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SPECIAL ISSUE

Indian Ocean Imaginaries / Imaginarios Indoceánicos

INTRODUCTION

Esther Pujolràs-Noguer & Juan Ignacio Oliva*
Universitat de Lleida / Serra-Húnter Fellow &
Universidad de La Laguna / GIECO-Franklin-UAH / Ratnakara

In this special issue dedicated to "Indian Ocean Imaginaries" ten research articles, three literary texts and an interview showcase the work of authors from this geographical area, many of them prize-winning figures, such as Abdulrazak Gurnah, M.G. Vassanji, Amitav Ghosh and Lindsey Collen, others lesser known but equally powerful writers like Tishani Doshi and Rudramoorthy Cheran. In all cases, the contributors have sought to locate these writers in the wider Indian Ocean space –what we are calling its imaginaries– rather than confining them behind a narrow political frontier. The titles of many of the articles indicate the importance of fluidity in the work of Indian Ocean writers. The first chapter of this volume, "Indian Ocean Imaginaries. The Academic Trajectory of the Ratnakara Research Group," charts the academic trajectory of the Ratnakara Research Group. Felicity Hand and Esther Pujolràs-Noguer, Ratnakara's two founding members, outline the diverse research outcomes generated by the group's active and fruitful engagement with the study of the literary and cultural productions of the Indian Ocean area. In her article "Negotiating Identity and Belonging in the Western Indian Ocean: Fluid Enabling Spaces in M.G. Vassanji's *Uhuru Street*" Dolors Ortega analyzes this short story cycle with its recurring characters who embody the social frictions that the colonial situation gave rise to. She provides a detailed background to the settlement of an Indian community in East Africa and shows how they often failed to integrate with the African population in a society clearly divided along racial lines. Ortega highlights the collective experience that permeates Vassanji's stories, which, she argues, can be read as a positive understanding of East African identities. Maurice O'Connor discusses the work of South African Indian playwright and novelist Ronnie Govender in his article "Exploring the Challenges of Ethnic Fluidity Within the Writings of Ronnie Govender." He examines how Asian, Coloured and Black communities were all victims of white exceptionalism during the apartheid regime. O'Connor suggests that Govender propagates the ideal of inter-ethnic conviviality in his writing, and what resonates strongly in this study is Govender's insistence on his Africanness even though friction inadvertently occurs.

Felicity Hand looks at the latest novel by the Mauritian writer Lindsey Collen in her article "The Fight for Land, Water and Dignity in Lindsey Collen's *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours*". She argues that Collen's work needs to be read as an Indian Ocean story that has a global transnational postcolonial discourse in its disregard for national or maritime boundaries in its bid for a universal post-

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ethnic, classless and gender-free humanity. The novel relates the rebellion sparked by the murders of four ordinary people whose only crime was to demand the right of access to land and water thus claiming a voice for so many dispossessed people in the developing world.

Esther Pujolràs-Noguer, Maricel Oró-Piqueras and Emma Domínguez-Rué explore the interstices of aging and narrative agency in two emblematic Indian Ocean novels, M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*. Pujolràs-Noguer et al argue that although the power of narration has been amply investigated in analyses of these novels (Hand, 2010; Samuelson, 2013; Helff, 2015; Pujolràs-Noguer, 2018), no article has –as yet– examined these texts within the framework of narrative gerontology. Thus, "Exploring the Interstices of Aging and Narrative Agency in M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*" fills up this void and brings to the fore the contradictions of (re) telling our life stories in old age by presenting biographical accounts as a way of weaving a tapestry that is never finished. However, as Pius Fernandes in *The Book of Secrets* and Saleh Omar in *By the Sea* from their aging perspective demonstrate, narrative closure would preclude narrative action (Baars, 1997) and so, imbued with the spirit of Scheherazade's *One Thousand Nights,* itself an Indian Ocean literary reference, their telling must be safeguarded at all costs –their tapestry must remain unfinished, so to speak– since there resides their capacity for making meaning and ultimately survive.

The 1972 expulsion of Asians from Uganda by the President of the time General Idi Amin Dada is one of the most traumatic events that Uganda has suffered which still reverberates in the imagination of the diverse Asian communities of East Africa. Through an analysis of Jagjit Singh's "Portrait of an Asian as an East African" (1971), Danson Kahyana examines the complexities and ambivalences of identity construction. In the close reading Kahyana performs in his article, "Singing against Anti-Asian sentiment in the East African Postcolony. Singh's 'Portrait of an Asian As an East African'," he explores the poetic devices that the poet deploys to express the pain of uprootedness and consequent state of statelessness and refugehood he suffered in view of his relationship with his homeland –Uganda– and his place of descent –India.

Jorge Diego's "'Stories that go on and on': Transformative Resilience against Gender Violence in Tishani Doshi's *Girls Are Coming out of the Woods*" offers a pungent examination of how violence is exerted upon the bodies of Indian women. This he achieves through his analysis of Tishani Doshi's poetry collection, *Girls Are Coming out of the Woods,* published in 2017 and which stands as a powerful record of the brutality inflicted against women and the gender prejudices imposed on victims

* The editors wish to acknowledge explicitly the funds of the Research Project "Rhizomatic Communities: Myths of Belonging in the Indian Ocean World" [PGC2018-095648-B-I00] (Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, IP Dr Felicity Hand, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona). Juan Ignacio Oliva is also indebted to the Project "Aesthetics, Ethics and Strategics of the New Migratory Cartographies and Transcultural Identities in Twenty-First-Century Literature(s) in English" [PID2019-109582GB-IOO], granted by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (IP Dr José Manuel Estévez-Saa, Universidade da Coruña).

of sex assaults in India. Doshi's poetry, as Diego demonstrates, also showcases the media and political interests used to detail crimes of gender violence as well as it portrays that, unlike the common discourse, there is a heterogeneity of bodies in the country. By placing this collection of Indian poetry within a larger feminist planetary dimension focused on transformative resilience, Diego finally illustrates how physical and psychological bodies survive, defy, transmute and, after Doshi's fashion, come out of the woods together.

The next article embarks on an often forgotten aspect of Indian Ocean literatures, namely their worldwide reception by means of translation. In an attempt to acknowledge the contribution of Translation Studies to literary research, Juan Zarandona's article, "Achmat Dangor (1948-2020) and M.G. Vassanji (1950-): The Reception of Two Afrindian Voices in Spain," exhibits the difficulties ingrained in the translation process of two authors with a particularly complex cultural and linguistic background. Hence, as Zarandona argues, translators of Dangor and Vassanji must choose between two translation methods: exoticising or domesticating. As the name indicates, exoticising implies leaving the translated text as close to the original as possible and, therefore, must face the possible rejection of target readers who find it difficult to understand the cultural markers of the text. On the contrary, the other translation method domesticates the original text and thus makes it easily accessible to target readers but it runs the risk of erasing its distinctive cultural flavour. Zarandona's article is a practical exercise whereby the translations of Dangor and Vassanji into Spanish and Catalan are dissected to determine whether their respective translators exoticise or domesticate the original texts.

A special issue on "Indian Ocean Imaginaries" could not be complete without an article devoted to Amitav Ghosh and eco-criticism. Through the lens of Neyrat's "ecology of separation" (Neyrat, 2018), Maria-Sabina Draga's "An Unconstructable Indian Ocean: Amitav Ghosh's Ecological Imaginary in *Sea of Poppies* and *The Great Derangement*" offers an insightful exploration of Ghosh's essay-book, *The Great Derangement* in conjunction with the first volume of his Indian Ocean trilogy, *Sea of Poppies.* In the light of the current coronavirus crisis, Ghosh's own version of what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin call a "green postcolonialism" (Huggan & Tiffin, 2007) –a technology-proof version of an emancipatory move of the margin against an oppressive, polluting centre– shares a deep concern with the ways in which the relationship between nature and culture, which has changed dramatically in the recent decades, mirrors a changing in the relationship between the "West" and the "East" and an increased fluidity in world hierarchies, as suggested by the triad "Land-River-Sea" proposed by the three parts of *Sea of Poppies.* If colonialism took European superiority over non-European civilizations for granted, it is now alternative, non-European forms of knowledge, Draga suggests, that prevail over western knowledge when it comes to facing nature's revolt against various kinds of prolonged human aggression.

The last article of "Indian Ocean Imaginaries" is a deliberate intent on the part of Esther Pujolràs-Noguer and Felicity Hand, to make visible one of the most recent and ruthless cases of colonialism: the Chagos Islands. "The Myth of the Empty Territory: The Tragedy of the Chagos Islanders" stems from a desire, as postcolonial scholars, to legitimize academically the Chagos Islanders' history of displacement and

hence position it as a crucial instantiation of contemporary colonialism. The first section of the article –The Chagos Islanders. Victims of a Ruthless Kidnapping– outlines the colonial history of dispossession of the Chagos Islanders whereas the second section –Writing Myth and Memory to Fight Cultural Injustice Against Chagossians– presents and discusses a performance against oblivion, namely the creative writing workshop that the authors, together with Dr Farhad Khoyratty from the University of Mauritius, organized as a means to publicize the tragedy of the displaced islanders.

Last but not least, we believe that the Creation section of this issue contributes successfully to complete our primordial task, that is to say, the delineation of an imaginary cartography of the Indian Ocean. It opens with a moving note devoted to the aforementioned and recently passed away academic and friend Farhad Khoyratty, tracing a personal sketch of shared moments in Mauritius and accompanied by some poems written in his honour by his life companion Bilall Jawdy. Following, we are delighted to publish a memoir by the Mauritian writer Lindsey Collen entitled "The Indian Ocean as a Unifying Force: A Memoir" which enhances the borderless ethos of the Indian Ocean territory while also underlining those disrupting forces that impose unnatural frontiers on its waters. Another asset of this volume is the poem "To My Grandmother. The Old Tea Factory at Kearsney, Natal" written by South African academic and poet Betty Govinden, which stands as a stark testimony against forgetfulness. Finally, a talk with the Sri-Lankan poet Rudramoorthy Cheran is included in the Interview section, written by Isabel Alonso, also a Ratnakara member.[1] It constitutes the perfect closure for this issue on "Indian Ocean Imaginaries." Cheran's poetic sensibility is beautifully exposed in an interview that poses the Tamil language at the core of the Indian Ocean imaginary. The transnational prescience of the Indian Ocean is transparent in this at once ancient and contemporary language spoken by over 77 million people. As a Sri-Lankan leaving in Canada, Cheran's interview is the testimony of a displacement but, most importantly, it is an invaluable performance of resilience and generosity before adversity.

As editors, we do not want this issue on *Indian Ocean Imaginaries* to be apprehended as a complete, enclosed, finished product. Closure goes against the Indian Ocean spirit that we have absorbed and accommodated to our experiences, both on an academic and individual level. That does not mean that we are not satisfied with the outcome, as a matter of fact, we are extremely happy to have been able to add a new gem to the "repository of jewels" collected by the *Ratnakara* research group. Consequently, we want to finish by paying tribute to the arduous labour and indefatigable spirit of the Chair of the Ratnakara group, Dr Felicity Hand. During the last decades she has been the motor of the Spanish academic research on the Indian Ocean literatures and cultures, and generously enough she has been backing this issue with her support, invaluable help and altruistic nature. We thank you Felicity and feel honoured to have you always on board.

[1] Not forming part of this monograph, the issue closes with another interview by Núria Mina (University of Lleida) in conversation with Canadian poet Lorna Crozier (U. Victoria).

INDIAN OCEAN IMAGINARIES. THE ACADEMIC TRAJECTORY OF THE RATNAKARA RESEARCH GROUP

Esther Pujolràs-Noguer & Felicity Hand
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Abstract

This article outlines the academic trajectory of the Ratnakara Research Group through a description of the research conducted in each of the financed research projects it has been awarded. *Ratnakara. Indian Ocean Literatures and Cultures* is the only Spanish research group that specializes in the study of the literary and cultural productions of the Indian Ocean area and has contributed to the creation and consolidation of Indian Ocean imaginaries.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, Ratnakara, Postcolonialism, Transnationalism.

IMAGINARIOS INDOCEÁNICOS. LA TRAYECTORIA ACADÉMICA DEL GRUPO DE INVESTIGACIÓN RATNAKARA

Resumen

Este artículo presenta la trayectoria académica del grupo de investigación Ratnakara mediante una descripción de la investigación llevada a cabo en cada uno de los proyectos financiados que ha conseguido. *Ratnakara. Indian Ocean Literatures and Cultures* es el único grupo de investigación español especializado en el estudio de las producciones literarias y culturales del Océano Índico y ha contribuido en crear y consolidar imaginarios indoceánicos.

Palabras clave: Océano Índico, Ratnakara, poscolonialismo, transnacionalismo.

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Compared to the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, as a solid area of research has only began to gain impetus since the 1980s. Current debates on the Indian Ocean focus on transnationalism as social scientists, in particular, have gradually understood the simultaneously unifying and fragmentary essence of this maritime space.

Accordingly, the geographical area of research comprised by the South-West Indian Ocean, that is East and South Africa, Mauritius, India and Sri Lanka, has been construed as a *rhizomatic* cultural and historical arena endowed with a natural sense of transnationalism rather than as discrete geographical regions (Hofmeyr 2010; Kearney 2004; Moorthy & Kamal 2010; Simpson & Kresse 2007). Historian Markus P.M. Vink singles out certain key terms in his landmark article on the "new thalassology" in Indian Ocean studies. Henceforth, porousness, permeability, connectedness, flexibility, and openness of spatial and temporal boundaries must inform any contemporary study of the area (Vink 52). Taking into account the danger of overlooking the flexible internal and external boundaries, scholars from various disciplines seem to agree on the need to regard the Indian Ocean as a unifying factor, connecting peoples and events across the ocean but at the same time as a divisive element that fragments and distances communities through space and time (Bose 25-26). These paradoxical notions of integration and fragmentation feature in much recent discussion of Indian Ocean writing, despite the fact that this area of research has yet to receive the critical attention from literary or cultural scholars that it deserves. No doubt this is in part due to its "messiness" as political frontiers fail to contain or explain with sufficient rigour the fluidity of its borders and the connectedness of its communities. However, literature revels in messiness as can be appreciated by the academic articles and examples of creative writing published in this special issue. Indeed, the inherent flexibility and porousness of the region bring to the fore the undertones of problems which are produced by myths of belonging: who belongs where and how long it takes a community to belong. The monsoon winds brought travelers and merchants across the Indian Ocean centuries before the Europeans even set foot in Africa. The Indian presence on the Swahili coast was substantial and merchants from the subcontinent began to acquire an increasingly important role in the commercial and financial life of Zanzibar. Under the British colonial machinery, Indians were recruited to build the railway in East Africa and indentured labour was required for the sugar plantations of Mauritius and Natal, thus mixing with the established African population. Many Indian Ocean writers both celebrate the hybridity of the region but also bear testimony to the inevitable friction and competition among the diverse ethnicities, in part triggered by the racial hierarchy instigated by the British. The socio-political, linguistic and religious ethnic mingling has given rise to an exciting new literature that this special issue acclaims.

Indian Ocean imaginaries are configured around Prestholdt's "basin consciousness" (454). To put it differently, in Indian Ocean fiction writing, national affiliations are modulated against an oceanic canvas that, in a rather nostalgic manner, revives the regional ethos of the maritime world of the past. However, this is a relatively recent development of Indian Ocean consciousness which is concomitant with the emergence of the new social imaginaries that have been shaped

as a consequence of the discovery of oil in the Gulf, the development of air travel and the increasing globalized nature of inter-state relations. The creation of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC) epitomizes Prestholdt's "basin consciousness" since only "sovereign states of the Indian Ocean" (Prestholdt 451) can be members. The oceanic orientation of IOR-ARC recovers the pre-colonial regional sensibility that viewed the Indian Ocean as a collective and shared geography.

Colonialism altered the perception of the Indian Ocean as a unifying, albeit contentious, geographical whole by imposing national closures that permeated the future movements of independence. As Prestholdt observes, the decolonization process of the area was punctuated by the nation-oriented ideology of empire and, as a result, the independent nations that emerged out of the political struggle for liberation had to re-negotiate their Indian Ocean spatiality. In Prestholdt's own words, "in the decades after independence the new nations of the Indian Ocean rim developed allegiances that hinged on corporate experiences of colonialism and a mutual respect for national sovereignty" (451). The sovereignty of the nation-state stood at the core of the alliances forged in the 1955 Bandung meeting and the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference. A recognition of a shared experience of colonialism did not entail, as Gupta insightfully notes in "The Song of the Non-aligned World: Transnational Identities and the Reinscription of Space in Late Capitalism," a recognition of a shared history. Nonetheless, a profound recognition of the existence of a shared history is precisely what emanates from Indian Ocean literature which is *necessarily* configured as a transnational performance. It is also through the lens of transnationalism that we evaluate our academic trajectories.

In 2010 we founded the research group *Ratnakara: Indian Ocean Literatures and Cultures* and by means of several research projects we have made a significant contribution to the opening up of the area of Indian Ocean literary analysis. We first began by arguing for the need to overcome the celebratory tone with which the phenomenon of hybridity in post-colonial studies is approached and to observe and question narrative silences and tensions in Mauritian and East African writing, which prove the deep cultural affinity, which dates from the days of slavery, between East Africa and the Indian Ocean (Hand 2009 & 2010a). As the title of this first research project disclosed, *Cartographies of Indianness in Indian Ocean Literatures. Memory, Affiliation, Trauma,* we sought to re-configure the concept of "Indianness" through the lens of traumatized memories. This was a reaction against the excessive celebration of multiculturalism that epitomized discourses of "Indianness" within, for example, the Caribbean space. From a non-essentialist perspective that prioritized individual experiences over the communal performance of uncontested multiculturalism, we counteracted the utopian Pan-Indian Oceanness expressed by Jules Herman, R.E. Hart and M. de Chazal. A re-assessment of heritage, culture, memory, social and linguistic identity in the geographical areas of East Africa, Madagascar, Reunion, Mauritius and the Comoro Islands thus ensued.

In our next project, *Relations and Networks in Indian Ocean Literatures,* we proceeded to show that the term "diaspora" –so often associated with success stories– sits uneasily in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean has been home to failed

diasporas, especially those people who have not embarked on projects of cultural memory and constructing homelands. Moreover, certain themes like purity and pollution have had to be reinvented. We showed that Indian diasporic communities cannot be dealt with in an impressionistic or essentialist fashion and, at the same time, have emphasised the transoceanic connections that bind Indian Ocean people together (Hand 2015, 2010b & 2011; Khoyratty 2011; Pujolràs-Noguer 2015).

The previous research which, as indicated before, focused on the literatures and cultures –in particular of the people of Indian origin– of Kenya, Zanzibar and the Mascarene Islands, showed us the need to expand on this work by incorporating the South African Indian community into the corpus. Thus we have corrected the imbalance in this area and contributed to the growing body of critical work on the South Asian diaspora in the Western Indian Ocean –a still relatively underresearched area. The South African Indian community has invariably been omitted from studies of the South Asian diaspora so our research has established a dialogic discourse amongst the Indian Ocean peoples and, in particular, amongst the people of Indian origin in East and South Africa and Mauritius. Therefore, while we continued to focus on the South Asian diaspora communities in the Indian Ocean world, we took our previous research findings in hybridity one stage further by exploring the sociality and patterns of connectedness that are being forged between diverse communities in South Africa. The Indian community in South Africa followed a different settlement pattern from Mauritius or Kenya, and yet, we located the specific South African Indian experience as an integral part of the overall Indian Ocean experience.

One major objective of this project was to gradually fill in the gap in Indian Ocean studies through –amongst other activities– the publication of a volume on South African Indian writers (Hand & Pujolràs-Noguer 2018). Writers of Indian origin have largely been omitted from studies of South African literature and, curiously enough, their work rarely finds its way into studies of the cultural productions of the South Asian diaspora. The shady area they occupy in terms of national belonging links them to East African writers of South Asian origin, whose credentials have frequently been questioned. Arlene A. Elder (1992) provides a careful reading of the short stories of Ahmed Essop, together with a discussion of the novels of the Ugandan Asian authors, Bahadur Tejani and Peter Nazareth. In his mammoth study *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (1997), Vijay Mishra claims that in South Africa "the multiracial disappeared under the politics of apartheid, [so] the writing of the Indian diaspora remained muted, and politically less agonistic" (59). Mishra devotes a page to the work of Ahmed Essop, who, he claims, offers a critique of South African supremacist ideology; but, like Elder, Mishra fails to mention any other South African Indian writer in his study. Naturally, this shows that in the late twentieth century few South African writers of Indian origin had been able to publish their work, a reminder of the political restraints on production and publication during the apartheid era.

More recent studies engage with what Mariam Pirbhai calls a "broadening of [post-apartheid South Africa's] literary frontiers" (70). She classifies the writing into two waves as well as two generations of diasporic writing in South Africa: the

writing that responded to apartheid and that of the post-apartheid years, after the demise of the regime in 1990 (Pirbhai 70). She claims: "It is in the later fiction that ethnic self-assertion is approached more forcefully" (71). Pallavi Rastogi agrees that "there is a direct and determinate relationship between politics and identity in South African Indian writing" (9) but argues that a South African identity is the primary affiliation, even though Indian idiosyncrasies are not wholly erased (Rastogi 9). Ronit Frenkel similarly tackles the thorny category of "race," which, she claims, still lies at the root of contemporary sociocultural divisions in post-apartheid South Africa. Her study "destabilise[s] such taxonomies by exploring what they mean and how they continue to inform culture" (6).

Therefore, we realized that, while critics were beginning to examine the recent writing of South African Indians, with the notable exception of Govinden's sensitive study of South African Indian women writers (Govinden 2008), no study had provided a comprehensive analysis of the patterns of connectedness that were being forged between diverse communities in South Africa; indeed, South African Indian writers are often still ignored in mainstream publications. While it is clear that racial and class categories could not be ignored in a country with a recent history of brutal exploitation and statutory oppression, many studies explored what we called "relations and networks" in the post-apartheid era, hence delineating a social geography in which subjectivities were being constructed beyond –and despite– constraining racial and ethnic parameters. Although we observed that scholars such as Gaurav Desai, Pallavi Rastogi, and Ronit Frenkel had engaged in an exploration of relational subjectivities in their work, thus already adhering to a "relations and networks" paradigm, they had never formally conceptualized the term. Our "relations and networks" framework should therefore be acknowledged as an attempt to foreground a methodology whereby ethnicity, class, and gender inextricably coalesce to map out the national space of post-apartheid South Africa. Through the analysis of a selection of writers, emerging as well as leading voices of the "new" South Africa, we managed to bring to the fore the sociality and patterns of connectedness that were being forged between South Africa's hitherto divided communities. Our starting point was that literature inflected productions and performances of identities in relation to the long history of trade and encounter that had been conceptualized largely from the perspectives of economic history and geographical studies.

Stemming from a Foucauldian perspective on subjectivity which measures the subject as an active participant in a strategic interplay of power relations, in *Relations and Networks in South African Indian Writing* –the visible product of the research conducted by the Ratnakara members– we fostered consideration of South-South subjectivities by *strategically* locating South African Indian literature within the relations and networks paradigm that shapes the Indian Ocean world and its cosmopolitanisms. These South-South subjectivities, which speak of relations and networks across the Indian Ocean, coexist with and also pre-date colonialism. Henceforth, we claimed that the experience of history as embedded in literary texts evinced an unceasing transformation of self. The literary texts which were examined –Aziz Hassim's *The Lotus People* and *Revenge of Kali,* Achmat Dangor's

Kafka's Curse, Shamim Sarif's *The World Unseen,* Ronnie Govender's *Black Chin, White Chin,* Imraan Coovadia's *The Wedding* and *High Low In-Between,* Ashwin Singh's *To House,* Dr Goonam's *Coolie Doctor* and Fatima Meer's *Prison Diary: One Hundred and Thirteen Days 1976* among others– displayed a varied range of mechanisms whereby institutional bodies, desires, and discourses were deconstructed in order to lay out the script for an aesthetics of resistance. It was paramount for us to demonstrate that understanding and situating the South African Indian experience as a constitutive component of Indian Ocean thalassology required a more nuanced investigation of the relationship between self and other than what had been elicited so far. We successfully concluded that the South African Asian community, despite having followed a different settlement pattern from Mauritius or Kenya, had to take its place as part of the Indian Ocean experience. Moreover, we have proved that a thorough study of South-South subjectivities can throw light on alternative ways of being in the world.

The re-assessment of "Indianness" initiated in our first project was thus consolidated in this second project in which not only narratives by authors of Indian origin from East Africa and Mauritius were analysed, but also narratives by authors of Indian origin from South Africa. All these narratives reflected individual cultural and memory projects while at the same time they manifested the transoceanic connections that unite the peoples of the Indian Ocean rim (Hand 2018a; Pujolràs-Noguer 2018 & 2019).

As outlined in the previous paragraphs, our research projects so far were entirely focused on fiction. Notwithstanding, in our next project, *The Aesthetics of Remembering: Empathy, Identification, Mourning,* we branched off into life writing. The reason behind this generic turn is the realization that the "re-membering" act that characterized the narrative development of Indian Ocean fiction writing had to be consolidated alongside the many autobiographical accounts of individual and/or communal memories. The first part of the title of our project, *The Aesthetics of Remembering,* is a straightforward allusion to the theoretical paradigm that we have created as a means to explore the diverse personal narrations of members of the South Asian diaspora in South Africa, East Africa and survivors or descendants of survivors of the partition of India (Hand 2018b; O'Connor 2018). The location of these life stories at the intersection of national and global exclusion rendered them particularly sensitive to the Affect Theory concepts of "in-between-ness" and "accumulative besided-ness" (Gregg & Seigworth 2010). As Williams (1985) would have it, these individual narratives delineate structures of feeling, that is to say, lived experiences, shared by communities geographically distant from one another. Empathy lies at the centre of our aesthetics of remembering methodology to the extent that we have proved how reading and creative writing foments an empathetic relationship with the marginalized subject unveiling her/his life. This aesthetics of remembering allows us also to re-assess the very concept of "empathy" through the lens of postcoloniality. Ultimately, the "aesthetics of remembering" explores the space created by the intersectionality of what we discovered to be three recurrent themes in studies of postcolonial expressions of selfhood: the above mentioned empathy, identity and mourning.

Postcolonial literary criticism has recently focused its scrutiny on life writing, that is the memoirs and experiences of citizens from former colonized countries. Autobiography has long featured as a subgenre of literary criticism but its emphasis on the Enlightenment persona, a rational, sovereign subject, usually male and invariably white, marginalized those people whose life stories were regarded as inherently inferior and of little interest, such as slaves, indentured labourers or simply people inscribed as being racially inferior. The proliferation of postcolonial theories has widened the understanding of selfhood and has challenged the notion of a unified, unique selfhood which could express universal human nature (Anderson 5). The very term 'autobiography' has tended to be relegated to the work of Western authors and has been replaced with the more inclusive category of 'life writing' (Whitlock 3). The changing nature of identity formations has contributed to the continued exploration of and experimentation in the generic forms of life writing, autobiography and memoir (Driver & Kossew 2014). In this way, the Enlightenment subject is decolonized and space is made for former minor genres to flourish. The inclusion of formerly overlooked writing subjects and the straining at the seams of the genre has brought about a need to read across national borders.

Postcolonial communities are nowadays transnational in outlook and filiation, which has encouraged scholars to propose new strategies for reading and analyzing these cultural productions. Recent critical work on life writing by people who have directly or indirectly experienced colonialism has often focused on traumatic experiences because their lives have been shaped by the shifting boundaries of what it actually meant to be human in these societies (Craps 2013; Hassan & Álvarez 2013 and Whitlock 2015). Craps highlights the traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority groups, which have been ignored in favour of the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity. The special issue of *Biography* edited by Hassan & Álvarez engages critically with postcolonial studies and autobiography by exploring the continued relevance of the term postcoloniality. Whitlock's comprehensive study includes insightful analyses of powerful testimonies of social injustices and oppression. Lives that are situated at the social, political, and cultural margins of the national and the global need to be represented but this is itself problematic, as Gayatri Spivak eloquently reminds us. The danger can be reduced to how the Western critic can explore the narratives of particular lived situations or personal histories which may remain trapped within the logic of the colonial past without fossilizing or essentializing them. The postcolonial present itself needs to be approached with extreme caution. The specters of colonialism may continue to haunt the contemporary, but we have reconsidered the critical preoccupations of subjecthood and resistance through careful readings of testimonials, memoirs, and political biographies as well as creative writing. The texts that we explored are selfconsciously focused on narrating lives in their proximity to physical and/or social death conditioned by the legacies of colonialism. However, we went beyond the pessimism of the past and explored how the texts chosen moved forward. From our perspective, fictionalised narratives of atrocities are to be treated similarly to the more expected first-person memoirs as we consider that human rights violations

can be brought closer to readers when victims or survivors become real people with names and backgrounds rather than just statistics in a roll call of horror.

The recovery and mediation of cultural practices which have been and may continue to be subjected to institutional forgetting is a key player in the struggle between hegemonic culture and minorities (JanMohamed & Lloyd 8) thus not only is archival work essential to the critical articulation of minority discourse but also the discovery of hidden testimonies, especially from women survivors. As an attempt to approach women survivors who had been victims of gender violence, we conducted two creative writing workshops in Kampala, Uganda. The first took place at the premises of *Isis-WICCE (Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange)*, an extremely active feminist organisation whose members are the recipients of harrowing stories from women who have been abused, both sexually and psychologically. The second creative writing workshop was organized together with *Femrite*, the association of Ugandan women writers and its focus was on life writing. These two creative writing workshops provided us with autobiographical texts that have contributed enormously to reinforce our theoretical paradigm called "Aesthetics of Remembering" and it also proved that writing can be a decisive component in the disclosure of invisible traumas. Equally important, it demonstrated that the transference from traumatic experience to narrative granted the traumatized victim an audience willing to listen to her story. The volume entitled *In/visible Traumas: Healing, Loving, Writing*, a recollection of the narratives produced in the creative writing workshop, is the substantial testimony of traumatized lives that are an intrinsic and indisputable part of Indian Ocean imaginaries (Pujolràs-Noguer & Hand, 2018).

The research that resulted from this third project led us to the recognition of a deep-seated "communal" self as a key factor in the functionality of the aesthetics of re-membering, which brings to the fore the *rhizomatic* nature of the Indian Ocean cultural geography. This was the basis for our ongoing research project, *Rhizomatic Communities: Myths of Belonging in the Indian Ocean World,* which aims at examining the life writing of communities that are numerically minorities in their adopted homelands and which debunks the myth of belonging as for them there can be no unilateral sense of belonging. Moreover, and as we could corroborate in our previous research projects, the Indian Ocean situation belies any sense of a unified, national belonging. We claim that these myths of belonging, once deconstructed, can only expose the undertones of problems experienced by ethnic minorities, people marginalized through disease and poverty and persons forcibly expelled from their homeland but at the same time can reveal similar patterns of reliance on cultural artefacts as survival strategies.

The archival and textual work so far conducted had been monitored by a focus on the "individual", that is to say, on how specific human beings performed their identities within a larger community structure. However, we realized that this individual-focused line of analysis began to falter and, therefore, could not be fully sustained, since a deep sense of community seamed through the individual identity performance. In other words, the communal self, pervaded in a manner that challenged but simultaneously guided the formation of a satisfactory, albeit

deeply dis-unified identity, through conciliatory acts of empathy via calculated episodes of mourning.

Critical work on the specificities of a potential corpus of "communal life writing" is practically inexistent. Our research into this area has identified one sole community which is treated under the lens of a forgotten postcolonial minority: the Chagossian people in Mauritius. Sociologists and anthropologists have studied the Chagossians (Jeffery & Vine 2011; Johannessen 2010) and there are studies on literary representations of them (Bragard 2008; Ravi 2010) but to date no study has explored the "communal" life writing of these human collectives. Davis et al remind us that "personal and collective memory creates a space where fact, truth, fiction, invention, forgetting, and myth are so entangled as to constitute a renewed form of access to the past" (11). We agree with them when they claim that "individual identity is constituted in relation to family and national history" (David et al 13) which upholds our aim to focus on the life writing of communities, in order to debunk the myth of belonging. This dismantling of the myth of belonging is an attempt to denounce the still pervasive myth of origins that surreptitiously intrudes in identity constructions and, at the same time, enhances the "in-betweenness" that defines a *rhizomatic* understanding of historical, socio-cultural and national affiliations. Glissant (1997) has long disclosed the multiplicity of cultural identities that configure individual identities. Thus, our point of departure is that life stories express the need to belong, but they highlight the fact that there is no unilateral sense of belonging. Likewise, and considering the traumatic essence enveloping these life stories, we should add Leigh Gilmore's assertion that "Trauma is never exclusively personal, it always exists within complicated histories, both individual and collective" (885). The Indian Ocean, as has been emphasized throughout this article, is construed as a *rhizomatic* cultural and historical network endowed with a natural sense of transnationalism rather than as discrete geographical regions (Kearney 2004; Simpson & Kresse 2007; Moorthy & Kamal 2010). The three axes of our project are delineated by the three communities we have selected: The Chagossian community, the communities resulting from the Eastern Partition of India and the South African HIV/AIDS community.

The Chagossian community of Mauritius suffered the pain of deportation and the prohibition of a legal recuperation of the homeland together with the added complication of the creation of a Marine Reserve and the suggestion that a return of the people would somehow harm the environment and provoke more climatic change on an already delicate ecosystem. Myths of a lost paradise notwithstanding, Chagossians have fought to promote and preserve their culture through highlighting various elements of material culture, such as food and séga music and dancing. Remembering and writing their experiences works as a great therapy for building up self-esteem as a people and for claiming a space in the Indian Ocean imaginary. However, this claim for visibility in the Indian Ocean imaginary, begs the following question: to what extent is the profound sense of community that binds the Chagossian experience formulated upon the loss of their homeland? The article, "The Myth of the Empty Territory. The Tragedy of the Chagos Islanders" included in this volume, seeks to untangle the diverse modes of coercion and persuasion that a forceful communal self can inflict upon the marginalized individual.

The second axis, narratives of the Eastern Partition of India, is a continuation of the work carried out in the previous project. Following Paul John Eakin's assertion that "we remodel our pasts to bring them into sync with our sense of our selves and lives in the present" (94), we aim to trace this conjuncture of past and present, especially in remembering traumatic events/histories. The "aesthetics of remembering" we coined in the previous research project, functions as an umbrella concept within which to (re)consider the aftermath of a traumatic event like the Partition of India. The role of autobiographies, testimonials, memoirs, and fictionalized first-person narratives, through which the event is itself (re)written, (re) imagined and memorialized, become the ground upon which the "history" of the event and a production of the "past" are constructed. In this new project, we will be seeking to answer the following questions: What happens to our understanding of the imbrication of the present in the reconstruction of the past? How do we analyze and understand memory as a "lived project"–structured and reconstructed not only through the anxieties of the present but also through the genres of recollection (memoir, testimonials, autobiographies, and fictionalized first-person narratives, photographs and foodways)? How does the communal self impinge on the process of self-creation of women that survived the Eastern Partition of India? In what representational mode(s) does the experience of communal marginalization and oppression of Dalits intertwines with the national trauma of Partition?

Our third axis is South Africa and specifically the people affected by HIV/AIDS who constitute a community of ostracised, stigmatized persons. The slow, incalculable devastation that HIV/AIDS wreaks proves this disease to be much deadlier than the famines, the wars, the corruption, the lack of clean water and so forth that scourge the country as it amplifies the damage at the same time that it undermines the ability to respond to these disasters because it targets the young and productive. In recent years, however, people and governments are becoming more engaged in their response to AIDS and this is visible in the growing body of personal narratives by AIDS sufferers. People affected by HIV/AIDS struggle to underline their presence in the national effort to build the New South Africa, a nation purposely construed upon inclusion parameters as an aftermath to the border-creating apartheid machine. So, the question to be confronted is: what representational strategies allow for the maimed bodies of HIV/AIDS sufferers to be integrated as an intrinsic part of the celebratory body politic of the Rainbow Nation?

Some of the questions put forward in our current project, *Rhizomatic Communities: Myths of Belonging in the Indian Ocean World,* are, if not completely, partially answered in this Special Issue on *Indian Ocean Imaginaries.* By reading this first article in which an academic trajectory modelled around the Indian Ocean has been outlined, the one experienced by the Ratnakara Research Group, one might erroneously conclude that, from a literary and cultural studies perspective, little remains to be explored in this geographical area. This is, of course, a blatant fallacy. It is specially in the literary and cultural arena that Indian Ocean studies are presently thriving. From a historical standpoint, Prestholdt affirms that "the Indian Ocean port city is practically a memory, yet the cosmopolitan ideal that it evokes is increasingly relevant to our world" (455). Feeding on Prestholdt 's assertion, and

from a literary and cultural positioning, we claim that the memory of the Indian Ocean port city and the cosmopolitan ideal that it evokes metamorphose into the rhizomatic community that has been aesthetically re-produced in Indian Ocean writing. Rhizomes, as Glissant suggestively infers, are endowed with an endless capacity for expansion and an instinctual resistance to closure. So, much remains to be explored in this ever expanding Indian Ocean rhizome.

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NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AND BELONGING IN THE WESTERN INDIAN OCEAN: FLUID ENABLING SPACES IN M.G. VASSANJI'S *UHURU STREET*

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Abstract

This article analyses the short story cycle *Uhuru Street*, which describes the life of the members of the minority Ismaili community, whom Vassanji fictionalises as Shamsis, in the context of crucial changes in the history of Tanzania. Diaspora, fragmentation and ethnic multiplicity in a really hierarchical tripartite society will be studied within the framework of cross-cultural networking in the Western Indian Ocean, where complex identity relations are established. Our discussion stems from a brief historical genealogy of the Indian community in Tanzania, it analyses the complex identity relations and affiliations among Tanzanian citizens of Indian descent, and moves on to the analysis of Vassanji's short stories in order to explore those fluid and enabling spaces where identity and belonging are to be negotiated.

Keywords: Vassanji, Indian Ocean, Diaspora, Displacement, Fluidity

IDENTIDAD E INTEGRACIÓN EN EL OCÉANO ÍNDICO OCCIDENTAL: ESPACIOS DE NEGOCIACIÓN EN *UHURU STREET* DE M.G. VASSANJI

Resumen

El siguiente artículo analiza el ciclo de relatos breves, *Uhuru Street*, que describe la vida de miembros de la minoría Ismaili, ficcionalizados por Vassanji como los Shamsis, en el contexto de ciertos cambios cruciales para la historia de Tanzania. En este trabajo estudiaremos la diáspora, la fragmentación y la multiplicidad étnica de una sociedad sumamente jerarquizada y tripartita en el marco de las redes interculturales del Océano Índico Occidental, donde se establecen complejas relaciones indentitarias. Nuestra discusión parte de una breve genealogía de la comunidad india en Tanzania, analiza la complejidad de las relaciones identitarias y afiliaciones que existen entre los tanzanos de asendencia india y sigue con el análisis de los relatos cortos de Vassanji para explorar esos espacios fluidos y posibilitadores donde hay una constante negoiación de conecptos como la identidad y el sentido de pertenencia.

Palabras clave: Vassanji, Océano Índico, Diáspora, desplazamiento, fluidez.

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The Indian Ocean, with its circulation networks, has been characterised as a major interregional crossroads and a fluid space of intense cultural negotiations between various local communities; "[a] great 'highway' for the migrations of peoples, for cultural diffusion, and for economic exchange."(Abu-Lughod 261) Unlike the Pacific and the Atlantic oceans, the Indian Ocean had well established sea routes navigated by Arab, Ethiopian, Persian, Bengali and Chinese trading fleets with tremendously wealthy port cities long before European colonial hegemony. This characteristic provided the Indian Ocean world with an idiosyncratic diversity that has shaped its social, cultural and economic life.

Since antiquity, commercial exchanges brought people of the coast and Arab and Indian[1] traders in contact with each other. The exchange of goods and ideas went hand in hand with the large-scale traffic in slaves and the connections between Indian Ocean African regions and the Indian Ocean world "ensured important exchanges of capital, people, commodities, technology, and ideas, albeit ones that fluctuated over time, and demonstrate that Indian Ocean Africa played an integral part in the creation and development of 'first global economy' " (Campbell 37) before the European arrival.

In fact, Europeans after 1500 did not have a great impact over the Indian Ocean world because the newcomers accommodated themselves to the continuing structures of an Indian Ocean world whose dynamics they hardly understood (Pearson 11). Furthermore, the Indian Ocean was a neuralgic centre of commerce and trade, as well as migration and cultural interaction and it comprised a great transregional exchange network that fostered somehow transnationalism, cosmopolitanism and universalism; identity traits that have permeated Indian Ocean social and cultural transactions over time by questioning solid and stable narratives of nation-states. Individuals and groups in a multiplicity of encounters with others determined their own practices of "cosmopolitan connection," which were diverse in theme, content and duration (Bertz 25). A good example of this is Dar es Salaam, the largest city in East Africa, located in Tanzania, which according to Brennan and Burton has been:

> above all a site of juxtaposition between the local, the national, and the cosmopolitan. Local struggles for authority between Shomvi and Zaramo, as well as Shomvi and Zaramo indigenes against upcountry immigrants, stand alongside racialized struggles between Africans and Indians for urban space, global struggles between Germany and Britain for military control, and national struggles between European colonial officials and African nationalists for political control. (13)

[1] As Marie-Aude Fouéré (359) points out, "[b]efore the partition of India in 1947, immigrants from the Indian sub-continent who settled in Tanzania were referred to by the English term "Indians" or its Swahili equivalent *Wahindi*. Today they are called "Asians" in English and *Wahindi* in Swahili." I will be using Indian for immigrants and Tanzanian citizens of Indian descent or Indian Tanzanians from the second-third generation onwards.

After 1800, the Indian Ocean was partially transformed but certain long-standing connections survived colonial rule (especially the British). As Bertz points out, instead of being destroyed by colonialism, "indigenous residents of the Indian Ocean adapted to new political structures and continued to travel, trade and interact across the sea in altered relationships mediated –but not dominated– by Europeans." (28) Both British colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism intensified certain existing transnational linkages across the Indian Ocean world (Bose 2006; Metcalf 2007). The Indian community experience in Tanzania serves as a good example of these linkages across the Indian Ocean.

This article explores Vassanji's work as a meditation on these cultural exchanges regarding Africans of Indian descent in Tanzania. The focus of this study will be on the short story cycle *Uhuru Street*, which traces the lives of the members of the minority Ismaili community, whom Vassanji fictionalises as the Shamsis, in the context of crucial changes in the history of Tanzania between the 50s and the 80s. Vassanji describes the double migration of the Shamsis to East Africa in the 19th century and from postcolonial Africa towards Europe or North America from the 1960s onwards. Diaspora, fragmentation and multiplicity of ethnic lives in a really hierarchical tripartite society will be studied within the framework of cross-cultural networking in the Western Indian Ocean, where complex identity relations are established. Our discussion stems from a brief historical genealogy of the Indian community in Tanzania, in order to understand the complex identity relations and affiliations among Tanzanian citizens of Indian descent, and moves on to the analysis of Vassanji's short stories in order to explore those fluid and enabling spaces where identity and belonging are to be negotiated.

TANZANIAN CITIZENS OF INDIAN DESCENT: HISTORICAL, SOCIOECONOMIC AND CULTURAL CONFIGURATIONS

As Brennan asserts, present-day Tanzania cannot be considered a multi-cultural society in which people of different backgrounds would blend together in harmony; it rather exemplifies a plural society in which people live "side-by-side but separately." (7) Tanzanian society is still divided along racial lines and identity categories, which were built by the state apparatus in colonial times.

> The categorisation of a group or person as being Indian, native, or Tanzanian is seen as a performative act connected to political and economic interests of the state, the state's representatives and pressure groups. On the other hand, persons which are subsumed under a category (Indians) as well as those excluded from it (Africans, Arabs, Europeans) are unequivocally affected by these categorisations which in the Tanzanian history of the last one and a half centuries have had substantial repercussions in the legal framework, allotment of political rights and access to economic resources. (Burton 5)

The first contacts between migrants from the Indian subcontinent and people living along the coast and in the islands of Zanzibar, followed by the impact of colonial rule, contributed to building a sharp socioeconomic and cultural divide between Africans, Arabs and Indians (Fouéré 362). In this section, special attention will be devoted to the ambivalent relations that came up between Africans and Indians as related to the concept of belonging.

While growing numbers of Indian Muslims had first settled in Zanzibar during the Busaidi Sultanate, it was not until the late 19th century that big Indian communities were formed in colonial Tanganyika. Very few Indians had settled on the mainland until the Germans invested in their colony in East Africa, building railways and encouraging commerce in the first decades of the 20th century. These circumstances established the position of Indians as "a middleman minority" (Burton 2), though the community was by no means monolithically well-off, incorporating as it did "humble street traders middling skilled artisans and affluent merchant families such as the Karimjees" (Brennan & Burton 35). Members of Muslim Shia factions (Ismaili Khojas, Bohoras) were mostly merchants, while Muslim Sunni factions, as well as Hindus, organised in caste groups (*jati*), were active as shopkeepers and artisans of different professions. As Eric Burton (2013) states, a diaspora is not a uniform or clear-cut group identity. However, despite language, religion, caste, class, and ethnicity differences among Indians, a diasporic pan-communal Indian identity emerged when German colonial policies favoured Indians over other communities. Indians distanced themselves from other communities and strong intracommunity ties were built to reinforce a Pan-Indian Identity.

Furthermore, this diasporic pan-communal identity may be understood as a result of a complex and really hierarchical socioeconomic context which was being forged at the time. German East African society was a highly stratified social apparatus. The white population were missionaries, professional and government servants, and owners and managers of farms, plantations, mines, and other businesses. Many Africans[2] were government servants, business employees, labourers, and producers of important cash crops, but the great majority, whose living standards were marked by poverty, were self-sufficient, small scale farmers who produced barely enough to survive. Wealthy Africans were excluded from the Indian monopoly on trade as the Indians and Arabs were the middle class and tended to be wholesale and retail traders. The most ambiguous among all these pigeonholed social categories was that of Indians, who, despite being favoured by colonial intervention partly because of their status as British subjects, were perceived as threatening menace by the Germans precisely on the very same grounds. Indians

[2] Africans were internally diverse. Swahili merchants, Shirazi or Afro-Shirazi (indigenous people) –divided in three main groups, Wahadimu, Watumbatu and Wapemba– and slaves, who were employed as domestic or farm workers, formed a society that found in Islam their common ground. (Fouéré 361)

were soon located above the Arabs in the social scale due to the fact that the Arab planter class became heavily indebted because of the suppression of slave-raiding and the commercial slave trade, which was at the basis of their plantation system. As a consequence, Indian creditors could acquire more land and could have the possibility to see their social status promoted. However, the economic situations of Indian immigrants were extremely varied. Well-off merchants were classified along with retailers, small landowners, and impoverished farmers and craftsmen under the single legal category of Indians.

The configuration of these racial categorizations was translated into legal provisions and discriminatory policies, in the social and economic sectors, in urban settings or in ideological apparatuses. The Germans saw the concentration of power by the Indian ascendency as a threatening potential to destabilise the *status quo* of a colonial world which was based on the assumption that Europeans were superior to all the other racial communities. Therefore, Indians, Arabs and Africans were legally essentialised and categorised as "natives" by the German colonial administration and they did not enjoy the same rights as the white population before the law. In practice, though, Indians enjoyed a preferential treatment in comparison to Arabs and Africans. This left Indians in a very complex social location, since they became the object of resentment or suspicion from every other racial community (Germans, Arabs and Africans).

After the First World War, Tanganyika became a League of Nations mandated territory administered by the British. New economic opportunities opened up in the region and immigration boomed again. Gujarati traders and other Indian migrants moved and settled in East Africa and they were allowed an active role in administration and economy. The British assigned Indians a middle category which gave them more rights than Africans, but still fewer rights than Europeans. Increasing feelings of a common identification among Indians against the British colonial policies in Tanganyika went along with the strengthening of class, religious and political divisions within the community. In Dar es Salaam, the British colonial administrative and commercial capital, the government created three racial zones across the city, splitting the city into racially and/or socially segregated neighbourhoods, which had already been devised by the Germans when they started to build up their new colonial capital (Burton 45-52). The colonial planners segregated the urban spaces on a racial basis following three monolithic categories of race: European, Indian, and African. The first line was drawn between Europeans and non-Europeans, and the second one between natives (including Africans and Arabs) and non-natives (Indians).

> European inhabitants were overwhelmingly located in Zone I, which included the old German quarter, northeast of the city centre, and embryonic coastal suburbs to the north. Indians were concentrated in Zone II, the congested bazaar which provided both residential and commercial quarters for what was, between the wars, Dar es Salaam's fastest growing community. The core of the African population was in Kariakoo and, from the late 1920s, in Ilala; though a number of urban

> 'villages' were also incorporated within the township boundary, notably Gerezani (demolished in the 1920s/30s) and Keko. (Brennan & Burton 31)

Such a spatial, economic and ethno-racial segregation between Africans and Indians was especially reinforced by the state through wartime policies of rationing during World War II. Africans and Indians were constructed as opposing communities as James Brennan (2) illustrates:

> For most Africans in colonial and early postcolonial Dar es Salaam, that 'Other' was neither the town's tiny European community, which figured so prominently in Africa's settler colonies, nor its similarly small Arab population, which figured so prominently in neighboring Zanzibar. Rather, it was the town's Indian community, who outnumbered Europeans and Arabs combined by nearly four to one, and who constituted roughly one quarter of colonial Dar es Salaam's population.

Indians were socially perceived as powerful property owners whom Africans depended on, even when they were not wealthy business people and their lives as small shopkeepers were closer to Africans' lives in Zone III. Isolated on the outskirts of the city, Africans were excluded from the business world dominated by Europeans and Indians, and they were controlled by new discriminatory laws that were intended to prevent the massive rural exodus of Africans who were seeking new opportunities in the city. Africans were scapegoated by the British administration. There was a constant. precariousness in their lives[3], and their social status was constantly being denigrated. As was likely to happen, this generated social unrest. The main intercommunity frictions occurred between those who had less social and spatial distance between them, Africans and Indians. Indians occupied that middle position between the British and the Africans. While they were second-class citizens for the British, they were perceived as subjects of privilege by Africans, therefore, becoming the target of their attacks and social unrest.

With Independence, residential segregation and colonial laws that restricted African mobility were officially off the political agenda. Despite being highly racialised, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) campaigned its official policy of non-racial nationalism at the Arusha Declaration of 1967, when President Julius Nyerere declared his intention to build a socialist project in Tanzania. However, socioeconomic and racial differentiation remained a marked feature of urban space (Brennan & Burton 52), and a residual presence of racial thought in the region has intervened in intercommunity relations up to the present.[4] Once Africans had gained

[3] Fouéré illustrates this by describing the Removal of Undesirable Native Ordinance that forbade "all 'Natives' (Africans) to walk at night without permission and without light, to hold parties or funeral ceremonies without permission, or to stay in Dar es Salaam for more than a week without official written permission." (376)

[4] According to Brennan "[t]he continuation of racial segregation in Dar es Salaam bitterly frustrated African nationalists. For them, urban *ujamaa* should, above all, result in the eradication of this iniquity. The politics of ujamaa, one observer wrote, was 'to live as a family without regard

their status as full citizens, Indians were targeted and scapegoated by those who had historically been set to occupy social locations below them. The Africanization of Tanzania had an implicit discriminatory racial effect over Indian people's lives: "Indians were seen as the new representatives of the class of exploiters living upon 'landlordism'. With other privileged groups of Tanzania such as Arabs and the few African capitalists, they were ostracized in a country that aimed to embrace socialism." (Fouéré 382). As a result, a second Indian diaspora to Europe, Canada and North America intensified in the years following Independence. However, with the new president Ali Hassan Mwinyi, those who stayed and had accumulated enough capital (Arab businessmen, African public servants and politicians and Indian merchants) were given the opportunity to participate in a free market economy.

Within such a hierarchical tripartite society it is not difficult to understand that the spirit of conviviality was constantly threatened by frictions, especially between those at the bottom of the social ladder. Economic inequalities between different racial communities in the town brought about a conflicting relationship between these communities. In fact, the general Indian economic advantage created by colonial racial privileges generated a great deal of resentment among the African population, especially in the years preceding and following Independence. As Brennan describes, for Africans "Indians were the shopkeepers on the other side of the counter who bought low and sold high, extracting African wealth between the margins." (8)

BINARY IDENTITY CATEGORIES IN TANZANIA, NATIONAL BELONGING AND VASSANJI'S DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS

As has been analysed in the previous section, Tanzanian society has historically produced racialised identity categories that problematise the Tanzanian national narrative. What it means to be Tanzanian might vary from group to group at a very specific historical moment, since binary social representations have reproduced identity categories built upon segregating policies and discriminatory conducts. In fact, a deeply rooted circulation of stereotypes has crystallised within the Tanzanian collective consciousness. While Tanzanian Indians have been, and are still, associated with wealth, greed and miserliness, Tanzanian Africans have been, and are still, identified with poverty, laziness and marginality. The stigmatisation of both groups by mutual resentment has constructed the signifiers "African" and "Indian" within an oppositional framework.

