

## Migrant women, place and identity in contemporary women's writing

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## **Migrant Women, Place and Identity in Contemporary Women's Writing**

### **Abstract:**

While recent scholarship on migration has reflected growing attention to gender, and to the intersectionality of race, gender and sexuality, there has been little focus on women's emotional and bodily responses to migration in the context of larger structures of sexism, racism, and the legacies of colonialism. In this paper I examine some literary portrayals of how migrant women's relationships with specific places of origin and settlement, both steeped in structural relationships of unequal power and experienced on an immediate, psychological and bodily plane, are fundamental to migrant women's changing sense of belonging and identity. Jamaica Kincaid in her novel *Lucy*, Tsitsi Dangarembga in her novel *Nervous Conditions*, and Dionne Brand in the opening poems of her volume *No Language is Neutral* evoke some of the complex ways in which migration can affect women's lives and identities, thus both complementing and critiquing some contemporary theorisations of migration and migrant identities.

**Keywords:** intersectionality; women; migration; place; embodiment; literature

Place is a concept widely explored within disciplines including geography and, traditionally, literary criticism. Literary scholars have deployed terms such as 'sense of place' and 'a writer's country' in focusing on the emotional significance of place in literature.<sup>i</sup> Human geography started in the 1970s to address the emotional significance of particular places in people's lives and, somewhat later, relationships between places and social identities.<sup>ii</sup> More recently, the field of emotional geographies has emerged to examine 'how emotional relations shape society and space' (Anderson and Smith 2001, p. 9); some migration scholars have begun examining the role played by emotions in shaping migrants' identities and experiences of place, 'home', belonging and transnational relationships (see Ryan 2008, Gorman-Murray 2009, Christou 2011).

Less work, however, has been done on what can be learned from literary

representations of migrants' emotional experience of place. In this paper I examine the portrayals of migrant women's embodied, emotional relationships with place and landscape in two novels and two poems. Drawing on theoretical explorations of place, migration and identity I show how the relationships depicted both reflect larger structures of hierarchy, and are fundamental to the women's changing sense of belonging and identity. In so doing, I argue for the importance of paying attention to literary writings which through their creative explorations of such themes can complement more theoretical contributions on experiences of migration.

In what follows I first provide an overview of the novels and poems, also explaining my reasons for choosing these works. I then introduce the concepts of intersectionality and the politics of location, as well as studies of embodied relationships with landscape, discussing their importance and their limitations in theorising migrant women's identity. Next, I examine the literary writings' portrayals of migrant women's identities and shifting relationships with place. Engaging readers' imaginations and emotional as well as intellectual responses, these works explore nuances, complexities and contradictions sometimes missed in other kinds of approaches; they shed valuable light on the ways in which migrant women may encounter place and landscape, incorporating embodied, emotional relationships with place into their multi-faceted intersectional identities.

### ***The novels and poems: An overview***

*Lucy*, a novel by Jamaica Kincaid, is the account of a young Antiguan woman who migrates to the US to work as an *au pair* for a white American family; it explores her changing sense of self as she grapples with her relationship with her employers and with

the physical landscape. *Nervous Conditions*, by Tsitsi Dangarembga, is a novel set in pre-independence Rhodesia and portrays its women characters' varying migratory trajectories and relationships both to each other and to the places in their lives, as well as the bodily and emotional struggles they experience in a context of profoundly unequal colonial and gender relations. The opening poems of Dionne Brand's volume *No Language is Neutral* explore a migrant woman's relationship with her place of origin, Trinidad, on her return there from Canada, interweaving themes of sexuality, (re-)connection with the land, and the emotional impact of the histories of colonialism and slavery embedded within it.

These texts are diverse in literary form as well as in the range of places of origin and settlement and the experiences of migration portrayed. Their characters and speakers grapple in very different ways with the changes in their lives. Despite these differences, however, all three authors depict migration in part in terms of individual women's struggles to come to terms with a different environment or re-connect with one left behind, and to reach some kind of resolution or wholeness in the face of difficult experiences; they vividly evoke both the women's geographical environments and their bodily and emotional relationships with these places. It is for such reasons that it is so fruitful to draw on them in reflecting on embodiment, place, and migrant women's intersectionalities.

While to varying extents the authors' own experiences can be seen to inform their writings, either in the emotions explored or because the authors themselves followed migratory paths similar to those portrayed, it is their works rather than their biographies that I examine here. These, like much (if not all) creative writing, reflect what I call

imaginative theorising on experience that may or may not be ‘true’ in a literal sense, but which creatively deals with, makes sense of, and contextualises subjective experience.

