

Worlding Asian American Literature

Transnationalism, Hemispherism, Planetarity

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CONTENTS

Abstract vii

Acknowledgements ix

Introduction: Transnational Asian American Studies 1

PART ONE – BETWEEN ASIA AND AMERICA 51

1 Traversing Chinese Borders: Hualing Nieh's *Mulberry and Peach* 55

2 Crossing Black Water: Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music* 100

PART TWO – TRANSPACIFIC AND HEMISPHERIC 145

3 Interconnectedness: Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* 149

4 Unpurely Japanese: Karen Tei Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles* 191

PART THREE – TO EUROPE 237

5 Vietnamese/Americans in Paris: Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* 241

6 The Pursuit of Lightness: Jhumpa Lahiri's *In altre parole* 284

Conclusion: Beyond Transnationalism, Toward Planetarity 331

Bibliography 345

LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1: *A Tale for the Time Being*'s 'Chinese box' structure 174

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the theme of mobility and the related concept of transnationalism through an analysis of selected works of contemporary Asian American literature by Meena Alexander, Jhumpa Lahiri, Hualing Nieh, Ruth Ozeki, Monique Truong and Karen Tei Yamashita. My study of the life and works of these authors shows how Asian Americans' transnational links include the United States and their originary or ancestral country in Asia but also other countries located all around the world: in North and South America as well as in Europe. Thus, this dissertation contributes to a revision of transnational Asian American studies through an expansion of its East-West, U.S.-centred transpacific perspective towards a planetary model. Indeed, the cross-border links described and established by these writers exceed traditional definitions of transnationalism, which therefore prove to be inadequate to represent such a wide range of ties. Hence, I point to the ways in which these authors' and their characters' transnational ties can be described by other paradigms, able to highlight multilateral connections that happen at a national but also hemispheric and planetary level. This thesis also contributes to recent discussions of mobility that, while acknowledging the centrality of mobility in today's world, do not uncritically praise it, considering instead how mobility is experienced differently according to factors such as ethnicity, class, gender and age. In order to critique celebratory or neutral understandings of mobility and transnationalism, I have coined the terms 'negative mobility' and 'negative transnationalism'. Finally, my analysis goes beyond ethnographic or

historiographic approaches to the study of Asian American literature as it highlights the formal aspects of the literary texts under examination, demonstrating how form has a central function to the narration. I especially focus on the role of languages other than English and of translingualism in these narratives since these linguistic features further emphasise the positioning of Asian American literature in the world.

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INTRODUCTION:

TRANSNATIONAL ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

Mobility has been a constant feature of human history: people have travelled in order to survive, to explore other regions, to find new resources or artistic inspiration. Today, more than ever,

> [a]ll the world seems to be on the move. Asylum seekers, international students, terrorists, members of diasporas, holidaymakers, business people, sports stars, refugees, backpackers, commuters, the early retired, young mobile professionals, prostitutes, armed forces – these and many others fill the world's airports, buses, ships, and trains. The scale of this travelling is immense. (Sheller and Urry 2006, 207)

If the twentieth century has been defined as "the Age of Migration" (Castles and Miller 1998), the number of migrants and travellers – be they forced or voluntary – has only increased in the twenty-first century. In Edward Said's words, "our age ... is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration" (2000, 174). Therefore, a critical reflection on this phenomenon

and its consequences – such as the creation of transnational networks – in the social sciences as well as in the humanities is essential.

This thesis explores concepts of mobility, border crossing and transnationalism through an analysis of selected works of contemporary Asian American literature. While the social sciences certainly help us understand migratory and transnational processes, the tools and materials that they employ are limited. A sociological study, which is conducted by using a systematic methodology, provides a general theory based on facts and figures. Literary works, instead, are created by immigrants themselves, and so they provide direct access to the immigrant writer's imagination, which they can use to express their thoughts, memories and feelings relating to their first-hand experiences of migration. Importantly, "literature contributes to voicing experiences erased or simply ignored in historical ways of knowing and representation" (Dirlik 2002, 211). Thus, literature and literary criticism can expand our knowledge of migration and transnationalism by filling the gaps in official, historical accounts of migratory and transnational experiences and by concentrating on aspects that are not strictly social, economic or political but rather emotional, affective and interior. Moreover, as the Vietnamese American writer Monique Truong asserts, a literary work can engage the readers' emotions: "fiction's greatest strength is its ability to create the conditions necessary for empathy" (quoted in Farley 2017), that is, for a deeper understanding of 'the Other'. Hence, literature encourages readers to engage in a cosmopolitan reading that is instrumental in building a cosmopolitan

(literary) citizenship (see Feghali 2018), which is the sine qua non of a peaceful living together in our mobile and interconnected world.

Transnationalism has been defined in the social sciences as "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994, 7). The transnational turn in Asian American studies represents its most recent development: it emerged during the late 1980s in response to post-1965 demographic changes in the Asian North American population as well as to the phenomenon of globalisation. The transnational perspective has drawn attention to previously overlooked texts written by authors who maintain a strong connection with their Asian countries of origin as well as other countries. The writers under examination belong to this category, and they are: the Indian American Meena Alexander and Jhumpa Lahiri, the Chinese American Hualing Nieh, the Japanese North American Ruth Ozeki, the Vietnamese American Monique Truong and the Japanese American Karen Tei Yamashita.

My choice of authors and their works reflects the preoccupations of the feminist and the transnational phases of Asian American studies, which have followed the initial cultural nationalist phase. Therefore, on the one hand, I have selected works by women writers to stress their significance within the Asian American literary scene; on the other hand, these works are not U.S.-centered. Thus, these texts constitute a counter-canon of Asian American literature as they challenge previous definitions of Asian American identity and literature that stressed masculinity and Americanness. Finally, it is on the basis

of the specific forms of mobility and transnationalism that these authors and their works portray and exemplify that I have chosen them, not according to any partiality for these authors' ethnicity.

In the first part of this introduction, I explain how transnationalism has become relevant to Asian American studies. To do this, I outline the development of Asian American studies from the 1960s up to the transnational turn, underscoring the differences between the groups who come under the category 'Asian American'. However, I concentrate only on the communities that are relevant to this study, that is, Chinese, Indian and Vietnamese Americans and Japanese North Americans. I then define the key concepts of transnationalism, diaspora, globalisation and cosmopolitanism. As they all imply the crossing of borders and the creation of links between different geographical areas, they are often employed interchangeably as if they were synonymous. Yet important differences exist between these notions: I therefore compare them to highlight their dissimilarities and to justify the choice of the adjective transnational – rather than diasporic, global or cosmopolitan – to characterise much of the focus of this dissertation.

AN OVERVIEW OF ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

Asian Americas

The umbrella term 'Asian American' was coined in the late 1960s under the influence of the Civil Rights Movement for political reasons, that is, to give voice to Asian people living in the United States. The only way to give visibility to Asian groups in relation to the dominant group was to form a broad-based movement that included both Asian immigrants and American-born Asians. Therefore, the price to be paid for political and cultural visibility was to level differences between the various Asian subgroups in the United States and to promote political solidarity in the light of common experiences and treatment in this country. Yet Asian immigrants' stories of migration to and settlement in the United States are very different according to their country of origin as well as their gender and class background (see Takaki 1998; Min 2006a; Goellnicht and Ty 2014; Miller 2015; Marsh 2016; Nadkarni 2016). Indeed, it is possible to refer to various Asian Americas.

Chinese men, mainly from the region of Guangdong, in South China, arrived on American shores especially after 1848 because of labour opportunities in Hawaiian plantations, U.S. gold mines and railroads. About 46,000 Chinese labourers, or *wah gung*, migrated to Hawai'i in the second half of the nineteenth century and about 380,000 to the U.S. mainland between 1849 and 1930. By 1852, approximately 24,000 Chinese had arrived in California, which they had renamed *Gam Saan*, 'Gold Mountain', to search for

gold. When the profits in gold mining decreased in the mid-1860s, Chinese miners gradually left the mines and became wage earners. In 1865, the Central Pacific Railroad started to hire Chinese workers for the construction of the transcontinental railroad. Within two years, Chinese labourers amounted to 12,000, and they represented 90 percent of the total labour force (see Takaki 1998; Min 2006b).

After the Gold Rush and the completion of the transcontinental railroad, the Chinese moved to San Francisco to work in the service industry or as low-paid workers in tobacco and textile factories. They also moved to the rural regions of California where they worked as farm hands. The fact that Chinese labourers were paid less than white labourers and so were more widely employed led to ethnic antagonism, particularly during times of economic crisis. Anti-Chinese sentiments culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prevented Chinese people from migrating to the United States and obtaining U.S. citizenship; the act was amended in 1924 to exclude citizens of other Asian nations as well. This act also precluded the reunification of families or the starting of new ones. As a consequence, a 'bachelor society' made up of single male workers developed (see Takaki 1998; Min 2006b).

The Chinese Exclusion Act was only repealed during World War II, in 1943, when the Chinese began to be seen as allies and the Japanese as enemies. Yet 33,000 second-generation Japanese Americans served in the U.S. army during the war, and one unit, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, became the most decorated unit of its size in U.S. history. Nevertheless, Japanese Americans were forced to live in wartime internment camps such as Topaz in

Utah, Poston in Arizona, Amache in Colorado, Jerome in Arkansas, Minidoka in Idaho, Manzanar in California and Heart Mountain in Wyoming (see Takaki 1998). In Canada, they were first relocated to Hastings Park and then to Slocan, New Denver, Kaslo, Greenwood and Sandon – ghost towns in the British Columbia interior. Others worked on sugar beet farms in Alberta and Manitoba. Those who resisted their internment were sent to prisoner-of-war camps in Ontario, in Petawawa and Camp 101 on Lake Superior (see Marsh 2016).

The Japanese started to arrive in Hawai'i and California in 1868 to work as field hands in the Hawaiian sugar cane fields and in the fruit and vegetable farms of California. Between 1885 and 1924, about 200,000 Japanese migrated to Hawai'i and about 180,000 to the U.S. mainland. In 1884, the Japanese government allowed Hawaiian planters to recruit contract labourers, or *kan'yaku imin*. By 1894, approximately 30,000 Japanese people had emigrated to America to work in the Hawaiian plantations. After the U.S. annexation of Hawai'i in 1900, bans and laws valid in the continental United States were extended to the islands, including the ban on contractual employment. Consequently, many Japanese labourers moved to the continent as they were no longer bound to the plantations. However, they became the target of discriminatory behaviours and legislation. In 1913, for instance, the Alien Land Law established that all aliens (i.e. noncitizen nationals) ineligible for citizenship, and therefore all Asian immigrants, could not own agricultural land in California. While the law did not specifically mention the Japanese, it was mainly intended for them. Already in 1908, Japan had agreed to discourage immigration to the United States (the Gentlemen's Agreement) and to Canada

(Hayashi-Lemieux Agreement), where thousands of Japanese immigrants had arrived in 1885 to work in canneries and on farms and railways. However, Japanese workers already residing in North America were allowed to send for their wives and children (see Takaki 1998; Min 2006b; Goellnicht and Ty 2014).

Thus, the period between 1908 and 1924 was characterised by the arrival of the so-called 'picture brides' in both the United States and Canada: marriages were arranged by parents, and couples were married while the bride was in Japan and the groom was in North America, having seen each other only in a picture. Husband and wife met for the first time upon the woman's arrival in North America. Therefore, the Japanese North American community transformed from a male migrant labourer community to a family-oriented people looking for permanent settlement. Japanese North Americans have developed their own way to identify themselves: the Issei are the immigrants; their children, the Nisei, were born in North America, and so were their grandchildren, the Sansei. These terms were coined after the Japanese words for number one, two and three (*ichi*, *ni*, *san*) (see Takaki 1998; Min 2006b; Goellnicht and Ty 2014).

South Asian immigrants[1] started to migrate to the United States in large waves especially after the 1965 Immigration Act. The first wave of South Asian immigration to the United States, however, goes back to the late nineteenth

[1] South Asia consists of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (Srikanth 2014, 339). As Ketu H. Katrak highlights, South Asian immigrants "encompass a multiplicity of ethnicities, religions, languages, and cultures. Hence the category 'South Asian American' does not indicate a monolithic whole, but rather a collection of differences that are often more compelling and significant than any similarities" (1997, 192-93).

and early twentieth centuries: immigrants were mainly male farmers from the Punjab who could not speak any English. By 1920, there were 6,400 South Asians in the United States. They initially worked as railroad workers; subsequently, they found employment in agriculture. Being unable to bring their wives to the United States or to marry white women, most of them remained unmarried or took Mexican wives. In 1920, the Alien Land Law prohibited South Asians from acquiring land in California, and, with the 1924 Immigration Act, they were prevented from obtaining U.S. citizenship. The 1924 law was repealed in 1946 when the right to naturalisation was given to South Asians although still with restrictions on the numbers of immigrants allowed in the country (see Takaki 1998; Min 2006b; Nadkarni 2016).

The U.S. Immigration Act of 1965 led to a significant change in the Asian American population by abolishing the national origin quotas. Yet Japanese Americans stopped being one of the main groups as the strong economy of Japan did not prompt Japanese to emigrate at this point (see Takaki 1998; Min 2006b). South Asian immigrants, instead, have migrated in greater numbers: those who arrived in the 1960s and 1970s were mainly professionals fluent in English, but since the 1980s there has been "much greater socio-economic diversity, ranging from lower-middle to working-class and uneducated, hence often unemployed, groups" (Schlote 2006, 393). There are now approximately 4.5 million residents of Indian origin in the United States, thus representing the

second largest Asian group in the country ("Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month" 2020).[2]

With the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 the United States also saw the coming of about 500,000 Vietnamese refugees within a span of ten years. In 1964, only 603 Vietnamese – mainly students, language teachers and diplomats – were living in the United States (see Takaki 1998). Therefore, the year 1975 represents the "popular signifier for the fictional 'initial' entrance and incorporation of people of Vietnamese descent as a racial ethnic group into the social fiber of the United States" (Truong 1997, 220).[3] Refugees arrived mostly in two phases: the first one coinciding with the fall of Saigon in 1975 (approximately 100,000 Vietnamese refugees arrived in the United States between April and May); the second one between 1978 and 1980. The second flow was characterised by the mass migration of Vietnamese and Chinese Vietnamese people on poorly constructed boats, hence the expression 'boat people'. Many of them died from bad weather conditions, starvation, illness or piracy (see Takaki 1998; Rumbaut 2006; Miller 2015).

Today, refugees constitute a minority of the Vietnamese American population as, over time, the immigration flow has transformed into one of family reunification thanks to the Amerasian Immigration Act of 1982 and the

[2] Today, about 7% of the U.S. population, 22.6 million people, are of Asian origin; the three largest groups are Chinese (5.2 million), Indian (4.5 million) and Filipino (4.1 million) ("Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month" 2020).

[3] Viet Thanh Nguyen explains that "[i]n the American imagination 'Viet Nam' is synonymous with the Vietnam War", and so both Vietnamese people and Vietnamese Americans have had to insist that "Viet Nam is a country, not a war" (2014, 365). Such symbolisation of Vietnam has had important consequences for literary production as well since the mainstream American public expects Vietnamese American writers to deal exclusively with the war (366).

Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1987. Moreover, "Vietnam's tremendous economic growth has driven recent migration to and from the country", and "the overabundance of highly skilled, productive workers is still likely to result in net emigration for many years to come" (Miller 2015). The Vietnamese have always constituted the majority of South East Asian immigrants to the United States, and today they represent the fourth largest Asian group in the United States with 2.2 million residents ("Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month" 2020).

Asian American Modes: Cultural Nationalism, Feminism, Transnationalism

Despite their very different experiences of migration, Asians living in the United States had to find a common ground in order to tackle their dissatisfaction at being considered perpetual foreigners and being stereotypically represented as 'Orientals'. Thus, while the term 'Oriental' was used in North America to indicate both Asians across the Pacific and inhabitants of American soil, the term 'Asian American' came to emphasise the American status of Asian immigrants and their descendants:

> *Asian American* has … been adopted as the preferred self-designation of the 'ethnically conscious' elements in the community, in contradistinction to the exoticizing *Oriental*.… Nevertheless, this subsumption of identity … is not meant to obscure the unique experiences of each subgroup, but merely to

> provide an instrument for political mobilization under chosen circumstances. (Wong 1993, 6)

Evidently, this was not a merely descriptive geographic label but rather a conscious and strategic appropriation in antagonistic and counterhegemonic terms of the racist homogenisation as indistinct 'Orientals' (Izzo 2006a, 10).

Originally, a hyphen was interposed between 'Asian' and 'American', and this was, more than a sign of union, a hint at the irreducibility of the Asian American experience to either Asia or America. At the same time, however, by creating the category 'Asian-American', Asians in America were claiming not only an identity and a voice of their own but also America itself. This is why great emphasis was initially given to the fact of being born in America. The centrality of 'Americanness' eventually led to the suppression of the hyphen so that 'Asian' could become an adjective of 'American'. The second-generation Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston, for instance, has stressed the need "to leave out the hyphen in 'Chinese-American,' because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight.… Without the hyphen, 'Chinese' is an adjective and 'American' a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American" (quoted in Cheung 1997b, 6). More recently, David Palumbo-Liu (1999) has introduced a new compound: "Asian/American". The slash stands for equality and describes an Asian American identity that is unable to decide between Asia or America. Thus, "a liaison between 'Asian' and 'American,' a *sliding over* two seemingly separate terms, is constituted. … 'Asian/American' marks *both* the distinction installed between 'Asian' and 'American' *and* a dynamic, unsettled,

and inclusive movement" (1). This new compound reflects the shift from cultural nationalism to transnationalism in Asian American studies as the two elements on the scales – Asia and America – have the same importance and are made to relate to each other.

Iyko Day (2007) notices, however, that the transnationalism of this compound is "based on an east-west rather than north-south axis", thus eliding Canada (72). Even when a hemispheric perspective has been adopted by Asian American scholars, the focus has been on "'the Americas' as south of the U.S.-Mexico border, which again occludes Asians in Canada" (70). He explains how the term 'Asian North American' has therefore been proposed as a tool to construct fruitful alliances and comparisons between Asian American and Asian Canadian (literary) contexts, while maintaining the specificity and distinctiveness of both (see Goellnicht 2000; Beauregard 2002). Day highlights the limits of this comparative method and argues for "a reconfigured comparativism that incorporates Asian Canada in ways that reflect important transnational connections" (80). In this study, I employ a hemispheric approach that looks both North and South as I consider how Ozeki and Yamashita have established transnational links to Canada and Brazil, respectively.

Cultural nationalism was especially supported by Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Wong, members of the Combined Asian American Resources Project (CARP). In 1974, they published the first important anthology of Asian American literature, *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*. Their main concern was 'claiming America', and, to

them, Asian American identity was masculine, militaristic and working-class.[4] This essentialist definition especially aimed to contest the white stereotype of the effeminate Asian man. Moreover, to them, only Americans of Filipino, Chinese and Japanese origin who were born in the United States, were English native speakers and knew Asia through the filter of the American mass media – and its stereotypes – could be regarded as Asian American writers and eligible for inclusion in their anthology (Chin et al. [1974] 2019, xxv-xxvi).[5]

This position was then challenged by the two following phases of Asian American studies: the feminist and the transnational. With the emergence of feminist and transnational concerns, two requirements of the 'real' Asian American as expressed by CARP have been questioned: American origin and masculinity. Indeed, CARP's essentialist definition of Asian American identity excluded Asian immigrants and women (with some exceptions, including Hisaye Yamamoto, Wakako Yamauchi and Diana Chang). The feminist phase started in the late 1970s and was particularly strong until the 1990s, although it is still on-going. Its concerns emerged clearly in the debate initiated by the

[4] Sau-ling Cynthia Wong explains that the expression 'claiming America' is "Kingston's, applied to [her novel] *China Men*, which did not appear until 1980. However, … 'claiming America' is such an important issue in Asian American studies from the start that I find it useful to apply it retroactively to the early cultural nationalist project" (1995, 22).

[5] Within the vast repertoire of stereotypical images associated with 'Orientals' are notably: Fu Manchu, protagonist of a series of novels created by the British author Sax Rohmer in the 1910s; and Charlie Chan, a humble Chinese American detective created by the U.S. writer Earl Derr Biggers in the 1920s and protagonist of a series of Hollywood films. Fu Manchu, as a prototype of the sinister and evil Asian man, epitomises the so-called 'yellow peril' discourse, a racist representation of Asians as a menace to the West. Conversely, Charlie Chan embodies the 'model minority' as he obtains membership in the American community "through quiet, faithful servitude" (Okihiro 2014, 143). Neither of these stereotypes, however, suggests that Asian Americans can be part of the nation. Moreover, despite being portrayed as a sexual threat to white women, Fu Manchu is, like Charlie Chan, a "de-sexualized" and "emasculated" character (Chan 2001, 3-4), and so both these characters perpetuate the stereotype of the effeminate Asian man. Both Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan were played by white American actors in yellowface, which compounds these offensive representations of Asian men.

publication, in 1976, of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. The debate involved those who supported CARP's androcentric notion of Asian American identity and literature and those who sustained Kingston's attempt to consider women as an important part of Asian American identity and cultural formation – an effort that I aim to carry forward with my study of Asian American literary works produced by women writers.

Elaine H. Kim was one of the first to criticise the *Aiiieeeee!* anthology and its sexist assumptions in a chapter of her pioneering study *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1982). In 1989, two anthologies of women's writing were published as a response to CARP's male-centred anthologies: *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* (edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Mayumi Tsutakawa) and *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and about Asian American Women* (edited by Asian Women United of California).[6] In these anthologies, works by Asian American women writers are organised not according to their ethnic group but rather thematically or sequentially. This is because these anthologies do not aim to design a specific kind of Asian American sensibility: as Shirley Geok-lin Lim states, "The ethnic culture of these anthologies is nonauthoritative, decentered, nondogmatic, unprogrammatic, uncategorizing, inclusive" (1993, 579). Ethnic-related issues remain at the core of Asian American feminism. For instance, Kingston's focus on women's liberation from

[6] Asian Women United (AWU) is a non-profit organisation founded in 1976 by a group of San Francisco Bay Area Asian American women. The organisation aims to explore the many aspects of Asian American women's experiences and varied cultural heritages through publications and video productions (*Asian Women United* 2016).

patriarchal norms has been read by some Asian American critics, such as Chin, as an act against her own ethnic community (see Vastolo 2006). Thus, Asian American women often find themselves divided between two worlds or loyalties, gender and ethnicity. They have to decide between "self-actualization", which often entails a condemnation of the patriarchal values of their ethnic community, and "social responsibility", which involves depicting their ethnic community entirely in a favourable light in order to promote its integration into the host society (see Wong 1988).

The transnational phase emerged in the late 1980s in response to post-1965 demographic changes in the Asian North American population as well as to the phenomenon of globalisation. After the immigration acts of 1965 (U.S.) and 1967 (Canada), much more diverse Asian populations – in terms of gender, class and region – have migrated to North America in larger numbers. In 1988, King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi published their *Asian American Literature: An Annotated Bibliography*, including the contributions of the newer Asian American groups. The transnational phase was especially inaugurated by Lisa Lowe's article "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity" published in the first issue of *Diaspora* in 1991.[7] Lowe declares:

> we are *extremely different and diverse* among ourselves: as men *and women* at different distances and generations from our 'original' Asian cultures – cultures as different as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Indian, Vietnamese, Thai,

[7] Published in the same year in the anthology *Asian Americans: Comparative and Global Perspectives*, Sucheta Mazumdar's essay "Asian American Studies and Asian Studies: Rethinking Roots" was also very influential.

> or Cambodian – Asian Americans are born in the United States *and born in Asia*, of exclusively Asian parents and of mixed race, … fluent in English *and non-English-speaking*[.]… [T]he Asian-origin collectivity is unstable and changeable. (1996, 66; emphasis added)

Thus, Lowe introduces the idea that there is no unifying or fixed Asian American identity but rather, as the title of her article suggests, heterogeneous, hybrid and multiple Asian American identities.

The arrival of a significant number of Asian immigrants after 1965 meant that it no longer made sense to define Asian American identity and literature on the basis of American origin and English language proficiency. Hence, the United States stopped being the pivot around which Asian American identity and literature were supposed to revolve according to cultural nationalism. The transnational phase has coincided with a new interest in works, often written by Asian immigrants, whose stories develop through transnational spaces: "dense sets of ties reaching beyond and across borders of sovereign states" (Faist 2010a, 13). Furthermore, the concept of a 'dual personality', criticised by Chin and colleagues ([1974] 2019) and stressed by feminist scholars (see Ling 1990; Lim 1993), is not only accepted but even expanded. Donald C. Goellnicht, for instance, suggests referring to a "multiple consciousness": "[r]ather than thinking in binary terms of inside/outside, we should perhaps think of hybrid positions as a web of multiple intersecting and shifting strands in which the precise location of the subject is extremely difficult to map" (1997, 340). Indeed, transnational Asian American writers' works encompass the

United States and their Asian countries of origin, with which they maintain a strong connection, but also other countries.

Scholars such as Kim have been very positive about this openness of Asian American writing towards "an ever-widening range of perspectives" as "Asian American writers cannot be confined by 'Asian American' themes or by narrow definitions of 'Asian American' identity" (2006, 244). Conversely, scholars such as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong and King-Kok Cheung warn against uncritical acceptance of the transnational trend. Their main argument is that 'claiming America' should remain strong because it constitutes the very basis of the Asian American experience. In her 1995 essay, "Denationalization Reconsidered", Wong points out that "the concept of *Asian Americans* is … explicitly coalitional[.]… [I]t grew out of a specific history of resistance and advocacy within the United States" (17). Wong contends that, while the category 'Asian American' was born for political reasons, the transnational perspective threatens to depoliticise it. She fears, for instance, that "certain segments of the Asian American population [namely, American-born Asians] may be left out without a viable discursive space" (Wong 1995, 16). Cheung, for her part, believes that "[p]erhaps the most important reason to maintain the designation of 'Asian American' literature is not the presence of any cultural, thematic, or poetic unity but the continuing need to amplify marginalized voices, however dissimilar" (1997b, 5). Thus, according to these scholars, the transnational paradigm is not adequate to represent and sustain the Asian American experience.

These criticisms rest on the assumption that transnational means postnational or anti-national. However, as Arif Dirlik observes,

> The term 'transnationalism' itself derives its meaning from the continued existence of nations, which is built into its semic structure.... [E]ven transnationals live in places (though they may move from one place to another); and ... what they understand by transnationality … [is] impossible to grasp without reference to the particular places they inhabit. (2002, 228)

Transnationalism is, indeed, a form of attachment to more than one nation, and so national identity is multiplied rather than erased. Moreover,

> [w]hile some assume that nationalism is linked to a more settled subject and that mobile subjectivity could be resistant to nationalism, it is clear that nationalism itself has proved to be protean and mobile, providing identities and affiliations to mobile as well as settled subjects, and indeed to what have come to be called 'global' and 'cosmopolitan' subjectivities. (Grewal 2005, 35)

If transnationalism has ever meant the erasure of territories and nations, this is attributable to incorrect interpretations of the concept as well as inaccurate usages of the term 'diaspora' to replace 'transnationalism'.

Indeed, the transnational phase has sometimes been defined as diasporic (see Wong 1995; Lim 1997; Palumbo-Liu 1999; Sohn, Lai and Goellnicht 2010). This is not completely wrong, but it is important to remember that if

> [a] diasporic perspective is necessarily transnational in scope, … a transnational approach is not necessarily diasporic because it need not involve the notion of diaspora. While there definitely has been a transnational theoretical shift in AAS [Asian American studies], it has been based on the more general concept and process of transnationalism rather than diaspora, although the latter term continues to be invoked often indiscriminately. (Okamura 2003, 176)

This statement cautions against confusing the two terms and further supports my choice of privileging the theoretical framework of transnationalism in this study.

It is important to notice that these three phases marking Asian American studies are overlapping even though they emerged in chronological order. As Wong argues, they should actually be considered "*modes*" rather than teleologically ordered phases (1995, 17; emphasis in original). Therefore, domestic, feminist and transnational modes can "coexist and alternate" (17). Indeed, not only does the feminist phase overlap with the transnational in chronological terms but also because of shared views – such as on divided or multiple identities. Besides, many transnational writers are women: in addition to the authors examined here, there are, for instance, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Diana Chang, Jessica Hagedorn, Chuang Hua, Nora Okja Keller, Sara Suleri, Lin Tai-yi and, in Canada, Lydia Kwa, Larissa Lai, Madeleine Thien, Kim Thúy and Rita Wong. As for Asian American feminists, they have never denied the

importance of 'claiming America', and, in this sense, they are not different from the cultural nationalists.

With regard to Asian American literature, works with domestic concerns and works with transnational features do not appear in chronological order. What can be placed on a chronological line is the emergence of a transnational perspective and sensibility in response to post-1965 demographic changes in the Asian North American population as well as to the phenomenon of globalisation. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin stated in her 2004 Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, "As the transnational becomes more central to American studies, we are likely to focus not only on the proverbial immigrant who leaves somewhere called 'home' to make a new home in the United States, but also on the endless process of comings and goings that create familial, cultural, linguistic, and economic ties across national borders" (2005, 24). Thus, a transnational stance enables us to consider previously overlooked texts, some of them written during the earliest phases of Asian American literary production: for instance, Chiang Yee's *The Silent Traveller* series, published between 1937 and 1972, *The Eavesdropper* (1958) by Tai-yi, *Crossings* (1968) by Chuang Hua or *Dictee* (1982) by Cha.

Certainly, transnationalism has now "become more commonplace as globalization expands to encompass once territorially separated discourses into a hubbub of exchanges" (Lim et al. 2006a, 15). Hence, contemporary literary works are more likely to reflect on and be affected by the increased interconnectedness of the planet. Conversely, in the earliest phases of Asian American literary production, the experience of settlement and, more

specifically, of assimilation into the fabric of U.S. society was prevalent. Autobiography became a way to express the ethnic subject's successful assimilation into society, especially for second-generation Asian Americans. Examples of this genre include *Father and Glorious Descendant* (1943) by Pardee Lowe, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) by Jade Snow Wong and *Nisei Daughter* (1953) by Monica Sone.[8]

The assimilationist tone seems to have faded away from more recent works, probably because "[a]n earlier generation of immigrants to the United States sought inclusion and membership as important values, while a younger generation of writers raised in a more 'global' environment may view the road to America less as a one-way route than as part of a global network of mobility" (Park 2015, 157). However, many Asian American works still formulate "the quest for a place in American life" (Kim 2006, 243). Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* constitutes a perfect example of a blended approach. The protagonist is a second-generation Chinese American girl who struggles to find her own place in the United States. She is finally able to do so by translating her Chinese legacy into the American English language, thus creating a hybrid Chinese American self and a bilingual, bicultural and transnational autobiography (see Miller 1983).

[8] There are, of course, some exceptions: in *America Is in the Heart* (1946), the first-generation Filipino American writer Carlos Bulosan describes the terrible working conditions of Filipino farmworkers in California and throughout the West Coast.

KEY CONCEPTS

Transnationalism

> America is coming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality, a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors.
>
> — Randolph S. Bourne, "Trans-national America" (1916)

The term 'transnationalism' spread widely after social scientists Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton Blanc used it to refer to "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (1994, 7). Until then, the term had been mainly employed in economic and political sciences within the meaning that can be found in contemporary dictionaries: "Extending or having interests extending beyond national bounds or frontiers" (*OED Online* 2020). The term related to "large-scale and powerful actors such as multinational companies and, to a lesser extent, political parties" (Faist 2010b, 1673). Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc are among the first scholars to shift the focus of transnational discourse on immigrants – non-institutional individual actors organised in groups or networks (Portes 2001, 186) – and their daily activities. To distinguish between the two types of transnationalism, the expressions "transnationalism from above" (referring to governments and corporations)

and “transnationalism from below” (in relation to immigrants) have been introduced (Smith and Guarnizo 1998).[9]

The progressive intellectual Randolph S. Bourne, however, was the very first to use the word ‘trans-national’ in relation to immigrants. In his 1916 article “Trans-national America”, he affirms that the American myth of “the melting-pot” has failed since “the tendency ... has been for the national clusters of immigrants, as they became more and more firmly established ..., to cultivate more and more assiduously the literatures and cultural traditions of their homelands”. Although Bourne does not offer a systematic definition of transnationalism, his comment anticipates later definitions such as the one provided by Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc. Moreover, Bourne had already understood its importance as well as individuated some of its main features. In his article, he especially advocates a new understanding of “Americanization” and American nationalism that overcomes the assimilationist and multicultural models and that acknowledges and fosters “trans-nationalism” and cosmopolitanism. Bourne sees immigrants as “no longer masses of aliens, waiting to be ‘assimilated’[.]... They are rather threads of living and potent cultures, ... striving to weave themselves into a novel international nation”. This ground-breaking view of the immigrant is resumed in later understandings of transnationalism, as I discuss in the following paragraphs.

[9] Moreover, Vertovec warns that some transnational social networks can be illegal and violent, such as terrorism or drug and arms trafficking (1999, 450).

It was during the 1980s and 1990s, in the social sciences, that the term was employed again with regard to immigrants and the consequences of their relocations across national borders. Steven Vertovec observes that

> shifting political and economic circumstances in both sending and receiving countries … have affected a range of developments such as migrants' capacity for political organisation in relation to both sending and receiving contexts, sending countries' more positive views of their emigrants, and the impact of migrant remittances on local economies.… Heightened attention to these kinds of phenomena and processes has marked, for many scholars, a significant shift in the ways contemporary international migration is understood. (2001, 574)

In particular, during their research on immigrants to the United States from the Caribbean and the Philippines, Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc noticed that "immigrants live their lives across borders and maintain their ties to home, even when their countries of origin and settlement are geographically distant" (1992, ix). Hence, they renamed immigrants who are "firmly rooted in their new country but [maintain] multiple linkages to their homeland" "transmigrants" (1995, 48).

Transmigrants' "multiple and constant interconnections across international borders" (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1995, 48) are built through everyday activities, such as "solidarity within kinship networks, political participation not only in the country of emigration but also of immigration, small-scale entrepreneurship of migrants across borders and the

transfer and re-transfer of cultural customs and practices" (Faist 2010a, 11). Through such activities, immigrants are able to establish cross-border social relationships: multiple networks of social relations form "social fields" crossing geographical, cultural and political borders (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1992, ix). Portes states that "[t]hrough these networks, an increasing number of people are able to live dual lives. Participants are often bilingual, ... frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political and cultural interests that require their presence in both" (1997, 812). It is this emphasis on the immigrant's presence in both countries, "'here' and 'there'" (Vertovec 2001, 575), that makes the concept of transnationalism an innovative and valuable tool of analysis.

Indeed, the transnational conceptual framework has represented a fundamental shift in perspective on the immigrant experience. As Vertovec explains, "most immigration research has generally tended to focus upon the ways in which migrants adapt themselves to, or are socially excluded from, their place of immigration" (2001, 574). In the United States, for instance, "the forging of an American nationality has been and continues to be the underlying concern that united all discourse about immigration" (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1995, 51).[10] Conversely, the transnational perspective, as anticipated by Bourne, sees immigrants not as individuals who need to be assimilated into the host society or as victims of racism but as active agents able

[10] In his study of immigrant autobiography, William Boelhower identifies the process of "Americanization" as central to all the texts in his corpus; such a process therefore constitutes a sort of "macrotext" or "single story" (1982, 25-52).

to build networks of social relations that span borders and link them to their country of origin.

Nevertheless, transnationalism has also been criticised (see Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004). First, the term seems to suggest an overcoming of national interests. In fact, it entails a multiplication of them as transmigrants are attached to more than one nation-state: some of them acquire a "multiple citizenship", which is "the most visible illustration of overlapping membership in political communities" (Rainer Bauböck quoted in Vertovec 2001, 575). Thus, Faist cautions against confusing "transnationalism" with "post-nationalism" (2010b, 1672). Transmigrants could actually be defined as "long distance nationalists" (Benedict Anderson quoted in Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1995, 52) – although this definition might be inappropriate given the specific political meaning of the term 'nationalist' and the negative connotations that can be attached to it.[11] Second, the description of transnationalism as a contemporary phenomenon has given rise to some objections. Indeed, there is evidence that immigrants, such as Italian, Polish, Russian and Chinese immigrants to the United States, have always maintained economic and social connections with their countries of origin – Bourne had already identified this tendency in the 1910s. Therefore, transnational ties cannot be ascribed solely to contemporary immigrants.

[11] Indeed, between the nineteenth and twentieth century, nationalism sparked the competition between European countries – leading to the First World War – and the imperialist conflict between the Great Powers. It is also essential to remember that nationalism is at the basis of such ideologies as Fascism and Nazism. Yet imperialism has been challenged precisely by the rise of nationalisms in postcolonial countries.

Nonetheless, contemporary transnationalism would differ from earlier forms of transnational experiences in at least two ways. On the one hand, technological development has facilitated travelling and communication. Travelling has been encouraged by faster and more extensive means of transportation as well as by low-cost air travel. Moreover, the Internet has enabled the formation of virtual social networks where connections between people across borders are immediate and, most of the time, free. Thus, contemporary transnational interconnections among immigrants are often characterised by their "intensity and simultaneity" (Vertovec 1999, 448) and by an increase in their "density, multiplicity, and importance" (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1995, 52). On the other hand, Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc emphasise that transnational immigration has been "facilitated rather than produced" by communication and travel technologies and that it is "best understood as a response to the fact that in a global economy contemporary migrants have found full incorporation in the countries within which they resettle either not possible or not desirable" (1995, 52).[12] Furthermore, they argue that it is precisely within the framework of a global, capitalist economy that transnational migration becomes "a global phenomenon" as "populations in capital-dependent countries are everywhere

[12] While it is wrong to consider racial discrimination as an obstacle to integration that is specific to the contemporary age, it is true that, as people have migrated from countries of the Global South to countries of the Global North, the repeated economic crises – such as the early 1990s recession or the more recent Great Recession – that have affected the Global North have limited immigrants' potential to attain better living and working conditions than in the country of origin (see Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1995, 50).

forced to migrate to centers of capital in order to live" (1992, x; see also Clifford 1994).

My research embraces the concept of transnationalism as a "type of consciousness" more than a social phenomenon (Vertovec 1999, 450). I use the idea of "transnational consciousness" to refer to single experiences that might (but do not necessarily have to) be shared by other individuals within a community – whereas Vertovec relates it to that of "diaspora consciousness", thus defining it as a collective consciousness. As a "type of consciousness", transnationalism has more to do with a state of mind rather than a social condition within a specific historical context. Robin Cohen notes that "transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims. In the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through shared imagination" (quoted in Vertovec 1999, 450). Although Cohen's focus on the "age of cyberspace" is probably unjustified – since the processes that he illustrates can occur without the help of modern technologies – his comment highlights the fact that transnational ties can be mental, cultural or sentimental as well as social, political or economic. Cohen introduces a more flexible idea of transnationalism able to describe transnational forms that do not necessarily fall into social scientists' definition of them.

When transnationalism is not bound to given social, historical or economic conditions, it becomes a state of mind, a "type of consciousness". As the authors and the literary works that I analyse in this study show,

transnationalism as a type of consciousness regards immigrants whose relocations occur within and respond to very different historical junctures: they are not necessarily prompted, for instance, by the need to find jobs, or they are not facilitated by modern technologies. It regards immigrants and their children and immigrants whose transnational ties are of various kinds – not just social or economic and not always positive and enabling – and include nations beyond their countries of origin and destination.

It is only by expanding the concept of transnationalism that immigrants' children can be analysed through its lenses. Some studies deny the presence of transnationalism among immigrants' children (see Portes 2001, 190). However, other studies show that even though transnational practices may not be intense among immigrants' descendants, the fact of being raised in a transnational *milieu* does wield an influence on their identity formation (Vertovec 2009). Some other studies have focused on the phenomenon of return migration confirming the existence of transnationalism among subsequent generations (see Levitt and Waters 2002; Conway and Potter 2009; Tsuda 2009a). Still, immigrants' children have often never been to their ancestral nation, or perhaps they have visited it for the first time as an adult. A meaningful example of this can be found in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. The narrator asks: "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" ([1976] 1989, 5-6). This excerpt poses questions about the nature of

transnational links that might be established by people whose knowledge of the ancestral country is very often mediated by their parents, their friends or even the media.