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to race, wealth, tribe, status, etc.'. He was disheartened, however, to see *uzunguni* or the European neighbourhood continue to exist, populated by 'Indians, Hindus, Khojas, Europeans', but not one African." (405)

This proves how identity, a process in itself, is the result of ideological formations. However, though "Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses" (Althusser 1971) in Tanzania have interpellated Indian and African communities and have fixed certain identity categories, writers, such as Vassanji, have re-evaluated these categories from other subjective locations. Vassanji writes from an in-between and dislocated space of diaspora, which allows him to move away from systemic cultural impositions towards more fluid identifications. His characters inhabit cross-cultural landscapes. Throughout his work, he observes his syncretic Shamsi community, whose members hold a hybrid identity, Hindu and Muslim, Indian and African:

> ... I was brought up under a very syncretic tradition... Our names for the imam would be the Hindu names for the Krishna; we would still speak of the Krishna in worshipful terms –a fact which really bothered a lot of mainstream Muslims...
>
> Anything that stinks of purity is just abominable. I personally cannot tolerate these calls to purity. (Rhodes 116)

His fictional Shamsis combine both ethnicity specificities –such as, myths folklore and Cutchi/Gujarati and Swahili terms– and hybridity, approached from a cosmopolitan standpoint. Vassanji understands identity as "a confluence of many streams, a multiplicity of identities; a palimpsest" (Vassanji 17), which is related to the fluid spaces that Indians have inhabited in Africa. As Vassanji suggests "for the Indians in Africa a sense of movement has always been there" (Rhodes 105); an on-going movement that has brought about constant cultural and social negotiations. He writes and recreates the history of those who are dislocated, neither here nor there, diasporic Indians living in East Africa and their further migration to Europe, Canada, or the United States. M.G. Vassanji, a diasporic subject himself[5], writes "the beyond."

> The "beyond" is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past... [...] we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond': an exploratory, restless movement caught so well in... here and there... (Bhabha 1-2)

Homi Bhabha's 'beyond' is transitory, liminal, interstitial, hybrid. It is the place where conventional patterns of thought and behaviour can be problematised and revisited by the possibility of crossing. Hybrid identities remain perpetually in motion, open to change and reappropriation. Likewise, Vassanji's characters live

[5] He was born in Nairobi, Kenya, and raised in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. He moved to the USA to study at MIT, where he received a doctorate in nuclear physics. From the USA he moved to Canada, where he has lived ever since.

border lives on the border of different nations, in-between different homelands. Migrancy exposes them to displacement, uprooting, fragmentation and discontinuity. They problematise dominant narratives of identity and belonging, which cannot accommodate those who live in-between. His characters mediate cross-cultural exchanges or transculturation and open new transnational spaces for identity and belonging.

> Over the years my attachment to the city that shaped me, Dar es Salaam, has remained, despite the changes in cityscape and demography and my belonging more and more elsewhere; when the political climate in Tanzania relaxed, I began to visit it more frequently. In my own way, then, I still belonged to Dar. Belonging is not a privilege given to you, it is not a choice you make; it is a feeling inside you. (Vassanji 32)

Displacement turns the diasporic subject's homeland into an imaginary construct, a series of narratives that he/she keeps with him/her. In Vassanji's foreword to *Uhuru Street*, he writes: "The Dar es Salaam of these stories is a place in the world of fiction. But it is the real Dar es Salaam, just as it is also the other towns there, on the coast and beyond, through which Uhuru Street runs and seeks access to the world." (xii) Vassanji's story cycle starts by locating "Uhuru Street as both a physical place and a construct with imaginative life in the minds and hearts of those who began life there." (Davis 10). Uhuru Street, an epitome of Dar es Salaam –or Tanzania–, is described as a city without borders; a city that "will follow you."[6]

> My first completed work was a collection of stories called *Uhuru Street* (1991). That street of my childhood runs through most of my fiction –a street beginning in the interior, heading for the ocean and the world, a metaphor for the aspirations of its clamouring children. (Vassanji 32-33)

As Ranjana Tripathi (168) points out, diasporas, as depicted in Vassanji's fictional world in the era of globalisation are better defined in terms of transnationalism networks with a dissolution of cultural and geographic borders among those who leave, those who stay and those who return. Transnational, hybrid and syncretic identities seem to go hand in hand in Vassanji's world. He illustrates this in an interview (Desai 197): "As East Africans, we were Asians and Africans, and my sons feel the same way, besides being Canadian. As Gujarati Khojas we could say Ali and Krishna in the same breath. (I am by no means religious now)." For Vassanji, identity multiplies, it is not to be understood as an "either/or" identification process that excludes, but rather an "and...then...and then..." appropriation of multiple singularities and specificities.

[6] This is a line from C.F. Cavafy's poem "The City," which according to Jacqueline Bardolph (1995) works as an intertext for the title of the short story collection.

UHURU STREET: A STREET WITH NO BORDERS

This short story cycle describes an immigrant world populated by members of the minority Ismaili community –Vassanji's community– which is a minority within a minority (Gujarati Khojas).[7] Double migration and diaspora, the leitmotivs of the cycle, set the scene for the interaction of Indians with the coloniser and the native Africans in a highly stratified tripartite society, and the socio-political frictions that push some Tanzanians of Indian descent to migrate to the Euro-American world from the 60s onwards. As Davis observes:

> Europeans, remnants of an imperial age, appear superior; the Africans are beneath the Indians in pre-independence Tanzania, although the roles are reversed after independence. This role-reversal, enacted in several stories, further suggests the inevitability of the departure of the Indians from Tanzania. (16-17)

This collection of short stories is divided by two historical moments, a historical milestone and a turning point that stays at the centre of the cycle. Independence arrives in the ninth story with the renaming of the street that epitomises the world of the Shamsis. Vassanji writes about it in his foreword: "Once Upon a time Uhuru Street was called Kichwele Street. The change marked a great event in the country. *Uhuru* means 'independence.' " (xi) The street serves as the stage for the changes in status and in the lives of Tanzanians of Indian descent in a socio-historical context marked by Independence. As a result, half of the stories are developed in a colonial context governed by the British, and the other half describes a Post-Independence world for Tanzanian Indians.

The public official narrative of history interacts with the private stories of its anonymous protagonists. Inscribed in the major historical landmark of the cycle (Independence), other different historical events leave their footprint in the lives and world of Vassanji's characters. The First World War, the visit of Queen Margaret to Dar es Salaam,[8] the campaign for Independence, just to quote a few examples, contribute to understand Vassanji's cycle as a retrospective account of the historical evolution of Tanzanian society.

[7] The word *Khoja* referred to those converted to Nizari Ismaili Islam in the Indian sub-continent from about the thirteenth century onwards. It included certain groups, predominantly from Gujarat and Kutch, who retained strong Indian ethnic roots and caste customs and maintained their Muslim religious identity. While the majority of Khojas remained Ismaili, one group became Ithna' ashari and a smaller group adopted Sunnism. (Asani 2011)

[8] This is a good example of how a historical event contributes to our understanding of the highly racialised context of pre-independent Tanzania. It is interesting to highlight the hyperbolic racialised overtones of this episode. There is a clear foregrounding of the metonymic whiteness of the princess's clothes as contrasted with the black mob "Sitting on Ali's shoulder and looking over the black, fuzzy heads of the mass of people, all straining their eyes and craning their necks, I saw the princess waving a white-gloved hand. Her dress was white and her wide-brimmed hat was also white". (18)

Emphasis is on the collective experience, a strong sense of community that permeates the cycle. One of the amalgamizing elements among the stories is the fact that, despite being peripheral, some of the characters appear in more than one story, as Davis suggests, to emphasise this idea of collectivity and promote "a collective self, shared by people with a common history and ancestry, providing a consistent frame of reference and meaning" (12) Vassanji's characters are connected by a wide range of circumstances: family relationships, friendship, ethnic group, or gender. They are caught in the labyrinth of identity either by being confronted by colonial divides, or by being subjected to a double displacement that leaves them in a desperate search to find their ambiguous affiliations somewhere in-between two worlds.

The stories in *Uhuru Street* come together as a story of generations new and old, the former searching for a new identity, the latter, fiercely holding onto the past. (Vahia 9088) They can be grouped following three thematic lines: Intra-community dealings, inter-racial/inter-community relations, and emigration.

INTRACOMMUNITY DEALINGS WITHIN A HIGHLY STRATIFIED INDIAN COMMUNITY

The Indian narrator of the first story, "In the Quiet of a Sunday Afternoon," lives a life that has been designed for him and woven out of cultural threads articulated by the social pressure and demands of the community. His mother was African, something that will work as a social marker in his life: "we all have a name here. They think I don't know they call me 'Black.' " (2) The narrator is aware of his own genealogy: "I was an orphan half-caste when I married, mother black. I was brought up by an Indian family, half servant and half son, and the night following the arrival of Good Kulsum and German with their proposal, I was told to take it." (9) Although relationships of dependence may be established between the races, boundaries are kept clear, never to be trespassed. Black is going to be signified as Black no matter what life choices he makes. He lives in a colonial world where hierarchies are to be respected.

The identity of Tanzanian Indians was a permanent collective construction, as they placed each other according to class or native village and introduced themselves by tracing their genealogies. German, the narrator's father-in-law, stands as the paragon of an old generation that embraces such values. When German breaks into the neighbour's home to inspect his son-in-law's new acquaintance, he starts the conversation in a rather intimidating way.

> 'You are the daughter of Jamal Mehiji,' he said at length.
> 'Yes,' said Zarina.
> German loudly cleared his throat as if he were about to spit on the floor, then shuffled off to the door, stuck his head out and spat.
> 'I knew your father,' he said when he returned. 'What town was he from?'
> 'Mbinga,' she answered.
> 'I know that! Where in India?'

'I don't know. In Cutch or Gujarat somewhere.'
'Mudra,' he said, nodding at me. 'I remember when he came to Africa.'
She said nothing (6)

A generational clash lies behind this conversation. German, who is well aware of the hierarchies that sustain his respectable world of small shopkeepers, pushes Zarina, who does not seem to be so well informed –or even preoccupied– about her own Indian ancestry. For German the Indian pedigree is crucial to understand one's position within the community; for Zarina it does not seem to be an operative signifier any longer. He despises her for coming from a "third class family" (7), as much as, he abominates the children who play in the street: "they are all pigs, all of them." (7) German defines himself in opposition to these members of his own community that do not share his socio-economic status. The narrator, feeling himself an outsider in a world he does not belong to and which is organised around fixed social positions, resolves to leave behind his family to start a new life with Zarina.

Vassanji points at the remarkable social stratification that characterises the Tanzanian Indian community, in which among many other ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences, class or socioeconomic status stand out above all the rest. In "The Relief from Drill," the narrator's brother, who is aware of the importance of social status within his community, tries to improve the lives of the members of his fatherless household by pretending to buy cheap items in an African outdoor market but spending his mother's savings downtown, instead. When the main character persuades the whole family to accept his buying bargains in the African market, the narrator comments: "for a few weeks the quality of life at home improved appreciably. Precisely those things we could not afford to have –whose absence betrayed our modest status, try as hard as we might to hide it– we could now get cheaply. At half the price or less." (45) This family is a good representative of those Tanzanian Indians who, despite not being wealthy business people and although their lives as small shopkeepers were closer to African lives in Zone III, still occupied a very differentiated social position from that of Africans. This is specially clear when the narrator describes the mnada (the open-air market):

> The mnada was not a respectable place to shop in because of the type of people believed to hang around there-jobless Africans from the districts, and thieves... And then, popular belief had it, especially in the Indian shops, that the newer and more decent articles there were 'hot' and for that reason dispatched quickly by auction every evening. If an item was stolen from your shop, the chances were that you would find it in the mnada by evening. You could even send your servant to buy it back. (44)

Both the boy narrator and his brother have internalised a segregating discourse under which Africans are denigrated and considered as thieves and criminals. The circulation of such stereotypes has constructed the Mnada street market as a place inhabited by non-respectable peoples in the imagination of these two boys. The narrator's brother wants to enjoy the privileges that the market has allowed him to have, but he does not dare to cross certain boundaries.

Although Tanzanian Indians defined their identity, generally in opposition to that of the Africans, Vassanji tries to move away from the essentialisation of the Indian community by drawing attention to the differences in perception even within the South Asian community. Every subgroup generally keeps its boundaries closed to the other Indian ethnicities. A good example of this is to be found in "Alzira" when the narrator comments: "the Pereras were Goans and their affairs of little interest to the rest of us." (20) Loyalty to one's ethnic group is evidenced over and over again. This is sharply dramatized in the contrasting reactions of the boy narrator and the Goan Alzira towards Tembombili, "one of Dar's several crazies, a small, thin, Goan man," (27) when he is almost beaten up by a mob and rescued by Alzira's brother, Pius.

INTERCOMMUNITY RELATIONS BETWEEN AFRICANS AND INDIANS

Although *Uhuru Street* is a celebration of ethnic diversity, Vassanji denounces the cruelties that have been addressed in both directions, from Indians to Africans and from Africans to Indians. Vassanji's stories embrace multiplicity and diversity in Tanzania, as the narrator in "For a Shilling" describes, Uhuru Street was: "(t)he crazy world of our daily associations-of Arabs, Africans, Asians and assorted half-castes..." (35).

However, Vassanji's stories focus on the frictions these cultural and ethnic interactions brought about in a society that is clearly divided upon racial lines. Each community has constructed its own identity in opposition to the other racial group, which unavoidably gives way to a constant social unrest that reinforces and distances one group from the other. In "The Sounds of the Night," the young narrator experiences this tension when he bumps into an African man who is heading to the mosque:

> 'Where are you going to, child?' he said.
> 'To the mosque.'
> 'The Indian mosque. What do you do there?'
> 'We pray.'
> 'You don't pray, you make fun!' He started mocking. 'Ai-yai-yai-yai,' he sang in a high-pitched voice.'
> Partisanship got the better of me and in a rage I cried, 'We don't make fun! We pray! It is *you* who makes fun!' (67)

The man's ridiculing intention and devaluation of Indians ratifies a divided world that the boy has already internalised when he is about to get to the Indian mosque, which happens to be placed side by side with the African mosque, and specifies which mosque he belongs to: "Not his but ours." (66).

Vassanji illustrates a world governed by racial divides, and even in those stories that are not primarily focused on intercommunity conflicts, we can find evidences of these frictions. This is the case of "The Driver," in which the narrator

illustrates the many intercommunity tensions in an episode that describes the fights between the Africans and the Arabs in Tanzania:

> Early in the morning, every day, a truck came to deliver meat and the event almost always ended at the brink of bloodshed. At an innocuous seeming moment one of the African delivery boys would put a palm to his lips, blow a tremendous fart, and muttering Y'Allah!' like an Arab, pause for a moment. This was the cue. One of the younger butchers would come running out, brandishing a knife, an axe or a steel, swearing in Arabic. 'You son of a dog! Your father's arse!' (53)

Idi the driver, the main character in the story, dismisses violent behaviours and he does not want to be associated with the delivery boys: "In contrast the delivery boys came barefoot and in tatters, hauling large hunks of bloody beef on their backs. No, he thought, as he reached the car, he was definitely not one of them." (53) He wants to move up the social ladder: "He was a driver trained by another driver at the District Commissioner's office in his village and hoping for a government job." (53)

The most devastating story in the cycle is the episode narrated in "What Good Times We Had," which describes the climate of hostility between Tanzanian Indians and Africans in a Post-Independence context that seems to have reversed the social roles[9] between them: "There was a price for everything here. And after all that, there was no peace to be had even at night, time for fear of robbers. They lived on the edge, not knowing if they would be pushed off the precipice the next." (93) The protagonist, a young woman who feels nostalgia for the past in which Indians were privileged and who is determined to leave the country that is not offering her many more opportunities, sees her dream falling to pieces the moment she is brutally attacked, raped and killed by the man who sells her the flight ticket to move to Canada. When the protagonist realises her inevitable fate, she associates the imminent criminal act she is about to be victim of with an escalating violence that has been historically constructed between African and Indian Tanzanians: "And she thought of all the black men she had presided over almost all her thirty-seven years with scorn...Was this revenge, or plain avarice?" (95) Vassanji inscribes this episode of violence within a systemic violence apparatus that has neatly woven the tension between these two communities.

Apart from the conflicts generated by the difficult coexistence between Africans and Indians in Tanzania, Vassanji tackles the issue of inter-racial relationships, one of the greatest taboos among these communities. This is a fear that is articulated by the resistant mother in "Leaving", who, after giving her blessing to her son Aloo to depart to North America, warns him: "Promise me...promise

[9] This change in Tanzanian Indians' social position is especially observed in "Ebrahim and the Business man" which illustrates the effects of the Africanization of Tanzania upon Indian Tanzanian business men: "What Teja was referring to was the recent take-over of properties that were let out for rent in a socialisation move by the government." (98)

me that if I let you go, you will not marry a white woman." (78) Vassanji describes the clash between old and new values in a Pre and Post-Independence world by contrasting two stories with very different resolutions.

"Ali," the second story in the cycle reveals the implausibility of Inter-racial relationships in colonial times. Ali starts serving at a "modest Indian household" because he is regarded as a suitable village boy: "You could not easily mistake him for one of those shifty characters who made a living by unpegging some item hanging for sale in a crowded store and making a dash for it." (13) The hierarchies within the colonial world and the general insecurity to which Africans are subjected serve as a backdrop for the story: "If he was smart enough, he would pick up the requisite skills and sooner or later move on to employment in a richer home, finally even with a European family –who could tell?" (13) Vassanji describes a stratified society where Indians would occupy a mid-position between the affluent Europeans and the oppressed Africans.

Ali fulfils the social expectations that have been drawn for him till that day he is caught by the narrator: "leaning against the top of the bathroom door and, face pressed against the metal bars, ... looking down through the ventilator window above it at my sister Mehroon taking her afternoon bath. Upon hearing me, he stared, looked at me, and jumped lightly down on the floor. 'I shall marry her.' " (19) Ali's peeping is not what has him dismissed, but his attempt to blur the boundaries that exist between an African servant and the daughter of an Indian household. His worst crime is to attempt to break the taboo of an inter-racial relation and imagine an unknowable and unconceivable future for himself by crossing the line that divides Indians and Africans. Racial stereotypes and vexatious behaviour addressed towards Africans in colonial Tanzania resonate throughout the story; the Mother ridicules him and mocks him on more than one occasion, such as, for example when she intimidates him by asking about his abilities: "Do you clean latrines? Yes Mama, yes Mama, yes Mama, he would answer; and then, only if she liked him, she'd come out with: 'And can you steal?' catching his 'Yes Mama' with a mischievous glint in her eye before he could quite suppress it. (14) Racist stereotypes and cruelties against Africans relate them with marginality and criminality in the Indian collective unconscious.

In Post-Independence Tanzania new opportunities are to be given to those who venture into inter-racial relations. "Breaking Loose" describes the story of Yasmin Rajan, an Indian Tanzanian university student, and Daniel Akoto, "a professor of sociology, on loan from the Government of Ghana" (83). They need to face her family's opposition to their relationship –when her parents meet the professor in their store: " 'There are no friendships with men -not with men we don't know...' The world is not ready for it-' " (87)–, as much as their own contradictions and discussions about ethnic authenticity. The professor's approach to Yasmin underpins a process of identity consciousness in the character: "At first her acknowledgement of her origins seemed to her a reaction against Akoto, the African; yet it seemed to be harking back to the authenticity he had been talking about." (88) It is through her inter-racial relationship with Akoto that she discovers her own identity as a hybrid:

> People, bound by their own histories and traditions, seemed to her like puppets tied to strings: but then a new mutant broke loose, an event occurred, and lives changes, the world changed. She was, she decided, a new mutant. (88)

Vassanjji opens new fluid subject locations, where characters such as Yasmin, affirm their Indian African identity as hyphenated subjects that mutate in multiple ways.

EMIGRATION: CROSSING THE BORDERS OF IMAGINED LANDS

Some of the stories in the cycle –more specifically "Leaving," "What Good Times We Had," "The London-returned," "Refugee" and "All Worlds are Possible Now"– are haunted by the inevitability of the departure of Indians from Post-Independence Tanzania. A clear example of this is to be found in the main character's thoughts in "Refugee", when he arrives in Germany: "How stupid, he thought, to venture out like this into the unknown. But he had been pushed out, ever so gently. From a sitting-room full of family in Dar into this utter, utter loneliness under an alien sky." (122) Physical, emotional and psychological displacement are experienced by these characters that feel compelled to leave their country. When the narrator in "The London-retuned" gets divorced from Amina, who decides to go back to Dar es Salaam, he re-evaluates his life in Toronto: "I tell myself I walked too far, too north, and left too much behind. We inhabited a thin and marginal world in Toronto, the two of us." (111) Furthermore, the narrator feels doubly displaced. He does not feel rooted anywhere, either in Toronto, or in Tanzania, where, as a London-returned, he was an outsider who went back just for holidays. One of those summers, he met Amina and "these two worlds met." (106) His already problematic sense of belonging is questioned once again when their world together collapses the moment Amina starts building up her community with friends who would gradually settle down with their families in Toronto: "Slowly, Toronto, their Toronto became like Dar, and I [the narrator] was out of it." (112)

As Davis observes: "Life changes for those who leave Dar es Salaam. Geographical distance alters perceptions and modifies attitudes. The stories that tell of immigrant lives emphasize the need to revalidate and accept, or reject, what had been learned at home". (20) Whereas Amina's departure from Tanzania affirms her belonging to her community, the narrator's double displacement -from Dar es Salaam to London and from London to Toronto- leaves him in a limbic space where it is hard to fully belong. The same narrator will be the main character in "All Worlds are Possible Now," which describes his return to Dar in search of home; a home that has become a very problematic concept for him. On his first day back, the narrator identifies a Dar es Salaam that has been constructed and imagined: "It looks the same... Or do I imagine, delude myself it is the same?" (131) Displacement turns the narrator's homeland into an imaginary construct, which is subjected to the fabrications of memory. In fact, Vassanji's story foregrounds the complexity

that is added to the concept of home in relation to the migrant experience. In a conversation with an old teacher and an old classmate, the difficulties to identify what home is for first generation migrants are reflected.

> 'Yes. But what is home?' he said.
> Fahndo and Almeida, like many of our other Indian teachers, came to East Africa as young men, unlike most of us, their students, who were second and third generation Africans.
> 'The whole world is our home. It's a global village' grinned Lateef. (135)

These two representatives of the second and third generation of Africans of Indian descent live a second Indian diaspora, which makes it difficult for them to go back to India, as their frame of reference, as their motherland. Likewise, they have a problematic relationship to situate Indianness as a transcendental signifier for their identity and sense of belonging. Instead, Lateef is calling for an open, globalising and transnational understanding of "home", a space with no clear borders, a crossroads of multiple cultural and social negotiations. Both Lateef and the narrator have left Dar and finally returned. They epitomise the ever-existing and on-going transnational linkages across the Indian Ocean world: "The ships that pass here no longer carry portents of faraway impossible worlds." (130) These faraway worlds are no longer impossible or strange. These two characters belong there, here, and somewhere in-between. They are the product of transnationalism, cosmopolitanism and universalism, as they have crossed the threshold of different geographical and cultural contexts. As migrant subjects, they occupy fluid enabling spaces in-between, which allow them to revisit old certainties about identity and belonging.

This story works as a coda for the cycle. It seems a concluding story, in which the narrator realises that there is no "plain longing for a home, a permanence" (139) for him, but a careful understanding of a vibrant city that seems to be constantly changing.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Uhuru Street explores the intrinsic diversity that defines Tanzanian society within the framework of the Indian Ocean world. The cycle contains a series of episodic stories that are organised chronologically around Independence and focus on the lives of Africans of Indian descent. Vassanji analyses the complexities of an extremely hierarchical society which has been divided along racial lines since colonial times. His fictional world provides a good vantage point to observe the complex subjective processes of double displacement and the problematic negotiations of intracommunity and transcultural dealings, affecting those who live, those who leave, and those who return to Dar es Salaam, a city which hosts a cosmopolitan population that includes an Indian diaspora and reflects the legacy of long relations with various locations across the Indian Ocean World.

According to Hofmeyr, "[a]t every turn the Indian Ocean complicates binaries, moving us away from the simplicities of the resistant local and the

dominating global and toward a historically deep archive of competing universalisms." (722) Vassanji's stories conclude with a promising note in this direction. His last narrator's identity seems not to respond to the historically constructed associations with ancestral Indianness, as it is not defined in opposition to Africans, either. This character seems to inhabit a more fluid and enabling space that complicates the binaries of his world. He is an outsider, and as such, he does not fully belong to one single place. He is the sum total of his life experiences in Dar es Salaam, London and Toronto and his identity is an open process that never ceases to become Other.

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EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES OF ETHNIC FLUIDITY WITHIN THE WRITINGS OF RONNIE GOVENDER

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Abstract

This paper explores how the fiction writer and playwright, Ronnie Govender, narrates Asian diasporic identity in the context of South African society. I shall depart from the premise that this Indian presence is ambiguous inasmuch as its subjectivity must negotiate the ontological categories of both whiteness and blackness. With this triangulated relationship in mind, I shall proceed to evidence how Govender delivers a layered reading of ethnic fluidity and how this was historically curtailed by a white minority who, systematically, dynamited conviviality as a means to shore up its own privilege. The principal texts employed in this study shall be: *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, *At The Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*, and *Black Chin White Chin: The Song of the Atman*.

Keywords: South African Asian, Ethnic Belonging, White Supremacy, Racial Ambiguity.

LOS DESAFÍOS DE LA FLUIDEZ ÉTNICA EN LAS OBRAS DE RONNIE GOVENDER

Resumen

Este articulo explora cómo el dramaturgo y autor de ficción, Ronnie Govender, narra la identidad diaspórica dentro del contexto de la sociedad surafricana. Mi premisa de arranque es que la presencia india en Suráfrica es ambigua en cuanto a que representa una subjetividad en la que se negocian las categorías ontológicas de lo blanco y lo negro. Con esta relación triangulada en mente, procederé a evidenciar como Govender presenta una lectura multifacética de la fluidez étnica y como ésta se vio históricamente truncada por una minoría blanca quien, de una forma sistemática, dinamitó la convivencia dentro de Suráfrica como una estrategia para garantizar sus privilegios. Para este estudio me centraré sobre todo en los siguientes textos: *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, *At The Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*, and *Black Chin White Chin: The Song of the Atman*.

Palabras clave: asiático surafricano, pertenencia étnica, supremacía blanca, ambigüedad racial.

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A recurring strategy within colonial administrative practices has been to afford minority groups privileges over the wider population as a means of control. As Amy Chua (2004: 2-15) evidences, free market democracy displays a similar tendency to replicate this colonial practice, and a cursory glance at the superior financial positions of the Lebanese community in West Africa, the Jewish community within post-Soviet Russia, or the Chinese diaspora residing in the Philippines, bears out this premise. Both in historical and contemporary contexts, the ambivalent positioning of Asians within East and South Africa speaks of a similar strategy. This community, oftentimes, displays an inter-community affiliation that is stronger than their identification with the nation state, and this gravitation towards cultural autonomy, coupled with an ingrained tradition of self-betterment, makes the Asian population both an object of suspicion and a target for criticism within the collective African imaginary. Being more economically successful also intensifies the perception of Asians as an outsider group, and their subsequent demonising is coloured, in great part, by the overall lack of social entropy within post-independence Africa. For many Asians, their sense of belonging becomes problematised, and their affiliation can often lie outside the African nation space.

I. THE COMMITMENT TO CONVIVIALITY

The majority of the (limited) academic articles accrued on Ronnie Govender situate his oeuvre within a diasporic aesthetics, grouped under the label of South African Indian writing[1]. Govender, however, is at pains to reject this classification and, in his poem "Who Am I?," the author has the following to say: "I am of Africa / Surging within the spirit / Of the Umgeni as it flows from Drakensberg / Through the Valley of a Thousand Hills" (quoted in Chetty 2). Here, we find a filiation with the physical landscape and the cultural dimensions of South Africa, and it is upon these the author projects his imagination. Whilst this question of belonging may, at first, seem ancillary when set against the task of analysing the author's fictional work, it is, on the contrary, of prime importance. I realise that one should never confuse the real-life author with his/her narrators, yet it is evident how the author's afro-centric position seeps into the imaginative process of recreating a historical period that saw the transition to full-blown apartheid.

One must situate Govender's sense of Africanness against his community which, traditionally, occupied a third space within both South Africa and East Africa. This has a historical antecedent where, as Ojwang (2013: 118) evidences, Asians in Africa were victims of the imperial practice of creating tiered societies of an oppositional nature. The administration of colonial Kenya, Uganda, Zanzibar and Tanganyika, for example, was configured through an almost identical three-tier racial system where the Indians acted as a social buffer between Africans and

[1] Taking my cue from Dan Ojwang (2013) I use the term Indian and Asian indiscriminately.

Europeans. Within this colonial configuration, Indians effectively became middle men and were denied the opportunity of adopting a natural organic hybridity towards Africanness.

A recurring theme that emerges from fictional texts of the Asian writers in Africa is how they attempt, and often fail, to negotiate a cultural space that accommodates both their Indian and African identities. Compared to the white settler communities of East and South Africa, Asians have always lived in much closer proximity to Africans and this has made them more vulnerable to racial conflict. They were victims of the imperial practice of creating tiered societies of an oppositional nature, and the administration of colonial Kenya, Uganda, Zanzibar and Tanganyika, for example, was configured through an almost identical three-tier racial system where the Indians acted as a social buffer between Africans and Europeans (Ojwang 118). Within this colonial configuration, Indians effectively became middle men and were denied the opportunity of adopting a natural organic hybridity. When one looks at the work of Moyez Vassanji, for example, one can detect an overall pervading sense of pessimism as regards the Indian presence in Africa and this, I claim, is informed by his personal sense of ambiguity regarding his own identity. As a literary trope, this in-betweenness is often narrated as being conflictive and debilitating rather than providing agency. Particularly, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) documents the exclusion of Asians from meaningful engagement within the new Kenyan nation, and in a revealing aside, the book's focal character, Vikram, describes himself as:

> [...] a young Asian graduate in an African country, with neither the prestige of whiteness behind me, nor the influence and numbers of a local tribe to back me, but carrying instead the stigma from a generalized recent memory of an exclusive race of brown 'Shylocks' who had collaborated with the colonizers. (Vassanji 238)

While one might argue that these sentiments refer, moreover, to recent historical events rather than to contemporary realities, the lines of friction that arise in Vassanji's narration of Kenyan *uhuru* (freedom) are still present within South Africa. Karen Flint (2006), for example, looks at Mbongeni Ngema's song *Amandiya* (2002), whose lyrics singled out the Natal Indian minority as being the cause of Zulu poverty. Ngema's song (which subsequently went viral) incited Zulus to rise up and attack the local Asian population whom they perceived to be an abusive merchant class (Flint 367). This is not to say that the Asian presence is solely construed in negative terms, yet this pervading image of the Indian *dukawalla* (the archetypal shopkeeper/small businessman who is solely interested in self-betterment at the expense of the communal good) is a stereotype that Asian writers in East and South Africa struggle against. Govender's insistence on fluidity over ethnic exclusivism is thus not just a case of literary *buonismo* but, instead, it represents a contra-narrative that contests the received perception of Indians as insular and self-serving. As such, Govender's work is the expression of a hybrid consciousness inasmuch as it is the product of a diasporic imagination channelled through an African affiliation. The history of indenture in South Africa is a continual presence within his works, and in the 2008

novelistic re-rendering of his earlier play, *The Lahnee's Pleasure* (1976), Govender uses the image of the Indian kitchen gardens of Cato Manor as a means to convey the cultural transformations of Indians in South Africa. Govender's forefathers, having transported seeds across the Indian ocean, plant them in African soil where (almost miraculously) they take and flourish. Contra the cultural taboo of the *kala pani* (black water) where the abandonment of the Indian subcontinent results in a loss of *varna* and the contamination of one's "pure" identity, the cultivated paw-paw, avocado, mango, guava, etc (all of which become an African staple) speak of the rhizomatic nature of this Indian/African identity. Through the organic symbol of the transplanted seeds, we come to see how Govender references his direct filiation to the African soil and, by extension, to his sense of rootedness which, simultaneously, is informed by his Indian heritage. "Call of the Muezzin ... To a Slow Samba Beat," for example, uses this motif of transplantation to show how this Asian presence has become naturalised in the eyes of Africans. Elias, the young Zulu, assures the reader that, while the Whites who lived in the Berea ridge called the plants "exotic," for him and other Cato Manor Zulus, "the pungent aroma of the curry leaves ... was as natural as daylight" (121).

Rajendra Chetty (2017) remarks that the author considered his grandfather's market garden at Cato Manor as a kind of paradise on earth, yet this same rhizomatic symbol that we find through the seeds transported across the Indian Ocean simultaneously comes to represent a locus of trauma. Govender has spoken about the destruction of the kitchen gardens in Cato Manor as being an event that has stayed with him for the rest of his life, and in his interview with Chetty (2001 247) he states that his sense of outrage actually served to "intensify my already strong sense of belonging to the district." The expulsion of all Indians from Cato Manor was the result of the 1950s Group Areas Acts which signalled the destruction of townships throughout South Africa.[2] The dismantling of multi-ethnic areas such as Cato Manor reconfigured those heterogeneous urban spaces into racially segregated areas and forced ethnic groupings to live and work apart. As Lemon (1991 8) argues, the ideology of apartheid served to thwart a transition from "conflict pluralism to a more open pluralistic society," and at the ideological centre of these Group Areas Acts was the idea of social segregation as a strategy to limit interracial contact and its revolutionary potential. In this light, Chetty (2017 38) has described Govender's work as "the vital memory of multiracial living in Cato Manor in a way that contributes to the new national identity; it reminds audiences and readers of the possibility of harmonious interracial existence." In particular, Chetty (33) considers *At The Edge: And Other Cato Manor Stories* as a "text-site of memory" in the sense that Govender's imaginative reconstruction of this township is a microcosmic representation of the revolutionary potential encapsulated within heterogeneity. "Over My Dead Body"

[2] This reconfiguration of the nation into an apartheid state had already been in the making and the previous 1946 Asiatic Land Tenure Act had already limited the amount of land Indians could buy.

makes a specific reference to the destruction of this conviviality through the character of Thinga who resists eviction from his Cato Manor homestead. In a specific (and ironic) reference to Gandhi, Thinga performs an act of passive resistance, the only option left open to him in the face of steamroller apartheid, and his fatal heart attack whilst remaining on his small plot of land becomes his last and futile gesture.

Given the repressive nature of white hegemony, which Govender himself suffered under, one might think a more belligerent attitude towards the white settler community would be present in his books and plays. This, however, is not the case, and the understated way in which he addresses the mechanisms of white oppression, coupled with the ecumenical treatment of his white characters, gives witness to this. In *Black Chin White Chin: Song of The Atman*,[3] we find a camaraderie between "Stomps" Diederichs, a conservative Boer from the Platteland, Rooks Duvenage, a Coloured man, and Chin Govender. As such, the relationship performs a textual imaging of a non-racialised South African society, despite the fact that Diederichs is, himself, a supporter of the imminent 1951 Group Areas Act, an ideological positioning that, one might infer, would be sufficient grounds to end this ethnically triangulated friendship. In the case of "Stomps," whilst he is ideologically suspicious of miscegenation, when Chin initiates an erotic affair with his white employer, Greta Schmeling, he comes to see this relationship between the White emigre woman and Chin as "the most natural thing in the world" (151). By holding an abstract belief system in creative conflict with contradictory attitudes generated by concrete situations, Govender thus provides his readers with a template for understanding the complexities of a heterogeneous South Africa.

II. NEGOTIATING WHITE EXCEPTIONALISM

While Govender's work does not essentialise all white identities, it does, nonetheless, examine how Asian, Coloured and Black communities were all victims of white exceptionalism. *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, one of the most successful plays staged by an author of Indian origin in South Africa, in this sense, explores the complexities surrounding racial segregation and how white racist ideologies fomented division. The author employs a pastiche English pub, divided into a Coloured and Asian area and a whites-only section, as his microcosmic representation of a tiered South African society where real and symbolic oppression was exercised upon the non-white other. Staged in 1974, the play's form was considered revolutionary as it was the first of its kind to use the patois of South African Indians. The author employs a (deceptive) humour that serves to bring to light the contradictory attitudes that Asians held towards whites and, for example, when the manual labourer, Mothie,

[3] The book was first published under the title *Song of the Atman*. In subsequent publications this title became a sub-title.

is discussing cultural differences with Sunny, the Asian barmen and the Stranger, the audience is informed that:

> Our girls don't use that (deodorant). You know why? They must bath every day when they light the god lamp. We don't eat beef and pork. We don't smell like the white people. Out girls don't smell like the white girls... every day, when I'm on the tractor, my boss's daughters come and play fools with me [...] Me I hold my nose and run away. (21)

The tone of *The Lahnee's Pleasure* is, in parts, reminiscent of V.S Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *Miguel Street* (1959) in that both use versions of Indian patois and employ humour as a form of social criticism. There is, however, a marked difference in the attitude each author displays as regards their writing material and this difference is illuminating. Naipaul always establishes a cultural superiority to his characters and his narrative point of view persistently speaks from an alienated subjectivity that looks upon Trinidadian society with certain disdain. This is always juxtaposed with the author's own cosmopolitan identity which informs his narrative point of view, and this mechanism is most evident in *The Mimic Men* (1967) where Ralph Singh speaks about moving from the darkness to the light in an analogy of the abandoning of his Caribbean island for London. Whilst Govender may use a similar brand of local colour humour like Naipaul, the authorial subjectivity is always embedded within the community and the doses of humour provide a strategic contrast to issues of power relationships that the play wishes to address.

Sexual surveillance is a predominate concern within the diasporic Indian community and, as such, it is treated in the play with an ironic tone. Whilst, at first, the eloping of Mothie's 15-year-old daughter, which is given an ironic treatment, may seem to be the play's central theme, what emerges from the margins of the text is a much more serious reflection on the colour lines drawn out by white hegemony. The Stranger and the bar man, Sunny, for example, enter into a discussion on the question of active resistance to racism versus a tactic of strategic subservience, and whilst the Stranger will not use sir to address a white person and is prepared to challenge white supremacy at every call, Sunny accepts white authority which, in the play, is embodied by the figure of the Lahnee (term used in South Africa for boss). Sunny and Mothie represent a humiliated consciousness and both look for recognition in the eyes of their respective *lahnees*. Amid a moment of tension in the Asian and Coloured part of the bar, the Lahnee enters the scene, wanting to know what the ruckus is about. The Lahnee takes an interest in the case of Mothie's missing daughter, and he contacts the police station to let them know that an Asian is on his way to file a complaint and that he is to be treated well at his behest. Now back from the police station with the promise that they are looking for his daughter, a drunken Mothie causes a scene. The Lahnee imitates Mothie's accent and suggests that all Indians are too emotional and irrational, at which the Stranger becomes indignant and assures the audience that, "When these guys were walking around in caves wearing animal skins our people were building temples in India" (34-35). The Lahnee wishes to defuse this tension by offering the Stranger a drink (he employs

the term "Sammy," a derogatory term used by white patrons to refer to Indian waiters in the Durban area) but the Stranger refuses and leaves in a sign of protest. Sunny and Mothie, on the contrary, see the Lahnee's patronising attitude as a case of knock-about humour and, here, Govender makes a subtle allusion to how Asians internalised their subservient attitude towards white domination. In this respect, the false *bonhomie* established between the white boss and the Indians is telling inasmuch as it speaks of the ambiguous in-between nature of Asians vis-à-vis the category of black and white. In the final scene, Mothie tells the Lahnee not to "worry about him [the Stranger], boss. You want I must sing for you, boss" and starts singing and dancing whilst Sunny and the Lahnee clap along (42). This show of subservience and the feigned conviviality of the Lahnee as a strategy to maintain the white status quo is the text's true theme and, when set against the comic elements of the play, it produces a greater effect upon the audience.

In comparison to the 2008 version of *The Lahnee's Pleasure,* the playscript, in its documenting of the epistemological violence exercised upon South African Indians, leans more towards pessimism as regards subaltern agency. Whilst the characters of the Stranger and Johnnie within the play do resist being pigeonholed as the archetypal and subservient "Sammy," the overall tone of the play speaks of the ubiquitous nature of racial oppression. The novel, in contrast, offers much more instances of the empowerment of Asians, and this I see as being a product of the date of publication. South Africa had transitioned from an institutionalised apartheid state to a pluriethnic nation, and Govender, in his re-writing of the 1974 play, brings to the fore the inactivated potentials present within it. For example, in the book's epilogue, we learn that the hotel where the bar is located has been bought by South African Indian businessmen. When representatives from Hulett Sugar want to know why they wish to buy the White House Hotel, they are told that it is because it overlooks the sugar-cane fields where the businessmen's grandparents toiled as indentured labourers. Whilst in the play the Lahnee holds a position of privilege, the novel challenges this perceived power. The Lahnee, now ironically called Richard So-So, is characterised as the son of a "Covent garden barrow boy" and, in an attempt to mask his true class identity, he emulates an elite accent (29). Robert Young (2008) in his *The Idea of English Ethnicity* looks at how notions of Englishness were never really about England per se but, rather, were fabrications of ethnic traits that served as a template for those who did not reside within England. As an identity, Englishness was, moreover, a question of an imperial affiliation with this fabricated identity and, as Young informs us:

> Englishness was created for the diaspora –an ethnic identity designed for those who were precisely not English, but rather of English descent [...] New Zealanders, South Africans [...]. Englishness was constructed as a translatable identity that could be adopted or appropriated anywhere by anyone who cultivated the right language, looks, and culture. (1-2)

In moments of tension, the Lahnee's true Cockney accent emerges from behind this appropriation, and the false sense of entitlement encoded within Mr.

So-So's performance as an imperial subject opens him up to ridicule in front of his subalterns. In this way, the fixity of the Lahnee's power is deconstructed, yet, rather than cast Mr So-So as an out-and-out bigot, the text prefers to explore the manner in which white identities are also contradictory and fragile. As with the character of "Stomps' Diederichs in *Black Chin White Chin*, the narrator in *The Lahnee's Pleasure* leaves a door open for the imagining of conviviality within South Africa rather than vilify white identity as a means of revenge for past wrongs. The narrator, "in fairness to him, and to get the picture as much into focus as possible" situates the Lahnee as a voter of Helen Suzman's (an anti-apartheid activist and MP) Progressive Party, although he may secretly endorse an apartheid state (13). This inherent contradiction within his subjectivity, it is soon revealed, can be traced back to his special predilection for his "melanin-overloaded" nanny, Matilda, who "he actually thought was his mother" to the extent that: "Even now he loves the smell of carbolic soap because it was the soap that Matilda regularly used in her daily bath" (14). Here, the unconscious memory of ethnic fluidity disturbs the vision of South Africa as a racially segregated society which is impressed upon him during his training as hotel manager where it was stressed that "in order to be a good manager he had to keep the Char Ous [the Indians] and the Pekkie Ous [the Chinese] who worked under him in their place" (14). As a means to re-address the underlying pessimism of the original play, Sunny, who the narrator also refers to on several occasions as "Blithering Idiot No 1" becomes the new manager of the White House Hotel and appropriates the identity of the Lahnee through a mimicking of Mr So-So's prestige accent (34-174). Meanwhile, the disgraced Mr So-So whittles away his lump-sum severance pay on liquor, sleeps in the Salvation Army Relief Hostel, and plays "God Save the Queen" on his accordion to passers-by. Whilst Govender is normally effective in his use of humour as a means of political satire, I see the above as heavy-handed and far-fetched inasmuch as the narrative's will to re-address those humiliations suffered under apartheid clouds his artistic judgement. It is evident that the denouement of the 1998 version of the *The Lahnee's Pleasure* is written from a perspective that simply wishes to overturn the wrongs of the past. When one compares this simple flipping over of the colonial paradigm against Ashwin Singh's *To House* (2014), we find that the latter provides the audience with a fuller vision on the complexities of an Asian collective negotiating their space with a post-independence South Africa. Set in a middle-class suburb of Durban, Singh's play provides a radioscopic analysis of reconciliation against the entanglement of power relationships where one group's gain spells another's loss. *To House*, in this respect, shows how, within the new configurations of power within South Africa, Asians may still suffer from racialised mindsets inherited from the old regime.

III. NARRATING THE CHALLENGES TO ETHNIC FLUIDITY

The *At The Edge* collection of stories examines how Asians were compromised within the Machiavellian dynamics of segregation, and Govender explores how the Indians of Cato Mano, Chatsworth, and other townships became the scapegoat of a fledgling apartheid state that aimed to consolidate its hegemony. Daniel Francois Malan, prime minister with the National Party from 1948 to 1954, said of the Indian population that, "as a race in this country, [it] is an alien element in the population, and that no solution of this question will be acceptable to the country unless it results in a very considerable reduction of the Indian population" (Quoted in Chetty 107). In "1949" Dumisane, who is originally from KwaZulu-Natal but now resides in the Cato Manor quarter, becomes the focal character who attempts to create a bridge of understanding between Africans and Asians. The fact that his children are not allowed to attend the Cato Manor government-aided Indian School, however, is just one example of how a white hegemony wished to thwart racial mixing and inter-communal understanding. Govender, however, is careful to provide a nuanced vision of the ways in which fluidity can be compromised, and we see how Dumi also feels slighted by his Asian landlord, Mr Maniram, who is disdainful towards him. This attitude, I suggest, corresponds to an inherited ideology of caste superiority that is applied to an African context and which sours conviviality. As with the other stories in this collection, the narrative in "1949" explores the complexities that inform the triangulated relationship between Asians, Africans and Whites. As regards the latter, Percival Osborne, Dumi's boss who is first described as "reasonable," assures us that, "The races were different and that's the way it should stay," and here the reader understands how, behind his façade of equanimity, lies an ingrained denial of egalitarianism (112). As Osborne's chauffeur, Dumi is present at the family's New Year's Party in Kloof where the crowd urge him to sing black spirituals and Louis Armstrong songs. Astounded at Dumi's performance, Osborne observes that, "if he were white he would have been singing at a beach front hotel or on the radio," yet his feigned tolerance soon evaporates when a middle-class Asian family move into his white neighbourhood (112). Through Dumi's narrative gaze we learn that, "These people [the Mahomedys] were as fair-skinned as the whites and were rich and well-dressed," and Osborne's over-reaction to the Maniram family's presence is informed by his unconscious insecurity regarding the nature of his societal power. In this context, the New Year's Eve party (which reminds us of the last scene of *The Lahnee's Pleasure*) is shown up to be what it is; a farcical show of bonhomie when juxtaposed against white paranoia that its power is being encroached upon.

The main focus of the text is the 1949 anti-Indian pogrom when, on the 13th of January, a concerted action was taken against Indian traders in Durban. Whilst this specific violence was triggered off by an incident at the market where Indian stall holders punished an African boy for stealing, the underlying grievances of the local Zulus against the Indian trading community were long-standing. In comparison to the Indian diasporic community, Africans suffered even more under white rule and, for example, the 1913 Native Land Act, which restricted the purchase of land

outside of reserves, gives testimony to how Africans were forced to the bottom of the hierarchical and white dominated society.[4] This punitive action against Indians in Durban was thus an expression of generational grievances against a system that held the Zulus down. Acting as a buffer between Whites and Africans, the Indian community became a convenient scapegoat for all the ills suffered by the latter and, in "1949," Govender narrates how white hegemony actively dynamited ethnic fluidity. Therefore, whilst the aforementioned attitude of racial superiority is our first response in understanding the intensity of the violence meted out on Indians, deeper motivations inform this pogrom. We are told that, "Trucks from the big firms are taking some tsotsis [young criminal from township area] to Cato Manor, Riverside and all other places where Indians live and are giving them petrol and paraffin," with Osborne taking an active role in the distribution of paraffin amongst his Zulu staff (114). Whilst rape, arson and murder are being visited upon the Indian community, Osborne chats to his staff in Zulu and assures them that, "The Indians deserve what they are getting. They make a lot of money from you people and they have no respect for you" (115). Dumi attempts to make his people understand that many Indians are as equally disenfranchised, yet although he speaks about Asian figures such as R.D. Naidu who fought against the colour bar, it is to no avail and the frenzy of collective hate takes a grip. In his final gesture of conviviality in the face of this communal madness, he attempts to save the Maniram family and dies with a spear embedded in his chest. Against the strategic pitting of subaltern ethnic groups against each other, the narrator assures us that, "there was no pity, no reason in the hearts of these malleable souls, held captive by minds more savage in their cunning" (117).

Situated within the same context of the aforementioned anti-Indian pogrom, "Call of the Muezzin ... To a Slow Samba Beat" offers up a distinct perspective on inter-ethnic relationships within the Cato Manor township. Against the scenario of orchestrated communal violence, the focus is, however, more weighted towards the trope of conviviality as a means to re-configure entrenched and negative attitudes towards the other. This is fleshed out through the relationship between Elias, an eleven-year-old Zulu, and the Asian storekeeper, Shaik, and the text, in this respect, shows how small gestures made across cultural divides can remain impregnated upon consciousness over time. Shaik, as a member of the Umkumbaan School Building Committee, which sets out to readdress the white neglect of Indian and coloured schools, functions as an alternative role model for his brother, Ahmed, who, through his charging of abusive rents to impoverished labourers, embodies the stereotypical exploitive Asian. As regards conviviality, Shaik functions as a foil to Elias in the sense that the contrastive aspect of their relationship augments the trope of identities in contact. Music becomes the means by which this fluidity is transmitted, and when Elias interprets the Kavadi music that is played from the

[4] "The 1949 Anti-Indian Pogrom and the Crisis in the Natal ANC" explores the complexities of the Indian position in Durban whilst outlining the Zulu grievances.

loudspeakers of the Shiva temple on his make-shift guitar, the narrator assures us that, "Ramani Ammal in far-away India would never have guessed that her songs would one day find resonance on a home-made guitar of the banks of the Umkumbaan River" (120). Elias's appropriation of Indian music thus becomes the narrative vehicle that gives focus to the trope of hybridity and, similar to the image of the kitchen gardens at Cato Manor as a symbol of shared cultural elements, his musical cross-overs provide a contra-narrative to the official white discourses on the incommensurability of racial cohabitation. Shaik, on discovering Elias's secret talent, decides to buy him a proper guitar, however, on the way back from the music store, he is confronted by the full-scale rioting. Despite the subsequent tragic events (the burning down of Shaik's business and the massacre of his children), the text leaves a door open to the ideal of conviviality. In a narrative flash forward, Elias now makes a living playing the guitar at an Indian hotel in Clairwood because despite him being an exceptional jazz guitarist, apartheid prohibits Blacks and Indians playing at White venues. When bored between sets, he takes out Sheik's guitar and "plays his own composition, which resembles the call of the Muezzin, to a slow Samba beat" (130). The song thus encapsulates the trope of conviviality between Africans and Asians in Cato Manor, and whilst this may have been temporarily destroyed, the text establishes the memories of this past as a site of resistance against imposed discourses of exclusion.

IV. MISCEGENATION AS A CHALLENGE TO SEGREGATION

During the ushering in of the Group Areas Act, the Asian body increasingly came under the surveillant and disciplinary gaze of the white hegemony. Within this milieu, the political significance of miscegenation thus became intensified as it came to signify a transgression of the core ideology behind apartheid. If we look at the body of Govender's work we can see how this trope is repeatedly used as a narrative strategy to both imagine and give testimony to a South Africa that was much more plural in its conception as a modern nation. "Over My Dead Body," in this respect, as well as displaying the author's anger at the destruction of conviviality, also introduces the question of miscegenation and the anxiety that surrounded this. Gurriah Naidoo is charged with *crimen injuria*, a legal term in South African jurisprudence which refers to unlawfully, intentionally and seriously impairing the dignity of another. An intent of sexual liaison was catalogued within *crimen injuria*, yet while it is the prostitute who solicits the Asian, the authorities make *her* turn state evidence so as to incriminate *him*. Naidoo is told by his lawyer that he "doesn't have a dog's chance" considering that the prostitute is white and, in effect, what the episode is documenting is how a white supremist regime saw any possible miscegenation as a threat to their hegemony (146). In the novelistic version of *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, the narrator deconstructs white authority through the relationship between Bronwyn Mary-Anne Braithwaite, the Lahnee's wife, and the 18-year old coloured, Fanyana Ngcobo, who is secretly studying to become a lawyer. Finding

the Lahnee inadequate, Bronwyn embarks upon a series of explicit sexual encounters with Fanyana and, in a more explicit section of the text, the narrator has Fanyana place his copy of *Roman Dutch Law*, vol I. under Bronwyn's posterior "to enable her to provide greater thrust" (78). Here, the sexual act operates as a metaphor for a contesting of white authority, with the law book as a future imagining of a wresting of this power away from white supremacy.

Of all of Govender's writings, *Black Chin White Chin: Song of the Atman* gives most attention to this trope of miscegenation through the character of Chin Govender (the author's real-life uncle). As such, the text complicates the dichotomy of "Black" versus "White" present in Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), the classical text to which Govender alludes in his title. In Chin's crossing of both colour lines, the narrative sets about to deconstruct the white/black binary through the image of the in-between Asian. Chin, through his cultivating of an air of sophistication, negotiates his difference by reconfiguring his racialised image. Here we find an appropriation of the figure of the dandy, which finds its homologue in Ceraso and Connelly's (2009: 7) study of the Indio-Caribbean men's "feminized version of hegemonic masculinity." This appropriation, I argue, is configured through Homi Bhabha's (1994: 86) understanding of mimicry which behaves like a fetish that mimes forms of authority. Here, Bhabha appropriates Lacan's (1977: 99) focus on mimicry, understood as something "distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind." Mimicry, in Bhabha's new configuration, becomes something inscribed within a particular discourse and appears as "a stain which dislocates and revalues normative knowledges of race, writing, history" (Seshadri-Crooks 378). Chin's mimicry of whiteness, through the figure of the dandy, thus constitutes a strategy that confronts and disrupts the authority of the original, in this case the hegemony of white settler authority. Therefore, when Chin uses his body as an aesthetic vehicle that transcends self-imposed limitations, he performs what Bhabha (1994: 87) defines as the undoing of "the original's mastery."