### ***Intersectionality and Location***

Some of the many studies, in several fields, examining identity in relation to race, gender, sexuality and class—sometimes also addressing migration, citizenship and belonging—are useful in exploring migrant experiences and subjectivities. The concept of intersectionality, which Jennifer Nash defines as ‘the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality’ (2008, p. 2), has positive potential for the examination of migrant women's identities; it enables consideration of the impact of macro-level, intertwining structures of hierarchy and oppression on individual experiences. Many migrant women experience discrimination not solely because of their race, gender, sexuality, or to add another, legal status, but at the points where two or more of these intersect. Their experiences as migrants may also shift; racism or xenophobia may be more in evidence in the country of settlement, or gendered expectations more pronounced in migrant communities strongly adhering to ‘traditional’ ways and structures.

But as is argued by some critics—including Patricia Hill Collins and Floya Anthias, whose work I touch on below—analyses of intersectionality can tend towards oversimplification, neglecting aspects of identity other than (usually non-white) race and gender; this, as Collins points out, is particularly ironic since black American lesbians were among the first to ‘explore interconnections among systems of oppression’ in the lives of black women, and included sexuality prominently in their

work (Collins 1998, p. 79, footnote 2). Some discussions of the concept assume a homogeneity among the ways in which diverse women are affected and reduce great complexity to a rather simplistic notion that ‘black women function exclusively as sites that demonstrate the importance of race-and-gender’ (Nash 2008, p. 7).

‘The politics of location’, a term coined by Adrienne Rich to analyse ‘the limits of feminism and the effects of racism and homophobia in the women's movement in the United States’ (Kaplan 1994, p. 138), is another theoretical lens that has been used in addressing issues of specificity and embodiment, and their relationship to differential power; the concept has since been widely influential in scholarly (and other feminist) grappling with issues of power and oppression.<sup>iii</sup> It is often used, however, in a way which treats ‘location’ metaphorically and rather abstractly, rather than referring to a person's grounded and embodied experience in particular geographical places.<sup>iv</sup> Thus this body of theory, too, at times tends to homogenise and to apparently treat experience as more abstract than embodied. Floya Anthias' formulations about identity and power, while complex and nuanced, also tend towards interpreting ‘location’ and the politics it engenders as an abstraction rather than a grounded reality.

Anthias argues that the concept of identity, even if acknowledged as comprising multiple layers or intersecting categories (race, gender, etc.), has limited value. It suggests, over-simplistically, a property that one ‘possesses’ as a result of one's social ‘location’; Anthias suggests the alternative notion of ‘translocational positionality’ to characterise race and gender as social processes, pointing to the importance of narratives in which people frame their own sense of positioning in society (Anthias 2002, 2008). Her formulation takes account of nuance, process, and people's own role in

constructing their sense of themselves, but she appears sometimes, as in the following passage, to conflate the metaphorical and literal meanings of words like ‘location’ and ‘place’.

...the term ['translocational'] signals a refusal to think of issues of population movement and settlement in terms of dislocation as this assumes a fixed and given location from which we become dislodged. Although this may appear in our imaginations to be the case, our locations are multiple and span a number of terrains such as those of gender and class as well as ethnicity and nation, political and value systems. To be dislocated at the level of nation is not necessarily a dislocation in other terms, if we find we still exist within the boundaries of our social class and our gender (2008, p. 15).

While it is true that ‘our locations are multiple’, and migration may not involve a shift in all aspects of identity, I argue that it is still important to acknowledge that a person's geographical location is intertwined with other aspects of her/his ‘positionality’ in terms of race, gender, sexuality and class. A change in geographical location through migration may involve subtle shifts in the connections between a migrant's emotional interactions with place and sense of self and political positioning. However, despite greater attention being paid to situated, local experience—as with the fairly recent shift in focus in the migration literature from transnationalism to ‘translocality’, defined in one influential text as “groundedness” during movement’ (Brickell and Datta 2011, p. 4)—and even within the growing body of literature on gender and migration, there is still little focus on migrant women's emotional and bodily responses to the places they leave and inhabit, in the context of macro-level oppressive structures.

### ***Literary contributions***

Jennifer Nash points out that some scholars have used poetry and narrative to ‘argue

that black women's experiences are “multiplicative”. She argues that these scholars' use of poetry to express such experiences ‘suggests a shortcoming in the methodological orientation of intersectional theory’, a failure to analyse adequately the complexities of individuals' experiences of micro- and macro-level inequality and injustice (2008, pp. 7-8). The point that creative writing can convey nuances missed by much theoretical writing is borne out by the vivid portrayals of relationships with place in much literature by migrants. The writings examined here portray individual migrant women's subjective, visceral relationships with place and landscape, relationships inflected with both the intersecting facets of individuals' identities, and the larger structures of hierarchy affecting their lives.