Furthermore, what sparks the interest of immigrants' children in their ancestral nations? And what about other countries? Could not an individual be attached to a country that is not necessarily their home, host or ancestral country but that can all the same represent an object of fascination, hence attachment? So far, the emphasis has been placed on links between two countries (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1995) and on "dual lives" (Portes 1997). Yet it is not uncommon that migrants and their children are placed between more than two countries and so develop multiple rather double identities. Ozeki and Yamashita, for instance, who are both immigrants' descendants, have forged links to Japan as well as to Canada and Brazil; Truong to France and Lahiri to Italy. Maybe the figure who complicates more dualistic understandings of transnationalism is Alexander as her life and works embrace India, Sudan, the United Kingdom, the United States and Italy but also other countries given her attention to issues of social justice worldwide.

Diaspora

> Diaspora cultures … mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place.
>
> — James Clifford, "Diasporas" (1994)

'Diaspora' is an older term than 'transnationalism', and it comes from the Greek word *διασπορά*, 'scattering'. It refers to the voluntary or forced scattering or dispersal of a people away from their homeland into new regions. It was originally used to indicate the violent dispersal of specific peoples such as the Jews, the Greeks and the Armenians. Newer usages of the term are broader and have come to designate dispersals that are not necessarily violent or forced, such as the trade diaspora of the Chinese or the labour diasporas of the Mexicans and the Turkish. At the same time, attempts have been made to provide a more specific description of this concept and to shape a model of diaspora by establishing paradigms, conditions and categories (see Safran 1991; Cohen 1993).[13] Although definitions may vary, some essential features remain constant: first, the term relates to religious, ethnic and national groups; second, it involves a longing for a real or symbolic homeland; third, such longing or consciousness is collective because it arises from the experience of a community.

In the 1990s, the term was adopted by postcolonial critics such as Paul Gilroy (1993) and Stuart Hall (1994) and by anthropologists and sociologists such as James Clifford (1994), Avtar Brah (1996) and Floya Anthias (1998) to engage with a wider range of realities and concepts such as colonisation, slavery, cultural identity, hybridity, gender, transnationalism and globalisation. As Khachig Tölölyan argues, the term "now shares meanings with a larger

[13] While it is fundamental not to lump together the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism, too narrow definitions of diaspora based on an "ideal type" can be hazardous as "no society can be expected to qualify on all counts [referring to the criteria proposed by some anthropologists], throughout its history" (Clifford 1994, 306).

semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community" (1991, 4-5). As the notion of diaspora comes in contact with that of transnationalism, the longing for home is counterbalanced by a certain rootedness in the country of settlement (Faist 2010a, 12). Clifford, for instance, recognises that "diasporic cultural forms can never, in practice, be exclusively nationalist. They are deployed in transnational networks ..., and they encode practices of accommodation with, as well as resistance to, host countries and their norms" (1994, 307). Usually, however, the critics of diaspora stress the "cultural distinctiveness" of diasporic communities (Faist 2010a, 20), for which the originary homeland remains the main source of identification (see Cohen 1993).

By reason of its emphasis on the country of origin, "not as something simply left behind, but as a place of attachment" (Clifford 1994, 311), diaspora is akin to transnationalism. However, while diaspora is used exclusively to refer to the dispersal of groups and communities, transnationalism is a more abstract and inclusive term that indicates the circulation of people as well as of information, goods and capital (Duong 2015, 233), and it designates various types of social formation (Faist 2010a, 9). The term 'transnationalism' is therefore a hypernym of 'diaspora': "[w]hile the usages of the terms often overlap, diasporic phenomena can be conceived as a subset of transnational social formations that have broader scope" (Faist 2010a, 33). As a type of transnationalism, diaspora is characterised by its unidirectional look at the originary homeland: "the concept of diaspora, whilst focusing on transnational

processes …, does so by deploying a notion of ethnicity which privileges the point of 'origin' in constructing identity and solidarity" (Anthias 1998, 558). Transnationalism, in contrast, establishes a connection with both country of origin and settlement, thus creating a network.

The subject of this dissertation is mainly (but not exclusively) transnational rather than diasporic Asian American literature. A transnational approach concentrates on individual rather than collective experiences, which are not necessarily of uprooting and loss but also of re-connection and enrichment. Indeed, "not all Asian North Americans feel that they belong to a 'diaspora,' and not all of them have experienced the same sense of dispossession that [some] diaspora scholars … emphasize in their definitions of the term" (Ty 2010, 22). Moreover, if both transnationalism and diaspora steer Asian American literature toward Asia, and they both reject assimilationist depictions of the immigrant experience, they mark different attitudes toward America: diaspora places it in the background while transnationalism considers it as an integral part of its network.

Hyungji Park's statement that "diasporic Asian American literature … does not privilege an assimilationist teleology and grants Asia and America a contemporaneity that assumes a nonhierarchical, nonchronological relationship" (2015, 157) clearly disregards the partiality of diaspora for the country of origin over the country of settlement – and over other countries. Besides, if it is true that Asian American literature is itself an example or subcategory of "Asian diaspora literature" (Park 2015, 165), this does not mean that it is necessarily diasporic – or transnational. In fact, the first examples of

Asian American autobiography are characterised by their assimilationist tone. The same logic can be applied to diasporic subjects who might find assimilation into the host society completely acceptable. Indeed, "an indigenizing mode can coexist and alternate with a diasporic or a transnational mode" (Wong 1995, 17). In other words, just as the terms 'transnationalism' and 'diaspora' often overlap, transnational and diasporic can refer to the same immigrant. Thus, it might be useful to distinguish between two uses of the adjective 'diasporic': one that indicates "a national, cultural or religious group living in a foreign land" (Baumann 2013, 22); the other that designates "a particular form of 'consciousness'" (Anthias 1998, 560), an attitude toward the host land and homeland. I use the adjective 'diasporic' throughout my study according to the second meaning.

A further distinction should be made between diaspora and exile. While diaspora has acquired wider meanings, exile, which also indicates the separation from one's country and is characterised by "an enduring longing to remigrate to the place of origin" (Baumann 2013, 19), retains a more specific meaning. The notion of exile "is resonant with ideas of forced emigration, displacement, social and political marginalization of an individual or a group of refugees", and it is "seldom associated with religious connotations" as "its use relates more explicitly to political persecution and forced flight caused by a nation-state" (Baumann 2013, 19-23). In addition, exile has a "frequently individualistic focus" (Clifford 1994, 308). Therefore, compared to diaspora, exile has a stronger political connotation and a narrower scope.

Globalisation

> 'Globalization' is on everybody's lips; [*sic*] a fad word fast turning into a shibboleth, a magic incantation, a pass-key meant to unlock the gates to all present and future mysteries. For some, 'globalization' is what we are bound to if we wish to be happy; for others 'globalization' is the cause of our unhappiness.
>
> — Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (1998)

Since the 1990s, the term 'globalisation' has been used to describe a wide range of phenomena emerging from the increased economic, social and cultural integration of the world's different regions. It was originally employed in the economic field to define the unification of the markets on a world scale ('globalisation of the markets') thanks to information and innovation technologies. These have had a significant role in the progressive weakening of national borders, which has resulted in accelerated flows of capital, goods, information, ideas and people – although, at the same time, some borders seem to be increasingly reinforced (for example, U.S. president Donald Trump's Mexican wall and the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union).

Globalisation has been both celebrated and condemned. On the one hand, globalisation has been praised as a positive process that promotes growth and social wellbeing. For instance, the argument is made that the liberalisation of the market encourages investment flows into developing countries, thus

helping to reduce the economic gap between these countries and developed ones. Moreover, globalisation can foster a global consciousness over issues such as the environment or human rights – the services and activities of the NGOs being an example of this kind of global engagement. In cultural terms, globalisation means facilitated and intensified cross-cultural exchanges, which have made it possible, for instance, to eat sushi in Italy or watch anime in Norway. On the other hand, globalisation actually enhances the inequality of the world's wealth distribution and determines the dominance of multinational companies over the world economy and individual nation-states. Furthermore, globalisation as a process that is homogenising the world has been widely criticised, especially because "global culture and global economy … originated in and continue to be perpetuated from the centres of capitalist power" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2007, 101). Thus, globalisation is often considered a form of economic, political and cultural domination of advanced capitalist countries over peripheral countries.[14]

Globalisation has much in common with transnationalism as they both involve the crossing of national borders and an interconnectedness between different geographical places. However, globalisation is used with reference to "processes and practices engaged in by … powerful world actors like governments or multinational corporations" while transnationalism also involves "processes and practices engaged in by ordinary people and social movements" (Rodriguez 2015, 119), as indicated by the expressions

[14] In this sense, imperialism can be seen as an early form of globalisation.

"transnationalism from above" and "transnationalism from below" (Smith and Guarnizo 1998). Moreover, the two are spatially different. First, globalisation delineates a spread which starts from a single centre whereas transnationalism establishes various sites of exchange (Lionnet and Shih 2005, 5). Second, "[w]hile the impact of globalisation is often assumed to be universal and worldwide, approaches linked to the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism refer to phenomena that occur within the limited social and geographic spaces of a particular set of regions or states" (Faist 2010a, 14). Therefore, globalisation acts through worldwide spreads and ends in a process of cultural and economic homogenisation while transnationalism acts through connections between specific sites generating hybridity and multiplicity.

In the literary field, global literature is sometimes associated with world literature.[15] The latter can refer to the sum of all the national literatures or to a set of canonical literary works, but it also indicates a type of literary criticism that concentrates on the circulation and reception of national literatures beyond the borders of their countries of origin, particularly thanks to translation (see Damrosch 2003).[16] The adjective 'global' appears especially in relation to works that openly thematise globalisation or whose themes are globally relevant (e.g. climate change or genetic engineering but also timeless themes such as violence).[17] This type of literature or critical approach has gained renewed attention in recent years insofar as the latest transportation

[15] The definition 'universal literature' has also been employed by literary critics such as René Étiemble ("littérature universelle"; 1982) and Silvia Albertazzi ("letteratura universale"; 2013).
[16] See also Johann Wolfgang Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*.
[17] See Eleanor Ty's critical work *Unfastened: Globality and Asian North American Narratives* (2010) and Adam Kirsch's *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century* (2017).

and communication technologies have facilitated contacts between different and distant areas of the world – leading to globalisation itself.

The boundaries between transnational, global and world literature are very blurry as all these terms mark the crisis of nation-based paradigms and highlight the interconnection and interdependence of different regions – and literatures – of the world. Referring to American literature, Yogita Goyal suggests that "transnationalism serves as a replacement for the outdated category of multicultural literature, and as an acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of the United States with the rest of the world" (2017b, 7), thus evoking Wai Chee Dimock's understanding of American literature as world literature (2006, 2007, 2017). Yet, in my dissertation, I employ the concept of transnationalism in a more specific way, drawing from social sciences and these disciplines' use of it to theorise the immigrant's experience of being attached to more than one country. Thus, while a transnational author does not have to be an immigrant, all the authors analysed here are either immigrants or immigrants' children who have in turn migrated to other countries. At the same time, migrants – and their descendants – are not necessarily transnational. As previously mentioned, assimilationist narratives were quite common during the first phases of Asian American literary production, and many works were set exclusively in Asia. The texts explored here differ from other Asian American texts as they do not just recount the immigrant's experience in America or life in Asia before America: they embrace both Asia and the Americas, and they track the characters' trajectories across these and other continents, such as Africa and Europe.

As the network created by some of the authors in my study thickens by inclusion of countries other than the country of origin and settlement, I set aside the limited concept of transnationalism to embrace the idea of world literature, which goes beyond the notion of bilateral connections between two nations (see Gillman and Gruesz 2011). I do not employ the adjective 'global' to refer to the literature produced by these writers as I join with those scholars who advocate "an urgent conceptual shift away from globalization to 'worlding'" (Elias and Moraru 2015, xvi). Oliver Scheiding describes the latter as "a relational mode of thinking" (2019, 41) while Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru (2015) define it as "the ecumenic process of coming together" (xii) or as "the creation of an ethical, 'diversal,' and relational ensemble" (xxiii). The notion of "worlding", embedded in "the critical-theoretical model of *planetarity*" (xi), therefore offers an ethical counterpart to the homogenising paradigm of the global, which, with its focus on the financial, economic and technological aspects of the world's interconnectedness, has failed to weigh "the cultural, political, and ethical implications of world interconnectivity" (xx). Thus, taking the world or the planet rather than the globe as our analytical framework enables us to see and build an interconnectedness among people and nations – across space as well as time (see Dimock 2006) – that is based on ethical relationality rather than on economic interests.[18]

[18] Among the first proponents of a planetary *versus* global vision are notably Gayatri Spivak (1999) and Masao Miyoshi (2001).

Cosmopolitanism

The term 'cosmopolitan' comes from the Greek word *κοσμοπολίτης*, formed from *κόσμος*, i.e. world, and *πολίτες*, i.e. citizen, and so it means 'citizen of the world'. Cosmopolitanism marks a tendency to consider oneself and all other human beings as citizens of the world, belonging to a single homeland regardless of national or ethnic differences. Humanity therefore constitutes a single community sharing a set of common values. Cosmopolitanism as a philosophical doctrine goes back to the Cynics; the concept was then adopted by the Stoics and particularly flourished thanks to Enlightenment philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (see Fine and Cohen 2002). Against traditional elitist and universalist formulations of cosmopolitanism, such as Kant's, more recent theories emphasise plural cosmopolitanisms, particularly in relation to the local or microcosmic level and to minority and marginalised people and cultures. Among such theories is that of "cosmopolitics" (Stengers 1997; Cheah and Robbins 1998; Latour 2004), "discrepant cosmopolitanisms" (Clifford 1992), "rooted cosmopolitanism" (Cohen 1992; Appiah 2005), "vernacular cosmopolitanism" (Bhabha 1996), "postcolonial cosmopolitanism" (Grewal 2005) and "minority cosmopolitanism" (Koshy 2011).

Today, cosmopolitanism also relates to the political engagement of people and nation-states all over the world to tackle issues of global justice. Globalisation has greatly reduced the capacity of nation-states to intervene, thus encouraging the emergence of cosmopolitan alliances between countries (Vertovec and Cohen 2002b, 1-2). But such alliances do not pertain only to countries: "many individuals now seem to be, more than ever, prone to

articulate complex affiliations, meaningful attachments and multiple allegiances to issues, people, places and traditions that lie beyond the boundaries of their resident nation-state" (Vertovec and Cohen 2002b, 2). The key concepts of this study are thus brought together, placed in a common context of border crossing and connections between different areas of the world. Cosmopolitanism, like transnationalism, creates networks that span borders and in which individuals consider themselves as part of different communities simultaneously (David A. Hollinger quoted in Vertovec and Cohen 2002b, 12).[19] It is also akin to globalisation in its downplaying of the nation and when globalisation involves a concern for global issues such as human rights.[20]

In the literary field, while some scholars have tried to identify a corpus of cosmopolitan works, others have concentrated on cosmopolitanism as a mode of reading that helps build a cosmopolitan citizenship (see Feghali 2018). For Kwame Anthony Appiah, this mode of reading "presupposes a world in which novels ... travel between places where they are understood differently, because people are different and welcome to their difference" (quoted in Domínguez 2012, 249). Cosmopolitan literature is therefore sometimes associated with world literature because of their common emphasis on the circulation of literary works beyond national borders. Sheldon Pollock, for

[19] See also Bruce Robbins's description of cosmopolitanism as "a reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance" (quoted in Grewal 2005, 43).

[20] But, as Robert Spencer points out, "cosmopolitanism is not the same thing as globalisation. If globalisation seeks to homogenise the planet from above (economically and culturally), then cosmopolitanism is a reaction or counter to this process, one that seeks to make general not exploitation or culture but democracy" (2011, 4).

instance, understands cosmopolitan literature as “literary communication that travels far, indeed, without obstruction from any boundaries at all” (quoted in Domínguez 2012, 247). In her description of world literature and of a transnational culture, Silvia Albertazzi argues that they originate from the (cosmopolitan) awareness of belonging to a community that is larger than the originary community or, in other words, of being an integral part of that continually moving chaos that we call “mondo” [world] (2013, 156).

Once again, boundaries between categories and concepts are blurry. Nevertheless, these terms remain meaningfully different, and so, when faced with the limitations of the concept of transnationalism, it is possible to turn to the category of world or cosmopolitan literature, which are both more inclusive. I especially adopt the notion of world rather than cosmopolitan literature because ‘world’ can be used as an adjective as well as a verb (i.e. to world/worlding). Therefore, it describes both a type of literature and the process of imagining and creating relationality and interconnectedness through literature. As Pheng Cheah points out, “World literature is an important aspect of cosmopolitanism because it is a type of world-making activity that enables us to imagine the world” (2008, 26). As we refer to a cosmopolitan literature, however, such a ‘worlding’ activity remains implicit, hidden behind the word ‘cosmopolitan’ whereas it should be foregrounded given its ethical relevance.

THE SCOPE OF THIS STUDY

So far, despite caveats that "[t]o understand Asian Americans it is no longer sufficient to comprehend their roots in U.S. history or, for that matter, in countries of origin, but a multiplicity of historical [and geographical] trajectories" (Arif Dirlik quoted in Okamura 2003, 172), the transnational turn in Asian American studies has focused primarily on the links between the United States and Asia and on the influence that Asia has had on the United States (see Palumbo-Liu 1999; Chuh and Shimakawa 2001; Simal and Marino 2004; Lim et al. 2006b; Grice 2012). A hemispheric outlook that embraces both North and South America can be found in critical works by Rachel Lee (1999) and Eleanor Ty (2010) and in the collection of essays *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas* (2005) edited by Wanni W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee, which is not a literary study. My dissertation broadens such a focus by highlighting Asian America's positioning within a network that spans the Americas, Asia and Europe. Indeed, as the authors and the literary works in my study show, Canada, Brazil and European countries such as France and Italy should also be considered if a truly transnational perspective is to be understood.

In her critical study *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (2004), Rajini Srikanth undertakes a similar task as she explores "how the United States becomes merely one of several sites of emotional significance for many South Asian American writers" (44-45). However, Srikanth argues that it is "particularly South Asian, Filipino/a,

Korean, and Vietnamese" American writers who establish links to their ancestral countries – by reason of a shared postcolonial condition (51).[21] This is a rather limited view that I aim to expand by including in my dissertation Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese as well as South Asian American writers. Moreover, Srikanth especially emphasises transnational ties that involve the ancestral country, and her argument does not extend beyond the hemispheric paradigm (see also Srikanth 2014). I instead foreground Asian Americans' transnational links to other nations than the country of origin and ancestral country and point to a planetary model able to compensate for the limitations of the transnational, transpacific and hemispheric paradigms.

Therefore, while critical works on Asian American literature have adopted a transnational – or international – approach to address a variety of themes, my study deals with transnationalism itself (see Lee 1999; Davis and Ludwig 2002; Simal and Marino 2004; Lim et al. 2006b; Grice 2012). Critics such as Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (2005) and sociologists such as Peggy Levitt and B. Nadya Jaworsky (2007) have highlighted the limits of standard definitions of transnationalism and the need to reframe and expand them. To do so, I explore how the authors and the protagonists of the literary works in my corpus embrace, challenge and sometimes even reject uneven transnational processes, thus questioning social scientists' definitions of transnationalism (see Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994; Portes 2001; Vertovec 2001). In particular, social scientists tend to assume that

[21] Srikanth does recognise that this transnational tendency is not recent nor is it limited to these groups, but then she mentions, as counterexamples, only white U.S. writers such as Melville, James, Hemingway and Stein (67).

transnationalism is always a positive process whereas, as Bruce Robbins notes, transnational experiences can be "unprivileged – indeed, often coerced" (1998, 1). They also posit that transnationalism is a phenomenon that occurs primarily within a capitalist system, that it is dependent upon the modern technologies and that it does not exist among immigrants' descendants. Moreover, although sociologists tend to use the term 'transnationalism' to underscore the links between country of origin and settlement, that is, between *two* countries, most of the characters and the authors of the literary texts under examination are placed between more than two countries and so develop multiple rather than merely double identities. I also distinguish between the terms 'transnationalism', which I use to indicate the *process* of forging relations to more than one nation, and 'transnationality', which I employ to refer to the condition or *quality* of being transnational.

My analysis also contributes to recent discussions of mobility as framed by critics such as Sara Ahmed (2003), Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2006). In describing the "new mobilities paradigm", Sheller and Urry explain how such a paradigm challenges both "*sedentarist* theories" and "*nomadic* theory [that] celebrates ... metaphors of travel and flight" (208-10; emphasis in original). Thus, while acknowledging the centrality of mobility in today's world, the "new mobilities paradigm" does not uncritically praise mobility – unlike, for instance, modernist Euro-American discourses of displacement (see Kaplan 1996). Instead, it considers how mobility is often accompanied by immobility; how people are denied mobility depending on their race, class and gender; and how

mobility does not always coincide with freedom as it can be coerced.[22] A significant figure in this regard is the one provided by the UN Refugee Agency, according to which, in 2018, the global population of forcibly displaced people amounted to 70.8 million (*UNHCR* 2020).

Yet mobility does not have to be coerced to be negative: migrants might move to another country of their own volition – because of pull and push factors – but then find that life in the host country is as hard as in one's own country. As a result, they are often trapped in a liminal space and in a pattern of 'back-and-forth mobility' that is best understood as an endless escape rather than as an opportunity. As Aihwa Ong contends, it is a "misleading impression that everyone can take equal advantage of mobility and modern communications and that transnationality has been liberatory ... for all people" (1999, 11). Takeyuki Tsuda supports this argument as he claims that "transnational migration is not always a liberating, empowering, and emancipatory experience" (2003a, 122). This especially applies to minority people or people who are oppressed and marginalised because of their race, class and gender or are victims of wars or the capitalist system of production.

Finally, my study joins the existing scholarly contributions to the integration of the aesthetic in Asian American literary discourse (see Davis and Lee 2006; Kardux and Einsiedel 2010). Much criticism has concentrated on the political and social content of Asian American writing rather than on its literary form, a tendency against which various critics have warned (see Sollors 1986;

[22] See also Doreen Massey's 1994 critical study, in which she draws attention to the "differentiated" nature of mobility (149).

Cheung 1997b; Goellnicht 1997; Kim 2006). While Asian American literature cannot be separated from its social and ethnic concerns, too much focus on the political content of these works risks overshadowing their literary features, such as modernist and postmodernist experimentation, magic realism, and the combination of different literary genres and narrative voices. Sue-Im Lee argues for "the complementary possibility of a historically and materially engaged analysis that *also* recognizes the aesthetic as a rich critical variable" (2006, 1). My analysis shows how the use of specific literary devices and genres enables writers to reinforce the message and tone delivered through their works. Thus, form and content are inextricably linked and ultimately enhance each other.

My selection of Asian American literary works, which includes both recent and not so recent works that have received little scholarly attention to date and a range of texts that have never been examined together, fills gaps in existing scholarship that focuses on transnational Asian American writing. Apart from a collection of essays, they are all novels, although some of them are so experimental that such a label is rather reductive. It is on the basis of the specific forms of mobility, transnationalism and transnationality that these literary works portray and exemplify – negative, transpacific, hemispheric, planetary – that I have chosen them, not because of an arbitrary preference for this genre. Finally, they are all works of contemporary literature published after 1970: while this might confirm that transnationalism is a phenomenon typical of our technological and capitalist era, the experiences of transnationalism narrated in these literary works more often than not unfold without or before

the advent of specific modern technologies and are not prompted by the capitalist system.

This study is divided into three parts, each of them comprising two chapters. In Part I, I discuss *Mulberry and Peach* ([1976] 1998) by the Chinese American writer Hualing Nieh and *Manhattan Music* (1997) by the Indian American poet and novelist Meena Alexander. Although these authors and their novels are undoubtedly transnational, both the protagonists of these texts, Mulberry and Sandhya, refuse to attach themselves to either the United States or China/India because of the violence that they experience in both countries. Thus, they develop what might be regarded as a negative version of transnationalism and find themselves in an alienating in-between space. Mobility is also negative since it is coerced in Mulberry's case, and it corresponds to a desperate escape with regard to Sandhya. Hence, it is a form of im/mobility.

In Part II, I analyse *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) by Ruth Ozeki and *Circle K Cycles* (2001) by Karen Tei Yamashita. Both authors are third-generation Japanese Americans, and their narratives shift the focus from the United States to Canada and Brazil respectively – although always in connection with Japan. Hence, they are representative of the transpacific and hemispheric efforts to displace U.S.-centred perspectives. Moreover, these works deal with "ethnic return migration" (Tsuda 2009a), a form of migration that has only recently come to the attention of social scientists and that sets limits to the creation of transnational ties. Therefore, although Ozeki and Yamashita are proof that transnationalism exists among immigrants'

descendants, their characters struggle to embrace such a process and experience a form of mobility that has negative consequences on their lives.

Part III examines *The Book of Salt* (2003) by the Vietnamese American writer Monique Truong and the Italian-language collection of essays *In altre parole* (2015) by the Indian American author Jhumpa Lahiri. In both texts, Europe plays a central role as Truong's novel is set in France, and Lahiri's work is written in Italian. These authors' links to Europe contribute to the expansion of the transnational perspective in Asian American studies and, in particular, to the 'worlding' (see Dimock 2007, 2017) of Asian American literature. Lahiri's work is especially significant with regard to a translingual understanding of American and Asian American studies. These texts, however, clash in their representations of mobility, which is experienced differently by their protagonists, one a colonial labourer and the other a privileged traveller.

PART ONE

BETWEEN ASIA AND AMERICA

INTRODUCTION

In this first part of my dissertation, I analyse the novels *Mulberry and Peach* (桑青与桃红, *Sangqing yu Taohong*; [1976] 1998) by the Chinese American writer Hualing Nieh (1925-) and *Manhattan Music* (1997) by the Indian American poet and novelist Meena Alexander (1951-2018). Both authors moved to the United States as adults, out of choice, and forged transnational links to this country and to their countries of origin, China and India. As I discuss in the first half of each chapter, these writers' transnationality is reflected by their literary works in their form, content, circulation and reception.[1] Set partly in China and partly in the United States, originally written in Chinese and later translated into English, *Mulberry and Peach* is not "a single book but an unstable textual complex that traverses multiple national, political, linguistic, and cultural borders" (Wong 1998, 225). As for Alexander's work, it constitutes a "poetics of dislocation" (Alexander 2009), responding to her experiences of migration. Having crossed the ocean – or 'black water' according to Hindu belief – several times, Alexander used the multiple fragments of her "broken geography" (Alexander 2003, 2) to create a textual "embroidery" (Alexander 2018) of which *Manhattan Music* is an example.

[1] I use the term 'transnationalism' to indicate the *process* of forging relations to more than one nation and 'transnationality' to refer to the condition or *quality* of being transnational.

In the second half of each chapter, I examine how, through both form and content, *Mulberry and Peach* and *Manhattan Music* portray mobility and transnationalism negatively. Although Alexander is mostly known as a poet, *Manhattan Music* constitutes a particularly suitable example of her transnational writing and, at the same time, of negative transnationalism and mobility. As such, it contains many suggestive parallels with Nieh's *Mulberry and Peach*. However, to the best of my knowledge, these novels have not been compared before. Both novels are set partly in Asia and partly in America, and they track the main characters' trajectories across continents. Mulberry and Sandhya are both Asian immigrants to the United States in search of a better future. Yet their experiences of violence in both homeland and host land prevent them from attaching themselves to any nation. Hence, they develop what I describe as a negative version of transnationalism, and, as a result, they live in an in-between space that is extremely alienating. For both Mulberry and Sandhya, mobility is also negative since it corresponds to a desperate escape rather than an opportunity.

1 TRAVERSING CHINESE BORDERS:

HUALING NIEH'S *MULBERRY AND PEACH*

> All in all, Mulberry and Peach is a demanding text, but it is one that amply rewards the reader willing to enter its world of searing, at times surrealistic, intensity.
>
> — Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, "Afterword to *Mulberry and Peach*" (1998)

Mulberry and Peach (桑青与桃红, *Sangqing yu Taohong*; [1976] 1998) by the Chinese American writer Hualing Nieh won the 1990 Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award for fiction, and it was named one of the 100 greatest Chinese novels of the twentieth century by *Asia Weekly* magazine. A truly transnational text, *Mulberry and Peach* crosses borders not only through its content and form but also in terms of its circulation and reception. Although Nieh has often expressed her great attachment to China, *Mulberry and Peach* deserves to be read transnationally, that is, by referring to its various cultural locations. Only recently have some scholars acknowledged and explored to a certain extent the transnationality of the text. After establishing how Nieh and her work are transnational, I not only attest to the transnationality of *Mulberry and Peach*, but I also focus on both how the text is transnational in terms of its

language, circulation and reception and how it deals with transnationalism itself.

In particular, in the second half of the chapter, I argue that the novel depicts transnationalism and mobility as coerced processes that have negative effects on the immigrant. The protagonist, Mulberry, is a Chinese refugee woman who is forced to relocate across China, Taiwan and the United States between 1945 and 1970 to escape war as well as male and institutional violence. My analysis further develops the discussion of Mulberry's unstable condition as a female immigrant by introducing the idea of a negative transnationalism. Placed in a transnational web against her will, Mulberry refuses to establish links with any nation as both China and the United States are fraught with violence. Hence, she is doomed to wander perpetually, and, at the same time, she is trapped in a frightening in-between space that causes "a vertiginous unbalancing of life and self" (Roberson 1998, 11). Indeed, she develops a multiple personality disorder that will haunt her for the rest of her life. Thus, mobility does not represent for Mulberry an experience of liberation but rather a form of oppression and, therefore, paradoxical immobility. While most scholars have concentrated on the content of *Mulberry and Peach*, I also explore at length its literary style and techniques since they contribute to the novel's transnationality and to the creation of a fragmented and multiple character, traumatised and destroyed by coerced mobility and transnationalism.

"I'M A TREE"

> Wo shi yi ke shu. Gen zai dalu. Gan zai Taiwan. Zhiye zai Aihehua 我是一棵树。根在大陆。干在台湾。枝叶在爱荷华 [I'm a tree. The roots are in China. The trunk is in Taiwan. The branches are in Iowa.]
>
> — Hualing Nieh, *Three Lives* (三生三世, *San sheng san shi*; 2004)

Novelist, editor, critic and translator, Hualing Nieh was born in 1925 in Wuhan, Hubei, China. Her family was traditional and middle-class. When she was ten years old, her father, an official of Chiang Kai-shek's government, was executed by the Communist Red Army. This event had a strong impact on her future political leanings as well as on her career as a writer. She has stated:

> I couldn't support the left because of what happened to my father ... At the same time, however, I wasn't happy with Chiang Kai-shek's government.... I couldn't take sides – I was an outsider – so I began writing about this situation of the Chinese at the time.... That was the beginning of my career as a writer. (Quoted in Feeley 2009)

Although Nieh seems to position herself as apolitical, her choice not to take sides still constitutes a political position. Moreover, she criticises both sides rather than remaining neutral. Such criticism can also be found in *Mulberry and Peach* where Nieh condemns institutionalised power and control in its various forms.

Nieh earned a degree in English from National Central University, Nanjing, in 1948. The following year, as the Communists were taking over China, she left for Taiwan with her family and her husband. Taiwan was "a closed place.... [N]o book could be allowed into Taiwan ... [I]t was a kind of intellectual, literary desert for some years" (Nieh quoted in Nazareth 1981, 12). Nevertheless, from 1949 to 1960, Nieh was the literary editor and a member of the editorial board of *Free China*, a liberal intellectual magazine, which enabled her to be in touch with some of the best Chinese intellectuals of the time. In 1960, however, the magazine was closed down by the Taiwanese government, and four people were arrested at the magazine. As a result, Nieh was "isolated for two years! … [T]hey couldn't arrest me … I stayed home and wrote ... and did translations, but nobody dared hire me. The secret police had been watching the area around my house" (quoted in Feeley 2009). Nieh dramatises this experience of isolation and political repression in *Mulberry and Peach* where she criticises the Taiwanese government through her portrayal of the protagonist's deteriorated mental health.

Nieh then taught creative writing at National Taiwan University and at Tunghai University. She published *Creeper* (1953), a novella in Chinese; *The Lost Golden Bell* (失去的金鈴子, *Shi qu de jin ling zi*; 1960), her first novel; two collections of short stories in Chinese, *Jade Cat* (翡翠猫, *Feicui mao*; 1959) and *A Small White Flower* (一朵小白花, *Yi duo xiao bai hua*; 1963); and a collection of short stories in English, *The Purse* (1959). She also translated English works by Anderson, Cather, Crane, Faulkner, Fitzgerald and James. Nieh has declared that translation trained her "to become a better writer in Chinese. A translator

must be loyal to the original author but also transform the language into something new" (quoted in Feeley 2009). Although Nieh has always preferred to write in Chinese than English, her comment suggests that it is also through English that her Chinese language skills have improved.

In 1963, Nieh met Paul Engle, then director of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, who was on a trip to research the contemporary literary scene in Asia. Engle invited her to the United States where she became a Writer-in-Residence in the Iowa Writers' Workshop the following year. In 1966, she obtained an MFA in Creative Writing from the same university. In 1967, Nieh and Engle co-founded the International Writing Program, an international version of the Writers' Workshop. Nieh served as co-director before assuming the role as director in 1977 when Engle, by then her husband, retired. Since 1967, more than 1,400 writers from more than 140 countries have participated in the International Writing Program's Fall Residency (*International Writing Program* 2018).[2] Because of their significant contribution to fostering exchange among international writers, Nieh and Engle were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976. In 1979, they also launched the "Chinese Weekends", thus enabling Chinese and Taiwanese writers to meet each other for the first time since 1949. Nieh was also co-director of the Translation Workshop at the University of Iowa from 1975 to 1988, the year of her retirement, and she has taught in major U.S. and Chinese universities. She has received various honorary doctorates as well as an award for Distinguished Service to the

[2] Nieh and the IWP are the subject of *One Tree: Three Lives* (2012), a documentary by Angie Chen that premiered at the 2012 Hong Kong International Film Festival.

Arts from the State of Iowa and the National Association of Governors in 1982. She is now Professor Emerita at the University of Iowa's Department of English and member of the Iowa Writers' Workshop Advisory Board.

A translation of Mao Tse-tung's poems by Nieh and her husband was published in 1971. Nieh also edited the two volumes of *Literature of the Hundred Flowers* (1981), a selection of Chinese literary works written in the 1950s. Nieh's latest novel, *Far Away, a River* (千山外，水长流, *Qian shan wai, shui chang liu*; 1996), deals with the search for identity and Chinese roots. One of her most recent works is her memoir, *Three Lives* (三生三世, *San sheng san shi*), published in 2004. The title summarises Nieh's transnational life story, deployed along three geographies and visualised by the writer as a tree with roots in China, the trunk in Taiwan and the branches in Iowa (2004, xxvii).

BEYOND CHINA

Mulberry and Peach tells the story of a Chinese woman who develops a double identity as a consequence of her traumatic experiences while relocating across China, Taiwan and the United States between 1945 and 1970. The time span covers some of the most significant events in twentieth-century Chinese history (broadly understood to include Taiwan): the Sino-Japanese war, the Communist takeover and the White Terror in Taiwan.[3] The novel is divided into

[3] The term 'White Terror' refers to the suppression of political dissidents of the Nationalist Party in Taiwan between 1947-1987.

four parts preceded by a prologue and followed by an epilogue. In the prologue, the protagonist, Peach, discusses her identity with a U.S. immigration officer: she claims that Mulberry (her former self) is dead. Each part of the novel opens with a letter from a defiant Peach to the U.S. immigration officer, telling him about her relocations across the United States and including a map of her itineraries. Each letter is followed by an extract from Mulberry's diary.

In the first part (1945), on the eve of the Chinese victory over the Japanese, sixteen-year-old Mulberry escapes from the war and her dysfunctional family but is stranded on a boat with other refugees in a Yangtze River gorge. In the second part (1948-1949), shortly before the Communist takeover, Mulberry flees to besieged Beijing where she marries Shen Chia-kang, the son of a declining upper-class family to whom she was betrothed from childhood. Part Three (1957-1959) sees the couple escaping to Taiwan where they are forced to live hidden in an attic with their eight-year-old daughter Sang-wa because Chia-kang has embezzled funds from the bank where he worked. In the last part (1969-1970), Mulberry is alone in the United States: she is an illegal immigrant chased by the Immigration Service and pregnant with an illegitimate child. In this part, Peach takes over Mulberry. The epilogue retells a Chinese myth.

The publication history of *Mulberry and Peach* "resonates uncannily with the physical and psychological traversals experienced by the protagonist, which in turn echo the author's own ordeals" (Wong 1998, 224). *Sangqing yu Taohong* was first serialised in a Taiwanese magazine, *Unite Daily News*, in the early 1970s. The serialisation was soon interrupted as the novel was considered

immoral for its satire of the Nationalist regime and even pornographic in its accounts of Peach's sexual activity. The ban in Taiwan was only lifted after the death of Chiang Kai-shek's son and successor in 1988. Previously, however, the serialisation had been taken up by a Hong Kong journal, and the novel was finally published in Hong Kong in 1976. A second, expurgated edition appeared in Beijing in 1980. Nieh agreed to such intervention in her novel because that was the only way to see it published in China at the time. Notably, the part set in the United States was deleted in this second edition.

Since the text had not been translated into English yet, its only audience was Chinese, and so early readings of the novel concentrated on its Chinese aspects. Therefore, in "Sinocentric" readings (Wong 2001) of the novel, anything that happens after Mulberry's separation from her cultural roots is irrelevant. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong affirms that "when return to a Chinese center is foreclosed, Mulberry/Peach might have fallen off the face of the earth" (2001, 142). She further explains that, in these readings, "the United States functions as the backdrop to the Chinese protagonist's inner morality play, a mere signifier to an assortment of spiritual ills. It is thus an ahistorical 'place,' or rather nonplace" (142). But if the United States' role in the novel is merely symbolic, why was it necessary to delete the whole chapter? Without it, the novel ends in Taiwan when the police discover Mulberry and Chia-kang's hiding place. More importantly, the final split between Mulberry and Peach does not occur.

Were the Chinese publishers too worried about presenting a Chinese character as completely destroyed, split as she is between two identities, one of

them particularly disturbing to them for its sexual boldness? Moreover, as Mulberry turns into Peach, she forgets everything about her past and, therefore, about China: "*[a]ll that happened so long ago I've completely forgotten*" (172; emphasis in original). Finally, when asked if she is loyal to the American government Peach answers affirmatively (165). Significantly, however, it is Peach and not Mulberry who decides to keep the baby, "the Chinese in [her] womb" (199). Yet this was evidently not enough to convince the Chinese publishers to keep Part Four.

The unexpurgated version was published on the mainland in 1989 and again in 1996. The text was translated into English in 1981 by Jane Parish Yang and Linda Lappin and published in Beijing by New World Press and in New York by Sino Publishing Company. Changes were made by New World Press, which was "under government control, like all publishers on the mainland at the time" (Wong 2001, 149), although the author had been reassured that there was no such need as the project was intended for non-Chinese audiences, and so it was not politically compromising. The altered version appeared in Great Britain in 1986, published by The Women's Press. In 1988, Beacon Press of Boston published a version based on the original manuscript but later dropped the title because of unsatisfactory sales (Wong 1998, 225). The text was republished in 1998 by the Feminist Press at the City University of New York.