Having appropriated the image of the dandy, Chin initiates an erotic affair with his white employer, Greta Schmeling, and this act can be read as the manifestation of an unconscious desire to come into power through association. Mohammed (2002), in relation to the aforementioned figure of the dandy, argues that Indian-Trinidadian men specifically used miscegenation as a means to garner new positions within a colonial society. Here, we find a homologue with Chin who, whilst walking hand in hand with Greta through a white residential neighbourhood, comes to sense how miscegenation, imagined through the figure of the dandy, brings him new authority. Chin's mimicry and miscegenation is destabilizing and subversive in equal measure, yet fraught with danger. The burning of Schmeling's car is one example of the expressions of violence against Chin's mimicry of whiteness, and these kinds of reactions to miscegenation inform and become the anteroom to the subsequent 1950s Group Areas Acts.

This relationship, for the reasons set above, terminates, and Chin's subsequent sexual liaison with the coloured girl, Grace, is significant as it marks a move away from his previous identification with whiteness. This movement towards an Afro-centric position, however, is marked with certain ambiguity; whilst his opening up

of the first multiracial hotel, or his strategic support of the fledgling ANC movement all indicate a strong affiliation with a pluralistic sense of African nationhood, his silencing of his relationship with Grace and his refusal to treat it as anything more than casual gives the reader an inkling of the divided nature of his subjectivity. When the text claims that, "he had not made any promises to her [...] yet was it not implicit in the way he made love to her?" what comes to light is the divided nature of Chin's psyche (183). This dissonance, I argue, is the result of an unconscious resistance informed by the ingrained cultural bias Asian communities have against miscegenation, and particularly where black or coloured Africans are concerned. As regards this cultural bias, the role of Asian women in East and South Africa has always been to be surveillant of sexual conduct within their community, and Floya Anthias (1998: 571-573), in this respect, declares that diasporic women became the bearers of "tradition" which was coded through ethnicity, and the transmission of these cultural mores and the maintaining of cultural cohesion, mediated through patriarchy, falls upon them. What this tells us is that, as regards a move towards a more Afro-centric subjectivity, there were a series of both external and internal factors that challenged Asians' embracing of ethnic fluidity.

CONCLUSION

At the core of all Ronnie Govender's work operates an imaginary that propagates the ideal of inter-ethnic conviviality. As we have seen, whilst these interactions may, at times, be fraught with difficulties and, in certain cases, present violent outcomes, the overall tone of Govender's work leans towards optimism as regards the possibilities of interethnic interaction. I see this insistence upon conviviality as an ideological positioning vis-à-vis the author's own Afro-centric subjectivity. Through a series of narrative strategies, Govender's texts show how ethnic realities in South Africa were never fixed but, on the contrary, were (and still are) constructed in relation to one another. Rather than viewing subjectivity through the cultural lens of one's own community, Govender sets out to narrate the historiography of the Indian community in South Africa as configured *through* interaction. Stephanie Jones (2011: 170), when speaking of the Asian presence in Africa, claims that "the difficulty of escaping a stultifying and brittle past, [...] is often signified [...] through interracial sexual relationships," and the trope of miscegenation, for example, becomes one way to enter into African history. In a settler-dominated society that was increasingly obsessed with racial categories, the body became central to the subaltern predicament, and many of the characters that populate Govender's narratives come to understand the constructed nature of these divisions. By placing the brown body in juxtaposition with these oppositional categories, Govender gives the Asian body new political significance and, in this sense, his protagonists transform their relationship into the categories of white *and* black. This narrative perspective offers new ways of looking at South Africa outside of this black/white dichotomy and, in fact, the Asian presence helps to deconstruct fixed notions from both sides of this racial divide. When the author draws up his

white characters, rather than create two-dimensional stand-ins for apartheid, we see how they are driven by internal contradictions, and the same can be applied to his portrayals of other South African ethnic groups. The driving force of the author's personal commitment to ethnic fluidity permeates these textual relationships so as to create an imagined conviviality that wins out over conflict.

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THE FIGHT FOR LAND, WATER AND DIGNITY IN LINDSEY COLLEN'S *THE MALARIA MAN AND HER NEIGHBOURS*

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Abstract

The novels of South-African born Mauritian writer and activist Lindsey Collen expose a historical continuum of class exploitation, ranging from the slave past of the country including both pre-abolition African slavery together with indentured labour from the Indian subcontinent to post-independence sweat-shop toil, ill-paid domestic labour and exploited agricultural workers. Her latest novel to date, *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours* (2010) probes this continuing class conflict and queries mainstream notions of heteronormativity. Access to water and land will be seen to lie behind the murder of the four main characters and the subsequent popular reaction. Collen insists that the underprivileged can become empowered through union, that participation and joint, communal effort can still make a difference.

Keywords: Mauritius, Lindsey Collen, Class Conflict, History, Uprising.

LA LUCHA POR LA TIERRA, EL AGUA Y LA DIGNIDAD EN *THE MALARIA MAN AND HER NEIGHBOURS* DE LINDSEY COLLEN

Resumen

Las novelas de la escritora y activista mauriciana de origen sudafricano, Lindsey Collen, denuncian un continuo histórico de explotación de clase. Dicha explotación incluye el pasado esclavista del país y, a partir de la abolición de la esclavitud, la contratación de obreros indios y en la época poscolonial el trabajo mal pagado en los talleres textiles, el ámbito doméstico y la agricultura. En su novela más reciente, *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours* (2010) Collen sigue explorando este conflicto de clase además de cuestionar la heteronormatividad de la sociedad y demuestra que el libre acceso al agua y a la tierra esconde el motivo del asesinato de los cuatro personajes principales, lo cual da lugar a una rebelión popular. La autora insiste en que los menos privilegiados de la sociedad pueden hacerse fuertes si se unen y que los esfuerzos comunes todavía pueden marcar la diferencia.

Palabras clave: Mauricio, Lindsey Collen, conflictos de clase, historia, rebelión.

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South-African-born Mauritian writer Lindsey Collen is the best known English language writer in the country, a former French and British colony, where the bulk of the population speak Kreol, a language based mainly on French with several words incorporated from Malagasy and Tamil. In this article I celebrate Collen's writing with special emphasis on her most recent novel, which showcases the major issue that recurs in her work, namely class conflict. In the first part of the article I locate Mauritius firmly in the wider Indian Ocean arena as none of its inhabitants is a native of the island. The majority of the population came from either Eastern Africa as slaves or the Indian subcontinent as indentured labourers. The Franco-Mauritians hailed from Europe and the Sino-Mauritians from China, which makes the country a perfect example of transoceanic identity. However, I also examine the flip side to what has been called the Mauritian miracle, which is the basis of the work of Lindsey Collen. In the second section I outline the major concerns of her work, which echo her political activism as a member of Lalit –struggle in Kreol– a left-wing party that fights for class equality, environmentalism, women's rights and is adamantly against any kind of communalism. The third part of the article focuses on Collen's latest novel to date *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours* (2010). Here Collen returns to her usual battleground of class conflict as this novel could be classified as a blueprint for rebellion in line with her 2001 novel *Mutiny*. However, this more recent work contains some of the writer's other concerns, namely environmentalism and homo- or transphobia. I conclude by claiming that Lindsey Collen's oeuvre is a true reflection of the hybridity and Indian Oceanness of her adopted country.

MAURITIUS, THE STAR AND KEY OF THE INDIAN OCEAN[1]

The South-Western Indian Ocean island nation of Mauritius seems to be an example of cosmopolitan multiculturalism. I use the term "island nation" with the utmost caution and merely as a kind of shorthand. The Republic of Mauritius comprises the islands of Rodrigues, Agalega and Saint Brandon (Cargados Carajos) as well as the major island of Mauritius but I will be concentrating on the latter.[2] In such a small, compact country, covering just under 2,000 square kilometres, isolated geographically from the African continent with even Madagascar 800 kilometres away, ethnic tolerance and democratic space sharing become a necessity of survival. Although Hindus constitute just over half of its almost 1.3 million inhabitants

[1] The motto *Stella Clavisque Maris Indici* features on the official coat of arms.

[2] It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the Chagos Archipelago, leased by the British to the Americans in the 1960s for the construction of a military base and currently part of the British Indian Ocean Territory. The 2019 United Nations Resolution has –unsuccessfully– demanded the UK return control of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius and thus allow the deported inhabitants to return to their homeland. See Hand & Pujolràs-Noguer 2019 and Hand 2021 forthcoming.

and all South Asian groups together make up seventy percent, no community can claim any ancestral rights to the land. All the present inhabitants of the country are by definition uprooted immigrants, the majority descending from slavery or indentured labour.

Accordingly, the land does not "belong" to any of the established communities and the Mauritian constitution has endeavoured to safeguard the rights of the smaller groups by way of its best loser system, using the Block Vote system.[3] In addition, eight members are appointed from a list of unsuccessful candidates under a "best loser" system designed to provide "balanced" ethnic and political representation. (Bunwaree & Kasenally 2005: 16), thus ensuring a fluid political representation of all to a greater or lesser degree (Srebrnik 2002 & Cawthr 2005).

Mauritius was heralded as an economic miracle at the turn of the 21st century. Terms such as the "African Tiger" have been applied as a means to explain the causes of the rising economic success of this island state (Aumeerally 2005; Frankel 2010). Until the time of independence, the Mauritian economy was based on its major crop the sugar cane. As sugar prices slumped during the late 1970s there was clearly an urgency to diversify the economy and during the 1980s Mauritius branched out into off-shore banking, and financial sectors started to blossom. This post independent boom led to the establishment of the island as an EPZ (Export Processing Zone) which in turn encouraged new investors to manufacture products using cheap local labour and avoiding cumbersome import and export duties (Curran 36). The success of these ventures has been proved by Mauritius' improved ranking among the nations of SADC (Southern African Development Community) and sociologists and economists tend to agree that the standard of living in Mauritius is one of the highest anywhere in Africa. Not only is its economy a source of admiration among scholars, its relative political stability, unusual in the African continent, is frequently noted by political scientists. Cawthra, (15) points to the fact that of all the countries in the SADC Mauritius is the most culturally and ethnically diverse.

Of all the ethnic communities that have settled on the island, the descendants of the East African and Malagasy slaves, known as Creoles, are the only ones who can make any claim as to being "authentic" Mauritians as they have no cultural allegiance to any other country. The history of Mauritius has often been narrated as an Indian success story that ignores the dehumanising conditions of slavery under which the Afro-Mauritians lost track of their cultural roots, with the individual struggles and cultural specificities of the former slaves swept under the carpet of historical oblivion, or at best, glossed over. Creole memories, either handed down from earlier generations or reconstructed in the present, celebrate the lost mythical ties with the African continent. Ironically, the very people who bequeathed the

[3] The National Assembly consists of 70 Seats. 62 members are elected by direct popular vote in multi-member constituencies (20 three-member constituencies on Mauritius and one two-member constituency on the island of Rodrigues)

country its most representative identity markers, sega dance rhythms and the Kreol language, are still struggling to find themselves a niche in society (Teelock 106).

Pockets of poverty exist all over the country and do indeed cut across any ethnic divide, and, as will be outlined below, class remains the essential divider and has rendered other categories –ethnic, religious, linguistic– as inappropriate and irrelevant for an appreciation of the work of Lindsey Collen unless it is taken on board. Intersectionality is essential for any significant sociocultural analysis and class and ethnicity definitely need to be considered in conjunction in the Mauritian context. Hence my use of the concept *clethnicity*, the inescapability of poor economic resources being identified rather too closely with ethnic essentialism or, in the words of anthropologist Thomas Eriksen, the social manifestation of the inevitability that "class as such is abstractly *unthinkable* removed from community" (110, emphasis in original).[4]

MAURITIUS: THE FLIP SIDE

Collen's wholehearted participation in grass roots politics and her work in Ledikasyon pu Travayer, an adult literacy association which has also published some of her novels, prove her commitment to fighting for the rights of the less privileged members of society, working-class men and women. Her novels are all set in Mauritius and deal with aspects of Mauritian life, but Collen's agenda is much more far-reaching and cannot be sealed within a postcolonial Mauritian paradigm. Her probing of class issues promotes her work onto an entirely different plane from the current trend in cultural –read "ethnic"– differences, making her concerns in tune with the drawbacks of transnational capitalism and worker exploitation, both local or global. Her work reveals the flip side to the Mauritian miracle far away from the five-star luxury hotels, the stylish Caudan waterfront and the hypermarkets which have become sites of access to globalized capitalism, "exceptional until the Eighties, when shopping was tacitly segregated by class and purse" (Khoyratty 73).

The African tiger may have one of the most defendable democracies in the continent but the riots that ensued after the death of the singer Kaya while in police custody in February 1999 only proved that social harmony and ethnic tolerance is skin deep. The figure of Kaya was much more than a singer, he incarnated the hybrid dream, "the inversion of the colonial founding myth of the island" (Chazan-Gillig 68). Collen's character Melomann, discussed below in the section on *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours*, is modelled on Kaya, whose suspicious death provoked unrest verging on outright rebellion similar to that featured in the novel.

Joseph Reginald Topize, popularly known as Kaya, was a highly significant figure on the Mauritian music scene. He had pioneered a style of Mauritian music known as "seggae," a fusion of West Indian reggae and sega, the traditional folk music

[4] For a more complete discussion of clethnicity, see Hand 2010.

of the island nation, which had originated amongst the former slave population. His music defied class or ethnic categories and posited a genuine transnational Indian Ocean identity as his music became popular throughout the Mascarene Islands. He was a Rastafarian and made no attempt to hide his lifestyle and habits but above all he was a man of peaceful methods. Most of his songs were in Kreol and he spoke of revolution and rights, which appealed especially to the Creoles, who saw in him a leader and spokesman.[5]

On February 18th 1999 Kaya was arrested under the Dangerous Drugs Act for smoking marijuana, called ganja in Mauritius, following a decriminalization rally, which was organized by the Mouvement Republicain party and attended by many Rastafarians and local musicians. Kaya was held for several days in Alcatraz Police Cells at Line Barracks in Port Louis without, it appears, the possibility of bail. On February 21st he was found dead in his cell and the official verdict was either suicide or accidental death –he had a fractured skull– but neither rang true amongst the Creole population and protests began almost immediately within Kaya's neighbourhood of Roche Bois and quickly spread across the whole of the country.

Kaya's supporters and fans accused the police of brutality, which was officially denied, but emotions were aflame and riots ensued lasting three days during which shops, homes, and churches were burned and looted, causing approximately fifty million US dollars. Several people were killed in the demonstrations including another musician, Berger Agatha, who was shot by the police (Selvon 506-507). In October 2000 the Government released a report on the riots compiled by a judicial commission. The report criticized the previous Government and the police for their handling of the riots; it also criticized some opposition politicians and Creole activists for inciting some of the riots. The police were criticized for holding the musician in a high security area for a minor offence (US Department of State, 2002). I have elaborated on the Kaya riots at some length as they provide the background to two of Collen's novels: *Mutiny* (2001) and *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours* (2010), which both envisage the possibility of an outright class war. Neither actually succeeds but as Collen herself states in the acknowledgements in *Mutiny*:

> The young people of Mauritius, who, during the February 1999 riots over the death in detention of the popular singer, Kaya, forced the gates of the prison at Borstal open, thus show[ed] the possibility of the kind of things already written down, by that time, in early drafts of this novel (*Mutiny* 343)

As a committed intellectual, Lindsey Collen's work contains a remorseless indictment of contemporary Mauritian and other Western-oriented societies immersed in –from her point of view– a hedonistic bourgeois capitalist consumerism that has lost sight of the commitment to solidarity and universal fraternity.

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[5] In one of his songs in English, *Free Man*, Kaya calls on people to "draw your destiny and it's time now to stand up/ Believe in the gospel of life/ Cause life is the story, will never die."

LINDSEY COLLEN'S WRITING

Collen's work reflects a common political purpose expressed through a highly poetical language and self-reflexive narrative techniques. Her creative energy forges new connections and a literary analysis of the metafictional potential of her novels proves them to be vehicles for the reassessment of –if not a direct challenge to– social, cultural and historical conventions. Collen's work is a scathing commentary on her society and consequently her latest novel uncovers the intricacies of the class-ethnic-gender smorgasbord of contemporary Mauritian life.

Collen lives in Mauritius and sets her work very carefully and recognisably within a Mauritian context with the use of place names, phrases in Kreol, references to real people and recent or historical cultural events. However, she juggles very neatly with the two readings: a localized Mauritian –and thus Indian Ocean– story with a global transnational postcolonial discourse (Hand, 2011). In Collen's literary world, Mauritius represents the road map for a new world order, a laboratory where the great human experiment somehow sadly went wrong but which can also provide the key to putting things right. In this sense we can read the national motto somewhat ironically as the colony was the key to efficient imperial connections across the Indian Ocean rather than a solution to peaceful cohabitation. Among the many issues that are recurrent in her work is the imperative need to recuperate and come to terms with the slave past of the country and the vindication of the role of the working class in the forging of a democratic state (*There is a Tide* 1990); the transnational constraints of heteropatriarchy (*The Rape of Sita* 1993); a condemnation of injustice and the need to give a voice to the dispossessed (*Getting Rid Of It* 1997); a call for action and a recipe for productive solidarity (*Boy* 2005) and her belief in the strength of community as a means to make changes in society (*Mutiny* 2001 and *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours* 2010).

I place Collen's often mordant criticisms of the workings of her country of adoption within their sociocultural milieu, which does not deny the artistic value of her novels. Her work is not only valid as a kind of political manifesto or as a piece of ethnographic writing. On the contrary, much of the energy that emanates from her work is a result of the combination of the immediacy of her dialogues and the passionate beauty of her language. It is true that Mauritius, and by extension Mauritian literature, does not figure on the mental maps of most post-colonial critics. The almost ambiguous geography of the country –politically part of the African continent but culturally and demographically nodding towards Asia– has not contributed to its inclusion on university reading lists and Collen's work has not featured largely in current postcolonial scholarship.[6] Undoubtedly, her forceful, almost blunt, didactic social message may have discouraged a certain type of critic,

[6] Recently more critics have analysed Collen's work, for example Githire (2014), Perrin (2014) Matteau Matsha (2015) and Lavery (2016) apart from my own work, Hand (2010; 2011 & 2020).

more attuned to gender or ethnic identity politics rather than, what may seem to be, old-fashioned class differences. In a country like Mauritius, whose inhabitants pay allegiance to a diversity of ethnic backgrounds, it takes a dedicated writer to pursue what she feels to be the great social divider: class.

Collen's characters are never identified on ethnic terms, on the contrary, she deliberately con/fuses the issue. Her characters are divided –if at all because Collen believes in the unity of all humankind– along class lines, that is in terms of those who possess jobs, homes, a means to earn a dignified living as opposed to those who are or have been dispossessed of any kind of subsistence, exploited by bosses or simply relegated to the economic periphery of society without a fair chance to improve their status. She alludes intentionally to farmers, fisherfolk and domestic workers as she feels that most middle-class Mauritian writers still have great emotional difficulty in dealing with working people. Contemporary Mauritian writing –in all languages– clearly cannot be contemplated without a reference to the work of Lindsey Collen.[7]

Collen's purpose is to question the validity of Mauritian democracy, especially as regards the less favoured classes in economic terms and those who are discriminated against on account of their sexual orientation or their gender. Her picture of Mauritius differs enormously from the official story, the one proudly announced to the media or even the one political scientists and economists publish their articles on. Her novels paint a completely opposing picture to the official government policy of projecting an image of Mauritians as a peaceful, tolerant people. Tourism accounting for a sizeable chunk of the country's economy, this common-sense approach has been adopted to encourage a growth in the industry. Collen's oeuvre is also transnational as it delves into those issues that disregard national or maritime boundaries and unites people in its bid for a universal post-ethnic, classless and gender-free humanity.

Collen's artistry consists in correctly gauging the exact dose of political accusation and emotional rhetoric, without falling into an excessive propagandistic trap. Her purpose is not to celebrate a successfully planned and adroitly executed prison escape in *Mutiny* or to chart the road map for a successful popular rebellion in *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours* but to draw our attention to the importance of collaboration, mutual aid and, above all, determination. Similar sentiments are echoed in Nawal El Saadawi's prison memoir, when even smuggling out a letter requires a mixture of tenacity and obstinacy:

> 'Fathiyya, I want to send a letter to my family ... is that possible?'
> 'Everything is possible,' she whispered.
> 'Inside prison?' I said out loud, in astonishment.
> She laughed. 'Inside prison is just like outside prison. Everything is possible ... what's important is the *determination* to do it'. (El Saadawi 1994: 135; emphasis mine)

[7] Admittedly, Julia Waters focuses on Francophone literature in her recent study on the Mauritian novel but relegating such a prolific writer as Collen to a mere footnote (2018: 44) seems somewhat amiss.

Collen exposes a historical continuum of class exploitation in her writing, ranging from the slave past of the country including both pre-abolition African slavery together with indentured labour from the Indian subcontinent to post-independence sweat-shop toil, ill-paid domestic labour and exploited agricultural workers. She argues that "we are split asunder socially into warring groups or classes – those who work to live and those who control stocks derived from past work, *work or not*" ("The World" 45-46; italics in original) *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours* (2010) probes this continuing class conflict and queries mainstream notions of heteronormativity –hence the title, *her* neighbours, instead of the expected *his*. In the following section I trace the causes that lead to the deaths of the four main characters, Brij Kalapen, Eshan Zukahi, Melomann and Zan Pol Kanzy/Polet and, more importantly, the uprising galvanized by these murders. Access to water and land will be seen to lie behind the conflict that sets off the tragedy and the subsequent popular reaction. Collen insists that the underprivileged can become empowered through union, that participation and joint, communal effort can make a difference.

THE MALARIA MAN AND HER NEIGHBOURS

Lindsey Collen's latest novel to date, *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours* (2010) relates the events leading up to the suspicious deaths of four working-class characters, whose only crime is to demand the right to live dignified lives. The novel begins with their murders or, according to the police, their deaths by natural causes, suicide, accidental drowning and electrocution (*The Malaria Man* 12-13).[8] The subsequent chapters are a flashback of the events that set the rebellion in motion and the final two sections (193-251) provide alternative narratives that fill in the gaps and reflect on the events. In her depiction of the four main characters –or rather the heroes as they will become by the end of the novel– Collen surpasses herself as she creates a trans woman, the malaria man of the title, known as Zan Pol Kanzy or Polet; Melomann, a saxophone player, clearly inspired by Kaya; Eshan Zukahi, a potato planter; and Brij Kalapen, fisherman, pig-breeder and trade union representative for the abattoir where he works. In this novel she abandons her usual trinity of characters who represent the three major ethnic groups of Mauritius: Hindus, Muslims and Creoles, to incorporate Zan Pol, a trans woman and thus to extend the cast of misunderstood, marginalized people. Collen is clearly a political writer and her work may be understood to be too confrontational but she believes, following Jean Paul Sartre, that "the 'engaged' writer knows that words are action" (23).

In her analysis of *Mutiny* Helen Cousins suggests that "[t]he sharing of recipes also binds the women together as family" (77). This notion of a family –what I have called a newly constructed clethnic community (Hand 2010: 129)– is a clear case

[8] Henceforth all references to the novel will be cited as MM followed by the page numbers. As Collen uses italics a great deal, unless otherwise stated, they are hers.

of practical identity taking over from categorical identity. The four protagonists of *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours* make up Zan Pol's family and this clethnic community of four who give their name to the riots (MM 232) embody the hybrid mixture of Mauritian society, in both ethnic and gender terms. Brij, the Hindu, works as a pig farmer in an abattoir; Eshan Zukahi, the Muslim convert (MM 59), plants potatoes at the co-op farm; Melomann and Zan Pol/ Polet, from the Creole community, work as malaria men cleaning canals and rivers of mosquitoes. Collen's creation of a trans woman who is disowned by her family and the victim of regular taunts and even assault widens the group of discriminated individuals, as fluid gender identities clash against the intolerance of prejudiced societies. Zan Pol is forced out of her home after it is hit by a cyclone and her homeless state makes her an easy prey for transphobic abuse:

> So then she became a refugee. Housed in the social centre. She had to cower there, for weeks. Because of a bunch of youths who would hang around and goad her. Until she ended up in hospital so badly injured (MM 53).

Zan Pol's life is circumscribed by her gender identity. In moments of panic, as when Eshan discovers who is behind the diversion of the water and redirects the flow to its original path, Collen plays with personal pronouns to indicate the performativity of gender as the malaria man fluctuates his/her identity according to the situation. "Zan Pol nearly faints in fright. He lets go his bicycle, *he becoming she and back to he again, his her and back his again*" (MM 134). Zan Pol demonstrates the inadequacy of stereotypical qualities based on outmoded gender binaries. The typical attribution of bravery to men is dismantled by Collen when Zan Pol is "suddenly terrified by what Eshan has done. His courage wanes. I am not brave enough for this, whether I'm him or her" (MM 134). Biological reductionism together with the binary of nature and culture are dismissed by Collen who gives a voice to the trans community through this sometimes flamboyant but always warm and affectionate character, much loved by her working-class neighbours. Eshan takes a basket of mangoes to his fellow malaria men but Zan Pol deserves an extra portion:

> One share as Melomann's workmate, one as their neighbour. *Once a neighbour always neighbour*. She used to live in the rented house just next door [...] [t]hen there was a Cyclone that blew it all away (MM 53).

The reference to cyclones is common in Mauritian writing and Lindsey Collen's work is no exception.[9] She uses the cyclone as a metaphor for class as, although it destroys implacably without selecting its victims, its effects depend very much on their economic situation (Hand 2010: 58 & 122). While *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours* does not focus specifically on this meteorological phenomenon, so common in the South-West Indian Ocean, the passing reference cannot go unnoticed

[9] See Hand (2020) and Ravi (2017) for further discussion on cyclones in Mauritian writing.

as a feature that ravages the poor and vulnerable members of society. Class conflict lies at the heart of this novel as the four protagonists –some deliberately, others as collateral damage– are conveniently removed as they challenge the power of what Collen calls finance capital, which, she argues "is in open war-fare against the rest of the globe and against its people" (webpage 2019).

Mal Benny, the general manager at the abattoir, suspected of double-dealing with local mafias and bent on privatising the business, has no sympathy for Brij or his fellow union delegates. He aims to cut short their complaints by patronising them and undercutting their class loyalties:

> Each person in this country –including you three misfits– is no more than a member of a particular group, a *community*, a race, a religion [...] and *that* is where you *fit*. In your community. Which is why you are *misfits.* [...] Creoles where they belong, in pork. Muslims in their rightful place, beef, Hindus, since there are neither vegetables nor salads in here, in goats (MM 120).

Mal Benny –far from being blessed[10] with positive attributes– is an unpleasant, despicable boss determined to eliminate the troublemakers who have uncovered his devious business plans. The action that triggers the deaths of the four protagonists is Eshan's discovery of why the water supply has been cut off and his crops are dying. The sugar estate bosses intend to drive the small farmers off the land so they can buy it up cheaply and make a huge profit. So determined are they to drive what they call "scavengers off the land ... the hard way" (MM 82) that even rivals team up in order to "eradicate vegetable planters, first divert their water, then get at their land, eradicate the weak" (MM 83).

Ownership of the water supply becomes the key battleground in environmental conflicts around the globe. Lindsey Collen has incorporated ecocritical concerns in her work, for example in *Boy* where the main character discovers the geography of the island as he learns about the evolution of the country from a slave-owning society to a democracy (*The Subversion* 156-157), and in *There is a Tide* and *Getting Rid Of It,* where, in her own words, the characters are "fractured socially from an exploiting, dominating, warring class" (2019: 47). *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours* therefore is a continuation of this concern coupled with the author's belief in the power of solidarity and the need to join forces. As far as environmental movements are concerned, the 1973 Chipko movement in India has inspired popular movements all over the developing world as local communities have joined forces to defend their right to use and control natural resources such as local water supplies, which often involves entering into disputes with multinational corporations and their regional representatives. As Guha and Martínez-Alier suggest, these disputes represent "a new kind of class conflict" (5) because low-income workers find themselves in opposition to economically and politically powerful elites, the local

[10] Perrin points out the pun in this character's name (2014: 75).

factory manager having morphed into a faceless exploiter from overseas. Likewise, in her book *Making Peace with the Earth*, Indian activist Vandana Shiva argues that:

> Land, for most people in the world, is people's identity; it is the ground of culture and economy. Seventy-five per cent of people in the third world live on the land and are supported by it –the earth is the biggest employer on the planet (30)

In Collen's novel, the murder of the four protagonists is due to their demand for the right to the land and access to the water supply to irrigate it. Shiva goes on to claim that " 'Privatisation' was launched as the core of the globalisation and trade liberalisation paradigm, based on the crude ideology that public is bad, private is good; domestic is bad, multinational is good" (84). Certainly, the bourgeois conspiracy in Collen's novel that threatens the livelihood of many cooperatives has not counted on the fortitude and perseverance of the underclass, steadfast in their convictions. The four so-called troublemakers have to be dealt with conclusively. Melomann, the saxophonist inspired by the seggae musician Kaya, who "sees the class war seeping out of the workplace into everyday life" (MM 92) is arrested for a road accident and found hanging in the police cells. Eshan Zukahi can no longer fight for the co-op land as he very conveniently drowns himself in a well. Brij Kalapen is electrocuted by an obsolete machine used to kill the animals, thus embodying the excuse to privatize the abattoir. Zan Pol/ Polet's death, "tuberculosis, they say, for that transvestite, the Malaria Man, no sign of injury on her body. No autopsy necessary" (MM 154) ignites the mass hysteria that culminates in a full-scale rebellion with barricades, arson and storming of the prisons. Collen provides three narratives of how the rebellion was forged and how it failed to overturn the status quo: Hank, the waterworks technician, who finds himself caught up in the riots; Brij's widow, Binndu's story, in which she inadvertently overhears the plan to do away with the four meddlesome workers; and the omniscient narrator's view of the events. The latter seems to be Collen's final word on rebellions, echoing *Mutiny*, in which she states that "[i]t's the *possibility* that's important" (55).

> And, of course, it's doomed. Once you win against the police, then what? Nothing is ready to be born. So the vacuum brings looters. Looters bring pillage. Pillage exactions. Then defeat. And they call the whole caboodle 'riots'.
> But, and this is the important bit now: It doesn't mean you shouldn't have done it. It just means *they* chose the time.
>
> This time (MM 188; bold in original)

CONCLUSION.
CONSOLIDATING INDIAN OCEAN WRITING

Environmental concerns hit Mauritius very keenly on 6th August 2020 when the Japanese cargo ship Wakashio ran aground on a coral reef near Mahebourg, in the south east of the island. The resulting oil spill is an ecological tragedy as the consequences on local marine fauna may take years to heal. Mauritian people rallied

around immediately and worked day and night to contain as much oil as possible so that it wouldn't reach the shoreline, where it is more difficult to clean. The social impacts have been enormous for the fishing communities living in the region because the fish that have been caught contain high levels of arsenic (Lalit 2020; Lewis 2020). This unfortunate incident has served to remind people of the value of nature and the sea in particular. Collen has poignantly expressed her relationship with the sea:

> Behind and below the illusion of the stereotypical welcoming and beautiful Indian Ocean and its islands, [...] there is the deep surface of historical lived experiences involving those same waters, filled with diasporic and displaced pain extending back over years (Matteau Matsha & Stiebel 6; and see Collen's own text in this volume).

Collen's writing is anchored in Mauritian reality and any analysis of her work needs to locate it within the spatial and political geography of the South-West Indian Ocean. Her strong political commitment to stirring social awareness among those people who have been silenced by history or by cultural and gender constraints is one of her contributions to Indian Ocean literature. The interface between the local and global is one of Collen's strengths as her work reaches out beyond the shores of Mauritius to the outside world while at the same time dealing with specificities that characterize the creolized society of the South West Indian Ocean.

For Collen there is plenty of conscience raising still to be done and a need for people willing to add their grain of sand. It is a call for people to become involved and be active players in the tragicomedy of life. Collen speaks to a world-wide readership as she believes it is the global community that has the power to unite and make change matter (2019). In this sense writers –especially in Africa– will always be more than just writers. The tragic career of people like Ken Saro-Wiwa is an inspiring example for many.[11] George Orwell wrote in 1946 that "In our age there is no such thing as 'keeping out of politics'. All issues are political issues" (Orwell 357) and for Lindsey Collen that lesson has not lost its relevance to 21st century Mauritius and her two novels of rebellion, *Mutiny* and *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours*, can be read as a useful tool for reminding us of the power of solidarity.

The recent oil spill and the fictional events portrayed in Collen's latest novel are no laughing matter but as Rachel Matteau Matsha claims, "[l]aughter symbolizes the subversion of power and resistance that accompanied the creation of identity" (11) so ending the novel with the spontaneous hilarity of Brij's widow, Binndu reinforces Collen's message that:

> It doesn't sound much to start with, but as our enemies used to say last time round, it was no more than a saxophone player, a midget, a cripple and a pervert, and look to what lengths those enemies had to go in order to halt *their* challenge, a challenge that hadn't even taken form yet. So, you never know (MM 251).

[11] See Nixon 2011: 5-29.

The idea of this being even remotely possible is what Collen wishes to transmit through her writing and the solidarity and community spirit shown in the aftermath of the oil spill suggests that perhaps this is not so far away.

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EXPLORING THE INTERSTICES OF AGING AND NARRATIVE AGENCY IN M.G. VASSANJI'S *THE BOOK OF SECRETS* AND ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S *BY THE SEA*

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Abstract

Indian Ocean literature has captured the porousness and fluidity that configure the Indian Ocean space through narrations in which history and memory, both individual and collective, blend to voice the uninhabited silence forged by unsettled colonialism. M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) are perspicuous exponents of the undertows that lurk behind the troubled existence of uprooted individuals for whom the act of telling stories becomes their means of survival. Given the old age of the protagonists of both novels, Pius Fernandes in *The Book of Secrets* and Saleh Omar in *By the Sea,* this article examines the power of narration from the perspective of narrative gerontology. Imbued with the spirit of Scheherazade's *The Arabian Nights,* itself an Indian Ocean literary reference, Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar biographical accounts become the source of their *literal / literary* survival.

Keywords: Indian Ocean, Narrative Gerontology, M.G. Vassanji, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Exile.

ANÁLISIS DE LOS INTERSTICIOS DEL PROCESO DE ENVEJECIMIENTO Y LA ACCIÓN NARRATIVA EN *THE BOOK OF SECRETS* DE M.G. VASSANJI Y *BY THE SEA* DE ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

Resumen

La literatura indoceánica ha integrado la porosidad y fluidez que caracteriza el espacio del Océano Índico en narraciones donde la historia y la memoria, tanto individual como colectiva, se funden para dar voz al silencio infructuoso forjado dentro de una herencia colonial perturbadora. *The Book of Secrets* (1994) de M.G. Vassanji y *By the Sea* de Adbulrazak Gurnah ofrecen, mediante la biografía de sus dos protagonistas, Pius Fernandes y Saleh Omar, dos ejemplos perspicaces de la importancia de la narración como medio de supervivencia para seres desarraigados. Teniendo en cuenta que ambos protagonistas son personas mayores, este artículo examina el poder de la narración desde una perspectiva de narrativa gerontológica. Poseídos por el espíritu indoceánico que emana de *Las mil y una noches,* Pius Fernandes y Saleh Omar emergen cual Scheherezades que encuentran en la capacidad de contar historias la fuente *literal y literaria* de su supervivencia.

Palabras clave: Océano Índico, narrativa gerontológica, M.G. Vassanji, Abdulrazak Gurnah, exilio.

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Irony is the unforgiving register which gives everything back to us
Gurnah, *Desertion* (230)

The bulk of our existence goes virtually unnoticed, and to that extent unstoried. Awareness of this gap –between existence and *texistence,* between raw life and *story* of life– is the entry point for irony
Randall, "Aging, Irony, and Wisdom" (168)

What is in dispute is whether history has a meaning as 'History'
Young, *White Mythologies* (54)

INTRODUCTION. THE POSTCOLONIAL IRONIST. NARRATIVE, HISTORY AND HUMAN AGING

M.G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* (1994) and Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) present the fictional autobiographies of two elderly men, Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar, who recount their respective life stories. For different reasons, both characters are prompted to look back upon their lives from their present situation of destitution, vulnerability and dependence –Pius Fernandes is a retired teacher in Dar-es-Salaam and Saleh Omar a refugee in England. The biographical character of both narratives and the specific geographical and historical context in which they occur thus positions them as significant examples of narrative agency in Indian Ocean textualities.

The particularity and the complexity of the specific social and national contexts where the novels take place (Tanganyika/Tanzania and Zanzibar)[1] thus intertwine (life)story and history: both life narratives not only take place alongside –but are intimately connected with the collapse of colonialism in East Africa, since the homelessness of exile that both characters experience in their later years is itself a direct consequence of the dismantling of the British Empire. Although the relevance of narration in the novels has already been analysed within the context of "unresolved imperialisms" (Hipchen and Chansky 147) surrounding the Indian Ocean (Hand 2010; Samuelson 2013; Helff 2015; Pujolràs-Noguer 2018), we believe the nuances of narrative agency in postcolonial texts from the perspective of narrative gerontology have not yet been examined in depth. This article is concerned with the ways in which the aging process intersects with both characters' life narratives as postcolonial texts that negotiate identity within the uprootedness of exile. Hence

[1] Tanganyika gained independence in 1961 under the leadership of Julius Nyerere. Zanzibar gained its independence in 1963 which, due to the outbreak of the Zanzibari Revolution, lasted only 11 months. The Zanzibari Revolution came to an end when in 1964 Zanzibar joined Tanganyika and, as a result, the Republic of Tanzania was formed. The novels under discussion capture this historical moment and, therefore, the respective experiences of their protagonists are modelled around this fluctuation of national identities.

our analysis will focus on the interstices between aging and narrative agency within the framework of narrative gerontology.

> Narratives originate in our culture, and through the language and symbols lifestories provide, we can understand each other, ourselves, and our social environment. Therefore, the narratives of individuals in different life situations, in different cultures and even in different time periods will constitute the most important data sources in this new psychology. (Ruth and Kenyon in Birren et al. 20)

Narrative gerontology "provides a lens through which to see the storied nature of aging" (Kenyon 965). While literary gerontology is concerned with the meanings of growing older beyond physiology and chronological age –that is, culturally, socially, politically, etc.– narrative gerontology refers to lifestories and the power of narrative in understanding the "cognitive, affective and motivational dimensions" (Ruth and Kenyon in Birren et al. 5-7) of the aging individual. Narrative gerontology therefore constitutes a useful tool for the study and understanding of the aging process from a lifecourse perspective, as has been documented by gerontologists such as Jan-Erik Ruth, Gary Kenyon and James E. Birren (1996) among others. Already in 1996, Ruth and Kenyon establish that "biographical approaches, such as narratives, life stories and autobiographical material, provide an excellent medium for investigating both the idiosyncratic and shared aspects of human aging over the life span" (2).

Contesting the stereotypical view of aging as a more or less homogeneous process towards decline and death, narrative gerontology not only allows us to understand the shared experience of the aging process, but also to account for the multifaceted aspects that may interact in each individual's life story, thus offering a less limiting and more meaningful approach to aging. As Ruth and Kenyon state, "by employing biographical approaches we are also able to describe how cultures, subcultures, or family patterns are reflected in individual lives, and how particular people adapt to or expand the possibilities and limits set by the historical time period in which we live" (2). Aside from constituting a valuable tool to understand not only the aging process in general but the aging individual as well, life stories also capture the creative quality of life narratives as encompassing the constant formulation and reformulation of the individual's identity since "lifestories are theorized to involve the whole person" (Ruth and Kenyon 5-7). Otherwise put, in narrative gerontology, human beings are approached as emotionally-constituted bodies and so, "as we grow, mature and age in time," Ruth and Kenyon infer, "we gradually form and reform ourselves and the stories we tell about ourselves" (5-7). Thus, narrative gerontology focuses on the value of lifestories as a powerful medium through which both the person retelling his/her own story as well as the collective in which he/she is inserted can make sense of the individual's story and aging process within a specific historical and social context.

Telling one's own narrative and attaining a better understanding of one's own life story constitutes a way of keeping personal integrity and being able to negotiate the constant development of one's identity, thus bringing about fulfilment and

happiness. As Cohler and Cole state, "within contemporary society, maintenance of a sense of coherence or personal integrity, making sense of unpredictable life changes is essential for moral and positive well-being" (Cohler and Cole in Birren 63). Several studies in gerontology (Baars 2012; Edmondson 2015) have engaged with the question of wisdom in later life. In these studies, and as Plato narrates in *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, wisdom is not a quality that the older individual attains by virtue of having merely accumulated knowledge and experience, but rather it resides in the ability to put it into practice for the sake of one's own happiness as well as for the common good (Baars 93). Recent studies (Domínguez-Rué 2018; Casado-Gual et al. 2019; Oró-Piqueras 2019) have similarly used narratives to establish a correlation between creativity, wisdom and an enhanced quality of life in old age by remarking on the contribution of narrative and creativity to the development of a sense of wisdom through a deeper understanding of one's life. As Randall and Kenyon assert, "we access our wisdom only 'by telling the story of my life', that is, by getting it out and then stepping back from it to investigate and interpret it." (Randall and Kenyon 34).

Together with the concept of wisdom, the life stories in the two novels under discussion engage with irony as a distinctive trait of postmodern writing, as the narratives both subvert and rewrite the certainties, among others, of chronological sequence, omniscient narrator, colonial discourse, and history –more ostensibly, history viewed as univocal, as a fixed categorisation of events, history with a capital "H", that is, the history of Western Imperialism. As Randall contends, "in contrast to modernity, with its implicit commitment to certainty and control, irony concerns the acceptance (if not embracing) of ambiguity and relativity, contingency and contradiction, plus the mistrust of the grand master narratives of politics, science and religion" (Randall 166). Both postmodernism and postcolonialism, in their attempts at deconstructing the master narratives of Western civilisation, use irony as a significant component of their narratives. In that sense, life stories intersect with postmodern / postcolonial narratives in their use of irony in a similar way they engage with the concept of wisdom, since, as Randall observes, "the possibility [...] that old age is not just 'the age of irony' (Gibbs 370) but 'the narrative phase par excellence' (Freeman 394) [...] invites us to look at irony from a narrative perspective as well" (Randall 167). Interestingly enough, in the historical development of the figure of the foreigner that Kristeva embarks on in *Strangers to Ourselves,* foreigners are described as "the best of ironists" (Kristeva 10). Although Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves* is not directly concerned with either postcolonialism –her search for the foreigner starts in classical times and ends with Freud– or gerontology, her examination of "foreignness" resonates powerfully with the strangeness that envelops the postcolonial/old-age experience of Vassanji's Pius Fernandes and Gurnah's Saleh Omar. Henceforth, narrative gerontology provides the connecting thread between irony, wisdom and lifestory in postcolonial texts as a valuable means to understand the aging process by offering a more meaningful approach to the life lived as it is.

Despite the fact that both postmodernism and postcolonialism share a common distrust of master narratives, a cautionary remark on the differing starting points of these two "post-" mindsets should be made: whereas postmodernist

discourses are exaltations of disaffected subjectivities upon the individual's discovery of the inexistence of a coherent self, postcolonial discourses must first of all work, as Linda Hutcheon concedes, "to assert and affirm a denied or alienated subjectivity" (quoted in Mishra and Hodge 281). The fundamental difference between the postmodern and the postcolonial fragmented self is that the latter has never enjoyed a coherent, if fraudulent, subjectivity in the first place due to colonialism.

As narrators, both Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar become postcolonial ironists, since they treat history as a category of representation that results in the conflation of "history" and "story" (Young 2004: 55). Their biographies take an ironic stand towards some of the epistemological foundations of Western thought –individual/collective, story/history and past/present– their life narratives thus becoming exponents of wisdom. As gerontologist Ruth Ray contends, "a person is truly 'wise' when she is able to see life as an evolving story and to create some distance between self and story by reflecting on it from multiple perspectives" (Randall 167). In this respect, the postcolonial texts by Gurnah and Vassanji display "the storied complexity of [their] lives" (Randall 167).

The memoirs of Saleh Omar and Pius Fernandes are composed of a collection of individual memories, fragments of stories and historical accounts that merge the individual and the collective, thus dismantling the unified discourse of the colonial history of the Indian Ocean. The pieces resulting from these narrations construct a postcolonial map of the Indian Ocean where the life stories of individual characters conflate with the collective memories of a people and rewrite a history that is increasingly marked by the affective motivations of the characters in charge of the narration (Ruth and Kenyon in Birren et al. 1996). The cask of *ud-al-qamari* in *By the Sea* and Alfred Corbin's diary, "the book of secrets" in Vassanji's eponymous novel thus act as both recipients and generators of the characters' biographies as well as becoming metaphors of the history of East Africa. Very significantly, the trauma of exile and the bereavement of uprootedness is the starting point of the narrative in both novels. For Saleh Omar as well as for Pius Fernandes, old age is empty of the comfort and wellbeing of home. While their later lives are forcefully transformed into painful openings rather than becoming comfortable endings, this new, albeit arduous, beginning grants them the possibility of making their lives meaningful and, therefore, humanly and socially valuable.

Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* and Gurnah's *By the Sea* are two books about East African history and the devastating effects of (de)colonization and exile, but they are also about personal and family tragedies and the healing potential of narrative. This article aims at analysing the interaction of aging and narrative agency in the East African context. In this light, the memoirs of Alfred Corbin and Pius Fernandes in *The Book of Secrets* and of Saleh Omar / Rajab Shaaban and Latif Mahmud in *By the Sea* become, we contend, acts of self-definition and resistance against the destructive potential of exile and oblivion, which in turn provide further nuances to the interaction between fictional memoirs and historical accounts.

The current mythology surrounding old age in the West is grounded upon an ideal of placid and solid rootedness. The ending is near but this is, up to a certain extent, reassuring, since you no longer have to worry about the ordeals of starting once again. The fact of becoming old in a familiar and well-known environment when one has his/her own home and is surrounded by objects, photographs and mementoes that are part of one's story as well as family members, neighbours, friends and acquaintances that have shared one's life story and history is related to quality of life in old age. When referring to the house where her grandmother's family lived for a century and where she spent part of her childhood and early adulthood, Penelope Lively explains "I can move around my memory house and focus upon different objects. The house itself becomes a prompt –a system of reference, an assemblage of coded signs. Its contents conjure up a story; they are not the stations of an oratorical argument, but signifiers for the century" (x). This is precisely where Lively's grandmother died, surrounded by the space and objects that defined her. Needless to say, this comforting old-age experience that Lively's grandmother enjoyed must be placed alongside those other old-age experiences that are framed within existential quagmires that *defer* the coveted "rooted ending".

As a matter of fact, the "rooted ending" ideal absolutely escapes our narrators; what we are witnessing in *By the Sea* and *The Book of Secrets* are two people whose aging process is stamped by uprootedness and their alleged endings forcibly encoded in beginnings. This turns their aging experience into a fascinating case of gerontologist narrative because, in a way, and no matter how tragic the circumstances are, they "begin" again and so their narratives challenge the forceful sense of closure habitually imposed on the aging process. Needless to say, their beginnings are infused with the irreversible pulse of experience, an experience shaped by the conflation of "history" and "personal stories" –the individual and the communal– and written with the mood of the *wise* postcolonial ironist. This individual-cum-communal experience is contained in the objects upon which their biographies are built, namely, the book of secrets and the casket of ud-al-qamari which resonate with Lively's proposition of the close connection between memory and objects (Lively 2001). When memory is thus adhered to objects, life narrations are automatically endowed with a metaphorical dimension. As Ruth and Kenyon state, "meaning in biography is manifested through metaphors" (3). In this case, Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar's precious objects symbolise the clash between their personal stories and the official historical account of their respective homelands. The destruction of "History" –the unilateral, univocal history of Western Imperialism– is manifested through these objects which complicate historical discourse by presenting history as a metaphor modulated by the cognitive, affective, and emotional dimensions (Kenyon 1997) of the life stories of two old-age narrators whose respective homelessness forces them to start again.

Said's apprehension of exile is a calculated definition of homelessness and fragmentation and, as such, it captures the essence of Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar's profound uprootedness. As the author states,

> Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. (Said 2001: 173)

This indeed describes the sadness, fragmentation and irretrievable sense of loss that befall Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar, but, as we shall later prove, in the narration of their life stories they find a textual space whereby they will assuage "this crippling sorrow of estrangement" (200, 173), this throbbing sadness that is embedded in the fragmented self. And this is because this "unhealable rift" (Said 2001: 173) between themselves and their true homes will find a meaning inasmuch as their stories are integrated in historical discourse and accounted for as valuable explorations of uprootedness in old age.

It is precisely within their respective narratives of displacement in old age that *their* objects act as powerful metaphors of stories and as treasures to be kept. The casket of ud-al-qamari is Saleh Omar's sole connection with his origins, with his past, with his subjectivity. We should remember at this point that Saleh Omar travels with a false passport which identifies him as Rajab Shaaban Mahmud. This enforced impersonation should be apprehended as the most extreme manifestation of subject fragmentation and, in this view, the significance of the casket of ud-al-qamari in phrasing Saleh Omar's life narrative is intensified: the casket of ud-al-qamari contains his true self, as opposed to his identity as Rajab Shaaban. As far as Pius Fernandes is concerned, the book of secrets, Alfred Corbin's diary, turns him, an English teacher, into the historian he had always wanted to be. This direct incursion in history, in other words, this dissection of the diary of a colonial officer grants him, we may add, *ironically*, the opportunity to reflect upon and find meaning in his own life.

As recipients of individual memoirs as well as collective memory and national history, both objects bring to the fore the complex question of historical responsibility. Enshrouded in history as Saleh Omar and Pius Fernandes's individual life stories are, their narrative agency can only be successful as long as they position themselves as subjects-in-history (Falk 52-56) who, after Vico's fashion, make, and thus participate and have the capacity to transform historical narrative (Vico 2020; Said 1978 & 1993). Ownership of the object, which means ownership of the stories contained in the object, becomes an act of historical responsibility. Whoever owns the object, owns the story and hence both the casket of ud-al-qamari and Corbin's diary –the book of secrets– are infused with an aura of sacredness that upgrade them both to a worshipping status. Corbin's diary is literally turned into an object of worship in the shrine that Pipa builds in honour of his deceased wife, Mariamu. The love

triangle embodied by Pipa, the *dukawallah*,[2] Mariamu, the indigenous girl, and Corbin, the colonial officer, resides inside the book of secrets and so the communal force involved in the act of unveiling the object necessarily leads to the disclosing of other stories linked with other characters. Ud-al-qamari is likewise sanctified as its inclusion in the chapter entitled "Relics" testifies to. The religious connotations evolving around the word "relic" convert the object –the casket of ud-al-qamari– into a powerful metaphor of historical resilience. Actually, ud-al-qamari's potent yet volatile fragrance epitomizes the narrative force that charts both the life of Saleh Omar and the history of Zanzibar.

Saleh Omar and Pius Fernandes's life histories are henceforth impregnated with the sacredness of the objects wherein their narratives are trapped. The validity of their lives is therefore consolidated through the meaning that emanates from their metaphorically-constructed narrations. The very act of narrating their stories is what makes their lives valuable and meaningful. Considering they are, to all extents and purposes, old men visibly defeated by homelessness and uprootedness, their metamorphosis into Scheherazades that survive because of their capacity to tell stories is a pungent reminder of the power of the *storied* self before the process of aging (Randall 2013). Contravening what Mishra calls "the linear flow of historical narrative" (118), Gurnah's Saleh Omar and Vassanji's Pius Fernandes engage in a narrative mode more attuned to Jan Assman's "communicative memory" (1995). The result is an intentionally disrupted narration moulded around "non-specialization, reciprocity of roles, thematic instability, and disorganizations" (Assman 126) whereby past and present, speaker and listener fuse to lay bare the incompleteness and fragility of history. This is a history metaphorically fabricated and once the genius of history is released from its lamp –the book of secrets and the casket of ud-al-qamari– history, as Pius Fernandes puts it, "drifts about in the sands" (BS 189).[3]

The Book of Secrets' opening scene offers readers a view of Pius Fernandes as an old man, a retired teacher roaming the streets of Dar es Salaam in search of a shop that sells cheap, second-hand shoes. His meagre pension does not allow him to lead a dignified, uncomplicated and reassuring old-age. At this point in his life, and despite the fact that he migrated to "Tanganyika Territory" (BS 260) in 1950, when he was in his early twenties, the "essential homelessness" (BS 301) he felt upon his return from England where he went to complete an MA, envelops his aging performance. A Goan Indian by birth, the deep-seated feeling of estrangement that marks his existence has only been intermittently alleviated through his work at "the Shamsi Boys' School"[4] (BS 262) where he meets Gregory and Rita, the two pillars of his emotional subsistence. With the former, a homosexual English teacher, Fernandes develops an enduring, if peculiar, friendship, whereas onto the

[2] "Dukawallah" is the name whereby shopkeepers of Indian origin in East Africa are known.

[3] References to this book are indicated as "BS" plus page number.