### ***Landscape and embodiment in theory and literature***

Barbara Bender suggests that ‘we broaden the idea of landscape and understand it to be the way in which people... understand and engage with the material world around them’, pointing out ‘that people's being-in-the-world is always historically and spatially contingent’. She writes that, ‘depending on who we are (gender, status, ethnicity and so on) and the biographical moment, we understand and engage with the world (real and imagined) in different ways. Which bit of ourselves we bring to the encounter also depends on the context. And as neither place nor context nor self stays put, things are always in movement, always becoming’ (Bender and Winer 2001, pp. 3-4).

Selves and identities, multifaceted, intersecting and reflecting larger structures, are forged in particular contexts and environments, in relationship with others and with place. Moreover, these relationships are, fundamentally, sensual: as Sara Ahmed writes,



[t]he immersion of a self in a locality is... not simply about inhabiting an already constituted space (from which one can simply depart and remain the same). Rather, the locality intrudes into the senses: it defines what one smells, hears, touches, feels, remembers... the subject and space leak into each other, *inhabit each other* (1999, p. 341; emphasis in original).

And while much work that has been done on embodied relationships with place is concerned with people's interactions with familiar localities, scholars (including Ahmed) have begun to ask what significance for migration have

the crucial ways in which we experience and respond to the world not just at the level of representation, but through the very nerve fibers of the body. Through our synapses, through our skin and our blood, through hot and cold, sound and resonance, smell and touch... through emotions that register as bodily affects: hope, fear, disgust or visceral pleasure (Wise and Chapman 2005, p. 2).

Migrants leave, pass through, settle in, places familiar and new; they respond to them according to their experiences and identities, in as embodied and immediate a way as anyone 'rooted' in a home community.<sup>v</sup> And despite the widespread assumption 'that movement creates a *dis*-location between people and landscape...[d]islocation is also relocation. People are always in some relationship to the landscape they move through—they are never nowhere' (Bender and Winer 2001, p. 8).

Embodied relationships with place, which shift as migrants interact with different environments, may also have wider implications. Migration may involve a refashioning of already complex identities; as landscape (in the sense of relationship with the environment) shifts with travel and resettlement, so too may individuals' understandings of themselves and the world. The politics of a migrant's location—understood in both the literal and the metaphorical sense—may undergo subtle shifts, or profound change.

*Identity and the weather*

Among the first experiences described in many fictional accounts of migration from warmer climates to the northern hemisphere is a migrant's encounter with the weather: cold, wet or snowy weather is often represented as an integral part of the overall emotional experience of migration. Wintry conditions, however, rather than being symbols or external analogues for internal states as is implied by Elizabeth Bowen's term 'psychological weather' (cited in Tindall 1991, p. 84), are in themselves meaningful components of the whole experience—which may be characterised by exclusion, homesickness, uprooting, loneliness and/or hostility—and intrinsically linked to the shifts in identity experienced.

Kincaid, in *Lucy*, uses weather as a component of her protagonist's wider emotional landscape. The narrative is written from the point of view of Lucy, a young Antiguan woman who travels to the US to become an *au pair*. The story opens with Lucy's first day in the US, later tracing her struggles to come to terms with her new family and country and to distance herself from Antigua and from her oppressive, love/hate relationship with her mother.

Towards the beginning of the novel, Kincaid writes (from Lucy's viewpoint):

That morning, the morning of my first day... was a sunny morning. It was not the sort of bright sun-yellow making everything curl at the edges, almost in fright, that I was used to, but a pale-yellow sun, as if the sun had grown weak from trying too hard to shine; but still it was sunny, and that was nice and made me miss my home less. And so, seeing the sun, I got up and put on a dress, a gay dress made out of madras cloth—the same sort of dress that I would wear if I were at home and setting out for a day in the country. It was all wrong. The sun was shining but the air was cold. It was the middle of January, after all. But I did not know that the sun could shine and the air remain cold; no one had ever told me. What a feeling that was! How can I explain? Something I had always known... something I took completely for granted, 'the sun is shining, the air is warm,' was not so. I was no longer in a tropical zone, and this realization now entered my life like a flow of water dividing formerly dry and solid ground, creating two banks, one of which was my past—so familiar and predictable...—the other my future, a gray blank, an overcast seascape on which rain was falling and no boats were in sight. I was no longer in a tropical zone and I felt cold inside and out, the first time such a sensation had come over me (1994, pp. 5-6).