As the novel was written in Chinese by a female immigrant in the United States who had been in exile in Taiwan, *Mulberry and Peach* "has been claimed as an example of modern Chinese literature, overseas Chinese literature, literature by writers from Taiwan, literature of exile, diasporic literature, Asian

American literature, feminist literature, border-crossing literature, and more" (Wong 1998, 210). Kirk Denton argues that "[t]he genesis of *Mulberry and Peach* raises some questions about literary hermeneutics.… [I]s Nieh Hualing a Chinese writer, a Taiwanese writer, or an overseas Chinese writer? Drawing from such diverse literary traditions as she does, based on which traditions are we to view her novel?" (quoted in Wong 2001, 133). Literary scholars who have focused on the Chinese tradition of the novel have read *Mulberry and Peach* as an allegory of modern Chinese history, the protagonist being a symbol of the self-exiled "Wandering Chinese" obsessed with China[4] and her split personality a metaphor of the division between Nationalists and Communists (see Pai 1976; Lee 1991; Yu 1993). Other critics have concentrated on the Asian American dimension of the text and on Mulberry's experience as a female immigrant who travels from China to the United States, thus also looking at gender (see Wong 1998; Amato 1999; Chiu 2003; Cho 2004; Chen 2005; Feng 2010; Fusco 2012; Greenberg 2016). As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, my analysis expands the inquiry into Mulberry's unstable condition as a female immigrant by introducing the notion of a negative transnationalism.

Despite the English translation and the fact that Nieh lives and writes in the United States, *Mulberry and Peach* is still an overlooked text outside the Asian American literary field. This is certainly true for many other Asian American works, notable exceptions being *The Woman Warrior* (1976) by Maxine Hong Kingston and *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) by Amy Tan. According

[4] The expression "obsession with China" was coined by C. T. Hsia in 1971 to describe the work of modern overseas Chinese writers.

to Sheng-mei Ma, these authors' success is determined by their ability to satisfy the dominant American readership's appetite for "exotic (hence ethnographic) and politically correct (hence feminist) readings" (1998, 12). Monica Chiu compares the success of Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (1989) with the invisibility of *Mulberry and Peach* and affirms that "*Jasmine*'s reception … becomes representative of 'acceptable' women's immigration trials[.]… Meanwhile, less positively concluding and more difficult novels, like *Mulberry and Peach*, attract scant critical attention" (2003, 20). In other words, Jasmine's ostensibly successful assimilation into the U.S. social fabric as well as the novel's far less experimental form may facilitate its appeal for a mainstream American audience.

Initially, under the influence of cultural nationalism and its emphasis on Americanness, *Mulberry and Peach*, like other overseas Chinese novels, did not receive much attention from Asian American scholars either. As explained in the Introduction to this thesis, the supporters of cultural nationalism defined Asian Americans as those who were born in the United States and were native speakers of English. Consequently, "[i]f membership in the [Asian] American canon is dependent upon being born in America..., those who lie outside this imagined community are pushed into a form of symbolic literary exile" (Amato 1999, 34-35). Not only was Nieh not born in the United States, but also, unlike writers such as Mukherjee, she kept writing in her mother tongue. Furthermore, overseas Chinese authors' "continued identification with the socio-political realities of their homelands as well as their narratives' general omission of an American assimilation plot" reinforced their exclusion from early Asian

American literary scholarship (Amato 1999, 34). Thus, "until recently overseas Chinese works from the U.S. ... were usually considered the sole terrain of Chinese literature or area studies departments" (Amato 1999, 35). It is thanks to the transnational turn in Asian American studies, which has shifted the focus from the United States to Asia and to the relations between these two areas, that such texts have been rediscovered.

As Jean Amato contends,

> we need to employ a more interdisciplinary approach to these Chinese immigrant texts.... To focus on a novel's representation of the trope of the imagined Chinese homeland, or the American minority experience in isolation to the other, is to deny the impact of U.S.-China-Taiwan relations and transnational forces on the scholarship and reception of these works. (1999, 36)

The transnational turn in Asian American studies has prompted literary critics to adopt such an "interdisciplinary approach". Hence, they have studied texts such as *Mulberry and Peach* transnationally, that is, from multiple perspectives, addressing both their Asianness and Asian Americanness.

Admittedly, only a transnational reading could do justice to a "traveling" (Wong 1998, 209) and "border-crossing" (Wong 2001, 147) text like *Mulberry and Peach*: "[b]ecause the protagonist's journey originates in China and continues on to the United States, … the novel could be understood as a text spanning the Chinese and the Chinese American, the Asian and the Asian

American" (Wong 2001, 131). Just as Mulberry cannot be completely separated from Peach as they are, in fact, a single woman, so too it would be wrong to try to define this novel just in terms of its Chineseness or Chinese Americanness. Therefore, "Sinocentric" readings (Wong 2001) of this novel need to be integrated with readings that account for the Asian American dimension of the text. My analysis endorses this transnational perspective and contributes to establishing *Mulberry and Peach* as a transnational Asian American text since, although it was originally written in Chinese, it reaches beyond Chinese borders in terms of content, form and reception.

Reading *Mulberry and Peach* transnationally and "cross-culturally" (Wong 1998, 212) brings to the surface the various influences that have shaped Nieh's literary techniques and style; these are both Eastern and Western. Nieh declared in the 1980s that she was "more and more Chinese in writing" (quoted in Nazareth 1981, 15): indeed, Chinese literature has wielded an important influence on her work. At the same time, it has to be noted that Nieh earned a degree in English and that she has read and translated many British and U.S. writers. Western authors who have inspired her include Anderson, Cather, Crane, Ellison, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, James, Lawrence and Mansfield (Nazareth 1981, 14). Thus, on the one hand, "[i]n some of its diction, allusions, and imagery, [*Mulberry and Peach*] is as traditional as any classical Chinese romance. The elements in the novel that would be identified as Gothic by a Western reader ... are in fact Chinese through and through" (Wong 1998, 209-10). On the other hand, Nieh takes from the Western literary tradition both

modernist and postmodernist techniques such as interior monologue, montage and pastiche.

First published in 1976, *Mulberry and Peach* represents one of the earliest examples of modernist and postmodernist Asian American texts together with Chuang Hua's *Crossings* (1968), Kingston's well-known *The Woman Warrior* and *Dictee* (1982) by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Evidently, modernist and postmodernist literary devices, by creating fragmentary and heterogeneous texts, are particularly suited to give voice to the equally fragmented, plural subjectivities of immigrants and their descendants. Yu-Fang Cho (2004) explains that Nieh was part of a group of writers who relocated from mainland China to Taiwan after the Communist takeover in 1949. These writers "formed the mainstay in the modernism movement and dissident voices that challenged the Nationalist government's dictatorship in Taiwan" (161). Cho (2004) reads Chinese literary modernism as a legacy of U.S. cultural hegemony in post-war Taiwan as well as, more generally, a vestige of Euro-American imperialism in Asia. Therefore, Nieh's use of modernist and postmodernist techniques reveals the transnational links between China and the United States, and it contributes to the novel's transnationality as her style is not purely Chinese but is also infused with Western influences.

It is important to notice that *Mulberry and Peach* "indexes a kind of transnationality that is simultaneously translingual" (Shih 2014, 337). Indeed, the novel was originally written in Chinese and later translated into English. Nieh has explained that the choice to write in Chinese came to her instinctively:

> When I came to Iowa..., I lost touch with my mother tongue. I couldn't make up my mind which language to write in – Chinese or English? I'd already published seven books in Chinese but was also familiar with Western literature.... I couldn't write a word for quite a few years. Then, one day ... I sat down and began writing *Mulberry and Peach* on Chinese checked paper, and suddenly I couldn't stop writing! (Quoted in Feeley 2009)

Whereas the use of a second language generally requires a reasoned analysis of linguistic choices, the use of a mother tongue is more spontaneous. Further, language skills are usually better in the mother tongue than in the second language. Nieh has asserted: "I cannot write in English, although I do translation.... [Y]ou are not as good as you are in your own language" (quoted in Nazareth 1981, 17). She has also declared: "I don't think I could make my writing come out the way I would like in English. The Chinese language is rooted in me" (quoted in Feeley 2009). While the choice of the mother tongue might seem obvious, this is not the case with such authors as Samuel Beckett, Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, Ágota Kristóf, Milan Kundera, Yann Martel, Bharati Mukherjee, Xiaolu Guo, Ha Jin, Yiyun Li and, as I discuss in Chapter 6, Jhumpa Lahiri. In fact, there are more specific reasons why Nieh does not write in English.

A possible reason for choosing to write in Chinese is that Chinese American authors have less access to English-language publishers than mainstream Anglophone authors (Xiao-huang Yin quoted in Martin 2006, 359). Moreover, according to Xiao-huang Yin, "Chinese-language writers [in the U.S.]

enjoy a high degree of freedom that their counterparts writing in English do not have" since they do not have to fulfill mainstream public expectations. He argues that "for Chinese immigrant writers, creative writing in English often demands suppression and distortion of the Chinese sensibility that does not fit into the stereotyped portrayal of 'Orientals' that is popular in mainstream American culture" (1998, 177-79). Yet, for some Chinese authors, such as Ha Jin (1956-) and Qiu Xiaolong (1953-), writing in English means "preserv[ing] the integrity of [their] work", as Jin has declared (2009), that is, avoiding Chinese censorship. Had Nieh written her novel in English and published it first in the United States, she could have circumvented censorship in her homeland. Furthermore, her husband could have helped her find an American publisher. In short, Nieh "would have had many advantages" writing in English (Chen 2012).

Besides, if writing in English means addressing an Anglophone audience, the author who writes in Chinese addresses a Chinese readership with its own expectations (see Martin 2006). In her analysis of *liuxuesheng wenxue*, that is, overseas Chinese/Taiwanese student literature,[5] Margaret Hillenbrand discusses overseas Chinese authors' choice to write in Chinese and concludes that this partly depends on their willingness to speak to a Chinese audience eager to know about life in the United States: "the demands of people back home, both real and perceived, constitute a powerful, but little-noted, motive force behind the production of non-Anglophone texts in diaspora" (2013, 50).

[5] The genre was inaugurated by the Chinese American writers Nieh, Hsien-Yung Pai, Lihua Yu, Jo-hsi Chen and Shi-Kuo Chang in the 1960s and 1970s (Hillenbrand 2013, 51).

However, only one section of *Mulberry and Peach* is set in the United States. Moreover, once Nieh's novel was published in English, she was very mindful of her Anglophone audience as well. Wong argues that "Nieh's investment in 'Chineseness' is unquestionable: her desire to see her book published on the Chinese mainland was strong enough to ... [lead] her to reluctantly agree to the expurgation of part four" (1998, 225). Nonetheless, the author's intervention in the publication of the English version to make the text more accessible to Anglophone readers also reveals her desire to see it cross China's borders – and probably, at the same time, to avoid misinterpretations.

The main reason why Nieh has continued to write in Chinese is more closely related to stylistic implications of language. She has stated: "My style is very compressed with regards to wording, which can be easily expressed in Chinese but requires too much explanation in English because of all of the cultural differences" (quoted in Feeley 2009). Furthermore, "[w]hen I write in Chinese, I feel I have to create my own language, one that is not specific to any particular locale" (quoted in Feeley 2009). Thus, Nieh uses Chinese, the language with which she feels more comfortable, to serve her own purposes and to express her originality, which she has defended on other occasions, asserting that her work is not part of the Chinese tradition but her own (quoted in Nazareth 1981, 15). Indeed, given her life story, Nieh's 'tradition' is not only Chinese but also Taiwanese and Chinese American.

It is true that her work is very much focused on "the Chinese experience" (Nieh quoted in Feeley 2009). Nieh has declared that she is "obsessed" with it: "The longer I am away from my own country, the more I am concerned with

the heart of the situation of the country" (quoted in Nazareth 1981, 11). Her belief that "[t]he Chinese experience expressed in another language feels like a skeleton without flesh and blood" (quoted in Feeley 2009) has further encouraged her choice of writing in Chinese. Nieh's case seems to confirm the idea that Chinese-language overseas authors' "continued use of the Chinese language underscores their Chinese ethnocentrism" (Martin 2006, 361). However, as I mentioned in the biographical section of this chapter, Nieh has also described herself as a tree with roots in China, the trunk in Taiwan and the branches in the United States (2004, xxvii). Nieh's assertions reveal a contradiction as she identifies with both China and the United States and, at the same time, claims to be primarily involved in the Chinese situation, thus distancing herself from the United States. But "[i]f Nieh shows signs of 'obsession with China'..., she is equally obsessed with the observation of American reality" (Feng 2010, 146). In *Mulberry and Peach*, for instance, she describes the protests against the Vietnam War. Moreover, her literary techniques are strongly influenced by the Western literary tradition. Her work might be increasingly Chinese, but it belongs to her own eminently transnational, syncretic and hybrid literary tradition.

Clearly, *Mulberry and Peach* cannot be contained within the borders of a single nation. Certainly, the transfer of the story from a Sinophone to an Anglophone context, which involves both textual and cultural translation, was not without difficulty. Indeed, "[d]ifferent readerships respond to the same text in different ways, ... and the shift in contexts insures that readers of the translation will process it according to values with which they are most familiar,

those peculiar to the translating language" (Venuti 2012a, 496). This is why Nieh felt the need to clarify the title for the English-language reader by providing the English translation[6] with the subtitle "*Two Women of China*". Nieh also added at the beginning of each section a brief description of the characters and of the setting.

With regard to the title, Wong explains that it is charged with specific Chinese references. Hence, the need for clarification in the English version:

> *Sanqing* and *Taohong* … literally mean 'Mulberry Green' and 'Peach Red' ... The color imagery is quite accessible to non-Chinese readers[:] … 'freshness and innocence' for 'mulberry green,' and 'passion and danger' for 'peach red[.]'… [T]he cultural accretions attached to these words may not be readily apparent to the Western reader. Each plant word is extraordinarily evocative in the Chinese language.... [T]he mulberry is a sacred tree in China.… [T]he peach blossom ... is replete with centuries of allusions ranging from the erotic to the utopian to the tragic. Although the peach fruit's association with sensuality/sexuality in English is consonant with one meaning of *tao* in Chinese, the other meanings are lost in translation. (1998, 212-13)

Indeed, texts cannot be transferred from one language to another or from one culture to another without the risk of 'losing' or 'betraying' some of the meanings they convey.

[6] The novel has also been translated into Croatian, Dutch, Hungarian and Korean and sections of it into Polish (Wong 1998, 227).

As Lawrence Venuti indicates, translation is a "transformative" process: "The multiple contexts that constitute the source text, when translated, inevitably undergo various degrees of diminution and loss" (2012a, 496). This is why the translation process cannot be simply a "transcoding" (Vermeer 2012, 193), that is, a mere substitution of elements in the source language with equivalent elements in the target language. Yet the circulation of literary works outside their national borders relies precisely on translation: "[i]n most historical periods as well as in most geographical areas, only a small minority of readers can comprehend more than one or two languages.... Translation thus enables the international reception of literary texts" (Venuti 2012c, 180). In other words, translation can determine the transnationality of literary works, their belonging to a world literature.[7]

The translation of *Mulberry and Peach* into English has made the text available to an Anglophone audience, thus increasing its already transnational character. As long as the text was only read by a Chinese-speaking audience, its transnationality in terms of content was barely acknowledged – because of the focus on its Chinese aspects – and it was definitely not transnational in terms of its circulation and reception. This argument also accounts for my choice of analysing the English translation of *Mulberry and Peach*: although translation cannot convey a perfectly corresponding version of the original text, here it highlights the transnationality of the novel, which constitutes the very

[7] Translation, however, is not praised unanimously: Emily Apter (2006), for instance, sees translation – especially into 'hegemonic' languages such as English and French – as a threat to the production of literary works in languages considered peripheral (see also Spivak 2012). She has also drawn attention to the concept of "untranslatability" (2013).

focus of my analysis. Yet *Mulberry and Peach* is still an understudied text even within the Asian American literary field, probably because Nieh's *oeuvre* is still associated with a Chinese context. Indeed, besides *Mulberry and Peach*, only two other works of hers have been translated into English. My analysis seeks to affirm the importance of studying this work in light of the transnational turn in American and Asian American studies since it draws attention to the transnational connections between the United States and China and their literatures while also problematising celebratory views of transnationalism and mobility.

A BROKEN SOUL

Mulberry/Peach feels like a foreigner and an outsider wherever she goes. Her life is marked by endless relocations that deny her a home and a permanent address. In Part Four, Mulberry's immigrant file reports her permanent address as "[n]one" (161). In Part One, when one of the refugees escaping the Sino-Japanese war and stranded on a boat with Mulberry suggests exchanging addresses, Mulberry declares that she does not have one (36). In fact, almost nobody on the refugees' boat seems to have a permanent address. In particular, Refugee Student, who is 20 years old, represents "the generation growing up during World War II. He is patriotic, aware of his rootless condition" (15). Those belonging to this generation, including Mulberry, are forced to leave their homes to escape the war: first the Sino-Japanese war and then the Civil

War.[8] It is obviously Nieh's generation as well: Mulberry's journey across China, from China to Taiwan, and then to the United States reflects Nieh's own displacements.

With regard to Nieh's generation and those writers who come under the category of 'overseas Chinese/Taiwanese student literature', Nieh herself, Hsien-Yung Pai and Lihua Yu, they are transnational subjects who do not entirely fit social scientists' definitions of transnationalism (see Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1992, 1995). Indeed, these writers had to escape the war in their country and, subsequently, political repression in their host land. In Nieh's words, "exile is the result of repression" (quoted in Chen 2012). In her specific case, the reason why she eventually moved to the United States is strictly linked to her encounter with Engle, who offered her an opportunity at the University of Iowa. Evidently, transnational subjects do not exist solely in the context of a capitalist economy: these writers did not move because of job opportunities in the centres of capital, and, given the historical period, their attachment to or "obsession" with their originary homeland was certainly not facilitated by modern technologies.

Mulberry escapes not only war and political repression but also male violence, although she first experiences violence not from a man but from her mother. Lao-shih, Mulberry's friend, tells her: "You know when she [Mulberry's mother] was drunk, she would beat you for no reason, until you bled" (18). Mulberry's mother is the man of the family in a traditional, patriarchal sense:

[8] For a brief but accurate summary of the historical framework of *Mulberry and Peach*, see Wong's afterword to the novel (1998, 213-16).

her husband has become impotent, and she is the one who has authority. Lao-shih says of Mulberry's father: "he's not a man.... You said so yourself. Your father wounded his 'vital part' during the campaign against the warlords" (18). Her mother's masculinity and resulting authority are embodied by her possession of a family heirloom, a symbol of male power: "[m]ama took the jade griffin from my father's pocket. She said she should be the one to take care of the family heirloom" (19). While her husband has lost his masculinity, Mulberry's mother seems to have acquired it instead by taking the jade griffin. Thus, although violence is inflicted by a woman, it is still associated with the male gender.

In Part Two, male violence and oppression are portrayed through Mulberry's relationship with Chia-kang who objectifies her as "a vehicle in service of male sexual desire and patrilineal reproduction" (Cho 2004, 175). Mulberry has no other choice but to marry him: "she is bounded by the arranged marriage and she does not have a home to which to return.... [S]he cannot escape her role dictated by the patriarchal script" (Cho 2004, 176). At the wedding, the master of ceremonies says to Mulberry: "I will quote from *The Classic for Girls* the following words of advice: 'A woman must submit to her husband" (89). He then adds: "May your sons and grandsons be without end" (89) – although Nieh subverts this idea by giving Mulberry a daughter. Mulberry wants to escape this patriarchal order that subordinates her to men and imposes upon her the traditional role of wife and mother.

In Part One, Mulberry carries the jade griffin that she has stolen from her family (which her mother took from Mulberry's father): "[t]his isn't an

ordinary piece of jade, Lao-shih. This jade griffin was passed down from my ancestors", and specifically, the male ones (19). Lao-shih notes: "Now your younger brother is the only son. Your father will pass it along to him, and you won't get it" (19). Crucially, the jade griffin slips from Mulberry's hands and breaks. Although this is described as an accident, earlier on Mulberry recalls that when she was a child she had decided that "one day I would smash the griffin" (20). The griffin is indeed a symbol of male privilege in a patriarchal society that denies women the same rights as men.

Her journey to America, however, does not secure her a final escape from male violence and oppression. Here, Mulberry/Peach has an affair with Chiang I-po, a Chinese professor married to a white woman. I-po, like Chia-kang, also uses Mulberry/Peach to reclaim his masculinity (see Cho 2004) but does not want to compromise his social position and so demands that she has an abortion when he finds out that she is pregnant with his child. Although Mulberry/Peach wants to keep the baby, Mulberry knows that she is "*an alien with no way out I must get an abortion*" (201; emphasis in original). Her position as an illegal immigrant in the United States denies her the security she needs: if her application for permanent residency is unsuccessful she will be deported, although "*the Chinese are foreigners who haven't any place to be deported to*" (182; emphasis in original). Mulberry declares of her pregnancy: "*an illegitimate child with no roots I don't have the courage to keep it*" (193; emphasis in original). She herself is now rootless as adverse circumstances and the experience of violence preclude a physical and psychological return to China.

Furthermore, in both countries, Mulberry/Peach is subjected to state control. The attic where Mulberry, Chia-kang and their daughter hide symbolises the "claustrophobic political policies" of the Taiwanese government in those years (known as "White Terror") and their "alienating effects" (Amato 1999, 39).[9] The family "can't stand up straight" (118) because the room is too small, they "don't dare stand in front of the window for fear someone might see [them]" (118), and they cannot talk aloud, so they write words with their fingertips on each other's palm or use matches to reproduce ideograms. As a consequence, conversations are very short and compressed; sometimes they are a sequence of isolated words:

> SOMEONE ON ROOF
>
> RAT
>
> MAN
>
> WHO
>
> SOMEONE IS FOLLOWING US (117)

This conversation between Mulberry and Chia-kang also reveals Mulberry's persecution complex, a sign of her declining mental health rendered on the formal level by the repetition of the same words and phrases.

Indeed, "the narrative style of this section of the novel is obsessive in its use of iteration" (Fusco 2012). Some examples include: "The noise on the attic

[9] The attic also recalls Nieh's own state of isolation in Taiwan after the closure of *Free China*, the magazine where she worked.

roof has started up again" (116); "On the roof the gnawing is beginning again" (121); "Tonight there is no gnawing on the roof" (123); "The noise on the roof starts up again" (125). Note the repetitions here:

> I am sleeping on my *tatami* mat.
>
> Chia-kang is sleeping on his *tatami* mat.
>
> Sang-wa is sleeping on her *tatami* mat. (116)

Another recurring element is the clock, which always stays at the same hour: "[t]he time on the clock in the attic is still twelve thirteen. It makes no difference if it's midnight or noon.... Chia-kang doesn't try to repair the clock anymore. We have our own time" (125). According to David Palumbo-Liu, this "strictly idiosyncratic temporality" indicates the characters' isolation from the law and society, and "[a]s the fugitives' time away from historical time lengthens, we find the gradual production of neurosis and psychosis particular to social isolation" (1999, 347). Thus, the language and images used in this section effectively reflect the sense of oppression within a tight and isolated space and the resulting sense of alienation further exacerbated by the prohibition to communicate or move freely.

Mulberry's obsessive thoughts also relate to her yearning to escape from the attic: she looks "at old newspapers about people running away" (126), she writes escape stories (138) and even dreams about escaping (135-38). As Chia-kang refuses to escape, Mulberry eventually decides to go out on her own during the night under the pretext of assisting Aunt Ts'ai, their host's wife, who

is at the hospital. Hence, Mulberry's personality starts splitting: "[m]y life splits in half. Daytime in the attic. Night-time at the hospital" (141). At this stage, however, Mulberry is conscious of her duality and of her performance: for instance, she disguises herself as a servant during a party at Uncle Ts'ai's house. At the end of the night, Uncle Ts'ai congratulates her: "Uncle Ts'ai says I should win an Oscar for the best performance by an actress.... I begin a new life. I go out during the day. Back to the attic during the night.... I am now Uncle Ts'ai's maid, housekeeper and mistress" (147). Thus, Mulberry's new role gives her the freedom to leave the attic. Because she is not Mulberry anymore, but Uncle Ts'ai's mistress, she is not under state control – although she is defined in relation to yet another man.

It is in the same logic that Mulberry develops a second personality in the United States, although this happens unconsciously: in order to avoid the trauma of another relocation and of male and institutional control, Mulberry turns into another person, Peach. Nonetheless, "Mulberry's fantasies of escape are always thwarted or end in capture. The inevitable scripting of failure in Mulberry's escape stories marks the danger and seeming impossibility of moving beyond the control and surveillance of the nation-state" (Chen 2005, 101). Indeed, "*[t]he earth is a huge attic*. The huge attic is divided into millions of little attics, just like ours" (129; emphasis added). These words convey that state control is everywhere and that one can only escape from it by living in self-imprisonment; therefore, escape is illusory. Mulberry's own escape from the attic fails miserably as the police find her and Chia-kang, and, once in the United States, she is haunted by the Immigration Service. Moreover, even

though she turns into Peach, "Peach's body betrays her original identity as Mulberry" (Greenberg 2016, 286). It follows that Peach is under state control, too.

State power is embodied in Part Four by the U.S. immigration officer, a meaningfully neutral and anonymous figure:

> [h]e is dressed in a dark suit with a black and grey striped tie. He wears sunglasses, although it's an overcast day. The dark lenses disguise the only distinguishing part of his face: eyebrows, eyes, the bridge of his nose. Only the anonymous parts are visible: bald head, sharp chin, high forehead, beak nose, and pencil-thin moustache. (3)

As Serena Fusco notes, the officer is "almost parodic in his anonymous de-humanization" (2012). Peach, however, calls him "*Mr* Dark" (3; emphasis added), thus providing him with a masculine gender and reinforcing the idea that violence is primarily masculine. Mulberry is obsessed with this figure who chases her even in her dreams and who wants to determine her identity on the sole basis of her conduct: "[w]hat we want to investigate isn't your state of mind, your emotions, or your motivations ... [but] your behaviour" (165). Therefore, Mulberry is not considered a human being whose actions are driven by a variety of reasons and feelings: she is just an "Alien" whose identity is dictated by the numerical sequence "89-785-462" (3).[10] The same practice was used to identify Japanese American and Jewish prisoners in internment and

[10] The American legal system defines as 'alien' a person who is not a citizen.

concentration camps in the U.S. and Europe. It is thus possible to draw a parallel between dehumanised powers which in turn dehumanise those who fall under their control.

Mr Dark demands that Mulberry/Peach be loyal to the American government if she wants to obtain permanent residency. Mulberry protests that she is Chinese but is forced to confirm her U.S. loyalty:

> 'Are you loyal to the American government?'
>
> 'I'm Chinese.'
>
> 'But you're applying for permanent residency in America. Are you loyal to the American government?'
>
> 'Yes.' (165)

Mr Dark's language is coercive and does not leave much freedom of speech or room for manoeuvre for Mulberry. Hence, "[f]rom the Mainland, to Taiwan, to the US, Nie [*sic*] places her protagonist(s) in the middle of a complex and inescapably transnational web" where Mulberry is subjected to the pressure of "a double request of political loyalty" (Fusco 2012). Therefore, if Mulberry's split personality can be read as a metaphor of "political disintegration" (Pai 1976, 210) or "political irreconciliation" (Chiu 2003, 24) in China (namely the division between Nationalists and Communists but also between mainland China and Taiwan), such national divisions actually develop on a larger, transnational scale. Mulberry is required to choose between Right and Left but also between the United States and China.

Yet America and Asia are not two separate entities: not only because many Asian immigrants chose to inhabit U.S. soil (especially after the 1965 Immigration Act) but also because of U.S. involvement in Asian matters. For instance, Peach joins a group of demonstrators against the war in Vietnam. When she sees that they are wearing tags with the names of soldiers killed in Vietnam, she decides that she also wants to wear a tag: "[t]he name of the dead person is Mulberry" (13). As Cho explains, "this unusual juxtaposition of their deaths dramatizes that the soldiers and Mulberry are victims of U.S. imperial maneuvers abroad and immigration policies at home, respectively" (2004, 165-66). Indeed, Mulberry metaphorically dies under the pressure of the U.S. government's investigation as well as because of the violence that she has experienced in China, Taiwan and the United States.

Thus, in the United States, Mulberry encounters a reality that is as harsh as the one from which she comes. Nieh portrays a complex picture where there is no clear-cut dichotomy between East and West, Asia and America, refusing "to split her subject into two distinct Eastern and Western absolutes" (Amato 1999, 33). Peach is often described by scholars as the American and, hence, untraditional and sexually uninhibited side of Mulberry's personality (see Pai 1976; Cho 2004; Shih 2014). In fact, Peach often speaks in Chinese as well as in English, which accounts for the retention of her Chineseness. More importantly, Mulberry "has never had an innocent childhood" (Wong 2001, 144): she steals a precious object – and by stealing it she rebels against the patriarchal order; she runs away from her family; and she is sexually active before marrying. In addition, when she is in Taiwan, she has an affair with a

much older man whose wife is dying of cancer in the hospital. For this reason, no linear transformation from negative to positive, or the reverse, can be traced. Such a transition would suggest that there exist two poles, one positive and the other negative. Yet Mulberry does not choose the United States as her new home, and, at the same time, she cannot return to China since both East and West are fraught with violence. Mulberry thus experiences a negative version of transnationalism as she refuses to forge transnational ties to either China or the United States.

Nevertheless, Mulberry is forcibly placed within a transnational network, and such a network turns into a trap. Throughout the novel, Mulberry's limited freedom is rendered by the juxtaposition of images of mobility and immobility. While Mulberry is often placed within confining spaces such as the refugees' boat, the Shens' house, the attic and Taiwan itself – "a green eye floating alone on the sea" (118) – Peach seems to celebrate in her letters the American myth of mobility and, particularly, of Westward movement:

> [h]e [a Polish lumberjack] wanted to go east. I wanted to go west. (159)

> I'm wandering around these places shown on the map.... Sometimes I hitchhike. Sometimes I take a bus. As soon as I get somewhere, I leave. I don't have any particular destination. I'm always on the road.... One by one, the horizons sink behind me and new ones rise ahead of me. (11)

Yet "when an Asian American mobility narrative consciously alludes to Westward movement as a possible structuring principle, the effect is typically ironic" (Wong 1993, 127). Although Peach claims to be headed West, she does not move Westward but in a circle (see Feng 2010, 147) in contrast with the American myth of Westward movement.

Furthermore, Peach's optimistic tone is easily destroyed in a context of forced migration. While

> [s]he seems to have complete agency and control over her movement, ... [h]er ostensible mobility ... is forever haunted by the reality of her *forced* flight across the United States: the constant threat of the officer's efforts to hunt her down, to mark her as an illegal alien, and to deport her. (Cho 2004, 164; emphasis added)

Another example of forced relocation is Peach's banishment from the water tower where she was living with a Polish lumberjack and where she had decided to have her baby. Before leaving, Peach hangs a wooden plaque

> imitating what was written on the plaque that the astronauts left on the moon:
>
> A WOMAN WHO CAME FROM AN *UNKNOWN PLANET*
> ONCE LIVED IN THE WATER TOWER
> 22 FEBRUARY 1970-21 MARCH 1970
> I CAME IN PEACE FOR ALL MANKIND (159; emphasis added)

The reference to the unknown planet presents Peach as an 'alien'. Such designation is given real substance by the U.S. Immigration Service, which actually labels her as "(Alien) number 89-785-462" (3). Moreover, just as the astronauts left the moon after their exploration only able to remain there for a brief time, so too Mulberry, as an 'alien', will never be able actually to settle in the United States. Mulberry's reworking of the moon plaque reveals her desire to 'claim America' (see Feng 2010, 147): she portrays her presence in America as a conquest, but she is aware that her foreignness will prevent her from staying longer or being fully accepted on U.S. soil.

Immigrants' tales of mobility, therefore, often constitute a counter-discourse to exalted portrayals of the same themes of mobility and travel. Mobility is, in this case, a necessity or even an imposition. As Sau-ling Cynthia Wong affirms, there is

> one striking difference ... between mainstream and Asian American discourses on mobility. In the former, ... movement across the North American continent regularly connotes independence, freedom, an opportunity for individual actualization and/or societal renewal ... In the latter, however, it is usually associated with subjugation, coercion, impossibility of fulfillment for self or community – in short, Necessity. (1993, 121)

Wong's classification is perhaps too rigid given that novels such as John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957) and Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* (1946) end on an optimistic note, implying a movement toward America that is liberatory, full

of hope, warmth and light. Yet these novels' endings stand in tonal opposition to the rest of the text, in which mobility is presented as negative. In *No-No Boy* mobility is marked by shame, fear and hatred, and in *America Is in the Heart* mobility does not translate into a linear movement toward a final resolution. Mobility is dictated by reasons that are out of the control of Carlos, the protagonist, and so he embarks upon a directionless journey at the end of which he does not achieve what he was looking for. As for Mulberry and Peach, they are both compelled to cross multiple borders without actually wanting to do so because of the war and as a result of male and institutional violence. Hence, although images of confinement, imprisonment, and immobility seem to conflict with Mulberry/Peach's endless relocations, both mobility and immobility constitute a form of oppression and a cause of suffering, what Cho calls "immobility within mobility" or "im/mobility" (2004, 160).

As Mulberry sees no solution to her precarious situation, she recedes and metaphorically dies to make way for Peach, who is not afraid of the U.S. Immigration Service or of travelling and is assertive in her relationships with men. Nieh describes Mulberry's metamorphosis into Peach as a process of disappearance and rebirth:

> I grope my way into the bathtub. As I sink down into the water, I become a new woman – ... all my pains vanish. All feelings of suspicion, fear, and guilt disappear. The water warms my whole body. I am translucent as water.
>
> It is wonderful to be alive. (166)

The symbolic image of water is usually associated with both death (as in flood mythologies) and rebirth (as in the Christian baptism) as well as with the erasure of a definite identity. Mulberry, becoming as "translucent as water", a natural element that takes the shape of its container, can abandon her previous identity and acquire a new one.

Interior monologue, a typically modernist technique, is largely used to express Mulberry/Peach's thoughts, especially in Part Four where Peach and Mulberry emerge as two distinct voices (in Mulberry's narrative). However, just as the final transition from Mulberry to Peach happens almost imperceptibly, so too does the splitting of their voices. To distinguish between them, the author italicises Mulberry's thoughts, but she does not explicitly indicate who is talking. Therefore, it is the reader's task to understand and follow the shifts between voices. It is only after some time that Peach openly addresses Mulberry, making it clear that the italicised paragraphs report Mulberry's thoughts:

> [*m*]*y finger tips* [*sic*] *hurt suddenly I realise that the cigarette I'm holding is burning my fingers my shoes are splattered with mud on the table beside the bed there's a half-drunk Bloody Mary. What's happened to me. I never touched alcohol cigarettes or mud.*
>
> ...
>
> It was my joke. You're dead, Mulberry. I have come to life. I've been alive all along. But now I have broken free. You don't know me, but I know you. I'm

completely different from you. We are temporarily inhabiting the same body. (182-83)

Mulberry's speech is an example of stream of consciousness: while Peach's thoughts are somewhat more rational (e.g. conventional punctuation and a logical sequence of thoughts), the syntax in Mulberry's speech more closely reproduces the ramblings of the mind (e.g. lack of punctuation and flows of sentences without conjunctions). This suggests that it is Mulberry who suffers from mental illness, whereas Peach *is* the mental illness, that which makes Mulberry delirious.

The above excerpts show how, in *Mulberry and Peach*, the form is very innovative and reflects the content of the novel: "Nieh's innovativeness reveals itself not only in the text's structure but also in its diction, syntax, and even page layout: variations in sentence length and rhythm, paragraph structure, and typography are carefully correlated with narrative content" (Wong 1998, 211). Indeed, as Nieh herself points out, "in art, form is one of the artistic expressions. Form has meaning too" (quoted in Nazareth 1981, 17). Hence, to understand fully the meaning of *Mulberry and Peach*, an analysis of the content cannot be separated from formal considerations.

Other modernist features of *Mulberry and Peach* are its non-linearity and fragmentation, which reflect Mulberry's "fractured self-images" (Chiu 2003, 22). To begin with, the protagonist's duality is rendered on the formal level by the juxtaposition of Peach's letters and Mulberry's diary entries – which in turn are directed to a double audience: the U.S. immigration officer and the

addressees. As Cho observes, “The entire novel consistently juxtaposes two fragmented temporalities (in Peach’s letters and Mulberry’s diaries), dual geographical references (the United States versus ‘Chinas’), and alternate voices of Mulberry/Peach” (2004, 159). The epistolary or diary form, being constituted by a series of letters or diary entries, is in itself fragmentary. Therefore, it is often employed to give voice to a fragmented rather than a unitary self (Elizabeth C. Goldsmith quoted in Greenberg 2016, 278). Moreover, although Mulberry’s diary entries follow a chronological order, such an order is fragmented and disrupted by numerous flashbacks and by Peach’s letters.

Generally, in *Mulberry and Peach*, syntax is also quite fragmented. Both sentences and paragraphs tend to be short, which contributes to the text’s fragmentation:

> [o]ur boat lurches along the crest of a wave, bobbing up and down, then lunges downstream like a wild horse set loose.
>
> There’s a crash. The boat stops.
>
> The drum stops. The cursing stops.
>
> We’re stranded on the rocks. (25)

> Taiwan is a green eye floating alone on the sea.
>
> To the east is the eyelid.
>
> To the south is a corner of the eye.
>
> To the west another eyelid.
>
> To the north, the other corner of the eye. (118)

As it is possible to see from these excerpts, language is charged with symbolism and poetic rhythm as it plays with short sentences, repetition, enumeration and assonance, thus enhancing the emotional intensity of the story.

To increase the text's fragmentation, Nieh makes use of the literary device of montage[11] by inserting in the text heterogeneous materials such as maps, drawings, newspaper clippings, slogans, popular stories, rhymes and songs. The text presents other typical features of "montage literature" such as "syntactic contractions and breaks, or visualizations through an emphasis on typography ... Furthermore, it stresses intermediality by experimenting with discourses of modern communication technologies: newspaper, radio, film" (Barndt, Sperling and Kriebel 2016). For instance, in Part Two, the narration is frequently interrupted by the radio whose 'talking' is signalled by the italicized font: "*'I, the commander, am mounted on my horse, and I am busy looking for signs of movement....'* Chia-kang keeps moving the radio dial back and forth" (78; author's ellipsis). Capital letters are also used to report the materials mentioned above, thus providing the text with a visual quality that recalls fragmentation. Indeed, the usual fullness and homogeneity of the conventional written page is disrupted by the insertion of variously formatted written fragments or drawings. Nieh also employs, although to a lesser extent, the postmodernist technique of pastiche, reproducing, for instance, fragments taken from Beatles songs or from Buddhist texts.

[11] Montage is usually associated with Soviet cinema of the 1920s and particularly with the theorist and filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, but it then developed into a literary technique thanks to writers such as Eliot, Stein and Dos Passos (Barndt, Sperling and Kriebel 2016).

All these features combine to provide the reader with a sense of the protagonist's fragmented self. Moreover, through the heterogeneity of its formatting as well as of the fragments it incorporates, the text reflects the protagonist's multiplicity: her multiple identities and multiple (re)locations. In addition, there is no single narrative voice in the text but three: an omniscient narrator (in the prologue); Peach's voice; and Mulberry's – although, as mentioned earlier, shifts between voices are often not marked, thus providing a sense of fluidity between voices which are, in fact, one. Thus, the fragmentary and heterogeneous nature of the text strengthens Nieh's depiction of the protagonist as a fragmented and plural subject, traumatised and destroyed by coerced mobility and transnationalism.

Another post-modernist feature of the text is its metafictionality. Usually,

> [t]he epistolary genre implies its own authenticity. The letters that compose the novels suggest the genre's value as artifact, and editorial introductions often reiterate the text's status as found material. This is a fiction, of course, but one that explicitly asks the reader to suspend disbelief, to treat the material as historical sources. (Greenberg 2016, 273)

Here, however, the presence of a "theatrical apparatus" (Chen 2005, 96), which introduces the characters and the setting, draws attention to the fictional nature of both Peach's letters and Mulberry's diary entries.

As mentioned earlier, the author added the paratext (that is, the subtitle and the lists of the characters) to the English translation to make the text more

understandable to the Anglophone reader. Yet this paratext also plays a subtler role: by revealing the fictionality of the narrative, it presents the text as an allegory rather than as an accurate account of Mulberry/Peach's life. Furthermore, by adding the subtitle "*Two Women of China*", Nieh establishes a link between individual and nation, private and public, thus anticipating that the novel is a metaphor for "what it is to be Chinese in the twentieth century" (Nieh quoted in Nazareth 1981, 12).