[4] The Shamsis of *The Book of Secrets* are actually the Ismailis, an Indian community whose spiritual leader is Aga Khan and to which Vassanji himself belongs.

latter, a former student of his, he pours his romantic delusions. Gregory's death and Rita's migration to London leave Fernandes in a state of heartfelt disaffection, an individual utterly alone amid a community he fails to acknowledge as his own. When his sense of displacement is felt most severely and his desire to belong –and thus mitigate his distressing homelessness– is most urgently wanted, his former student Feroz appears and offers him Corbin's diary, the book of secrets. Feroz's gesture, his offering of Corbin's diary to Fernandes, should be read as a communal token whereby Fernandes's belonging is reinstated and, consequently, his membership recognized. In short, what Feroz offers Fernandes is the opportunity to make his life meaningful by precisely infusing meaning in the lives of all those "trapped" in the *mzungu*'s diary,[5] the book of secrets. The communal force that lurks behind the object is unobtrusively inserted in the opening lines:

> They called it the book of our secrets, kitabu cha siri zetu. Of its writer they said: He steals our souls and locks them away; it is a magic bottle, this book, full of captured spirits; see how he keeps his eyes skinned, this mzungu, observing everything we do; look how meticulously this magician with the hat writes in it, attending to it more regularly than he does to nature, with more passion than he expends on a woman. He takes it with him into forest and on mountain, in war and in peace, hunting a lion or sitting in judgement, and when he sleeps he places one eye upon it, shuts the other. Yes, we should steal this book, if we could, take back our souls, our secrets from him. But the punishment for stealing such a book is harsh –ai!– we have seen it. (BS 1)

Fernandes identifies the diary as "a record of an early posting, one forgotten fragment of an addendum to a well-documented history" (BS 8) which he is determined to unravel because "like a snoop I must follow the threads, expose them in all their connections and possibilities, weave them together" (BS 99) since, as he rather categorically puts it, "the story is all that matters" (BS 251). The telling of the story, the re-creation of the world ensnared inside the book of secrets gives meaning to his life since, as he learns, the desire that bound Corbin, Pipa and Mariamu is contingent upon the desire that binds *him* to Rita, Ali –Rita's husband– and Gregory. Ali is the embodiment of that first secret, the alleged sexual relationship between Mariamu and Corbin. Born to Mariamu immediately after his marriage to Pipa, Ali's paternity remains a secret which resists disclosure. Actually, the novel ends without certifying Ali's paternity. Fernandes's desire for Rita and his emotional attachment to Gregory are therefore entangled in a larger communal structure which Robert C. Young in *Colonial Desire* calls the "desiring machine" (98) of empire. It is, after all, "the book of *our* secrets" (BS 1; authors' italics).

Gurnah's *By the Sea* confronts readers with the ultimate version of homelessness, the one experienced by Saleh Omar, the old man who decides to emigrate

[5] "Mzungu" is a Kiswahili word which literally means "aimless wanderer." This is the word used by East Africans to refer to white, European people.

to the UK as an asylum seeker. Behind his fake identity as Rajab Shaaban there lies the crudest manifestation of forced displacement, the one perpetrated by one's own homeland. It is his native land, Zanzibar, that repudiates Saleh Omar by imperilling his life and forcing him to emigrate with a passport that deliberately misidentifies him. We should remember at this point that Rajab Shaaban is regarded as Saleh Omar's arch-enemy and so this polarization intensifies the fragmentation of his homeless self. Saleh Omar's uprootedness is painfully asserted through his recognition that his own homeland community concocted the disappearance of his family. History, as epitomized through the Zanzibari Revolution, serves the interests of small family feuds that foreground the bigger feuds of the national family. But History, once again, fails to unilaterally coordinate the multiple voices that configure the stories that emanate from the casket of ud-al-qamari. Where History fails, Saleh Omar's life narration succeeds. Not only will his narration give meaning to his own life but to the life of Latif Mahmud, the actual son of Rajab Shaaban, his arch-enemy, with whom, in an ironic turn of events, he becomes emotionally attached.

It is Saleh Omar as postcolonial ironist that Kevin Edelman, UK customs officer, meets at Gatwick airport. Aware of the need to be identified as "asylum seeker" by the British authorities in order to be allowed entrance in the UK, Saleh Omar performs his refugee-ness by pretending not to speak English. This fact encourages Kevin Edelman to freely articulate the discriminating undertows of the laws for asylum seekers while exposing in a transparent manner the discrimination ascribed to age:

> 'Mr Shaaban, why do you want to do this, a man of your age?' [...] How much danger is your life really in? Do you realise what you're doing? [...] You don't even speak the language, and you probably never will. [...] No one will give you a job. You'll be lonely and miserable and poor, and when you fall ill there'll be no one here to look after you. Why didn't you stay in your own country, where you could grow old in peace? This is a young man's game, this asylum business, because it is really just looking for jobs and prosperity in Europe and all that, isn't it? There is nothing moral in it, just greed. No fear of life and safety, just greed. Mr Shaaban, a man of your age should know better.' (*Sea* 11)[6]

Kevin Edelman is oblivious to the fact that Saleh Omar is denied the right to "grow old in peace" (*Sea* 11), just as he is oblivious to the fact that Saleh Omar speaks English and can understand everything he is saying to him. The postcolonial ironist is obviously lost to Kevin Edelman. What Kevin Edelman sees in front of him is merely another "asylum seeker".

However, Kevin Edelman misses a more insidious aspect of the life of Saleh Omar when he unabashedly neglects the powerful narration contained in the casket of ud-al-qamari. After having ceremoniously displayed Saleh Omar's scanty belongings, taking "one item out at a time, laying each one out carefully on

[6] References to this book are indicated as "*Sea*" plus page number.

the bench, as if he was unpacking clothing of some delicacy" (*Sea* 8), he "sighed" (*Sea* 8) when seeing "the small wooden casket" (*Sea* 8), as if *sensing* the importance concealed in this small item but failing altogether to fully grasp the stories that emanate from the "glorious perfume" (*Sea* 8) he sets free when opening the box. Ud-al-qamari, the fragrance Kevin Edelman unproductively lets loose, Saleh Omar productively captures through an empowering remembrance act that leads him to the person who gave him the casket in the first place, Hussein, who, incidentally, is the connection between himself and Rajab Shaaban's family. Saleh Omar's old-age life narration is set forth and his survival is thus safeguarded.

The post/colonial import of the objects that materialize Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar's old-age narrations deserves to be stressed. The book of secrets, as has been indicated throughout, is the diary of a colonial officer and, as such, the stories contained in it are delineated against the complexities and unresolved conundrums of the colonial past and the postcolonial present. The casket of ud-al-qamari is in the same manner enmeshed in the quandaries of pending post/colonial resolutions. More intriguing is the fact that the objects are coveted by the various protagonists whose lives fill up the text. Corbin's diary is stolen, lost and finally recovered by Feroz who gives it to Pius Fernandes in the hope that he will transcribe its contents. But prior to this, Corbin himself attempted to recuperate his lost diary thus inscribing the fight over possession of the object in a colonizer/colonized framework. It is not surprising that Saleh Omar describes Kevin Edelman's act of dispossession as a plundering act whereby "the casket which I had brought with me as all the luggage from a life departed, the provisions of my after-life" (*Sea* 31) is ruthlessly taken away from him. Kevin Edelman's action evokes the colonialist drive to annihilate the identities of those with, as Joseph Conrad incisively puts it, "a different complexion or slightly flatter noses" (11). Ownership of the object truly means ownership of the story, and, in a further twist, it also means ownership of history, but this is a *hi/story* in which the individual and the communal, the colonized and the colonizers conflate with each other and, in the end, the *wise* thing to do is to give the narration away. In the words of Pius Fernandes:

> What I can never disclose, give to the world, is mine only in trust. The constant reminding presence of a world which I created, a history without the relief of an outlet, can only serve to oppress. And so I have decided to relinquish it. Only then can I begin to look towards the rest of my life and do the best with the new opportunity that has come my way. (BS 363)

In a similar manner, Saleh Omar relinquishes his story the moment he shares it with Latif Mahmud. He, like Pius Fernandes, knows that "a history without the relief of an outlet" (BS 263) is meaningless. Only by phrasing their respective "textistences" (Randall 2013: 165) can they "look towards the rest of [their lives]" (BS 363), even if –and that is the instant when narrative gerontology becomes crucial –this future is consciously carved in old age.

CONCLUSION.
THE SURVIVAL OF THE STORIED SELF

Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar, the narrators of *The Book of Secrets* and *By the Sea* respectively, must face later life without the calm comfort of home generally attributed to the aging experience. However, it is expressly their experience of uprootedness that impels them to forge a new beginning in a foreign landscape against which, paradoxically, the story of their lives is rendered meaningful. In other words, the unravelling of their respective life stories –which in turn both disrupt and re-inscribe historical narratives and the discourse of colonialism– precludes their textual (and literal) disappearance as older exiles. Their sense of homelessness is hence dissipated at the same time that their lives are provided with a meaning. In *The Book of Secrets*, Pius Fernandes embarks on an interpretation of Alfred Corbin's diary, and so he fulfils his vocation as a historian while recovering a decisive chapter of family and national history. His later life is infused with a sense of purpose. In turn, Saleh Omar's painful experience as an exile in England in *By the Sea* paradoxically grants him the chance of accommodating the sorrows of his past and coming to terms with the deeds committed against Latif Mahmud's family. By adopting the identity of Rajab Shaaban, Latif Mahmud's father, and later welcoming the son into his life, Saleh Omar is able to find both peace of mind and an appropriate consistency to his life story. In both novels, the life stories of the main characters provide a liminal space that weaves a net of entanglements between self, home, identity, nation and history. The outcome is a narrative which, although (necessarily) unfinished, is capable of compensating the irreparable loss signified by exile, on the one hand, and bestowing meaning on their lives, on the other:

> A book as incomplete as the old one was, incomplete as any book must be. A book of half lies, partial truths, conjecture, interpretation, and perhaps even some mistakes. What better homage to the past than to acknowledge it thus, rescue it and recreate it, without presumption of judgment, and as honestly, though perhaps as incompletely as we know ourselves, as part of the life of which we all are a part? (BS 364)

In this respect, both novels illustrate Ruth and Kenyon's view that

> ... by employing biographical approaches we are also able to describe how cultures, subcultures, or family patterns are reflected in individual lives, and how particular people adapt to or expand the possibilities and limits set by the historical time period in which we live (Ruth and Kenyon 2)

Even if loneliness and loss have stamped their lives, the characters find significance (both discursive and literal) to their individual life stories and provide cohesion to their identity as postcolonial individualities/textualities, while giving further texture to family accounts and national history. By narrating their individual experiences, inevitably entangled with the historical background in which they lived a good part of their lives, the two protagonists not only make sense of their life

stories from the perspective of old age, but they also add meaning to Indian Ocean communal histories. Narrative, once again, becomes a healing element by which the characters resist the potential oblivion that exile brings with it, enhanced in this case by the social exclusion old age may also entail, while simultaneously they enrich historical accounts with their storytelling ability and personal memories.[7] Imbricated as they are in *The Arabian Nights'* scent of the Indian Ocean imaginary, Pius Fernandes and Saleh Omar emerge as powerful old age Scheherazades determined to survive.

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[7] Class plays a decisive role in the stories of Saleh Omar and Pius Fernandes. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the intricacies of "class" in the lives of both characters but suffice it to say that in their respective cases, their growing old is concomitant with their becoming poor. To put it differently, both Saleh Omar and Pius Fernandes enjoyed a good social standing in their youth which temporally coincided with the colonial period, but they lost this privileged position as their lives were approaching old age and the times entered the postcolonial era.

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SINGING AGAINST ANTI-ASIAN SENTIMENT IN THE EAST AFRICAN POSTCOLONY: JAGJIT SING'S "PORTRAIT OF AN ASIAN AS AN EAST AFRICAN"

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Abstract

The 1972 expulsion of Asians from Uganda by the President of the time, General Idi Amin Dada, is one of the most traumatic events that Uganda has suffered. This article examines how this event is imagined in Jagjit Singh's 'Portrait of an Asian as an East African' (1971). I am interested in three inter-related issues that the poet depicts in this work: the pain of being uprooted from a place one has known as home, only to be cast into a state of statelessness and refugeehood; the nature and character of the emergent postcolony that the poem speaks to; and the ability of poetry to give prescient insights, given the fact the poem was published a year before the expulsion was announced. In the close reading of the poem that I perform in this paper, I pay special attention to the poetic devices that the poet deploys to speak to the three issues that I have mentioned above, and the success with which he does this.

Keywords: Prejudice, Expulsion, Trauma, Atrocity, Asians.

UN CANTO CONTRA EL SENTIMIENTO ANTI-ASIÁTICO EN LA POSTCOLONIA DEL ÁFRICA ORIENTAL. "PORTRAIT OF AN ASIAN AS AN EAST AFRICAN" DE JAGJIT SINGH

Resumen

La expulsión de la población asiática de Uganda perpetrada por el presidente del momento, el General Idi Amin Dada, es uno de los episodios más traumáticos que Uganda ha sufrido. Este artículo examina cómo el poema de Jagjit Singh, "Portrait of an Asian as an East African" (1971) imagina este episodio. Mi interés radica en analizar tres aspectos interrelacionados del poema: el dolor del desarraigo y la condición apátrida del refugiado; la naturaleza y carácter de la poscolonia emergente a la cual el poema se dirige; y la capacidad de la poesía para formular premoniciones sobre el futuro, dado que el poema en cuestión se publicó un año después de la proclama de la expulsión. En la interpretación del poema que realizo, destaco los mecanismos poéticos que el autor utiliza para tratar los tres temas antes mencionados y el éxito con que los lleva a cabo.

Palabras clave: prejuicio, expulsión, trauma, atrocidad, asiáticos.

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INTRODUCTION

In *The Columbia Guide to East African Literature in English Since 1945* (2007), Simon Gikandi and Evan Mwangi (76) identify Jagjit Singh as one of "the most important East African writers," but they do not provide a special entry on him and his work. A talented poet and playwright, his work imagines the tension between the Asians and the black politicians of newly independent East Africa in a powerful and poignant way. Born in Uganda in 1949, Singh "went to Senior Secondary School, Kololo, where he was awarded a Gold Medal for obtaining four distinctions in A-levels in 1969" (Cook and Rubadiri 199) and to the School of African and Asian Studies at the University of Sussex where he "won distinction while reading literature" (Gregory 447). His works include his play, *Sweet Scum of Freedom*, which "won third prize among six hundred entries in 1971 in the Second BBC African Service Competition for new half-hour radio plays" (Gregory 447), and "Death, etc., etc.," "No Roots, No Leaves, No Buds," "Portrait of an Asian as an East African," and "Public Butchery" in *Poems from East Africa*, an influential anthology edited by David Cook and David Rubadiri, first published in London by Heinemann Educational Books in 1971.

"Portrait of an Asian as an East African" is in three parts. In Part I, the persona sets the scene of the issue he is discussing, the impending expulsion of the Asians from East Africa over the "great issue of citizenship" (156). The Asians are being treated shabbily by the post-independence politicians who doubt their (Asians') commitment to the newly independent nations, and who have forgotten the Asian contribution to East African modernity, evidenced by their historic role in building the Kenya-Uganda railway between 1896 and 1903, which left over two thousand four hundred of them dead "while six and a half thousand were invalided" as a result of "the hardships that the thirty-two thousand indentured laborers had to endure –plagues of jigger-infestations, man-eating lions, harsh weather conditions and workplace accidents" (Ojwang 10).

In Part II, the persona remembers the bravery of the Indians for treating the Victoria Cross medal given to them by imperial Britain with contempt, for it is a false honour in the sense that it was "for blood discarded / and bodies dismembered / in white wars of yesterday" (157). It is implied that the Indian soldiers did not have a cause for which they were fighting, which is why the persona sees their acts of soldiership in terms of discarding blood and dismembering bodies. It is this realization that they were made to fight a war that had no meaning to them that makes them treat the medals given to them with so much disdain that they fling them "into the dung-heap of the british empire" (157). This line can mean at least two inter-related things: that the British Empire is no more than a dung-heap (so it deserves no respect), and that the British empire has collapsed (i.e. it is a dung-heap). Perhaps this explains why the noun "Britain" is spelled with a lower-case b, instead of the upper-case B that is usually used to render the names of countries or empires.

In the final part, the persona bemoans the toxic racial situation in East Africa, where the colour of the Asians' skin has made them "malignant cells [that] must fade away soon" and "green leaves / that must sprout no more" (158), that is to say,

a group of people fated to a certain doom, which I read as the impending expulsion and loss of their homes, with the term 'home' having a ray of meanings including "a sense of "patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection" (Marangoly George cited in Ojwang 5). This final part, like the first one, makes it clear that the Asians are victims of history, hence the lines "lead the ram to the altar / and wash away the sins of history" (159). This allusion to the Jewish religious practice of a ram being killed as atonement for the sins committed by the community underlines the persona's view of the impending expulsion of the Asians as a scapegoat. In this paper, I revisit this view, and several others that the poem throws up for reflection, as I examine the manner in which Singh imagines the 1972 expulsion of the Asians, which his poem –like Peter Nazareth's novel *In a Brown Mantle*– prophesied. Suffice it to mention that prophesy in this context means the ability to "see the present with absolute clarity" (Nemerov 223), to the extent of presciently stating what will happen in the near future.

VERSIFYING THE EXPULSION AS LOSS AND TRAUMA

In the poem, the persona depicts the impending expulsion from East Africa as a terrible loss, which is why his tone of voice is one of anguish. The Asians are not just on the verge of being expelled from the region, but they are also humiliated in different ways, hence the powerful image of the "bent shadow" that the black nationalists will soon break, which could refer to the loss of pride and confidence that the Asians have suffered to the extent that they are not willing to fight back when they are provoked. The phrase "bent shadow" suggests that they are under a lot of strain (they are imagined from the perspective of a shadow, moreover one that is not straight), while "unfriendly frown" gives the reader an idea of the atmosphere that the Asians are living in (that of loathing). No wonder, in back alleys and government offices, they wear a "subordinate Asian smile of friendship / that proclaims the Jew also is a citizen" (157), thereby attracting the hostile reply, "citizen? ... perhaps so, / but of Asian extraction" (ibid). The allusion to the Jews is important, for it is meant to give an idea of how serious the Africans' resentment was to the extent that it is compared to anti-Semitic attitudes in Europe, made most famous in William Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice* (which features a Jewish businessman, Shylock) and most notorious in Nazi Germany where millions of Jews were killed during the Second World War. I read the exaggeration contained in the allusion to be intended to attract attention to the plight of the Asians in post-independence Africa, which is undoubtedly dire, but not comparable to that which the Jews endured at the hands of Adolf Hitler. The poem imagines a future where the Asians will soon be

> flying,
> unwelcome vultures all over the world,
> only to unsheathe fresh wrath
> each time we land (158)

In Simatei's reading of these lines, "[t]he gesture really is to another place, another nation where the ritual of dispersal will probably be repeated" ("Writers in Diaspora"), since if the country of the persona's return were India, his land of descent, then the question of wrath upon arrival would not arise. The India the persona knows is not a physical one that he wishes to return to, but rather what Salman Rushdie calls an imaginary homeland –"an India of the mind" (10).

Suffice it to mention that the above lines ("and soon we shall be flying, / unwelcome vultures all over the world, only to unsheathe fresh wrath each time we land") proved perceptive, if not prophetic, for indeed when the Asians were expelled from Uganda, they were not well-received in the country most of them headed for –Britain– irrespective of whether or not they held British passports. The word "wrath" is particularly important given the fact that Britain did not just decide "to disown its responsibility to its non-white citizens" as David D'Costa, one of the characters in Nazareth's second novel *The General Is Up* puts it (44), but actually did worse: it claimed that the Asians, even those who held its passports, were Uganda's responsibility (Kahyana "Negotiating" 126). Derek Humphrey and Michael Ward give a detailed account of this in their book *Passports and Politics* (1974), where it is clear that Britain's reluctance to welcome its coloured passport holders is a kind of expulsion which, like Amin's, was based on racial grounds. White families from other commonwealth countries enter Britain without any difficulty while Asians from East Africa are barred from the country because of the 1968 Immigration Act which made their D-class British passports worthless. Salman Rushdie comments on this issue thus:

> One of the more curious aspects of British immigration law is that many Rhodesians, South Africans and other white non-Britons have automatic right of entry and residence here, by virtue of having one British-born grandparent; whereas many British citizens are denied these rights, because they happen to be black. (133)

Rushdie is being diplomatic here, for what he is actually saying –if stated in crude terms– is that the distinction that Britain makes between passport-holding and citizenship when it comes to denying black or coloured people into the country is racist. In his memoir about the expulsion *From Citizen to Refugee*, Mahmood Mamdani gives many examples of British racism against the expelled Uganda(n) Asians. For instance, in a refugee camp in Kensington, the Asians are called 'wogs' and treated like helpless refugees, even those who carry British passports. Things get from bad to worse in this camp; eventually, camp dwellers are asked to carry cards and wear badges clearly marking them as refugees. When four white people come to the camp and try to beat three Asians, the camp personnel just stand and watch. A huge fight erupts as the Asians try to defend themselves, leaving one of them wounded (*From Citizen* 127). If we remember that it was Britain with its allies like Israel that did not just bring Idi Amin to power, but also kept him there for "eight long years" by selling him high-tech military and surveillance equipment (Mamdani *Imperialism* 1), this segregated treatment of Amin's victims becomes hard to bear. It is evidence of what the persona calls "the false kindness of the white race" (Singh "Portrait" 158), for both the British passport and Britain itself that the Asians

associated with security against ultra-nationalist post-independence politicians turn out fake and unreliable, respectively.

INTERROGATING SOME OF THE POEM'S ASSUMPTIONS

There is no question about the fact that the expulsion of the Asians from Uganda casts them as victims of history and as scapegoats. In the first place, the Indians did not engineer the colonial creation of "a racially stratified society, with the whites constituting the upper class, the Asians the middle class and the Africans the bottom class, hewing wood, fetching water and baby-sitting white and brown babies" –a three-tiered racial structure in which "the British used the Asians to serve the imperial interests by acting as the intermediary between the white colonizers and the black Africans" (Kahyana "Narrating" 101) and to "to provide a buffer between the Europeans and the Africans" which made them "absorb most of the resentment against the new cash economy, although they were never its sole or even primary beneficiaries" (Ojwang 13). It is the British colonialists who engineered this three-tiered system, which inevitably made the Africans consider the Asians as part of the colonial force that was lording it over, and subjecting them to servitude. In this respect, the Asians are victims of history, including that which imagined them as "Jews of Africa," an epithet which contained the same negative assumptions about the Asians as were to be found concerning Jewish merchants in Europe (Seidenberg 14).

But the Asians were not completely victims of history or "the unintentionally corrupted" (159) as the persona puts it, for there is at least one instance in which they contributed to their troubles in post-independence East African countries. This is in the area of their relationship with Black people, in which they considered themselves superior to the Africans whom they regarded members of the lowest caste, and atavistic remnants of the Neolithic Age (Seidenberg 7). Tirop Peter Simatei suggests that this feeling of racial superiority on the part of Asians, together with the notion of exclusion, which is so ingrained in their caste-centered social organisation that it comes to them almost naturally, militated against social (and sexual) intercourse between them and the Africans (74). Most Ugandan Asian writers are honest about the existence of racial prejudice among some Asians as shown by what they depict in their writing. Jameela Siddiqi, for instance, sarcastically depicts the ignorance of some Asian characters, whose crass prejudice against Africans is appalling. One such character is Mrs Naranbhai in her second novel *Bombay Gardens*, who on arrival in East Africa muses thus:

> [W]hat a pity about the natives. Why did they have to be so dark […] How could one know whether they were clean or not? With such dark skin how do you tell dirt apart from skin colour? Did they wash? How did they know when all the dirt had washed off? Did the water turn black? So why were the rivers and lakes so clear and sparkly blue? Is it true they eat humans? (101-102)

While the novel makes it clear that this crass prejudice is a result of the fact that this is Mrs Naranbhai's first visit to Africa, her attitude towards Africans does

not change in the course of the novel; if anything, it gets worse as her relationship with her servant, Jannasani, whom he accuses of being the typical lazy African even as he works himself to the bone, shows (Kahyana "Negotiating" 136).

In her memoir *No Place like Home*, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown Alibhai-Yasmin depicts similar racist sentiments. Her uncle, Ramzan, says: "These black shenzis [barbarians/savages] don't know how to make money, you know. It grows on trees here" (7). And his son, Shamsu, shares this sentiment: "It is in their nature, you know. Bloody empty-headed, can't work, just want to drink their money, only understand the stick and the shoe [a reference to the practice of some Asians beating Africans]. No culture, you know, not like us" (9).

There are many ways in which one can explain this prejudice, but three will suffice for this discussion. First, the colonial racial structure already discussed above, which placed the Asians as second to the British, and therefore racially superior to the Africans. Second, the Asians' caste system which places people in different social positions of privilege or servitude. In this scheme of things, Africans were regarded members of the lowest social caste (Seidenberg 7). Finally, the Asians' anxiety about their future, that is to say, their fear of a black peril of sorts should the tables of the racial structure turn, thereby dismantling their racial and economic privileges. This is because independence "precipitates a crisis in the master-servant relationship precisely because it is achieved on principles such as equality and freedom of the African hitherto treated as if fit only to be a servant of both the White Man and the Asian" (Simatei 93-94). In other words, for the Asians, what was unimaginable happens, thereby throwing their world into disarray.

Needless to mention, these toxic sentiments of racial superiority soured the relationship between Asians and Africa, thereby contributing to the tense environment that Idi Amin exploited in 1972 when he expelled the Asians from Uganda. As for the view that the Asians served as "the scapegoats for the real exploiters who want[ed] to find an excuse for the lack of egalitarian development in the country" (Nazareth "Social Responsibility" 97), this is mostly true, given the fact that even the most corrupt black government officials like Gombe-Kukwa (as depicted in Nazareth's *In a Brown Mantle*) and Dr. Ebongo (as depicted in Singh's radio play "Short Scum of Freedom") shamelessly make this charge. Besides, "[f]ewer than 10 percent of the Asians were involved in business, industry, and transportation: most were teachers, doctors, civil servants, bank clerks, and lawyers" (Nazareth "Adventures" 383), while the "pre-1972 owners of large-scale property: industrial, commercial and residential" numerically "constitute a tiny minority [of] around 50 families" (Mamdani "Ugandan Asian Expulsion" 272). This means that the charge of exploitation usually labelled against Asians as a group is erroneous, for it gives the impression that all Asians were traders and industrialists. This does not mean, however, that all the Asians were completely clean. There were those who were involved in unethical business practices that tantamounted to exploitation, if not economic sabotage, for instance those that M.A. Tribe writes about in his article "Economic Aspects of the Expulsion," who siphoned money out of Uganda using methods like "over-invoicing of imports and under-invoicing of exports, false declaration of factor incomes such as profits and rents, and improper use of personal transfers" (144).

On the issue of Asians taking on East African citizenship, the poem makes it clear that for the post-independence black nationalist, it is not enough that the Asian is a citizen: he/she remains in the category of the alien irrespective of his/her citizenship status, simply because he/she has a different skin colour. This signals the failure of citizenship as a pedagogical tool meant to construct the people belonging to the nation as "the many as one" and "out of many one" (Bhabha "DissemiNation" 294), irrespective of the differences in race, ethnicity, class, gender, or sexuality. This is the reason as to why when the Asian declares himself/herself as a citizen, the black nationalist replies sardonically, "perhaps so, but of Asian extraction" (Singh 157). In other words, the reality of difference in race overrides the unity that the pedagogical tool of citizenship is designed to inscribe or foster, thereby making the exclusion of the Asians from the category of citizen, and later their expulsion from Uganda, "symptomatic of the sickness of the nation, indeed of the failed project of building a multiracial nation" (Simatei 99). Mahmood Mamdani attributes this partly to the shrewdness of some Asian capitalists/bourgeoisie who, by the middle of the 1960s, "had succeeded in shifting the terms of affirmative action from 'Africanisation' to 'Ugandanisation' so that '[b]y virtue of citizenship, and local incorporation of companies, it was now in a position even to benefit from affirmative action" (95). This angered the black nationalists for they were able to see the game the capitalists were up to, as I explain in a moment.

Affirmative action, it should be recalled, came into being in the early 1950s, as the British colonial government's response to the nationalist peasant strikes of 1945 and 1949, which called an end to racial discrimination that favoured the whites and the Asians at the expense of the Africans in various areas like industrialisation, large-scale farming, retail business, and the civil service (Mamdani "Uganda Expulsion" 94). It is the shrewd shifting of the terms of affirmative action from Africanisation to Ugandanisation that made the category 'citizen' suspect, since it collapsed the distinction between citizen and subject –to use Mamdani's famous formulation– that had sustained the colonial enterprise, with the citizen being the civilized (the non-native, usually white, with rights) and the subject being the native, considered uncivilized and in need of "an all-round tutelage" (Mamdani *Citizen and Subject* 17). The insightfulness of this formulation is however haunted by its failure to adequately explain the place of the Asians in British colonial East Africa, for although they were non-native and with some rights, their privileges were not as wide-ranging as those of the white colonialists. They were citizens but not quite, to paraphrase Bhabha's famous phrase, "almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha *Location* 89) –a thing that remains true even after political independence as the poem under discussion so powerfully demonstrates.

Perhaps the most contentious aspect of the poem is the way it imagines pre-colonial East Africa using the imperialist language of civilizing the dark savage. The persona attributes the hostility that black nationalists mete on the Asians as arising from amnesia: black blood has decided to "forget / swamp sleeping savagery of greenness / that burst into an Indian bazaar" (156). I understand the persona to be saying that East African civilization and modernity owe themselves to the Asians' presence in the sense that before their arrival, the region was "swamp

sleeping savagery of greenness" (ibid). Since the black nationalists "have no quibbles whatsoever about the pleasures of modernity" (Ojwang 164), as seen by the Mercedes Benzes they drive, the black suits they wear and the bank accounts they run in Switzerland ("Portrait" 156), it is implied that their shabby treatment of Asians is a form of ingratitude that needs to be exposed and condemned. By imagining pre-colonial and pre-Indian diaspora East Africa as being mere swamp and jungle, Singh elides black Africans' achievements of the period, for instance pre-colonial Buganda's impressive highways that John Speke, Emin Pasha, and Henry Morton Stanley write about with respect (Reid 105-07), and her production of iron implements like hoes and knives which ceased with Britain's colonisation of the country as a result of mass importation of British iron products (Mamdani *Politics and Class* 34-35).

Besides, there is a problem with attributing the bad blood between the Asians and the Africans to a failure in memory, since it "suggests that the problem is fundamentally one of consciousness and attitudes" as Ojwang observes, yet a better approach is to locate "the conflict in the uneven patterns of accumulation and exploitative social relations, rather than one that focuses solely on the affective responses to such historical problems" (Ojwang 164). This contextualization is what this paper attempts. Singh's take on the friction between Asians and Africans in post-independence East Africa therefore comes off as partisan, since he identifies with the British colonialists, who conquered the region and other parts of the world in the name of civilizing the native. While his poem might be read as a lament for lack of equitable treatment of Asians and Africans in post-independence East Africa, the fact that he constructs the Asians as having civilized and modernized savage Africa that is now throwing out the bringer of modernity might be read as a desire, if not a call, for a privileged position for the Asian.

It is significant that the poem takes the entire region of East Africa as constituted by 1970 as its area of focus, and not just Uganda where the expulsion was to take place in 1972. This is evident in its title, "Portrait of an Asian as an East African." There are at least two ways of explaining this, the first one being that the Black people's resentment to the Asians in the region was widespread in all the countries, as shown by the racially-charged statements many nationalist politicians made soon after independence, and racially-charged happenings. The example of racially-charged statements have been captured in imaginative texts like Nazareth's novel *In a Brown Mantle* and Singh's radio play "Sweet Scum of Freedom." In the former, an African character called Gombe-Kukwaya states thus, with the Asians in his mind, "Those who come to this country must go back where they came from. We can do without your kind here. We have had enough of exploiters" (75). Later in the novel, he ominously declares, "If I were in power, I would chase all these brown people into the sea [because] they kept aloof from us until we won our Independence and now that we are the bosses, they are trying to be friendly" (114). In the latter text, Dr Ebongo, the Minister of the ridiculously large ministry of Commerce and Trade, Broadcasting, Foreign and Cultural Affairs in a post-independence East African government says this as part of his speech in parliament:

> [Although now independent] the African is still very, very oppressed, I tell you –economically oppressed. We still have a lot of foreigners in our country. I am referring of course to the Asian community now ... But I must warn the Asians. We will never allow them to have one foot in Britain, the other foot in India and only their hands in Africa playing like prostitutes with our commerce and trade. (45)

These imagined statements reflected those made in actual life, for instance those by the first President of Independent Kenya Jomo Kenyatta and his Vice President Daniel Arap Moi, who bluntly demanded, on several occasions, that Asians leave Kenya if they refuse to subordinate their social, cultural and economic interests to those of black Africans (Theroux 47-48). For the racially-charged happenings, a very good example is the mass expulsion of the Asians from Zanzibar during the Zanzibari Revolution of 1964 (Ojwang 13), which was organized by "a motley crew of peasants, laborers and sharecroppers" led by a Ugandan man called John Okello (Ojwang 96). The tendency to portray the expulsion of the Asians as having been unique to Idi Amin's Uganda is therefore erroneous. Its purpose, I guess, is to present Amin as the beast, and the leaders of Kenya (Jomo Kenyatta) and Tanzania (Julius Nyerere) as the beauties, which is not historically the case, for while Amin's 'solution' to the human question was cruel and brutal, Kenyatta's and Nyerere's were also tough, albeit effected with more subtlety. The end result of these subtle approaches was however the same –the Asians leaving Kenya and Tanzania in large numbers. In M.G. Vassanji's short story collection entitled *Uhuru Street*, these departures are represented by characters like Aloo (who lives Tanzania in "Leaving") and the woman in "What Good Times We Had," who –just before she is murdered– is on the verge of leaving the country.

CONCLUSION

After the expulsion, Singh disappeared from the East African literary scene, unlike Peter Nazareth who remained active as an academic and literary critic based at the University of Iowa in the United States of America, and Bahadur Tejani who kept writing articles, for instance "Farewell Uganda," published in *Transition* two years after the expulsion, and creative writing collected in *Laughing in the Face of Terrorism* (2009). For Singh, the expulsion from East Africa meant leaving the East African literary scene altogether, so much that it is not known what he wrote and published after 1972, or even what became of him. In this respect, he can be said to be a "proud eagle / shot down / by the arrow / of Uhuru" –to use a verse from Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Prisoner* (94), with the shooter being Idi Amin Dada himself. For if the expulsion had not happened, it is possible that Singh would have continued to write and publish poetry and plays. His silence after the expulsion can be read in many ways, one of them being the hypothesis that I am proposing: that Singh loved Uganda so much that upon being expelled from it, he could not bear write anymore, since writing involves remembering the time gone by, which is itself "a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense

of the trauma of the present" (Bhabha "Remembering" 123). In formulating this hypothesis, I am informed by Charles Kebaya's insightful observation that there is "a contradictory process at play in representing atrocities: the compulsion to speak and make the trauma visible and the pressure to remain silent in the face of one's inability to articulate a truthful representation of the experience" (2). This insight guided me to the conclusion that it is likely that after prophesying the atrocity that was about to happen to Ugandan Asians, Singh became too traumatized to continue writing about the country he had lost, hence his silence after 1972.

I am invoking p'Bitek's image with the seriousness it deserves, to underline the toll that the expulsion had on some of its victims. The image suggests that the eagle is grounded, wounded or perhaps killed by the arrow with which it is shot. Likewise, Ugandan Asians who were expelled do experience a deep wound in terms of the statelessness they experienced, with Bahadur Tejani remaining as stateless as 1976 (Tejani and Koshi 48), and the trauma that the expulsion caused on their psyche, particularly on the idea of self and belonging. But there is a difference between p'Bitek's persona and Singh's: the former is shot down (read: detained) for assassinating a post-independence political leader (presumably a head of state), that is to say, there is cause for his arrest and detention, while the latter is shot down (read: expelled) for the colour of his skin and "the sins of history" associated with this colour, some of which have been identified already –prejudice against Africans, racial isolationism, and ethnic insularism, to mention but a few. While p'Bitek's persona could have avoided his fate if he had not assassinated the politician, it is likely that Singh's fate is more or less sealed, for even when the Asians work hard to be accepted as East Africans (by participating in the anti-colonial struggles in Kenya, contributing to the East African economies through industrialization initiatives, and taking on Ugandan, Kenyan and Tanzanian citizenship), the stereotype that they are exploiters (milkers of the economy as Amin put it) remains. This makes "Portrait of an Asian as an East African" an archive of atrocity, in the sense that it documents how the Ugandan nation cleansed itself of one of the groups that constituted it –the Asian citizens or residents– thereby causing this group untold anguish and trauma. It is also "a memorial to a people and a place" –to use Rashna Batliwala Singh's phrase (138)– in the sense that it keeps alive the experiences and anxieties and the feelings of despair and dejection that the East African Asians experienced at a particular time and place in history.

The helplessness and despair that the persona experiences in the poem is recognizable to anybody who has lived under a dictatorship, where the ordinary citizen is treated like an inconvenience or a burden to be got rid of, and not a resource to be harnessed for national survival and development. For while the poem depicts the invalidation of Asian citizenship in the East African nations of the 1960s and 1970s as having been as a result of the racial intolerance and prejudice of the time, this practice (of invalidating citizenship) still takes place in the East African nations of the 21st century, but in a different form. In Uganda, this is seen in the way some groups, for instance members of the political opposition, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-sexual, queer and inter-sex people, are hounded by state apparatuses like the national Police force, which acts in partisan ways during elections (Abrahamsen and

Bareebe 3), and the national parliament which enact homophobic laws targeting them (Xie 6 and Jjuuko and Mutesi 269-270), respectively, irrespective of their citizenship status. In President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni's Uganda (in power since 1986 and still counting), sometimes the invalidation takes the form of people being denied particular opportunities because they do not have access to the huge patronage machine that has been put in place, which is "typically in the form of government contracts, tenders, and jobs" (Mwenda 29). Needless to mention, this machine does not care whether or not one is a citizen; what matters is one's relationship to the people in power by blood, marriage, or "the political leanings of the clients" (Green 95). In other words, Singh's poem continues to be relevant today, 50 years after it was published.

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"STORIES WHICH GO ON AND ON": TRANSFORMATIVE RESILIENCE AGAINST GENDER VIOLENCE IN TISHANI DOSHI'S *GIRLS ARE COMING OUT OF THE WOODS*

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Abstract

Tishani Doshi's *Girls Are Coming out of the Woods* (2017) details the gender violences inflicted against women in India and the world to promote consciousness-raising, resistance, and subversion against interlocking systems of patriarchal power based on economy, ethnicity and gender. In this paper I firstly propose that Doshi promotes a transformative mode of resilience that guarantees socio-politic change rather than acceptance and submission. Secondly, I reflect on how Doshi's description of the fear and gender violences systemically inflicted on women unveil counter-stories that exceed the portrayal of women as victims. Finally, I propose that Doshi's presentation of resilient bodies embraces the interplanetary possibilities of creating constellations of co-resistance that allow the world to go forward instead of leaning back.

Keywords: Indian Writing in English, Tishani Doshi, Transformative Resilience, Gender Violence.

«HISTORIAS QUE SIGUEN Y SIGUEN»: RESILIENCIA TRANSFORMADORA EN CONTRA DE VIOLENCIAS DE GÉNERO EN *GIRLS ARE COMING OUT OF THE WOODS*, DE TISHANI DOSHI

Resumen

Girls Are Coming out of the Woods (Las chicas salen del bosque), de Tishani Doshi, relata las violencias de género cometidas contra las mujeres de India y el mundo promoviendo concienciación, resistencia y subversión contra los sistemas patriarcales basados en variables económicas, étnicas y de género. Se analiza cómo Doshi promueve una forma de resiliencia transformadora que garantiza un cambio socio-político en vez de una mera aceptación y sumisión. Seguidamente, se estudia cómo Doshi describe el miedo y las violencias de género contra las mujeres permitiendo su testimonio para que tengan más matices que los de víctimas. Para terminar, se destaca cómo las descripciones de corporalidades plurales favorecen una interplanetariedad que crea redes de co-resistencia que permiten al mundo ir hacia delante en vez de contraerse.

Palabras clave: Literatura india en lengua inglesa, Tishani Doshi, resiliencia transformadora, violencias de género.

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Violences against women in their multiple forms that inflict fear, hate, shame, and pain on the physical and spiritual bodies of women in India have been the subject of much research by feminist theorists (Bhutalia 2000, 2006; Menon 2004, 2012; Mankekar; Kandasamy 2020). In this context, resilience emerges as a theoretical concept which can challenge dominating political, economic, and capitalist structures through narratives that promote awareness-raising, resistance, and subversion against interlocking systems of patriarchal control based on class, race, gender, caste, or sexuality. This understanding of resilience therefore implements a social transformation (Roy 2011; O'Brien 2015; Folke; Coleman; Chatterjee; Fraile-Marcos) that is obviated in neoliberal uses of the term that simply safeguard the stability and power structures of patriarchal control.

These narratives of resistance and subversion that understand resilience in this transformative trend promote the alteration of socio-politic, gender, caste, and ethnic constructs which systemically limit individuals and communities. Writers, such as Arundhati Roy (1996, 2017), Manjula Padmanabhan (2008, 2015), Anuradha Roy (2015, 2018), Meena Kandasamy (2014, 2017), Prayaag Akbar (2017), and Tishani Doshi (2010, 2019), have described characters in contemporary or a near-future India who contest the current neocolonial tellings and capitalist arrangements of Indian history that stereotype, control, and limit the role of women. These authors have presented Indian women who survive and escape the "treacherous hypocrisies of Indian society" (Kandasamy 2015) in order to challenge the multiple systems of domination and violence placed upon women living in contemporary India.

Tishani Doshi's poetry collection, *Girls Are Coming out of the Woods* (2017), is an example of these subversive possibilities of resilience because it exposes the brutality perpetrated against women's bodies and demands the survival of women subverting and denouncing gender violence to be guaranteed. The poems present women whose existences appear in history to refuse the routes and roots of systemic attacks against their sex. Doshi offers a multivocal testimony of transformative resilience to raise awareness about the necessity of a collective action to disrupt the performance of violence against women in India and the world.

Doshi fosters a heterogenous poetic space that denounces the many acts of gender and sexual violence that are a consequence of what Doshi calls the "large-scale malaise of gender violence in India" (in Nair). In this context, the aim of this paper is threefold. Firstly, it dwells on resilience to explain the differences between a mode of resilience that simply adapts and another which confronts. Secondly, it studies the fear and gender violence performed against the bodies of women in *Girls Are Coming out of the Woods* to see if there is a transformative or adaptive resilience in their stories. Finally, it unveils Doshi's portrayal of resilient and plural

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bodies to connect with a transformative hope that answers Doshi's own question about "how we go forward with this [current] momentum [of gender violence and human catastrophes]?" (2018b: 36'06''-36'08''). My ultimate goal is to show how Doshi calls for interplanetary and feminist possibilities of survival (Spivak 2012; Moreno Álvarez 2017) through her stories to defy, transmute, and come out of the woods together.

Tishani Doshi shows that the physical body is born to decay, but its corporeal and spiritual stories stay, adapt, and challenge existing narratives. In the eponymous poem, *Girls Are Coming out of the Woods* (2017), Doshi repeats the echo of "girls are coming out of the woods" (37) to reflect the resilient capacity that human beings develop to survive, denounce, and attack the entrenched structures that perpetuate gender violence. This survival is understood not only as individual but collective because, as Susie O'Brien exclaims, "you cannot be resilient by yourself" (2018). It is not only about surviving and congratulating your own life as an individual but being aware that there is a social change required to modify the political, safety, family, caste, religious, and economic strategies in a state like India. A collaborative transformation of the individual and social realms defies the commodification of stories of self-resilience to implement a community resilience that fights against the hegemonic patriarchal powers of the socio-political array.

Political discourses articulate narratives of fear that limit the self and community agency of human beings with insecurity and hesitation as inhabitants of the world. Strategies of survival and adaptation are necessary to ensure the future but it is crucial to analyse the neoliberal fetishisation of resilience that praises adaptation and survival without questioning why vulnerability and precariousness occur (Bracke 852; Fraile-Marcos 5; Coleman 21). This mode of neoliberal and adaptive resilience seems to match the act of being alive with inevitable suffering or disadvantage.

C.S. Holling defined natural resilience as "the ability of a given system to absorb changes of state [...] and still persist" (17) and Susie O'Brien highlighted how Holling challenged "the traditional ideas of a harmonious balance in nature [because] the natural world is in a perpetual state of flux" (2017: 46). The neoliberal uptake on resilience, on the other hand, only celebrates the individual equilibrium that assures individual survival. Accordingly, there is a mode for resilience that praises transformation, revolt, and renewal (O'Brien 2015) as opposite to a form of resilience that safeguards "adaptation," "recovery," and "re-organization" (Folke 256) without social change. Neoliberal interests reside on the latter trend, assuming that the "fantasies of the good life," such as "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality and life-building accomplishments" (Berlant 3) happen if you individually adjust to the system. Leanne Simpson signals that there are "politics of grief and victimization," which emerge and "focus on individual trauma instead of collective" (239). In contrast, there is a mode of resilience which is transformative because it modifies the individual and also collective to, as Eva Darías-Beautell points out, "bounce forward" (164) instead of bouncing back to subaltern nets.

Tishani Doshi's *Girls Are Coming out of the Woods* congratulates the transformative mode of resilience which exceeds the violence exerted, both

historically and systemically, against women. Doshi's collection denounces that violence is a neoliberal strategy to distil an affective fear that emerges when there is a threat of pain (Ahmed 2017; Maillard 2018). Activist and writer, Meena Kandasamy exclaims that the book is "a battle cry" that "captures gendered violence and the hostility with which victims are viewed [...], and yet, celebrates the impossible beauty of the everyday" (2018). Gender violence in India is a structural problem that positions women as subordinate to men and the law system, dependant on "a flawed democracy" (Roy 2016: 66) and "a judicial void" (Menon 2004: 41) that favours a dichotomy between the public/private space where religion orchestrates the public and the state limits the private.

The result of gender violence and fear is the enactment of what Sara Ahmed calls "an apartness [...] inferiority [...] dependence [and] vulnerability" (2004: 64) placed upon women in both public and private spaces. This description of women as subaltern links them as "vulnerable objects" (Menon 2004: 142-143) subject to suffering violence. Doshi's collection accounts for different forms of violence against women but does not show women as static victims. Instead, the book works as a polyphonic canvas of challenges and opposition that criticises the patriarchal construction of India's legal, social, religious, and state politics. This is the transformative mode of resilience that Doshi recognises as her primary goal in the collection: speaking about and against centuries of violence and silencing to validate the stories of women because, "these voices wouldn't be gone for nothing. They will come back and we will be forced to hear them" (Doshi 2018a: 14:04-14:26).

This promise of regeneration emerges in the vision that Doshi used to write her eponymous poem. In her own words, she was

> travelling on a bus in Ireland five or six months after Jyoti Singh was assassinated [...] listening to Bollywood and [she] had this vision of armies of women marching coming out of the Irish woods. Some of them were alive, some of them were dead, some of them had disfigured faces, some of them were armed [...] I wrote this poem thinking on What do we do with all these disappeared women, killed [...] only because they are women (12:40-14:04).

She states that she was trying to negotiate her personal experience as a woman, with "a passion and desire [...] to react against the reality" (14:06) that favoured the killing of Jyoti Singh and her friend, Monika Ghurde, to whom the poem is dedicated.

Girls Are Coming out of the Woods details the different forms of violence exerted upon the bodies of women like girls "wrapped in cloaks and hoods, [...] carrying a multitude of scars, collected/on acres of premature grass and city/buses, in temples and bars" (35), "girls [...] with panties tied around their lips," "girls lifting their broken legs [...] with uncles [...] who put bullets in their chests/and fed their pretty faces to fire," "girls who sucked the mud clean/off their ribs," "girls/found naked in ditches and wells," and "girls forgotten in neglected attics/and buried in river beds like sediment/from a different century" (36). However, there is a comeback from these women, who return "the way birds arrive/at morning" with a spirit of war and vengeance to point these testimonies towards a brighter future.

This promise of revenge is articulated in that echoing voice that announces that "girls are coming" to avenge. Other poems, such as "The Women of the Shin Yang Park Sauna, Gwanju" (52-53), "Encounters with a Swedish Burglar" (55), "Understanding My Fate in a Mexican Museum" (62-63), "Meeting Elizabeth Bishop in Madras" (75-77), and "Grandmothers Abroad" (78-79), reflect on how gender violence is transnational. Nevertheless, the collection adds hope, within what Kandasamy recognises as the "celebration the impossible beauty of the everyday" (2018), to escape the fetishisation of victimisation. Doshi is a valedictorian of a transformative mode of resilience that strives for survival through transformation, and so the collection closes with an ode to "the transformative capacity of art which is a thing of great potency and contagion" (in Nair) as the last lines of "When I Was Still a Poet" read "love springs/from dirt like carts" (2017: 95).

The book should be read beyond its pessimistic notes as its primary message is a promise of change because, as Henry Giroux states, hope is subversive (64). Arundhati Roy (2020) and Partha Chatterjee have arguesd that careful optimism favours a collective change in contemporary politics. Doshi has also noted that she is not the "dark poet," who writes about "tragedies" (2018a: 22:42-22:54). Instead, she declares, "I would classify myself as a happy poet" and she recalls the positive notes of "The Leather of Love" (2017: 66-67) and "the light in the end of the book" (21:03-21:11). She argues that there is a possibility for change, which is facilitated through telling stories because "stories are eternal igniters" (in Nair) that invite reflection.

This interpellation is clear in the first poem, "Contract" (1-2), which is dedicated to its readers. It features the poet as a mosquito and it was written when she was awakened by one and realised that she wanted to "find as many ears as [she] could [to] buzz all around and make as many ears as possible to buzz around and awaken the reader hopefully not to pass on life-threatening life diseases" (2018b: 00:42-01:00). The poem features the poet's skin "turning inside out" to incite the reader to "reinvent every lost word, to burnish, to steal, to do what I must /in order to singe your lungs" (Doshi 2017: 1). This renewal and collective opposition are necessary because her body is "meagre" and she "has lost so many limbs to wars, so many/eyes and hearts to romance" (2). The poem/contract uses an imperative tone ("Don't kill me, reader," "love me") to embark upon the collaborative rewriting of stories and histories. She closes the poem with a warning:

> But love me
> and I will follow you everywhere–
> [...]
> to every downfall and resurrection.
> Till your skin becomes my skin.
> [...]
> And when you put your soft head
> down to rest, dear Reader,
> I promise to always be there,
> humming in the dungeons
> of your auditory canals–
> an immortal mosquito,

hastening you towards fury,
towards *incandescence* (2, my emphasis).

Kandasamy has stated that "Contract" "invokes the powerful image of tortured female genius for whom melancholy is a precondition [and] readies the reader for a series of brutal, bitter truths" (2018). Doshi describes how the poet's body has suffered violence and that the telling of this suffering will make the reader visit all their "dungeons" "hastening towards a fury" that calls for the transformative power of those who are denounced (in Nair). It is then our role as readers to understand the structures of gender violence in order to undermine the systems that sustain them.

Violence is understood as a myriad of systems (Maillard; Zizek) that inflict subjective violence ("performed by a clearly identifiable agent"; Zizek 1), symbolic violence ("embodied in language and its forms"), and systemic violence ("the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems;" Zizek 2). Doshi states that it is "violence against women" that worries her the most (in Nair) and Kandasamy has acknowledged that *Girls Are Coming out of the Woods* "retells stories of pain against different women and from different ages" with "compelling moment[s] of anger." In this section, I will describe the ways in which Doshi explains these experiences of fear and violence to create "constellations of coresistance" (Simpson 9) that guarantee a transformative resilience that denigrates the power of gender violence.

Doshi asks herself "what can I offer as a poet?" (2018a: 03:42) and "how do you write about violence without perpetuating it?" (in Nair). In an interview with Indian poet, Karthika Nair, she exclaimed, "[w]hat do you do with [violence]? A greater violence would be a disconnect, to not feel someone else's suffering. And this is where poetry enters, and dance and film." The poem, "Find the Poets" serves as her reply:

I wanted to find out the truth
about how a great land like this
could allow ancient columns to crumble
[...]
Find the poets, my friend said.
If you want to know the truth, find the poets.
But friend, where do I find the poets?
[...]
and what do they sing about?
Find the poets, my friend said.
They will not speak of the things you and I speak about.
They will not speak of economic integration
or fiscal consolidation.
[...]
But they could sit you down
and tell you...
how they arrive like the rain,
unexpectedly cracking open the sky.
[...]

They will talk as they have been talking
for centuries...
till only the bones of truth remain (82-83).

The line "cracking open the sky" (83) provides the objective for this poetry collection. Doshi explains how poets want to subvert survival "till only the bones of truth remain." Kandasamy has pointed out that the words in this collection "will change [the readers'] life" (2018) as she recognises "an agency of disclosure" in Doshi's descriptions of fear and violence. This agency of disclosure forms the backbone of this collections' transformative resilience. She details the "burdens of enforced shame" (in Nair) that women carry but she also celebrates the possibility of shouting back and marching against such injustices. Kandasamy believes that this book "will jolt you into wokeness [and] tense and clench your fists because this is a battle cry" (2018). This collaborative reaction ignites hope as it urges its readers to form strategies against fear and violence.