The language in this passage, while simple, as in the phrase ‘it was sunny, and that was nice and made me miss my home less’, is profound and evocative, clearly illustrating the centrality of the weather to Lucy's experience of arrival. Sara Ahmed writes that migration involves ‘a spatial reconfiguration of an embodied self; a transformation in the very skin through which the body is embodied. Hence the experience of moving often to a new home is most felt through the surprises in sensation: different smells, different sounds as [sic] night, more or less dust’ (1999, pp. 341-342)—and heat and cold. Lucy feels such ‘surprises’ as a fundamental shift in her experience of her embodied self. A previous certainty is questioned for the first time. Her previous and current lives seem split; the contrast between shining sun and cold air threatens her whole sense of reality, and of self. She feels ‘cold’, ‘inside and out’: the chill is felt bodily, mirroring the physical environment and deeply influencing Lucy's inner experience.

#### *Embodied experiences of return*

Splits in identity and relationships with two places are also evoked in the experiences of Nyasha, in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. The novel's narrator is Tambu, a young girl growing up in rural pre-independence Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia). She struggles to gain an education, eventually managing to attend the mission school run by her uncle, Babamukuru, the family patriarch, and later to win a scholarship to a convent school. Central to the novel is Tambu's close relationship with Nyasha, her cousin, who spent her early childhood in Britain, before returning to Rhodesia. Tambu becomes increasingly critical both of colonial education and of gender relations in her cousin's

family, as she watches Nyasha's increasingly desperate struggles with her father, and eventual anorexia. The novel is Tambu's adult, critical and emotionally sensitive retrospective narration of these times as she grapples with the changes in her own and her cousin's life.

While Dangarembga portrays various instances of women's migration, it is Nyasha's return to Rhodesia that is the most difficult. She has benefited from her stay in England, where she gained in political understanding and was exposed to alternative roles and identities. But she comments to Tambu that her parents should have sent her home. Her dual acculturation, a result of colonialism, has left her not knowing where she belongs and unable, on her return, to re-adjust to the patriarchal structures and interactions in her family. The fact that she was powerless to influence her parents' migration choices compounds her difficulties. In the following passage she talks to Tambu about her experience of return:

‘Actually’, confessed Nyasha.. ‘actually we were frightened that day [when the family returned to Rhodesia]. And confused. You know, it's easy to forget things when you're that young. We had forgotten what home was like. I mean really forgotten—what it looked like, what it smelt like, all the things to do and say and not to do and say. It was all strange and new. Not like anything we were used to. It was a real shock!’

...’We shouldn't have gone’, Nyasha was saying, looking disheartened. ‘The parents ought to have packed us off home... Maybe that would have been best. For them at least, because now they're stuck with hybrids for children. And they don't like it... It offends them... And I don't know what to do about it, Tambu... I can't help having been there and grown into the me that has been there... Really, it's very difficult’ (Dangarembga 1988, p. 78).

Nyasha highlights the ‘shock’ of return in terms of sensory experience: ‘home’ had become ‘strange and new’ in immediate, physical ways. Moreover, Nyasha’s use of the word ‘hybrid’ contrasts with that of theorists who celebrate ‘hybrid subjectivities’ for their transgression of boundaries and fixed, binary notions of identity. Migrant experience is thought to generate creative forms of identity, a subversive, hybrid ‘third

space' (Bhabha 1994). But Nyasha's experiences are one fictional illustration of how in the context of colonialism and patriarchal relationships, migration's disruptions can be alienating and painful. Her migration greatly heightens her experiences of racism and sexism; having been made aware of the oppressive forces at work in her life without gaining the resources necessary to combat them, she fruitlessly resists patriarchal family structures and colonialist attitudes about the perceived superiority of Western culture to 'backward' African ways.

An especially powerful reflection of Nyasha's emotional and bodily experience of the pain of her struggles is provided by her dieting and later anorexia. Her attempts to become slim are a form of protest against her father's standards of decency and modesty for women. Nyasha's 'refusal of food at the family table or her self-induced vomiting after having to eat there is a response to the sexual and cultural politics enacted there' (Thomas 1992, p. 31). In one instance, she resists the ritual of waiting to eat until her father has been served the best food, helping herself out of turn; later, having been reprimanded, she refuses to eat at all. Nyasha is frustrated at herself for not being able to 'take it' when her father 'puts on his God act' (1988, p. 190) (despite her incisive understanding of his behaviour's roots); her dieting and later disease are simultaneously a means of resistance and of self-punishment.

Her illness results from gender oppression but also from her suffering under colonialism: she undergoes the contradictory pressures of having to be both 'decent' in patriarchal Shona terms<sup>vi</sup> and successful in western ones. Her pain, articulated through a predominantly female illness, is one instance of the 'nervous conditions' which the novel's title and epigraph—'The condition of the native is a nervous condition', from

Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*—suggest colonised people may develop. Thomas draws on Sartre's argument that colonised peoples 'bury' their unacceptable rage at domination before being able to undertake struggles for independence. '[I]f this suppressed fury fails to find an outlet,' Sartre writes, it is turned inward, devastating the oppressed themselves. 'Nervous conditions' such as Nyasha's anorexia—and, in one episode, her vicious self-harm using shards of pottery— may result (Thomas 1992, pp. 26-7; Fanon 1967, p. 16).