However, Mulberry/Peach is actually "stateless – a wanderer cut off from homeland, family, and community" (Wong 1998, 220), and if she is indeed "a representative of the Chinese in diaspora" (220), she nevertheless rejects China as well as the United States. Jean Amato affirms that "there is no security of an essential homeland to go back to in this novel – no comfort zone" (1999, 39). Cho further argues that *Mulberry and Peach* "does not cast exile in a sentimental light, imagining home, and by extension, the nation, as the authentic origin of belonging and return" (2004, 187). This is why it would be wrong to read the protagonist's mental illness "as an active resistance to assimilation and as a reaffirmation of the character's 'Chineseness'" (Martin 2006, 348). Nonetheless, not only can Mulberry/Peach not return home, but she also cannot stay in the United States.

Therefore, Mulberry/Peach's story does not belong either to the diasporic or to the assimilationist paradigm. As a matter of fact, various forms of violence encountered in both China and the United States make Mulberry/Peach reluctant to choose between one or the other. Pin-chia Feng's statement that *Mulberry and Peach* is "about how a Chinese diasporic woman

turns American" (2010, 147) ignores the fact that if Mulberry/Peach wants to 'claim America', she soon has to come to terms with its hostile reality. Thus, instead of establishing links between her homeland and her host land, Mulberry/Peach rejects any national attachment. Moreover, *Mulberry and Peach* conveys that transnational ties are not necessarily as enabling as sociologists tend to suggest: the protagonist is forcibly placed within a transnational web that entraps rather than enriches her.

Hence, Mulberry remains in a "liminal" position (Feng 2010, 138), a frightening in-between space that causes "a vertiginous unbalancing of life and self" (Roberson 1998, 11). Susan Roberson points out that "[f]or the immigrant, exile, or refugee, living in diasporic border zones multiplies identities, loyalties, voices, and violence, making the diaspora a site of hybridity and alienation" (1998, 12). Therefore, hybridity does not constitute a vantage position or a positive feature. As Lisa Lowe argues,

> Hybridization is not the 'free' oscillation between or among chosen identities. It is the uneven process through which immigrant communities encounter the violences of the U.S. state, and the capital imperatives served by the United States and by the Asian states from which they come, and the process through which they survive those violences by living, inventing, and reproducing different cultural alternatives. (1996, 82)

But even though Mulberry survives, her solution to end her suffering, turning into Peach, does not work as expected: "the agency she gains depends on her

psychic fragmentation into two different personae, a fragmentation that the Mulberry persona ... finds terrifying and not at all enabling" (Greenberg 2016, 287). Indeed, Mulberry keeps re-emerging and is plunged into a state of confusion and fear: "*[h]ow could I have done such a shameless thing ... I don't even recognize myself!*" (177); "*[d]oes this face in the mirror belong to me?*" (195) (emphasis in original). These excerpts vividly convey Mulberry's state of disorientation and distress, her terror as she realises that she has become a threat to herself and that she has lost every anchor, even her own self. Mulberry is ultimately an unbalanced, alienated and destroyed character, resisting "notions of the malleable and empowered postmodern subject, the border-crossing nomad, the happy transnational" (Chiu 2003, 30-31). Coerced mobility and transnationalism destroy her and having no place to go is traumatic.

Thus, Mulberry's split personality symbolises an irremediably broken soul. Various scholars have used the term 'schizophrenia' to refer to the protagonist's double identity or split personality (see Pai 1976; Lee 1991; Ma 1998; Palumbo-Liu 1999; Cho 2004; Fusco 2012). However, "while multiple or dual personalities may be a symptom of schizophrenia, schizophrenia encompasses a much broader range of disorders, multiple personalities being one possibility" (Martin 2006, 363). Therefore, with regard to Mulberry, such definitions as 'multiple personality disorder' or 'split personality' better describe her mental illness. Yet the etymology of the term 'schizophrenia' is particularly revealing of Mulberry's state: *skhízō* (σχίζω) means 'to split' and *phrén* (φρήν) means 'mind, heart, soul'. Hence, outside of medical discourse, 'schizophrenic'

can mean 'broken soul' (see Ma 1998) as well as 'split mind'; Mulberry's split mind is indeed an expression of her broken, traumatised soul.

The epilogue further confirms Mulberry's troublingly liminal, transnational positioning. Nieh retells a Chinese myth: Nu-wa, the daughter of a god, drowns in the sea (hence the metaphor of water recurs) but "refuses to die" (207) and so transforms herself into a bird. Princess Bird goes to live on a mountain but flies "back and forth between the Sea and the Mountain" (207), each time carrying a pebble in her beak in order to turn the sea into solid ground. There is definitely something positive about Princess Bird's resilience and confidence – "I will do it if it takes me billions and trillions of years, until the end of the world" (207) – but a sense of desperation is also intrinsic to this story. The final sentence, "To this day, Princess Bird is flying back and forth between the Sea and the Mountain" (207), suggests that Princess Bird will never accomplish her impossible task and will always fly "back and forth". Similarly, Mulberry rejects physical death and so turns into Peach. Mulberry, however, will always come back, weaker but conscious that Peach is destroying her.

Princess Bird's story also implies that Mulberry/Peach will never stop wandering and always be a foreigner. If identity can be constructed outside the national space (Feng 2010, 145), Mulberry/Peach's grievous state indicates that this is not a desirable condition. The tale of Princess Bird stresses "the impossibility … to find a real home, either permanent or temporary" (Cho 2004, 180) and how this constitutes a cause of suffering. Nieh "constructs the movement from China to America as incomplete, as an oscillation between

'Chineseness' and an (im)possible translation and absorption within a 'Chinese American' identity label" (Fusco 2012). It is precisely this "oscillation", this movement "back and forth", that marks the desperation in Princess Bird's tale as it recalls trauma through repetition. Trauma, "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" is a "pattern of suffering that is inexplicably persistent in the lives of certain individuals" (Caruth 1996, 1-3). Hence, traumatic events keep coming back for those who lived them. Moreover, trauma, which is first experienced through forgetting (Caruth 1996, 17), prevents Mulberry from retaining her past: "I have forgotten what happened in the past" (94); "*[a]ll that happened so long ago I've completely forgotten*" (172). If Mulberry cannot rely on her Chinese roots to shape her identity, she cannot turn to America either. She is like a bird desperate to touch land, but the horizon shrinks instead of expanding.

Therefore, if Nieh and her work can be described as transnational, the opposite is true for Mulberry/Peach. In her novel, Nieh makes use of modernist and post-modernist literary techniques, such as interior monologue, stream of consciousness, montage, pastiche, metafictionality, and a fragmentary and non-linear narrative structure, to give substance to a fragmented and multiple character, destroyed by negative mobility and transnationalism. Indeed, Mulberry/Peach is placed within a transnational network (China-Taiwan-U.S.) against her will, and so transnational ties turn from a powerful resource into a trap. Mobility is also imposed on Mulberry/Peach, who has to escape war and state control as well as male abuse in both China and the United States. As a

result, she does not forge any form of attachment to either country and is doomed to wander perpetually in search of a stable home and identity.

2 CROSSING BLACK WATER:

MEENA ALEXANDER'S *MANHATTAN MUSIC*

Having looked at the transnational links between the United States and Asia and at forms of negative mobility and transnationalism through an analysis of Hualing Nieh's life and novel *Mulberry and Peach*, I now explore similar themes as they can be found in the life and work of the Indian American writer Meena Alexander. Alexander forged transnational connections to her host land, the United States, and her homeland, India, expanding the transnational model as she embraced other nations as well. Indeed, Alexander also lived in Africa and Europe. Yet her links to Europe have been neglected by critics who have acknowledged and examined the transnationality of her life and work (see Shankar 2001; Schlote 2006; Naidu 2010; Han 2014). Therefore, I address this aspect, especially focusing on her fascination with Italy and its literature.[12] Following an overview of Alexander's biography, my analysis demonstrates how her work is transnational – also in relation to Europe – and how it constitutes a "poetics of dislocation", to use Alexander's own phrase (2009), responding to her experiences of border crossing.

[12] Alexander's links to Venice and her Venice poems have been discussed by Hoshang Merchant (2010) and Shaul Bassi (2018) although not in relation to transnationalism and the consequences of the creation of such transnational ties for Asian American studies.

I then analyse her novel *Manhattan Music* (1997), illustrating how both mobility and transnationalism take a negative shape in the protagonist's life. Sandhya leaves her native India in the late 1980s to flee the violence of patriarchal and state control. Once in the United States, however, she is a victim of racism and feels trapped in her roles of wife and mother. Like Mulberry, Sandhya experiences a negative version of transnationalism as she does not feel at home either in Asia or America and so refuses to establish ties to either place. As a consequence, Sandhya travels back and forth between India and the United States, which for her does not represent a liberatory experience but rather a desperate escape. As is the case with Mulberry, Sandhya's state of in-betweenness leads her to mental instability. However, contrary to Nieh, who condemns her protagonist to perpetual wandering and suffering, Alexander saves her protagonist, and, for this reason, most scholars have offered positive interpretations of the novel's ending (see Feng 2005; Mehta 2009; Jain 2011; Krishnamurthy 2016). Nevertheless, this ending needs to be problematised since Alexander proposes the much-criticised model of the assimilated immigrant and of a binary opposition between Asia and America. Finally, most scholars have only touched upon the form and structure of *Manhattan Music* whereas I attend more closely to the novel's form since this strengthens the ideas that the novel seeks to convey as well as contributing to the text's transnationality.

FOUR CONTINENTS

> And what of all the cities and small towns and villages I have lived in since birth: Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozencheri, Pune, Delhi, Hyderabad, all within the borders of India; Khartoum in the Sudan; Nottingham in Britain; and now this island of Manhattan? How should I spell out these fragments of a broken geography?
>
> — Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines* (2003)

Born in 1951 in Allahabad, India, into a Syrian Christian family, Alexander moved to the United States in 1979 and lived there until her death in 2018. She is remembered as "an admired and respected member of both the US and Indian poetry communities" (Staff 2018) as well as an accomplished novelist, essayist and scholar. Her death "touch[ed] off a wave of grief that swept across literary fields in both the United States and India" (Mozumder 2018). These comments confirm Alexander's literary stature in both the Indian and U.S. contexts, and others highlight the cosmopolitan nature of her life and work (Bassi 2018; Basu 2018). Indeed, in addition to Asia and America, Alexander also lived in Africa and Europe, thus becoming "the epitome of mobility in an age of migrant flows" (Sabo 2016, 68). Her first relocation occurred when she was only five as her father, a meteorologist who worked for the Indian government, obtained a job in Sudan. Yet Alexander used to spend six months of each year in Kerala, India, often visiting her maternal grandparents in

Tiruvella. Thus, she began to live "between two worlds" (Ling 1990, 105) at a very young age, developing connections with both of them.

Alexander was very precocious and started university at the age of thirteen, obtaining a BA in French and English in 1969 from the University of Khartoum. During this time, some of her poems were translated from English into Arabic and published in the main newspaper in Khartoum. Alexander could not read Arabic, but it is one of the various languages that she could speak, including Malayalam (her mother tongue), English, Hindi and French. At the age of eighteen, she moved to Nottingham, England, where, in 1973, she obtained her PhD with a thesis on British Romantic women poets. Then, she returned to India where she worked as a lecturer at various universities, including the University of Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru University and the University of Hyderabad. In 1979, after marrying the Jewish American historian David Lelyveld, she moved to New York where their two children were born and where she became Distinguished Professor of English and Women's Studies at the City University of New York (CUNY), teaching in the PhD Program in English at CUNY Graduate Center.

Her literary works deal with issues of migration, dislocation, uprooting and the search for a home. Her first publication was the collection of poems *The Bird's Bright Ring* (1976). Her eight volumes of poetry include *House of a Thousand Doors* (1988), *Illiterate Heart* (2002), *Raw Silk* (2004) and *Atmospheric Embroidery* (2018). Her poems have also appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harvard Review*, *Kenyon Review* and *Threepenny Review*, amongst other journals. Moreover, Alexander gave readings at various festivals, including

Poetry International London, Rome Poetry Festival and Poetry Africa as well as at Sahitya Akademi (India) and Yale Political Union. Although Alexander is mostly known as a poet, her work spans various literary genres. In addition to *Manhattan Music* (1997), she wrote another novel, *Nampally Road* (1991); an autobiography, *Fault Lines* (1993; revised and expanded in 2003); two collections of essays and poems, *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (1996) and *Poetics of Dislocation* (2009); and two academic studies, *The Poetic Self: Towards a Phenomenology of Romanticism* (1979) and *Women in Romanticism* (1989). Her memoir, *Fault Lines*, was named one of *Publishers Weekly*'s Best Books of the year while her collection of poetry, *Illiterate Heart*, won the PEN Open Book Award.

Alexander received awards from various institutions, such as the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, Fulbright Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Arts Council of England and National Endowment for the Humanities. In 2009, she was the recipient of the Distinguished Achievement Award in Literature from the South Asian Literary Association, and, in 2014, she was named a National Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study. She was also Visiting Professor at various universities and Writer-in-Residence at the Center for American Culture Studies at Columbia University, the National University of Singapore and the University of Hyderabad. Alexander's relations with institutions located all around the world further confirm the transnationality of her life and work, shaped by her relocations across four continents.

STITCHING TOGETHER BROKEN GEOGRAPHIES

> This is the harmony that underwrites a poetics of dislocation, where multiple places are jointed together, and the whole is lit by desire that recuperates the past, figures forth the future, thread of gold at the rim of a black horizon.
>
> — Meena Alexander, *Poetics of Dislocation* (2009)

Alexander spoke of herself as "a woman cracked by multiple migrations" (2003, 2), and her relocations across four continents gave shape to what she called "a broken geography" (1). The title of her memoir, *Fault Lines*, refers precisely to this sense of being fractured – in geology, the fault line is a break in the earth's surface – and imperfect, "a mass of faults, a fault mass" (2). When she was young, she thought that her relocations would prevent her from being a writer (quoted in Iwanaga and Srikanth 2001, 8). In particular, she thought that all the great writers lived in just one place all their life and that they belonged to a recognisably national tradition (quoted in Ali and Rasiah 2000, 80). Some of the authors that influenced her certainly fit this description – for instance, Wordsworth, Woolf, Dickinson and Whitman (Shankar 2008). Yet, as the Black British writer Caryl Phillips affirms, the "migratory condition, and the subsequent sense of displacement, can be a gift to a creative mind" (quoted in Friedman 2004, 206). Indeed, Alexander's work is built upon the multiple worlds in which she lived. Hence, the geography is not broken but recomposed through and in her writing.

When Alexander was in India, she "did not need to write. [She] could just be" (quoted in Duncan 1999, 26). In contrast, her many migrations posed the questions of who she was, where she came from and to which tradition she belonged (Alexander 2003, 2). It is precisely these existential questions that drove her need to write. In addition, as soon as she reached the United States, Alexander became aware of her race and ethnicity, which was a shock for her, "the shock of arrival" that gives the title to her 1996 collection of poems and essays. She declares in one of these essays: "there is always one's own body, which is marked as Other in this country [the United States]. Ethnicity can draw violence" (1996, 7), not only physical but also psychological since being considered different and foreign can generate alienation and existential anguish.[13]

It was thanks to writing that Alexander was able to "evade the names they ha[d] given [her]" (2003, 73)[14] and so define herself, as attested to by these lines: "I have to write myself into being" (73). Alexander wrote in order to understand who she was, and so her work is mostly – and almost obsessively – autobiographical. Recuperating the past through memory is central to Alexander's work as she constructed her sense of self through a stratification of all her previous selves: "I think of myself as most like a landscape I'm making a

[13] Alexander's emphasis on the United States as the place of her ethnic and racial awakening seems excessive as it is unlikely that she did not have any previous experience of racism – for instance, in the United Kingdom. She explained that although the poems and essays in *The Shock of Arrival* "rise out of various moments in [her] life, each was created under the sign of America" (1996, 1). Thus, Alexander seems to elide the United Kingdom from the narrativisation of her life in favour of an (Indian) American narrative.

[14] Here Alexander also refers to the names that she was given by her parents, 'Mary Elizabeth', which revealed her Christian and colonial background. Alexander chose to name herself 'Meena', a Hindu name, at age fifteen. This was also the name under which she started to write poems (Alexander 2003, 73).

palette out of, layering. A palimpsest of self" (quoted in Ali and Rasiah 2000, 71). In this act of "layering", there is a willingness to embrace every single shade of one's own existence, accepting and cherishing life *here* and *there*, in an effort to link them. Indeed, not only Asia and America but also Africa and Europe coexist in Alexander's life and work. Alexander "[gave] equal weight to the past and to the present", accommodating "disparate selves and fractured subjectivity" (Naidu 2010, 92). Thus, by connecting her past with her present, Alexander adopted an approach that was neither diasporic nor assimilationist but transnational.

To Alexander, writing was also a means to find a home. Displacement denied her a physical home, and so she envisioned home as being located inside herself: "[t]he sea cast me loose. / The sea tore from me all that I had. In doing so, it gave me an interior life" (2009, 178).[15] Home was thus "a sheltering space for the mind" (1996, 3) where Alexander could reach her own self and where the multiple homes that she had inhabited converged. However, this would have not been possible without the act of writing: "[a] poem can travel; the imagination does in fact move over boundaries. I'm an Indian writer; I'm also an American writer" (quoted in Ali and Rasiah 2000, 79). Therefore, for Alexander, reaching home did not entail a physical journey but rather a spiritual and imaginative one. Through writing, Alexander was able to draw together her multiple affiliations to distant geographical and cultural realities and be both Indian *and* American.

[15] Here Alexander recalls the beginning of her relocations when she crossed the Indian Ocean to get to Sudan.

Yet Alexander's complex geographical and cultural positioning challenges notions of hybridity based on binarisms such as Asian/American. Indeed, she thought of herself as composed of "multiple beings locked into the journey of one body" (2003, 1) and expanded W.E.B. Du Bois's idea of "double consciousness" by hinting at a multiple consciousness: "[b]ut now, at the tail end of the century, perhaps there are *many* souls, many voices in one dark body" (1996, 2; emphasis added). Alexander seems to anticipate Donald C. Goellnicht, one of the first proponents of a transnational turn in Asian American studies and of a reassessment of the concept of "double consciousness", which "we might expand to 'multiple consciousness.' Rather than thinking in binary terms of inside/outside, we should perhaps think of hybrid positions as a web of multiply intersecting and shifting strands in which the precise location of the subject is extremely difficult to map" (1997, 340). Alexander's "precise location" is, indeed, "difficult to map": although she lived in the United States, many other locations marked her "broken geography" (Alexander 2003, 2). Thus, Alexander's life and work demonstrate that the concept of transnationalism has to be broadened to include affiliations with more than two countries or continents.

Indeed, Alexander's work spans Asia, America and even Europe in terms of its content and reception. Alexander expressed "the necessity for a global awareness" (Srikanth 2004, 86), and her attention to issues of social justice worldwide counterbalanced her obsession with her own biography. Hence, "while her lamentations about not being able to locate herself in one place … can sometimes border on excessive and, therefore, artificial despair,

Alexander's value lies in her being able to pack her words with the contours of many lives and geographies" (Srikanth 2004, 88). Roshni Rustomji-Kerns (1998) describes this combination of private and public, individual and collective, as "an extraordinary expansion of concern for other people" that departs from a centre of "intense self reflection [*sic*]".

For instance, the killing of Safdar Hashmi, a young Indian Marxist playwright and director, in 1989, near Delhi, inspired Alexander to write two poems, "For Safdar Hashmi" and "Moloyashree",[16] published in India in 1995 and in Canada and the United States in 1996. The poems found an enthusiastic audience in India and Alexander was invited to read them at the Sahitya Akademi in 1997. Thus, Alexander was able to reach India, although she was "sitting in New York writing this poem" (quoted in Ali and Rasiah 2000, 78). Another example is her poem "Estrangement Becomes the Mark of the Eagle", included in *The Shock of Arrival*, which is a response to the First Gulf War. In *Manhattan Music*, Alexander refers to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (22), the Salman Rushdie affair (67), Rajiv Gandhi's assassination (156), the Italian Red Brigades (169), Saddam Hussein (179) and Muslim radicalism (153), anticipating the terrorist attacks on New York (197). After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Alexander wrote some poetry that reflected upon these events, such as "Lyric in a Time of Violence", included in a chapter of the revised version of *Fault Lines*.

[16] This title refers to Moloyashree Hashmi, Safdar's widow.

These are all examples of how Alexander's work exceeds mere self-reflection and of how it includes Asia, America and Europe. Her fascination with Italy and its literature is also significant for how transnational links can be established with countries other than the homeland or host land. Transnationalism must include but does not have to be limited to two countries and, in the case of Asian Americans, to just an Asian country and the United States. Yet, so far, the transnational turn in Asian American studies has focused on the links between Asia and the United States, thus overlooking Asian Americans' connections to Canada, Latin America or Europe, for example. The critical neglect of Alexander's links to Italy might be read as part of this trend. However, Europe plays a significant role in the life and works of writers such as Alexander, Monique Truong and Jhumpa Lahiri (see Chapters 5 and 6).

A noteworthy example of Alexander's connections to Italy is her interest in Venice, which positions her within a tradition of writers fascinated by the city, including Shakespeare, Goethe, Wordsworth, Stendhal, Byron, Balzac, Ruskin, James, Wharton, Proust, Mann, Pound, Hemingway and Calvino. Given that this tradition is conspicuously European and North American (and mostly male), Alexander constitutes an exception, the sign of a changing world where postcolonial relations and transnational links have enabled access to faraway locations and literatures. In an essay entitled "Why Venice?" (2009), Alexander explains her attraction to the city and describes it as "a third place, as the mouth of the east and the lips of the west" (149). Indeed, Venice has a long history of transnational economic and cultural links with other countries, especially in the East. Moreover, with its canals and boats, Venice reminded Alexander of Kerala

and its backwaters – a network of lagoons, lakes, rivers and canals located parallel to the Arabian Sea coast (150). Thus, Venice became the source of inspiration for some of the poems in the collection *Quickly Changing River* (2008), such as "House of the Red Canoe", "Dog Days of Summer", "Sun Colored", "Self-Portrait in a Floating Mirror", "Acqua Alta" [High Tide], "Venetian Pigeons" and "No Ceremony".

With regard to "Acqua Alta", Alexander stated: "Like so many of my poems 'Acqua Alta' makes a symbolic space where sometimes discordant worlds can hang together in harmony" ("Alexander Poem" 2013). As in "Why Venice?", Alexander sets up as the joining link between India and Venice the element of water – which often recurs in her oeuvre (see Joseph 2009): "[a]s a child, half a world away / I floated in a black canoe" (80). The two worlds are then merged: the *acqua alta*, or high tide, in Venice is caused by the Indian monsoon, and Kālidāsa, the Classical Sanskrit poet, dreams by the Accademia Bridge (80). Thus, water dissolves borders and with them any sense of belonging to a specific, bounded place. Alexander wonders: "What might it mean to belong, anyway, when the streets are filled with water? / Venice makes me ask this question" (2009, 150). Alexander's question might actually be a realisation that, when borders become fluid like water, they can touch and overlap. Hence, it no longer makes sense to refer to a single origin or identity.

Alexander visited Venice several times and was Poet-in-Residence as part of the celebrations for the 500th anniversary of the Venetian ghetto (2016). There, she wrote a cycle of poems about Sara Coppio Sullam, a Jewish woman poet who lived in Venice in the seventeenth century. This cycle, together with

poems by Rita Dove and Esther Schor, was published in 2018 in *Poems for Sarra/Poesie per Sara* by the Venice-based Damocle. The poems appear both in English and in the Italian translation by Federico Mazzocchi and Anita Pinzi. In addition, a collection of selected poems was published in Italy with the title *Otto poesie* [*Eight Poems*] (2011): on the left side of the page the poems are in the original English and on the right side in the Italian translation by Marco Fazzini. Therefore, Alexander's work spans borders not only in terms of content but also reception.[17] In 2011, Alexander also visited Vicenza where she was invited to the poetry festival *Dire poesia* [Saying Poetry]. *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (2013) includes a poem that she composed in Italy after her visit to the city, and the title, "Teatro Olimpico" [Olympic Theatre], refers to one of the best-known historic buildings in Vicenza. With this poem, Alexander makes an unexpected connection between East and West as it is part of a cycle of poems about Jerusalem.

Alexander's appreciation of Italy extended to its literature: in a poem titled "Reading Leopardi" (2008), Alexander muses on "L'infinito" [The Infinite] (written in 1819, first published in 1826), one of the most famous poems by the Romantic Italian writer Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837). Alexander thinks of her many origins and identities – Arabic, Hindi, Malayalam – and, as in Leopardi's poem, the rustling wind raises the poet's awareness of the infinite. Hence, she is "stripped of the names that were given to [her]" (65).

[17] Her poems have also been translated into Swedish, Urdu, Malayalam and German (Bahri and Vasudeva 1996, 43-44; Green 2016, 80). It is worth noticing that when her poems were first published, it was in an Arabic translation, hence marking her work as world literature from the very beginning.

In other words, her anxieties regarding her identity/ies vanish as she identifies with Leopardi's longing for the infinite, his desire to sink "in this immensity": "così tra questa / immensità s'annega il pensier mio: / e il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare" [thus my mind drowns into this immensity, and how sweet it is to sink into this sea] (2016, lines 13-15; my translation). Leopardi's poem evokes the bliss of losing one's identity as it fuses with the infinite. Thus, as argued earlier, it is no longer necessary to define oneself in relation to a single point of reference: instead, one can expand one's consciousness to make it ever more inclusive.

It is this tendency to expansion and connection with multiple parts of the world that marks Alexander's work as transnational. The concept of transnationalism, however, should not overshadow that of postcolonialism as the world Alexander came from is also a postcolonial one. To Alexander, the notion of "a geography of displacement" was inseparable from that of "a postcolonial geography" (quoted in Ali and Rasiah 2000, 72). Indeed, Alexander was born four years after the Partition of India and its independence, and she arrived in Sudan in the year of its independence. Moreover, her father obtained a job in Sudan because of postcolonial relationships between India and other newly independent and formerly colonised nations. In any case, postcolonialism and transnationalism do not exclude each other: Alexander came from a postcolonial background, but she was also transnational.

As a postcolonial writer, Alexander's choice of writing in English was vexed by the fact that it is part of a legacy of British imperialism in India, and so it "exert[ed] an intimate violence" on her (Alexander 2009, 117). For a year,

when she was a child, Alexander had a Scottish home tutor who taught her English. Mrs McDermott would insist on the 'correct' pronunciation of words, which Alexander found exasperating: "[o]ver and over she made me repeat the words ... till their sharpness overwhelmed me, made my mouth hurt.... I knew the words already but in a different way. And she tried her level best to polish out my Indian English and replace it with the right model" (2003, 111-12). The process of learning 'good' English is violent as it tears Alexander's bond with India by imposing a 'pure' linguistic form that is alien to her. Considering that English is just one of several languages that Alexander knew, why did she choose it as her literary language?

The main reason why she did not write in Malayalam – her mother tongue – or Arabic is that she never learned how to read and write in these languages. She wrote her very first poems in French because she had read some poetry by Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé at school in Khartoum. She eventually chose English as she was inspired by Indian poets who wrote in English such as Toru Dutt (1856-1877) and Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), both women writers. In addition, she read Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore's poems translated into English. British and North American literary influences also played an important role in bringing her close to the English language. As a teenager, Alexander was especially fascinated by the British Romantic poets: reading their works would encourage "liberating thoughts", which came to her in English (2003, 118).

Yet English "had to be pierced and punctured lest the thickness of the white skin cover[ed] over [her] atmosphere, [her] very self" (118). Here,

Alexander voices her need to shape English such that it does not suffocate her ethnic and cultural identity. Thus, she used "a special sort of English ... [that] bends and sways to the shores of other territories, other tongues" (1996, 11). Like other postcolonial writers, Alexander employed English in a subversive way, allowing it to merge with other languages and using it to express her own individual, transnational world. In doing so, she challenged the repressiveness, 'purity' and 'whiteness' of the English language and canon. Alexander declared, for instance, that Malayalam "ha[d] always been there … alongside any other language [she] used" (1996, 11). Indeed, since poetry has a "sonic body" (quoted in Green 2016, 81), and her mother tongue existed for her as orality (quoted in Maxey 2009, 193) and therefore as sound, Malayalam had a significant influence on her writing.

Another example of Alexander's subversive use of English can be found precisely in her 'Italian' poems, which are scattered with Italian words and phrases: toponyms, such as "Calle del Cristo" [Christ Street] (82); names of historic buildings, such as "Palazzo Ducale" [Doge's Palace] (70); saint's names; terms like "lire" [lira] (71), "palazzo" [palace] (79) and "canzone" [song] (83); linguistic collocations, such as "Acqua Alta"; literary quotations, such as the one taken from Leopardi's "The Infinite" (64); quotes taken from songs, such as "O sole mio" (68); and graffiti (69). Maria Lauret would call them "wanderwords", which she defines as "words and phrases in other languages that disrupt, enchant, occlude or highlight the taken-for-granted English of American literature and can thereby perform wonders of poetic signification as well as cultural critique" (2014, 2). Indeed, these words bring linguistic, cultural and

ideological difference into American literature, thus working against the homogenising power of (English) monolingualism (Lauret 2014). Moreover, this way, Alexander expresses more vividly her transnational attachment to Italian language and literature. As I discuss in Chapter 6, this final argument also applies to Lahiri, who has recently written her works in Italian.

However, Alexander's identification with oppressed postcolonial subjects clashes with her privileged upbringing within an upper-middle-class Syrian Christian family. Her paternal grandfather was a landlord while her maternal grandfather was a theologian and social reformer. Her maternal grandmother attained higher education and became the first woman member of the legislative assembly in the State of Travancore. Her father worked as a scientist for the Indian government. Furthermore, as Alexander herself admitted, she did not leave her motherland as a consequence of war or political repression: "I was not torn away from my ancestral home ... I left ... because my father got a job he wanted to take ... in another country" (1996, 116). In other words, her mobility was not dictated by necessity but by choice, and her relocations were voluntary rather than coerced.

Moreover, in the United States, she was a member of the academy, thus enjoying a privileged position within U.S. society that contradicts her emphasis on her sense of marginality (see Singh 2008). If she was indeed postcolonial and part of a minority group – both in India as a Syrian Christian and in the United States as an Asian American – she nevertheless did not live at the margins of society. According to Oana Sabo, "Alexander's elite background and class privilege belie her self-construction as a tragically split diasporic

individual and minority subject exposed to patterns of racialization in the United States" (2016, 71). However, being privileged and migrating by choice do not spare the immigrant from everyday racism, gender discrimination, the discomfort of being away from the familiar or the consequences of having many affiliations – which, as I discuss later, is also the case with the protagonist of *Manhattan Music*.

Similarly, transnationalism applies to the situation of refugees but also to "well-qualified, affluent migrants whose stock of human and cultural capital insures their unfettered global mobility" (Sallie Westwood and Annie Phizacklea quoted in Schlote 2006, 395). In fact, for many refugees, whose homeland has been devastated by some kind of disaster, especially war or political repression, it is hard to maintain a connection with it, as demonstrated by Nieh's *Mulberry and Peach*. Thus, both Nieh and Alexander expand the model of the transnational immigrant proposed by social scientists, according to whom transnational migration has developed within the framework of a capitalist economy as "populations in capital-dependent countries are everywhere forced to migrate to centers of capital in order to live" (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1992, x). Nieh moved to the United States because of an opportunity at the University of Iowa and Alexander primarily because she had married an American citizen (see Green 2016, 85). Furthermore, if Alexander's father moved to Sudan because of a job opportunity in a newly independent Sudan, it can be hardly described as a relocation from a capital-dependent country to a centre of capital.

Although "an accident of biography" (Alexander quoted in Iwanaga and Srikanth 2001, 8), Alexander's transnationality is nonetheless undeniable and is reflected in her work, which depicts a "complicated, unstable world, shifting within diasporic and migrant spaces" (Alexander quoted in Ali and Rasiah 2000, 88). Such diasporic space can be better observed from the United States, a nation where immigration is part of its very structure (Alexander quoted in Maxey 2006, 29). Alexander stated: "Here there is this diasporic space ..., and I feel that it's made the writer that I am. In order to write, not only did I have to deal with what was outside the door, but I also had to hearken back to these very early memories of moving between India and North Africa" (quoted in Iwanaga and Srikanth 2001, 8). The reference to the "diasporic space" and "memories" seems to allude to a diasporic approach, which implies a longing for the homeland that prevails over the wish to integrate into the host country. Nonetheless, Alexander expresses her need to face both her American present and a past made up of relocations across continents.

America also liberated Alexander as a writer given that the United States does not have as long a literary tradition as Britain (quoted in Maxey 2009, 194). Therefore, according to Alexander – and other South Asian North American writers such as Bharati Mukherjee and Michael Ondaatje (see Maxey 2012) – North American English also allows for more creativity whereas British English is linked with a colonial past where hybridity[18] is considered a threat to

[18] In postcolonial discourse, the term 'hybridity' indicates "the creation of new transcultural forms" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2007, 108), and it disrupts notions of homogeneity and purity. Homi K. Bhabha (1994), for instance, especially focuses on how hybridity challenges the idea of a cultural hierarchy by revealing the mutuality and interdependence of cultures.

white purity. Thus, the United States played a controversial role in Alexander's life: although it is the place where she claimed she first became aware of her race and ethnicity in a negative sense, it also "provide[d] her with a unique location from which to reconsider ... diasporic identities" (Sabo 2016, 69), offering her more freedom as a writer.

Moreover, in the United States, her ethnicity not only exposed her to racism, but it also provided "multiple anchorages" that enabled her to learn from other ethnic minority writers (Alexander 2003, 202). Alexander was inspired, among others, by the Indian diasporic writers Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie; the Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston; the aforementioned Indian American writer Mukherjee and Sri Lankan Canadian poet and novelist Ondaatje; and the African American novelist Toni Morrison (see Rustomji-Kerns 1998; Maxey 2006). Most of these writers work, like Alexander, across literary genres, experimenting with both prose and poetry. Their influence and that of white American, Indian and European writers – such as Leopardi – determines the intertextuality of Alexander's oeuvre and contributes to its transnationality.

Thus, as Sabo argues, Alexander

> expands the dual model of diasporic identity formation based on a rift between homeland and hostland [*sic*]. Having no single home, or having multiple homes, means that she avoids the trap of idealizing origins. Nor does she simply 'claim America,' preferring instead to forge multiple lateral and *transnational*

> connections to other minority groups in the United States and to racialized subjects located elsewhere. (2016, 68; emphasis added)

Sabo's comment has the merit of highlighting Alexander's transnationality and departure from a diasporic model. Yet, in its emphasis on the "lateral ... connections to other minority groups ... and to racialized subjects", it overlooks the influence of Indian authors as well as mainstream white European, British and U.S. writers on Alexander's work. Besides, it seems to imply that Alexander's connections with other ethnic minorities in the United States and elsewhere overcome any willingness to 'claim America' or to forge any attachment to India. This would contradict the very meaning of transnationalism, which, with regards to the immigrant, refers to an attachment to both homeland and host land.

Alexander's wish to "draw together India and America" (quoted in Rustomji-Kerns 1998) turned into a larger project that saw her building affiliations with multiple geographic and cultural locations in the world, including Italy. The title of her last collection of poems, *Atmospheric Embroidery*, refers precisely to this aspiration of "stitching together" different places through the act of writing (Alexander quoted in Green 2016, 87). It is important to remember that transnational does not mean postnational – while the term seems to suggest an overcoming of national interests, it actually entails a multiplication of them as "transmigrants" (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1995) are attached to more than one nation-state. Alexander did not celebrate a "postnational, passportless ideal" (Dayal 1998, 237) but rather

aimed to make a synthesis of her multiple national affiliations. Hence, the "fragments of [her] broken geography" (2003, 2) are recomposed to form a rich, exceptional body of work.

THE VOICES OF MANHATTAN

> Is America this terrible multiplicity at heart? ... [I]s there nothing but ... this perpetually shifting space ..., innumerate, multiple anchorages, breathless exhilaration, the only home we have at the tail end of this century?
>
> — Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines* (2003)

The protagonist of *Manhattan Music*, Sandhya Rosenblum, is an Indian woman from Kerala who moves to New York in the late 1980s after marrying Stephen Rosenblum, a Jewish American man. In India, Sandhya has faced the restrictions of a patriarchal society as well as state violence. She experiences the latter indirectly but vividly as her first love, a student activist, dies after being brutally tortured by the police. Her arrival in the United States, however, is marked by the shattering of her expectations of freedom, and her sense of alienation reveals itself not only in relation to U.S. society but also to her life as wife and mother. The novel consists of an "Overture", thirteen chapters, and a "Coda". The chapters dealing with Sandhya's story alternate with shorter chapters narrated by Draupadi Dinkins, a friend of Sandhya's. The titles of Sandhya's chapters, "Sitting", "Stirring", "Going", "Stoning", "Turning" and

"Staying", trace Sandhya's journey from paralysis to agitation and, finally, settlement. They also highlight the precariousness and instability of her condition, further stressed by the present participle, which is generally used to form the progressive aspect of verbs, indicating temporary and incomplete actions.

Draupadi is an Indian American performance artist: her "ancestors were scattered from British sailing ships, dark bits of ground pepper flung onto plantations in Trinidad, Fiji. Bonded laborers from India ... Papa and Mama migrated to America, settled in Gingee by the Hudson" (4).[19] Significantly, while Draupadi speaks in the first person, and thus is given agency over her speech, Sandhya's story is told in the third person. Indeed, whereas Draupadi confronts her identity issues through artistic creation, Sandhya appears throughout the novel as a voiceless, passive character, overwhelmed by her feelings of homelessness and unable to speak for herself or to take action.

In her chapters, Draupadi plays a role similar to that of the Shakespearean Chorus. The "Overture", in particular, functions as a Prologue where Draupadi introduces the protagonist and anticipates her issues: "[w]hat drew me close to Sandhya? ... She was alone, afloat in the city and I was someone to confide in" (3). Yet the subject of the very first sentence of the novel is not Sandhya but Draupadi, thus disclosing that Draupadi is not simply a commentator but also a protagonist – indeed, some scholars have identified

[19] Gingee is a town in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, as Sandhya herself points out (50). There is no evidence of a Gingee in the United States. Alexander seems to be playing with geographical locations to highlight the instability of national borders and the impact of Indian migration to the United States, thus reimagining the United States as an Indian space – and in particularly diasporic terms since Draupadi comes from a history of Indian indenture.

Draupadi as Sandhya's alter ego (see Shankar 2001; Feng 2005; Kimak 2014; Krishnamurthy 2016). Therefore, "in spite of the fact that Sandhya is the center of the emplotment, the narrative flows in and out of the consciousness of different characters and becomes a collage of their stories" (Feng 2005, 34). I focus on Sandhya because, like Mulberry in Nieh's novel, she exemplifies the migrant affected negatively by transnational mobility and unable to attach themselves to any nation.

Other characters whose stories find expression in the novel include Stephen; Rashid el Obeid, Sandhya's lover; Gautam, Sandhya's first love; Jay, Sandhya's cousin; and Sandhya's other cousin, Sakhi. In the chapter titled "Stirring", for instance, the narration imperceptibly passes from reporting Jay's memories of Gautam to Gautam's own thoughts while he is being tortured by the police. The "Coda" contains four poems by Jay, and about halfway through the novel there is also a chapter titled "Jay's Journal". *Manhattan Music* is indeed a choral novel characterised by what Mikhail Bakhtin ([1929] 1984) called "polyphony": "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (6) or "a plurality of fully valid voices within the limits of a single work" (34). In *Manhattan Music*, multiple voices intersect with Sandhya's to create a contrast but also a dialogue. Indeed, multiplicity is a central idea to the novel, and it is developed at the level of both form and content.