The disconnecting effect of the fear of physical, mental, and spiritual pain has been amply studied (Ahmed 2004; Khair 2016; Roy 2019). Amit Chaudhuri recently stated that "a new India is emerging, and it is a country ruled by fear," pointing how Indian politicians are stifling "dissent." *Girls Are Coming out of the Woods* exposes fear but also transformative dissent and opposition. For instance, in "Fear Management," the narrator describes an encounter with "a row of fishermen" who "are making noises at her" (Doshi 2017: 14). The poet feels afraid because this is "the kind of sound designed/ to entice a small, brainless creature/into a corner before smashing it/underfoot [...] with their ceaseless, cooing threats." This poem is a reflection on an incident that occurred when Doshi was walking along a coastal village in Tamil Nadu, which made her realise how she was a victim of the systemic violence modulated by a patriarchal hegemony. Her vulnerability and fear are shown in the last lines:

When so much can be vanished
so silently into the dark teeth of sleep,
tell me, wouldn't you fear for your life?
What it is. What it might become (15).

The fear of "what it might become" is also described in "Everyone Loves a Dead Girl" (16-17), which analyses the management of fear in a different environment, that of upper-class "parties" (16), where upper-classes would deliberately silence the stories of gender violences. In this setting, there is an exhibition about "Wounds you Never/Thought Imaginable" and people "discuss methods/of dying [...] because the myth of the peaceful/bed annoys them." There is a celebration of fear because girls "arrive at parties alone because they are dead/now and there is nothing to fear except for the sun." However, there is hope because

[...] A girl
call her my own, call her my lovely, stands up and says,
I would like to talk about what it means to suffocate on pillow
feathers, to have your neck held like a cup of wine, all delicate

and beloved, before it is crushed. Another stands, and another,
and even though they have no names and some of them
have satin strips instead of faces, they all have stories
which go on and on

This voice unveils the violence that makes women afraid and denounces those who fetishise the dead female body. The poem ends with the dead women's narratives "charg[ing] around like Bolshoi dancers re-entering/the world alive, and with wonder." Doshi subverts the stories of victimhood and urges women to tell their own truths in order to understand why women feel afraid and to learn who benefits from that fear.

Girls Are Coming out of the Woods describes different types of violence (explicit, symbolic, and systemic) to illustrate the social, political, caste, and religious gender violence in India and in the world. Gender violence is established as a collective problem rather than an individual act. Societies that are driven by patriarchal patterns that believe in men's natural and cultural superiority over women are illustrative of what Slavoj Zizek calls "explicit violence" (1) because there is an "identifiable agent" that performs visible violence against another. In the collection, Doshi recognises this possibility in her exploration of individual perpetrators of explicit violence, such as Bill Cosby in "Disco Biscuits":

We were talking about the subject of Quaaludes,
Of which I know nothing except back in the 70s,
When I was being born, Bill Cosby slipped them
To a bunch of women (40).

In "Saturday on the Scores" (50-51), the narrator recognises that the female body "is just a cage" trained to "seduce/a stranger" while he is "walking beside you" and "you agree on nothing" (51), thereby indicating the lack of consent. This version of a controlling man is the central figure in "Ode to Patrick Swayze" (21-22), where Doshi denounces the tendency to cling onto a man. She describes the toxic idealisation of love in popular culture: "I wanted to be your baby [and] I realized what I'd wanted/most was to be held by someone determined/to save me (22).

She also recognises group perpetrators. Accordingly, Doshi points at Boko Haram in "A Fable for the 21st Century" and the femicides in Mexico in "Understanding My Fate in a Mexican Museum" (62-63). These two poems talk to each other, acknowledging the normalisation of collective explicit violence. In "Understanding My Fate in a Mexican Museum," the narrator recognises social forms of collective violence, such as "fertility flagellation." She gathers these experiences of being "subjugated, fumigated, skinned/ and mutilated like those girls in the barrios" (63). The poet recognises that by naming, telling, and retelling there is a collective reply that can enhance subversion. She writes, "I long to see/A clearer vision of wayward women who list/between the knowing and unknowing." She calls for a common transnational action because "in time/dear past and future selves in time/ we will resolve our joint concerns." Here, there is a possibility for transformative resilience because "unknowing" becomes key to changing old patterns.

"Symbolic violence" (Zizek 1) assembles discursive and sociolinguistic practices which silently privilege men and assume an inferior status for women (Menon 2012). "Your Body Language Is not Indian! Or Where I am Snubbed at a Cocktail Party by a Bharatnatyam Dancer" (47-49) and "Grandmothers Abroad" (78-79) account for these acts of symbolic violence committed against women. In the former, Doshi explains that she has "withstood barricades/of scolding aunties and so many diabolical winters/of social conditioning" on the subject of breeding (47). She complains that she "has been carted around/like a lady's lapdog, peeing and being petted" (48) because she is not married. Nevertheless, she utters "N-O" (47) in response to this violence when she "declined the invitation/to breed." Here, there is a commitment to defy the expected patterns of maternity and marriage. She disagrees and celebrates it as a cooperative act of agency. She writes, "we will dance, /the wind and I our bodies like rosebushes alight / in the sky, clanging against the geometry of stars, / with no one around, and no one watching" (48).

Doshi urges women to tell their own stories and to reject the victimisation imposed upon them as recipients of symbolic violence. In "Grandmothers Abroad" the migrant women are "stripped of all [their] memories" (79) because they are "scourged of colour, / bandaged in their daughter's fleeces, hounded by their sons and nieces." She writes "[y]ou will want them to tell them to resist [...] Granny, don't become that omnipresent/migrant woman, stripped of all her memories." Doshi invites them to meet in courtyards and "unfold upon the paisley sleeves/ of [their] bereaved imagining," thereby granting a sense of possibility and hope to these women, their daughters and granddaughters. This is a poem about memory as a tool of resistance and resilience against forgetting, and so these women get to know their origins, where they are coming from.

Economic and political systems work, as Nivedita Menon (2004) or Arundhati Roy (2019) have proclaimed, on the assumption that women must occupy inferior or limited positions. The paternalistic attitudes of the state, legal, and religious institutions in India are based upon pillars of "systemic violence" (Zizek 2) that are interiorised by women as the recipients and by men as the performers of violence. This systemic violence validates the current neoliberal political system of violence in India and fosters women's self-repression as a survival mechanism (Mankekar).

Doshi celebrates the bonds that different women share in new spaces and cultural practices. Accordingly, she interweaves a collective net of counter-stories against systemic violence. In "O Great Beauties" (71-73), Doshi dismantles the "devotion to serious women" (72) and laughs at the canonical descriptions for of female beauty. In "The Women of the Shin Yang Park Sauna, Gwanju" (52-53), she details her own shame when she sits along Chinese women who are naked in a sauna and subverts her sense of fear to feel the revolutionary possibilities of tracking similarities and differences between female bodies without shame or a male mediation. In "Strong Men, Riding Horses" (38-39), Doshi condemns the violence of "the empires of harmony, of men who ride horses" (38) to denounce how politics and the state are managed by patriarchy and fear. She calls them "treacherous" and urges that we "counter these phantoms [because] they are/lurching towards [women]

with balsam" (39). Doshi implores women to "wake now" because there is hope for change as "All that we mourn is here already."

As stated in the first section, plural voices in the form of *we* emerge in "Girls Are Coming out of the Woods," "Everyone Loves a Dead Girl," "Contract," and "When I was Still a Poet" to resist, survive, and defy. Also, in "Understanding My Fate in a Mexican Museum" the narrator changes from *I* into *We*. So, we read, "dear past and future selves in time/We will resolve our joint concerns" (63). Through her poetry, individual voices become both resilient and collective to attain change for those "past and future selves."

"Girls Are Coming out of the Woods" unveils the corporeal and physical limits placed upon women. It encourages a collective change, enhancing what Leanne B. Simpson calls the creative constellations of coresistance (9), where resistance against systemic violence involves "persistence, commitment and profound caring" (9). Doshi reclaims the recovery of stories and the creation of these constellations of coresistance to safeguard their "individual self-determination" (Simpson 3) together with a vision of community as a "constellation opening a doorway" to a different world (212). The urgency of the poem and the use of the plural voice fosters hope. Doshi writes,

> Girls
> are coming out of the woods
> with panties tied around their lips,
> making such a noise, it's impossible
> to hear. Is the world speaking too? (Doshi 2017: 36)

Morbid descriptions of different forms of violence against women are organised in the collection to ignite a common and collective transformation. This is how women can bounce forward rather than bounce back to violence.

A CONCLUSION TO THE STORIES THAT GO ON AND ON

Tishani Doshi favours a feminist option where physical and psychological female selves survive, defy political and religious structures, transmute, and come out of the woods together. Nivedita Menon has urged for the necessity of a "feminist practice" (2012: 64) that fosters change instead of theories. Sara Ahmed has also insisted upon the necessity of performing and celebrating "disruptive acts" (2017: 7) and Priyamvada Gopal has prioritised "dissent" viii) to ensure a transnational change. Doshi's descriptions of women challenging the violence inflicted upon them are such practices of dissent and disruption that foster a transformative mode of resilience.

Girls Are Coming out of the Woods gathers individual stories as fuel for a collective action to exercise agency against the patriarchy's transnational hegemony. This supremacy is addressed in the collection, as previously stated, not only within the Indian context but also transnationally. The book emerges as an archive that fills the generational gap for many Indian women who can exercise processes of knowing and unknowing to master the narratives of his-story within the dominating political

arena. The agency of disclosure shared in every poem nurtures healing spaces where writing narratives is key because, as Michael Basseler argues, "narrative is perhaps the major cultural and cognitive scheme through which notions of resilience are currently generated" (25). The testimonies of these women reclaim their space on the pages of the collection through the subversive agency of hope (Giroux; Ahmed 2017; Chatterjee). Doshi writes in "Girls Are Coming out of the Woods" that "[g]irls are coming/out of the woods, clearing the ground/to scatter their stories"; these collective voices are celebrated as they are marching "forward" to make the world a better place, instead of going "backward" to strategies of adapting.

Telling stories and writing become essential in this process. In "Every Unbearable Thing," which was written after *Girls Are Coming out of the Woods* on the occasion of the emergence of the #metoo movement in India, Doshi states that "it is the/world asking to be made again/so let us bring flowers let us/bow down let us worship/and reveal our scars let us" (2018c). The promise and practice of renewal inherent to transformative resilience happens when "scars" are acknowledged and the perpetrators of those marks are addressed, attacked, and subverted because the remaking and telling of stories allow the world to be asked "to be made again."

This cry to make the world anew is an interplanetary commitment in the collection. Interplanetary is what Alejandra Moreno Álvarez calls "empathetic universals whose embodiment, spatiality and intersubjectivity is constituted in relation to others, where being human is being conhuman" (85). This conhumanity is interplanetary and overcomes differentiating adjectives, such as global or cosmopolitan, which position everything in relation to the self and other. Instead, the adjective interplanetary celebrates the fact that "to be human is to be intended toward the other" (Moreno Álvarez 85). This is Doshi's promise in her collection.

Kandasamy urges the reader to "pick up this book" and "listen to the girls coming out of the woods [because their] words will change your life" (2018). Accordingly, *Girls Are Coming out of the Woods* promotes awareness-raising, resistance, and subversion because, as Tishani Doshi states, while women can now "go out alone at night [...] the dangers don't go away" (in Wroe) In this context, transformative resilience is still limited by the dominating political, economic, and neoliberal structures.

The collection tells of the brutality inflicted on women and contemporary India's gender prejudices but it also creates the possibility of dismantling the interlocking systems of patriarchal power based on the economy, race, gender, or sexuality. In Doshi's work, women are not merely fetishised victims but they are also agents who change, threaten, and, most importantly, tell their own stories, because "everything that's been said/is worth saying again" (Doshi 2017: 8). It is our role as readers, authors, and researchers, to decide whether we accept our current world or whether we go forward and join the constellation of coresistance reflected in Doshi's poems that tell "stories which go on and on" (16).

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ACHMAT DANGOR (1948-2020) AND M.G. VASSANJI (1950-): THE RECEPTION OF TWO AFRINDIAN VOICES IN SPAIN

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Abstract

Dangor (Johannesburg, 1948-2020) and Vassanji (Nairobi, b1950) are two contemporary Indian-African ("Afrindian") diasporic writers who share a hybrid combination of Indianness and Africanness. Both writers have been translated into Spanish and, in the case of Vassanji, Catalan. The number of translations is rich enough to establish many description-based contrasts, and the proposal of future guidelines for translating Afrindian writers. The description takes into account the powerful autobiographical overtones typical of African writing, and describes how they have been made available to Spanish readers. A representative sample of exoticizing textual units from the original texts will be compared with their translation solutions in order to explore if exoticizing is the right method for this kind of postcolonial African Indian literature. The results indicate that exoticizing has been clearly favoured by the translators.

Keywords: Achmat Dangor, Moyez G. Vassanji, Indian-African Letters, English-Spanish Translation, Autobiography.

ACHMAT DANGOR (1948-2020) Y M.G. VASSANJI (1950-): LA RECEPCIÓN DE DOS VOCES AFROINDIAS EN ESPAÑA

Resumen

Dangor (Johannesburgo, 1948-2020) and Vassanji (Nairobi, 1950-) son dos escritores contemporáneos pertenecientes a la diáspora indoafricana (afrindios) que comparten una naturaleza híbrida de indianidad y africanidad. Ambos han sido traducidos al español, además de al catalán para el caso de Vassanji. El número de traducciones es suficientemente abundante para plantearse contrastarlas desde un enfoque descriptitivo y proponer una serie de directrices para la traducción de otros escritores afrindios. Se tomarán, igualmente, en consideración los fuertes rasgos autobiográficos de la escritura africana al compararse una muestra representativa de unidades exotizantes de los textos originales con las soluciones de traducción aplicadas. Los resultados indicaran que este ha sido realmente la opción preferida de los traductores y lo que parece más adecuado para traducir la literatura afroindia poscolonial.

Palabras clave: Achmat Dangor, Moyez G. Vassanji, letras indoafricanas, traducción inglés-español, autobiografía.

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INTRODUCTION

This article draws its concepts, empirical data and inspirations from two main sources. First, according to the American scholar David Damrosch (2003), the concept of "world literature" in combination with "translation" has sparked new interest, especially in the context of postcolonial literature. Damrosch rejects the use of the term "world literature" to describe what is mostly the Western European literary canon, and proposes instead that it be used to describe literature that circulates beyond their countries of origin. In other words, "world literature" relies on a fruitful collaboration between the fields of Literary Theory and Translation Studies.

In the postcolonial context, more and more translations are being made from and among an unprecedented range of literary worlds, recognized and marginal (Tymoczko 1999). A good example of this trend, and my second source of inspiration, is the reception of postcolonial literature into the Spanish literary polysystem. Books (including translations) published in Spain circulate easily in Latin America, parts of the USA, and other areas of the world. This chapter considers two Spanish polysystems, in Castilian-Spanish and Catalan, both official languages of Spain.[1]

However, the reception of African Indian writing is generally marginal: "...so far a much neglected postcolonial entity" (Lal 2006: 253), and therefore deserves further attention. Although scholars like Karpinsky (2012) acknowledge the contributions of African Indian writers, this group is generally overlooked by scholarship. For example, in their volume on autobiographical South African writing, Cornwell et al. (2010) overlook works from the diasporic South African Indian community, even neglecting such cultural icons as Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), Ronnie Govender (b1934) and Imraan Coovadia (b1974) (see also Daymond 2018; Roy 2018). A similar neglect is noted in Arkin et al. who comment that "[I]n the field of creative literature, however, Indians have not distinguished themselves as other South Africans have. Only a handful of writers have had their work published and no major writer has emerged so far" (1989: 201). Govinden (2008: 19) notes that this ignorance of African Indian writing has negative international consequences in terms of the reception of such works. It is evident that this literature still has to conquer its own readership both at home and abroad (Rastogi 2008).

Efforts to address this neglect led to the foundation of the "Ratnakara Research Group. Indian Ocean Literatures and Cultures," based at the Department of English at the Autonomous University of Barcelona in the 1990s and founded by Felicity Hand and Esther Pujolràs-Noguer. As Hand and Pujolràs-Noguer describe it:

> Ratnakara, a Sanskrit term for "*ocean*" and "*repository of jewels*," encapsulates the rationale behind our research group.We envisage the Indian Ocean as a mine of cultural experience with multiple connections that link the countries of its western shores with the Indian subcontinent, a relationship that was thriving centuries

[1] Spain has four official languages: Castilian or Spanish, Catalan, Galician and Basque.

> before the Europeans set foot in the area thanks to the Monsoon winds. Our group seeks to uncover the richness of the cultures and literatures of the region, ranging from Kenya to South Africa and not forgetting Mauritius, the star and key to the Indian Ocean (Ratnakara, online).

Ratnakara has contributed to the recognition of South African Indian writer Ahmed Essop (see Zarandona 2015, 2016, 2018) as one key figure in the world of Indian Ocean literature and its consequent translation of Essop's short story *Two Sisters* (1978), into Spanish as *Dos hermanas* (Essop 2010) testifies to this. Zarandona (2018a) addresses how race plays an influential role in the reception of South African literature in Spain. While white writers such as Nadine Gordimer and J.M. Coetzee are well received, and some black writers such as Zakes Mda have a moderate following, translations of South African Indian literature are rare.

In this paper, I explore the writings and translations of two contemporary African Indian writers, the South African Achmat Dangor (1948-2020) and the Kenyan-Canadian Moyez Vassanji (b1950). Both authors have been translated into Spanish, and Vassanji also into Catalan. Of Dangor's ten works spanning from 1981 (*Waiting for Leila*) to 2017 (*Dikeledi Novel*), three have been translated into Spanish. These are: *The Z Town Trilogy* (1990) translated as *Trilogía de Z Town* (2009) by Juan Estrella; *Kafka's Curse* (1997) translated as *La Maldición de Kafka* (1999) by Encarna Quijada Vargas; *Bitter Fruit* (2001) translated as *Fruta amarga* (2004) by María Montserrat Vía. Of Vassanji's fourteen works spanning from 1989 (*The Gunny Sack*) to 2019 (*A Delhi Obsession*), only one, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) has been translated into Spanish as *El mundo incierto de Vikram Lall* (2006) by Gemma Rovira Ortega. It has also been translated into Catalan as *La pàtria aliena de Vikram Lall* (2006) by Xavier Pàmies Jiménez.

Both writers are African, Indian, minority, postcolonial, diasporic, hybrid and contemporary. Not only do their works enlarge the English-language literature canon and make it more inclusive, but they also promote the richness and complexity of "world literature," specifically the Spanish literary polysystem.

However, although there is no doubt about their Africanness or contemporaneity, for example, the adjective "minority" must be handle more carefully. Indian literature in English has been consistently taught in Departments of English around the world, most specially those in English-speaking universities. Recent studies such as *The Indian English Novel. Nation, History, and Narration* (2009), by P. Gopal, prove this.[2] And some of the Indian or Indian diasporic texts and writers have not only known a great academic success, but a popular one too. But it is also true that these literary works are still far from occupying the centre of the English language world literary polysystem. Besides, both Dangor and Vassanji belong to the African-Indian diaspora. Dangor always lived in South Africa, which means that he suffered all the discrimination that his community endured for so many

[2] Gopal includes three pages on Vassanji (2009: 172-174), but does not mention Dangor.

years. And Vassanji only started his literary career once he settled down in Canada. Finally, the minority status is more perfectly appreciated when we approach other international polysystems, such as the ones on Spain, both in Spanish and Catalan, where their texts in translation occupy a very marginal position.

COMPARISON OF TWO AFRINDIAN WRITERS

"Afrindian" is a term popularized by scholar Pallavi Rastogi (2008), who applied it to the South African Indian community and their complex struggle to find an identity, and to describe their long fight for recognition and acceptance in their country. They feel themselves to be first South Africans, and then members of the large diasporic Indian world. The term derives from Lal's (2006) monumental *Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora*, where he describes the South African Indian diaspora through the term "Afroindian." According to Lal, "'Afrindian' therefore symbolizes the Africanization of the Indian self in a unique intersection of diaspora, postcoloniality, Indianness, apartheid, and black/white binary oppositions" (242). Specifically referring to Dangor, Lal further comments on the uniqueness of South African Indian literature, "that reflects distinct South African realities, so far a much neglected literary postcolonial entity" (253).

Dangor, born in 1948 in Johannesburg, is therefore representative of the relatively successful (but discriminated under apartheid) South African Indian community. He remained in South Africa, and devoted himself entirely to writing until 6 September, 2020, when he died. He won numerous prizes, including the South African Bosman prize for *Kafka's Curse*; and *Bitter Fruit* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2004. He was also given the Lifetime Achievement Award by the South African Literary Awards (SALA). He taught creative writing and South African literature at City University of New York. He was President of the Nelson Mandela Foundation. His first published work belongs to the year 1981, when he started a professional career fully devoted to letters (novels, short stories, novellas, poetry).

Dangor's uniqueness is emphasized by Ronit Frenkel (2010), who claims that Dangor confounds unitary taxonomies in both his writings and his identity. He has been listed both as Indian and as "Coloured," a category imposed on a heterogenuous group of people originating from areas as diverse as India, Madagascar, East Africa, West Africa, Indonesia and Malaysia. The British Council (S.A.) webpage on English language literature includes an entry on Achmat Dangor that explains this ambiguity clearly:[3]

[3] The unavoidable elusiveness of the term "coloured" indicated the absurdity behind the whole racial identity classification in apartheid South Africa.

> I am an African with Asian and Dutch blood in me, I don't know what race I am, and I don't care" –this is how South African poet and novelist Achmat Dangor, born into an Indian and Muslim family in Johannesburg, describes himself. This description, together with Dangor's literary production, is a poignant reminder of the absurdity and arbitrariness of racial categories. The institutionalization of racial typologies can only give rise to racist regimes such as South Africa's apartheid. Thus, Dangor's fiction and poetry unsettle superficially-drawn racial divisions and challenge societies built on racial codes.

Some of Dangor's characters mirror his hybrid identity. For example, Oscar, one of the protagonists in his novel *Kafka's Curse* (1997) is described as follows:

> What they really meant was: Oscar's not one of us. He was a mixture, Javanese, and Dutch, and Indian, and God knows what else, they would later discover. He was the lovely hybrid whom Anna had fallen in love with, perhaps because of his hybridity (11).

I propose that the term "Afrindian," though coined in South African territory could also be applied to East African Indians like Vassanji. As the *Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* also outlines (Lal 254-262), they, or their ancestors, first travelled from India to East Africa, and then a great part of them were *forcibly* repatriated from Africa in the 1970s, many moving to Great Britain, the United States of America and Canada. Their two migrations, their two diasporas, have also been narrated in an Afrindian literature.[4]

Vassanji, born in 1950 in Nairobi, Kenya, is therefore representative of this phenomenon. When his father died, his mother decided to move to Tanzania in order to be among her own family members. And in 1978 he moved to Canada where he got a grant and trained as a nuclear physicist at MIT and taught in different universities before devoting himself to writing. He is a Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advance Study in Shimla, India, and has won numerous awards, including the Commonweath Prize, the Bressani Prize, and Giller Prize (twice), Canada´s most prestigious literary award. From 1989 and ever since he has been fully devoted to literature, as a writer and as an editor (he and his wife are in charge of *Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad*).

[4] It should be noticed that "Asians" –as they were referred to– were expelled by Idi Amin in Uganda –but they were not officially expelled from either Kenya or Tanzania. As a matter of fact, in the case of Tanzania and under Julius Nyerere's leadership, some "Asians" formed part of the Government.

AFRINDIAN LITERATURE: MINORITY, AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL AND DIASPORIC

Afrindian literature is characterised by three main aspects: first, it is an example of minority writing, especially when you study how frequently and how succesfully it has been translated into the languages of Spain; second, it has strong autobiographical tones; third, it contains unique diasporic reflections on the Indian "homeland."

Afrindian Literature as Minority Writing

Among the efforts to define and describe the main characteristics of Afrindian literature, the words by Vijay Mishra (2006: 139) are specially illuminating and applicable to both Dangor and Vassanji. He claims that the literature of the Indian diaspora is arguably one of its greatest accomplishments, as the literature produced is among the best writing in English since the mid-20th century. Mishra (2006: 139) notes that it is a minor literature written in a major language:[5]

> The use of the term "minor literature," therefore, signals a number of formal characteristics of the literature of the Indian diaspora: it removes the absolute link between peoples and mother tongues... it places the writer in the midst of the greater concerns of the nation even when he or she may be seen as an outsider; and it voices, through a thoroughly nuanced use of English, something that belongs specifically to a diasporic group consciousness. The literature of the Indian diaspora as an example of a minor literature suggests that a minor literature does not come from a minor language but it is something that a minority constructs in the majority language, in this case predominantly English... As a minor literature reflecting these characteristics, the literature of the Indian diaspora is bold, imaginative and foundational.

The Canadian scholar Eva Karpinsky (21, 25), in her book *Borrowed Tongues. Life Writing, Migration, and Translation*, studies the phenomenon involving diasporic minorities writing about their experience and indentity in a borrowed major language by means of (un)conscious acts of translation from their mother tongues:

> Spanning the axis between "mother tongue" and "borrowed tongue," translation for a migrant encodes the tensions between the two and can be experienced through metaphors of movement and displacement, as exile from one or the other, tinted with nostalgia for either language, or as exile from both, the mother tongue and the borrowed tongue (21) [...] Writing in English, either as the language of symbolic empowerment for many immigrants, or as the language of historical oppression for

[5] Although Mishra does not mention it, these laudatory words must also be applied to Afrindian literature in English.

> many indigenous and postcolonial subjects, already "disarticulates" the original, and therefore exposes violence inherent in the act of translation (25).

Afrindian Literature as Autobiographical Postcolonial Writing

"Autobiography" has always been a fuzzy category in literary theory, ranging from any fiction writing that has some autobiographical elements related to its author, to a very distinct genre in which author, narrator, and protagonist are one and the same (Anderson 2011). The latter has enjoyed a long tradition of texts, e.g. Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994). Indeed, it is difficult to identify differences between life-writing subgenres –biography, autobiography, travel books, memoirs, diaries and testimonies, and they also produce hybrids with other genres and subgenres. Xu (2017) notes that translating such autobiographical works presents many challenges. Cornwell et al. (17) claim that life writing (autobiography) has always been an effective medium of expression for African writers:

> What is most distinctive about African autobiography is its concern to present not a unique existence but a representative life that helps to explain the historical circumstances that engendered it (Cornwell et al. 38).

Recent years have witnessed an explosion of interest in the so-called "autobiographical moment in postcolonial theory" (Huddart 2014), i.e. a movement away from focusing on the self-lives of white, Western men to exploring a varied assortment of new selves belonging to hybrid, diasporic, mobile, male/female subjects generated by colonialism or postcolonialism; what Ania Loomba (16-22) calls the contrasts between the binary opposition between colonial and postcolonial worlds.

The novels of Dangor and Vassanji are not strictly autobiographical, but include many autobiographical elements based on the life experiences of their authors. Dangor's *The Z Town Trilogy* (1990), *Kafka's Curse* (1997) a*nd Bitter Fruit* (2001) deal with the Indian community in South Africa during the apartheid and post-apartheid times from the viewpoint of their author's life experience. Similarly, Vassanji's *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) is based on its author's experience of the predicament and hardships of the East African Indian community and their second diaspora. The epynomous protagonist of this novel, Vikram Lall, is an adult living in exile in Canada who contemplates his life as a teenager of Indian origin living in Kenya in the 1950s. The coincidences with Vassanji's own life experience are very clear (Gopal 172-174).

Afrindian Literary Perspective of "Homeland"

Many Indian diaspora writers, including Afrindian ones, such as Vassanji, have made the pilgrimage back to the "homeland," and the diverse nature of their return journeys has been captured in the memoirs they consequently wrote. Whereas V.S. Naipaul (1932-2018, born in Chaguanas, Trinidad, within a family

who emigrated from northern India) and Michael Ondaatje (b1943 in Sri Lanka but emigrated to Canada) experienced this pilgrimage negatively, to Vassanji it was a positive experience. Naipaul's memoir *Finding the Centre* (1984) narrates his travel to what he perceived as "primitive" India for the first time, and Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (1983) to his return to Sri Lanka. To both Naipaul and Ondaatje, the visit was portrayed as a horrible nightmare, a journey into a barren place which was the source of much frustration, because India and Sri Lanka had become alien lands to them.

By contrast, Vassanji's return, described in his autobiographical account *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* (2008), meant his reconciliation with India, that distant land, the land of his grandparents. He managed to prove that it was possible for him to enjoy and be part of three different cultural and geographical backgrounds: East Africa,[6] Canada, and India. His visit occurred shortly after he had published his novel *The Assassin's Song* (2007), set entirely in India, which was received as a novel of India, and not an Indian diaspora novel. For him, his "in-between" world has really turned into his "in-among" world.

Vassanji's positive yet realistic attitude is reflected in the following excerpt:

> India has changed. The country brims with confidence, a refreshing contrast to the images of my youth (*Life* magazine) of starving, dying India. Embarrassing India. Now, on the sixtieth anniversary of Independence, the *Times of India*'s headline is "60 and getting sexier"; tabloid language, unfortunately, is a marker of sophistication and coolness even in this established newspaper. The media talk is endlessly of the economy and growth rates and "Chindia" –the superpowers on the threshold, China and India; film celebrities, cricket, and America are the obsessions. America is to be emulated, competed against, bettered. Everything on television (if in English) gives the appearance of a studied mimicry of America. Cool India (the phrase itself lifted from Tony Blair's Cool Britannia) is to some degree Mimic India (Vassanji 2008: 148-149).

RECEPTION OF AFRINDIAN WRITING IN SPAIN

Although Afrindian writers may have reached a high status of international recognition for their postcolonial, Afrindian, autobiographical works, in Spain their status as worldwide authors is as yet unrecognized. As a matter of fact, the whole bulk of African literature falls prey to this lack of recognition in Spain. This is true even of great iconic authors such as Chinua Achebe (1930-2013). Nearly all his works have been translated into Spanish, and *Things Fall Apart* has been retranslated frequently. However, in Spain, only a tiny number of readers know him (Zarandona 2010). By contrast, the diasporic Indian writers V.S. Naipaul and Michael Ondaatje are well

[6] In 2014 he published his "African" memoir, *And Home Was Kariakoo: A Memoir of East Africa* in which his East African Asian essence was explored.

known in Spanish translation –the Spanish ISBN Database includes seventy entries for Naipaul and twenty-nine for Ondaatje (Feb 20 2020). This is understandable as Naipaul is a Nobel Laureate and Ondaatje became very popular due to the film adaptation of his novel *The English Patient* (1992). However, Afrindian writers such as Dangor and Vassanji are, I argue, marginalized since even the fact of being translated does not guarantee a rich reception.

In his doctoral thesis, Fernández Ruiz (2019) lists a number of factors related to the poor reception of translated African literature in Spain. First, commercial publishers are not interested in publishing African literature in translation, so this kind of literature is only published when there is some kind of institutional support or sponsorship. Second, these translations are regarded as exotic second-class products limited to a minority of readers interested in other cultures, so publication is characterized by very short runs or small imprints (usually by small publishing houses) that do not survive for a long time. Third, there are no translators specialized in African literature.

METHODOLOGY

Christiane Nord (1997) proposes two types of translation: "instrumental translation," when the function of the target text (TT) dominates, and "documentary translation," when the source text (ST) function dominates. Documentary translation is also classified into four different types: interlineal, literal, philological and exoticizing. "Exoticizing translation" is the one typical of modern fiction prose: it strives to reproduce ST form, content, and situation, and may include textual units of the ST.

My research aim is to explore to what extent the Spanish translators have followed this exoticizing principle when translating Dangor and Vassanji. The principles of Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS), as established by Gideon Toury (2012), are also followed, in the sense that the empirical description of the translations must come first, and then the theorizing about them.[7]

Following this concept of "exoticising translation" and using a descriptive approach, my research methodology includes the following actions:

1) Choose one preliminary textual sample from each of the translations and describe whether an exoticising or domesticating strategy is applied.

[7] Toury claimed that Translation Studies, as a new discipline, had to be provided with a sound descriptive or empirical branch upon which to base all theoretical reflection. This was something that was lacking so far. Translations are subject to time and historical context, so we can only study what was regarded as «translation» in a given time and place. In other words, the changing norms that have determined the concept of translation. And only when these norms are fully described and placed in time and space, translation scholars would be able to go a step forward and study invariable translation laws beyond time and space.

2) Elaborate a hypothesis according to these preliminary samples.
3) Try to prove the hypothesis by selecting excerpts from the source texts (STs) and extracting all textual units (words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs) in languages other than English, and then comparing them with their corresponding units in the target texts (TTs). Proper nouns (individual people, place or commercial names, etc.) will be excluded. (For convenience, the STs and TTs are coded.) The following excerpts were selected for Dangor (D) and Vassanji's (V) original texts and their Spanish translations:

- ☐ D1: *The Z Town Trilogy*, Part 2 "Birds of Prey" (pp. 35-91)
- ☐ D2: *Kafka's Curse*, Chapter 2, "Majnoen" (pp. 21-41)
- ☐ D3: *Bitter Fruit*, Chapters 1-3 (pp. 3-42)
- ☐ D1-T: *Trilogía de Z Town*, "Aves de rapiña" (pp. 65-151)
- ☐ D2-T: *La maldición de Kafka*, "Majnoen" (pp. 37-66)
- ☐ D3-T: *Fruta amarga*, capítulos 1-3 (pp. 13-63)
- ☐ V1: *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, Chapters 1-3 (pp. 3-45)
- ☐ V1-T1: *El mundo incierto de Vikram Lall* , capítulos 1-3 (pp. 11-56)
- ☐ V1-T2: *La pàtria aliena de Vikram Lall*, capítols 1-3 (pp. 13-46)[8]

RESULTS

With the aforementioned roadmap in mind, this is the first preliminary action carried out.

Dangor's Preliminary textual units

After a close reading of the whole texts, these first units for our preliminary analysis were chosen because of their very special cultural and linguistic characteristics, and for their symbolic value.

To begin with, a clear example of "exoticizing translation" can be seen here: a textual unit of the ST, the title of the South African anthem in an African language is kept, and sung by a multilingual chorus of characters. The translator adds a full explanation in a footnote for his Spanish readers who are not very likely to understand the emotional meaning of the song and its complex history as symbol of the struggle:

[8] The very title of the novel, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, involves a real challenge. It is the story of a man's conflict trapped in the perilous in-between of two different worlds, Africa and India (Gopal 2009: 172-174). The options taken by the two translators for "in-between world," as "mundo incierto" [uncertain world] (Spanish) and "pàtria aliena" [alien homeland] (Catalan), miss the complex meaning and intentions of the original.

D1: Sarah Kock was buried with the pomp and ceremony fitting of the widow of a hero. And when the anthem was sung, Dorothy too lifted her fist to the proud strains of *Nkosi Sikilel iAfrika* though she and many others did not understand its words, but were filled with the beauty of its meaning (107).

D1-T: Sarah Kock fue enterrada con la pompa y la ceremonia que correspondía a la viuda de un héroe. Y cuando se cantó el himno, Dorothy también alzó el puño a los orgullosos acordes del «Nkosi Siklel iAfrika», porque aunque ni ella ni muchos otros comprendían el significado de aquellas palabras, se dejaban llevar por su belleza (172-173).
*«Dios bendiga África», himno de la Sudáfrica antiapartheid, posteriormente adoptado, con variaciones, como himno nacional. (N. del T.) ["May God bless Africa," hymn of anti-apartheid South Africa, later on adopted, with some variations, as the national anthem (my translation)]

Secondly, in this ST, the Afrindian character Malik is able to pronounce a whole sentence in Afrikaans (something not unusual in a multilingual society) and make fun of it. This fact reflects the former national policy by which everybody in South Africa had to learn Afrikaans. Malik's mocking is thus based on the fact that Afrikaans was the language of the oppressor. English-speaking South African Indians usually spoke it well, so the use of Afrikaans relevant in this linguistic context is especially marked.

The translator reproduces the whole textual unit without any explanation in the main text, which is really exoticizing. The compensation appears in a final glossary (217), a detailed paratext that solves all the linguistic and cultural difficulties that Spanish readers may encounter. However, surprisingly, the translator omits the name of the language, Afrikaans, in both the text and in the glossary. In my opinion, she seems to assume that her readers will not have any idea about the existence of this language, so she had better not complicate their understanding of the text any further.

Another item is the ST word "kofiya" (a typical Middle Eastern headdress). In the ST, the word is local, part of the South African Indian and other Muslim communities (not part of the general non-Muslim idiom), and therefore it is not given typographical emphasis. The translator rewrites it in italics, *kofiya*, which is the norm in Spanish for foreign words.

D2: He ignored the set of clothes, a dark suit, white shirt and red tie, the soft white kofiya, very similar to the one he wore himself, all neatly folded and displayed upon the seat of the chair.
"Ons mense begrawe nie hul dooies asof hulle op pad partytjie toe is nie," Malik said in Afrikaans, his tone mocking (44).

D2-T: No hizo el menor caso de las ropas que había pulcramente preparadas en una silla: traje oscuro, camisa blanca y corbata roja. La *kofiya* suave y blanca era muy similar a la que él mismo llevaba.
–Ons mense begrawe nie hul dooies asof hulle op pad partytjie toe is nie –dijo Malik en tono burlón (70-71).

Glosario: (...) *Ons mense begrawe nie hul dooies asof hulle op pad partytjie toe is nie*: nuestra gente no entierra a sus muertos como si fueran de camino a una fiesta (217).

In the third place, the translator also chooses an exoticizing method, as she keeps the local word *tsotsi* in her text. As in the above textual units, the word appears in italics, as it is a foreign lexical unit in Spanish, and possible misunderstanding is compensated by means of a final glossary where three Spanish synomyns are offered (364).

D3: ... drinking in the street like a kid, or worse still, like a tsotsi who had taken to petty crime because he couldn't face life. (6).
D3-T: ... bebiendo en la calle como un niño, o todavía peor, como un ***tsotsi*** que había empezado a cometer delitos de poca importancia porque era incapaz de hacer frente a la vida. (17).
Glosario: (...) tsotsi: gandul, vago, gamberro (364).

Vassanji's Preliminary textual units

Finally, the Indian and African Indian word "Bauji" appears twice in this fourth ST text sample. The Spanish-language translator transfers it the first time as "bauji" (not capitalized and not in italics, the latter contravening Spanish convention), but for its second instance she chooses to explain it by means of the formal "padre" (father). Neither a footnote nor a glossary entry is provided. We only have this balance between one instance of exoticizing (bauji) and one of domestication (padre). By contrast, the Catalan translator (Xavier Pàmies) changes both instances of "bauji" to the informal "papa" (daddy). This indicates that this translator prefers a strategy of domestication, as here the exoticizing textual unit has been eliminated twice. The translator also ignores the fact that this solution can be regarded as too colloquial for the typical pragmatic uses of language and strict forms of address between younger and older generations within Afrindian family circles.

V1: Why don't you go back to India? I'd miss you, but you can go and make up with Bauji ... and I could even follow you later with my family.
He grunted. I could never make up with Bauji, not at this moment. (83).
V1-T1: –¿Por qué no vuelves a la India? Yo te echaría de menos, pero podrías hacer las paces con bauji... Y quizá dentro de un tiempo mi familia y yo podríamos reunirnos allí contigo.
–No podría hacer las paces con padre, de momento no –refunfuñó él–. (93).
V1-T2: ¿Per què no te'n tornes a l'Índia? Et trobaria a faltar, però podries fer les paus amb el papa; i fins i tot jo podria venir després, amb la família.
El tiet Mahesh va rondinar. No podria fer les paus amb el papa de cap manera, si més no ara. (77).

HYPOTHESIS

The results of this preliminay survey indicate that Nord's theory seems to be correct. Therefore my working hypothesis is that "exoticizing translation" is the preferred strategy for the Spanish translators, but that there can be instances of translation that follow the opposite one, as the Catalan translator shows. However, it is also evident that all the translators are too prudent and afraid that their readers would not understand the texts without explanatory footnotes and glossaries, suggesting that Afrindian literature is considered too exotic for the average Spanish reader.

CORPUS EXTRACTION

If interested in the full corpus see: https://www.researchgate.net/project/Afrindian-writers-in-Spanish-translation (Zarandona 2020). However, the main results that I have found are outlined in the coming parapraghs.

DANGOR'S TEXTS AND THEIR SPANISH TRANSLATIONS: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

In the *Z Town Trilogy* extract (D1), I found 32 textual units in other languages, mostly (23) in Afrikaans. Afrikaans units include: short expressions such as "Ag tog!" (38), "jagse ding" (41), "kak-en-kou" (shit-and-chew) (51), "ja-nee" (60), as well as single words such as "Baas" (41), "skenner... skennervrou" (62). Occasionally, full sentences are included, such as "As jy nie off-jok nie gaan jy jou ma hier in die straat sien" (42).

The other nine samples include other South African languages, e.g. mampara (87, Zulu), Tsamaya (87, Sotho), Cape Coloured dialect, e.g. "Skora Skora" (72), Scabarash (47). Malay words, e.g. "ejaar" (77), and even one instance in French "avant garde" (56).

In the translated excerpts (D1-T), the translator Juanjo Estrella opted to transfer the ST units, mainly with explanations either in the text or in the glossary, e.g.: –¡Ag tog! (67); Baas (71) *Bass, «jefe» en afrikáans (71); «jagse ding», «cosa cachonda» (73); *As jy nie off-jok nie gaan jy jou ma hier in die straat sien*. Jane la reprendió, (73). Some instances of domestication are also present: «I, a Southern Black Tit» (60), «¿Yo, un carbonero negro meridional» (103); «I am not a skennervrou» (62), «No soy una chismosa» (62); or «Befok that ausie» (68), «Es rara esa forastera» (114).

Similarly, the samples in other languages evidenced mixed translation strategies, with some being transferred: «...the traditional ejaar that she wore...» (77), «...del ejaar tradicional que llevaba» (131) or «Masha-Allah! You look beautiful» (79), –¡Masha Allah. Está preciosa»; and others domesticated: «Hey wena, its time to get out of here'» (87), «Eh, tú, ya va siendo hora de que te largues de aquí» (146).

The translator mirrors the multilingualism of the South African linguistic reality, retaining more than 50% of the original non-English textual units. It may seem that he reduces the level of exoticizing, but the result is still very exoticizing for Spanish readers. This strategy was probably the right balance between respecting the original and attaining understanding and acceptance in the target language and culture.

Kafka's Curse (1997: 21-41) and its translation (1999: 37-66) are very similar as far as this powerful stylistic device by Dangor is involved. The ST excerpt yielded 18 samples, 12 in Afrikaans, and the other six in Arabic, Hebrew, and Asian languages. The translator, Encarna Quijada Vargas, clearly favoured exoticizing, as she exoticizes, for example, «...this Helpmekaar Home?» (27), «...a los de esa Helpmekaar?» (46); «...the living shame of a white hoer» (30), «la vergüenza viviente de una *hoer* blanca» (50); or «... he looks like a chaar» (31), «...parece un *chaar*» (51).

Finally, *Bitter Fruit* (2001: 3-42) and its translation (2004; 13-63) yield similar results. The ST excerpt includes 17 relevant text units: 10 in Afrikaans, and the rest in Arabic and African languages (Swazi, Zulu, Sotho). The translator María M. Vía also favours exoticizing: «He remembered how the police made them "tauza"» (15), «Recordó cómo la policía les había hecho *tauza*» (28); or «Her family calls him "ougat"...» (28); «Su familia le llama *ougat*» (46).

Thus, all three translators made very similar translation decisions when dealing with Dangor's Afrindian expressions.

VASSANJI'S TEXTS AND THEIR SPANISH TRANSLATIONS: A GENERAL OVERVIEW

Analysis of the ST excerpt yielded 49 text units in other languages. Words in Punjabi include the following: "bhajias," "samosas," "dhokras," "bhel-puri" (6). Local African languages' (Kikuyo, Masai) words and phrases include the following: "panga" (26), "Tokeni nje! Sasa hivi!" (31), ... Unlike Dangor who included whole sentences, Vassanji restricted exotic terms to single words or short phrases.

Both translators, Gemma Rovira Ortega (Spanish) and Xavier Pàmies (Catalan) make a real effort to keep this literary hybrid language in their target languages, i.e. their overall strategies are exoticizing:

V1: Indian families having stopped over in their cars for bhajias, samosas, dhokras, bhel-puri, and tea (6).
V1-T1: ... las familias indias se detenían allí con sus coches para comprar *bhajias, samosas, dhikras, bhel-puri* y té (16).
V1-T2: ... moltes famílies índies hi paraven amb el cotxe per comprar-hi bhajies, samoses, dhokres, bhel-puri i te (14).

V1: But mother was from India and not as intimidated by the angrez-log (as they called the Europeans) as Papa was (16).

V1-T1: Pero mi madre era india, y no se dejaba intimidar tanto por los *angrez-log* (como llamaba ella a los europeos) como mi padre (26).
V1-T2: Però la meva mare era de l'Índia, i els angrez-log (com ella anomenava els europeus) no la intimidavem tant como al meu pare (22).

V1: The Mau Mau are devils, I said, echoing my mother. Her term was "daityas" from Mythology (27).
V1-T1: –Los mau-maus son demonios –dije, haciéndome eco de mi madre. La palabra que empleaba ella era *daityas*, de la mitología hindú (37).
V1-T2: Els Mau-Mau són dimonis, vaig dir, repetint el que deia la meva mare. La paraula que ella feia servir era el terme mitològic «daitya» (30).

However, the Catalan-language translator occasionally domesticates the ST items, e.g. "daal" (Va: 28) is translated as "llenties" (Vc: 23), "congresswallahs" (Va: 33) as "congressistes" (Vc: 28), and "panga" (Va: 36) as "matxet" (Vc: 30). He also adapts some of the original exotic words to the Catalan spelling and pronunciation systems, e.g. "àscaris" [askaris] (Vc: 25), "culi" [coolie] (Vc: 29).

Dangor's translators preferred exoticization: D1T (40,6%), D2-T (88,8%), D3-T (52,9%). So did Vassanji's Spanish and Catalan translators: V1-T1 (90%) and V1-T2 (80%). It is quite evident that Spanish translators, into both Spanish and Catalan favour exoticising. These data confirm my hypothesis. When translating this kind of exotic texts, the addition of notes and/or glossaries seems to be the best option. If the translated text does not reach wider audiences, the explanation must be sought in cultural factors, not in linguistic ones.

CONCLUSION

This research project on the translations of the works by Achmat Dangor and Moyez G. Vassanji into two of the official languages of Spain is a fascinating initiatory journey of discovery with many practical applications. It involves literary translation from an African perpective, and as such, it contributes to current debates on colonialism and postcolonialism, world literature and its circulation routes, modern fiction, the major-minor languages diatribe, the relationship among literatures, migration and diaspora, a reformulation of the literary canon, African Studies, Indian Studies, Afrindian Studies, the translation act of exoticising versus domesticating, and, finally, life writing and autobiography. Above all, it offers a unique opportunity to promote the literary fortunes of two writers who have much to tell the world, including the Hispanic part of it. Spain, its people and its publishing houses are very fond of translation. The fact that two Afrindian literature writers such as Dangor and Vassanji have translations of their works published in Spain proves this claim. But being translated into Spanish or Catalan does not guarantee a sound reception in Spain. The majority of Spanish readers are generally disinclined to choose texts coming from outside their cultural area of comfort (Europe or the Americas). Literature coming from Africa is always regarded as minority, alien,

exotic, or difficult. No aggressive commercial policy has ever been promoted to make people aware of African literature. They were translated because of the interest of some academic circles or interest groups.

Another factor to take into account is the fact that the five texts have all been translated by a different translator. Translators therefore do not seem willing to accept another similar challenge or they do not have sufficient material to make a career out of this type of translation. Consequently, specialization in this kind of literature, or in one of these specific writers does not unfortunately happen.

Under these circunstances it may be difficult for both of them, Dangor and Vassanji, to be translated in Spain on a more well-established basis and get a strong readership, but it is not impossible, as the previous examples have shown. And above all, difficulty does not mean lack of interest, but rather the opposite. The building of a real world literature based on the circulation of works by means of translation only adds more points of interest to the Spanish and Catalan translations of the novels by Dangor and Vassanji, and their rarity can only be viewed as another one of their many attractions.

But things may change. More translation projects and the education of the younger generations towards the appreciation of those writers or literatures about which they may not know much must be a national priority. An undergraduate general course or a specialized master's degree within the framework of a Faculty of Translation Studies may also constitute the perfect catalyst that can make a difference in the future. Afrindian literature has much to offer. The number of works and words that qualify to be included in this corpus on Indian Ocean literature in the languages of Spain may be small at the moment, but it may become larger in the near future.[9]

Future or prospective translators of this type or another type of exotic texts, from the point of view of Spanish readerships, may consider exoticising as the best option. This study is an attempt to foreground, on the one hand, the significance of Dangor and Vassanji's texts in world literature and, on the other, exoticising as the most satisfying approach towards their translation. The complete texts by Dangor and Vassanji in Spanish translation should be taken into account alongside the other Afrindian writers that have also been translated into Spanish or any of the other official languages of Spain so that a compilation of sound data in this field would further their reception and foment future translations.

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[9] Disbabelia, a University of Valladolid Press series devoted to texts and writers that have never been translated, or very rarely so, into Spanish or other languages of Spain, will publish an anthology of Indian Ocean writers in 2021. It will include translations into all the official languages of Spain: Catalan, Basque, Galician and Spanish. Consequently, this volume will struggle to popularize this literature and put an end to its status of minority reading.

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AN UNCONSTRUCTABLE INDIAN OCEAN: AMITAV GHOSH'S ECOLOGICAL IMAGINARY IN *SEA OF POPPIES* AND *THE GREAT DERANGEMENT*

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Abstract

In his 2019 book *The Unconstructable Earth: An Ecology of Separation*, Frédéric Neyrat opposes the idea that, having come very close to destroying the Earth in the Anthropocene, man can now use geoengineering to reconstruct it. Instead, Neyrat proposes an "ecology of separation" which recognizes the Earth's self-regenerating capacity as essentially separate from man's intrusion, thus suggesting that the condition for the world to survive in an age of increasing apocalyptic dangers is an acceptance of the limitations of human agency. This article will argue that Amitav Ghosh's own ecological project, developed in his 2016 essay-book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, which started as early as his historical opium war novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008), narrates an ecology of separation similar to Neyrat's, a version of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's "green postcolonialism" that confronts Eurocentric aggression against non-European civilizations and against nature.

Keywords: Ecological Imaginary, Ecology of Separation, Green Postcolonialism, Indian Ocean, Unconstructable.

UN OCÉANO ÍNDICO INCONSTRUIBLE: EL IMAGINARIO ECOLÓGICO DE AMITAV GHOSH EN *SEA OF POPPIES* Y *THE GREAT DERANGEMENT*

Resumen

En su libro *The Unconstructable Earth: An Ecology of Separation* (2019), Frédéric Neyrat se opone a la idea de que, habiendo estado muy cerca de destruir la Tierra en el Antropoceno, el hombre trata de usar la geoingeniería para reconstruirla. En cambio, Neyrat propone una «ecología de la separación» que reconoce la capacidad de la Tierra de autorregenerarse sin la intrusión del hombre, lo que sugiere que la condición para que el mundo sobreviva en una era de crecientes peligros apocalípticos es la aceptación de las limitaciones de los seres humanos. Este artículo argumenta que el propio proyecto ecológico de Amitav Ghosh, desarrollado en su libro de ensayos *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), que había ya empezado en su novela histórica sobre la guerra del opio, *Sea of Poppies* (2008), narra una ecología de separación similar a la de Neyrat, una versión del "poscolonialismo verde" de Graham Huggan y Helen Tiffin que enfrenta la agresión eurocéntrica contra las civilizaciones no europeas y contra la naturaleza.

Palabras clave: imaginario ecológico, ecología de la separación, Poscolonialismo Verde, Océano Índico, inconstruible.

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In his 2019 book *The Unconstructable Earth: An Ecology of Separation*, Frédéric Neyrat discusses the discovery of the new planet Earth, which, having practically been destroyed by man in the Anthropocene, has in recent times been subjected to a painful process of eco-constructivist climate geoengineering, meant to repair what had previously been damaged (1-9). Neyrat takes issue with the idea that any such reconstruction may be possible and argues that the only way to save the planet is a cancellation of the uninspired nature-culture encounter in favour of a total separation between technology and nature. Having come very close to destroying the Earth in the Anthropocene, man has been trying to use geoengineering to reconstruct it. Yet, the extent to which science can be used to fix the damage is placed under a big question mark in the book. Instead, Neyrat promotes an "ecology of separation" which, as its name suggests, recognizes the Earth's self-regenerating capacity as essentially separate from man's intrusion, thus suggesting that the condition for the world to survive in an age of increasing apocalyptic danger is a necessary acceptance of the limitations of human agency and the need to respect the sovereignty of nature. Neyrat pleads for an "unconstructable Earth", which, to be saved, needs not a new kind of nature-friendly human intervention, but, on the contrary, to be left alone, to be allowed to follow its own rhythms rather than externally imposed human or technological ones. The planet seems to protect itself from the damaging human agency of the late capitalist age through withdrawing in a kind of subjective subconscious of its own, which calls for freedom from human intervention:

> In order to make the Earth opaque enough to resist the technological dominance of the hypermoderns, we must emphasize its unconstructable part, which is not in opposition to its living part but precedes it, supports it, and can be aligned with it. This nocturnal, unobjective, and asubjective part is that which withdraws from human dominance and is subsequently established as the unattainable condition of humanity. (Neyrat 168)

Neyrat's concept of unconstructability serves to promote what, in the title of his book, he calls an "ecology of separation". This separation principle consists of maintaining the human factor and the planet's natural environment as distinctly apart as possible, on the basis of a declared respect for the natural and to the detriment of a long-established principle of universal human superiority over everything there is. Nature, instead, is treated as an entity in its own right, which has a balance of its own that is best left untroubled and which deserves suitable respect.