Thus there is a collusion of forces of racism and sexism, felt at the level of her own body, affecting Nyasha's experiences of migration, her sense of herself and her relationship to place. Such experiences are little examined in the migration literature, although Whitney Edwards (2009) coins the term 'migration trauma' to describe the experiences of women characters in Caribbean migrant writers' works. Gannit Ankori writes of displacement as experienced bodily and represented in the work of Palestinian visual artists:

Displacements... imprint themselves upon the body and inevitably rupture its defining skin-contour. Hence, regroupings require a reconstruction of the skin, a redefinition and repositioning of the body, of the Self. ...it is precisely at the painful juncture where bruised skins, dislocated bodies and lost homes intersect that works of Art come into being (Ankori in Ahmed *et al.* 2003, p. 86).

Nyasha's piercing of her skin in the self-harm episode referred to above can be interpreted in this light, as a rupture reflecting her painful experiences of displacement, though resulting not in creativity but in her ultimately self-destructive attempts to take control of her body.

#### *Pain, dis/connection and the land*

Lucy's relationship with place, too, is intertwined with her painful awareness of

racism and the colonialism associated with her place of origin. Her anger leads her to be on her guard and distant. Simultaneously, she longs to connect with the people and places around her.

While Lucy was relieved to leave Antigua, her relationship with her employers' family and particularly with the mother, Mariah, is sometimes fraught. Lucy explains her attempts to cut all ties with her place of origin, because of the pain associated with it, when she says:

I felt that if I could put enough miles between me and the place from which that letter [from her mother] came, and if I could put enough events between me and the events mentioned in the letter, would I not be free to take everything just as it came and not see hundreds of years in every gesture, every word spoken, every face? (Kincaid 1994, p. 31)

She implies that Mariah possesses this freedom that she herself lacks; she struggles to separate herself from Antigua in order to be free of the weight of colonialism's long history, and of her mother's impact upon her.

Her relationship with her place of origin thus affects her relationship both with Mariah and with her current environment. There is both affection and distance between the two women; underlying the warmth are Lucy's endeavours to make sense of Mariah's behaviour, happiness and privilege, and unconscious racism. Her critiques of Mariah, while stemming from her perspective on racism, also reflect Lucy's simultaneous longing for and rejection of the possibility of an emotional connection to nature. She appears sometimes to envy Mariah, whose obliviousness to the history of US appropriation of Native American land enables her to enjoy an unproblematic attachment to the luxurious house and surrounding countryside where the family go every summer.

This holiday home has radically different meanings and resonances for the two

women. For Mariah it is a place of freedom, peace and retreat, much needed in light of the burdens of family life and her conflict with her husband, which she understands in feminist terms. Lucy, conversely, feels that the land's beauties can only be enjoyed by her white, middle-class American employers at the expense of the Native Americans who were once its inhabitants, seeing the erasure of this violent and painful history as implicit in Mariah's very happiness. In the light of this radical difference of experience, we might ask, as does Julian Thomas of two separate communities inhabiting the same landscapes, 'Is it more accurate to say that there is a single physical landscape, which is perceived in different ways', or to speak of 'multiple, distinct yet overlapping landscapes', occupying the same space (in Bender and Winer 2001, pp. 181-2)? The contrast between the landscapes in this one location is based on power, on the two women's very different positioning and intersectionalities.

Lucy's attempts to distance herself from the environment are not always successful. When she and Mariah's family leave the summer house Lucy *decides* not to miss the land, describing it with wistful affection at the same time:

I said goodbye to everything one month before we left. I would not miss the lake; it stank anyway, and the fish that lived in it were dying from living in it. I would not miss the long hot days, I would not miss the cool shaded woods, I would not miss the strange birds, I would not miss animals that came out at dusk looking for food—I would not miss anything, for I long ago had decided not to miss anything (Kincaid 1994, pp. 81-2).

Despite this decision, and the anger which has pervaded Lucy's encounters with the land, this passage reflects a longing for the simple attachment to this beautiful place which she feels Mariah enjoys.

Some of the complexity of Lucy's relationship to place can also be seen in her feelings about snow. As shown above, her initial experience of the North American



winter contributes greatly to her sense of uncertainty. Her feelings about the weather change over time, however, as does her sense of herself in relation to the world.