An example of the novel's multiplicity or "dialogism"[20] (see Bakhtin [1929] 1984, [1975] 1981) in formal terms is Alexander's experimentation

[20] See also Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia", which also refers to the presence of multiple voices, languages, styles and perspectives within the space of a single narrative ([1975] 1981).

with different genres as she combines poetry, theatre and music within the space of the novel. The Prologue, a theatrical device, is named "Overture", the orchestral introduction to an opera. The "Coda", usually the concluding section of a piece of music, contains Jay's poems. Moreover, the novel interacts with other literary works and languages, becoming a vehicle for Alexander's transnational and syncretic literary and cultural tradition. For instance, Alexander uses the postmodernist technique of pastiche and starts Draupadi's chapters with quotations taken from a variety of authors: Kalidasa, Ellison, Shakespeare, Genet, Blake and Kafka. She also borrows from Indian epic stories such as those in the *Mahabharata*. Indeed, Draupadi is the name of the heroine of this Hindu epic: Alexander repeatedly refers to this myth in the novel but "appropriates and invents her individual version" of it, creating a "Hindu amalgam of several female deities [that] crosses the borders of time and ... space" (Shankar 2001, 300-1).

Alexander also inserts Hindi terms in the novel, such as *ayah* (14), *kurtas* (15), *salwar* (17), *dhurri* (87), *baingan* (88), *kajal* (92), *gulmohar* (101), *nageswaram* (107), *bhajans* (111), *dupatta* (135), *konafa* (146), *vidu* (214), *pallu* (216), *methi* (221). These words are not translated into English, which indicates that the author did not have any particular didactic aim. Rather, "the choice of leaving words untranslated in post-colonial texts is a political act, because ... glossing gives the translated word, and thus the 'receptor' culture, the higher status" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2002, 65). Here, instead, as I suggested in relation to Alexander's use of Italian words in her poems, "the ideological logic of an imperial language's naming of the world is ruptured by

the appearance of wanderwords" (Lauret 2014, 50). Furthermore, in this way, Alexander reproduces closely the thoughts of a hybrid mind, crossed by multiple cultural references.

It is such a multiplicity that Sandhya has to learn to embrace in order to overcome her unhappiness in the United States. Sandhya has married Stephen for two reasons, the first being the urge to escape from painful memories, that is, forget Gautam and the violence he suffered: "Stephen had married her and brought her to America. She would live here, she would learn to forget" (11). Notably, Sandhya is not the subject of the first sentence but the passive object of Stephen's agency. The second reason why Sandhya marries Stephen is to avoid patriarchal restrictions in India. Significantly, such restrictions are recollected by Sandhya mainly in connection with her mother, with whom she quarrels over such issues as arranged marriage. This aspect may be related to Alexander's own biography and conflicted relationship with a traditional mother who, according to the author, did not welcome her writing since this was "against a model of womanhood of some sort[.]... I should have a certain amount of education but not too much"; her father, in contrast, always encouraged her (quoted in Maxey 2006, 25).

Sandhya decides that she "would arrange her own marriage, leap over the terrible wall her mother had erected" (34). Stephen, a Jewish American (like Alexander's husband), brings Sandhya to the United States where she expects to achieve the freedom that she could not have in India. Yet, once there, Sandhya finds herself leading a life that she had not envisioned, not unlike the one that her mother had wanted for her. Her identity, aside from that of wife

and mother, is empty: “the emptiness was growing in her.... [A] gnawing hunger, a desperation even” (42). Alexander, like Nieh, avoids clear-cut dichotomies between East and West, Asia and America, showing that women’s lives in the United States are not necessarily full of personal realisation and that, in India, there can be both feminists and female advocates of patriarchal values.

As Lavina Dhingra Shankar argues, “unlike the stereotypical immigrant female in Asian American fiction who is portrayed as being sexually liberated by Euro-American men ..., Sandhya feels repressed by her white husband” (2001, 295). Stephen does not understand Sandhya’s dissatisfaction as he believes that by buying her “that rice cooker she had set her heart on” (63), he will make her happy. Alexander then creates a contrast as she interrupts Stephen’s thoughts with Sakhi’s entrance in the room, “muttering something about domestic violence in the South Asian community.... What did he know of that?” (63). Stephen does not understand that, although he is not being physically violent to Sandhya, by reducing her happiness to the possession of a domestic appliance, he is ignoring Sandhya’s need to be more than just a wife and a mother.

When Sandhya first arrives in the United States and receives her green card, the immigration officer tells her: “welcome to America. Be happy here” (7). Stephen adds: “the gates of America are open wide[.]... We’ll live here, Sandy, we’ll be happy, I promise you” (7). By using the English nickname ‘Sandy’, Stephen is erasing Sandhya’s Indian identity. Moreover, ‘Sandy’ is a unisex name. Hence, Sandhya’s womanhood is diminished, made neutral and

childish and so dependent on Stephen. The nickname also establishes a subtle reference to the author since 'Sandy' is a diminutive for 'Alexander' as well as for 'Sandhya'. The officer's welcoming attitude and Stephen's "liberal vision" (39) contrast with Sandhya's actual experience. Indeed, Sandhya feels foreign although she has been given the legal right to stay in America: "[s]upposing she were to swallow the green card, ingest the plastic, would it pour through her flesh, a curious alchemy that would make her all right in the new world?" (7). Sandhya wishes she could absorb her right to stay in America so that it is not located outside her but becomes intrinsic to her. While the possession of the green card marks her as a relatively privileged immigrant, it is still a symbol of her foreignness.

Yet the ultimate sign of her foreignness is something she cannot hide: Sandhya's brownness exposes her to racism and makes her feel uncomfortable in the United States. As Susan Stanford Friedman observes, "no matter what passport one carries, the body that looks 'foreign' is subject to a variety of gazes" (2004, 191). In the chapter entitled "Stoning", Alexander describes an episode of racism towards Sandhya and Sakhi – similar to the one reported in her autobiography *Fault Lines*. Sandhya is reluctant to tell her husband about the incident and seems to feel distant from him because of his different ethnicity. Therefore, Sakhi and her husband, not Sandhya, tell Stephen about the stoning. The scarce communication between Sandhya and Stephen increases the distance between them. Thus, Sandhya finds herself lonely, without a community, "a place for herself" (133). After she imagines swallowing her green card, Sandhya wonders: "What if she could peel off her brown skin, dye

her hair blonde, turn her body into a pale, Caucasian thing, would it work better with Stephen?" (7). Sandhya pictures herself white as if this could make her integrate into U.S. society and reduce the psychological and emotional distance between Stephen and herself. Yet, through this vivid imagery, Alexander suggests that assimilation is an extremely violent process and, at the same time, an impossible one.

Sandhya's state is not unlike Mulberry's: both flee their countries because of institutional violence and patriarchal control, but the United States does not satisfy their longing for freedom. Mulberry, however, cannot return to China because she has experienced too much violence there, and, besides, it is politically unsafe to do so. Sandhya, in contrast, despite the memory of Gautam and patriarchal control, is still attached to India. She recalls her childhood home in Kerala in a vivid and affectionate way: "The house of her childhood with its whitewashed walls and sandy courtyard marked the center of a luminous geography" (140). Sandhya is especially attached to the memory of her childhood because "the landscape of childhood seemed to allow entry into a simpler world" (140). Sandhya wants to recuperate this "simpler" and "luminous" world; hence, each summer, "to keep things on even keel [*sic*], she kept returning to her childhood home" (41).

Even when she is in the United States, Sandhya mentally travels to India, be it through memories or dreams. When her body is in the United States, her heart is in India, a condition that Ketu H. Katrak, discussing writers in English from the Asian, African and Caribbean diasporas, calls "the *simultaneity of geography* – namely, the possibility of living here in body and elsewhere in mind

and imagination" (1997, 201; emphasis in original). Sandhya lives "between two worlds" (Ling 1990, 105), and her very name means, in Sanskrit, "those threshold hours, before the sun rose or set, fragile zones of change before the clashing absolutes of light and dark took hold" (227). Thus, a condition of in-betweenness is intrinsic to Sandhya; the combination of her Indian first name and a Jewish surname also indicates an in-between, hybrid identity.

However, while Katrak's "simultaneity of geography" implies a diasporic attitude, Sandhya's in-betweenness indicates that she is not at home either in Asia or in America. Sandhya does not retain a pure, romantic vision of her homeland as might be expected in a diasporic response to migration: she only clings to it by inertia, because India is what is most familiar to her: in her mother's garden, "[s]he felt she knew every inch of outspread land" (103). When she returns to India, she is not actually going "homeward": "[r]ather, it was an *accustomed* life" (97; emphasis added). Yet India holds not only the memory of her childhood but also of women dying under a patriarchal regime and of Gautam. As Nalini Iyer observes, various types of violence "coalesce to create dispossession and displacement for the female subject in a patriarchal and flawed nation" (2009, 143-44). Moreover, during her visit home to assist her ill father, Sandhya misses her daughter, Dora. Hence, first her mind, then her body, travels back to the United States.

Sandhya's journeys between the two countries recall the epilogue of Nieh's novel, where Princess Bird flies back and forth between the mountain and the sea, unable to land anywhere. Similarly, Sandhya does not feel at home anywhere: "*[h]ome is where, when you go* ... she thought, but the thought

remained unfinished in her head" (115; emphasis and ellipsis in original). As a consequence, she struggles to establish links with either India or the United States. Thus, her transnationalism is, like Mulberry's, negative, given these characters' inability to develop a strong attachment to any nation. Yet, while Mulberry's experiences in both the United States and China are entirely negative, Sandhya's relationship with her home and host countries is further complicated by the positive aspects that they retain: the United States being the place where her daughter and lover Rashid are and India the place of childhood and family ties.

Mobility also represents a negative element in Mulberry's and Sandhya's lives because it is dictated by the fact that they cannot settle anywhere. As a result, they both develop a mental instability that destroys them. Indeed, Sandhya's repeated relocations between two continents destabilise her sense of self and make her feel transparent, that is, without an identity: she "felt stretched so thin she feared she might die of the sheer transparency needed to be in two places at once" (95-96). At the same time, she feels fragmented:

> I am lying here in Tiruvella, my birthplace....
>
> Forty-eight hours ago I left Kennedy airport.
>
> And ... for the sake of some clarity that might eventually help her *piece her life together*, she thought out all the places the plane had stopped at. (99; emphasis added)

If modern technologies have invigorated the making of transnational ties, thus enabling immigrants to feel at home in two (or more) countries, here they seem to enhance immigrants' sense of disorientation as they make it possible to relocate to distant countries within the span of a few hours. The following lines convey the same feeling of fragmentation while Sandhya is in New York: "all she had at hand were *scraps* of space ..., *morsels* of time ... The borders she had crossed had marked her very soul. Now she was a tattooed thing[.]... And who would find her beautiful? (74; emphasis added). As in the passage describing Sandhya's desire to become white, Alexander uses an epidermal image again, this time to evoke the pain caused by crossing borders. The pain is so acute that it becomes a visible mark on the body, disrupting its smoothness and wholeness and making it grotesque.[21] Thus, like Mulberry, Sandhya is a fragmented character, broken or "tattooed" by her multiple border crossings.

Sandhya's sense of fragmentation is rendered at a formal level "through the structural division into chapters as well as through the non-linear, associational structure of each chapter, reminiscent of stream-of-consciousness" (Kimak 2014, 150-51). Indeed, through the technique of internal focalisation, which is usually combined with free indirect discourse (Stevenson 1992, 32), the narration follows the characters' thoughts as they go back and forth between memories of the past and meditations on the present. Such formal fragmentation also reflects "the impact of ... geographical displacement" (Sabo

[21] In some Indian tribes, such as the Arunachal Pradesh's Apatani tribe, women were tattooed in order to become less appealing for men of rival tribes (Savitha and Lakshmi 2017, 5). Alexander's notion that tattoos make the body ugly might come from this, or it might just be her own personal perception.

2016, 70) on Alexander, who has described herself as “a woman cracked by multiple migrations” (2003, 2), although she ultimately benefitted from such experiences as they represented a great source of literary inspiration.

Unlike Sandhya, Draupadi takes advantage of her fragmentation through artistic creativity. Sandhya’s and Draupadi’s “lives were poles apart, driven hard by place and circumstance” (3-4), hence the difference in their reaction to their confusion about who they are. Whereas Draupadi was born in the United States, and her ancestors were Indian labourers in Trinidad and Fiji who then migrated to America, Sandhya was born in India, and her “people … seemed never to have budged from the Indian subcontinent” (4). Sandhya can easily trace her lineage and her past, thus enjoying a wholeness that Draupadi does not have as her lineage is “scattered” (4) and fragmented. Sandhya is locked in by her privilege, and when her wholeness is disrupted she does not know how to react. Draupadi, in contrast, is familiar with the sense of being fragmented and plays with her past, shaping it through her creativity. Nonetheless, her father’s statement that “[b]orn in America, there’s nothing you can’t be[.]… Make yourself up, child” (90) clashes with life in Gingee where he and his family are victims of racism. Therefore, to put into practice her father’s advice, Draupadi leaves her house in Gingee and settles in Manhattan where she becomes an artist.

As the title of the novel suggests, Manhattan is another protagonist of the novel, and Alexander’s choice of this setting is deliberate. Alexander herself lived in Manhattan for many years, and, as Stephanie Han observes, “Alexander is transnational, but New York City … features prominently in her work” (2014,

294) – hence, she is, in some instances, trans*regional*. In New York, various ethnicities mingle and interethnic coalitions become possible. Indeed, in the United States, and particularly in New York, Alexander had the opportunity to learn from other ethnic minority writers. New York is a "'contact zone' of multiple, heterogeneous assemblages of peoples and cultures" where "refugees, immigrants of color, and (post)colonial diasporas from around the world gather and interact" (Zhou 2014, 201-2). In *The Shock of Arrival*, Alexander writes of Manhattan: "The city fronts me.... [A] city filled with immigrants. The scents ... of migrancy [are] everywhere in Manhattan" (1996, 137). Draupadi also declares: "We have it all here in New York, I swear: Milan, Rome, Delhi, and Gingee, too" (50), thus drawing attention to the immigrant population in New York. Against this multifarious and overwhelming background, there are two possible scenarios presented by Alexander: either becoming lost, as Sandhya does; or finding a source of enrichment for one's identity, as Draupadi does.

Draupadi mixes American and Indian elements to shape her identity, adding a variety of origins: African, Asian American and European.[22] Whereas India constitutes a significant part of Sandhya's identity, embedded in her personal history, for Draupadi, India is "a phantasm, not a memory" (Duncan 1999, 24), and her connections with it are not direct but mediated by her family. Therefore, she uses her creativity to fill in the missing parts of the landscape of her origins. Draupadi embraces syncretism and is determined to "make up" her past (52; 86) with the fragments that she has. Draupadi's

[22] Her very name, Draupadi Dinkins, is a hybrid although 'Dinkins' is actually an Americanisation of the Indian surname 'Dineshwaran', which her grandfather changed when he was in the United States.

multiple, transnational identity is reflected by the fragmented and miscellaneous nature of her chapters, which constitute the most experimental parts of the novel: they contain quotations, poems and letters; portions of the text are given visual emphasis through the use of italics or capital letters; stream of consciousness is also used so that paragraphs and sentences can be very short, with no logic, and the tense jumps back and forth from present to past.

Sandhya's cousin, Sakhi, constitutes another example of how to live in the United States without renouncing one's Indianness. An immigrant like Sandhya, Sakhi has settled in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with her Indian husband and has a job as a social worker.[23] Sakhi feels Indian, and "she would live and die that way. No one could change her skin, or say to her: your parents are not buried in the churchyard in Tiruvella[.]... Nor have you ever spoken Malayalam" (132). Yet she has "become an American" (132): although "it didn't come naturally" (132), to her this is the only way to survive in her new environment. Sakhi "embodies a mode of self-reinvention that resists the assimilative model and demonstrates another way of claiming belonging in America, while insisting on maintaining her Indian identity" (Zhou 2014, 221). Sakhi reaches such a balance through her passion for social work.

Sandhya, conversely, stubbornly clings to her Indian identity, which prevents her from moving on. Draupadi says: "memory swelling like black water threatened to drown her" (4). The expression 'black water', or *kala pani*, comes from Hindu culture and indicates the ocean or, metaphorically, a

[23] 'Sakhi', meaning 'woman friend', is also the name of a South Asian organisation founded in New York in 1989 to deal with violence against women (*Sakhi for South Asian Women* 2017).

threshold that should not be crossed and so a danger: "[a]ccording to Hindu belief, the traversing of large expanses of water was associated with contamination and cultural defilement as these crossings led to the supposed loss of a 'pure' Hindu self" (Mehta 2018, 51).[24] Draupadi, by comparing Sandhya's memory to "black water", implies that clinging to her Indian heritage is dangerous. Therefore, Sandhya should actually subvert the admonishment contained within the notion *kala pani* as it entails a purist notion of the self that does not allow any contamination or hybridisation, which is precisely what Sandhya needs.

In New York, Sandhya is especially confused by "all these ethnicities" (7), all the voices that make up the music of Manhattan, or "Manhattan music". At first, Sandhya cannot identify with them as these voices upset her: "do you [Draupadi] think to be American I have to hear all these voices? ... Those voices hurt so much. Squatting on me, burning through me, and nothing, nothing left" (200). Sandhya, who has known only one voice so far – that is, only one tradition and ethnicity – is afraid of this multiplicity that is pushing through her and is unable to accept her fragmentation: "[u]nlike Draupadi ..., who ha[s] grown up in a multicultural setting, she is unable to negotiate the differences and hybridities of her surroundings" (Fludernik 2003, 282). In other words, Sandhya cannot make sense of her Indian identity in the United States.

Sandhya finds temporary relief in her affair with Rashid. With him, Sandhya is able to find a wholeness (albeit illusory), a shape and a consistency

[24] The term also describes the crossing of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans and the Caribbean Sea by Indians who then became indentured labourers in the plantations of the British and French colonies between 1838 and 1917.

to her identity: she "gained substance and weight through his desire, his touch.... Lacking him, she could not compose herself" (152). Thus, Sandhya's feelings of transparency and fragmentation are driven away by her passion for Rashid. Yet this is problematic because Sandhya is still passive and needs to rely on others, especially men, to define herself. Therefore, when Rashid rejects Sandhya's suggestion to live together, effectively ending their relationship, Sandhya plunges into depression and eventually tries to commit suicide as her sense of self has become heavily dependent on him. Further, she is deprived of the presence of another man in her life: her father dies, and she does not go to India for the funeral because of the geographical distance, which increases her grief.

Whereas Nieh's Mulberry commits a metaphorical suicide by developing a second personality, Sandhya actually tries to hang herself. This choice might be read as culturally driven: Alexander has expressed her concern with the large number of suicides by young girls in India (1996, 205-6; Bahri and Vasudeva 1996, 51), and Sandhya herself is haunted by the memory of a pregnant girl from her village who jumped into a well because of "the shame they made her feel" (210). Possibly, Sandhya is also pressured by the sense of shame that was instilled into her "for feeling passion" (210) – for Rashid. Yet Sandhya's story is not only about "passion in a time of violence"[25] (Alexander quoted in Ali and Rasiah 2000, 87), but it also shows that immigrants' expectations are not always satisfied and that the United States is not always a land of freedom,

[25] Here Alexander refers to the historical background of the novel: the First Gulf War.

especially for women. Moreover, not everyone can live between nations, creating a balance and ties between *here* and *there*. Indeed, violence experienced in both home and host country can put the immigrant in a very difficult position since violence estranges them from either place. Sandhya's suicide attempt is an extreme consequence of such a condition. Draupadi finds Sandhya's body "swaying", her "face contorted" (204). She then saves Sandhya: "I ... cut you down. Rubbed your poor raw neck. Your eyes were open.... [Y]our throat had a rope mark" (204-5). Alexander's vivid description of Sandhya's suicide attempt and rescue increases the tragic nature of the event, successfully revealing that mobility can bring deep suffering to the immigrant, even when they are privileged and migrate out of choice.

Sandhya especially epitomises the Indian woman who follows her husband to the United States. What Christiane Schlote states about the characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's and Lahiri's works is also true for Sandhya: "While the common scenarios in the context of South Asian immigration – entering North America as dependent wives or as students – continue to provide the main impetus to leave for a large number of characters, these journeys are hardly ever taken lightly. Instead, most are accompanied by fearful apprehensions" (2006, 396). As Alexander explains, such "fearful apprehensions" arise from the fact that

> the old ways of living are no longer valid, and you haven't really been taught as a woman to branch out on your own.... Sandhya is ... a poignant character because there's a longing in her, which I have seen in ... women who've come

> here [the United States] and really don't know what to do. I've felt that at some point in my life coming here. (Quoted in Ali and Rasiah 2000, 84-85)

Yet Sandhya is not an artist like Alexander, able to express her thoughts and emotions through writing. Thus, despite the recurrent biographical parallels – besides those highlighted earlier, Sandhya comes from exactly the same ethno-religious and class background as Alexander – author and character do not completely coincide.[26] While it seems that Alexander wanted to project onto Sandhya her experience as a female Indian immigrant in the United States, she also wanted her to embody other women's stories. To do so, she depicts Sandhya as an unexceptional, everyday woman struggling to find a way to face her sense of alienation and dissatisfaction without the resources that an artist like Alexander or Draupadi has.

Some scholars have argued that what Sandhya lacks to live in the United States successfully is precisely a passion or a talent, like art for Draupadi and social activism for Sakhi (see Iyer 2009; Mehta 2009; Jain 2011; Kimak 2014). Nevertheless, Sandhya's limit is not that she is a simple housewife (Iyer 2009, 143), but that she has an "intensity of perception" (131) that overwhelms her. Although all immigrants have "their problems. Traveling places was hard, staying was harder" (207), Sandhya is especially sensitive and introspective. Whereas many immigrants accept "tuck[ing] the suitcase under the bed" (207),

[26] It is worth noticing, for instance, that while Alexander does not take her husband's name, Sandhya does, confirming her dependence on men and her passivity in relation to them.

Sandhya keeps using it and does not know where to leave it, hence her dramatic choice to end her life.

After her failed suicide attempt, however, Sandhya leaves the narrow space of her existence to enter a community of people sharing the same experiences of migration and uprooting. Thus, she eventually learns how to turn her fragmentation into a positive and enriching multiplicity. Sakhi brings Sandhya to a women's meeting in New York, and, "among many Indian women, Sandhya felt she had entered a country where she needed neither passport nor green card" (211). Sandhya understands that she is not the only one to suffer and being part of a community gives her a sense of belonging and an identity. Seeing how these women's lives are interconnected with hers, Sandhya accepts multiplicity as a feature of her identity. In Draupadi's words: "We each have to be many women" (222). When interviewed, Alexander herself highlighted the importance of the community (Bahri and Vasudeva 1996, 38; Maxey 2006, 29), as the ending of *Nampally Road* also suggests: Mira, the protagonist, expresses herself through the voices of other women (Davé 1993, 110-11).

Similarly, Sandhya stops feeling fragmented as she lets the music of Manhattan enter her soul: she "stood there, the strains of music rising again, staring at herself in a bright mirror. There she was, *intact* and *whole*" (215; emphasis added). Sandhya can finally hear and enjoy "the sounds, fragrant, subtle as flesh, countless voices singing" (221), not a "ceaseless cacophony" anymore (193). These voices belong to a diasporic community of men and women, all different, but united by their experience of border crossing. At a formal level, Alexander's use of the technique of internal focalisation enables

her to merge the voices in the novel: because all the characters (except Draupadi) speak through a third-person narrator's voice, their voices blend, like notes in musical composition. This does not mean that Alexander's novel is "monologic" (Bakhtin [1929] 1984). In fact, the "metaphor of 'Manhattan music' challenges perceptions of [the United States] as ... monotonal or ... monochromatic" (Jain 2011, 148). The novel portrays Manhattan as a space where different voices and skin colours coexist. Thus, multiplicity is central to the novel in terms of both form and content.

Furthermore, Sandhya is no longer a passive character, and she does not need to rely on others to find her identity: when Draupadi asks her to take part in her performance and play the role of "the immigrant women", Sandhya tells her: "I don't want to speak your words. I have to find my own" (222). Hence, Sandhya can finally see herself: gazing into the water of a lake in Central Park, she "caught sight of two eyes staring back at her.... My eyes, thought Sandhya, those are my own eyes staring back at me" (227). The novel ends in a circular way as Sandhya returns to Central Park where she was at the beginning, and Draupadi's question about Sandhya's ability to see herself is given an answer. Sandhya decides that she "will stay close to the ground" (223), meaning that she will not try to hang herself again and that she will stay in America: "[t]here was a place for her here[.]... And she ... knew she would live out her life in America" (228).

What is suspect in this apparently optimistic ending is Alexander's emphasis on leaving the past behind, thus reproducing the much-criticised model of the assimilated immigrant. It seems contradictory that, after

presenting many transnational characters – like Draupadi and Sakhi – Alexander describes Sandhya's recovery as a passage from a dark past to a bright, exclusively American future. Alexander's tone in the following lines is almost epic: "She was racing into America from the dark vessel of her past and she could hear it singing in her, ready to break free, the load of her womanhood, of the accumulated life, breaking free into an inconceivable sweetness" (219). Alexander's use of the image of the "dark vessel" as a symbol of the past, of the verb "racing" to indicate an excited movement towards America and the repetition of the words 'break(ing) free' associated with "inconceivable sweetness" to depict Sandhya's overcoming of her past reiterate an outdated binarism between Asia and America where India is dark and suffocating, and America is sweet and liberating.

Alexander ultimately yields to the simplistic and caricatured model of a binary opposition between Asia and America. In doing so, she contradicts what the novel has been conveying until this reductive ending: namely that immigrants' expectations are often shattered as they reach America; that they can be American without renouncing being Indian; and that they can inscribe the past in the present. The ending also conflicts with Alexander's own example since her work is distinctly transnational and was led by the effort to turn her "broken geography" into an "embroidery" that brought together her multiple, transnational connections to America, Asia, Africa and Europe. A possible explanation for this ending might be the influence – not fully acknowledged by Alexander – of earlier Asian American novels, such as Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* (1946) and John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957). In these novels, the

ending is optimistic and implies a movement toward America that is liberatory, full of hope, warmth and light.

However, when Sandhya eventually returns home after leaving the hospital, she cooks Indian food for breakfast rather than "the usual cornflakes or oatmeal" (221). This detail and the fact that she feels at home when she is among other Indian women might suggest that Sandhya has not abandoned her ties to India and that she has actually learned to incorporate her Indianness into the American context. Yet, even if Alexander were using the image of the dark vessel to refer to Sandhya's past sufferings, both in India and in the United States, she nonetheless ends her novel hurriedly, without giving any indication of how Sandhya will find satisfaction in the United States (see Shankar 2001, 299). In other words, by the end of the novel, Sandhya still does not know what America might represent for her: "[t]here was a place for her here, though what it might be she could never have spelled out" (228). Whereas all her friends have something to do at the Diwali celebrations – "Draupadi ... setting up her scene, ... Sakhi with her pamphlets and banners" (226) – Alexander does not provide Sandhya with her own talent or passion. If Sandhya has learned that she is not alone in her suffering and that she has to trust herself rather than others to find her happiness, behind her excitement for her new, bright future in America, there is still an emptiness that she does not know how to fill.

CONCLUSION

While both Nieh and Alexander are examples of how immigrants forge and maintain transnational ties to both homeland and host land – with Alexander actually expanding this model with her connections to Africa and Europe – the protagonists of their novels reject this process and experience forms of negative mobility. If our century is characterised by increased mobility, Mulberry's and Sandhya's relocations across Asia and America warn us against celebratory notions and narratives of mobility that evoke images of freedom and self-realisation. Nieh highlights in her novel how mobility is imposed on the immigrant and, especially, on the refugee, and so it does not represent an empowering experience but rather a form of oppression and, therefore, paradoxical immobility. As for Sandhya, although she chooses to leave India, her mobility is equally negative as her travels back and forth between India and the United States are a consequence of her inability to feel at home in either place, like Mulberry vis-à-vis China and the United States. Thus, Mulberry and Sandhya develop a negative kind of transnationalism, that is, they do not establish links to either country of origin or settlement. Yet living outside and in between national borders is eventually painful and alienating as Mulberry's multiple personality disorder and Sandhya's suicide attempt prove. Whilst it is true that, unlike Mulberry, Sandhya ultimately decides that she will live her life

in the United States and is optimistic about her future in this country, her enthusiasm originates merely from an intuition rather than from a solid vision, based on an equally strong sense of self. Therefore, both Sandhya and Mulberry appear to be lost, despite the fact that Sandhya is a relatively privileged migrant. Indeed, multiple factors, including not only ethnicity, gender and class but also emotional sensitivity, need to be considered when analysing the migrant experience since it is an intersection of them that determines the negative nature of such experience.

PART TWO

TRANSPACIFIC AND HEMISPHERIC

INTRODUCTION

I now explore Asian America's links to Canada and Latin America by looking at the Japanese North American writer Ruth Ozeki (1956-) and her novel *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) and the Japanese American writer Karen Tei Yamashita (1951-) and her creative (auto)ethnographic text *Circle K Cycles* (2001). Both authors are third-generation Asian Americans, and they are proof that immigrants' descendants develop transnational ties – in their case, to the United States and Japan. However, Ozeki and Yamashita, like Meena Alexander, expand the transnational model by looking North, to Canada, and South, to Brazil, thus adding a third element to their network, which becomes hemispheric. Thus, narratives like *A Tale for the Time Being* and *Circle K Cycles* reveal the need to use the term '(Asian) American' from a hemispheric perspective and to acknowledge various Asian American writers' tendency to embrace other nations besides the United States and their originary or ancestral homeland in Asia. Ozeki's novel expresses a transpacific vision as well, which is wider, however, than its usual understanding within Asian American studies where the term 'transpacific' has always implied U.S.-Asia relations. Ozeki focuses on Canada instead of the United States, thus showing that the latter country is not the only and necessary American point of reference within an Asian American transnational and transpacific framework.

Ozeki and Yamashita not only share a hemispheric perspective but also, as I discuss in the second half of each chapter, both describe, like Hualing Nieh and Alexander, forms of negative mobility and transnationalism through Nao's story in *A Tale of the Time Being* and the Brazilian Dekasegi's experience in *Circle K Cycles*. Nao, a Japanese American teenager who has lived all her life in the United States, and the Dekasegi, second- and third-generation Japanese Brazilians, are compelled to migrate to Japan for different reasons. Ozeki and Yamashita show how this type of migration, named by Takeyuki Tsuda "ethnic return migration" (2009c, 1) to distinguish it from the return migration of the first generation, can be a negative experience that leads one to reject transnationalism. Indeed, returnees are often considered cultural foreigners, and so they suffer social marginalisation, which prevents them from feeling attached to their ancestral homeland. Yet Ozeki leaves open the possibility of establishing transnational links as Nao eventually internalises some aspects of Japanese culture, especially Zen Buddhism, and even forges a link to France, by developing an interest in French language and culture. As for Yamashita, she criticises any idea of cultural purity and separateness both by experimenting with form and by describing phenomena of cultural hybridisation.

3 INTERCONNECTEDNESS:

RUTH OZEKI'S *A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING*

In this chapter, I analyse *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) by the Japanese North American writer Ruth Ozeki. Set in Canada and Japan, this novel makes an important contribution to expanding the transnational perspective in Asian American studies. Ozeki's inclusion of Canada, instead of the United States, in her novel shows how this latter country does not represent the pivotal point of Asian American studies any more and that Asian Americans' transnational ties can include other nations beyond the United States and an Asian country. In my analysis, I probe the reasons behind Ozeki's transnationality, which only emerge in her interviews and have not yet been addressed by scholars. I then discuss how, in Ozeki's case, transnationalism can be formulated through the transpacific and hemispheric paradigms.

Subsequently, I examine the ways in which Ozeki engages with Buddhist philosophy in *A Tale for the Time Being* at the level of form as well as content. The role of Buddhism in the novel has been acknowledged by scholars (see Starr 2016; Krevel 2017, 2019; Schmidt 2017; Hanrahan 2018; H. Lee 2018) and reviewers (see Kosaka 2013; Schwarzbaum 2013; Ulin 2013; Dwyer 2017) but not fully explored. I reveal how, in the novel, the Buddhist concept of

interconnectedness and the notion of transnational ties complement each other and how such an emphasis on multiple interconnections is expressed at the level of form. So far scholars have considered transnationalism in *A Tale for the Time Being* through the lenses of feminism (see Starr 2016; Parikh 2017) and postmodernism (see James 2017), and they have emphasised the novel's transpacific perspective mainly with regard to its environmental concerns and its attention to the transnational reach of nuclear disaster (see Suzuki 2014; Fachinger 2017; Huang 2017; Jimenez 2018; Adams 2019).[1] Yet there are other ways in which the novel underscores transnational, transpacific and even planetary connections. Indeed, Ozeki expresses a vision of planetary interconnectedness that characterises relations not only between humans and the environment but also between human beings, both men and women, beyond catastrophe.

However, through Nao's story, the novel also uncovers the obstacles to the realisation of transnational ties and describes a form of negative mobility. Nao is a Japanese American teenager who is forced to move to Japan after having lived all her life in the United States. Ozeki shows how ethnic return migration can constitute a painful experience: Nao faces social marginalisation as she becomes a victim of bullying (*ijime*) because of her foreignness, which prevents her from feeling attached to Japan. Nevertheless, Ozeki leaves open the possibility of establishing transnational links as Nao eventually internalises some aspects of Japanese culture, especially Zen Buddhism. Nao also develops

[1] Guy Beauregard (2015) addresses the transpacific dimension of the novel to stress its ethical relevance for thinking of Canada beyond the nation.

an interest in French language and culture, thus forging a third, unexpected transnational tie that has not received critical attention to date and that once more challenges traditional, bilateral understandings of transnationalism.

"I'M CAUCASIAN-JAPANESE-AMERICAN-NATURALIZED-CANADIAN"

> Exotic? Well, botanically speaking, yes, but ... I'm more of a hybrid or a mutant.
>
> — Ruth Ozeki, *My Year of Meats* (1998)

Ozeki is a novelist, filmmaker and Zen Buddhist priest. She was born in 1956, in New Haven, Connecticut, to a white American father and a Japanese American mother. Ozeki's inherent hybridity has prompted her to cross U.S. borders to reach Japan and Canada. While travelling and living in these regions, Ozeki has gained what David Palumbo-Liu describes as "a diverse and fascinating set of life experiences and a considerable skill set" (2014). Ozeki attended Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, obtaining a BA in English Literature and Asian Studies in 1980. She was then awarded a Japanese Ministry of Education Fellowship to pursue graduate work in classical Japanese literature at Nara University, Japan. During her Japanese years, besides working as a bar hostess, she taught in the English Department at Kyoto Sangyo University and founded an English language school in Kyoto.

Upon her return to the United States in 1985, Ozeki started a film career in New York as an art director, designing sets for low-budget horror films, including *Robot Holocaust* (1986) and *Mutant Hunt* (1987). She then turned to television production, and, in 1988, she began to work for Telecom Staff, a Japanese production company, directing documentaries for Japanese TV. Her first film was the documentary *Body of Correspondence* (1994), winner of the 1994 New Visions Award at the San Francisco Film Festival. Her other documentary, *Halving the Bones* (1995), was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival. In this film, Ozeki explores her mother's Japanese roots as a way to reconnect with her and with her own Japanese origins. Through her mother, Ozeki also traces her maternal grandparents' stories, which are embedded in Asian American history: her grandmother was sent to Hawai'i as a 'picture bride' in 1909, and her grandfather spent four years in a Japanese American internment camp in New Mexico.

In 2006, Ozeki received an honorary doctorate from Smith College where she is the Grace Jarcho Ross 1933 Professor of Humanities in the Department of English Language and Literature. Ozeki has been a contributor to the *New York Times* op-ed page, and she serves on the Creative Advisory Council of Hedgebrook[2] as well as the Advisory Editorial Board of *The Asian American Literary Review*. In 2010, she was ordained as a Sōtō Zen Buddhist priest.[3] She is affiliated with the Brooklyn Zen Center and the Everyday Zen

[2] Hedgebrook is a literary nonprofit organisation whose aim is to support women writers. They offer writing residencies, master classes and salons at their retreat on Whidbey Island, Washington (*Hedgebrook* 2018).

[3] The Sōtō School is one of the three sects of Zen Buddhism. The other two are Rinzai and Ōbaku.

Foundation, and she is the editor of the *Everyday Zen* website. Ozeki, who holds both U.S. and Canadian citizenships, lives with her husband Oliver Kellhammer – a German-Canadian environmental artist – in New York and British Columbia.

Ozeki's first novel, *My Year of Meats* (1998), deals with the themes of hybridity and in/fertility, with global corporate media and the globalised meat industry. The novel is based on Ozeki's experience of working in Japanese television and tells the story of two women: Jane Takagi-Little, a mixed-race Japanese American director, and Akiko Ueno, a Japanese housewife. Jane is directing a TV cooking show whose aim is to promote meat consumption in Japan and mainly addresses Japanese housewives. Jane's show reaches Akiko as her husband is convinced that eating meat will make her fertile and so insists that she watches the show, learns how to cook meat and eats plenty of it. Jane, however, soon finds out about the side effects of eating meat that has been produced with the use of hormones, antibiotics and other chemical substances. Having come into contact with Akiko, Jane starts to feel responsible for her and for the rest of her Japanese audience. The novel won the 1998 Kiriyama Pacific Rim Award, which celebrates literature about the Pacific Rim and South Asia, and the 1998 Imus/Barnes and Noble American Book Award.

Her second novel, *All Over Creation* (2003), addresses similar issues to *My Year of Meats* but shifts the focus from meat to potatoes, genetic engineering and agribusiness, blending reflections on family ties with discourses on biodiversity and environmental activism. The protagonist, Yumi Fuller, is a mixed-race Japanese American woman who returns to her parents, once potato farmers, after years of separation. Having become pregnant as a teenager, Yumi

had run away from her provincial, suffocating hometown in Idaho but later decides to restore her relationship with her parents when she finds out that they are both very ill. The family drama is then complicated by the arrival of a group of young environmental activists who are campaigning against GMO potato seeds that are promoted by a multinational corporation. *All Over Creation* was the recipient of the 2003 WILLA Literary Award for Contemporary Fiction and the 2004 American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, which honours excellence in American literature without restrictions with regard to race, gender, religion, nationality or literary genre.

Ozeki's latest novel is *A Tale for the Time Being*, but she has also written a work of non-fiction, *The Face: A Time Code* (2016). In this extended essay, Ozeki reports her thoughts while looking at herself in a mirror for three consecutive hours. The experiment is a pretext to meditate on identity formation, the body, memory and family ties. Like *A Tale for the Time Being*, this text is also infused with Zen Buddhist ideas, especially in relation to identity. Ozeki has declared about *The Face*: "it felt like a very natural expression of the interests I've returned to over and over in my writing. You can certainly see them in my novels and my film work" (quoted in Nixon 2016). Indeed, as this brief introduction has shown, Ozeki's life and work have been marked by recurrent concerns: hybridity, a shifting identity, self-portraiture, transnationalism, globalisation, environmentalism and Buddhist philosophy. All these elements are tightly intertwined in her works and especially in *A Tale for the Time Being*, as discussed below.

The theme of hybridity, be it cultural or horticultural, often recurs in Ozeki's literary *oeuvre*. The term 'hybridity' "as used in horticulture ... refers to the cross-breeding of two species by grafting or cross-pollination to form a third, 'hybrid' species. Hybridization takes many forms: linguistic, cultural, political, racial, etc." (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2007, 108). In postcolonial discourse, the term indicates "the creation of new transcultural forms" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2007, 108), and it disrupts notions of homogeneity and purity. Homi K. Bhabha (1994), for instance, especially focuses on how hybridity challenges the idea of a cultural hierarchy by revealing the mutuality and interdependence of cultures. Hybridity is also associated with the concepts of "dialogism" and "polyphony" used by Mikhail Bakhtin ([1975] 1981) to highlight the disruptive power of multivocal, non-monolithic narratives. In both instances, hybridity has positive connotations, and it is largely in this light that Ozeki presents the concept in her work.