Neyrat's book proposes a version of ecology –an "ecology of separation"– different from the one that has by now become classical, promoted, among others, by Donna Haraway. Her book *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) describes a dynamic intertwining of the natural with the culturally constructed or the man-made, of the body with the mind, of the rational with the emotional, of the masculine with the feminine etc. Thus, Haraway's solution to the human destruction of the environment is one of intertwining and even "friendship" between humans and the environment, a continuum between the human and the natural conceptualized

as "Natureculture". Neyrat opposes such a continuum, on accounts of the fact that the natural and the human (often understood as the technological) are very different and experience has shown that too much interaction between them leads to their damaging each other. Neyrat's dissent from the common view is just one example of the diversity of perspectives that have pervaded environmental humanities, a field of enquiry increasingly visible on the global stage.

In recent times, the rise of environmental humanities has often met with the similarly spectacular trajectory of global writing in English. In a postcolonial light, this confirms an evolution in world pluralism and a general increase in respect for fellow human beings, as well as for the planet. Along cognate lines, Huggan and Tiffin's green postcolonialism (*Interventions*, 2007) marks an important development in postcolonial ecocriticism. It is mostly an opportunity to examine relationships between humans, animals and nature in postcolonial literary texts in order to show that

> human liberation will never be fully achieved without challenging the ways human societies have constructed themselves in hierarchical relation to other human and non-human communities, and without imagining new ways in which these ecologically connected groupings can be creatively transformed. (Huggan & Tiffin 2010: ii)

This involves a reconsideration of the ways in which we position ourselves with respect to animals and the environment and how nature interferes with our actions and decisions. It also has an impact on the bigger chapter of postcolonial history rewriting, which calls for an act of reassessment from the perspective of the former colonised and not of the colonisers. In his 2009 article "The Climate of History", Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, from the same perspective of the formerly marginalized, for a more accurate, cleaner version of history, rewritten so as to give a voice to the formerly voiceless instead of the previous narrative of imperial power chronicled in traditional history books. This rejection of history written from the West and from the centre, in good New Historicist tradition, but expanded so as to include non-human histories too, in a symbiosis with the actually very related human history, shows that ecology should not only be about the natural environment, but also about the environment of inter-human relations. Thinking in a cleaner, saner way and repairing exclusions is a principle that should dominate the whole way in which, as humans, we position ourselves with respect to the world, and this includes our whole range of connections. So, Chakrabarty's project is one that aims at deconstructing anthropocentrism in the world and its mirror image in colonial history, Eurocentrism. This comes close to Dominic Head's "deep ecology" and epitomizes a radical shift in our thinking about the world, as Huggan and Tiffin go on to show:

> The British ecocritic Dominic Head has prioritized the 'fundamental social restructuring associated with deep ecology' over the 'provisional management strateg[ies]' of environmentalism (1999: 27). For Head, as for his American counterpart Lawrence Buell, environmental crises and Western thought are

> intrinsically interwoven: 'Western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today's environmental problems' (Buell 1995: 2). We need, argues Buell, 'better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it' (ibid.). The crisis in Western thinking that Buell, among several others, has identified is intimately connected to Europe's history of conquest and colonization and the ideological hegemony it (re)produced. (Huggan and Tiffin 2007: 5)

This crisis of nature seems to provide a mirror of human crises, which can be of many kinds, yet seem to ultimately reflect on the extent of the damage they produce to our environment. Thus, since nature is the ultimate measure of all events of consequence on Earth, and since postcolonialism as a discipline has long become an official (rather than subversive) discourse taught in universities, it follows that the current fact of increasingly redefining postcolonialism as green postcolonialism is a legitimate one.

> Green postcolonialism, however, is not just critical; it is also celebratory. Both postcolonialism and ecocriticism are, at least in part, utopian discourses aimed at providing conceptual possibilities for a material transformation of the world. (Huggan and Tiffin 2007: 10)

As there has been an increasingly stronger connection between the environment and global writing in English, even more so in the current global Covid-19 crisis, more and more areas of the humanities focus around environmental concerns. Thus, as we speak, an area of intersection is being created between fields of the humanities such as history, philosophy, literature, music, cultural studies (with its ramifications) and the more and more visible ecological concerns that have emerged in the contemporary world. All of this seems to be of particular interest in recent global writing in English, which exists in a transnational space that has been all the more affected by the Covid-19 crisis.

Ecocriticism as a broadly emerging critical perspective views literature as "an ecological principle or an ecological energy within the larger system of cultural discourses" (Zapf 55), a form of cultural ecology that has "moved beyond former one-sided, biological-deterministic views of the nature-culture relationship towards the recognition of the difference and relatively independent dynamics of cultural and intellectual phenomena" (Zapf 51). Eco-fiction is imaginative literature (i.e., fictional or non-fictional literature which uses the powers of imagination to discuss and even criticize aspects of real life, while pretending to be purely fictional) understood as a form of cultural ecology, whose function is both critical and activist. It provides means to discuss important political issues more freely and openly than politics can, through the power of example, but also through the capacity of literature to imagine alternative worlds, in which the wrongs of society are challenged and sometimes even put right in the possible world constructed in the book.

One author who has illustrated and elaborated on such concerns in an almost systematic manner, in both his fiction and his non-fiction, is Amitav Ghosh. His fiction writing is generally pervaded by an ecological perspective on the world, not only at the level of content, but also in his narrative structures and technique

and character building. Ghosh's work promotes a radical rethinking of human interactions in an ecological light, which, I would like to argue, imagines the Indian Ocean as a kind of receptacle of dynamic forces in which older and newer perspectives and attitudes melt and interact. This article uses Neyrat's theory as a lens through which to read Amitav Ghosh's own ecological project in his 2017 essay-book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, read in conjunction with his historical opium war novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008). In the light of the current coronavirus crisis, Ghosh's own version of what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin call a "green postcolonialism" (a technology-proof version of an emancipatory move of the margin against an oppressive, polluting centre) shares a deep concern with the ways in which the relationship between nature and culture, which has changed dramatically in the recent decades, mirrors a changing in the relationship between the "West" and the "East" and an increased fluidity in world hierarchies, as suggested by the triad "Land-River-Sea" proposed by the three parts of the Ibis Trilogy. A similar interconnectedness of how the world is made is suggested by the similar three-part structure of *The Great Derangement* ("Stories-History-Politics"), which confirms the traditional Hindu chain of being, in terms of which everything is connected. If colonialism took European superiority over non-European civilizations for granted, it is now alternative, non-European forms of knowledge that prevail over western knowledge when it comes to facing nature's revolt against various kinds of prolonged human aggression.

Ghosh's Indian Ocean becomes a kind of imaginary world outside history, which challenges not only many received conceptions of former times (given that some of his writing, for example, looks back upon history), but also some conceptions still shared by the world we live in. I will base my discussion on Ghosh's 2008 *Sea of Poppies,* the first of his historical *Ibis* trilogy about the opium wars, which is based on such views, later to be continued in Ghosh's fiction. While the trilogy relies on a project that Ghosh announces since *The Shadow Lines*, which is one of relativising history and its limitations, *Sea of Poppies*, through its tripartite structure (*Land*, *River* and *Sea*) spells out a whole process of evolution from traditional, immutable mentalities, through to a path towards evolution and on to the spatial and symbolical fluidity granted by the Indian Ocean.

As already mentioned, Ghosh has been practicing a fiction of fluid borders at least since 1988, when he published his classic on the topic, *The Shadow Lines*. A year earlier, the same fluid physical lines separating states, which reflects on how identity is conceptualized in the respective territories, had been stated by Gloria Anzaldúa in her *Borderlands/ La frontera*. The latter's translation ambiguity is afforded by the book's bilingualism: "frontera" means "border" rather than "borderland", so the passage to English complicates the concept, adding a meaningful zone of transition to it. This, like Ghosh's lines, which are not real, but shadowy, extends to many formerly strict categories associated with borders, such as ethnic or national identity, caste, gender, religion and so forth. This is visible in the construction of Ghosh's characters, as Robert Dixon notices: "The characters in Ghosh's novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but 'dwell in travel' in cultural spaces that flow across borders – the 'shadow lines' drawn around modern nation states"... [They

inhabit] "a discursive space that flows across political and national boundaries, and even across generations in time" (Dixon 10; 18). As, in the contemporary world, separate, discrete cultures have given way to categories of fluidity and change as migration/ relocation has become increasingly frequent, Ghosh's interest in the dynamic of cultures and in cross-border movements, in the always changing nature of identity rather than rigid categories responsible for dividing people, has not only continued in his novels (primarily the *Ibis* trilogy, *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*), but was also taken to a more theoretical level in his 2016 essay book *The Great Derangement*. Thus, I propose a reading of *The Great Derangement* as an essay book on climate change in conjunction with *Sea of Poppies* (in particular Part III: *Sea*, whose title refers both to the Indian Ocean and to the sea of poppies of the novel's title), since this novel is not only the first in the *Ibis* trilogy, but among the first of Ghosh's novels that focus on the impact of the environment on human destinies since former times.

Sea of Poppies is built around the initially parallel destinies of many characters, each of them with their own stories of displacement, who come together by chance and end up forming alliances that transcend social categories, time and the original spatial distances that divided them. This act of coming together happens mostly in Part III, when they meet on the *Ibis*, the schooner that takes them all to the opium plantations in Mauritius, whether as indentured labourers or to different ends. The transformative effect that the *Ibis* journey has on them is a reversal of the traditional *kala pani*, the act of crossing the black waters and thus cutting off all bridges from home, including losing caste. The moment of departure, when the actual crossing is about to begin, is marked in Part III: *Sea* of the novel as a particularly meaningful experience, stronger than any other, for those who take part in it:

> Slowly, as the vessel's motion made itself felt in the pit of every stomach, the noise yielded to a pregnant, fearful stillness. Now the migrants began to absorb the finality of what was under way: yes, they were moving, they were afloat, heading towards the void of the Black Water; neither death nor birth was as fearsome a passage as this, neither being experienced in full consciousness. Slowly, the rioters backed away from the ladder and returned to their mats. Somewhere in the darkness, a voice, trembling in awe, uttered the first syllables of the Gayatri Mantra – and Neel, who had been made to learn the words almost as soon as he could speak, now found himself saying them, as if for the first time: *Om, bhur bhuvah swah, tat savitur varenyam*... O giver of life, remover of pain and sorrow... (Ghosh 2008: 387-388)

Difficult as this crossing might be, though, it is the most important scene in the novel and, ultimately, a symbolical marker of progress from bondage to freedom (even though that freedom may include other forms of bondage), from one particular historical stage to another. It also involves, as seen from the perspective of the whole of Ghosh's work, a radical challenging of the inviolability of strict social categories such as caste. For Deeti, the widow whom her secret untouchable admirer Kalua saves from her dead husband's funeral pyre, losing caste through both crossing the black waters and marrying Kalua is not at all the tragedy it would normally be in the Hindu background. It is, on the contrary, a life-giving path to freedom and

to a new, better life, despite losing caste. This is a transformation all the people on board the *Ibis* experience as they embark, actually, on a new historical stage in the development of societies around the Indian Ocean, which becomes a world in itself, a fluid host of change and movement towards another and, in some ways, better world.

Ghosh's later essay book on climate change, *The Great Derangement*, also consists of three parts, which are announced from the very beginning to be intrinsic to the logic of the book, to such an extent that they are even arranged in a visually attractive triangular shape in the table of contents: Part I –*Stories*, Part II –*History* and Part III –*Politics*. In the first part, entitled *Stories*, Ghosh builds a whole theory around how stories come into shape, as human civilization interacts with the rhythms of nature, sometimes to the detriment of one or the other. Ghosh notices that there is not enough literature on climate change and, while his own writing seems to aim at providing a solution to the problem, he also comes close to laying the foundations of an ecocritical literary theory. This theory is based on the interconnections between stories and the world from which they emerge and with which they continually communicate. In Indian tradition, a story grows from another "like a lotus vine", to quote from another contemporary Indian practitioner of storytelling in novel form, Vikram Chandra (Chandra 1995: 617). At the end of Chandra's novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* the most important thing when a person dies is for their story to survive. Chandra is fascinated by the never-ending interaction between stories and the reality they grow from (which he explores in most of his work), as he confesses in an interview:

> I think for me it's really illuminating to see how people use stories. And what I mean by that is that a story I tell today is similar, but not necessarily the same thing that my grandfather was telling, you know. Here is this narrative coming back to me through somebody else's interpretation. I guess it's narcissistic in some sense, but it's very engaging. The monkey in *Red Earth* realises that he's telling his story, but it changes as it goes on and then you'll have to let it go. I think it's a great pleasure to me in hearing what people have to say. Sometimes it's strange, because story connects back to history. I got letters from several descendants of James Skinner. And that was amazing because, you know, people who were part of the story that I was telling wrote to me, that's pretty moving. (Chandra 13)

Chandra discusses here the historical inspiration he got for his 1995 novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain.* Having been built on significant nineteenth-century detail which he turned into story, historical detail then returns to him in the guise of descendants of one of his characters, who write letters to him and comment on the making of the novel. The idea of people using stories to fill in gaps in history or to answer questions about life that are difficult to answer otherwise brings into the picture an idea of narrative knowledge which reigns supreme among all other knowledges humanity has access to. Since the *Mahabharata*, the foundation epic which is considered by Indians to contain everything there is and has ever been in the world (*itihasa*), stories have been regarded as an important (if not the main) source of knowledge. Contemporary Indian authors are rediscovering this asset and reinstating the revigorating power of storytelling in a global world in ecological

crisis, where a perspective on the world that dwells in process rather than stasis is needed more than at any other point in time.

Like Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh is one passionate storyteller, who, moreover, takes storytelling, from the Buddhist Jataka stories and Urdu *dastaans* (Ghosh 2016: 18) to narrative forms such as the novel nowadays, beyond the already featured human and superhuman world, into the universe of nature and environmental concerns. Thus, to return to *The Great Derangement*, the book's three parts create a system that practically imagines the whole fabric of the world through the lens of storytelling. Just as people are never ready for the spectacular turns of the plot in a well-written thriller, nor are they ready for natural disasters (Ghosh 2016: 25), of which he chooses a few whose stories he tells with lavish details. Some of these are famous cases, such as that of hurricane Sandy that ravaged New York in 2012, others are lived experiences, such as the tornado that hit north Delhi on March 17, 1978, which Ghosh witnessed directly, having accidentally taken a different turn on his way home from work on that day. He agrees with the fact that the main reason for such phenomena is the current global warming. However, he integrates them in a wider historical perspective at the beginning of *The Great Derangement*, as he tells the story of his ancestors:

> My ancestors were ecological refugees long before the term was invented. They were from what is now Bangladesh, and their village was on the shore of the Padma River, one of the mightiest waterways in the land. The story, as my father told it, was this: one day in the mid-1850s the great river suddenly changed course, drowning the village; only a few of the inhabitants had managed to escape to higher ground. It was this catastrophe that had unmoored our forebears; in its wake they began to move westward and did not stop until the year 1856, when they settled once again on the banks of a river, the Ganges, in Bihar. (Ghosh 2016: 3-4)

By mentioning natural catastrophes as a reason that has always displaced populations, Ghosh shows that the current climate change situation is one episode in the epic of nature in interaction with human settlements. The interaction of the human factor with water ("living by the water", Ghosh 2016: 37) seems to be of particular concern. However, it seems that such concern is caused primarily by interactions between land and water (as we see in *Sea of Poppies* in Part II: *River*, where the Ganges provides a path of freedom towards the sea, but then the true freedom is granted by the Indian Ocean).

That nature has its own epic is an idea supported by the concept of an "environmental uncanny" for which the author makes a case (Ghosh 2016: 32), to be found, for example, in the mystery of tiger stories in the Sundarbans (Ghosh 2016: 30). Discussing nature in such terms derived from literary criticism provides a methodology of analysis that we could further apply in a reading of Ghosh's own fiction. Thus, we recognize in the narrative structure of *Sea of Poppies* the complex interaction between stories, history and politics discussed in *The Great Derangement*, yet in the former case adapted to the novel's historical narrative context. Irrespective of their situatedness in time and history, Ghosh's characters are

generally modern-minded, mobile characters in perpetual movement and change, with an understanding of human relationships and values that goes far beyond contextual conditionings. History, approached like just another story, is tackled from the perspective of the same continuity across everything that exists and has ever existed. Thus, for instance, the author identifies a blatant connection between imperialism and climate change, to be found in the way in which European imperial powers treated Asian economies along centuries (Ghosh 2016: 87). Ghosh's approach to history is in agreement with Dipesh Chakrabarty in "The Climate of History", which he discusses in *The Great Derangement* as one particular way to read the interconnections between stories that focus on humans (of which history is one) and those very similar ones that focus on nature (Ghosh 2016: 9-25). In his fictional and non-fictional writing, Ghosh practices a dynamic model of history, aiming in the *Ibis* trilogy at its rereading from the margins rather than from the centre, in the line of Subaltern Studies and New Historicism.

The universe on board the *Ibis* comes close to Donna Haraway's natureculture continuum, with those characters who insist on rigid social divisions being eliminated (Bhyro Singh is killed by Kalua, whom he despises because he is an untouchable and whose wife he offends) and with interhuman connections being formed across all social, geographical and cultural borders (Deeti and Kalua, Paulette and Zachary or Neel and Ah Fatt). The world on board the *Ibis* resembles a kind of utopian, imaginary universe in which all that has life is equal, which leads to the erasure of strict categories such as the inviolability of marriage or the incompatibility of castes. This world has a flexibility that creates a continuum between humans of different castes, genders and social categories, just as in Haraway's theory a continuum is created between life and the mind, the animal, the human and the man-made (or the machine). The Ganges –the sacred river which here makes the transition from land, the space of rigid, rooted rules, to the fluid, dynamic sea of change which is the Indian Ocean– is associated with a complex plethora of rituals of death, rebirth and purification, as Hindu ritual borrows from the symbolism of nature. Such a scene, which prepares the mental fluidity that accompanies the journey down the Ganges, is the moment of true ecological intimacy represented in *Sea of Poppies* by Deeti and Kalua's wedding in nature:

> Although she had no more of a plan than he did, she said: We'll go away, far away, we'll find a place where no one will know anything about us except that we are married.
> Married? he said.
> Yes.
> Squirming out of his arms, she wrapped herself loosely in her sari and went off towards the river. Where are you going? he shouted after her. You'll see, she called over her shoulder. And when she came back, with her sari draped over her body like a veil of gossamer, it was with an armload of wild-flowers, blooming on the bank. Plucking a few long hairs from her head, she strung the flowers together to make two garlands: one she gave to him, and the other she took herself, lifting it up above his head and slipping it around his neck. Now he too knew what to do and when the exchange of garlands had bound them together, they sat for a while,

> awed by the enormity of what they had done. Then she crept into his arms again and was swept into the embracing warmth of his body, as wide and sheltering as the dark earth. (Ghosh 2008: 188-189)

This scene of love that defies all limitations, even death (previous to this, Kalua had just saved Deeti from *sati*) is a symbolical trigger of action in *Sea of Poppies*, unleashing creative energies for building a new life which would have been impossible in the absence of such a will to break down rigid social rules. This seems to be the starting point of Ghosh's ecological thinking, a form of perceiving the world as free from preconceived ideas as possible, as ready as possible to experience the dynamic of the human world and of nature directly, unmediated by any lens.

In *The Great Derangement,* Ghosh seems to have gone one step further than *Sea of Poppies*, beyond a celebration of the possible harmony between nature and human beings (as in the scene above) towards a recognition of the fact that there are moments in nature (such as hurricanes) which escape human control altogether and which, at least in the first instance, do not benefit humans. In a recent review of Ghosh's latest novel, *Gun Island*, published in *The Guardian*, Alex Clark calls *The Great Derangement* "an examination of collective denial in the face of climate breakdown" (Clark 2019). This collective denial, which has been going on for a long time, has mostly consisted in unlimited human intervention in the balance of nature. While, like *Sea of Poppies*, *The Great Derangement* still celebrates the harmony between human beings and the environment, the third part of the latter, entitled *Politics*, makes a case for the fact that a change in the politics of human behaviour towards nature has to change for the current climate crisis to be overcome or at least stopped. The benefits of human intervention in nature are exposed as being an illusion, as the book concludes by pleading for action in a way that, interpreted in the light of Ghosh's whole work, seems to lead towards an ecology of separation:

> The struggle for action will no doubt be difficult and hard-fought, and no matter what it achieves, it is already too late to avoid some serious disruptions of the global climate. But I would like to believe that out of this struggle will be born a generation that will be able to look upon the world with clearer eyes than those that preceded it; that they will be able to transcend the isolation in which humanity was entrapped in the time of its derangement; that they will rediscover their kinship with other beings, and that this vision, at once new and ancient, will find expression in a transformed and renewed art and literature. (Ghosh 2016: 161-162)

The isolation mentioned here very likely refers to the conflictual relationship created between humankind and the environment at a time of increased number of natural catastrophes such as tornadoes and hurricanes. However, it would be hard for today's reader not to connect it to the many periods of isolation of varying intensity at the time of the Covid-19 global crisis. Whether this crisis, whose extremity has surpassed that of many other crises, is due to human negligence towards the environment is not yet altogether clear. As for Ghosh, even though he continues to celebrate an always desirable harmony between humans and nature, such harmony, as suggested by the above reference to a new generation that should learn to look

upon nature with clearer eyes, will only be possible in conjunction with a practice of respect towards and non-intervention in nature, a kind of ecology of separation as described by Neyrat. Somewhat paradoxically, harmony with nature seems to require a separation from it. This, however, implies not a renewed nature-culture division, but a nature-culture continuum based on respect for each other's specific ways of being.

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THE MYTH OF THE EMPTY TERRITORY: THE TRAGEDY OF THE CHAGOS ISLANDERS

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Abstract

In this article we outline the tragedy of the Chagos Islanders forcibly evicted from their homeland to make way for an American military base. A new colony was invented, the British Indian Ocean Territory, which would be declared a marine reserve in 2010. The British have refused to allow the Chagossians the right to return to their homelands not to protect the environment, but rather to safeguard the political agreement based on economic and military imperialism. Therefore this community has been condemned to historical erasure as their stories are imbricated in the official narration of an empty territory. To prevent the plight of the Chagossians from falling into oblivion, we organized a creative writing workshop with members of the community in order to grant visibility to the Chagossian fight for identity and recognition.

Keywords: Chagos, Imperialism, Creative Writing, Identity, Memory.

EL MITO DEL TERRITORIO VACÍO: LA TRAGEDIA DE LOS HABITANTES DE LAS ISLAS CHAGOS

Resumen

En este artículo describimos la tragedia de los habitantes de las islas Chagos, los cuales fueron desahuciados de su tierra natal para que los americanos pudieran construir una base militar. Para ello fue necesario inventar una nueva colonia, British Indian Ocean Territory, que fue declarada reserva marina en el año 2010. Los británicos han denegado a los Chagosianos el derecho a regresar a su tierra natal no por razones ecológicas de protección del medio ambiente sino para preservar un acuerdo político basado en un imperialismo económico y militar. Así pues, la historia oficial de esta comunidad está unida a lo que denominamos la narración del territorio vacío, una narración perversa que los condena a una invisibilidad perenne. Para impedir que su tragedia caiga en el olvido, organizamos un taller de escritura creativa con miembros de la comunidad para así dar visibilidad a su lucha por ser reconocidos.

Palabras clave: Chagos, imperialismo, escritura creativa, identidad, memoria.

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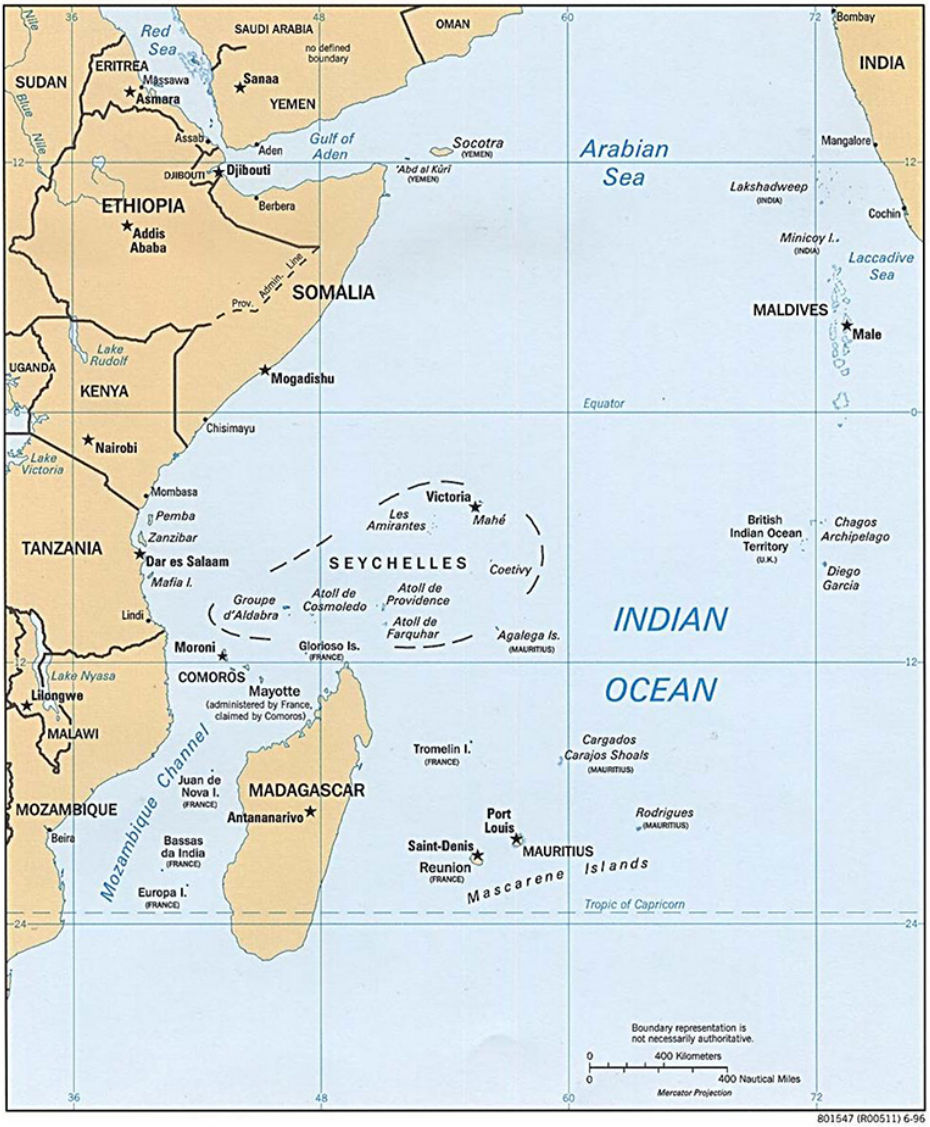
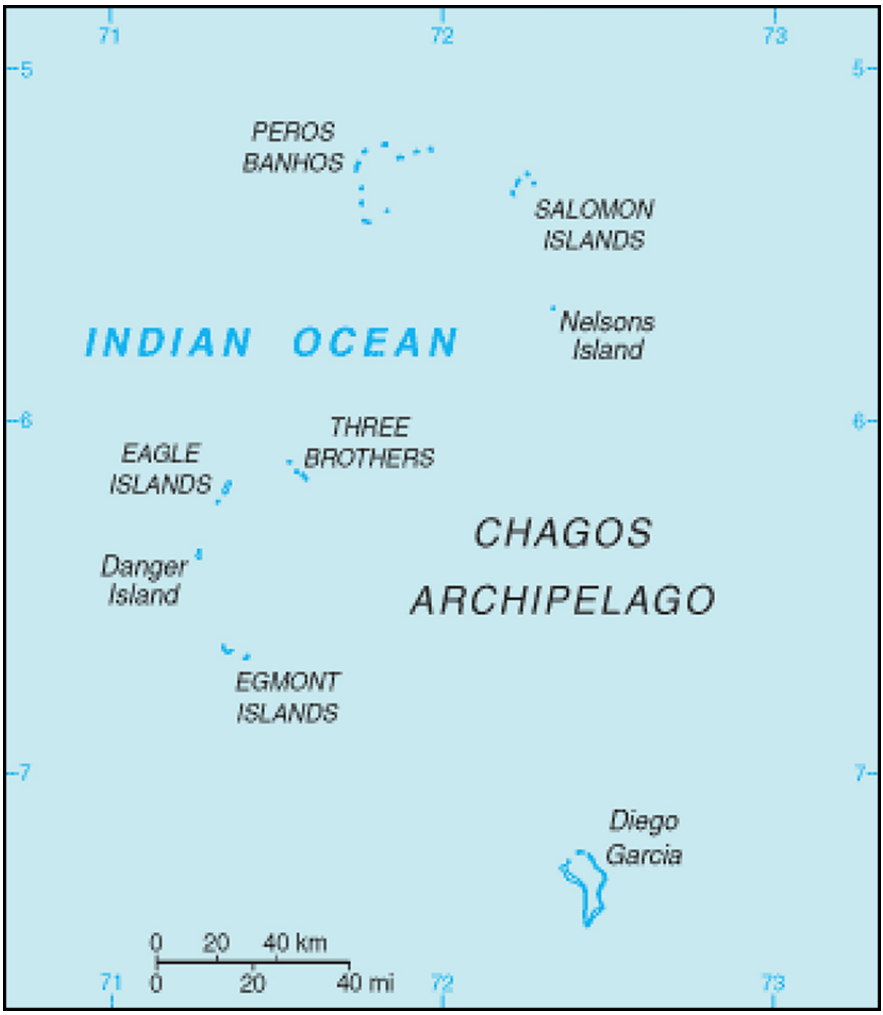
Western Indian Ocean





Mo ti ena 13 an

Mo ti ena 13 an
Depi mo ti ena 13 an dan Sagos
Mo ti ena 13 an
Kouto dekoke ti dan mo lame

Angle inn arive
Misie angle inn arive dan Sagos
Angle inn arive
Angle, ou ras nou bouse manze

Mo pa pou bliye
Zame mo pa pou bliye, mo mama
Mo pa pou bliye
Laba mo'nn kit dan simitier

Mo pa pu bliye
Zame m opa pou bliye mo fami
Soufle trwa kou
Mauritius inn zet nou dan Moris

Li bien foupamal
Li bien never mind misie-la
Li bien foupamal
Kant mem nou pena boulo[1]

I was thirteen

I was thirteen
Since I was thirteen in Chagos
I was thirteen
I held the coconut knife in my hand

The British came
The British masters landed in Chagos
The British came
You, British, took our bread from our mouths

I won't forget
I'll never forget, my mother
I won't forget
I left her over there in the cemetery

I won't forget
I'll never forget, oh my family,
It blew thrice
The Mauritius threw us overboard in Mauritius

He doesn't care
He is a "never mind" master
He just doesn't care
Even if we are jobless

[1] *Group Tanbour Chagos. Leritaz Kiltir Chagossien.* 2018. Chagos Refugees Group and University of Edinburgh. As stated in the back cover, the album is a tribute to Chagossians: "This album pays tribute to Chagossians who sang these (and other) songs on Chagos, and is dedicated to all Chagossians and their supporters."

"Mo ti ena 13 an," is the first song of the total 12 songs that form the record *Group Tanbour Chagos. Leritaz Kiltir Chagossien* sung in Kreol, the language of the Chagossian Islanders, to the rhythm of sega, a syncretic musical genre forged within the colonial plantations of Indian Ocean islands. Echoing the plea of their enslaved African ancestors, sega song lyrics depict episodes of ordinary life while infusing them with the spirit of dissent of protest songs. The reason why we have chosen this particular song to start our article on the Chagos Islanders is because "Mo ti ena 13 an" (When I was thirteen) captures the fateful moment when, as Chagossians put it, "the land was sold"[2] and they were therefore displaced from their homeland and literally thrown in Mauritius. The song works within a remembrance framework whereby an adult Chagossian recalls the instant in which she[3], alongside her other fellow Chagossians, is ruthlessly uprooted and thus, her song emerges as a powerful remonstrance of resilience, a resisting performance against oblivion. This article stems from our desire to contribute to remember and make visible the tragedy of the Chagos Islanders in an attempt to legitimize academically their history of displacement and hence position it as a crucial instantiation of contemporary colonialism. The first section of the article –The Chagos Islanders. Victims of a Ruthless Kidnapping– will be devoted to outlining the colonial history of dispossession of the Chagos Islanders whereas the second section –Writing Myth and Memory to Fight Cultural Injustice Against Chagossians– will present and discuss a performance against oblivion, namely the creative writing workshop that we, together with Dr Farhad Khoyratty from the University of Mauritius, organized as a means to make the tragedy of the displaced islanders visible.

THE CHAGOS ISLANDERS. VICTIMS OF A RUTHLESS KIDNAPPING

The tragedy of the Chagos Islanders is the 50-year-old story of a displaced people, forcibly evicted from their homeland and resettled in Mauritius or the UK where many finally migrated. The Chagos Islands, of which Diego García was the most populated, were handed over to the Americans by the British to be used as a military base. The Chagos formed part of what was then the British colony of Mauritius, which gained its independence in 1968. The two thousand islanders were left without a home from 1967 to 1973, the year the last ship, the Nordvaer brought the last Chagossians to Mauritius. The ruthless handling of the Chagossian people, dispensable objects that had to be removed to make way for the military use of the island of Diego Garcia, is poles apart from the protection and support received

[2] "When the land was sold" is the sentence that the participants in our creative writing workshop repetitively used to refer to that original moment of displacement. Incidentally, this is the title we have chosen for our blog on the Chagos Islanders.

[3] The singer's name is Mary Joyce Mercida and this explains the use of the female pronoun "she".

by the Falkland Islanders during the conflict with Argentina in 1981. The British declared the area a marine reserve in 2010, but their refusal to allow the Chagossians the right to return to their homelands is not to protect the environment, but rather to safeguard the political agreement based on economic and military imperialism.

The Chagos Islands were originally populated with slaves from coastal East Africa and Madagascar who arrived there via Mauritius, but Mauritius itself has no indigenous population as everybody there was a migrant, either voluntary or enforced. By the mid-twentieth century Chagos had a population of approximately 2000, most working in the coconut plantations, producing copra and coconut oil for export (Jeffery 2006, 298). In 1965, following independence negotiations with Mauritian politicians, the UK government excised Chagos from colonial Mauritius to form part of the new British Indian Ocean Territory. In 1968 Britain began illegal and secret removal of the population of the Chagos Islands following an agreement in 1966 to lease the islands to the US so that Diego Garcia would become available for a US military base. In this way the Whitehall conspiracy that contended that there were no indigenous inhabitants was formulated. At the request of the US government, the UK government had literally depopulated the entire archipelago by 1973, first by restricting the importation of supplies and preventing the return of Islanders who had gone to Mauritius for medical treatment, and later by forcibly removing the remaining Islanders and sending them to Mauritius and the Seychelles. In other words, the British government saw fit to invent a new colony, the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), just to justify the detachment of part of what was in fact the colony of Mauritius. As Mauritian historian Jocelyn Chan Low pertinently asks: "Why a new colony in the Indian Ocean at a time when the British seemed bent on getting rid of the remaining dust of empire?" (Chan Low 107).

The Chagos Islands and their inhabitants were fairly isolated from the outside world but before the creation of BIOT "the Indian Ocean connected the Chagos and Mauritius on a regular but somewhat infrequent basis" (Johannessen 2018, 268). It is undeniable that the sole purpose of creating BIOT was to kick the Chagossians out. They were not regarded as permanent inhabitants of the islands, but rather as a so-called "floating population," that is temporary workers or, imported labourers (Johannessen 2018, 279). This is of course untrue as Chagossians had been living on the islands since the early 19th century, proof of which are the numerous graves of people dating back several generations. Instead of acknowledging their right to the land, the British showed an imperious attitude of contempt towards the islanders by maintaining the fiction that they didn't exist as political subjects. According to the British and the Americans, there was no functioning civilization on the islands so the people were expendable, in other words, their presence was regarded as a trivial detail. This is disturbingly obvious in John Pilger's moving documentary *Stealing a Nation* (2004), where he argues that the recuperation of the Chagossians' right to their land is a quest for justice.

The newly independent state of Mauritius does not come out of this issue completely blameless as it decided not to put forth its claims over the Chagos and not to raise the issue at the United Nations (Chan Low 120). Chan Low goes on to argue that if Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam –the first Prime Minister of

independent Mauritius– finally conceded on Diego Garcia it was because he had become convinced –the British having manoeuvred brilliantly to convince him– that if he proved conciliatory on the excision of the Chagos Archipelago, the British government would finally decide in favour of independence for Mauritius at the close of the Constitutional Conference in 1965 (Chan Low 118; Jeffery 2006, 304). It is only in recent years that Mauritius is claiming sovereignty over the islands that it happily signed away. The inclusion of the Chagos Archipelago –and the intervening waters– as part of Mauritian territory would increase its size and importance on the world stage. Mauritius failed to act in accordance with the basic tenets of humanity as the deported Chagossians were left to their own devices once they were disembarked in Port Louis and relegated to the lowest position in society. Their living conditions were –and many still are– precarious and unsanitary.[4] It is true that the years leading up to and immediately after the independence of Mauritius were highly volatile with interethnic strife, rising unemployment and a housing shortage threatening the viability of the new state (Jeffery 2010, 1102) which was not the ideal scenario for the integration of the new migrants. Over the years various Chagossian groups in Mauritius have campaigned for fair compensation and the right to return to Chagos. Their records document one thousand surviving islanders plus approximately 4500 of their second generation offspring. The Chagossians won limited financial compensation from the UK government in 1978 and 1982 but lost a legal claim for further compensation in 2003 (Jeffery 2007, 963). A judicial review in the name of the Chagos Refugees Group leader, Olivier Bancoult, concluded in 2000 that the depopulation of Chagos had been unlawful since it was contrary to the laws of the territory. In response, the UK government used the royal prerogative to impose a new immigration ordinance in 2004 preventing Chagossians from entering the territory so the people would be banned forever from returning to their homeland. Olivier Bancoult's legal team won a judicial review of this latter legislation in 2006 –a shaming rebuke from the High Court which ruled in favour of the Islanders. The UK government appealed unsuccessfully in the Court of Appeal in 2007, but won its final appeal in the House of Lords in 2008.[5] It is beyond the scope of this article to delve further into the legal proceedings and the political tug-of-war over sovereignty among the Chagossian communities in Mauritius and in the UK but suffice it to say that certain groups would be in favour of the Chagos returning to Mauritius while others are claiming for total independence.[6] The legal proceedings are still ongoing but despite all these setbacks, the Chagos Refugees Group remains committed to seeking the right to resettle Chagos. The 2019 United Nations Resolution has –unsuccessfully– demanded the UK return control of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius but despite all these setbacks, the Chagos Refugees Group remains committed to seeking the right to resettle Chagos.

[4] See Jeffery & Vine 2011. 98-100 and Ravi 2010. 345.
[5] See Stephen Allen, 2014 chapters 1 & 2; Johannessen 2010 72; Lobo 2016. 13.
[6] See de l'Estrac, 2011 chapter XIII for a detailed discussion on the sovereignty issue.

In order to justify the creation of the marine protected area (MPA), the British Foreign Office had continually asserted that it was impossible for the Chagossians to return to their homes and to this end they conducted a feasibility study in which it was claimed that in the longer term life would be precarious and human interaction on global warming would be counterproductive. Therefore, the question arises as to the pollution caused by the 4000 US servicemen and women and the civilian contractors who work on Diego Garcia, the largest American military base outside the US, and the immense environmental damage caused by the building of the base (Sand 2009, 120). The Americans are keen to extend the 50-year lease and each side, the US and the British both claim that it is for the other side to decide the feasibility of a return of the Chagossians thus washing their hands of any responsibility (Curtis 2007). It is true that a select group of Chagossians was permitted to visit the islands in 2006 –what was regarded as a pilgrimage as opposed to a humanitarian visit for the islanders– but the stay on Diego Garcia was much more controlled as "all cameras were confiscated and not redistributed until after visitors left the military area" (Johannessen 2011, 204).

Time is clearly not on the side of the Chagossians. When the area was declared a marine reserve in 2010, the islanders claimed the project to be a ploy to block their return, as it would make it impossible for them to live there since it would ban fishing, their main livelihood (Lobo 13-14; Rincon 2010). As far as the rationale for the creation of the marine reserve area is concerned, the recent leaking of a series of documents that are US state department cables recording private meetings between Foreign Office officials and their American counterparts are exceedingly revealing.

> [Her Majesty's Government] would like to establish a "marine park" or "reserve" providing comprehensive environmental protection to the reefs and waters of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), a senior Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) official informed Polcouns [Political Counsellor] on May 12. The official insisted that the establishment of a marine park – the world's largest – would in no way impinge on USG use of the BIOT, including Diego Garcia, for military purposes. He agreed that the UK and US should carefully negotiate the details of the marine reserve to assure that US interests were safeguarded and the strategic value of BIOT was upheld. He said that the BIOT's former inhabitants would find it difficult, if not impossible, to pursue their claim for resettlement on the islands if the entire Chagos Archipelago were a marine reserve (Curtis, website).

The conclusions of Colin Roberts, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) Director, Overseas Territories are equally significant:

> According to the HMG's current thinking on a reserve, there would be "no human footprints" or "Man Fridays" on the BIOT's uninhabited islands. [Roberts] *asserted that establishing a marine park would, in effect, put paid to resettlement claims of the archipelago's former residents*. Responding to Polcouns' observation that the advocates of Chagossian resettlement continue to vigorously press their case, Roberts opined that the UK's "environmental lobby is far more powerful than the Chagossians' advocates" (Curtis, website; italics in original).

The decision to establish a military base on Diego Garcia was clearly part of the United States' wide global military strategy as its "V-shaped atoll provided a perfect maritime harbour right in the middle of the Indian Ocean" (Johannessen 2018, 269).

The case *of/for* the Chagos Islands posits a challenge to studies of transnationalism and globalization inasmuch as it stands as a pungent example of the linguistic manipulation of power discourses. A straightforward military occupation is legally sanctioned by resorting to an environment-friendly-constructed jargon that presents the Chagos Islands as a site to be protected against the "destructive" actions of their native inhabitants. There is a further challenge to be considered in the case *of/for* the Chagos Islands and that is a challenge addressed to, in Davis and Todd's words, "the bounds and the legitimacy of the nation-state structure itself" (Davis and Todd 774). During British colonial times, the Chagos Islands territory was envisioned as an integral part of Mauritius but upon the advent of independence, as we have discussed elsewhere, the BIOT was created so that this territory could easily become American territory. This political transaction between the UK and the US left the Chagos Islanders in a state of utter powerlessness which resulted in their homeland displacement and abandonment in Mauritius. Strictly speaking, the Chagos Islanders were not Mauritian citizens. The Chagos Islands fell prey to British, American and Mauritian national interests and as such they materialize as a stalwart albeit distressing example of the global essence of colonial dispossession.

WRITING MYTH AND MEMORY TO FIGHT CULTURAL INJUSTICE AGAINST THE CHAGOSSIANS

In an essay entitled "Reflections on Exile," Edward Said offers one of the most pungent definitions of exile. Exile, he asserts, "is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience," (Said 173) and, he continues, "it is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (Said 173). Exile is thus captured as an existential malaise that impinges sorely on the lives of those who are deracinated and literally left without a home. This is indeed the tragedy enveloping the Chagossian experience, a tragedy that is persistently nurtured by fragmentation and loss and which, to our mind, should be inscribed within the literature of trauma studies.

The trauma of exiles is, at least in the modern era, conspicuously entrenched in the trauma of colonization and, in this respect, once again, the case of the Chagos Islands is an excruciatingly painful illustration of the ruthless machinations of power forces and, at the same time, it also provides us with a unique insight into the ironies and ambivalences of the colonial/imperialistic enterprise: amid the imminent independence of former colonies, a new "colony", the BIOT, is created so as to preserve British and American interests in the area. In a cynical twist, a discourse of environmental protection is generated to justify their *purely* colonialist bias. As postcolonial scholars, it was in their stature as colonial victims that we were drawn

towards the Chagos Islanders and, it is from our position as what we like to term "literature practitioners," rather than literary critics, that we have approached an examination of the tragedy of the Chagossians via a creative writing methodology. In August 2019, with the logistical support of the Chagos Refugees Group, which promotes and preserves the culture and traditions of the Chagos Archipelago, together with Dr. Farhad Khoyratty from the University of Mauritius, we organized a creative writing workshop, entitled "Writing Myth and Memory to Fight Cultural Injustice Against Chagossians," which aimed to make the tragedy of the displaced islanders visible. Naturally, the question that ensues is the following: what can a creative writing workshop offer that is intrinsically different to other methodologies? In order to answer this question, we will need first to elucidate what the myth of the empty territory entails and to what extent this myth can be liberating or, on the contrary, enslaving.

The horror of a fragmented subjectivity is tacitly counterbalanced by the creation of what Said names a "reassembled identity" which, through the workings of the imagination, fabricates a *desired* homeland and thus, *discursively* fills up the void of the loss produced by forced displacement. In other words, the exiles' broken lives are reconstructed, albeit moderately, by re-imagining a homeland and, from this perspective, we could infer that this creation process is, in fact, a survival strategy that allows exiled communities to lay claim to an origin, or, to be more precise, to an original home. The ethos of exile is punctuated by a "discontinuous state of being" (Said 177) and precisely because they "are cut off from their roots, their land, their past" (Said 177), they obstinately cultivate a desire for wholeness expressed as a myth of origins. If, as Simone Weil expressed, "to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul" (quoted in Said 183), the Chagossians' struggle to recuperate their identity is necessarily entangled in the collective narrative of the myth of the empty territory since, in their specific case and due to the singular particularities of their displacement, "home" is a place of no return. Unlike other dislocated communities who may have the opportunity to visit the geographical territory that is acknowledged as their place of "origin," the Chagossian community's irretrievable loss is experienced as a lack of geographical continuity which, in a way, enhances the mythification of the land –the empty territory– as edenic.[7]

The dangers of conceptualizing Chagos as a paradisiacal Eden results in an erasure, as Laura Jeffery notes, of the hardships of daily life. As an example of the romanticizing process of the collective narrative, Jeffery notices how the sega songs –an indisputable Chagossian cultural marker– performed by islanders resident in the archipelago described in a realistic tone the sorrows and joys of everyday life, whereas the sega songs created after displacement focus entirely on reproducing the

[7] As mentioned before, a selected group of Chagossians were permitted to visit Diego Garcia in 2006. However, the visit was very brief and they were under severe constraints from the US authorities, for example, they could not take photographs and so, their cameras were confiscated.

nostalgia that assails those excised from paradise. As a matter of fact, the song that initiates this article, "Mo tie ena 13 an" (I was thirteen), corroborates Jeffery's remark. However, the detrimental consequences of integrating this collective narrative as an intrinsic part of one's own individual experience are to be observed in the 2003 court case in the UK in which Mr Justice Ouseley ruled out against the Chagossians because, according to him, all witnesses appropriated the same standardized history of victimhood, to the extent that they provided contradictory statements related to their own experiences of displacement, something that legal language could not possibly sustain. Jeffery's analysis of this specific court case reveals how the collective experience blends with the individual one and pinpoints the potentially dangerous outcome of such conflation when what is called forth is the individual narration. In relation to Chagossians' memories of life on Chagos, the displacement, and their circumstances on arrival in Mauritius, people now remember not the events themselves but their own and others' narratives of the events; they know the significance of what happened to the community, but the ability to recall precise episodes from up to forty years ago has faded over time (Jeffery 2007, 963-964). But the inability to "recall precise episodes from up to forty years ago" does not mean that their present experience of exile and trauma cannot count as evidence of both powerful narrations of resilience and testimonies of existence.

We consider the Chagossian experience as one forged within a trauma paradigm and this constituted the focus of our creative writing workshop. At the core of the traumatic experience there resides a space shared by both the individual and the collective since, as Gilmore puts it, "trauma is never exclusively personal, it always exists within complicated histories" (Gilmore 31). Acknowledging trauma as that which resists linguistic expression (Caruth 1996; LaCapra 2001), our creative writing workshop generated a space wherein an exploration of the intersections of the individual story with the collective one was granted; we were particularly interested in assessing how the profound sense of community that binds the Chagossian experience was formulated upon the loss of their homeland. We likewise sought to untangle the diverse modes of coercion and persuasion that a forceful communal self can inflict upon the marginalized individual. As mentioned earlier, the myth of the empty territory functions as a survival tool that allows Chagossians to be strategically rooted in their homeland and yet, the same myth is a constant reminder of a past that has lost grip of the actual events and given way to a communal narrative that propels Chagossians constantly back to an overpowering narrative of the past that could potentially shun the creation of possible narrations rooted in the present and blur the multifaceted, diversified scenarios of identity-making in the future.

The first-hand experience of trauma that moulds the lives of first generation displaced Chagossians is bound to differ from the traumatic experience of dislocation that second and third generation Chagossians have inherited from their elders. This differentiation between first-hand and inherited trauma is not intended to minimize the traumatic dimension of second and third generation Chagossians, but rather, to highlight a narrative development in the Chagossian experience that, without disclaiming its collective narration manages to delineate a unique, personal story. Hence, the participants –9 women and 3 men– were of different ages to ensure

an intergenerational dialectics and they were all, from their varied perspectives, motivated to record their memories.

The Chagossians who have remained in Mauritius tend to be people who have only received primary school education and have a limited command of English, which was challenging for us as we were used to running this kind of creative writing workshop with university students and graduates fluent in English. Some of the participants –the younger ones– had an acceptable level of English and were even willing to write their responses in English. Their native language, Mauritian Kreol, is the language that Chagossians and the majority of Mauritians habitually use, despite the fact that English, together with French, are the accepted official languages of the country.[8] The language difficulty was overcome as the participants could follow our instructions and whenever they stumbled over a particular phrase, Dr. Farhad Khoyratty and one of his doctoral students, Ms. Maxine Ahlan-Yin Corral, from the University of Mauritius came to our aid. We encouraged the participants to write their responses in the language they felt most comfortable in as the purpose of a creative writing workshop is none other than fomenting the ability to express oneself in the language of one's choice. The sessions were conducted in English but Kreol was used by the participants whenever they felt they needed to respond orally to our prompts. On the blog entitled "When the Island Was Sold" that we have published, the responses appear in both Kreol and the English translation.[9]

The workshop lasted for three very intensive days as in such a short time we were able to accomplish two vital goals. First and foremost, the men and women who attended understood that their culture was being valued by people from outside their community. Secondly, their memories would be published online and thus become visible to a potential worldwide audience.[10] In short, they were ensured that their life stories were meaningful and valuable.

The methodology we employed to conduct the workshop was geared by the capacity of literature to foment empathy. As literature teachers, we have witnessed the power of literary aesthetics to engage students emotionally and ethically with the representation of reality exposed in written and/or visual texts. Although we were aware of the fact that our participants were not students of literature and that some of them could barely read or write, we nonetheless used a literary aesthetics approach in our sessions. We were extremely sensitive towards the fact that some of the participants were among the original deportees who had limited literacy and so, we adapted conscientiously the texts to this reality, often shortening them and accompanying them with visual material that helped to convey the message in an uncomplicated manner –we used powerpoint presentations that included short texts

[8] According to its Constitution Mauritius in fact does not have any official language even though Kreol is spoken by 90% of the population. English is the language of administration while French that of culture.

[9] See https://blogs.uab.cat/whentheislandwassold/.

[10] The participants in the workshop expressed their consent to have their names appear on the blog, which indicates their eagerness for their stories to be heard and read as authentic.

and images. We believe it is important to emphasize that limited literacy does not in the least impair cognitive richness and aesthetic sensitivity and, as a matter of fact, the older members of the group were the most articulate in recounting their life experiences. The moment they sensed that their life stories were treasured, they generously shared their experiences with us. What is more, in a conjoined communal effort, their stories were actually written down by the younger participants.

The three sessions were structured around the following themes: (1) Names and Homes, (2) Land, Sea, Borders, Travels, Exile and, finally, (3) Remembrances, History Box. As can be elucidated from the titles of each session, the themes touched upon crucial aspects of the Chagossians' traumatic experiences. Each session was carefully crafted to motivate them to work through their traumas (LaCapra 21-22) so as to reflect on their suffering and thus enable them to act upon these traumatic events productively. We usually started with a seemingly innocent questionnaire to gradually motion them towards the core of the traumatic event via a literary text that exposed some issues concurrent with the Chagossian experience of displacement.

The very simple question "What is your name?" functions as a stepping stone to reach more intimate information about oneself when this question is placed alongside two related questions: "Who gave you your name and why?" and "Where and when were you born?" Thus, in this first session, we managed to unite "names" with "home" since behind each name there is surely a family story about genealogical continuation or discontinuation tightly linked with a sense of "home." This was illustrated through a passage from the novel *Love Marriage* by the Canadian-Sri-Lankan author, V.V. Ganeshananthan in which the narrator, Yalini, reflects upon her name. Born in Canada of Sri Lankan parents, her name is an attempt on the part of their parents to assuage the disturbing pain of displacement they must endure in Toronto. Their daughter's name becomes their permanent attachment to their homeland.