When snow falls again, the following spring, it seems to represent for Lucy the beginning of a new history and self, away from her island and mother. At one point, after noting that the snow had previously been just an ‘annoyance’, she says:

this time when the snow fell, even I could see that there was something to it—it had a certain kind of beauty... The days were longer now, the sun set later, the evening sky seemed lower than usual, and the snow was the color of a half-cooked egg-white, making the world seem soft and lovely and —unexpectedly, to me—nourishing. That the world I was in could be soft, lovely and nourishing was more than I could bear, and so I stood there and wept, for I didn't want to love one more thing in my life, didn't want one more thing that could make my heart break into a million little pieces at my feet (1994, pp. 22-23).

This passage suggests Lucy's pain at experiencing her environment, despite her attempts at self-protective distancing, as ‘nourishing and beautiful’.

Lucy's simultaneous desire for and resistance to emotional connection to places and people, and her sense of being an outsider in a predominantly white country, are evoked as the novel ends. She has achieved something of what she had wanted on leaving Antigua: distance from family, independence, life in a place where relative anonymity is possible. But her desired happiness and fulfilment are elusive. She sadly describes her sense that the scene outside her window looks unreal, feeling that she will never be ‘taken in’ (1994, pp. 153-4).

Dionne Brand's writings, in their sustained engagement with the meanings and effects of her migration to Canada and return trips to Trinidad, evoke a complex and nuanced relationship with her place of origin. The themes Brand explores in her poetry collection, *No Language is Neutral*—language and politics, the pain of legacies of and

ongoing oppression, and struggles towards dignity and empowerment—are continuously informed by her evocations of migration and return.

The collection's first two poems echo an assertion Brand makes elsewhere: that, because of the deep meaning and pain that her place of origin holds for her, '[y]ou cannot simply go to a place, to visit friends, to pick mangoes on your way to the beach and count on that being all. You cannot meet yourself without being shaken, taken apart' (1994, pp. 54-55). These poems evoke both the meaning and the pain of reconnecting with specific places in Trinidad.

Especially when read with the second poem, 'return', the first can be interpreted as a profound reconnecting with land which on the one hand colonisation, and on the other hand migration, have wrested from the speaker. The speaker reclaims land associated with slavery and colonisation, connecting it instead with herself, her female lover and with poetry. The poem begins:

this is you girl, this cut of road up  
to blanchicheuse, this every turn a piece  
of blue and earth carrying on, beating, rock and  
ocean this wearing away, smoothing the insides  
pearl of shell and coral

It continues, repeating 'this is you girl' at the beginning of each stanza: a phrase that at once identifies the land with the speaker, the land with her lover, the land with the poem itself.

The speaker implicitly discovers or rediscovers land her lover has not seen, seeing her in Trinidad's land and sea. The third stanza begins 'this is you girl, even though you never see it', suggesting that despite distance, the land is a source of not only her own but her lover's belonging and being. The speaker feels her love and passion for the

woman reflected in the power of the land: 'this is you girl, this is the poem no woman/ ever write for a woman because she 'fraid to touch/ this river boiling like a woman in she sleep'. The poem evokes the land 'where you make sense': both poem and land give meaning to the speaker herself and to her feeling for her lover.

The land is described in terms that evoke a woman's body: the image of the ocean 'smoothing the insides' suggests the insides of both rock, 'pearl of shell and coral', and of the speaker's own body. There is mention of 'that pulse of the heart/ that stretches up to maracas': the heartbeat is located in this particular environment. The poem also connects *itself* to the land: 'this is you girl, this is the poem no woman/ ever write for a woman because she 'fraid to touch this river boiling like a woman in she sleep'. This linking of the poem and the landscape—both are 'you', the woman loved by the speaker—suggests also that both are expressions of powerful, almost frightening connection and intimacy.

The poem closes with the following stanza:

this is you girl, something never waning or forgetting  
something hard against the soul  
this is where you make sense, that the sight becomes  
tender, the night air human, the dull silence full  
chattering, volcanoes cease, and to be awake is  
more lovely than dreams

The line 'this is where you make sense' can be read to refer both to the place—it is a place of meaning and a source of being—and to the poem itself, which makes and expresses deep connections.

This stanza evokes a sense of sensual as well as emotional fulfilment: the land encountered, like the speaker's lover, has an abiding and dependable quality, 'never waning or forgetting'. Meaning emerges from relationship with both, and fulfilment and

relationship are attained through what is both seen and heard. The poem ends, indeed, with a line celebrating life and the state of being awake in all one's senses in this place: 'to be awake is more lovely than dreams'.