In both *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation*, the protagonists, Jane and Yumi, are mixed-race Japanese Americans like Ozeki. In *All Over Creation*, Ozeki deals with hybridity in both the cultural and agricultural context. For instance, Yumi's parents sell seeds by post, and her father, a white American, writes in one of the catalogues that they send to their customers:

> We are proud to announce that this year there are 17 new listings, including ... exciting additions to Mrs. Fuller's 'Oriental Collection[.]'... And while we are

> on the subject of Exotics, there is an idea in circulation that these so-called 'aggressive non-native' plants are harmful, invasive, and will displace 'native' species. How ironic to hear these theories propounded by people of European ancestry in America! Just consider this: Not a single one of the food crops that make the U.S. an agricultural power today is native to North America. Our plants are as immigrant as we [white Americans] are! (2003, 67)

Through this agricultural metaphor, Ozeki criticises the idea that contact with the 'non-native' (the immigrant) is detrimental for the 'native' (the white American), drawing attention to the importance of immigration in American history. Indeed, not only are white Americans themselves migrants, but immigration and the interaction or hybridisation between non-native and supposedly native "species" also form the basis of the economic, political and cultural "power" of the United States.

However, Ozeki's celebration of immigration and hybridity proves problematic insofar as it downplays Indigenous spaces and identities. Other examples include Ozeki's narrativisation of the Indigenous population, the Coast Salish, in *A Tale*:[4] she only hints at them, neutrally acknowledging their presence and leaving their history untold.[5] Hence, she almost naturalises their dispossession. Ruth, a fictional version of Ozeki in the novel, even makes a joke about land claim, declaring that she could also claim a homestead that

[4] Hereafter I will abbreviate *A Tale for the Time Being* to *A Tale.*

[5] Ruth mentions that the island where she lives is "named for a famous Spanish conquistador" (141), and so it is very likely Cortes Island, that is, Klahoose territory. Yet Ozeki does not explicitly reveal the name of the island, and she seems to take advantage of the vagueness of the location to avoid territorial acknowledgement. This practice, however, plays an important role in the recognition of Indigenous people's history and rights.

belonged to a Japanese family, later interned during the war, on behalf of her people, thus erasing the specificity and priority of Indigenous land claims. She says: "I could just go there and sit in their driveway and refuse to leave. Repossess the land and kick out the Germans" (32). In *My Year of Meats*, Jane proclaims that

> [a]ll over the world, native species are migrating, if not disappearing, and in the next millennium the idea of an indigenous person or plant or culture will just seem quaint.... [B]eing half, I am evidence that race, too, will become relic. Eventually we're all going to be brown, sort of.... I straddle this blessed, ever-shrinking world. (1998, 20)

Here, Ozeki completely dismisses Indigenous identities, their historical and cultural richness, the rights of Indigenous people and their importance for humanity and the environment as they contribute to cultural diversity and biodiversity. Indigeneity is as significant as hybridity and transnationalism: when the latter are emphasised, it should not be done at the expense of the former. The fact that many people live within transnational spaces does not mean that this model is preferable and should be imposed on everyone. In fact, Indigeneity should not be considered a limit to transnationalism: Indigenous people can be transnational (see Krupat 2002; Forte 2010; Byrd 2017), and transnational networks can be created in parallel with Indigenous spaces.

In *A Tale*, the theme of hybridity is not as overtly addressed as in Ozeki's previous novels. The novel links two stories that happen in distinct geographical

places and historical times. One story occurs in Japan, before the 3/11 catastrophe,[6] and it is contained within the diary of the Japanese American sixteen-year-old Naoko Yasutani, known as Nao. After Nao's father loses his job in California when the so-called 'dot-com bubble' bursts, the family returns to Japan where Nao starts to compose her diary – in English, as she can only speak a little Japanese. The other story is that of the reader of her diary: Ruth is a novelist who lives on an island off the coast of mainland British Columbia with her husband Oliver. Ruth is trying to write a memoir but is suffering from writer's block. One day, she finds Nao's diary inside a Hello Kitty lunchbox washed ashore by the ocean waves, and she becomes completely absorbed in it. Thus, although Nao's story happens before 3/11, in Japan, and Ruth's story takes place after 3/11, in Canada, Ruth's reading process makes the two stories synchronous and connected.

In the novel, there are very few hints at Ruth's mixed-race identity, such as only a few references to her Japanese mother and a more explicit one to her "Japanese ancestry" (32). Yet even this information only suggests that she is Japanese American and not necessarily mixed-race. Therefore, the main clue is an implicit one: it is primarily by way of biographical parallels that the reader guesses that Ruth is biracial. Nonetheless, as Ozeki herself points out, although the theme of hybridity is not "highlighted, ... it's there, ... in the structure of the book, the conversation between two cultures and two continents" (quoted in

[6] The expression '3/11', coined after '9/11', refers to the earthquake and subsequent tsunami that hit North-East Japan on 11 March 2011.

Ty 2013, 165). Moreover, the transnational connections on which *A Tale* is built seem to be rooted precisely in Ozeki's biracial status.

Indeed, the fact of being mixed-race "has conditioned [Ozeki] to always assume that [she is] never going to be any one thing, that [she is] always going to be multiple" (Ozeki quoted in Ty 2013, 166). In an interview with Palumbo-Liu, she stated: "my mixed-race identity is why I experience myself, and the world, pluralistically. I'm a racially hybridized, genetically pluralistic entity, who has never lived in any one place or culture" (2014). Hence, Ozeki's hybridity has prompted her to find connections with other countries and cultures. These links have enabled her to give expression to her pluralistic sense of self: "I'm Caucasian-Japanese-American-naturalized-Canadian" (quoted in Palumbo-Liu 2014). As I show later, this pluralistic vision of the self is at the centre of *A Tale*, in terms of both form and content.

Yet transnationality also means in-betweenness. In Hualing Nieh's novel *Mulberry and Peach* ([1976] 1998) and Meena Alexander's novel *Manhattan Music* (1997) (see Part I), the protagonists suffer because of their in-betweenness and their inability to forge links with any nation. In contrast, Ozeki is not only able to build ties with various nations, but she also takes advantage of being "between worlds" (Ling 1990): "realising that I was neither here nor there but occupied some liminal space, neither in one culture or the other[: t]hat's a great vantage point" (quoted in Sethi 2013). Ozeki believes that being "in the middle" is particularly important for a writer "because that's where the vantage point is. That's where you can see" (quoted in Lee 2013). This position of perceived primacy, even exceptionalism, of being racially

mixed, is shared by other mixed-race writers. Ruth Maxey suggests that these writers, including Hanif Kureishi and Ayub Khan-Din, offer a utopian image of mixed-race people in order to "rewrit[e]" traditionally racist discourses (2012, 121). Ozeki's choice of discarding her Anglo-American surname, Lounsbury, might be read as a way to reinforce her hybrid identity: whereas in 'Ruth Ozeki Lounsbury', the Anglo-American element was stronger, the combination 'Ruth Ozeki' is a balance of the two elements that form her hybrid identity.

Thus, contrary to Mulberry and Sandhya – the protagonists of the above-mentioned novels who develop what might be regarded as a negative version of transnationalism – for Ozeki, being in between multiple places and cultures constitutes "a source of inspiration and strength" (Ty 2013, 160). Hence, transnationalism is positive, and the liminal space becomes a site of creation rather than destruction. However, Ozeki's confidence in hybridity and the in-between space is sometimes frustrated in her novels. In *My Year of Meats*, for instance, Jane has trouble getting pregnant: "[l]ike many hybrids, it seemed, I was destined to be nonreproductive" (1998, 183).[7] But if hybridity might not be 'productive' on a biological level, it seems to be on an artistic level, at least for Ozeki, who is a prolific artist working not only across genres and media but also across borders.

Ozeki's connections between North America and Japan mark her transnationalism as 'transpacific'. The term 'transpacific' is actually a development of the so-called 'Pacific Rim discourse', which constitutes a "trope

[7] Ozeki is probably referring to mules' inability to reproduce.

for a set of economic, political, and cultural processes creating relationships within a supraregion of Asia and the United States" (Donald Nonini quoted in Suzuki 2014, 362). Pacific Rim discourse was first introduced in the economic field in the mid-1970s as a U.S. response to the emergence of Asian economies, particularly Japan's, and it was only later adopted by cultural and literary critics. Therefore, the concept was initially "almost exclusively an American [U.S.] usage" (Connery 1994, 32).[8] The Pacific Rim discourse especially revealed the influence or impact of Asia on the United States and, according to Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, at the origin of the increased "permeability" between America and Asia, there is precisely the growing economic influence of Asia (1995, 5-6). Thus, Pacific Rim discourse establishes a link between Asia and the United States, moving America into, or consolidating America with, Asia (Chuh and Shimakawa 2001, 3).

The term has progressively come to designate a much larger area that includes "the emerging capitalist states of Asia, the redoubts of Australia and New Zealand, as well as all of North America and much of Latin America" (Nguyen 2017, 192). Rachel Lee relates the concept of the Pacific Rim to those of "Asia-Pacific" and "Asian diaspora" as they all refer to "a displacement of the American [U.S.] optic" (1999, 107). Indeed, in this extended network of nations, the United States loses its centrality: Pacific Rim discourse "presumes a kind of metonymic equivalence. Its world is an interpenetrating complex of

[8] Christopher L. Connery explains that "[t]he origin of the term is geological, referring to the rim of volcanic and tectonic activity around the Pacific Ocean – the Bering Strait, Japan, China, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Coasts of North and South America" (1994, 32). Before becoming a popular term in the economic field, it had already appeared in British Columbia, Canada, when the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve was established in 1970.

interrelationships with no center" (Connery 1994, 32). When applied to Asian American studies, the concept of the Pacific Rim reveals that "Asian America is no longer just a location in the United States, but is at the same time a location on a metaphorical rim constituted by diasporas and motions of individuals" (Arif Dirlik quoted in Okamura 2003, 172). These "individuals" include various Asian American writers who are culturally and emotionally attached to the United States but also to their Asian countries of origin/ancestral countries and other countries, such as Canada.

Recently, however, the Pacific Rim discourse has been replaced by the transpacific perspective. Erin Suzuki explains that this term both "extends and exceeds" Pacific Rim discourse and describes "the ways that different Asian, Pacific Island, and American cultures and communities mutually shape one another as they circulate throughout the region" (2014, 352). Literary critics prefer this term because Pacific Rim, having been introduced for economic reasons, "still implies something ... capitalist and commercial" (Nguyen 2017, 197). In addition, while Pacific Rim is a "singular construction", "there is not just one transpacific, but multiple transpacifics" (Suzuki 2014, 353). Indeed, the transpacific perspective addresses previously ignored transnational exchanges, such as "movements and experiences wrought at the grassroots level", occurring particularly among the Pacific Islands (Suzuki 2014, 353).[9] In this sense, the transpacific formulation represents not only a type of

[9] Lisa Yoneyama, however, argues that "the transpacific designation inherits problematic cartographic legacies of militarized global capitalism and its political rationality that have long vacated the people and histories of the Pacific Islands" (2017, 479-80). Given these differing views, it is clear that the transpacific perspective is still open to discussion and development.

transnational exchange or network but also a progression of the transnational turn in Asian American studies towards more inclusiveness.

Yet little attention has been paid to Asian American writers' ties to other American nations than the United States, hence the significance of Ozeki's novel for an effective expansion of Asian American studies. As Michelle N. Huang notices, "*A Tale for the Time Being*'s topography spans Japan and British Columbia, two locales outside the de facto 'America' of Asian American studies (the United States)" (2017, 96). Therefore, *A Tale* takes up the transpacific challenge to be more inclusive and to displace U.S.-centred paradigms not only by reaching Japan but also by shifting the focus from the United States to Canada. As Petra Fachinger argues, "while *My Year of Meats* and *All Over Creation* are predominantly American [U.S.] novels in both their settings and cultural references, *A Tale for the Time Being* is decisively Canadian in its attention to coastal British Columbia and its literature, albeit in a transnational rather than a parochial way" (2017, 48). Thus, the novel also satisfies a hemispheric perspective insofar as "Hemispheric American Studies" aims to "put pressure on the word 'American' by tightly linking it with the larger hemispheric world that American Studies has often seemed to exclude" (Levander and Levine 2007, 4). Indeed, the United States most often functions as a synecdoche for the whole of America, and the very term 'Asian American', even after the transnational turn, has always presupposed the United States.

If Ozeki's ties to Canada and her dual citizenship make her a transnational Asian *North* American writer, and if *A Tale* is definitely more focused on Canada than the United States, the United States still plays a more

prominent role than Canada in Ozeki's *oeuvre*. Indeed, her previous novels are set in the United States, and in *A Tale* Ozeki refers to important events of U.S. history such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and its aftermaths. In addition, her representations of Canada are sometimes less accurate than her depictions of the United States. For instance, in *A Tale*, she uses the U.S. term "reservation" (225) rather than the Canadian 'reserve' – and she fails to acknowledge the local First Nation. Thus, Canada and Japan might seem like mere satellites in Ozeki's transnational network. Yet neither Canada nor Japan is Ozeki's originary homeland: as a consequence, she does not have a thorough knowledge of these countries. But even though the United States, Canada and Japan occupy unequal positions in her transnational network, they are all present, and so their connections should be acknowledged and explored. It is not useful to insist on the intensity of transnational links and the weight of the nodes that form transnational networks as it leads to essentialised, limiting notions of transnationalism. Instead, the fact that Ozeki has forged transnational ties with Japan even though she was not born there allows for an expansion of the concept of transnationalism. Indeed, she demonstrates that transnationalism exists among immigrants' descendants, contrary to what some social scientists have theorised (see Portes 2001, 190). Ozeki's transnationality is even more notable since only her mother had Japanese origins, and she was a second-generation Japanese American.

While in *My Year of Meats* Ozeki gives expression to her ties to Japan by connecting Jane and Akiko through Jane's TV show, in *A Tale* it is through Nao's diary that a transpacific connection is created. Ozeki's choice of a diary rather

than a blog needs consideration since the novel is set in the twenty-first century, and, as Ruth affirms, the Internet has become people's "primary portal onto the world" (147). In an age where people meet more and more on the Internet and where virtual connectivity is pervasive, Ozeki's choice seems anachronistic or old-fashioned. Furthermore, the diary does not reach Canada thanks to the latest transportation technologies but rather is carried by the currents of the Pacific Ocean. Thus, Ozeki shows that transnational connections do not depend entirely on today's technology, which contradicts social scientists' emphasis on transnationalism as a typical phenomenon of the contemporary technological era (see Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1995; Vertovec 1999).

In fact, although the Internet can give us access to an exceptional amount of information about the world – it is indeed through the Internet that Ruth gathers information about Nao's world – it often acts as "a kind of temporal gyre, sucking up stories ... into its orbit" (114). Hence, these stories are soon lost and forgotten, and so our connections to the world are often ephemeral and superficial. Conversely, Nao's presence on the Internet has been intentionally erased by a software created by her father in order to protect her from cyberbullying. Nao's Japanese classmates use cyberspace to torment and humiliate her, uploading a video of her fake funeral and, later, of their sexual assault of her. Not only can the Internet be used with harmful intentions, but it can also isolate people rather than connect them. Nao used to have a blog, but she concludes: "There's nothing sadder than cyberspace when you're floating around out there, all alone, talking to yourself" (125). Therefore, Nao decides that she will write a diary, which is "the opposite of a blog. It's an antiblog,

because it's meant for only one special person" (26). Nao addresses in her diary this "special person", her potential reader, and writes: "It feels like I'm reaching forward through time to touch you, and now that you've found it [the diary], you're reaching back to touch me!" (26). Nao's words reveal the central function of the diary: it is only once Ruth has found the diary that a contact between them is established. Thus, Nao's diary functions as intermediary in the long-distance, out of sync relation between Nao and Ruth.

As the diary is transported by the ocean waves from Japan to Canada, not only does it generate a transpacific connection, but it also constitutes an actual transpacific object. Hence, the Pacific Ocean, rather than constituting a gap between continents, represents a site of connective forces. Indeed, it constitutes a chronotope, and, as such, it plays a fundamental role in the narrative: it is "the organizing cente[r] for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (Bakhtin [1975] 1981, 250). Like the road chronotope, the ocean chronotope is closely linked to the motif of meeting: although the encounter between Ruth and Nao does not happen in the ocean itself, it is the ocean that makes the encounter possible.

Ruth finds Nao's diary in a lunchbox on the shore of the island where she and Oliver live, in the middle of Desolation Sound, British Columbia. According to Oliver, the lunchbox belongs to one of the "Great Garbage Patches" that float in the oceans: he explains that two of these masses of garbage and debris are located in one of the Pacific gyres, large systems of oceanic currents, that "flow directly toward us from Japan and diverge just off

the BC coastline" (14). The box presumably escaped from this Pacific gyre, and it is probably one of the many Japanese objects that were engulfed by the 2011 tsunami: "[a]ll that stuff from people's homes in Japan that the tsunami swept out to sea[:] [t]hey've been tracking it and predicting it will wash up on our coastline. I think it's just happening sooner than anyone expected" (14), Oliver explains.[10]

Presenting the diary as part of the debris that floats into the ocean reveals Ozeki's sensitivity to global environmental issues. Indeed, her novel has been analysed through the lens of ecocriticism as it deals with humans' destructive impact on the planet (see Fachinger 2017; Huang 2017; Jimenez 2018). Ozeki especially explores what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence": "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (quoted in Marland 2013, 853). She does so through Nao's diary, which becomes the symbol of both potential nuclear contamination and of the pervasive, long-lasting effects of the human use of plastic. Indeed, the arrival of an intact Japanese lunchbox on the shore of British Columbia testifies to the resilience of plastic while drawing attention to the interconnectedness of the planet. Moreover, the novel is partly set in the Fukushima prefecture, home of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant,

[10] Oliver is most likely referring to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (GPGP) located in the North Pacific Gyre. *The Ocean Cleanup* website reports that the GPGP is "the largest of the five offshore plastic accumulation zones in the world's oceans. It is located halfway between Hawaii and California.... [It] covers an estimated surface area of 1.6 million square kilometers" (2018). Most of the plastic is not actually visible to the naked eye as it turns into "microplastics [that] are very difficult to remove and are often mistaken for food by marine animals", thus endangering their lives (*The Ocean Cleanup* 2018).

which melted down after the tsunami, and it gives voice to the preoccupation of Ruth and Oliver's neighbours that Nao's diary might be contaminated with nuclear waste. Nuclear contamination is another example of "slow violence" as well as of how choices made in one location of the planet can affect the rest of it.

In both cases, Ozeki highlights transpacific connections and tackles environmental issues from a global rather than local perspective. Thus, *A Tale* responds to the "ecocritical lack of engagement with theories of globalization and transnationalism" (Heise 2008, 387) and satisfies

> the need for an ecocritical paradigm that is ... more globally embracing – in other words, one which, while sensitive to environmental justice issues at a local level, is also able to register the temporal and planetary implications of anthropogenic environmental destruction in a world where no act or result of damage can be seen as purely local. (Marland 2013, 845)

While ecocritical readings of *A Tale* are not at the centre of my analysis, they nevertheless expose the novel's emphasis on the fact that "the planet is really small, and we are all radically interconnected" (Ozeki quoted in Ty 2013, 162). Oliver's observation that "[t]he earthquake ... moved the coast of Japan closer to us" and that "Japan is coming here" (202) is, in this sense, revealing.[11] Yet, in *A Tale*, such planetary interconnectedness is also explored in less ecocritical

[11] The novel's focus on the movement and moving closer of the lands of the Pacific Rim might justify the continued use of Pacific Rim discourse – given the geological origin of the term. Yet, for the reasons explained earlier, Pacific Rim discourse is now generally outdated.

ways. Although the novel sometimes adopts a 'biocentric' or 'ecocentric' perspective that challenges the centrality of the human that is typical of the Anthropocene,[12] human relations are still at the core of *A Tale* – as I discuss below – not only in its attention to the relationships between the characters in the novel but also to human history.

INTERCONNECTED THROUGH TIME AND SPACE

Ozeki has declared that "[s]o much of what [she is] writing about in [*A Tale*] is informed by basic Buddhist principles – of interdependence, impermanence, interconnectedness" (quoted in Ty 2013, 161). In this section, I analyse the multiple ways in which *A Tale* engages with these Buddhist notions, particularly focusing on the concept of interconnectedness and on how, in the novel, it is related to transnationalism. Ozeki mainly draws from Zen Buddhism as she herself is a Zen Buddhist priest. She first discovered Zen Buddhism as a child through her maternal grandparents, who were Zen practitioners. Moreover, during the late 1950s and 1960s, Buddhism and Eastern philosophies became popular in the United States, especially thanks to the Beat writers. It was not until the 1990s, however, when Ozeki's parents started ageing, that she became seriously involved in Buddhism: it was "the encounter with sickness, old age,

[12] This term unofficially identifies "the current geological epoch, suggested by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000. It signifies the extent of human (or anthropogenic) impact on environmental change since the industrial revolution" (Marland 2013, 860).

and death that really was the turning point", Ozeki has stated (quoted in Dwyer 2017).

Zen (禅) is a Japanese word that comes from the Chinese *Chán* (禪), which in turn comes from the Sanskrit *Dhyāna* (ध्यान): all these terms mean meditation. The genealogy of the term reflects the development of Zen Buddhism, which originated from Chán Buddhism (禪宗, *Chán zōng*), a school founded in China in the sixth century CE by the Indian monk Bodhidharma. Chán Buddhism was introduced in Japan by Japanese Tendai[13] monks who had travelled in China as well as by Chinese missionaries in Japan. Among the Tendai monks who brought Chán Buddhism to Japan, two had a particularly relevant role: Myōan Eisai (1141-1215) and Eihei Dōgen (1200-1253), founders of the Zen Rinzai (臨濟宗, *Rinzai shū*) and Zen Sōtō (曹洞宗, *Sōtō shū*) schools, respectively (see Pasqualotto 2003, 2008).

The very title of Ozeki's novel was inspired by Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* (正法眼蔵, lit. *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*; 1253), in which he discusses, among other things, the concept of *uji* or 'being-time'. The characters *u-ji* (有時) can also be read in Japanese as *arutoki*, which means 'for the time being' ("Ruth Ozeki Interview" 2013), hence the novel's title. The characters literally mean 'at a certain time' or 'sometimes'. Dōgen, however, reads the characters individually, 'being' (有) and 'time' (時), hence 'being-time': "[t]his brings out a meaning latent in the original words: each 'certain time' ... is a direct

[13] Tendai (天台宗, *Tendai shū*) is one of the most important schools of Japanese Buddhism and was founded in the ninth century by the Japanese monk Saichō (767-822).

manifestation of being, and vice versa" (Waddell 1979, 116). Thus, Dōgen emphasises the interconnectedness and sameness of everything that exists since "all beings in the universe exist as time" (Waddell 1979, 120).

Ruth looks for information about Dōgen on the Internet and writes down this citation from the *Shōbōgenzō*: "*In essence, everything in the entire universe is intimately linked with each other as moments in time*" (30; emphasis in original). Ozeki greatly relies on this concept of interconnectedness through time: she has affirmed that Nao's "family is connected through time ... [as] certain kinds of issues cycle back through time" ("Ruth Ozeki Interview" 2013). For instance, Jiko (Nao's great-grandmother), her son (Nao's great-uncle) and Nao have all read and are fascinated by Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* while Nao, her great-uncle and her father all have to confront suicide. Yet in the novel space is also important as events occurring in different places affect and link people around the world – a vision of transnational or, better, planetary interconnectedness to which I return later. Certainly, time is a central theme of the novel: time is present not only in the novel's title but also in Nao's very name, which is pronounced like the English word 'now'. Moreover, Nao's diary is contained inside the cover of *À la recherche du temps perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*] (1908) by the French writer Marcel Proust. Ozeki was particularly preoccupied with time when she was writing *A Tale* as her parents had died, which led her to think of time-related issues such as old age and death (Weber 2016). The study and practice of Zen helped her deal with her anxieties related to time passing.

In *A Tale*, Ozeki projects onto her characters her concern regarding time passing and the impossibility of seizing the present, the here and *now*. Like Ozeki, Ruth also worries about time, but she learns from Jiko, who is a 104-year-old anarchist feminist Buddhist nun, how to attain peace of mind. When Ruth meets Jiko in her dreams, she experiences something akin to a Buddhist enlightenment. An underlying idea of all Buddhist schools is that enlightenment is reached when we understand that we are not single, separate entities but that we exist as part of a larger reality where multiple entities are interconnected and depend upon each other for their existence. Daisetsu Teitarō Suzuki defines Zen Buddhist enlightenment, or *satori* (悟り), as the experience of the human mind when it identifies itself with the totality of things or when "the finite becomes conscious of the infinite residing in it" (1959, 218-19). Suzuki affirms that "we may take this experience as being somewhat akin to a totalistic intuition of something that transcends all our particularized, specified experience" (1960, 74). Thus, experiencing *satori* is to be liberated from our "limited, restrained, egocentric existence" (1960, 16). This is why this experience implies an act of self-effacement in order to lose our ego in the totality of things or the infinite.

In her oneiric meeting with Jiko, Ruth experiences

> a feeling, of *nonbeing*, ... which filled her with such an inchoate horror that she cried out and brought her hands to her face, only to find that she no longer had one. There was nothing there.... Nothing but a vast and empty *ruthlessness*.

> ... There was just this – this eternal sense of *merging and dissolving* into *something* unnameable *that went* on and on *in all directions, forever*.
>
> ... [A]nd in an instant, her dark terror vanished and was replaced by a sense of utter *calm* and *well-being*. (122-23; emphasis added)

Ozeki's vocabulary recalls Suzuki's description of *satori* as the identification of the human mind with the infinite. Indeed, Ruth does not have a definite identity anymore, which she depicts as having no face, probably because our facial traits are what distinguish us most. Ozeki plays with the word "ruthlessness" to indicate both the fact that Ruth is not there anymore and how violent this feeling is to her. But although, at first, Ruth is disorientated by this sensation and is gripped by fear, she is then overwhelmed by a sense of tranquillity, a glimpse of *satori*.

The Zen discourse on how to reach *satori* echoes Indian Buddhist principles on how to attain Nirvana. Theravada Buddhism[14] maintains that an essential step to eradicate pain and reach happiness is to realise that the self is not autonomous (*anattā*, or 'no-self', 'egolessness') or permanent (*anicca*, or 'impermanence'). Thus, Buddhism warns us not to attach ourselves to the idea of an ultimate, individual reality, or being, or ego because there is no such thing. Identity is relative: both in the sense that it is not absolute, and in the sense that it is shaped in relation to others as expressed by the theory of 'interdependent origination' or 'dependent co-arising' (*paṭiccasamuppāda*).

[14] Theravada is one of the three main schools of Buddhism. The other two are Mahayana and Vajirayana.

According to this theory, each reality is, at the same time, dependent on and at the origin of other realities. Such interdependence is represented through the image of a circular chain with twelve links: each link simultaneously originates from the previous link and generates the next. Therefore, Buddhism – similarly to transnationalism – conceives of the world as interconnected, every reality or individual depending on each other (see Suzuki 1974; Pasqualotto 2003, 2008).

The interconnectedness of the novel's characters and their stories can be seen in the novel's structure. The novel is divided into four parts, and each part consists of alternating sections that reproduce Nao's diary entries (first-person narrator) and report Ruth's story (third-person narrator). Two other sections include the letters of Nao's great-uncle Haruki #1 translated into English. Yet the novel's structure is best described through the metaphor of the Chinese boxes, evoked by the Hello Kitty lunchbox, which contains stories and is at the same time contained within a story. In fact, as Oliver notices, "It's bags within bags" (9), given that each item is contained in a freezer bag. Ozeki's novel is the ultimate receptacle of all this material whose reading brings to us the stories of not only Ruth and Nao but also of Haruki #1 as well as of Oliver, Jiko and Nao's father, Haruki.

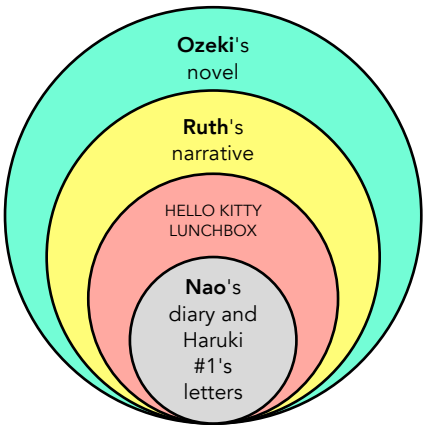


Figure 1: *A Tale for the Time Being*'s 'Chinese box' structure

A Tale is indeed a dialogic, polyphonic text (Bakhtin [1929] 1984) where multiple voices coexist and intersect. Ruth's reading of the materials contained in the lunchbox is in itself "a dialogic process" as she is "part of a larger community of engagement" (L. B. Davis 2015) that helps her interpret the materials that she has found. As Ozeki affirms, the use of multiple points of view "destabilizes the sense of there being a singular 'author' running the show, in charge of the fictional world" (quoted in Palumbo-Liu 2014). In addition, each narrator (Nao, Haruki #1 and the narrator of Ruth's story) has a different style, particularly Nao, who expresses herself in a typically teenage fashion. Moreover, Ruth's choice – which is also Ozeki's – of a third-person narrator to tell her own story enables her to reach *anattā*, that is, the detachment from the self that is necessary to identify with 'the Other', in this case Nao, but also with the other characters in the novel.[15]

Indeed, through Nao, Ruth connects across borders with the various characters that populate Nao's world, and she is affected by them. Ruth empathises with both Nao and her father, feeling "a strong sense of almost karmic connection" (311). Furthermore, Ruth meets Jiko twice in her dreams, and she feels "a keen ... sense of kinship with this woman from another time and place" (150). Both Ruth and Jiko are indeed fictional versions of Ozeki as suggested by a small detail: "the glasses she [Jiko] was wearing, which had thick, squarish black frames, [were] not unlike Ruth's own" (39) and Ozeki's –

[15] This choice could also be considered as Ozeki's tribute to the *shishōsetsu* or 'I-novel', a Japanese autobiographical form that flourished at the beginning of the twentieth century and that is usually narrated in the first or third person. In this regard, it is also worth noticing that Jiko, whose name means 'self' or 'oneself', is presented as "a woman pioneer of the 'I-novel'" whose work is titled "*I-I*" (150).

as can be seen in photos of her. Thus, characters – and author – are all interconnected and influence each other, although they often feel lonely or, like Ruth, live in isolation. For instance, Ruth overcomes her writer's block as she decides to intervene in Nao's story and writes the ending of it as well as recounting her own story; Nao and her father are saved by Ruth's intervention; Jiko helps both Nao and Ruth with her Buddhist teachings; and Haruki #1's letters inspire Nao.

The transpacific relationship between Ruth and Nao, in particular, constitutes a fictional translation of the aforementioned 'interdependent origination' or *paṭiccasamuppāda* theory. Indeed, the reader – in this case Ruth – cannot exist if not in relation to a text: in this case Nao's diary. Towards the end of the novel, Nao writes: "Wow. I'm really going to miss you. It's crazy, I know, since you don't even exist yet. And unless you find this book and start to read, maybe you never will. You're just my imaginary friend, at least for now" (385). Hence, Ruth's existence depends on Nao and when Nao's last diary entries suddenly disappear, Oliver observes: "if she [Nao] stops writing to us, then maybe we stop being, too" (344). At the same time, however, the text and the characters in it exist insofar as someone reads the text. Therefore, Nao exists inasmuch as a reader finds her diary and reads about her.

In addition, readers have agency over the text since every reader produces a different interpretation of the same text. As Nao says to her potential reader, "together we're making magic" (5) as their interaction will create something that she alone cannot produce. Indeed, toward the end of the novel, Ruth is able to intervene in Nao's story and change the end of it, thus preventing

Nao and her father from committing suicide. Hence, the missing diary entries reappear. In fact, Ruth's intervention in Nao's diary starts much earlier as she adds footnotes to provide explanations to some of Nao's points. The presence of footnotes in Ruth's own sections – with an explicit reference to Oliver in one of them (395) – suggests that Ruth is the author of her own sections as well as of Nao's story.[16]

Ruth, however, is sceptical: "[s]he hadn't been writing; she'd been *reading*. Surely a reader wasn't capable of this bizarre kind of conjuration, pulling words from the void? ... Who had conjured whom?" (392). But Ruth is not simply a reader: she is a novelist, and Nao is her "imaginary character" (Ozeki quoted in Ty 2013, 162). Thus, *A Tale* shows "what happens when a character taps a writer on the shoulder and calls her into being; it's about the character creating a novelist" (Ozeki quoted in Sethi 2013). This is also the way Ozeki claims she had the idea for the novel, that is, hearing Nao's voice in her head ("Ruth Ozeki Interview" 2013). Hence, the line that separates writer and reader becomes blurred, thereby confirming the Buddhist notion of non-dualism according to which everything that exists is interconnected and interdependent and cannot be separated.

The relationship between Nao and Jiko is also very significant as Jiko helps her great-granddaughter while she is having a hard time as a "kikokushijo" kid (帰国子女, lit. 'repatriated children'; 43). Nao is part of a phenomenon that has only recently come to the attention of social scientists

[16] *A Tale* could be described as a "work-in-progress novel" or "poioumenon", a term coined by Alastair Fowler to indicate "a particular form of metafiction that involves the production of a narrative about the creation of a book by a narrator or character" (Mason 2017, 362).

and that has been variously defined as “reverse immigration” (Oka 1994), “return migration” (Yamanaka 1996, 2003; Tsuda 2000, 2003b, 2009c; King and Christou 2011), “ethnic homecoming” (Tsuda 2009d), “diasporic homecoming” (Linger 2001), “dual diaspora” (Linger 2001) and “counter-diaspora” (King and Christou 2011). Return migration has been studied since the 1970s, but the first studies focused mainly on the return migration of the first generation while they overlooked the second generation (King and Christou 2011, 452). As argued by various critics (see Tsuda 2009c; King and Christou 2011), the study of second-generation return migration is fundamental because it contributes to enlarging more traditional and restricted views of transnationalism that have ignored or even denied the existence of transnational ties among immigrants’ children.

More recently, Takeyuki Tsuda (2009c) has distinguished between “return migration” and “ethnic return migration”: while “return migration” concerns immigrants who return to their country of origin, “*ethnic* return migration” sees immigrants’ descendants moving to their ancestral homelands (1). Such “returns” often constitute a negative experience since returnees are considered cultural foreigners, and so they suffer social marginalisation (3). In her diary, Nao writes of how happy she was in America and how difficult her life is in Japan as she is a victim of “ijime” (いじめ, bullying; 44). Because she does not speak Japanese fluently, Nao has problems integrating at her Japanese school where she is considered a “poor loser *foreign* kid” (44; emphasis added). Therefore, Nao gets “tortured” (44) on account of her being foreign: “[i]n Japan they call it ijime, but that word doesn’t begin to describe what the kids used to

do to me" (44). *Ijime* is often supported by teachers and is carried out in the form of insults, physical assaults or by ignoring the victim, treating them as if they did not exist (see Salvaggio 2013; Kawano 2016). Nao has to endure all these forms of physical and psychological violence in addition to sexual abuse.

Because of her traumatic experiences in Japan, Nao refuses to be (re)assimilated into Japanese culture and clings to her American identity: "[a]s far as I'm concerned, my whole life started and ended in Sunnyvale, which makes me American" (43). Her sense of Americanness is so strong that "[i]n Sunnyvale, [she] used to think [she] was adopted. Some of [her] friends there were Chinese girls adopted by ordinary Californian parents, but [she] felt like the opposite, like an ordinary California girl adopted by Japanese parents" (136). Thus, Nao seems to reject the possibility of creating transnational links between Japan and the United States, and she displays a strong diasporic attitude towards the latter. Indeed, although Nao was born in Japan, she was brought to the United States as a baby, and so although the United States is technically her host land, Nao considers it her homeland.

Hence, in Japan, Nao feels like a "ronin" (浪人), which literally means "wave person", "floating around on the stormy sea of life" (42). Although Nao's situation is different from Mulberry's and Sandhya's – as the protagonists of Nieh's and Alexander's novels are examples of negative transnationalism while Nao maintains her ties to the United States – they all suffer because of mobility, which, particularly with regard to Mulberry and Nao, is thrust upon them. Their sorrow is so deep that they all seek death: Mulberry metaphorically dies by developing a second personality; Sandhya attempts to hang herself; and Nao

almost commits suicide. Thus, mobility is, once again, negative since it is imposed and constitutes a cause of intense suffering.

Nao affirms: "I would probably already be dead if Jiko hadn't taught me how to develop my superpower" (44). Jiko's "*SUPAPAWA–!*" (176) is obtained by practising Zazen meditation and is basically the ability to cope with one's difficulties: "Jiko said that zazen meditation probably wouldn't cure me of all my syndromes and tendencies but it would teach me how not to be obsessed with them" (162). Moreover, Nao uses her "supapawa" to deal with the bullies in her class as when she is sexually abused: "I summoned up my supapawa, and soon the shadows were just mosquitoes, buzzing in the distance and bothersome only if you let them be" (277). Given her attackers' greater numbers, Nao cannot react physically against them, and so she uses a different strategy, which she has learned thanks to Zazen, to deal with the danger that she is facing. To Nao, Zazen becomes a "home that you can't ever lose" (183), helping her overcome the sense of uprooting that she feels in Japan. Thus, Nao eventually embraces transnationalism as she connects to Japan thanks to her relationship with Jiko, who teaches her about Zen Buddhism, providing her with a tool for survival. The writing of the diary is also therapeutic for Nao as she is able to find a connection with a friend that otherwise she would not have; Kayla, the only American friend with whom she was in contact after moving to Japan, soon stops writing to her.

Nao also develops an interest in French culture and language. France is a recurrent presence throughout the novel: Nao works in a French maid café in Tokyo's Akihabara district, and her diary is contained inside the cover of

Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Nao's choice of Proust's book is casual: her main objective is that of hiding the diary from her abusive classmates: "who would pick up an old book called *À la recherche du temps perdu*, right?" (21). If her classmates would not know what the title means, Nao "[doesn't] know what it mean[s] either" since she cannot speak French (21). Yet a special connection is established between Nao and the French writer: "there I was, sitting in a French maid café in Akiba [Akihabara], thinking about lost time, and old Marcel Proust was sitting in France a hundred years ago, writing a whole book about the exact same subject.... [I]t felt as if me and old Marcel were on the same wavelength" (23). Thus, Japanese, Japanese American and French culture meet in Nao's diary, confirming that Nao is not as essentially American as she claims to be. Indeed, in her diary, Nao reveals a cosmopolitan sensibility – discussed below – and a tendency to connect with other countries and cultures as proved by her interest in Zen Buddhism and French language and culture.

Nao's enthusiasm for French language and culture is strengthened by her relationship with her great-uncle Haruki #1, who was studying philosophy and French literature at Tokyo University when he was recruited by the army to be a kamikaze pilot during World War II. By reading the letters that Haruki #1 wrote during his time as a soldier, Nao establishes a special relationship with her great-uncle. In his letters, Haruki #1 writes about his experience as a soldier, his preoccupations with time and death, and his readings of Zen Buddhist texts. Ruth finds Haruki #1's letters as part of the other objects contained in the Hello Kitty lunchbox and tries to decipher their content.

However, the letters are in Japanese and inside one of them there is a composition book written in French, which is a secret version of the letters.

French therefore constitutes an element of connection between Nao and her great-uncle: as Oliver notices, "Secret French diaries seem to run in the family" (226). When Nao and her father find the letters, Haruki wonders why they are written in French, and Nao knows why: "[i]t was safe ... If the bullies found it, they wouldn't have been able to read it" (368). Musing on the possibility of "flying toward the ocean", Nao observes: "It's the same big Pacific Ocean where Number One [Haruki #1] crashed his plane into the aircraft carrier. That's nice.... I would be with Haruki forever. He's so smart, we would have lots to talk about. Maybe he could even teach me French" (269). At the end of the novel, we know from her father that Nao has won a scholarship to study French at an international high school in Montreal, Canada. Not a *ronin* anymore, Nao finally knows where to locate herself, and she can look to the present and to the future. Hence, time is, in the words of Proust, *retrouvé* or regained.