> My parents named me Yalini, after the part of their home that they loved the most. It is a Tamil name, with a Tamil home: a name that means, in part, Jaffna, Sri Lanka, the place from which they came (Ganeshananthan 21)

The idea behind posing "names" and "home" as our first topics was clearly to question to what extent the Chagossians could regard Mauritius as their home bearing in mind the initial –and perhaps continued– rejection of the exiles as undesirable migrants. To enhance the fragmented identity they had to face in Mauritius, they were confronted with a passage from Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* in which the protagonist, Esperanza, must wrestle between the Spanish she speaks at home with her family –the parents are from Mexico– and the English she speaks at school since she lives in the US. The protagonist of Cisneros' novel must negotiate her hybrid identity, her cultural roots spreading across the US and Mexico, her untranslatable Spanish name a constant reminder of her Mexican ancestry. Via the fictional character of Esperanza, our participants pondered on their own hybridity and what they envisioned as their true home. Whereas the older participants did not recognize Mauritius as "home," the younger participants

deployed a closer Mauritian affiliation. To finish the session with an optimistic note, we resorted to a section from Grace Nichols' poem "Wherever I hang" in which she unabashedly affirms that "Wherever I hang me knickers –that's my home" (3) thus exhibiting "home" as a fluctuating and adjustable concept whose stability is contingent upon geopolitical sensibilities.

The second session opened with images of the 2015 refugee crisis. Shameful pictures of people fleeing poverty, religious and/or political persecution captured the attention of the older participants who relived their own unceremonious banishment from the Chagos Islands. Vivid moments of deportation scenes were recreated by those participants who experienced the traumatic homeland displacement at first hand. Two episodes recalled by Yaya, one of the oldest participants, have been selected to reproduce that fateful moment since, we believe, they are rueful testimonies of the cruelty of humankind in the face of power relations. The first one relates to the anguish she –and they all felt– when all of their dogs were gassed before their very eyes and thought that their children would be next in line. That is the moment, she conceded, when they understood that they had to agree to leave otherwise their children would be killed. The second episode is particularly alluring in its combination of domesticity and forced displacement. Just the day before, the laundry had been done and the clothes lay spread out on stones to let the sun dry them; it was while on board the ship that took them to Mauritius that she suddenly remembered about the clothes and realized then how they would remain there for ever, laying on the sun, forgotten and abandoned, a reflection of their own fate. And yet, the Chagos Islands would perennially remain with them, their children and their grandchildren. This is what the poem "Voyager Dust" by Syrian-American Mohja Kahf showed them, how "voyagers" always "carry it on their shoulders, / the dusting of the sky they left behind" (1). As the American-transplanted Mohja Kahf realizes, the voyager's dust that impregnated her mother's scarves is now on her shoulders too, a poetic recognition of inter-generational communion.

While preparing this session, we knew we had to be extremely tactful in the way we presented the material and how we could manage the posterior discussion. The reason for this is the knowledge that the Chagossians, as mentioned before and unlike other displaced individuals, cannot return to their islands because of the presence of the American military base. It is true that a select group of Chagossians, among them some of our participants, was permitted to visit the island in 2006 but that was regarded as a pilgrimage and were not allowed to take anything from the islands, not even sand from the beach.[11]

Jisele, one of the participants who went on this pilgrimage, shared with us how distressed she was before the sight of her parents' neglected grave which was located next to the immaculately tended grave of a dog that had belonged to one of the Americans living in the military base. The right to mourn your loved ones

[11] Needless to say, and as the objects they brought to our last session testified to, they disobeyed and took with them sand and conch shells they picked up from the beach.

is not equally granted to all human beings, as Judith Butler insidiously observes in *Precarious Life* and the Chagos Islanders' experience of exclusion crudely testifies to.

A passage from Abdulrazak Gurnah's 2001 novel *By the Sea* was the starting point for our third session which was devoted to remembrances. In this extract, the protagonist, sixty-two-year-old Saleh Omar, is humiliated by the customs officer at Gatwick airport who, in a theatrically exaggerated manner, displays the meagre contents of his suitcase and confiscates the only valuable possession he took with him from Zanzibar: a small casquet containing the perfume *ud-al-qamari*. As it is, *ud-al-qamari* is his emotional link with his homeland, which he is obliged to leave for fear of his life. When Kevin Edelman, the customs officer at Gatwick, dispossesses Saleh Omar from his precious object, this is felt as a theft, as an illegal act sanctioned by the law, and this is exactly the way that our participants interpreted the scene and connected it with the theft of the Chagos Islands. We think it is worth reproducing the whole passage:

> 'What's this?' he asked, then carefully sniffed the open casket. It was hardly necessary, as the little room had filled with glorious perfume as soon as he opened the box. [...] So I didn't tell him that it was ud-al-qamari of the best quality, all that remained of a consignment I had acquired more than thirty years ago, and which I could not bear to leave behind when I set out on this journey into a new life. When I looked up again I saw that he would steal it from me.
>
> Ud-al-qamari: its fragrance comes back to me at odd times, unexpectedly, like a fragment of a voice or the memory of my beloved's arm on my neck (Gurnah 13 & 14)

The historical, emotional and cultural import attached to the wooden casquet of *ud-al-qamari* led us to request the participants to bring any objects that they regarded as part of their history to form part of what we called the history box. The rationale behind this exercise was that these objects could be placed within a box and could be sent to outer space as an example of their culture so if any human being opened the box they would have an idea of what this culture meant for humanity. Among the objects that the participants chose for the history box were sand and shells from the islands, conscientiously preserved by the older members of the group, which they had collected on the pilgrimage trip mentioned above deliberately contravening the regulations enforced by the administrative organs that authorised the pilgrimage. The younger members of the group suggested putting a fishing rod in the box as a reminder of the profession of many of the inhabitants of the islands. The *bomme* and the *zeze*, musical instruments used in *sega* singing and dancing, were also considered to represent their culture and the inclusion of a *piké*, a tool used to cut up coconuts, indicated the widespread use of the fruit in their cuisine as well as a tribute to the major export and source of livelihood of the archipelago.

Creative writing has proved an invaluable tool to bear witness to trauma. As a tool of disclosure and safe expression (Jess-Cooke 11), creative writing is therapeutic because it enhances creative expression which is an inextricable part of our subjectivity. The creative process that culminates in the production of a piece

of work is in itself a useful, meaningful act that communicates an experience that engages or relates to other people. Therefore, the act of remembering and writing their experiences worked as a great therapy for building up self-esteem as a people and for claiming a space, as Chagossians, in the Indian Ocean imaginary. By communicating their own individual stories, by processing individually the collective memory that shaped their communal selves, in short, by owning and expressing their traumatic experiences, the Chagossian participants of our creative writing workshop were able to disclose and interrogate those silences that are imbricated in the narration of the empty territory and perilously plunges them into a transcendental homelessness.

The ultimate aim of this creative writing workshop was to grant *visibility* to the Chagossian fight for identity and recognition. Moreover, as is often the case, ultimate aims are forged within a poignant desire to express that which lies beyond expression because, as Jisele, one of the participants in the workshop revealed in a terrifyingly genuine declaration of emotional incapacity, "It hurts." In this simple albeit not simplistic "It hurts" resided the essence of a successful creative writing methodology: to create a space wherein participants whose existence is enveloped by the persistent and overwhelming shadow of trauma can find a way to articulate their frustrations, their desires, their longings and, above all, their stubbornly human claim to existence. In an act of exceptional generosity, Monette thanked us for helping them verbalize emotions that were kept inside themselves because they were too harrowing to be let out and shared with others. As far as we are concerned, and in what attempts to be an act of profound admiration, we would like to conclude this article by overtly thanking all the participants in the workshop and, above all, for giving us an invaluable lesson in human dignity.

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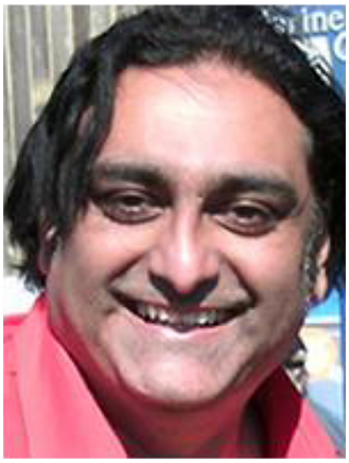
CREATION

OUR MAN IN MAURITIUS

Esther Pujolràs-Noguer & Felicity Hand



To say that this special issue on "Indian Ocean Imaginaries" is the culmination of a long time scholarly dedication to unearth the aesthetics that configures the Indian Ocean as a literary gem is a gross understatement. The word "culmination" confers the feeling that something coveted has been achieved, which certainly applies to our academic endeavour and yet, inherent in the word there is also a sense of closure, a sensation of accomplishment that foreclosures continuation and which clearly resists the inexhaustible energy that has propelled our work. In other words, "Indian Ocean Imaginaries" is indeed a culmination of sorts but, more importantly, it is the material recognition of the *ongoing* work conducted by a group of people whose academic tenacity echoes the resilience of the very Indian Ocean that is their object of study. On an intimate, personal level, "Indian Ocean Imaginaries" trespasses the purely academic scenario to embrace the remembrance of one person, Farhad Khoyratty, our man in Mauritius, who left us on 23 July, 2020. Unexpected as death always is, Farhad's was emphatically uncalled for and, therefore, we, as friends, in an attempt to defeat death's impinging forgetfulness, claim back our man in Mauritius in the imaginative cartography of our "Indian Ocean Imaginaries." However, before we lay claim to the island of Mauritius via our man, let us first embark on a narrative detour that will bring to the fore another island, Zanzibar, a crucial depot in our peculiar biography of the Indian Ocean.

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In *Beginnings, Intention, Method,* Edward Said ponders on the specificity of origins when he puts forward a series of interrelated questions: "Is the beginning the same as origin? Is the beginning of a given work its real beginning, or is there some other, secret point that more authentically starts the work off?" (Said 1988, 3).[1] Inspired by Said's incisive questions, we too would like to flesh out an origin for our Indian Ocean adventures, in general, and this "Indian Ocean Imaginaries" adventure, in particular. Thus following Said's questioning mood, we too wonder whether our journey to Zanzibar was what started it all or whether there was some "other, secret point" that "more authentically" stamped this beginning as an *original* beginning. Be that as it may, we are going to grant Zanzibar this honorary position as origin and so, declare the island our Indian Ocean commencement.

If a geographical location had the capacity to contain a historical recipe of the Indian Ocean –spices, slaves, incommensurable water– this place would be Zanzibar, the small island off the Indian Ocean coast that is now part of Tanzania. Zanzibar was, to us, a gift; a well-deserved destination after years of academic labour, a prize hard won. On 11 July 2010 the world's eyes were set on Johannesburg, South Africa, where the final match of the FIFA World Cup took place, a match that proclaimed the Spanish squad, "La Roja," the winner of the most important soccer championship. We enjoyed the victory in Rome, at Fiumicino Airport, to be more precise, our stopover to Zanzibar, our Indian Ocean beginning. It was in our visit to "The House of Wonders," one of the most emblematic museums in Stone Town, where we decided that the Indian Ocean was to be the locus of our further research. Totally mesmerized by the history of the place, the vibrancy that emanated from the food stalls around the Old Fort that hosted the Zanzibar International Film Festival we attended and the novels of Zanzibar's most iconic writer, Abdulrazak Gurnah, we planted the seeds of what would later become our research group, *Ratnakara. Indian Ocean Literatures and Cultures.*

Other journeys have followed Zanzibar, other Indian Ocean sites have been visited and each one of them has contributed to shape what we regard as an eclectic Indian Ocean inventory. It has been Mauritius, though, the island that has imprinted our Indian Ocean inventory with a somewhat more indelible, emotionally-laden record. This is a record that bears a face and a name: Farhad Khoyratty, our man in Mauritius. He was the one to open to us the doors of the University of Mauritius, where he worked, and he was the one who helped us to organize the creative writing workshop with the people from the Chagos Refugees Group. But he did much more than this: he guided us through the complexities, ambivalences and richness of the history and culture of Mauritius, exhibiting the island's idiosyncrasies, its lights and shadows, with always humorous insights. A connoisseur of food, he would arrange succulent outings to varied Mauritian restaurants, from the most refined to the most unsophisticated but, we can assure you, in all cases the food was simply excellent and the conversation superb. He would stop at a street stall for us to try authentic

[1] Said, Edward W. *Beginnings, Intention and Method.* Granta Books, 1988 [1975].

Indian ice-cream, a delicacy we would most surely have missed had it not been for his extreme kindness. He was much more than a respected and respectful colleague; he was our friend and his company is sorely missed, his absence a gnawing grief.

We could not attend his funeral, one of the many consequences of Covid19 restrictions, and we wonder now how we will react to stepping on Mauritian soil without his guidance, his company, his smile. This is an ominous journey laying ahead of us, a journey we will certainly undertake because it *must* be undertaken. There is somebody waiting for us in Mauritius, Bilall, Farhad's beloved. As such, he has inherited Farhad's title and thus he has become now "our man in Mauritius." We dedicate this special section on "Indian Ocean Imaginaries" to our dear friend, Farhad, our man in Mauritius, who we love and will always cherish. There is no better way to do this than starting the issue with the poems Bilall, our present man in Mauritius, wrote in memory of his lover and life companion, Farhad Khoyratty.

> Poetry is a gift which in turn is given as a gift to the world. And it is an inclusive world, opening the door of one's life to a guest, Humankind's sacred 'other'; to the guest, the fellow-traveller, the gift of experience, of vicariousness, of empathy, of rest.
>
> Farhad Khoyratty

The quest

Rowing down the Styx,
What a fool have I been?
Baffled as I remember,
I let the Charon slip while burying you,
There are no comforting words,
I deserve to be anathematized,
Shunned like Meursault,
I brought two this time,
As I crossed the river of tormented souls,
So many of them darting around,
Shoals of souls,
You are not among them,
But there lying in my heart,
I am becoming you,
I am You.

My tryst at midnight

My body was trembling
Ensnared yet I was rattling on
Feeling the deaf adder pressing against my chest
We were not running abreast.
Longing to see my beloved in you,
Befuddled, as you see my bewildered look
I am puzzled
Naked and restless
Abashed by hidden thoughts

The waiting

Quite an unusual existence,
The Vyāna is no more,
I am morphing
Let the vultures be
Do not contend, my love
Life is uneventful, but
How unbearable Not to
Hear your mellifluous voice
Kiss your sinful lips.
Yes, my Beloved,
This tantalizing scent of your body,
This touch of yours, so sensual
I am distraught
Oh my beloved,
I am passionate
I yearn to see you again,
How long will this stint end?
I desire you.

I've morphed into something I dread
Spurned,
I fear your rejection
A lot of prevarication,
In such predicament,
Drop this hedonistic pursuit,
And hear my anguish cries,
Hear my unwritten lines,
I desire you.

The death camp

"Arbeit Mach Frei",
An understatement of No respite,
Few words that make us all shudder,
You've been hired in this death factory without your will,
So you will toil to death,
To make the Schadenfreude thrills.
A derelict Fortress sacredly guarded,
A Forbidden City for the Emperor of tramps.
We were mice scurrying and whipped,
Petrified,
Oh Dervish, at least mice onboard were not tortured.

Captured, our happiness ebbing away,
Wrung all emotions out of our body,
The cries, the pains, the screams,
The rapes, the tortures,

We no longer cry for our children,
Yes, Demeter, trees continue to blossom.

You became remains,
Remains, mere remembrances
No more wallowing in pity, Just remains.
Counting your unnumbered days,
Has the sun outwon the moon?
You've lost count in this starry night,
The screams, the voices,
These brusque wailing sounds echoing in your head,
You depict yourself in one of Munch's paintings,
But this time your cries are unheard.

You passed by the chestnut tree,
Hardly could you gaze at the inflorescence,
But spot a lovely place to be, a place to seek solace,
An aiding branch to support the weight of your body,
Hung your body timidly like a dry chestnut,
From there you would be contemplating the efflorescence on the wall,
Your dead body would look pretty serene,
That very second you would be liberated,
Escaping to the hell of Angelico seems more welcoming,
Beyond doubt, Nietzsche, this is amor fati.

Resuming work after the burial

Thrown into an unknown yet known land,
A promised land I was promised,
Eyes staring,
Starving lips moving,
Devoured by the eagerness of inquisitiveness,
Gushing to hushing,
Pricked by curiosity,
A thick disposable needle,
I was The Blanche Dubois in New Orleans, except for the attire,
I wanted to retire the second their dazed gaze brush me,

Queen of Sheba, they thought they were,
Without the charm and allure,
Reigning on this marshy swathe,
Aficionados of gossips,
The old granny would join in,
Nothing concrete,
Gobsmacked, how frivolously futile her contribution is,
Her only contribution is the paleness of her skin,
I have to take it to the chin,
Such performance deserved a standing ovation,
With much mirth, she would eat with a good appetite,

The tattletale lady.
Hegemony is a not a tale,
You meet them during your End-of-Year party,
Your relationship would be on the tip of their tongues,
Murmuring how depraved your life is,
Miss Nincompoop shone from the herd and would call you filthy,
She will get away with murder by denying it,
Her smile comforted her,
She knew it all along,
She would escape scot-free.

Bilall Jawdy

THE INDIAN OCEAN AS A UNIFYING FORCE: A MEMOIR

Lindsey Collen

I write this during the lockdown that has stopped a good deal of the world's ordinary activities. Whole countries have had to bring their national economies to near standstills just to daunt the New Coronavirus epidemic. Yes, it has taken something as small as a virus to make us see, even if momentarily, our destinies as one. Humanity as one. Humanity must be *one*. And yet it is a tall order. As US President Trump reminds us when he announces that China must "pay" for the virus. That sounds more like a threat of war. As always, things pull in different directions at the same time.

Anyway.

It is a good time to mull over the Indian Ocean, which surrounds us in the Republic of Mauritius, and on whose shores I was born –though far away from here– and around whose shores I have lived most of my life. For me, the Indian Ocean has been a unifying factor, not a border. But, things that stare you in the face are not always easy to see. And right now, as if to highlight the contradiction, what with the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi going as nationalist as Trump, and both India and Pakistan having nuclear bombs, the Indian Ocean does not seem a unifying force for anything more than a few individual lives, mine just one.

I was born –fate had it– within days of the apartheid regime being voted in by the white minority electorate in South Africa. It feels like a curse.

It was 1948.

I was born in the village of Mqanduli, some 15 miles from the Indian Ocean on a dirt road that meandered through the most beautiful hills in the world, where each family lived in a perfectly round hut with thatch so beautifully laid that it reflected sunlight, a small herd of cattle in the kraal, some chickens, and a plot of mielies and pumpkins. Women wore ochre robes and turbans and old ladies smoked long pipes. Young men were off, working in the mines on the Rand and fruit-picking in the Cape. Children walked long distances in their uniforms to mission schools. Pre-apartheid South Africa was already segregated by the previous Jan Smuts regime, though not yet "classified". So, the village of Mqanduli was white –traders, civil servants, a doctor and a labour recruiting agency– and a few coloured families. Smuts, en passant, was notable for sitting on Churchill's war cabinet and for having been named from 1940 as Churchill's replacement as British Prime Minister, if need should arise. Think of that.

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Anyway.

The first two decades of my life were spent living in different parts of South Africa –mostly inland: from Mqanduli to the capital Pretoria then to the hamlet Bochum way up North from when I was two to five years old and where I became trilingual, being the only person to speak any two languages in the little compound we lived in, so became a constant formal interpreter from English to and from Sotho, Sotho to and from Afrikaans, and English to and from Afrikaans –hence my life-long love of mother tongues. Then we moved to the village of Xalanga where I learnt Xhosa, and where at 6 years old I published my first two articles and self-published and even self-printed a book of poems, then to the capital of Natal, Pietermaritzburg where I saw young Indian girls my age with gorgeous, brightly coloured bracelets and clothes with glitter sewn in, and where I played dressing up in smart people's unclaimed fur coats at my friends' father's dry-cleaning shop (he had come to Pietermaritzburg as a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, as had his wife). Then it was back to rural Eastern Cape to Qumbu. And then to East London to a government boarding school, Clarendon, for girls who were, by then, classified as being "white", where I participated in rebellions against the school authorities and apartheid. For five years I lived in East London, an Indian Ocean port city that was always being silted up, and even if we were kept "in" because it was not unlike a prison, I was constantly aware of the smell of the Indian Ocean as the trade winds hit us. Finally my family was moved to the Highveld city-of-all-cities, Johannesburg, the centre of the gold mines, where my father was put in charge of an Alexandra Township in rebellion, and during which time I was at the University of the Witwatersrand and for the first time was involved in conscious struggles, as opposed to rebellions.

But, every year, from the time of my birth, for a full month, I spent five weeks out of 52 looking over the Indian Ocean.

It was from a place on the Mbashe River Mouth in the Eastern Cape.

There, I literally looked at all that sea. I looked out from a run-down holiday resort we went to every year. It was part of my parents' marriage contract –my mother had to follow my father around, he being a magistrate/native affairs commissioner/ Bantu affairs commissioner– and so to give her a sense of continuity, they spent five weeks every year, my father's entire leave, at this tranquil place, lost to the modern world. It was where my mother had spent her holidays every year from when she was a baby, too, being very near Mqanduli where she grew up. This was my stable experience of the Indian Ocean for 18 years.

This bit of the Eastern Cape, like Mqanduli nearby, like two other places I lived for years, Xalanga and Qumbu, was what was "the fault line" on the geography of South Africa. It was left like a gash on the earth's skin after the colonial subjugation of the peoples of Southern Africa. It was a fault line that you could feel, if you cared to.

The British troops, after eight different wars of conquest against the Xhosa peoples for 100 years from 1779 to1879, left a bit of land in the Eastern Cape as a "native reserve", later notorious as a Bantustan: the Transkei. This part of South Africa was really only subjugated from 1856 onwards after the mass movement to kill cattle and burn crops –in a desperate attempt to get rid of the invaders – after

which resistance seemed broken. But it was not. The fight was still there. I could feel it as I grew up.

So, it was on this truce line that my father was born, my mother was born, I was born, and that I lived much of my childhood life on, and that we, as a family, in addition always spent five weeks a year on.

For that annual holiday, we were on a grass koppie on the edge of a thick forest that I grew to know like the back of my hand, trained by my mother who knew it before me. And we looked out over the Indian Ocean. And as I looked out at the Indian Ocean, on my left was a lighthouse warning ships of the dangerous rocks and currents. The rundown hotel we stayed in was constructed with the flotsam from shipwrecks over the decades. Even a dog swam ashore from one. On the right, out of sight was the huge Mbashe River pounding into the sea, bringing red mud, and attracting rough farmers from the Vaal River area with their fishing gear for the cob fishing in season. The mail ship went past at night, all lit up, once a week, carrying letters and parcels. The rest were endless merchant ships. All this movement on the ocean. And we watched the dolphins that we called porpoises following the sardines. Maybe they *were* porpoises.

The fault line, or truce line, in South Africa's history means that many of those born on it have the gift of seeing both sides at once. We have the gift of more than one pair of eyes: Nelson Mandela comes from Mvezo, here; Neville Alexander from not far away –Cradock; Chris Hani, too– Cofimvaba. These are the famous ones. Anyway, maybe it gives those of us interested in such things not just the ability to see more around us than our own family circle, but to, perhaps more easily, get the *desire,* even a burning desire, to see the whole, big picture. Living on a fault line, we can easily see different classes of people impinging on reality in different ways, and being impinged upon differently. We hear the memories of the colonizers' invasion and the pushback of the colonized as they tell it to us, themselves. In endless stories. Even more than that: the fault line shows how things were *before things were like they are now* and even gives a hint as to how things were *before then.* And also perhaps to envision how things can perhaps be afterwards, what they might be like. If we have the flair for imagining waves of past history, why not hazard taking a look at the swells into the future? Such is the destiny of those born on a fault-line: it is a presence you can feel, if you care to.

And so, we, those born on this particular fault line, are always reminded that there were people thousands and thousands of years before us, people who had lived on this land, lived there before those of us who shared our lives with our herds of beloved cattle, without those of us who planted our sorghum or maize, long before the colonizers came with their trade, their one god and their machines. We feel them: They were the hunters and gatherers, those humans who understood the earth better than we do. From whom we may now need to learn. *They* understood it so well that they could sustain human society for maybe 200 000 years in that exact part of the world, while we the planters, the millers and bakers, can't seem to manage 10 000 years without so many break-downs in transmission. And as for humans in the time of the industrialists and the bankers, in the 300 years since they came to power, we are already wrecking the joint. They, the wise people who

hunted and gathered before us, were our forefathers, our foremothers. They roamed the mountains and hills, and stared over the Indian Ocean. They knew that the purpose of life was to visit people and listen to their stories. And they left art-work on the walls of caves to remind us of this. And they made musical instruments from the fencing wire with which the colonizers fenced them out of their immense lands. This is the human past, the collective human heritage that we, who lived on that fault-line, don't just have, but that we know we have, or more precisely that we *can* know we have. Meaning *we are all one*. Whatever you might see on the surface. We didn't have to wait for the Coronavirus to remind us.

Anyway, the resort we stayed at was kept going for the first 11 years of my life, as I say, by the flotsam, and maybe some jetsam before the actual moment of the wreck, washed ashore from the ship called something like Koondoochee –it was perhaps an India-based ship. Towels and sheets, even pillow cases, had the ship's insignia embroidered into the corners. Furniture –beds and chairs and tables, even benches– all had the name of this ship branded into the planks they were made from. The next 11 years or so, the resort was kept alive by flotsam from another shipwreck: the Laerca, or something like that, a Russian ship. This was the ship whose dog swam ashore out of the Indian Ocean, shook himself on the beach, and was called forever by the name of that sunken ship, Laerca. And, just as the previous stock of towels were wearing thin and no longer absorbing water, new ones washed ashore. Just as the furniture made out of the first ship was becoming more and more disreputable, and good for nothing but to fling into the coal burner, there came a cargo of floating raw materials for the resident carpenter. The original owner of the place was, in fact, a ship's carpenter from Aberdeen given a lease and permit after the Great War –as it was called. And my maternal grandparents were friends of his. Also from Aberdeen.

A word on why we wandered around this way, our own nuclear family, all over South Africa: My father, though against apartheid, was an implement for setting it up and enforcing it. He was the state. And he was transferred to wherever his colleague pro-Nationalist, pro-apartheid Commissioners did *not* want to go. Usually because it had become the most dangerous place for such a civil servant to be in. My mother detested the apartheid system and was not, by law, allowed, while married to a civil servant, to be involved in politics. So, my political engagement, I put this in brackets, is, in a way, nothing more than my living a life my parents would have, themselves, lived had they, at some point, taken a drastic decision. Which they did not. They, too, were born on the fault-line, so had a certain wisdom. I merely did in my political life what they might have done.

So, anyway, the Indian Ocean was what was stable for me. For five weeks a year. Its waters, its crashing breakers, its swells, and its lagoons, its gullies, its fish, its dolphins, its ships, its estuaries and river mouths, like the Mbashe and the Mbanyana, and higher up their waterfalls, its Cwebe forest, thick and with 30-foot tall trees, with green mambas and other dangerous snakes, brightly coloured birds, and botanical rarities that were still being catalogued at the time I was a child. I acted as the forest guide to a botanist doing the collecting of species of plant for the University of Natal as it was then called.

This resort's rickety dining room chairs and out-of-tune piano relied on guests for upkeep. And if amongst guests there was not a plumber of sorts to repair the septic tanks out back, the toilets, too, would not have worked. One such plumber-guest had written a sign in the men's loos, my brothers told me when they had just learnt to read and didn't get the joke yet, "Do not throw stompies into this septic tank. They get soggy and hard to light." Cheapskates, my brothers said, those must be.

And I meanwhile watched the strange society exposed on the truce line, the fault line scarring the land. But I watched from the edges of the society.

The bedrooms of this ramshackle hotel were separate rondavels for each family. And these were just like the staff quarters' rondavels higher up on the hill behind the resort, where the workers and their families lived.

So, we had this apartheid –never more than a few metres apart– of white holiday-makers with four or five senior staff of the resort living in one society alongside the black African workers, staff of the resort. Living not apart, but as one entity: a sort-of hotel.

And my mother and father and I as a child spoke Xhosa, so we saw both worlds, by not just hearing both, but by listening to them.

And I would look out over the Indian Ocean for hours –as ships plied the dangerous waters out front– trying to make sense of the rest of the country and the rest of the world.

And wherever I went in South Africa, from all those such different perspectives that I was privileged to be given by my father's incessant transfers, including this fault line perspective again and again and again, I still could not understand what was going on in the country, let alone in the rest of the world. I had the desire to. But I couldn't understand a thing.

It was to me a confused mass of contradictions. And I never stopped thinking about it.

What was the country? First, the Union of South Africa? Then from 1961, the Republic of South Africa? What was the world beyond? You could learn the technicalities as taught in schools. And then again, my parents were informed and well-read people. There were even encyclopaedias. I was also, of course, treated to anecdotes by my grandparents about their parents. And I listened to endless stories from wise women, in charge of looking after me, about the past and about things you can't see but that exist.

But, as a whole, it all made no sense.

Where did the people like my family come from, to be here? And why? I knew what I was told: my paternal grandad came from a London Baker's family and my granny, a Scots sheep farmer's daughter, out to Umtata to set up Collen's bakery in what was a Native Reserve. My granny, if arguments arose, threatened my grandad with a repeat of the Battle of Bannockburn. My maternal grandparents came from Aberdeen to work as itinerant book-keepers, given permits by the Authorities of the new Union of South Africa to audit the books of all the retail shopkeepers in that part of the Eastern Cape who traded with African farmers. But, in what interests was all this *conquest* that so clearly had gone on? The wars? Clear land-grabs? My maternal grandad had stopped speaking to any of the other white people in Mqanduli from

a political feud that took place before I was born, when the village council ousted the Coloured people from their land. That was *before* apartheid. And what was this enslavement, this working in the diamond mines then the gold then the coal mines? Enslavement of my maternal uncle and of all the young Xhosa men who worked underground. My uncle spoke Xhosa as a native speaker. I only ever had one hint: my grandad, this one, informed me that I should never trust the ruling class –I had no idea what he meant– especially your own, in his case the Scots ruling class. But, it did not get me far.

I never met any explanation –not in Mqanduli, not even in Pretoria, the capital, nor in Bochum up North, nor in Xalanga, nor in Pietermaritzburg in Natal, nor in Qumbu, nor in East London, looking out over the Indian Ocean from the windiest of all cities. All those places, each with a perspective, and still I couldn't understand a thing.

It was only when I came to Johannesburg, far from the sea, up in the Highveld, that I finally began to see the light of day. And it was accidental.

I enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand, and when on my way to the campus on my very first day, I got lost walking down from the bus stop, I fell in with youngsters who were the children of the bourgeoisie. Only then did I begin to understand.

There had been a social class missing in *all* the people I had ever met or ever even seen in my whole life. And what I read failed to unmask them, as a class, for me.

So, this class was not only out of sight. It was out of mind.

But at Wits, I saw the class. So I got to know it was there. And to keep it in mind.

The parents of the kids, who became, by this strange coincidence, my circle of friends, owned huge construction firms, owned real estate companies, owned and ran gold mines, owned immense international commercial enterprises, ran shipping companies, represented huge European firms in South Africa, ran the stock exchange, and so on. The more lowly amongst them were the country's top lawyers, who served them. These friends thought I was the country bumpkin that wore strange clothes, had a cheek and was argumentative. We organized big demonstrations of thousands of students against the final, last imposition of total apartheid in our University.

I also, of course, had access to *books*.

Although at the time, during apartheid, you had to have a special permit to read Marx and Engels and any other communists, who may have told you of the existence of a class called the capitalist class.

And I also became friends with a young American student whose father was a *finance* capitalist who, having fallen foul of the Federal Internal Revenue Service, arrived *penniless* in Johannesburg where he was free from the threat of extradition. He had not a cent on him. His son was at University with us, and told us how penniless they were. Six months later he invited me to his parents' house. His father by then owned a massive estate north of Johannesburg, with a lodge (for some part of the servant class, at the gate to the estate), a lodge twice as big as our family's house in Highlands North, and a garden the size and scope of Pamplemousses Garden in Mauritius. Then I began to see how things work. The friend explained it to me. He

had worked as an assistant to his father before his flight from the tax-men. So, then I saw the class of *finance* capitalists, too, who know which new billion-dollar project suddenly needs funds and which funds somewhere in the world are suddenly freed up for investment *at the same time*. His father was one of those. He was trusted. It's all there to see. You only have to *look*.

So, I saw across the seas, across the oceans including the Indian Ocean, from inland. To the financial centres like London and New York. To the colonial pillage and conquest. To the industrial centres like Manchester and Liverpool. And how my grandparents' long sea voyages all the way out to the Cape Colony, were, in fact, dictated, as part of mass displacement, by the economic dynamics controlled from these centres. The economic dynamics ran slavery, waged war, set up frontiers, taxed people, recruited them to sell their labour power, and passed laws to order them. The lot.

And this was all run from the heart of the capitalist hub out to the spokes in the rest of the world –upon one of which I was amongst those millions impaled. Well-nigh unable to get a view of things.

When I landed in Johannesburg in 1965, even before I went to Wits, all I could see as I was walked or went on motorbikes or caught buses around the city were these huge mine dumps. No-one had warned me. Huge big barren geometric-shaped mountains in the middle of a huge city. This one pale orange, that pale pink. This one beige, the other one pale mauve. The mines under the ground. A mile under the ground, some of them. Into the real heart of darkness, into which working people were press-ganged. While the banks above them in the bright sun ran the mines, and then the merchant banks ran the banks. And the banks and merchant banks, with their mine-owners and factory owners, and the big farmers, got to run the Government that ran the country, including my father. All with a lot of push-and-pull between different interests.

And so everything, the broad outline, fell into place.

All the rest of society, however high up, just works for this class, one way or another. The higher up work at getting all the rest of us to keep working for that top-dog class, and to work as quietly as possible *for them,* for them to rake in money so big it increases the size of their capital. No questions asked. I had not been supposed to be asking big questions. But being born on a fault-line, you might have a tendency, like I did, to do so. And then, all the different perspectives from which I had seen South Africa and the Indian Ocean, in turn, helped.

Whether in colonial pillage pre-apartheid days, or during apartheid or even today, when we hear the sound of the shots fired at the striking Marikana platinum miners even before the shots from Sharpeville or Soweto have stopped ringing in our ears, and when there is still the echo in our collective memories of Jan Smuts actually bombing from the air, people striking against a dog tax and hut taxes in 1917 in Namibia –it becomes clear who and what the driving forces are. All these excesses of the State, and the very State itself, work ceaselessly in the interests of this small, powerful class that most people cannot even see.

Before going to Wits, I had never seen higher than a preacher, a magistrate, a retailer, a dry cleaning workshop owner, a baker, a cloth seller, a doctor, a farmer

–and a vast mass of workers, so-called intellectual workers like teachers, lecturers, clerks, and nurses and so-called manual workers, from carpenters and electricians to railway workers, mine-workers, and field labourers, rubbish collectors cleaning up after us and minters making the coins, as well as peasants, eking out a living from the land. And I had "seen" millions of people, what with all these different viewpoints I had the privilege to stand on during my life in South Africa.

So it is in Mauritius today.

In the middle of the Indian Ocean, where I have lived for over 45 years, I still never really meet anyone from that class of *owners* of sugar estates, banks, off-shore companies, tourist hotels or real estate magnates but I do now have the advantage that, from my days at Wits University, I learnt that they are there. And they are the ruling class. They still rule. They still divide and rule.

So, I *see* the bourgeoisie. I see the interests the colonial powers had in Africa and India and, on the way between them, Mauritius. I understand the phrases in the history books about "The Dutch East India Company" that seemed to me to be the Government, and then "The British East India Company", ditto that mystified me for 20 years of my life. How come a company is a Government? And I could see the ruling colonial classes world-wide, too, in retrospect, as they quickly de-colonized around us from the time of my birth in the 1940s, quitting India, while apartheid took the hard-line colonial path, and both went on –the decolonizing and the hard line colonizing– through to the 1960s and 1970's when the colonizers finally got out of Mozambique –until 1994, when South Africans finally defeated apartheid. Now there remains Palestine, at the top end of the Indian Ocean, colonized today by the US-Israel alliance. And Diego Garcia, part of Chagos, part of Mauritius, bang in the middle of the Indian Ocean, with a US military base on it. Both now declared illegal by the highest International Court. But still colonized, anyway. Two struggles I'm still involved in.

In between then, South Africa and Mauritius, where did I live and what did I learn, and are there other links to the Indian Ocean?

For a year, I lived in the United States, on a farm in upstate New York in the beautiful Chautauqua County on the foothills of Appalachia. I lived and went to school amongst the rural poor who are often "invisible" in the US. And today over 50 years later, I listen, during the lockdown, to New York State's Governor Andrew Cuomo's famous daily Coronavirus briefing as he refers to all the parts of NY State I knew, just after listening to the Mauritian Coronavirus briefing. A strange juxtaposition.

I visited the New York City Stock Exchange from which the world's finances were and still are run as well as Fort Knox where the gold dug out of the ground in South Africa ended up in ingots. Today Fort Knox still stores 4,583 tons of gold underground for the Federal Reserves. How many mine dumps sticking into the air in Johannesburg does that represent? How many workers' toiling in the dark passages underground brought that stock there?

So, knowing something of the contradictions of American society –from its beautiful jazz clubs to its working class pubs, from its parochialism, which can mean people don't notice the Indian Ocean exists and might believe Africa is a country,

to the country's persistent slave-mentality hangover so frighteningly present, from its lively debates to its hysteria against communism, from its anti-Vietnam war movement at the time to its hypocritical conservatism –has helped me understand its present decline as a super-power and as an empire and the reactionary storm this is creating.

Other viewpoints were eclectic.

Like, I later lived for a year in the Seychelles, plumb in the middle of the Indian Ocean. I sailed there from Durban in a ship called the Karanja which meandered up the Indian Ocean's western shores into Maputo still called Lorenzo Marques, into Beira, Mombasa, Dar-es-Salaam and then on to Mahe. I felt the Indian Ocean –its size, the similarities of the port cities on its edges, its age. And on that trip, in the middle of the doldrums, we came across an ancient calmed dhow and our ship gave them water to fill all their containers and I saw how long it had been that there had been links across the whole of the Indian Ocean, just looking at that enormous boom on that enormous handmade sail ship; and colonization suddenly seemed a recent phenomenon.

And it was when I was in the British colony of the Seychelles that three of its islands were being stolen by the British and put after Chagos into the invented colony "British Indian Ocean Territory" so that the USA could later set up its base on Diego Garcia. And later, it would be my brother-in-law (my husband's sister's husband) who would advise the Seychelles Government in a case to win the Islands back, which they did. And then Ram and I would be involved in struggling to get the rest of Chagos re-integrated with Mauritius and to get the base closed down.

And I also lived a year in London, where I worked as an illegal worker in various jobs like a sandwich bar on Carnaby Street, then as a temporary typist at Johnson Matthew Metals Merchant Bank in the City of London which further educated me on finance capital, and then at the multinational Rank Xerox. I studied at the LSE and it was in London that I met my partner, Ram Seegobin, who is Mauritian. Amongst other things, we gave a hand with a support group for the liberation of Mozambique, Angola and Guinea Bissau from Portuguese colonization. And this is how we ended up going to Tanzania, where we ended up living a few months looking out at the Indian Ocean together.

We went to Dar-es-Salaam in order to complete our signing up to work in the liberated zones of still-colonized Mozambique –as doctor and teacher respectively. But political history was moving apace. Just then, there was the coup in Portugal that got rid of the Portuguese dictatorship and overnight Frelimo that ran the liberated zones, moved its headquarters from Dar-es-Salaam to Europe. And we would have had to return to London to sign up. And in any case, it would not be the same to work for a predictably bureaucratic regime that Frelimo could be expected to become. So, we stayed in Tanzania for three months. There right on the sea front just north of Dar-es-Salaam, we looked out over the Indian Ocean every day. Ram taught friends there to dive in the sea, since he recognized it as so similar to what he had known under the sea in Mauritius; and then –since we were so nearby– we decided to catch a plane over and visit Ram's parents in Mauritius before going home to London.

And Mauritius, coming out of the post-Independence state of emergency, was so interesting, socially speaking, that we stayed, moved into a house in a village, and got involved in grassroots struggles and left-wing politics. Right here in the Indian Ocean.

And, talking of the ocean, we bought an old fishermen's pirogue and began fishing in the traditional ways off the west coast of Mauritius. I learnt the ways of dolphins and whales and birds and turtles and fish, and the currents, the winds, the different kinds of rains, and how to smell a cyclone's approach. And so it was that I learnt the ways of traditional fishermen, as we became of them.

And later when there was a bit of doldrums in the struggle of the working class that had had its heroic days in 1979 and 1980, shaking the bourgeoisie rigid, when I found I had a bit of spare time, that was when I began to write the novels I had always been threatening in jest to write. "Can I put that in a novel I intend to write?" I would joke with people. I never thought I would. But I did. Seven. All set in the Indian Ocean.

And the novels were set mainly in the social reality I live in, in Mauritius among the rural working class. Surrounded as I am by people who had moved or been moved by force from Africa, Madagascar, India and a handful from France, across the Indian Ocean wherever they started from, and who have created a language that I love, Mauritian Kreol, and a society that I love, and that is today under threat of new forms of colonization even before the old are over: While Diego Garcia (and the whole of Chagos) are still illegally occupied, although Lalit the party I'm in has finally forced, after 40 years' struggle, the Mauritian State to go to the UN Court, the ICJ, where last year Britain was declared an illegal occupier –and while the Mauritian Kreol language is still banned as the written form as medium for children to learn maths and science, and is still banned in Parliament, there is now a new kind of re-colonization beginning. It is along the lines of the Israeli-plus-US colonization of Palestine: the buying of the arable land, and in the Mauritian case, selling it off to millionaires from all over the world and giving them citizenship to boot. And while the State subsidizes the sugar estate owners as they sell off their "real estate" (the arable land) and also thus subsidizes the millionaire new settlers, this same State has not been able even to replace the asbestos housing that is a colonial legacy in the working class, nor to assure a modicum of food security during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. And, through WTO agreements, today the Mauritian State hounds out traditional fishermen from the sea, as Hilton Hotels and others take over the lagoons and as international fishing companies (Spanish, French, Korean, etc.) fish the massive territorial waters of Mauritius.

Mauritius, as you know, is the 18th or 19th biggest country in the world –counting, land and water. I say that because I'm sick of people saying it's small, as if small is an excuse for all manner of things.

So, it is not "a small island". It is part, rather, like any other, of our beautiful, little planet. A planet threatened.

And before signing off, one last Indian Ocean eye-opener I had. It was in 2006.

There was a "Conclave of Writers" held at a beautiful old palace called Neemrana. Fifty of us writers from Africa and Asia were brought together to look at where the world was 50 years after the Bandung Decolonization Conference. Congress was back in power after ousting the first BJP stint in power, and the conclave was perhaps a way of recentring the Congress role in decolonization. But, for writers it was a rich, multi-viewpointed image, a kaleidoscope of all angles on the Indian Ocean. And getting such a view from African and Asian writers was both vivid and unforgettable.

At the same time, staying at Neemrana gave me a second viewpoint on India: from right near the top in a palace. I had only seen India from the very bottom before, when, by mistake, I booked six of us into a hotel that was both a brothel and in a shit canal and situated in a squatters area, when we were attending a No Bases Conference in Mumbai two years earlier. So, again, by chance I was reminded of class society, living later in one of the most beautiful old fortresses of India.

And, as I write, I think how we live in times when the capitalist class world-wide is led by two warring factions –the globalists who want capitalist investment in every nook and cranny and then, worse still, the nationalists, led by Trump and various fascistic groups elsewhere, who remind us every day of how fascism rose in the 1930s.

At least *seeing this* is a beginning.

And then there are the rest of us. And it is up to us to halt this rise in fascism. And it is up to us to go further than that and to change society so we all decide together how to proceed, not just a handful of us.

And now the Coronavirus has come to remind us, all the rest of us, that our destinies are one.

If we do not act as *one humanity*, we are in trouble relative to something as tiny as a virus. Let alone the trouble we face from other calamities. There is the pollution caused by our ruining classes that is bringing us to the verge of any number of tipping points –worldwide– while there are nuclear weapons constituting a constant threat, what with reckless men's grubby fingers on nuclear buttons. And this is true on the shores of the Indian Ocean, too, as well as elsewhere –with two nation states– India and Pakistan –having the power to destroy all of this *one humanity*, as well as the others like USA, Russia, UK, Israel, France, China and North Korea.

We do need, right now in history, to be reminded by the hunters and gatherers of old how to sustain society, how to be *one*. Only when we are *one humanity* can we hope to save the planet. For the past few centuries that would have sounded like an exaggeration. Right now it's an understatement.

But one that our ancestors for the first 95% of our common human history, as they looked over the Indian Ocean from the escarpment, would have understood.

17th May 2020

TO MY GRANDMOTHER[1]
THE OLD TEA FACTORY AT KEARSNEY, NATAL[2]

Betty Govinden[3]

The light streams through the cracks
Haunting lines
Spectres
shards of memory[4]
dancing patches on the crumbling walls
sunlight on a broken column[5]
derelict and silent
Stone-bodies
on the coolie lines

A sad lonely mango tree
A neglected hibiscus
Marigolds under the thicket
Choking
And Pride of India
In need of pruning
Only the eternal
Bees and butterflies

Your sari hitched to your waist
You toil from morning till sunset
The open spaces of the hills and dales
your allotted prison
under the African sky
nimble fingers

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[1] See my chapter, "The Indentured Experience -Indian Women in Colonial Natal", in my book, *Sister Outsiders,* Unisa, 2008. 65-86. It includes the story of my grandmother, who died on January 13th 1948 [on my 4th birthday], 6 months after India received its Independence.

[2] The Kearsney Estate, run by Sir John Liege Hulett, was a tea and sugar estate, on the north coast of Natal, near the town of Stanger, 50 miles from Durban. Beall (1990: 153) observes that the "most intensive use of women's labour on plantations was made by tea estates in the Stanger District on the North Coast".

[3] This poem was first published in Govinden, Betty, "Two Oceans Marathon –Women from the South", *AGENDA– Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 33 (3) 2019. 87-95.

[4] Rushdie, 1991. 12.

[5] Attia Hosain, 1961.

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picking leaf
by leaf
by leaf
You become lettered in the ways of the fields
Reading the hills and dales
Writing your name in the wind
Wafting it across the seas

The lush green hills of leaves
hoisted up
Spread out to dry
on shelves lined with hessian
you turn the leaves
hour
by hour
by
hour

to catch the rays of the African sun
you work for a shilling a month

you look wistfully
at the rows of wooden boxes
filled with leaves
dried
drained
to begin their journey
across the billowy seas
to the soil of your heart
your hearth
your home

the leaves
the leaves
you see your fingers
fingering the leaves
the African sun sealed within
your hands reach out
to the boxes
the boxes

The light streams through the cracks
Spectres
shards of memory
moving patches on the crumbling walls
sunlight on a broken column
All is derelict and silent
Stone-bodies
on the coolie lines

A long shadow
Is cast
Over the hills and valleys of Kearsney
Abandoned by history
Across the *kala pani*
To the hills of Bezawada
In Andhra Pradesh
the River Krishna flowing old and languid
catches images
fleeting
of the Old Tea Factory
under the African sun

Dancing on the waters
Over hills and valleys
windswept with longing
my spirit
forever
entwined with yours
I have come in search of your
Dreams
Growing in your garden
Submerged in air
Under the African sky

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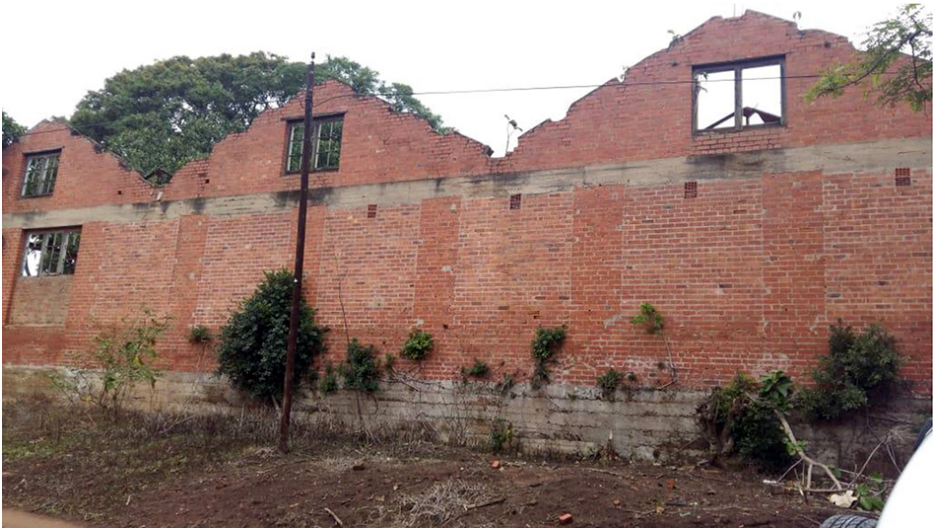

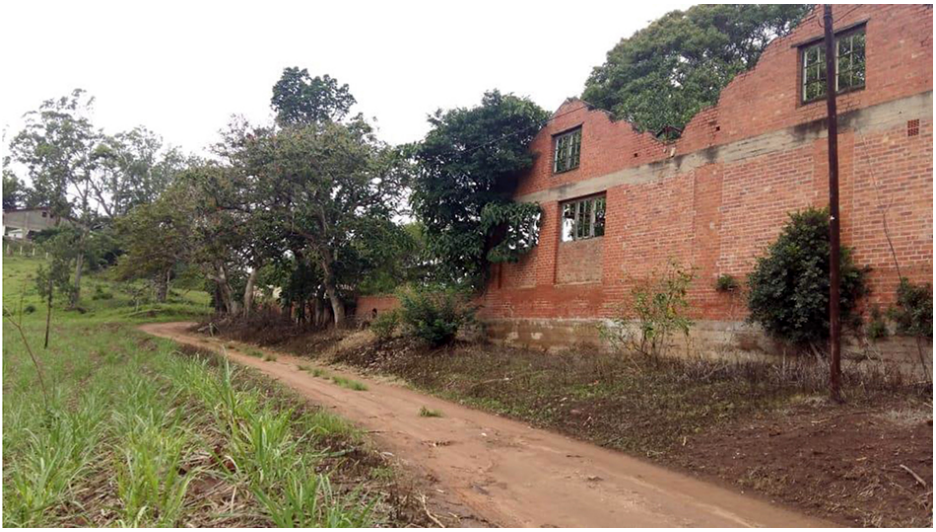

Photos by Dean Chris Reddy.

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INTERVIEWS

OCEAN AS HERITAGE: ON TAMIL POETRY AND IDENTITY, TRANSNATIONAL POLITICS, AND THE RECOGNITION OF GENOCIDE. AN INTERVIEW WITH CHERAN

Isabel Alonso-Breto & Cheran Rudhramoorthy
University of Barcelona & University of Windsor, Ontario (Canada)

ISABEL: Cheran, first of all thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview when I am aware that you are such a busy poet and academic. It is my intention to broach a variety of issues. To begin with, I would like to ask you, very generally, about your relation with poetry, more specifically when and where poetry comes to you.

CHERAN: It's a very fine question. Your question is metaphorical, and I love metaphors. However, today for a change, let me take it literally, at least to start with. Poetry doesn't come to me. It lives with and within me. There are instances when I get deeply affected by images, words and wounds outside of me and by other events. As a poet, my poetic senses and my poetic antennae are always on alert, so there is no separation between poetry and life for me. That said, I can mention different ways in which poetry can arise within me. Sometimes it emerges just like a word: I get inspired by a word and that word can create the whole poem. If I take a word and throw it in the air and I follow it, it writes a poem. Some other times there is just a simple sound, such as when, in the early morning, you hear the chirping of an unknown bird outside. Yet another possible inspiration is some kind of image, for example a burning book that crosses the oceans and reaches you. In a similar way, it could be an incident, something I witness or even stories I hear. These are some of the forms in which most frequently poetry emerges in me. There are other ways too: some of my poems came to me in my dream. But I need to get up right away because otherwise they would disappear. So, if you ask me, this is the technical way of describing how poetry comes to me, and anyone who reads my poetry, either in Tamil or in translation, will discover such elements of shock or surprise, which are always there as part of it. Actually this list is not exhaustive, since there are all kinds of possible ways. That is why I always say that writing a few poems is easy, any person can write at least a few lines of good poetry, because there is a universal human attachment to beauty and to language, but being a poet, living as a poet twenty four hours seven days a week, is totally different.

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Isabel: You have said somewhere that you can only write poetry in Tamil, whereas as an academic and in other genres you have written extensively in English. Could you tell us something about this, about your relationship with the two languages?

Cheran: Perhaps you remember translating "Ask," one of the poems included in my anthology *A Second Sunrise*. In this poem there is a line where I talk about what I call "the loneliness of language". You need to imagine that I have been living for years in places where I could not speak Tamil, where I had to speak mainly in English, because there was no real possibility to talk and communicate in Tamil, but I kept writing and dreaming in Tamil: that's what I mean by the loneliness of language. Once I decided that Toronto is going to be the place I'm going to live in, even if there is a large Tamil community here with whom I can speak the language, I feel that to continue writing my poems in Tamil is the best way for me to keep organically linked to my heritage, which was largely defined by the Tamil language. I can write all kinds of texts in English but will write poetry only in Tamil in order to keep a more intimate connection to that language. Also, as you know, poetry as the linguistic expression hovers above all the other forms of writing. For poetry you need to have complete mastery of the language. Also, by way of writing in Tamil, I maintain one of the strongest aspects of our identity and culture, because the Tamil identity is largely based on a linguistic identity. In other words, Tamil does not correspond with the name of a territory or a land, even though the struggle for and aspiration to gain a fully autonomous land or territory is very much alive. Wherever Tamil is spoken by large numbers of people, the place then becomes part of a "Tamil speaking world of goodness." I keep a very strong connection to my heritage through my poetry.