In an essay, Brand evokes an emotional and spiritual connection to Trinidad experienced on a return visit, and strongly affected by her experiences of Canada. There, Theresa Zackodnik points out, 'her experience of racism has been one of division, experiencing herself as self and other and resulting in what W.E.B. DuBois has called "double consciousness"' (1995, p. 197). On her return to Trinidad, Brand immediately becomes aware of the contrast between the two places in terms of everyday racial experience. The relief at not having to be constantly aware of her 'difference' is tangible; she feels, as she and her partner arrive, that they are 'slip[ping] into our skin' as 'the gravity of racial difference disappears' (Brand 1994, p. 59). As in the poem examined above, she expresses her feelings about return here in evocative, bodily terms, illustrating again Ahmed's contention that migration is 'a transformation in the very skin through which the body is embodied' (1999, p. 342). Brand experiences her racial identity differently in Canada and Trinidad; travel enables a shift in her experience of her own intersectional self and a greater sense of emotional and bodily connection with her environment.

The second poem in *No Language is Neutral*, 'return', describes a Caribbean island with both apparent nostalgia and underlying violence. The poem opens with the line: 'So the street is still there, still melting with sun', suggesting that, on her return, the speaker finds little has changed and creating a sense of memory and of wistfulness; Repetition of the word 'still', throughout the poem, suggests immobility, in terms of

both the continuing presence of the past, and the absence of movement in the scene.

There is, one might imagine, no wind, no human or animal movement indicating life.

But the description, as it unfolds, also reveals underlying ominousness, harshness and violence. Several lines appear at first to be simply descriptive of a tropical environment and the effects of its heat: there is mention of a ‘scorpion orchid’ growing by the road, of people with ‘eyelashes scorched’. But these and other phrases build up as the poem progresses into a subtle sense of threat, sometimes hidden, sometimes more overt. The line ‘[s]till razor grass burnt and/ cropped’ ominously suggests the land’s destruction for the planting of more profitable crops. Mention of ‘the trickle of sweat and cold flush of heat raising the smell of cotton and skin’ suggests hot weather and clothing worn to keep cool; simultaneously, particularly with the mention of cotton, there are echoes of slave labour. The words ‘still/ the butcher’s blood staining the walls of the market’ could refer either to a butcher selling meat in a food market, or to the butchery of slavery, as reflected in a slave market. The fact that in most of these cases alternative interpretations of the descriptive imagery are possible only serves to heighten the sense of unease and menace conveyed.

The poem ends with an evocation of the brutality the islands have seen that, despite the unfolding violence of the poem, shocks because of the surface nostalgia: ‘still the hard, distinct, brittle smell of/ slavery’. This line suggests that the memory of slavery’s agonies is embodied in the land itself, as real, present and tangible as its colours, smells and heat.

These two poems, juxtaposed and in stark contrast to each other, explore the many, layered meanings of one location, for one migrant woman. In the first, belonging, love

and connection are powerfully conveyed through language evocative of both sexuality and sensuous relationship to land; the second communicates a sense of the memory of violence and slavery embedded in the place, along with the nostalgia of a return migrant rediscovering a landscape 'still' unchanged. The two poems taken together reflect the speaker's multi-faceted identity, echoed in her emotional responses as she encounters her place of origin.

***Fiction and poetry: imaginative theorising***

The novels and poems examined here explore how migration results in the women's identities coming to encompass, sometimes painfully, multiple perspectives and complex relationships with place. The bodily and emotional alienation, and sometimes re-connecting, portrayed, and the emphasis on weather and particular landscapes in these writings are important pointers to the often neglected materiality of migrant women's lives. The writings powerfully evoke a variety of ways in which migrant women experience relationships with place that are emotional, embodied and inflected with their racial, gender, and sexual identities.

The two novels depict young women undergoing intense emotional difficulty as they grapple with a changing sense of self in relation to place and landscape, and the oppressive forces which their migrations have brought into sharp relief. The poems explore intense emotional responses to a place of origin, communicated in a way powerfully evocative of a complex, multifaceted self. In all cases, intersectionality is reflected in the depictions of women's sensual, embodied relationships with place, nature and landscape. The power, immediacy and complexity of these writings provide a

commentary on some individual, emotional effects of migration; I argue that they thus point to some of the limitations and fill in some of the gaps of those theories of identity, migration and intersectionality which neglect the material, emotional and embodied dimensions of women's migration and relationships with place.

Such theories can shed much light on these themes, as argued above. Concepts including intersectionality and the politics of location facilitate thinking about how migrant women experience macro-level structures of privilege, disadvantage and inequality. Recent work on emotional and embodied relationships with place and landscape illuminate such concepts still further. However, there is a tendency in some of this work to homogenise and over-generalise individuals' experiences, identities and relationships, and to make abstract even concepts which appear to emphasise groundedness, such as 'embodiment' and 'location'.