Nao's and Haruki #1's passion for French culture and literature creates another, unexpected transnational link, this time to France – and through France to Canada, which is part of the wider territory of *la Francophonie* as well as of Ozeki's transpacific network. As with Canada, Ozeki's inclusion of France – a country that, as I discuss in Chapter 5, also features prominently in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt* – challenges transnational readings of Asian American literature that focus uniquely on the bilateral connections between the United

States and a country in Asia, offering instead a vision of planetary interconnectedness that includes various regions of the world.

Ozeki explores transnational and planetary interconnectedness also by referring to events of human history and by showing the impact of such events on her characters. As mentioned earlier, Ozeki refers to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and to the consequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. These historical events might seem distant from Nao and her father, who live in Japan, or Ruth and Oliver, who have moved to a secluded island. But even though "news of the world had little relevance" to the daily lives of the inhabitants of the island (272), Ruth and Oliver used to live in New York, and they still have friends and activities to do there – as a matter of fact, they are in Wisconsin on September 11. Nao has spent most of her life in the United States, and so, even in Japan, she feels American. Nao states that, after 9/11, her "classmates were nice to [her] for a while because of [her] *connection* to America" (274; emphasis added). Critics and reviewers of *A Tale* (see Lee 2013; Schwarzbaum 2013; Ulin 2013; Starr 2016; Hanrahan 2018; Jimenez 2018) tend to refer to Nao as a Japanese teenager, but she is Japanese American and actually considers herself an American *tout court*.

To Nao's father, 9/11 symbolises the realisation of his fears. In Sunnyvale, California, he designed interfaces for a gaming company, but he lost his job after disapproving the company's decision to apply his interfaces to designing weapons controllers. Haruki explains: "When 9/11 happened, it was clear that war was inevitable.... A generation of young American pilots would use my interfaces to hunt and kill Afghani [*sic*] people and Iraqi people, too.

This would be *my fault*" (388; emphasis added). Hence, Japan, the United States and the Middle East are fatally linked, and Haruki, who is back in Japan, feels responsible for a war that occurs far away from him. Nao and her father are examples of a cosmopolitan sensibility as their lives are deeply affected by these events: Haruki's depression, which he develops after losing his job and moving back to Japan, worsens when he hears about the terrorist attacks; Nao's menstruation, which had stopped since she left the United States, resumes the day that the United States starts bombing Afghanistan. Thus, Ozeki highlights not only the global interactions between countries but also how such interactions deeply affect the private emotional and corporeal lives of people all around the world – a process of 'glocalisation' that sees the local being shaped by the global (and vice versa).

The writing of the novel itself was influenced by another tragic episode, the 3/11 catastrophe: indeed, Ozeki decided to insert herself in the book only after this event. She had submitted *A Tale* to her agent in 2011, but after the earthquake happened, she realised that Japan and the entire world were "a different place", and so she withdrew the novel ("Ruth Ozeki on Catastrophe" 2013). The 3/11 catastrophe made her ask herself this question: how does "a fiction writer respond to an event of that catastrophic magnitude ... still unfolding?" ("Ruth Ozeki on Catastrophe" 2013). Hence, the role of Nao's reader, whose identity Ozeki had struggled to shape, is given to Ruth, a fictional version of Ozeki. This choice enables the author to address more personally the catastrophic events that have marked not only Japan but also the rest of the world and Ozeki herself as an individual. Therefore, for Ozeki, becoming Nao's

reader means taking responsibility for the people involved in the catastrophe (see "Ruth Ozeki on Catastrophe" 2013).[17]

Another reference to transnational encounters between nations is made through the figure of Haruki #1, recruited by the army to become a kamikaze pilot. Eventually, Haruki #1 refuses to "crash his plane into the enemy aircraft carrier ... [and flies] into the waves instead" (386) – a choice that evokes Haruki's own decision to resign from his job, which indicates that the two Harukis share more than a name. Moreover, Ozeki draws attention to the presence of Asians in Canada and to Asian Canadian history. Ruth finds Nao's diary at the "Jap Ranch": "[t]he old homestead ... had once belonged to a Japanese family, who were forced to sell when they were interned during the war" (32). In another passage, Ozeki hints at the impact of Spanish imperialism on British Columbia: the island where Ruth and Oliver live is "named for a famous Spanish conquistador, who overthrew the Aztec empire. Although he never made it up as far north as his eponymous isle, his men did, which is why the inlets and sounds of coastal British Columbia are scattered with the names of famous Spanish mass murderers" (141).[18] Although Ozeki only fleetingly hints at the consequences of colonisation on the Indigenous population, these comments successfully convey that the island, an apparently remote place,

[17] Masami Usui defines *A Tale* as an example of "3/11 literature": "[a]s Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 created Atomic Bomb literature, 9/11 in New York created 9/11 literature[,] ... [a] group of Japanese writers could not help writing, directly or indirectly, on 3/11, initiating the foundation of a 3/11 literature" (2015, 91).

[18] The mention of the "famous Spanish conquistador" suggests that Ozeki is very likely referring to Cortes Island, where she lives with her husband.

detached from the rest of the world, is actually a theatre of international conflict, encounter and migration.

All these examples of interconnectedness illustrate how the novel does not approach this theme only in terms of the human impact on the environment within the transpacific area (ecocritical readings) or the transnational connections between women (feminist readings). Rather, human history reveals how peoples and cultures have never been discrete, autonomous entities and that even the most remote places in the world have been affected by the mingling or clashing of different people. Moreover, if it is true that the connections between Ruth, Nao and Jiko are very significant, the same can be said for Nao's relationships with her father and her great-uncle. Thus, the novel does not pivot around female bonds – as further suggested by the very marginal role played by Nao's mother. In fact, it shows how "we are *all* interconnected through time" ("Ruth Ozeki Interview" 2013) and also through space.

Ozeki makes use of modernist and post-modernist techniques (see James 2017) – such as metatextuality (see R. G. Davis 2015), montage and pastiche – to give shape to a complex, heterogeneous text that mirrors the content of the novel, based on the Buddhist vision of reality as multiple and interconnected. For instance, Ozeki inserts in the novel a variety of materials, which she suggestively compares to "flotsam in a gyre" (Lea 2013). These materials include: 165 footnotes; six appendices; a bibliography; the content of web pages; e-mail exchanges between Ruth and a professor (with an example of 'e-mail within e-mail'); excerpts from songs, Buddhist texts, prayers, journal articles and books; sign writings; small black and white pictures; emojis; lists;

instructions for Zazen meditation; Japanese legends; and quantum theory. Some of these materials are given visual emphasis through the use of italics or different page layouts, fonts and sizes. Moreover, the first and third part open with a citation by Dōgen while the second and fourth part open with a quotation from Proust. The dialogue between Japanese and French culture is also articulated through the presence of many Japanese words (in the Japanese alphabet, in their transliteration and in the English translation) as well as French words and phrases. These "wanderwords", as I argued in relation to Alexander's use of Italian and Hindi words in her texts, highlight the composite and diversified nature of American literature (see Lauret 2014).

Ozeki further endorses the principle of interconnectedness and challenges any dualistic vision of reality as she merges fact and fiction in her works. Indeed, she often adds fictional elements to what she presents as autobiography and factual elements to what she presents as fiction, thus creating a form of autofiction. For instance, she has admitted that the pictures that she used in her autobiographical documentary *Halving the Bones* are not actually hers but those of her friends' mixed-race daughter (Weber 2016). In *My Year of Meats*, Jane shares many biographical details with Ozeki, who inserts a bibliography at the end of the novel to support the authenticity of what she has been describing – namely, the horrors of the meat industry.

In *A Tale*, Ozeki pushes this strategy further: despite some discrepancies, Ruth is basically Ozeki's fictional double, and the paratextual apparatus (footnotes, appendices and bibliography) aims to provide the novel with a scientific, rigorous tone. Thus, readers are invited to read the novel as an

autobiographical, realistic text. Yet Ruth and Ozeki do not completely coincide: unlike Ozeki, Ruth is not familiar with Buddhism or Japanese popular culture. Besides, Ozeki never mentions the name of the island where Ruth and Oliver live: she only hints at it as if to make the reader suspicious of a thorough correspondence between author and character. Moreover, the presence of magical elements clashes with this pretence of realism: a Jungle Crow coming from Japan lingers as a mysterious presence near Ruth and Oliver's house; Nao talks to Haruki #1's ghost; and some of her diary entries disappear and then reappear after Ruth meets Haruki in her dreams. These and other supernatural elements contrast with the autobiographical component and the scholarly paratextual apparatus. Scholars such as Fachinger have highlighted the "promising links between environmental writing and magic realism" (2017, 54-55; see also Marland 2013) as magic realism would be particularly effective at "drawing attention to the ... consequences of 'slow violence'" (55). However, magic realism in *A Tale* also has another function: it frustrates the dualistic view of literature as either fact or fiction. Hence, it brings in a new way of seeing literature and the world by revealing their inherent instability and their composite, hybrid nature – indeed, *anattā* and *anicca*.

Thus, the form of the novel reflects the multiplicity, heterogeneity and interconnectedness of the stories contained in *A Tale*. The text also reflects Ozeki's hybrid, syncretic, transnational world, which finds in Buddhism a suitable philosophical and spiritual translation. Indeed, both transnationalism, which has been defined as the process of forging links between countries (Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1995, 48), and Buddhist philosophy conceive

reality and the self as multiple and as part of a larger, interconnected reality. Yet Ozeki goes beyond the notion of bilateral ties between two nations that is usually implied in the definition of transnationalism. Rather she expresses a vision of planetary interconnectedness that involves various regions of the world. As we have seen, Ozeki's hybridity has prompted her to think of identity as shifting and plural and to find connections with multiple places and cultures, namely the United States, Japan and Canada. In *A Tale*, she connects her characters also to other and even more distant places: for instance, France and the Middle East.

With its focus on transpacific and planetary connections, *A Tale* departs from more 'traditional' Asian American literary texts that are concerned with portraying the experience of the Asian American community in the United States. As Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1995) argues, it is important not to discard completely the domestic dimension in Asian American studies. However, as *A Tale* demonstrates, novels that embrace a more transnational and cosmopolitan perspective have enriched and expanded the field of Asian American studies. Ozeki's work reveals how Asian Americans forge links not only to the United States and their originary or ancestral country in Asia but also to other countries. Further, Ozeki shows that we are all interconnected and interdependent, which, in our globalised century, is a truth that cannot be ignored. Hsiu-chuan Lee points out that novels like *A Tale* do not simply acknowledge human interconnectedness but also undertake "a cosmopolitics that occurs through the process of storytelling, reading, and writing" (2018, 32). *A Tale* actively restructures "the world by drawing previously nonexistent

alliances and comparisons between people, times, places, ideas, and memories" (H. Lee 2018, 32). Hence, the novel contributes to the worlding of American and Asian American literatures (see Dimock 2006, 2007), that is, to that process that simultaneously reveals and establishes links between these literatures and the rest of the world. While 'claiming America' remains a strong motif of Asian American literature – and rightly so – 'claiming the planet' represents an essential step toward decentring the United States and countering its provincialism and sense of its own exceptionalism. Furthermore, by claiming the planet, Asian American literature promotes a cosmopolitan or planetary consciousness that is essential to build a peaceful world community.

4 UNPURELY JAPANESE:

KAREN TEI YAMASHITA'S *CIRCLE K CYCLES*

If the study of Ruth Ozeki's life and work has highlighted Asian America's connections to the North, namely Canada, in this chapter, I foreground Asian America's relations to the South, that is, Latin America, by looking at the Japanese American writer Karen Tei Yamashita and her creative (auto)ethnographic text *Circle K Cycles* (2001). Because of the wide scope of Yamashita's interests, which exceed the Asian American field to embrace the Latin American, she has received little scholarly attention from Asian Americanists. I therefore aim to show the significance of Yamashita's work for Asian American studies. In particular, I demonstrate how her North-South or hemispheric approach contributes to the expansion of the transnational perspective in Asian American studies.[19] Moreover, her move southward adds a new dimension to Asian North America through which it is possible, by adopting a comparative outlook, to achieve a deeper insight into its communities and to develop a "minor transnationalism", that is, a "symbolic

[19] Only Rachel Lee (1999) and Eleanor Ty (2010) have adopted a hemispheric approach in their critical studies of Asian American literature.

geography of relations that become the creative terrain on which minority subjects act and interact in fruitful, lateral ways" (Lionnet and Shih 2005, 2).

My analysis then focuses on Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles*, a particularly understudied work in which the author exposes the limits to the creation of transnational ties as well as the underside of a transnational migration that is imposed by the dynamics of capitalism. Yamashita therefore describes, like Hualing Nieh, Meena Alexander and Ozeki, forms of negative mobility and transnationalism. She recounts the lives of second- and third-generation Japanese Brazilians who return-migrated to Japan in the 1980s and 1990s. "Forced to move by the demands of capitalism" (Nguyen 2017, 194), the Dekasegi (migrant workers) face difficult working conditions as well as social marginalisation due to the fact that, as I explained in my analysis of Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*, returnees are often considered cultural foreigners. As a result, they struggle to embrace transnationalism. Such a negative transnationalism is closely linked to the phenomenon of ethnic return migration, a link that scholars have not sufficiently stressed and explored in existing work on *Circle K Cycles* (see Chuh 2006; Ling 2006, 2012; Kam 2008; Ragain 2018; Sheffer 2020).

Doubly outsiders, the Dekasegi live in a liminal, in-between space at the margins of both Japanese and Brazilian society. However, a feeling of *saudade* – homesickness or nostalgia – toward Brazil prevails. Through *saudade*, Japanese Brazilians express their attachment to Brazil and their Brazilianness against the hegemonic pressures of Japanese culture to conform to a standard of 'pure Japaneseness'. Yet Yamashita criticises these dichotomies both by

experimenting with form, thus creating a unique "palimpsestic" (Chuh 2010), multi-genre, multilingual and polyphonic work, and by describing phenomena of cultural hybridisation and creolisation that unsettle any idea of 'purity'. My detailed analysis of both literary techniques and genres offers alternative and expanded readings as compared with those proposed by other scholars (see Kam 2008; Ling 2012; Ragain 2018; Sheffer 2020).

LOS ANGELES – TOKYO – SÃO PAULO

Yamashita is a novelist, short-story writer, playwright and professor. She was born in 1951 in Oakland, California, and she is a third-generation Japanese American, or Sansei,[20] as her grandparents migrated to the United States in the early twentieth century. Yamashita's father was born in Oakland and her mother in San Francisco; once married, they moved to Los Angeles in the 1950s. Before settling in Gardena, the family lived in the Los Angeles Jefferson and Crenshaw neighbourhoods: as Yamashita reports, these areas "reflected a cultural mix of working class folks of color, confined to circumscribed areas of the city through housing covenants" (quoted in Crisman and Sexton 2016). Thus, Yamashita was "brought up in a Los Angeles culture of mixed ethnicities"

[20] The terms 'Issei' (first-generation Japanese American), 'Nisei' (second-generation Japanese American) and 'Sansei' (third-generation Japanese American) were coined by Japanese Americans themselves after the Japanese words for number one, two and three (*ichi*, *ni*, *san*).

(Yamashita 2008, 206); such cultural, ethnic and social mixing features prominently in her body of work.

Yamashita studied English and Japanese literatures at Carleton College, Minnesota, and spent her junior year in Japan as an exchange student at Waseda University, Tokyo. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1973, and, in 1975, after receiving a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship to study Japanese immigration to Brazil, she moved to São Paulo where she lived for nine years. Here, she met and married the Brazilian architect and artist Ronaldo Lopes de Oliveira, with whom she had two children. It was during her Brazilian years that Yamashita started to write fiction. Her short stories, such as "The Bath", "Tucano" and "Asaka-no-Miya", won first prize in competitions such as the 1975 *Amerasia Journal* Short Story Contest, the 1975 *Rafu Shimpo* Short Story Contest and the 1979 James Clavell American-Japanese Short Story Contest. Moreover, in 1977, she received a Rockefeller Playwright-in-Residence Fellowship at East West Players in Los Angeles for her play *O-Men: An American Kabuki* (1976).

In 1984, Yamashita and her family moved to Gardena where she worked for twelve years as an Executive Assistant for KCET, a local public television station. At the same time, she continued to write, producing plays, screenplays, translations and feature articles – including pieces on Brazil for a local Japanese newspaper, the *Rafu Shimpo*. Since 1997, Yamashita has been teaching at the University of California Santa Cruz where she is a Professor of Asian American Literature and Creative Writing. Yamashita has received various awards, such as the Excellence in Teaching Award (2001), the Chancellor's Award for

Diversity (2009) and an appointment as the co-holder of the UC Presidential Chair for Feminist Critical Race and Ethnic Studies (2012-2015).

Among Yamashita's multimedia/stage performances are *Hiroshima Tropical* (1983), *Hannah Kusoh: An American Butoh* (1988), *Tokyo Carmen vs. L.A. Carmen* (1990), *Noh Bozos* (1993), *Anime Wong: A CyberAsian Odyssey* (2008), *Jan Ken Pon* (2012), and the musicals *Rock Candy* (1987) and *GiLArex (Or Godzilla Comes to Little Tokyo)* (1989). According to Stephen Hong Sohn, Yamashita's dramatic production represents "one of the most sustained avant-garde undertakings with respect to Asian American performance, musicals, and creative composition" (2014a, 358). *Anime Wong: Fictions of Performance*, a selection of Yamashita's plays edited by Sohn, was published in 2014.

Her first novel, *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990), addresses the themes of immigration, globalisation, economic imperialism and environmental exploitation. Set in Brazil, this magic realist, postmodern novel recounts how the exploitation of a plastic landmass called Matacão destroys the Amazon Forest as well as altering the characters' lives. The story is narrated with black humour by a ball that floats in front of the head of one of the characters, a man from Japan named Kazumasa Ishimaru. Other characters include Kazumasa's Brazilian maid, Indigenous people of the rain forest, a three-armed U.S. businessman and a three-breasted French ornithologist. The novel won the 1991 Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award and the 1992 Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for fiction by an American woman.

Brazil-Maru (1992) is a historical novel set in Brazil that tells the story of a Japanese Brazilian Christian socialist commune, from its establishment in

the early 1920s to its decline in the 1970s. The novel is based on the research that Yamashita conducted in São Paulo on Japanese Brazilians, which was originally meant to be academic. However, she eventually decided to use the materials that she had gathered to write a work of fiction as she believes that literature can reveal aspects of the immigrant experience that a historical or anthropological approach would omit (see Murashige 1994; Gier and Tejeda 1998; Shan 2006; Crisman and Sexton 2016).

Like *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, her third and best-known novel, *Tropic of Orange* (1997), is also written in a magic realist and postmodernist style. The novel deals with issues of migration, border crossing, and cultural and national identity. Set in Los Angeles and Mexico, *Tropic of Orange* relates the story of seven characters – Asian American, African American and Latino/a people – in seven separate sections. However, these stories intersect as an orange brought from Central America causes a standstill on Harbor Freeway. The Tropic of Cancer, a thin thread attached to the orange, has also crossed the border between Mexico and the United States. The novel was a finalist for the Paterson Fiction Prize in 1998.

After *Circle K Cycles* (2001), Yamashita published *I-Hotel* (2010), a collection of novellas set in San Francisco that mixes prose, playwriting and graphic art. Like *Brazil-Maru*, *I-Hotel* is also the result of years of research and interviews. *I-Hotel* narrates the origin of the Asian American movement between 1968 and 1977, and it describes the struggle to save San Francisco's International Hotel – also known as 'I-Hotel' and home to many elderly Filipino Americans who had been prevented from marrying and starting families due to

anti-miscegenation laws. *I-Hotel* was a finalist for the 2010 National Book Award, and it was awarded the 2010 Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association Award, the 2010 California Book Award, the 2011 Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award and the 2012 Association for Asian American Studies Prose Book Award.

Her latest work, *Letters to Memory* (2017), explores the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II through the Yamashita family archive and letters exchanged between Yamashita and various experts. Yamashita has declared that "writing about the Japanese wartime internment and about the Asian American movement has been a political gesture, to make evident an injustice related to current issues of undocumented migration ... [and] race-based policing and incarceration" (quoted in Crisman and Sexton 2016). In fact, all of her writing is characterised by its political content and social concerns, both at the local and the global level. As Caroline Rody observes, "Yamashita manages at once a global reach and a rich local specificity" (2004, 132). Truly glocal, Yamashita's writing has brought a global dimension into Asian American literature while also respecting its local, domestic dimensions and history.

SOUTHWARD

> There are ethnic artists whose eccentricity and largeness of vision strain the capacity of received forms. One such is Karen Tei Yamashita, wildly imaginative

> and politically engaged, brilliant and humane, Asian, American, and Latin American.
>
> — Caroline Rody, "The Transnational Imagination" (2004)

With the exception of *I-Hotel* and *Letters to Memory*, Yamashita's works do not deal with the Asian American experience in the United States, embracing Latin America and the Japanese Brazilian community instead. Her choice might be part of a generational tendency, that of the Sansei, to abandon the Nisei ideals of assimilation and integration into U.S. society (see Imafuku [2008] 2012, 87). Yet there are other reasons behind Yamashita's choice to leave U.S. territory. During her first stay in Japan as a student in the early 1970s, Yamashita felt the need to conceal her "Americanness" in order to "belong or to 'turn Japanese'" (Yamashita et al. 2008, 208).[21] However, Japanese people seem to be obsessed with the idea of a "pure Japaneseness", which "is defined not only by racial descent but also by complete linguistic and cultural proficiency" (Tsuda 2009b, 242). Therefore, although Yamashita "developed an intuitive grasp of mimicry" and seemed to pass for a "pure" Japanese person, people would still question her about her Japanese ancestry and were surprised to find out that she had a "pure" Japanese lineage (*Circle K Cycles* 12). Hence, for Yamashita, going South was a way to discover "what being a pure Japanese might be. What was the essence, the thing that might survive assimilation and

[21] Yamashita's first visit to Japan could be described as a 'roots journey' since she went there to "follow [her] roots" (Yamashita quoted in Palleau-Papin 2012), that is, to reconnect with her relatives and to trace her family history.

integration into a new culture and society, the thing that tied communities in the North to those in the South and to the Far East?" (12).

As a student, Yamashita was interested in anthropology under the influence of Paul Riesman, her professor of Cultural Anthropology in college. Riesman suggested that she should pursue graduate studies in Anthropology in the United States (Shan 2006, 128). Yamashita, however, moved to São Paulo in 1975 after receiving a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship to study Japanese immigration to Brazil. She returned to the United States only nine years later, having abandoned anthropology but "found a story" that kept her engaged with her research in Brazil (Yamashita quoted in Shan 2006, 129) and gave her the inspiration for writing fiction. In Brazil, Yamashita worked with the anthropologist Maeyama Takashi, who asked her to do oral histories of Japanese women immigrants. Yet her limited skills in the Japanese language prevented her from fully understanding her speakers and restricted her access to many useful materials, such as newspapers, letters and diaries (Yamashita quoted in Shan 2006, 129-30), which she needed to write an academic study.

Feeling that it was important to make known Japanese Brazilians' stories, Yamashita found that she could still do it through writing fiction. Indeed, fiction granted her more freedom as she could "embellish" the stories that she had gathered (Yamashita quoted in Gier and Tejeda 1998). Arif Dirlik notes that Yamashita's choice to deal with past events through literature is part of "a range of attitudes toward history", common among Asian American writers, "that extends from a desire to bring history and literature together to the benefit of both, to the repudiation of history for its complicity in hegemony,

oppression and erasure of ethnic pasts and sensibilities" (2002, 211). While Yamashita does not completely dismiss history, she believes that fiction can express aspects of the immigrant experience that a historical or anthropological study could not convey: "[y]ou couldn't express the emotion.... You'd have to stick to facts" (quoted in Murashige 1994, 56). Therefore, literature is actually "more truthful" (Yamashita quoted in Shan 2006, 130) insofar as it reveals the emotional core of the immigrant experience. Finally, as Te-hsing Shan observes, fiction can reach a wider audience than an academic study: by reading Yamashita's novels, more people know about the Japanese Brazilian community "than through all the research findings of anthropologists and sociologists" (2006, 131).

Thus, Yamashita has established a transnational link to Brazil and the Japanese Brazilian community "by way of learning and study and immersion, a kind of auto-didactic way of becoming. And of course, ... [she] married a Brazilian and ... [their] children were born in São Paulo and are also Brazilian" (Yamashita et al. 2008, 204). Indeed, what emerged as an academic interest subsequently turned into an affection for the country and its people. In particular, Yamashita found in Brazil an environment in which she could express her hybridity as a Japanese American, which is revealed by her very name, composed of a first name that was extremely popular in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s and a Japanese surname. Yamashita likes "the hybridity of [her] name, the pidginness of it" (*Circle K Cycles* 54), and she rejects the idea of racial and cultural purity – a concept that, as I show later, Yamashita especially criticises in *Circle K Cycles*: "I happen to be by bloodline

entirely purely Japanese, but what difference does that make? ... The idea of expecting purity is simply racist. Raised in the U.S. and having lived in Brazil absorbing languages and cultures and other histories, I've become, well, me" (quoted in Glixman 2007).[22] While Ozeki attributes her transnationality to her being mixed-race, Yamashita argues here that her transnational, hybrid self is not the result of genetic mixing but of her upbringing in the United States and of her encounter with Brazil and its people, which reveals the ideological nature of Ozeki's claim.

It was precisely in Brazil, an exceptionally syncretic society, that Yamashita was able to express and develop rather than restrain her hybridity and transnationality. Yamashita has declared that, "[h]aving studied previously in Japan, Brazilian culture was a welcoming space in contrast to the rigid homogeneity of Japan's and my perceived rejection there as an 'impure' Japanese American" (Yamashita et al. 2008, 204). While Yamashita recognises that racial democracy and colourblindness have become stereotypes about Brazil that do not entirely correspond to reality (see Murashige 1994, 51; Yamashita et al. 2008, 209), she has experienced "a very generous and gracious acceptance, at least on the surface, of strangers and people who come to visit Brazil. So there's an endearing quality about the country" (quoted in Murashige 1994, 51). Having "caught the Brazilian bug" (Yamashita et al. 2008, 209), Yamashita has placed Brazil and the Japanese Brazilian community at the heart of her literary works.

[22] In addition, her children are mixed-race – like the children of Alexander, who was married to a Jewish American man.

Thus, “although Yamashita calls herself an ‘Asian-American’ writer, her subject matter, and her formal approach to it continue to defy the geographic and canonical boundaries implied in that label” (Gier and Tejeda 1998). Indeed, most of her works deal with geographies other than the United States and with communities different from the Asian American. *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*, for instance, “is noteworthy in the history of Japanese American literature because it marks a movement away from the treatment of specifically Japanese American characters toward a stunning blend of genres and characters” (Yogi 1997, 148). The novel is set in Brazil, and it features characters coming from North America, Latin America, Asia and Europe – and its narrator is not even human. *Tropic of Orange* is set in both Los Angeles and Mexico, and its characters are Asian American but also African American and Latino/a. Finally, *Brazil-Maru* and *Circle K Cycles* both recount the Japanese Brazilian experience in Brazil and Japan, respectively.

Furthermore, Yamashita has stated that, although she enjoys Asian American writers such as Jessica Hagedorn, Garrett Hongo and R. Zamora Linmark (Worra 2004, 3), her literary influences are mainly Latin American: among them are the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges, the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa, the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, and the Brazilian Mário de Andrade and Moacyr Scliar (Murashige 1994, 51; Gier and Tejeda 1998; Glixman 2007). Gustavo Geirola points out that Yamashita “no [mira] a América Latina desde una mirada hegemónica ... [m]uy por el contrario ... [modeliza] su escritura a partir de obras y autores latinoamericanos” [does not look at Latin America from a hegemonic position ... quite the contrary ... she

shapes her writing taking as a model Latin American authors and their works] (2005, 126; my translation). Yamashita's use of magic realism is an example of how Latin American literature has inspired her. While other Asian American writers like Ozeki have employed this literary technique, they have not been associated with Latin America. Yamashita, however, combines magic realism with Latin American settings and characters, a choice that makes her more typically Latin American than Asian American. In addition, Yamashita assumes a role that is well-known within a Latin American context, that of the "escritor-investigador" [writer-researcher], a combination that U.S. critics tend to find unusual (Geirola 2005, 119, 127). In fact, her literary influences – like Alexander's – include authors from all over the globe: the white Americans John Irving and Kurt Vonnegut; the African American Toni Morrison; the British Indian Salman Rushdie; the Turkish Orhan Pamuk; the Italian Italo Calvino; and the Portuguese José Saramago (Murashige 1994, 51; Glixman 2007).

Hence, labelling Yamashita's works can be a challenging task as they stand at the crossroads of "academic disciplines, but also publishing categories and literary genres, such as U.S. ethnic literature, Asian American literature, Asian American women's literature, postcolonial literature, diasporic literature, postmodern literature, science fiction, and magic realism" (Thoma 2010, 6-7). Labels such as "border" literature (Rody 2004, 131), transnational literature and world literature are probably more appropriate than Asian American for describing most of Yamashita's works. Indeed, until recently, her works have been excluded from Asian American literary discourse (Chuh 2006, 620; Thoma 2010, 7). Published at a time when the transnational turn was at an

early stage and the urge to 'claim America' was still dominant, these works' contribution to Asian American studies went unnoticed. In contrast with this lack of scholarly attention, *I-Hotel* and *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* have received considerable critical acclaim: this might be due to the fact that these literary works appeal to a wider readership given their 'localised', identifiable subjects of Asian American history and environmental issues. Yet not only *I-Hotel* but all of Yamashita's works are shaped by the Asian American context.

Rachel Lee, for instance, demonstrates how even an extremely global novel like *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* can still be read through Asian American lenses – the character of Kazumasa, a Japanese railroad engineer, representing "a subtle parody of a familiar archetype, the Chinese American railroad worker" (1999, 242). This figure of U.S. and Asian American history is at the centre of Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980), a classic of Asian American literature. As for *Tropic of Orange*, Caroline Rody observes that "Asian American history leaves its traces in this ambitious novel, but ... Yamashita extends these traces into extravagant designs, ... unanticipated in Asian American novelistic tradition" (2004, 130). Thus, despite the Latin American focus of much of her work, Yamashita still deserves to be studied as part of Asian American literary studies.

Once Yamashita's body of work is included in the Asian American category, it is possible to see how her works have expanded and enriched such a category. As Rody affirms, Yamashita has taken "the Asian American novel to new places and welcom[ed] into it new kinds of characters, broadening and complicating the geographical, historical, cultural, and generic contexts of

representation in that body of literature" (2004, 131). Geirola further notes that Yamashita destabilises "la idea de una identidad concebida en términos de una oposición binaria, lo que en inglés se traduce como *hypenated-identity*. Ya no se trata de lo asiático-americano ... esta categoría de la identidad se pluraliza y se hace más compleja" [the idea of an identity conceived in terms of a binary opposition, which in English is translated as 'hyphenated-identity'. It is not about the Asian American ... this category becomes pluralised and more complex] (2005, 119; my translation). Indeed, Yamashita adds a third element, Latin America, to the Asian American compound, which, as I discuss below, has important consequences for Asian American studies.

The first consequence is that, by looking southward, Yamashita introduces an innovative North-South or hemispheric approach that helps destabilise "el provincialismo de los Estados Unidos" [U.S. provincialism] (Geirola 2005, 120; my translation). As Kandice Chuh argues,

> Although Asian American literary studies have in recent decades taken the 'transnational turn' ..., the particular rubric of 'hemispheric studies' has not found as much traction in the field as, for example, 'diasporic' or 'Pacific Rim studies'.... [M]ost transnationally inclined criticism in Asian American studies has been more involved in mining understudied or otherwise occluded east-west connections than in looking critically north or south. (2006, 618)

Scholars have focused especially on the bilateral connections between the United States and particular Asian countries. If Ozeki's move northward toward

Canada already constitutes an expansion of Pacific Rim and transpacific paradigms that continue to emphasise the United States, Yamashita extends such an expansion even further by moving toward the southern hemisphere.

Scholars such as Viet Thanh Nguyen (2017) relate Yamashita's work to Pacific Rim discourse, which is, however, misleading: first, Brazil, Yamashita's primary Latin American reference point, is not part of the so-called Pacific Rim or Asia-Pacific regions – either in geographical or economic terms; second, emphasising Yamashita's East-West connections overshadows her original and innovative North-South hemispheric approach. Other scholars have highlighted Yamashita's deviation from an East-West perspective, but they have not stressed her North-South coordinates (see Lee 1999; Rody 2004) while others have identified the originality of her North-South approach (see Chuh 2006; Ling 2006, 2012; Patell 2018). Jinqi Ling remarks that Yamashita's "privileging of South America in her writing is particularly suggestive in its resonance with the new global geopolitics in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s: namely, the ascendance of South-North relations as a 'new global equation'" (2012, 6). Yet only Chuh (2006) has actually recognised such an approach as hemispheric, thus placing Yamashita's North-South perspective within a specific field of study with its own *raison d'être* and aims.

The term 'hemispheric' is used in literary criticism to indicate an inter-American study, that is, a critical approach that aims to locate the various North, Central and South American literatures in relation to or in comparison with each other. It also marks a shift in focus away from the United States, the nation that often still functions as a synecdoche for the whole of America. Thus,

hemispheric American studies aims to "put pressure on the word 'American' by tightly linking it with the larger hemispheric world that American Studies has often seemed to exclude" (Levander and Levine 2007, 4). The hemispheric paradigm emerged as a response to Janice Radway's 1998 presidential address to the American Studies Association where she urged American scholars to study the United States in relation to the other American nations and to stop using the term 'America' to indicate only the United States. In order to highlight "the interdependencies between nations and communities throughout the Americas" (Levander and Levine 2007, 6), hemispheric American studies has primarily focused on the relations between the United States and Latin America (see Levander and Levine 2007) or, more recently, between Canada and Latin America (see Siemerling and Casteel 2010; Roberts 2015).

Chuh points out that, within Asian American studies, hemispheric studies poses a specific "set of critical questions":

> [i]n what way(s) can hemispheric studies enhance the study of racialization in the US? ... [H]emispheric studies articulated through Asian American literary studies underscores the need to look within and among but also *beyond* the Americas and specifically to Asia in critical efforts to challenge the discursive centrality of the US. (2006, 619)

Yamashita satisfies such requirements: on the one hand, she adopts a North-South perspective that makes it possible to gain a better grasp of the Asian North American experience through comparisons with Asian South America;

on the other hand, she highlights the East-West connections between Asia and America, with *Circle K Cycles* representing a further step toward a decentring of the United States, given that it recounts the experience of a South American community in Asia.

While Yamashita does not directly compare the Japanese American experience with the Japanese Brazilian, her Asian American background and location call for such a comparison. It is worth noticing that only *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* has been translated into Portuguese,[23] which means that, despite their Brazilian focus, Yamashita's texts – published by Coffee House Press, a nonprofit publisher based in Minneapolis – have a mostly Anglophone and most likely (Asian) North American readership. Therefore, Yamashita presents Japanese Brazilians to Asian North American readers, opening the way to comparisons that can improve our understanding of Asian North America and of its communities. Indeed, "Asian America can no longer be understood only in terms of its U.S. designation versus its various Asian origins ... Rather, Asian America must also be grasped in relation to the configurations of other Asian diasporas that function within, across, and beyond Asian-Pacific and the Asian-Latin American formations" (Ling 2006, 2). Thus, Yamashita's literary journey demonstrates how an openness to the South may result in a new awareness of the North. Indeed, she has turned to the United States and to the

[23] The Portuguese translation by Cristina Maria Teixiera Stevens and Carolina Berard is titled *Matacão, uma lenda tropical*, and it was published in 1990 by Zipango. There is also a Japanese translation by Kenji Kazama published in 1994 by Hakusuisha with the title *Nettai urin no kanata e* (熱帯雨林の彼方へ).

history of the Asian American community only after looking southward, to Mexico and Brazil, and after exploring Japanese immigration to South America.

In this sense, Yamashita's literary trajectory goes in the opposite direction to that of Asian American studies, which started with a strong emphasis on the domestic dimension and then gained an awareness of transnational and global processes. Yamashita herself has revealed:

> I seemed to be a lonely boat traveling in the opposite direction of every other boat on the literary sea now moving in concert toward ... transnationalism. As if I'd already been there ... and done my time, and now I'm moving back in time to historic moments like the Asian American movement. (Quoted in Brada-Williams 2010, 4)

Yamashita is certainly not the only author to have produced transnational works before the so-called transnational turn occurred – earlier works include *The Eavesdropper* (1958) by Lin Tai-yi, *Crossings* (1968) by Chuang Hua or *Dictee* (1982) by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. However, she has gone where no other Asian American writer has ventured and has produced a whole body of transnational work.

Furthermore, her return to more 'canonical' Asian American subject matter is significant: Yamashita's writing could be taken as an answer to various scholars' preoccupation with the idea that the transnational turn might eclipse the political, domestic dimension in Asian American studies (see Wong 1995; Cheung 1997b). Yamashita proves that it is also by adopting a transnational,

global perspective that the local, domestic reality can be better understood and represented. She has stated: “Even if my current projects seem historic and location specific, my own epiphany while researching has been to acknowledge the implicit transnational and global reach of these subjects” (quoted in Brada-Williams 2010, 4). As Chuh argues, Yamashita’s “work ... helps us understand that moving analytically beyond the frame of nation does not entail a displacement or disavowal of the continuing importance and effect of national identities” (2006, 629). Her *oeuvre* is, then, a realisation of Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s vision of the phases of Asian American studies as “*modes*” that can “coexist and alternate” (1995, 17; emphasis in original). In addition, her works may encourage Asian North and Asian South Americans to develop a “minor transnationalism” (Lionnet and Shih 2005).

Certainly, Yamashita’s “largeness of vision” (Rody 2004, 131) entails a certain amount of pain, which she metaphorically describes as a “backache”: “my back aches. It is longer than it should be, expanded geographically.... It is ... a vertebrae of pidgin utterances ... It is a bridge and a beast of burden” (*Circle K Cycles* 17). Therefore, reaching distant geographies and forging transnational links enriches one’s identity, but at the same time it also brings suffering as demonstrated by Japanese Brazilians’ experience in Japan. In *Circle K Cycles*, Yamashita embraces transnationalism and hybridity against parochialism and notions of purity, but she also shows the underside of transnational migration and the issues that migrants have to face as they live in the liminal space between cultures. Thus, she describes a form of negative transnationalism and mobility and problematises the concepts of hybridity and in-betweenness.

Yamashita offers a disenchanted, and simultaneously humorous, account of a phenomenon that she neither celebrates nor condemns but simply explores "with wry anthropological detachment" (Centina-Hsieh 2001), describing its multiple facets and faces.

COMING FULL CIRCLE

In 1997, Yamashita lived with her family in Seto, Japan, for six months, from March to August, in order to study the Brazilian community living in Japan at that time. During her stay, Yamashita wrote a monthly travel journal for the website *Cafe Creole* – where it is still possible to find her diary entries. *Circle K Cycles* blends these non-fictional documents with fictional stories "to paint as varied and textured a portrait as possible of the life [Yamashita] saw and experienced" during her visit (11). The text is divided into six chapters preceded by a Prologue and followed by an Epilogue, and each chapter is titled with a month name, tracing Yamashita's six-month stay in Japan. Therefore, like *Brazil-Maru*, *Circle K Cycles* constitutes Yamashita's account of what she has learned through research and lived experience about Japanese Brazilians. *Circle K Cycles* resumes precisely from the point where *Brazil-Maru* ends: in its Epilogue, Yamashita already hints at Japanese Brazilians' return migration to Japan as a consequence of Brazil's economic crisis. In what follows, I provide a historical overview of Japanese immigration to Brazil and of Japanese Brazilians' return migration to Japan (see Tsuda 2000, 2003a, 2003b, 2009d;

Linger 2001; Carvalho 2002; White 2003; Yamanaka 2003). As *Circle K Cycles* is based on these events, it is essential to be aware of them to fully understand the text and appreciate how Yamashita revisits some of these experiences creatively.