My approach to the concept and practice of heritage is different. The traditional approach to heritage and culture is to assume that there are intrinsic and immutable values to culture and heritage. We expect that culture and heritage will not change and that it should not change. I would view this as a static model of heritage. This approach is not really helpful. For example, we cannot simply say that there is only one way to be a Tamil or to belong to Tamil heritage. Tamils have multiple locations, multiple ways and belonging. However, what unites us is solidarity across nations, cultures, oceans and territory. We must not forget that we are talking about an oppressed people and a community which suffered genocide, and writing poetry in Tamil is not only an act of resistance but my contribution to my language and to my heritage and to the cultural dimensions of being Tamil in multiple ways.

Isabel: And how does English intervene in the equation?

Cheran: I'm very conscious that my poetry must be available through translations to all the people who speak different languages. I am multilingual but English becomes an important vehicle for me in that context because of

colonialism and post-coloniality. In a way, I can be categorized as a rooted cosmopolitan. My rootedness in the larger idea of cosmopolitanism comes through my language. I am very comfortable writing in English but one of the difficulties and why I insist on writing poetry in Tamil is that my mastery over Tamil is much deeper than my mastery in English. I can write plays and I can write non-fiction and academic papers and essays in English, but regarding poetry, to have mastery you need an extraordinary ability and having grown with the language in your formative years. Although I started learning and reciting poetry in English from grade six, still I am reluctant to say I know poetry in englishes. Yes, there are several englishes. On the other hand, I have memorized, studied, and am always at home in Tamil classical and modern poetry.

Isabel: I am very interested in your craft as a poet, in the technical aspects. How do you elaborate on a poem? Do you write different versions until you feel satisfied? When do you know that a poem is finished?

Cheran: Elaboration takes place in my mind. I do not type my poems. I write them in beautiful notebooks, journals and on other assorted but lovely papers. I am still a sucker for fine stationary. After writing them in longhand, I wait for a few days, weeks, months and sometimes years. Then I will type them up one by one. In that process, I will edit, add, cut, chop, mutilate, etc. But there were instances when I could write a poem in one go. I do not think that my poems are a finished product. As I say in one of my poems titled "I cannot finish off this poem," the poem continues. It never ends. Here is the poem:

This poem cannot be
finished off writing,
this song not ended,
thirst not quenched.
Every memory refuses
to be effaced, every plot
declines to produce, every face
is reluctant to endure.
A dream unwilling to dissolve,
lingers forever–although
I do not know if
I am in the dream or out.
Wandering and transience
spread endless, dazzling rays.

What else can I send,
to feed everyone the
sweetness of unbitter
solitude, besides this poem?

(Translated from Tamil by Geetha Sukumaran)

Isabel: Regarding your topics, have you ever forced yourself into writing about something, because you felt it was necessary? Have you ever, shall we say, written against yourself?

Cheran: Yes. This is what I prefer to refer to as applied poetry or using your craft and poetic imagination to do other things. For example, I have written dozens of songs to music at the request of my friends who are composers. There is a certain degree of compromise, but I really loved the end product. Similarly, I have written eulogies, felicitations, greetings, and introductions to books in poetry. It is a different kind of poetry. There are more than a hundred protest slogans, poetic lines I wrote to be used as traditional agit-prop variety. I also wrote short verses –love letters– for my friends, so they could send them to their would-be or not would-bes. It was a good experience. Though I would not consider them as writing against myself.

Isabel: How does a poet like you rid himself of the terrible memories of war? Is poetry a form of exorcism?

Cheran: I do not think so. Writing war or war poetry is different, I think. Celebration of poppy and military heroism and sacrifice is something I do not want to compare with writing genocide. Combat trauma is not what we have gone through. What we have gone through and are still going through is a trauma of genocide and this will not end with my generation. A few weeks ago, I had an opportunity to discuss, recite and exchange poetry with a group of Tamil women who were tortured, sexually assaulted, and had some of their family members killed by the Sri Lankan security forces in 2009. They write poetry as part of their resistance and renewal. Some of the poems have opened up venues, words and images that can capture the "un-grabbable" in the context of genocide. Their poetic work heals them. I am not sure whether I can convincingly say that about my poetry. However, I can admit that writing poetry after genocide, controls my anger.

Isabel: Let's talk about Tamil culture or as you would say cultures, of which your oeuvre is part. I know Tamil is a language spoken by more than 77 million people, and thus it is among the twenty most spoken world languages. According to you, what is the role of Tamil culture in the world?

Cheran: Tamil is one of the very few classical languages that is still in use. It is an ancient language, with a very long literary tradition: its rich body of literature and poetry dates back to BCE 500 if not earlier. Tamil has evolved without being dependant on any other language or as an offshoot of another language. And interestingly, many classical languages are now gone, in the sense that they are classical, and no one speaks them anymore in their daily life. But in the case of Tamil, as you have correctly said, there are more than 77 million people who speak it at present. Amazingly, a contemporary speaker of Tamil can read and understand at least some parts of the classical literary texts that exist in the language, even if they were written several thousand years ago. Some words that were used all those years ago are still

used in the common everyday language in Tamil and Malayalam. Then Tamil is simultaneously a classical as well as a contemporary language. But you never see Tamil in the list of classical languages and literatures that are being taught in Euro-American universities, including my university in Canada.

Isabel: So, the strength of Tamil culture lies in its rich past?

Cheran: The past is important to a great extent, but not only that. I always tell Tamil activists and the people who valorise Tamil culture and Tamil heritage that, instead of making a case for Tamil identity being solely based on this antiquity, we have to frame the question more broadly, that is: How and what have the Tamil language and Tamils contributed to world culture, to enrich the entire human civilization? What I mean is that we cannot, in the name of heritage and of culture, allow the communities to wallow in archaic moments of ancient glory or practice, for instance, the self-immolation of wives in the husband's funeral pyre or preventing women from crossing the oceans. Or, in the name of heritage and culture we cannot allow patriarchy to dominate every aspect of a woman's life. So, in the name of keeping the past alive you cannot say, this is our culture and heritage, and it is the best in the world, and we are a superior "race." In the case of Tamil, because there is an extremely politicized situation for the language in India, Sri Lanka and some other parts of the world, there is a tendency to go back repeatedly and frustratingly to these glorious past moments of Tamil culture with a sense of nostalgia for a lost empire, recalling powerful military expeditions. This keeps happening, but when I look at it, I say, No, these are not the creative and healthy threads of heritage and culture I would delineate from our history and heritage. There are other powerful threads and episodes we can learn and articulate.

Isabel: Thus, I understand that you would rather identify with a more contemporary approach to Tamilness.

Cheran: That's right in a sense: my role in Tamil culture and heritage would be that of a progressive contribution, both as a poet and scholar. In Canada, we are just about to establish a Chair in Tamil studies at the University of Toronto. To contribute to this purpose, I have delivered lectures and talks in hundreds of meetings, seminars and fundraising events. In each of those I am emphasizing my ideas and asking some pertinent questions: What is Tamil heritage? What is this culture we are talking about? Can we please stop using the past glory as opium and move forward? My argument is: first of all, the heritage is a claim making. And if we are trying to articulate a kind of heritage that is "unique" or that has made a significant contribution to humanity at large, we have to clearly express what it is. In response to my questions, I have organized a list of various aspects from a critical heritage studies perspective for Tamils to think about.

Isabel: Would you elaborate on the most important ones?

Cheran: The first and most important aspect is to think about Tamils and *Tamilness* not as a singularity. There are various and multifaceted Tamil communities that inhabit several parts of the world. Being Tamil is a transnational reality and identity.

Secondly, we have a very ancient and rich poetic tradition, called Sangam poetry, and the concept of *Thinai* that emerged from a critical analysis of this poetry. The concept of *Thinai* is simultaneously a literary, theoretical and critical method and an eco-poetic convention that helps us in framing and explaining multitude of Tamil identities and heritages. There are no parallels to *Thinai* convention in other civilizations. Mikhail Bakhtin's Chronotopes can be considered but the *Thinai* is denser and multi-faceted. I have written extensively on this in English and Tamil.

The corpus of Sangam poems collected in eighteen anthologies, as you can see in the translations of A.K. Ramanujan, George Hart, A. Dakshanmurthy and several others, constitute an excellent creative contribution to humanity. We are talking here of a very old tradition that is secular in nature. Some of the values expressed in that poetry are relevant and important even now. For example, the poem which reads: "Every country is my country / every human is my kin" embodies the idea of cosmopolitanism that we envision now. In this way, cosmopolitanism, in the sense of how Appiah discusses it, was articulated and celebrated more than two millenia ago as a value and praxis. The poem says that, to someone who speaks the Tamil language, territory and land should be secondary, while what is important is the contours of feeling (*pulaneri vazakku*), the landscape and how you create it, how you create *your own* landscape in a metaphorical sense. So it is very interesting, as it takes away the idea of identity as something bound to land and territory. The idea of a human community bound, instead, to language and imagination and moods, moments, music, flora and fauna and landscapes is a different way of talking about identity and belonging.

Thirdly, the ocean. The Sea. Tamil identity cannot be studied or situated without the precolonial ancient maritime trade, voyages, seafaring, imperial military expeditions, the Coolie and indenture, refugees and the deep connection to the Indian Ocean. Indian Ocean imageries cannot be fully grasped without Tamils. In the colonial times, thousands of Tamils were traded off, sent as indentured labourers and "Coolies" –the word Coolie itself is Tamil–, then as refugees in the post-colonial period. Coolie Tamil and Refugee Tamil cannot be erased out in the discussion of Tamil identities. A significant number of Tamil poems are about oceans. As Derek Walcott says, for us, the sea is history too. But it is also an indelible part of our identity and imagination.

Isabel: It is remarkable that such a contemporary take on identity should have been outlined so long ago.

Cheran: Indeed. And another relevant aspect is that Tamil has always been part of a secular identity and heritage, that is, it has never been part of any singular religion. In fact, all languages originate and prefer a secular mood and mode, but in the course of time most of the languages, whether they are classical or modern, become predominantly attached to one particular religion. You see, Latin is attached to Christianity, Sanskrit to Hinduism, Persian and Arabic to Islam, and so on. But if we take Tamil, Hinduism, Saivism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Aseevakam (Ajivika), Vaishnavam (Vaishnavite) or Islam, all those religions have been part of Tamil language and identity. In that sense it has a long history of being secular and actually going beyond the common understanding of 'secular/secularism'.

Isabel: So there is no particular connection between Tamil and Hinduism?

Cheran: The Tamil civilization and heritage have always been multicultural and multi-religious.

There is no exclusive connection between Tamil and the arbitrary colonial aggregation of hundreds of faiths as "Hinduism." Sadly, it does not prevent sections of the Tamils from claiming and articulating the contested "Tamil-Hindu" coupling for political reasons in Sri Lanka and India.

Isabel: What kind of relationships are established among Indian Tamils, Sri Lankan Tamils, Malaysian Tamils and, in short, Tamils hailing from different places? Because while they share a common language, their histories differ in wide ways. How do these communities come together, especially in diasporic locations?

Cheran: We do not use the term Indian Tamils. The term we use, coined by that community itself, is "Malaiyaka Thamilar" –the Tamils of the Hill country. This is what I call being a Tamil in multiple ways. It means that in the contemporary world, as I mentioned above, Tamil is a transnational identity. We can no longer confine our deliberations on Tamil identities as rooted in a single territory, be it India, Sri Lanka, Canada, Singapore, South Africa or Malaysia. There are several Tamil communities in each of these places, and one major aspect that links all of them is language, but there are also variations in the language, and different dialects. The Tamil spoken in Batticaloa is different from the Tamil spoken in Jaffna, and so on. In a similar way, the Tamil heard in those places is not the variety heard in Singapore. Even in Tamil Nadu, there are different accents in Northern and Southern Tamil Nadu. But Tamil has diglossia: when you switch from the written to the colloquial, there are differences. Yet written, formal Tamil is common to all those spoken variations all over the world.

In connection with this, we need to keep in mind that we cannot generalize talking about a common identity: there are commonalities but there are different ways of being Tamil. The identity of Tamils who left Sri Lanka as refugees is much more political than that of those Tamils who left for the Silicon Valley to work as a part of voluntary migration. Their experience

and their context are different, thus their identity, while Tamil, has different dimensions. Anthropologist Valentine E. Daniel wrote about *Being a Person the Tamil Way,* but I choose to write, instead, "Being a Tamil, multiple ways." For example, let us look at the second or third generation Tamils in the diaspora. They identify very strongly as Tamils in a political sense, but most of them do not speak the language or their Tamil vocabulary is limited. And I do not think it is appropriate to tell them: Listen, you don't speak the language, so you are not Tamil.

ISABEL: Do Tamils worldwide have a common political agenda?

CHERAN: I think there is a political agenda, or rather, there are all kinds of groups trying to come up with a common agenda, but there are no cohesive practical plans. In November, this year, during the lockdown, one of the largest Tamil gatherings, called *Rise Tamil* was held online. It was a virtual congregation of the top Tamil businessmen, women, professionals from all sectors, Tamil scientists from all over the world, politicians, writers and artists. There were more than five hundred of them; they met for three days and worked out an economic, cultural and social agenda for the Tamil speaking world. The reason why this common agenda is needed is that whether Tamils live in Sri Lanka, India, or elsewhere, there is this uneasy sense of being treated as "second class" citizens everywhere they live when it comes to the rights of the language and full articulation of Tamil identity.

ISABEL: Is this the case also in India?

CHERAN: Yes, also in India, because ever since the new but strong Hindu nationalist government came into power, they are trying to systematically undermine Tamil and impose Sanskrit and Hindi. They know the demands of the people in Tamil Nadu and know that it has always been in the forefront of opposing compulsory Hindi. Further, in the past six years there have been lots of agitations against the imposition of Hindi in Tamil Nadu and Southern Indian states.

A few months ago, a member of the Indian Parliament from Tamil Nadu, a fellow Tamil poet and a friend of mine, Kanimozhi Karunanidhi, arrived at the Chennai airport in Tamil Nadu. The military official at the airport asked her if "she was an Indian" when Kanimozhi asked her to speak in English or Tamil as she did not know Hindi. This conflating of Hindi with Indian as implied by the military official at the airport was probably a routine occurrence. In another incident a few weeks prior to that, a top Indian government officer excluded non-Hindi speaking people from a central government training programme. I am afraid these are not isolated incidents. There is a trend that has intensified since 2014 when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) formed the government at the Centre. The current government's project is to make "Hindi-Hindu-India" a political, social and cultural reality.

Isabel: In which part of the world do you think Tamil culture is in a better state of health? Could it be India, in spite of the situation? Or rather Canada, where among other things, as you have mentioned, a Chair for Tamil Studies is in the process of being created at the University of Toronto, and where Tamil culture seems to be thriving?

Cheran: I think the first generation of Tamils in diaspora are still a very large part of the population. For instance, in the Canadian context, there are some 300,000 Canadian Tamils, and a sizeable number of this population belongs to the first generation. So you can imagine that the second generation are going to have a history of their own in the next thirty or forty years. When the first generation leaves the earth, there must be a completely different Tamil system which has been set up, and which enables the possibility, for instance, to study Tamil at university level, and in schools. At the moment, a Tamil community centre is being built in Toronto with the support of the provincial and federal governments. So that infrastructure is going to be there, and then the community is putting the emphasis on teaching and learning Tamil as a heritage language. At the moment, in Canada, you can learn Tamil at school until grade eleven, and then you can use the mark to go to university. Therefore, lots of students, say around 10,000 of them, will study Tamil, because it improves their prospects to access their chosen universities. And there are all kinds of other systems which are being planned. It is the same in the UK and in other places with the teaching of Tamil. Thus, even if at present there can be some intergenerational tension in terms of using the language, I am confident that Tamil as a heritage language, as a political identity, and as a kind of influential diasporic community, is going to stay. In fact, they are becoming more and more conspicuous in terms of political power: There is a Tamil Member of Parliament in the Canadian federal government already, and several representatives in the provincial government of Ontario. And more are coming. So down the road the community will thrive. I can tell you one similar example: the Sikh community, one of the oldest in Canada, for a long time lacked any kind of proper representation in the government, while now there are five ministers of Punjabi origin in the Cabinet. Our Minister of Defence is a Sikh Canadian, as well as the Minister of Infrastructure: they are Sikh and Canadian, and they identify as both, Canadian and Punjabi. For Tamils, there are still challenges ahead.

Isabel: You are suggesting that the prospects are similar for the Tamil-Canadian community.

Cheran: Exactly. This is what we call transnational politics. It is no longer immigrant politics. In a way, the politics of Catalonian people is also the politics in Canada. During the Israeli elections Israeli political parties used to charter flights from Toronto and Montreal to Israel for Israeli Canadians with dual citizenship, who can vote. Presidential elections in Croatia, at times can be decided by the diasporic vote. There are several examples of transnational politics here. The politics which are taking place

in, say, Palestine, are also the politics of Toronto and Ottawa. The politics of Punjab and India are very much echoed here. For instance, not long ago, there was a huge demonstration here in Toronto in support of a farmers' protest in India. So, it is not a matter of immigrants bringing their own political culture to the diaspora, but of transnational politics being in place all around. The Canadian Prime Minister issued a statement supporting the farmer protests in India. And the Indian government was not pleased; they said the Canadian government didn't have the right to interfere. But the Canadian politicians can argue that there are more than 500,000 Punjabi Sikh Canadians in this country (a conservative estimate for sure), and they are loyal to us and they are loyal to their Sikh identity as well. We cannot simply ask them to dump their Sikh identity.

Isabel: Definitely. Anyway, moving away from the fascinating matter of diaspora and transnational politics, which at present is such an important part of Indian Ocean imaginaries, I would now like to ask you about a poignant and deeply painful subject. Many scholars and intellectuals have qualified as genocide what occurred in the Spring of 2009 in the north of Sri Lanka, when the Sri Lankan government finally emerged as victor of a 26-year long conflict. You count yourself among them, actually you used that word earlier on in some of your answers. My next question is whether there has been any advancement in the recognition of genocide by international organizations.

Cheran: I would like to respond to your question as a journalist who reported/wrote about more than a hundred "genocidal massacres" in Sri Lanka, an academic who teaches a course on genocide, and as a poet who witnessed a structural genocide in Sri Lanka for twenty years. There has been a lot of activism surrounding the claim of genocide and the attempts at making the Sri Lankan government accountable for what happened in the last phase of the war. Genocide is a complicated case to establish because it has been politicized by nation-states and their international judicial institutions. For a community like Tamils, Kurdish, Palestinians, Baloch and several hundred other communities that have no "global/international" representation, it would be a very difficult task to make a case, mainly because the entire "international system" is in favour of states.

Lots of initiatives have been taken, and many efforts have been made at the level of international law in order to, again, convince the UN and other institutions to bring the Sri Lankan government to accountability. But, in order to raise awareness in various parts of the world that what happened in 2009 was genocide, we need to make them realise that it was genocide without witnesses. Thus, a big effort is being made in documenting these atrocities and creating online archives which make the case of genocide very solid. This is also an important project that challenges dominant international approaches to pre- and post-war Sri Lanka. However, the UN has sufficient evidence to call it genocide. The report of the UN Secretary General's Panel of Experts (POE) on accountability in Sri Lanka (2011),

and the report of the Secretary-General's Internal Review Panel on United Nations Action in Sri Lanka (2012) have sufficient information, evidence and testimonies on war crimes and crimes against humanity. Although these reports did not explicitly use the term genocide, it would be clear for anyone who reads the report that genocide was committed.

There has been limited support for this, and yet the government of Ontario has declared it was genocide, and also some of the Canadian Members of Parliament and politicians have done so. A motion to declare a Tamil genocide education week in Ontario is being debated. Thus, even if the Canadian government itself has not yet recognized the episode as genocide, there is certain progress at provincial levels. And a similar thing is occurring in the UK, where some parties and organizations are calling it genocide, and also in Australia and in Norway. So you can see that in various places where the diaspora is active the demand is gaining track, and that is going to go on for a very long time. And even though the UN is complicit with what occurred, there are a couple of relevant UN resolutions –which the Sri Lankan government has chosen to ignore. President Barak Obama in his book says that the UN failed Tamils in Sri Lanka. Tamil genocide, the first genocide of the 21st century, took place while he was the US president. His government was, like the UN, complicit in the genocide. Many powerful countries were either complicit or kept mum. That is part of the reason why it will be a difficult path for them to turn around and say, yes, that was a genocide.

ISABEL: The war officially ended in 2009. Would you like to tell us about the situation of Tamil communities in Sri Lanka in the last decade? When the war ended, besides thousands of Tamils living in diaspora, mostly in Canada as is your case, there were thousands of IDPs, Tamil people who, having been forced to abandon their homes, lived in makeshift refugee camps. What has occurred since then? Has the situation been normalised?

CHERAN: The current government has militarized most of its governance. Every major ministry and Department is under the military, so much so that the Sri Lankan military is now running the country. Even the fight against Coronavirus is militarized, and the curfews and transport restrictions are organized and controlled by the military. Literally everything is controlled by them. So, what has been going on in the last ten years is a process of increasing militarization, not only in the northern and eastern areas where the Tamils live in large numbers, but now other parts of the country have come under great presence of the army in all spheres of life.

The military has an enormous amount of autonomy. They can do anything without hardly any restrictions, and this is so because the president himself was a military man, and all the important positions of power are occupied by members of the army. Even a commission of archaeology and heritage that has been created in order to peruse and study the Buddhist history and heritage in the eastern part of Sri Lanka has military officers leading it together with Buddhist monks

Besides militarization, the second aspect that has been going on, which has been terrible for Tamils, is the Sinhala Buddhist colonization of lands which belonged to them. The government is building Buddhist temples all over the north and eastern parts, taking over the lands of the people and settling hundreds of Sinhala people in those areas. Obviously the aim is to change the demographical profile of these areas.

ISABEL: Wasn't this type of policies put in place already before the war?

CHERAN: Yes, they started doing this already in 1948, but then they couldn't get results as fast as they can now. After the end of the war, they were able to do it at full speed, like a bulldozer, because there was no resistance to these efforts. So, they are taking over everything. Together with militarization and colonization, they are taking over the lands and territories belonging to the Tamils in various parts of the north and east, and not giving them back, encroaching on what we call the "military cantonments". And a fourth fact is that to do every single thing in the north and east, you need to get permission from the military, which is everywhere. If you need to get out of your home because of Coronavirus, you need permission, not from a health officer, but from the military.

The combination of militarization and Sinhala Buddhist colonization turns out to be an extremely oppressive system, not only for Tamils but for the Muslims too. Here is an example: they are forcibly cremating every single body suspected of having died from Coronavirus. And of course, the Muslim, Christian and sections of the Tamil communities are extremely upset about this practice. Sometimes the authorities will just do this without the relatives' permission. And, as one could imagine, this is creating great discomfort, because, as the UN says, the victims' rights should always be respected, yet the government does not do so. This is a very systematic way of antagonizing the minorities now. Targeting Muslim communities has been going on for the past ten years.

ISABEL: So not only Tamils but also other minority groups are affected by that kind of policies.

CHERAN: Exactly. In the same way as white supremacists gained ground with Donald Trump in the US, extreme Sinhala Buddhist racist monks, with an extreme idea of Sinhala Buddhist supremacy, have gained ground in Sri Lanka. Their ideology is openly being articulated by the government, by the President, by very powerful social movements. At the moment, the situation is very dangerous. I don't know how it is going to play out in the future.

ISABEL: Let me thank you again, Cheran, for sharing this wealth of information.

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"WRITING IS HOW I UNDERSTAND THE WORLD": AGEING AND GENDER, QUALITY OF LIFE AND CREATIVITY. AN INTERVIEW WITH LORNA CROZIER

Núria Mina Riera*
Universitat de Lleida

The interview was conducted throughout two different evenings, at my home, during Lorna's stay in Lleida in November 2019.

NÚRIA: Good evening, Lorna, and thanks for accepting to be interviewed.
LORNA: My pleasure.

NÚRIA: So, the first question is, how would you define yourself in terms of identity at present?
LORNA: I've never had any problem with understanding and knowing what it means to be Canadian. I've never had any problem understanding and knowing what it means to be a woman. I think I write from both a Canadian's and a woman's perspective. And now that I'm seventy-one, I guess I could add the adjective "older" Canadian woman; and those would be the three defining terms of my identity as a writer.

NÚRIA: All right.
LORNA: And feminist.

NÚRIA: What do you think is the value of ageing into old age?
LORNA: I hope, as I get older, that I'm able to shuck off the inconsequential things in life. I hope that I am able to move further away from ego gratification, from the desire to win awards and prizes, and have my name in the newspaper, and be invited to exotic places. I still would like that to happen, I must admit, but may it become less consequential and less important; and may I fully realize that there is a richer reward to being a writer that goes beyond anyone's or any kind of recognition or praise. I hope that what I do has less to do with pleasing someone else, even a reader, even a literary audience, and has more to do with me, getting closer and closer to some kind of bone truth, some kind of word, or sentence, or thought, or image that I need to say, that could define who I am and get me closer to essential things.
And I hope my speaking and my writing is getting more pared down. I would pray that it's getting more significant, that it's touching something primal

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and deep, deep underground like an underwater stream. And it has less to do with the trickling water of what we see and hear above, the sparkly water, the water that lights up someone's face. I would like this water that my words are drawing to the surface to bring light to those who look into it, but to do something else, something darker, too.

Núria: What would be the positive and negative sides of ageing?

Lorna: The negative side of ageing is definitely physical, the fact that the body that you were used to being active with, the body that didn't have aches, and pains and stiffness and fears of being ugly is suddenly starting to suffer from those realities and those fears. It's hard for me to admit that I can't do some of the activities that I used to do with ease. I was a jogger, for instance and, at around forty-five, my knees started to ache and creek, and so instead I became a walker. I walk long distances and I try to walk quickly, but I can't run any more, it's too hard on the joints. Those are the kind of obvious things.

But I know I'm very lucky to be a writer, because one of my good friends is an oboist and she says that her mouth doesn't work the way it used to. It doesn't have the muscle strength and flexibility she spent years of practice working for it to attain. I don't have that problem. As a writer I don't need strong, adept mouth muscles or, if I were a pianist or guitarist, nimble fingers. I just have to hope my mind keeps being sharp, and as long as that's the case, maybe I'll have many years ahead of me as a writer. Some authors write into their eighties and nineties; I would like that creative longevity to be part of my future because writing is how I understand the world. It's my way of getting at what's going on around me, my way of revealing to myself how I feel about things, whether they be joyous or sad. I have to write about what I see and hear and sense, about what I feel. It's my way of being alive. So, whatever gods exist out there, I pray I can keep doing that, up to my last thought, my last feeling, my last breath. You know, Japanese poets are known for writing a death haiku; on their death bed they fashion their last syllables into a poem.

Núria: Oh, I didn't know that.

Lorna: Yeah, three lines. Basho has a famous one, and Issa, and Buson, and they spoke these words they'd spent a lifetime preparing for when they were a few breaths away from dying; their disciples wrote them down. Often the haiku weren't what we'd call profound, in the way we in the western world define

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* I asked Lorna Crozier to have the following interview for the MINECO Project "Aging, quality of life, and creativity through narrative" (ECAVINAR) [FFI2016-79666-R], as a member of the Research Group Grup Dedal-Lit from the University of Lleida (Spain). ECAVINAR examines the interrelations between literature, writing and active ageing, both in professional and amateur writers.

profound; they were imagistic, as haikus are. The haiku masters dictated a detail that came from the natural world, a beautiful, small summation of what final smell or vision or touch came to them before they passed away. The profundity comes from brevity and simplicity, at least a surface simplicity, and all the more philosophical implications such concrete details carry with them.

NÚRIA: How humble!
LORNA: How humble! And what a lovely thing to aspire to.

NÚRIA: Right. And what about the positive sides of ageing?
LORNA: Now that I'm seventy, I can say things that I might have been cautious about saying before. It's possible for me to be more blunt and people forgive me, I hope, but if they don't, does it matter? As long as I'm not mean, nothing should allow you to be mean. That's a tremendous advantage, you can be more honest, you don't have to worry about pleasing people as much as you used to. This lack of self-censorship can also be kind of fun. You can become a trickster.

And it's a relief to be in a stage where you can admire beauty without longing to possess it or be possessed by it. I can admire a handsome, bright young man like your husband without anything sexual clouding the appreciation. I can just admire, from a distance. I can admire your beauty, Núria, and the beauty of other young human animals and get a warm feeling from it. It doesn't have anything to do with lust or desire, those things so central to my younger self. It just has to do with taking a step back from that and being able to see the gorgeousness that is there, in the human body, in the younger human body. So, that's an advantage, I think.

NÚRIA: That's a bit controversial.
LORNA: [laughs]

NÚRIA: Depending on how you read it, but I believe that's very interesting precisely because we can read it in different ways. But I think that if we can maybe nuance it a little bit. Teasing you here, because I know your poems, how about a woman who is older but who actually loves admiring young men and feeling lust for them. What's your opinion on that?
LORNA: It'd be great to feel attracted, in a sexual way, to a young man (or an older one!). It hasn't happened to me, yet. But I haven't been alone for long, only seven months. I was with a man for forty years, and I adored him and was adored by him in every way. We were lucky to know passion as a man and a woman but also as two writers who chose every day to live together with each other and with words. On the other hand, I like the story of Georgia O'Keeffe, who had a young male assistant. Georgia O'Keeffe, the great American painter. She lived in New Mexico and a man, thirty years her junior I believe, showed up and became her amanuensis and ended up living

with her. Who knows if they were lovers but, according to all accounts, they were certainly very close. They enjoyed each other's company, whether physically, or intellectually, or artistically, none of our business. But they ended up living together, and he was with her until the day she died. I would not rule out that possibility. And certainly, I don't look forward to dying alone. Does anybody? My husband didn't die alone. I was with him. It's been the tradition in our society that older men have teamed up with younger women, sometimes there's been a thirty-year age gap, and no one thinks anything of it. As a seventy-one-year-old woman, if I fell in love with a forty-year-old man and he with me, that would be terrific, but it would be unusual and probably denounced. I can't imagine it right now, but who knows what's around the corner.

Núria: What can you tell me about your own creative process nowadays? In what ways have the methods that you use to write changed or remained the same throughout your life-course?

Lorna: I'm more patient with my silences, particularly after a book comes out. I go through a period where I think I'm never going to write again and I bemoan that this book is the last book. And I used to believe that one hundred per cent, that I'd have nothing more to say, I've said everything. After having written seventeen books, or however many it is, you'd think I'd get used to the fact that yeah, something else *is* going to happen. I may not know what it is right now or what direction I'm going to move in, but something's gonna happen. So, I don't get as nervous as I used to about my writing being over after the book comes out. I used to feel that panic as a younger writer; I used to be much more impatient. If I didn't start writing immediately after a book tour, for example, I'd think well, that's it, I'm washed out, I'm done.

In my braver moments, I've adjusted to the gaps between books. I'm more used to the silences. I have more faith, I guess, in my regenerative powers and my own creative process; it'll be born again out of the ashes; there'll be a rebirth of language. And I also think that I'm braver at trying different forms. You know, it was only recently that I started to write what we call prose poems in English, or lyrical paragraphs, and now I've written two books in that form, and I've written a second non-fiction book that is coming out in the fall. I'm also working on short stories, which I've never done before. Recently I had two of them published. When I was younger, I wouldn't have been brave enough to risk writing in different genres and sending those pieces out for public scrutiny.

Núria: For the online magazine *Toque and Canoe*?

Lorna: No, I'm doing travel pieces for *Toque and Canoe,* but now I'm writing short fiction as well. And it's scary, because I'm a neophyte, it's as if I'm starting from scratch, knowing nothing. At one point, I considered publishing the stories under a pseudonym so that no one would know I was the writer,

because it's risky, having no experience in fiction after having been a poet for over forty years. But I'm not going to stop myself because of fear –what do I have to lose? As I get older, I guess I'm more interested and more open and less frightened. I hope so. What if this new writing isn't perfect? Who cares if it isn't perfect? If it gives me pleasure, then why not do it?

NÚRIA: That's really interesting.

LORNA: [laughs] Yeah, I never wrote travel pieces until –was it five years ago?– the editor phoned me and said "I think you'd be good at this." She'd just read a nonfiction piece I wrote for one of Canada's national newspapers. I told her I'd never explored travel writing before and didn't have a clue how to start. She said, "Well, give it a try." And I did, and now I love the genre. It's a whole other kind of writing that's opened up for me. I feel like an investigator, a reporter, heading off into the world with my notebook, asking the right person the right question, and observing everything. And she says my travel writing is different from everyone else's on the site, because I come at it as a poet; it's full of images and detail and small anecdotes. She likes what I've come up with and wants me to keep going. I will, because it's fun.

NÚRIA: The travel writing took you to writing *The Wild in You*, right?

LORNA: Yes, it did.

NÚRIA: So, travel writing took you to poetry again, so back and forth.

LORNA: Yeah, exactly. And that was the editor of *Toque and Canoe* who comes from a journalistic background and doesn't write poetry herself. She sent me to the Great Bear Rainforest on the far west coast of Canada to do an article and told me she was going to introduce me to her friend, Ian McAllister, who's a world-class photographer. Then she added, naïvely I thought, "Why don't the two of you do a book together?" Oh yeah, sure, you think it's that easy? Ian's a famous, extremely busy man; I thought he wouldn't be interested; in fact, maybe I wouldn't be interested. And then we met, we ended up liking each other, and we collaborated. We thank her in the book for match-making, for getting us together. We wouldn't have thought of the partnership on our own.

NÚRIA: What is the role of literature for you at present, both in terms of writing and of reading?

LORNA: From the first time I read a book that had any depth or quality, I knew that reading made me feel more alive and less alone. That was a startling discovery. And I still get a chill when I read something and say, "Ah, I've always known that, but I've never heard it said that way before." That kind of recognition brings reader and writer together; we're both reminded that, for all of our differences, we're part of one species. We share the same emotions; we suffer, we love, we grieve, we laugh.

And of course, on top of the content is the way the language is used to express the common human truths that form our lives. In the best of writing these can't be expressed in any other way. They have a profundity, a beauty, a clarity particular to each poem or story or novel. The writers' craft, the ability to use those twenty-six letters of the alphabet in a fresh and startling way make the old stories new again. I read serious literature for that zing of recognition and for the beauty of the language that makes the connection between one person and another all the more multifaceted and acute. So, I read to be less alone and to wallow in the deliciousness of the words, laid alongside each other on the page.

Why do I write? Maybe to be less alone too, although I don't think of my reader or the audience when my fingers touch the keyboard. My audience, when I'm in the act of writing, is, finally, the best part of me. I'm writing to the person I want to be –the person that is smarter, funnier, kinder, more philosophic and articulate, that shadow or luminous being that sits behind my computer screen and says: "You can do better than that, that's a cliché, you can go deeper, you can say something more interesting than what you just said." When readers connect with my work, I love it; it's such a warm feeling. It's why I'm keen on giving poetry readings, because when you put out a book, you don't know how those who buy it are reacting to it. But when you present your poems orally and you hear that wonderful, peculiar silence that comes after someone hears a poem, it's an indescribable feeling. You know the listeners "get it." They get something from the words you wrote, and when the poem speaks to them, they can hardly breathe. They fall into a well of deep listening. The writer senses that. The audience's response ripples forward towards the writer and the writer can't help but think this poem is doing something good in the world! This poem is as valuable as an orange, maybe; it satisfies someone's thirst, taste, desire for *orange-ness*. The poem becomes a living, breathing thing, because the writer's breath sends it out into the air, to the ears of those in the room. The poems vibrate inside the listeners and they and the poem have a visceral, physical connection.

In my experience, poems do that more than any other genre. I've sat at many book launches where novelists or nonfiction authors read from their books, and it's just not the same thing. They don't elicit the same somatic response from those in the audience. That's partly because poetry is an oral art; it's meant to be read out loud and to be heard because it is, above all else, music. As a writer, I delight in creating the sonic effects that poetry can achieve. Just like a carpenter who builds a beautiful chair –he must feel wonderful when the first person sits in it, and he hears the creak and sees the body take the shape a body should take in a well-made chair: that's what happens when a well-made poem stands in a room and makes itself available for someone to ease into it. There's the pleasure a writer feels when a reader or listener settles into the language, the images. You hope your work changes people; maybe not in the big ways, but in smaller ways that maybe accrue into something larger.

Núria: Do you think our own perceptions of ageing may change depending on the ways we see the ageing process reflected in literature?

Lorna: Oh, yes, most definitely. Or I should say, at least I hope so. There's a lot of ageism in North-American culture right now. I'm not sure of European. My sense is that a European woman can still be considered beautiful even if she's older, but that's not the case in North America. Part of that is the terrible influence that the United States has on the world and perhaps especially on Canada, its closest neighbour. In US popular culture, for example, most of the female actors you see on screen have had face lifts. What you encounter in a movie is a woman who's playing a character who is supposed to be fifty-years old, but whose face looks like a thirty-five-year-old's; it doesn't have any lines or character. Whereas British actors like Judi Dench or Helen Mirren have age etched into their skin. As a woman watching a film with a British star, I can exclaim, "Oh, she doesn't look that different from me!" When I watch someone like Jane Fonda on the other hand, I say: "Her body is perfect, her face is perfect, she's seventy-nine or eighty. Why don't I look like that?" It's not a comforting thing; it makes you feel lesser as a human being. I think that literature, which is a more serious art form than popular film, takes us to a place with more honesty and import. It shows us that older people still feel, and worry, and love, and care, and spark with desire, even within the shell of wrinkled skin and a saggy body.

In my culture older people are invisible; the younger eye casts over them and does not see who they are. That person in a restaurant, that old man might have been a neurosurgeon; yet what people see is merely an old man, not someone who saved people's lives because of the deftness of his hands, his years of study, and his magnificent mind. It's so easy to erase someone when their face is puckered and ragged. If we read literature, hopefully some written by older people as well as by younger people with great imaginations and empathy, we'll see the real human being behind that pleated skin. [I just finished a collection of stories called *Olive, Again* by the fiction writer Elizabeth Strout. The collection made me feel elated because the heroine is a woman in her seventies, and she ages to her eighties by the final story. She is difficult, irascible, and oh so human! On the one hand after the death of her husband, who was always kinder than she, she falls in love unexpectedly with a retired professor; on the other hand, she worries about leaky bowels and takes the difficult step of looking for adult diapers in the pharmacy. How could such stories make me feel elated? The writer really saw her main character; she looked beyond the physical without leaving the physical behind and gave us a rare and luminous look at an old woman, who is bigger than life but at the same time, life itself.]

There's a wonderful song called "Hello in There" by the American folk singer and songwriter John Prine, one of my favourites. He talks about meeting an old person on the street, and instead of walking by, says "Hello in there, hello." In that greeting he acknowledges there is a human being of value inside that frail aged body. It's a beautiful anthem, "hello in there,"

for ageing people. I get very annoyed when those I don't know, waitresses, store clerks, bank tellers, call me *dear*. They would not call a forty-year-old woman, dear. It's a diminutive, a lack of respect. I've suddenly become an old dear? They have no idea what is raging inside me. It's like a little pat on my head.

Núria: Like a child.

Lorna: Like a child. And I want to say to them "I am not your dear." But I don't bother, because why am I going to upset my day or their day?

Núria: Okay. And what about quality of life and ageing? What does the term "Quality of life" mean to you?

Lorna: I have to realize that I'm speaking from a first-world perspective. I'm very privileged, because I don't have to worry about clothing myself, feeding myself or seeking shelter; people who come from other places, who come from poverty, those things I take for granted are still huge concerns for them. From my privileged position I can say that quality of life for me involves being able to think clearly, to meet with my friends and make new friends, to be physical in one way or another; if I can't run, I can walk. I need to be active to keep the oils in my body running, my engine running. Quality of life? I'm very lucky to have a house that has a garden, a benefit that is not unusual in Canada but I know it might be in Europe. I have a big garden, and to be out there among the vegetables, to be feeding my fish in the fishpond, to walk with my cat through the paths between the trees is a dream and something that I'm afraid I may have to give up someday because I won't be able to do the work anymore. Right now, though, and for the near future, I can handle it.

And I have the privilege of having an ample space to live in, which again I guess might be a Canadian thing. I have a house with more than enough rooms. I live in the country, where there are no street lights, where I can look at the sky and see the stars. I'm very, very lucky and I'm aware of that. My husband and I were never rich, but we saved whatever money we made in order to buy a house with a substantial piece of property because we both loved to be outside. And we needed our separate working spaces in the house because we were both professional writers. We needed to avoid getting into each other's hair or we'd get grumpy. We needed our privacy, so that's what we worked toward from the time we got together.

Núria: It makes sense.

Lorna: Yeah, good wine, good food, [laughs], good friends.

Núria: [laughs] Well, it would be never-ending, eh?

Lorna: Good jewelry, [laughs].

Núria: Right.
Lorna: Oh, and did I mention health, I should say health. I'm taking my health for granted, and as an older person, I should not take it for granted.

Núria: Old and not so old, you know.
Lorna: [laughs]

Núria: Okay, and how do you assess your own quality of life?
Lorna: Some mornings I wake up and say: "Oh, how wonderful! I have another day ahead of me." I hope that I'll continue to feel that way. Other days, since my husband died, I wake up sad and overcome with loneliness, but I try to shake that feeling: I remind myself I'm going for coffee with a friend, I'm going to the gym, I'm going to walk with my cat in the garden. When I can look forward to small things like that, I'm prevented from saying, "Oh, no, another day, and all that's happening is that I'm getting older." That would be terribly depressing. And I can also pull myself out of bed and say: "I'm going to work on a couple of poems today, I'm going to revise a poem today, or start a new short story and see where it takes me." I don't know what I'd do without my writing. I don't know how I'd survive without my writing, without being a writer, without getting up with a writing project in mind. A tonic for me, an elixir, is thinking, "Maybe I'll write a poem today." That's so exciting to me.

Núria: That's a very nice quote: "I don't know how I would survive without my writing." And not just for professional writers, but also for amateur writers, right? Because I do believe in the healing properties of writing, even though you may write something and it heals your neighbor. But then your neighbor writes something that you read and it heals you.
Lorna: I think that's lovely, and it acknowledges who you are within the community.

Núria: Even though we can observe both changes in subject matter and new approaches to pre-established themes in your work, there are some symbols and themes that you have used throughout your career. What is it that drives you to continue writing about these career-long topics and symbols?
Lorna: The landscape we grow up in, the landscape of our childhood gets embedded in us. The minerals of the water we drink come from the place we were born and where we spent our lives as children, those minerals form our bones. We are physically and psychically shaped by where our mothers gave birth to us and that place will never leave us. The big skies of the prairie, the absence of trees, the long, cold, white winters are inside me. When I'm writing and imagining a landscape for the setting of my poems, more often than not it will be the prairies.

When I decided to re-write the Old Testament, from a feminist and pagan perspective, the landscape was Saskatchewan, and not British Columbia though I was living in British Columbia and had been there for over a

decade. That choice made sense on a logical level because the Biblical stories are desert stories, and Saskatchewan gets fifteen inches of rain a year, it's really a desert too. Thus, it was an easy thing to conflate the regions. But, along with that, my interior life is set in the geography of my childhood more than the rainforest where I've lived the last thirty years. Pretty soon I'll have lived more years on the coast than on the prairies. I don't know if things in my writing will shift then or not. I doubt it, because I really do believe that the well that you drink from as a child remains the source that feeds your thirst, and waters your tongue, and makes you speak the way you do, in poetry and in conversation.

NÚRIA: Would you say breaking away with traditional prairie mindsets has played an important role in your work?

LORNA: I grew up really in the patriarchy. I certainly felt that in my house with my mother and my father. My father, for instance, was often unemployed; he worked in the oil fields and when winter would set in and the ground would freeze, he'd be laid off. And it would be very difficult for him and my mother to pay the rent. Very hard for her to figure out how she was going to put groceries on the table. Yet, he didn't want his wife to work. He said: "No wife of mine will work." And so, when she went out and got a job cleaning houses for wealthier people, and then selling tickets at the swimming pool and for the hockey games, he was very angry. His wife working shattered his male pride. He wouldn't have wanted any of his friends to know he alone couldn't support his family.

And I remember as a child –I was eight years old when she went out to work– I remember observing this and thinking something's wrong with this picture, we need the money. It did my mother a world of good to get out of the house. My father was very selfish. She'd ask for five dollars for grocery money, and he'd slide a five-dollar bill across the table and then pull it back, and she'd have to ask again. As a child, I said to myself: "This is never going to happen to me." His power games and their effect on her, made me swear that no matter what, I would be an independent woman, I would get an education, I would never rely on anyone, especially a man, for money. And it also made me look at the world differently, and to put my sense of that injustice in my writing. To vocalize that women have not been given an equal place in my society, in literature, in the workforce, in the mythology, in the stories, in the Bible. What can I do to set that right? What can I do to tell the other side of the stories we were exposed to, the side that women did not get to tell before?

I grew up in a society where women's narratives were not part of what we studied in the schools or read in the literature; they were considered lesser. And it became a goal of mine, that I would explore the perspective of those who were silenced or made invisible, the points of view of women, of the underclass, of the working class, of animals, to tell the stories of what it meant to live in a family like mine and not a middle-class or upper-class

family. I didn't find them in books, I didn't see my father in books, and I wanted to write about him, too.

NÚRIA: How does re-envisioning childhood memories in young-old age contribute to creativity?

LORNA: Memory is such a strange and wonderful thing. I don't know if you remember reading the part in my memoir in which Patrick and I are sitting around talking about our first memory. And I said, my very first memory is my mother stabbing a lizard in the back in the cellar.

NÚRIA: Ah, yes, I remember that.

LORNA: And Patrick said to me, "Lorna, you don't have lizards in Saskatchewan. It'd have been a salamander, it'd have been three-inches long. It wouldn't have been a foot and a half." I argued and argued and argued that it was my memory, that it was a lizard, and that my mother had been so strong, and had put a butcher knife in its back and opened the furnace door and thrown it in. Patrick said, "Phone your mum and ask her if it was a lizard." And I did, and she said, "What are you talking about? I wouldn't have done anything like that." I would have sworn in a court room that that was my first memory, yet my mother said it didn't happen. I've come to realize that what I think I remember I may have invented; I may have dreamt. But it doesn't really matter. That memory still informs how I saw my mother, how I thought she was this powerful woman who could slay dragons. Even though she tells me she didn't do it, I think she did it. I hold that image firmly in my mind, in spite of her denial. Memories, as you move further away from the inciting incident, you revise them even more. So, you can't trust what you think might have happened. What you have to trust is the story you created out of your past, and how central it is to your way of being and the way that you see other people in your life. Whether it happened or not is of no consequence. It's my story, part of who I was as a kid and who I became as an adult. Therefore, I'm going to hang on to it. When I write, certainly non-fiction, I'm drawing on what I think of as my memory, but I might be drawing on invention. And memory is at least eighty per cent invention.

NÚRIA: So, the other day you said something very interesting about wisdom. You said something that it was, I believe, actually very wise: "I don't think I'm wise because I don't have the answers to everything." In my view, that's precisely the point of being wise, acknowledging your lack of knowledge. So, what is your opinion on the common association of old age with wisdom?

LORNA: One of the advantages of old age is that you can dare to admit your failings, your gaps of understanding; that you can dare to be silly, you can dare to say, "I don't know. Why are you asking me? I have no answers to anything even though I've lived longer than you." And I think that willingness to dwell in uncertainty is part, too, of being a poet. The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke said that poetry doesn't try to give you an answer. It tries to

shine a light on the questions. And I believe that profoundly. That's what poetry does. It says, "Let's look at this question again. What is the meaning of life? What is love? How will life end? How will I go on?" Poetry makes you ask those questions in a new way, in a deeper way, but it doesn't try to give you the answer. And I think it's a relief to be older and say, "I don't know." Patrick and I both said that to his children, his two sons whom I'm closest to, who are in their forties now. "Why are you asking us?" we'd say. "We don't know anything." And we were able to live with that and to be comfortable with saying that. It's a release, it's a release.

Núria: And why do you think it's a release?

Lorna: Well, if you know all the answers, you've stopped searching. If you know all the answers, you're not asking the right questions, because the most profound questions are the ones we don't have a clue how to answer.

Núria: That's a very good one. And in relation to wisdom and old age, what is your view on mentorship? Have you ever been a literary mentor? Have you received literary mentorship?

Lorna: At an early point in my career, there were a couple of writers who were a decade older than me who believed in what I was doing, and who said, "You're a fine writer." I needed someone to affirm that I had talent because I didn't have any self-confidence. So, that was crucial. I've been a mentor to dozens, and dozens, and dozens of younger writers, partly because I was a teacher at a university for some twenty-five years. And those students that showed a spark, I wanted to help them in their careers and in their understanding of what good writing was; I wanted to give them a boost over the wall into some kind of success, and I still am in touch with them. Probably one of the sweetest things is that two of Canada's most well-known novelists, who began as poets, said that Patrick's and my life was also a mentorship to them. Because they saw how two writers could live together and be supportive, not envious or jealous. The way we lived –independent but passionate about each other as well as about our art– became a kind of role modelling for them.

I enjoy working with people who are at the beginning or middle of their careers. One of my tasks is to affirm their talent, because I know how much I needed that affirmation, but I also want to challenge them to become better and to work harder at their craft, to get over laziness or the common complaint that there's no time for writing. A real writer always finds time for writing, no matter what's happening in their day-to-day life. I think mentorship is important. I didn't have a lot of it, but I give a lot of it.

Núria: And finally, old age and gender. Do you think there are differences in the way the ageing process is experienced according to gender? Why, or why not?

Lorna: Unfortunately, as women we are more conscious of our bodies and body image. At age ten, eleven, twelve, we already want to lose weight; we already

wish our legs were longer, and our breasts were bigger or smaller; we are never happy with what we have, even if we're beautiful young people. Only later when we look back at photographs of ourselves from years ago, we think, "Why was that young woman so hard on herself? She looks beautiful." And, unfortunately, I think that self-criticism, that negativity drags through to when you're older. You look at yourself and say, "Oh, my gosh, I'm so saggy, my breasts are saggy, my face is wrinkled, even my earlobes are droopy. Do I look like this? Why aren't I looking like the women in magazines who are my age?" But they all have facelifts, or they weren't in the sun when they were children, and they didn't get sun damage. I think that men do not have that problem for the most part. My husband and our friends his age are examples. I have a very good friend who just turned eighty-one and we've been emailing back and forth, and I said something like "I'm an old woman now and I'm conscious of my body's decline, the loss of beauty, the sore knees, etc." And he said, "I don't feel that way at all." And he's ten years older than me. He said, "Men don't feel that way. We still think that we're younger, that we're a catch. That any woman would be happy to be with us." He said it jokingly, but there's truth in it.

I don't remember my husband, who was nine years older than me, ever being concerned about the way he looked until he was ill. I, on the other hand, was. And he was sweet enough to reassure me. But I didn't have to reassure him. He just felt he was a good-looking guy walking through the world whether he was seventy-nine or forty-nine. He never had that problem. I wish, I wish we as women could have the same confidence, I wish we would just love who we are and the way we look. Whether we're stocky or skinny; whether we have legs that are long or short; whether our breasts are large or small. I wish we'd just learn to love ourselves. One of my poems, "News Flash from the Fashion Magazines" was about that, right? Let's worship breasts no matter what they are shaped like. The refrain is "breasts are back" and when I read the poem, I ask women in the audience to shout the line and they join in with gusto. You don't have to have a perfect *Vanity Fair* breast that can't support a pencil underneath it, or that it fits into a champagne glass instead of a beer mug. Let's say bullshit to that. Let's say, whatever breasts I have are beautiful. I am beautiful. As women, we'd be much happier if we could say that to ourselves.

Núria: Indeed. And the last question, are there any specific experiences about both male and female ageing that you find more relevant to write about in your work?

Lorna: My work, since I started writing, has been at least partly autobiographical. So, I write about what is intriguing me at the moment; what's bugging me at the moment. I don't write about something because I think it's an issue I should explore. I write about what takes me away and then I figure out later what it is I'm trying to say. I go into the poem the way you would stand on the top of a mountain in a pair of skis and I push myself off into the snow:

I might fall, I might hit a tree, I might break a leg; I never know what's going to happen. I never know the end point of the poem.
In the process of writing, I'm not able to say in an academic way, well this poem is dealing with ... an abstract term. I just go into it because I have to try to understand something. And I understand something through searching for words, in a poetic way. I go into the language, the rhythms and the music. I never start with an abstract idea or an issue. I hope my poems are full of interesting ideas, but they usually don't begin there. They begin in a more sensory place. There's a Canadian poet from a generation before mine who said, "Wanting to write a poem is like having an interior itch that you have to scratch." I love that. That best describes the urge, the need, to write a poem. I know when the feeling's coming and then I just sit down at my desk and see what's going to happen next.

NÚRIA: So, maybe now you write more about ageing...

LORNA: Because I'm ageing, because I'm old in anyone's definition. So, yes now I'm writing about being an old woman. Being in a body that is not my youthful body. Hoping that my knees don't start aching so much that I can't walk like I used to. Not looking at myself in a bathroom mirror in a hotel room, where the lights are so brutal and unforgiving. "Ah! Who's that person? It can't be me!" Not worrying about how many lines I have in my face. That's what I'll be writing because that's who I am, and my poems embody who I am, and my body embodies my poems. And whether that's because I'm female or it's just me, I don't know.

NÚRIA: I love that quote. "My poems embody who I am, and my body embodies my poems."

LORNA: I'd never said that before, you brought it out of me.

NÚRIA: Well, this is the end of the interview. Thank you so much, Lorna, for your time and patience.

LORNA: You're welcome.

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