Scholars such as Ryan and Christou use in-depth interviews and narrative analysis to examine the role of emotions in shaping migrants' identities and experiences of place. Such work helps to ground theorising about migration and identity through theoretically informed interpretations of migrants' accounts of their lived experience.

Explorations of migration-related themes in fiction and poetry have some similarities to the narratives such studies cite. Many creative writings, too, add nuance and complexity to more abstract understandings of individual experience. Literary writings also differ, however, in that their authors intentionally invite the reader in to the experiences and emotions explored, through their creative use of language, evocations of place, and complex characterisations. Also, the authors themselves reflect experience and emotion in their texts, rather than analysing (other) migrants' experiences and

relationships. Thus, these writings engage in a sort of imaginative theorising on experience; while neither quantifiable nor verifiable, and whether or not they are direct reflections of lived experience, they deal with subjective realities, creatively and imaginatively rendered.

As such, and thus often implicitly or explicitly acknowledging differences within “groups” such as migrant women, the literature highlights the personal impacts of macro political processes and in so doing makes key contributions to debates.

I concur with Françoise Lionnet, who writes that she does not

... suggest that the particular (that is, personal and local) experience of a given writer should be taken as an exemplar of the general (that is sociopolitical and global) situation of a collectivity, ... Nor am I suggesting that individual and personal voices are the only legitimate locus for analyzing global political issues... My focus is on the processes that produce the personal and make it historically and politically unique (Lionnet 1995, p. 4).

She continues,

Literature allows us to enter into the subjective processes of writers and their characters and thus to understand better the unique perspectives of subjects who are agents of transformation ... in their own narratives as opposed to being the objects of knowledge, as in the discourse of social science (1995, p. 8).

What literature can contribute to understandings of migration depends, of course, on the strategies of the particular writer. Dangarembga portrays more than one migrant character; the characters’ intertwined stories reflect differing migratory trajectories, thus conveying some of the complexity and individuality of migrant women’s and girls’ experiences. Kincaid’s first-person account of one girl’s grappling with the issues and emotions her migration raises sometimes invites readers in, sometimes keeps them at a distance—rather reflecting the character’s self-protective distancing from her environment. The strong characterisation of this narrator creates a personal portrait of the issues Kincaid deals with, including racism, feminism, and colonialism; readers may



engage with these issues through their internal conversations with Lucy as an imagined but vivid personality.

In their rich, evocative language, Brand's poems explore deep, sometimes contradictory feelings, informed by political understandings, of connection and pain upon returning to a place of origin. Complex meanings are concentrated in a few lines of richly textured poetry; Brand's distilled emotional expression is extremely powerful in conveying the complexities of her speaker's response to return.

All three writers illustrate some of migration's personal and emotional effects in a context of global historical and ongoing inequality, and the ways in which migrant women's relationships with place and embodied intersectionalities may shift and unfold. Readings of these (and other) literary writings, enhanced by such theoretical tools as the concept of intersectionality, can potentially add greatly to our understandings of the effects of migration on experiences of race, gender, sexuality, power and identity.

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<sup>i</sup> Studies in ‘literary geography’ at the turn of the twentieth century examined particular landscapes’ influence on literary works; more recently, scholars have explored the multiple meanings of literary representations of place. See Tindall 1991, Johnson 2000. Matley (1987) gives a useful overview of trends from the 1880s to the 1980s.

<sup>ii</sup> See for example Massey 1994, Davidson and Bondi 2004.

<sup>iii</sup> Mohanty (1987) built explicitly on Rich's ideas; see also Kaplan 1994, Rowe 2005 and others.

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<sup>iv</sup> Though arguing a somewhat different point, Smith and Katz write that there is a tendency for spatial metaphors, such as location, position and locality, 'to become virtually free-floating abstractions, the source of their grounding unacknowledged' (1993, p. 80).

<sup>v</sup> Barbara Bender writes of 'a tendency to assume that a rooted, familiar sense of place requires staying put'; she cites a study of nomadic communities in Mongolia, for whom there is 'an ego-centred world in which the "centre" moves', and points out that for contemporary Roma, the caravan, whether on the move or temporarily stationed, is 'home' (Bender and Winer 2001, p. 7).

<sup>vi</sup> The Shona people are Zimbabwe's majority ethnic group, comprising about 70% of the population.

SHARON KRUMMEL is Co-ordinating Officer of the Sussex Centre for Migration Research and the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, University of Sussex.  
ADDRESS: Sussex Centre for Migration Research (SCMR), Arts B 363, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QN, UK. Email: [s.a.krummel@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:s.a.krummel@sussex.ac.uk)