During the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912), half a million Japanese people left Japan to escape rural over-population and poverty. The first destination was Hawai'i where Japanese immigrants worked in the sugar cane plantations. However, in 1907, Japan agreed to discourage immigration to the United States (the Gentlemen's Agreement) and, in 1908, to Canada (Hayashi-Lemieux Agreement). Later, access to the United States was also halted by the 1924 U.S. Immigration Act. Thus, Japanese migrants were redirected to Mexico, Peru, Brazil and later to almost all other countries in Latin America. Most of the Japanese migrants went to Brazil, mainly in the state of São Paulo, as the Brazilian coffee plantation economy was expanding and in need of an increased labour force, particularly because of the abolition of slavery in 1888 and the decline of immigration from Europe. Japanese emigration to Brazil began in 1908, when the ship *Kasato Maru* left Japan with 781 Japanese people on board (see Carvalho 2002, 3-7; Tsuda 2003b, 55-56).

Between 1908 and 1941, 190,000 Japanese entered Brazil as Dekasegi,[24] and many decided to settle permanently. Moreover, in the post-war years, there

[24] This term defines "labourers working on short-term contracts and returning to their homeland after a brief sojourn abroad" (White 2003, 312). The term originally indicated people from the rural areas who had to migrate to the cities to avoid poverty but who eventually returned home (Tsuda 2003b, 110). As Daniela de Carvalho explains, "In Brazil the term '*Dekasegi*' was used to refer to the *Issei*, and by the mid-1980s, was used to denote people of Japanese descent who migrated to Japan" (2002, 87).

was a second wave of Japanese immigration to Brazil, mainly because of economic hardship in post-war Japan (Tsuda 2003b, 55-57). However, in the 1960s, Japan's economic prosperity reduced the material benefits of emigration until the Japanese government ceased its emigration programme in 1973 (Yamanaka 2003, 129). Yet Japanese Brazilians have become the largest community of Japanese descendants (*Nikkeijin* or Nikkei) outside of Japan with a population of about 1,900,000 (*The Association of Nikkei and Japanese Abroad* 2018).

By the end of the 1980s, most second- and third-generation Japanese Brazilians lived in the urban areas of the most developed regions of Brazil, were well educated and middle-class. Compared to the Issei, the subsequent generations were more willing to integrate and were relatively successful in doing so (see Carvalho 2002; Tsuda 2003b; White 2003). For instance, the retention of Japanese citizenship and the use of Japanese language by young people were relatively low (White 2003). But despite their socioeconomic and cultural integration in mainstream Brazilian society, Japanese Brazilians maintained a strong symbolic attachment to a Japanese homeland, and they were proud of their Japaneseness, which they considered less "an ethnic stigma to be avoided than a positive asset to be maintained" (Tsuda 2003b, 58-65).[25] Indeed, their Japaneseness was seen in a favourable light by Brazilian people,

[25] Daniel T. Linger highlights that "it was rare for a Brazilian Nikkei to have set foot in Japan. One learned and reaffirmed Japaneseness through family and community assertions of identity, occasional consumption of traditional foods and celebration of traditional festivals, ... Japanese language classes" (2001, 25).

due to Japan's prominent position in the global order and to widespread positive images about Japan and its culture (Tsuda 2003b, 2009d).

Thus, when the economic crisis hit Brazil in the 1970s and 1980s, many Brazilian Nikkei decided to return-migrate to Japan rather than to other countries of the Global North such as the United States (Tsuda 2009d, 27, 34). At the same time, Japan was experiencing the so-called 'bubble economy' and a labour shortage that especially affected small- and medium-sized businesses in the manufacturing and construction sector (Tsuda 2009d, 31-32). Since internal migration from the rural areas was by then very limited, the Japanese government decided to turn to immigrant workers coming from other Asian countries. However, their presence disrupted Japan's ideal of an ethnically and racially homogeneous society (Linger 2001, 22-23; Carvalho 2002, 79). The latter is enshrined in nationality and immigration laws, which are based on the principle of *jus sanguinis* – or 'right of blood' (see Yamanaka 2003, 132).

Hence, the government made changes to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Law in 1989 so that only Nikkei (up to the third generation) could legally become unskilled workers in Japan (Carvalho 2002, 79). Basically, "[t]he law promised a flexible, low-cost, culturally tractable and racially correct labor force to do the industrial dirty work disdained by Japanese citizens" (Linger 2001, 23), such as on the assembly line of the manufacturing sector. Nikkei were thus entitled to a long-term visa that allowed them to stay in Japan for up to three years with no restrictions on socio-economic activities (Yamanaka 2003, 133). However, "flexible citizenship does not seamlessly translate into or [*sic*] dual/multiple citizenships or full, immediate participation

within each culture" (Kam 2008, 13). Indeed, ethnic return migrants in East Asia were usually given only preferential visas and not citizenship because they were being imported mainly as immigrant workers (Tsuda 2009d, 29). Yet the government "did not officially recognize the *nikkeijin* as unskilled foreign workers. Instead, the policy was ideologically justified as an opportunity provided by the benevolence of the Japanese government for those of Japanese descent born abroad to explore their ethnic heritage and visit their ancestral homeland" (Tsuda 2009d, 34).

In 1998, 274,442 South Americans of Japanese descent were living in Japan, of whom 81 per cent were Brazilians (Carvalho 2002, 80). Although the majority of Brazilian Nikkei came from a middle-class background, in Japan they could earn five to ten times their Brazilian salaries (Tsuda 2000, 55). Therefore, many Brazilian Nikkei were encouraged by Japan's new immigration law to return-migrate to Japan. However, as mentioned earlier, ethnic ties also influenced Japanese Brazilians' choice to migrate to Japan. Thus, the transnational connections "that enabled ethnic return migration were forged both from below by diasporic descendants, who imagined their ancestral ties to the ethnic homeland, and from above by the policies of these homeland governments" (Tsuda 2009d, 30). Nonetheless, it is important to notice that while Japanese Brazilians chose Japan as their destination because of their ethnic ties to this country, they did not actually choose to migrate but were forced to do so by economic circumstances.

Japanese Brazilians' 'return' to Japan is representative of the phenomenon of return migration, which I previously discussed in my analysis

of Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*, where I explained how such 'returns' often constitute a negative experience since returnees are considered cultural foreigners, and so they are socially marginalised (Tsuda 2009c, 3). While the representatives of the Japanese government assumed that Nikkei would more easily assimilate into Japanese society than other immigrants because of their Japanese descent and presumed cultural affinity, they soon realised – as did the Japanese Brazilians themselves – that Brazilian Nikkei were culturally more Brazilian than Japanese. For Brazilian Nikkei, such a realisation was particularly shocking since they were treated as Japanese in Brazil, and they had developed a nostalgic, romanticised vision of Japan, to which they felt attached as their true homeland (Tsuda 2009d, 32-33). Yet they had "essentially return[ed] to a foreign country" (Tsuda 2009c, 3), thus becoming "strangers in the ethnic homeland" (Tsuda 2003b).

What are the consequences of living in this liminal space, "between native and foreigner" (Tsuda 2000, 59), between Japan and Brazil, without completely belonging to one or the other? In *Circle K Cycles*, Yamashita creatively explores Japanese Brazilians' ethnic return migration to Japan and the issues that arise from being regarded as a foreigner in one's ancestral homeland. Moreover, Yamashita highlights the negative consequences of a mobility that is imposed and regulated by capitalist logic. Therefore, although Yamashita embodies cosmopolitan ideals, she describes a community that was not able to embrace such ideals given the negative outcomes of its transnational migrations.

Yamashita acknowledges such a gap between herself and the Dekasegi, stating with regard to her presence in the text: “I felt it my responsibility to say: I came with money, I had my family here, we were able to travel, we had a great deal of freedom” (quoted in Palleau-Papin 2012). Hence, by including herself in the text, Yamashita creates a contrast between her personal experience as a privileged traveller and that of migrant workers who did not choose to travel but were forced to do so by capitalist dynamics. At the same time, she suggests that, although she comes from a different community, she still feels the responsibility to make these people’s stories known, thus endorsing the idea of a “minor transnationalism” (Lionnet and Shih 2005).

Moreover, by drawing “attention to the uncomfortable position of manual laborers working abroad”, Yamashita creates an “auto/bio/ethics” insofar as she “forces the reader to think about the ethics and consequences of global markets” while also shaping an “auto/biography” in which her individual experience and self are connected with and shaped by that of a community (Kam 2008, 23). Thus, “the cyclical shape of *Circle K Cycles* … point[s] to the development of a self that is not autonomous but inextricably connected to the external world” (Kam 2008, 10), which is also a key concept of Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*. Tanya Y. Kam therefore suggests that *Circle K Cycles* be considered a “collective biography” (2008, 9): as such, it does not convey a single truth or a pure perspective but a multiply inflected, polyphonic tale in which diverse and divergent perspectives meet. These are highlighted by the use of different, alternating narrative voices and tenses as well as by the

presence of entire sections translated into Portuguese and Japanese by others, which makes *Circle K Cycles* a co-authored work.[26]

One of the characters, Zé Maria Fukuyama, especially exemplifies the Japanese Brazilian who migrates to Japan to perform unskilled "three Ks" jobs, the Japanese acronym for "dirty, dangerous, and difficult",[27] that are eschewed by native Japanese (Tsuda 2003b, xi). The letter 'K' in the book's title refers precisely to this kind of job while "Circle" and "Cycles" indicate the circularity of Japanese Brazilians' labour migration, from Japan to Brazil and back. As Jinqi Ling observes, "the circularity of Nikkei migrations ... may be readable as an ironic manifestation of a global process driven by the changing needs of capitalist production" (2006, 19). Thus, the "Cycles" of the title also refer to "the cycles of global capitalism" (Kam 2008, 29), which have dictated Japanese Brazilians' transnational mobility. The idea of circles is echoed by the graphics of the book: the title reproduces the circled K that composes the logo of the 'Circle K' convenience stores that proliferate in Japanese streets and that marked Yamashita and her family's routine during their stay in Seto; page numbers are also circled; the acknowledgments are contained in a circular frame; the flyleaf and the back cover are decorated with interpenetrating circles or bubbles of various dimensions; and the titles of the chapters and their sections are slightly curved.[28]

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[26] The Japanese section was translated by Keijiro Suga and the Portuguese section by Gloria Delbim, both Yamashita's friends (Yamashita quoted in Palleau-Papin 2012). Their names appear in the Acknowledgement section of *Circle K Cycles*.

[27] *Kitanai* 汚い, *kiken* 危険, *kitsui* きつい.

[28] Yamashita also writes: "We are circling Ks. This is a joke about my name, Karen". Thus, the image of the "circling" K (16) also hints at Yamashita's own mobility and her travels around Asia and the Americas. Round or globular forms often recur in her *oeuvre*: as well as in *Circle*

Yamashita offers a disenchanted commentary on the Dekasegi situation: "This dekasegi thing, it's ... one mafia. The contract companies, the government, business, banks, even those agencies that are supposed to give assistance" (33). Indeed, as Zé Maria Fukuyama's story shows, Dekasegi are victims of a complex mechanism of exploitation: not only do they have accidents at work, mainly because of exhaustion due to long working hours, but also the recruitment process is essentially a form of human trafficking. Labour broker agencies – *empreiteiras* – disguised as travel agencies are responsible for recruiting workers for Japanese companies: Zé Maria is deceived with prospects of a good job and nice accommodation, he gets into debt to pay for a visa and flight tickets, and once in Japan his passport is taken from him as a guarantee that he will finish his contract to work and that he will pay his debt.[29] After he has an accident at work, Zé Maria goes to the hospital and finds out that he does not have any insurance: his company pays his bills, but he loses his job. Later Zé Maria starts working as a Dekasegi recruiter with Maria Madalena, a Dekasegi who owns an *empreiteira* and one of the "three Marias" in the title to this section of the April Chapter.[30] However, Maria

K Cycles, they appear in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (the arc and the ball that narrates the story) and in *Tropic of Orange* (the orange itself). For Yamashita, this might be a way to express her awareness of the global connections and processes that she describes in her novels.

[29] Carvalho reports that "[m]any *Dekasegi* work[ed] from 15 to 19 hours a day" (2002, 97) and points out that they were not forced to work overtime but volunteered for it (96). Yet they would not have done it if they had not needed to repay debts, send money home or accumulate wealth to be able to return to Brazil as soon as possible (see Tsuda 2003a).

[30] This title might be read as a parody of the 'Three Marys', that is, the three women, all named Mary (Mary mother of Christ, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Clopas), who witnessed Christ's crucifixion. Thus, Zé Maria is presented as a martyr, accompanied to his sentence by his "three Marias" (Maria de Conceição, Maria Madalena, Maria de Graça). However, the name 'Maria' is also present in Zé Maria's own name: because 'Maria' is also a woman's name, Zé Maria could be seen as an androgynous figure, embodying both male and female Dekasegi whose common tragic destiny is highlighted by the fact that all the characters share the same name.

Madalena soon escapes with the workers' payroll,[31] and Zé Maria is accused of being her accomplice. He turns to the Brazilian Embassy hoping that they will help him, but they do nothing for him. Zé Maria is therefore deported to Brazil where he is put in jail.

Thus, not only has Zé Maria's life in Japan turned out to be difficult and unsatisfying, but Brazil also does not offer the support that he needs when he is in trouble – despite the fact that he belonged to a 'model' or "positive minority" there (Tsuda 2003b, 65). Indeed, as "[c]itizens caught in-between worlds, the dekasegi find themselves lacking sufficient protection from either country when it comes to labor laws and individual rights" (Kam 2008, 22). Before leaving Brazil, Zé Maria had two homelands, the originary and the ancestral, but he eventually has none as both Brazil and Japan have disappointed him. As Tsuda argues, transnational migration "can lead to disorienting experiences of social unrootedness [*sic*] in which migrants feel they do not truly belong to either the sending or the receiving society. Therefore, transnational movement, rather than liberating or empowering Japanese Brazilians, leaves many of them feeling socially unanchored" (2003a, 133). Hence, Zé Maria experiences a negative version of transnationalism, one that does not place the individual within a network of affirmative ties but into a void, a liminal and in-between space that is neither here nor there. Mobility is

[31] As Carvalho explains, "The employer usually pays the wages to the broker, who deducts his fee and pays the worker" (2002, 95).

also negative because it is imposed by capitalist logic, and so it does not represent a choice but rather the only way to go when there is no choice.[32]

We find Zé Maria's colleague, Maria Madalena, in the May Chapter, where she works as a telephone operator for a phone-sex line under the pseudonym of Maria Maravilha. This section consists of black-coloured pages reporting Maria Madalena/Maravilha's answers to her clients. Maria Maravilha's phone line unveils the stories of male Dekasegi who are exhausted from working too much; who have left their families in Brazil; who have recently arrived in Japan and feel miserable; or who have been in Japan for a long time but "never g[o]t used to it" (71). In order to escape their unhappy lives, they look for some kind of *maravilha* [marvel, wonder], something that has to be chased in secret – or in the dark – and that is as fleeting as Maria Maravilha's voice. While talking to her, they sometimes cry as they reminisce about the people whom they left in Brazil. As Tsuda highlights, "those Japanese Brazilians who come to Japan without their families experience a much higher rate of mental disorder because they have less social support with which to overcome personal difficulties caused by their social alienation and solitude in Japan" (2003a, 147). The black colour of these pages therefore conveys the 'darkness' of transnational labour migration and particularly of the male Dekasegi experience. Overall, the black and white pages of the book contrast

[32] Zé Maria is just one of many protagonists of a longer and larger history of global migration characterised by its enforced nature – hence also taking the form of human trafficking – and by disillusionment and liminality. One recalls, for instance, the Indian indentured labourers in the Caribbean between 1838 and 1917; the Issei 'picture brides' who, in the early twentieth century, migrated to North America; Filipino Americans who migrated to the United States before Philippine independence in 1946 as U.S. nationals but not U.S. citizens.

with its colourful cover: thus, the cover presents "a façade of glamour and hope that is fundamentally at odds with the subjugation and exclusion of dekasegi in Japanese society" (Ling 2012, 71), as portrayed in the text. This contrast between the gleeful cover and the more sombre content of the book is an expression of Yamashita's approach to recounting tragic events, which she often does through humor, "the easiest path" for her to express a "political point of view or purpose" (Yamashita quoted in Brada-Williams 2010, 2).

Yamashita offers another example of exploitation through Miss Hamamatsu's story. Miss Hamamatsu[33] is an eighteen-year-old Brazilian Nikkei, arrived in Japan at the age of fifteen. Her job consists of making copies of Brazilian TV shows (*telenovelas*) for video rental distribution among the Dekasegi. Her beauty earned her the title of Miss Hamamatsu '96, but she now dreams of winning the Miss Nikkei contest. The beauty contests represent an escape from her dissatisfying life: although she does not work on an assembly line, her job is equally repetitive, an endless "[s]top. Eject. Stop. Eject. Stop. Eject. Stop. Eject. Stop. Eject. Stop. Eject. . . ." (21; ellipsis in original). Her supposed friend Jorginho takes advantage of her naivety and precariousness: he deceives her with prospects of success – such as winning the Miss Nikkei contest – but while he pretends to care about her career, he actually wants to exploit her beauty and body to create profitable products meant for Japanese and single Dekasegi men, such as photographs and videos where she appears half-naked.

[33] In 1998, Hamamatsu was one of the Japanese cities with the largest concentration of Nikkei (Carvalho 2002, 91).

If Miss Hamamatsu is a vulnerable person because of her young age and precarious position, children are even more so. Although they did not choose to migrate, they nevertheless have to deal with the repercussions of their parents' choices. Therefore, for children as well transnational mobility can be a coerced and therefore negative experience. Yamashita tells of Iara and José, both the children of Dekasegi. Because Iara was only two years old when she arrived in Japan, she can now speak Japanese but not her mother's native language, Portuguese. As the narrator explains, most children "educated in Japanese schools since early childhood ... might understand some Portuguese but only [spoke] in Japanese" (90). This has some serious consequences on parent-child relations as parents and children struggle to communicate with each other. As Iara starts attending Portuguese language classes, her mother realises that her daughter asks her more questions: "speaking Portuguese ha[s] changed the relationship between [them]" (88). Conversely, children who have recently arrived in Japan easily become victims of bullying (*ijime*) at school because they cannot speak Japanese. José, for instance, is nine years old, his parents and he have recently migrated to Japan, and he is bullied because of his origin and his inability to speak Japanese – very much like Nao in *A Tale for the Time Being*. José is "angry" (93), "unhappy and confused" (87), and he says that he hates Japan and that he wants to go home in a rejection of transnational ties.

Mário, another character whose life has been marked by exploitation and sorrow, works in a factory "day and night, seven days a week. He [thinks] about nothing but money" (121). Some of this money he sends regularly to his

wife and son, whom he left in Brazil although he now has a new life, including a new partner. One of his friends defends him, saying that "[i]t's been lonely for him" (96); lately, he has been having nightmares and wonders if they are "a sign of guilt" about leaving his wife and son in Brazil (121). His girlfriend, Fátima, who also works in a factory, has delusions of persecution: "I have had this sensation that someone is following me, watching me. When I turn around, there is no one there" (127). These characters exhibit "the stress involved in adjusting to a new environment and to long working hours[, which] has caused numerous mental and physical problems. Cases of patients [Brazilian Nikkei migrants] admitted to hospital with mental disorders, particularly paranoid tendencies, have been reported" (Carvalho 2002, 91). Tsuda further argues that, "[b]ecause migrants are detached from both their home society as well as host society, such an anomic state of social disruption can ... have negative psychological effects, making them more prone to personal malaise and psychological disorder" (2003a, 135). Thus, like for Mulberry, Sandhya and Nao – the protagonists of other novels analysed in this study – so for Fátima and Mário the experience of migration has caused great distress and mental instability.

One night, Mário and Fátima are murdered in Mário's flat, their mutilated corpses found near a tunnel the next day. This gruesome episode reflects the violence that characterised Japan during Yamashita's stay (Yamashita quoted in Palleau-Papin 2012). The representation of violence in *Circle K Cycles* further encourages the reader to analyse the transnational and immigrant experiences through a perspective that unveils their negative, even

disturbing, aspects. Thus, Yamashita "underscores a major lacuna in transnational discourse. That is, the lack of serious engagement with the lived circumstantialities of the underside of globalization.... Yamashita overturns the received doxa on transnationality, which typically situates subject formation in areas beyond coercive systems of power or representation" (Ling 2006, 19-20). Indeed, the characters of *Circle K Cycles* demonstrate through their stories that "global interdependence is not innocent" (Kam 2008, 29): they expose the negative aspects of mobility and transnationalism, which are often coerced processes generating alienation and sorrow.

In the other sections of *Circle K Cycles*, Yamashita's personal accounts of her experience in Japan aim to highlight Brazilian Nikkei's and Japanese people's different cultural and behavioural norms. Indeed, Japanese Brazilians, having been born and grown up in Brazil, are culturally more Brazilian than Japanese. Such differences contribute to separating Brazilian Nikkei from mainstream Japanese society and therefore to their social marginalisation, especially because of Japan's obsession with ethno-racial homogeneity and 'purity'. Yamashita explores, for instance, the differences between Japanese and Brazilian approaches to food, which can be read as representative of divergent value systems. Although rice is a basic ingredient that is common to both cultures, the recipes for cooking it reveal very dissimilar attitudes not only to food but also to the concept of purity. While the Japanese recipe only requires two basic ingredients – rice and water – the Brazilian recipe mixes various ingredients such as garlic, onion, salt and oil. Kam maintains that, "[s]ymbolically, this zest for multiple flavors suggests a Brazilian appreciation

or acceptance of a mixed society" (2008, 21). Conversely, "[i]n Japan, rice must be ... polished white. One eats the purity of it. You can rarely find any other sort of rice, or grain for that matter" (*Circle K Cycles* 82). Thus, Japanese people's approach to food reveals their obsession with ethnic homogeneity and purity.

Moreover, while Japanese people usually discard objects that they do not consider useful anymore, Brazilians gladly take used, second-hand objects that the Japanese would regard as trash. Yamashita suggestively compares Japanese people's attitude toward trash to their treatment of Brazilian Nikkei, whom they see as "expendable citizens and disposable labor" (Kam 2008, 19). Walking around a district where many Dekasegi live, Yamashita observes:

> for a late Saturday afternoon, it's oddly quiet by Brazilian standards. People working zangyo. Overtime. People sleeping off the late shift. Their lives in Brazil may have been very different; they may have never worked a factory job before. Now they circle the three Ks.... A bank clerk presses metal into car bumpers.... A grandmother solders tiny wires to electronic plates.... And if the bank clerk loses his fingers or the grandmother suffers a heart attack, there is another clerk with fingers, another grandmother with a heart. (32)

Yamashita highlights the contrast between Dekasegi lives before and after leaving Brazil as well as the sacrifices they have made. Yet, once they have lost their 'functionality', Japanese society simply discards them like garbage.

Yamashita further exposes the differences between Japanese and Brazilian behavioural norms by inserting the English translation of a rule board originally written in both Japanese and Portuguese that she found at a condominium complex in Toyota City. Evidently, these rules are mainly intended for Brazilian residents and aim to 'correct' what Japanese residents consider to be disruptive behaviours, especially regarding waste disposal, noise and social gatherings. As Yamashita reports, "The Brazilians have had difficulty following all these rules" (110). Nevertheless, Brazilian people are willing to integrate into Japanese society: walking around the condominiums, Yamashita notes the "oppressive quiet" that characterises the place, "the sound of people trying very hard to be quiet" in order to be accepted (110).

However, the Japanese notion of Japaneseness prevented Brazilian Nikkei from becoming part of mainstream Japanese society. Tsuda explains that Japaneseness "is defined not only by racial descent but also by complete linguistic and cultural proficiency" (2009b, 242). As Carvalho states, "The *Nikkeijin* as a category dismantle this concept, sharing the 'blood', but not the commonalities of Japanese culture and mother-tongue" (2002, 123). Many Brazilian Nikkei had become culturally Brazilian and could not speak Japanese fluently, which constitutes a significant barrier to social integration in Japan (see Carvalho 2002; Tsuda 2003b; White 2003). Therefore, Brazilian Nikkei came to be considered "second-rate Japanese", "inadequate Japanese" or "*han Japa* (half-Japanese)" (Carvalho 2002, 121; Tsuda 2003b, 118). Essentially, "[t]hey [were] seen as having lost their 'Japaneseness'" (Carvalho 2002, 121), and so their cultural purity, something for which they were stigmatised and

socially marginalised (Tsuda 2003b).[34] Thus, Japanese Brazilians became liminal beings at the margins of not only Japanese society but also Brazilian society: they found themselves in an in-between space, "a strange limbo. When in Brazil, they were always called japônes; now in Japan, the Japanese treated them as foreigners ... [W]ho were they?" (*Circle K Cycles* 139). Once again, transnational migration proves to be a negative form of mobility that leaves migrants without a cultural identity or homeland.

Yet Japanese Brazilians developed strong feelings of *saudade* – nostalgia, homesickness – toward Brazil (Tsuda 2000, 2003a). Indeed, Brazil was infused with positive meaning when contrasted with the negative social experiences that Brazilian Nikkei had in Japan (Tsuda 2009b, 245). Thus, Dekasegi in Japan rejected transnational processes that would have linked them to Japan; instead, they reinforced their diasporic attachment to Brazil, which they expressed in the form of *saudade*. In *Circle K Cycles*, Yamashita explains that *saudade* "is a word that cannot be translated, only approximated ... In English it would seem to mean a longing for home.... [W]hen Brazilians speak of it, they often use the expression *matar a saudade*, which means literally, *to kill saudade*" (135). Brazilians kill *saudade* by visiting home, but they have also brought Brazil to Japan, by opening businesses that enable them to consume Brazilian food, clothing or media products, such as newspapers, music or TV programmes.

[34] Other reasons for their social marginalisation include their status as Nikkei since Japanese people commonly see Nikkei as traitors and consider emigration to be shameful; their status as Dekasegi, a term that originally indicated people of low social class from the rural areas who had to migrate to the cities to avoid poverty; their low socio-economic status as unskilled factory workers in Japan; and their South American origin as Brazil is widely associated in Japan with negative stereotypes of poverty, crime and underdevelopment (see Carvalho 2002; Tsuda 2003b).

Yamashita also describes the excitement among Dekasegi about football games involving the Brazilian team. As she reveals, what counts is not who wins but the event itself, a form of joyful gathering during which Japanese Brazilians show their pride for Brazil and feel closer to it: "[f]or one day, they are *in* Brazil" (132; emphasis in original). A similar occasion is represented by samba parades: as Tsuda explains, Japanese Brazilians rarely participated in samba parades in Brazil, but in Japan they are a way to kill *saudade* and to express their inherent "Brazilianness" (2000, 64-65).

However, Yamashita criticises ideas of cultural homogeneity and purity, and through both form and content she conveys the hybridity that pervades both Brazilian and Japanese cultures despite their supposed distinctiveness and separateness. As Chuh affirms, Yamashita "illuminates the compresence – the interrelated simultaneity – rather than discreteness of places, objects, and histories ordinarily thought distinct" (2016, 542). Thus, like Ozeki in *A Tale for the Time Being*, Yamashita also emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependence of people and places. For instance, the samba that Japanese Brazilians perform in Japan during festivals to express their Brazilianness is actually different from the traditional Brazilian samba. Indeed, Japanese Brazilians have appropriated and reinterpreted the traditional samba, which therefore turns into a new, hybrid cultural product (Tsuda 2000, 64). The very name of the festival during which this dance is performed hints at this process of hybridisation: "samba matsuri" (137) combines a Portuguese word and the Japanese word for celebration or festival. Yamashita also reveals that the origin of the Brazilian *pastel* is Chinese: then, "it was the Japanese immigrants who

became attached to its production.... Now pastel is back in Asia, but it is ... Brazilian" (85).

Yamashita asserts with regard to the Japanese language that it is "a kind of pidgin language" (53). Indeed, it comprises three character systems: *kanji*, which originates from the Chinese language; *hiragana*, the indigenous phonetic alphabet; and *katakana*, the alphabet that today is mainly used to reproduce foreign words and onomatopoeia. Through *katakana*, the Japanese language has incorporated many English words, but these have been altered: "[p]asokon for example. It means personal computer. Or konbini; that means convenience store" (54). Yamashita offers many other examples, and in so doing she deconstructs ideas that Japanese society and culture are purely Japanese. Yamashita concludes, "Nothing is sacred. Your tradition is someone else's originality" (86), a concept that Yamashita herself has put into practice by incorporating Latin American traditions and peoples into her writing, thus creating a unique work. Yet the more evident disruption of a presumed 'pure Japaneseness' is the Brazilian Nikkei themselves. At the same time, however, Yamashita suggests that the Dekasegi phenomenon has become so representative of Japan that Dekasegi should also be regarded as "purely Japanese" (14). Thus, Yamashita asks that Dekasegi be considered an integral part of Japanese society and not second-class or half-citizens, also considering that they provide its infrastructure and contribute in essential ways to its economy.

Yamashita's representation of Japan and of the Brazilian community as heterogeneous and hybrid is reflected by her mixing of English, Japanese and

Portuguese in the book. There are entire sections written in Portuguese and Japanese – such as the section about Maria Madalena's phone business, which appears first in Portuguese and then in English. The subtitles of the Maria Madalena section are in a pidgin language that mixes Portuguese and Japanese: for instance, "*fazer kampai*" means "to make a toast" (71) and "*sair do teiji*" "to leave the routine" (73). Furthermore, the chapter titles are all in English, but they are supplemented with a Japanese character: for example, the title "June: Circle K Recipes" is followed by the Japanese character for rice (米). Many Japanese writings are also scattered across the text, and many of the advertisements that are reproduced are bilingual: Japanese and Portuguese.[35]

Circle K Cycles conveys a sense of hybridity on an even more visual level. The cover is a colourful collage of images about Japan that challenges views of this country as monochromatic. Moreover, there is a picture of a Japanese girl whose curly hair disrupts her identification as 'pure' Japanese. Besides, her skin is not 'yellow', 'white' or 'black' but multicoloured. Yamashita also employs different types of font and formatting, and the written text is accompanied, through the literary technique of montage, by reproductions of a range of materials that variously refer to Japan and to the Brazilian community in Japan. These materials include photographs, drawings, maps, charts, miniature

[35] The use of foreign or vernacular words is part of the technique of defamiliarisation, which was introduced in 1917 by the Russian formalist theorist Viktor Shklovsky. This technique aims to inhibit the process of automatic perception: the presence of foreign words, for instance, disrupts the homogeneity and familiarity of the text, thus catching the reader's attention and making the text actually visible to their eyes and therefore significant to their minds. Yamashita uses this technique to turn a familiar terrain into an unfamiliar and foreign one, thus giving "the [Anglophone] reader the sensation of being in a place where you can't understand signs", which is what Brazilian immigrants experience in Japan where "[t]hey're entirely lost" (quoted in Palleau-Papin 2012).

crossword puzzles to complete, newspaper clips, magazine and book covers, postcards, posters, recipes, origami instructions, signs, lyrics and advertisements. The heterogeneity of these materials, of fonts and formatting reflects Yamashita's rejection of notions of cultural homogeneity and purity.

The use of these materials also highlights the interplay between fact and fiction in the text. In particular, they make the text look like a personal diary, and Yamashita herself appears in some of the photographs. The very layout of the book recalls a photo album as, unlike most books, its orientation is horizontal. Overall, *Circle K Cycles* retains many features of a travel diary, including the chapters named after months. Indeed, *Circle K Cycles* contains Yamashita's personal accounts of her stay in Seto, which first appeared as a travelogue on the website *Cafe Creole*. However, despite being inspired by real events, many of the Dekasegi stories in *Circle K Cycles* are fictional. Thus, *Circle K Cycles* can be defined as creative non-fiction or as "fictional ethnography" (Yamashita et al. 2008, 204; Yamashita quoted in Palleau-Papin 2012). Yamashita's choice to discuss the Dekasegi phenomenon through fiction is, as I explained previously, linked to her career first as an anthropologist and then as a fiction writer when she realised that through fiction she could convey more than through an academic study.

Given Yamashita's presence in the text, *Circle K Cycles* combines "fictional ethnography" and "autoethnography", a self-reflexive research methodology and form of writing that Yamashita learned from Professor Riesman, who was one of the first to introduce this method (Imafuku [2008] 2012, 84). Autoethnographers "use personal experience to illustrate facets of

cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders" (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011, 276). In its earlier meaning, autoethnography coincided with "insider ethnography" (see Hayano 1979), and the importance of articulating an "insider knowledge" is still emphasised (Adams, Ellis and Jones 2017, 3). Yamashita, however, is both an insider and an outsider to the Japanese Brazilian community since, although her children are Japanese Brazilian, she is Japanese American. Yet being a partial outsider is an advantage for Yamashita since the ethnographer who studies a group with which they are familiar should go through a process of "anthropological estrangement" – and therefore become a "stranger" – in order to gain an objective and probing attitude toward such a group (see Maso 2001).

Chuh argues that the "generic hybridity" of *Circle K Cycles* "structurally enables [Yamashita] to place variegated worldviews side by side. In this way, Yamashita specifically triangulates the US, Brazil, and Japan, making each significant, though differently so" (2006, 631). Hence, her mixing of fact and fiction also contributes to highlighting multiplicity and difference over homogeneity. Indeed, "the form is an experiment, but it's also about the best way to tell the story. The form speaks to the material" (Yamashita quoted in Chuh 2010). The experimental nature of *Circle K Cycles* suggests that the Japanese Brazilian community is not only heterogeneous and hybrid but also constantly changing.

In the 1990s, a new economic downturn in Japan left many Japanese Brazilians without jobs, but since the situation in Brazil was even worse, many of them abandoned their hope of eventually returning to Brazil and decided to

stay in Japan (Carvalho 2002, 95-96). Some of them, however, might decide to go to "Canada, Australia, America" or just "home, wherever that is. Japan might not be the final resting place" (147). Yamashita concludes *Circle K Cycles* with these words: "Nikkei on the move. I might meet you on a train in Bangladesh, a marketplace in Algiers, a sauna in Stockholm, atop a mesa in Hopi country, online at *CaféCreole* [*sic*]" (147). Therefore, "Nikkei has transformed from a designation of ethnicity to an unpredictable route through identity and difference.... [A] marker of transformation rather than stable identity" (Chuh 2006, 634). Nikkei thus become emblematic of the contemporary migrant whose transnational mobility is dictated by capitalist logic but also by ethnic ties, hope and *saudade*, and Yamashita suggests that there might not be an end to their peregrinations or to the hybridisation of their identities.

CONCLUSION

Ozeki's and Yamashita's life and work demonstrate how Asian Americans' transnational links can become hemispheric by reaching North to Canada or South to Latin America. A hemispheric paradigm contributes to the expansion and revision of the transnational and transpacific perspectives in Asian American studies, by decentering the United States and drawing attention to the wider context of the Americas. We can therefore refer to hemispheric Asian American studies, a field that needs to be explored and developed further. While both Ozeki and Yamashita regard transnational migration and hybridity as positive aspects of their lives that have resulted in the creation of networks that span the Americas and Japan, in their works, they present mobility as a negative experience and underscore the limits to the creation of transnational ties. Nao and the Dekasegi are ethnic returnees who have not chosen to leave the United States and Brazil, respectively, to migrate to Japan but were compelled to do so by external circumstances. Once in Japan, they face difficult living conditions and suffer social marginalisation, which leads them to reject transnational links to their ancestral/host land and cling to their American (U.S. and Brazilian) identities. Being physically distant from their home and socially and emotionally distant from the mainstream Japanese community, Nao and the Dekasegi, like Mulberry and Sandhya, find themselves in an

alienating liminal space that causes them suffering and mental disorders. Yet Ozeki suggests that transnationalism can still be realised and with positive outcomes. In her diary, Nao reveals a tendency to connect with other countries as proven by her interest in Zen Buddhism and French language and culture. Moreover, Ozeki shows, through various examples, how we are *all* interconnected through time and space. Yamashita identifies, within both the Japanese and the Japanese Brazilian communities, hybrid cultural forms that disrupt notions of cultural purity and separateness and indicate how processes of creolisation form the very basis of many cultural traditions. Therefore, both works highlight the interconnection and interdependence of people, nations and cultures, indicating how these are inherent features of humanity and of our planet.

PART THREE

TO EUROPE

INTRODUCTION

Having explored Asian American writers' links to North and South America, I now examine Asian America's ties to Europe through a reading of the novel *The Book of Salt* (2003) by the Vietnamese American writer Monique Truong (1968-) and the collection of essays *In altre parole* (2015) by the Indian American writer Jhumpa Lahiri (1967-). Truong, who narrates the story of a Vietnamese labourer named Bình living in 1930s Paris, and Lahiri, whose collection of essays is written in Italian, contribute considerably to the expansion and reconfiguration of the transnational perspective in Asian American studies. The concept of transnationalism actually fails to describe the network that Truong and Lahiri have traced by developing connections to France and Italy, hence the need to turn to more inclusive categories such as that of world literature, which goes beyond the notion of bilateral ties between two nations (see Gillman and Gruesz 2011). Yet this category needs to be revised, if not criticised, for some of its assumptions, such as its dependence upon the English language for its circulation (see Arac 2002; Spivak 2003; Tsu 2012). Lahiri's Italophone work is, in this sense, particularly significant as it contributes to a translingual understanding of American, Asian American and world literature.

If both *The Book of Salt* and *In altre parole* are works of world literature, then they portray very different kinds of mobility. My analysis of *The Book of*

Salt focuses on the negative nature and consequences of Bình's forced migration from Saigon to Paris. As a queer colonial labourer, Bình has to endure, in both Vietnam and France, various forms of violence and marginalisation. Hence, like Mulberry and Sandhya, he is unable to forge links to either Vietnam or France and experiences a negative version of transnationalism, which leads him to self-harm. Lahiri's autobiographical essays, in contrast, reveal how she chose and was able to move from the United States to Italy in order to learn the language, thanks to her privileged position as a successful writer. While Bình is rendered mute and so invisible by his lack of proficiency in French, Lahiri has overcome, thanks to the Italian language, her sense of failure toward literary expectations within the Anglophone context and found new artistic inspiration. Thus, Bình embodies a model of negative mobility as he is forced to leave his home and does not benefit from his migration whereas Lahiri, a privileged and voluntary traveller, is an example of positive mobility that enriches and liberates the individual.

5 VIETNAMESE/AMERICANS IN PARIS:

MONIQUE TRUONG'S *THE BOOK OF SALT*

The protagonist of *The Book of Salt* (2003), a novel by the Vietnamese American writer Monique Truong, is a queer Vietnamese cook named Bình who works for the Governor-General in Saigon and then for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in Paris in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The character of Bình is based on Toklas's descriptions, in *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* (1954), of the Vietnamese cooks who worked for Stein and her in Paris. Hence, the *Cookbook* is the main intertext for the novel, which is, to a certain extent, a postcolonial rewriting of Toklas's book. Thus, a connection is established in the novel between the United States, France and Vietnam, and particularly between U.S. and French imperialism in Vietnam and the experience of refugees of the Vietnam War in the United States – including the author herself – and that of Vietnamese colonial subjects living in the French metropole. Various scholars (see Eng 2008; Troeung 2010; Stefani 2015; Magosaki 2016) have emphasised Truong's important contribution to the expansion of Asian American studies beyond its U.S.-bound transpacific perspective, but only Timothy K. August (2018) has

read *The Book of Salt* as a work of world literature.[1] I therefore expand upon August's argument by highlighting how, as an example of world literature, the novel is instrumental in reconfiguring the transnational discourse in Asian American studies.

The Book of Salt has received considerable attention from scholars, most of whom have read Bình's story in optimistic terms, accepting the novel's simplistic ending (see, for example, Durham 2005; Eng 2008; Edwards 2012; Fargione 2013; Stefani 2015; August 2018). I instead underscore the negative nature and outcomes of Bình's forced mobility, countering scholars' view of a positive liminality with the idea of a negative transnationalism. Indeed, as a queer colonial labourer, Bình has to endure, both in Vietnam and in France, various forms of violence and marginalisation. As a result, he is unable to forge links to either country, which leads him to self-harm. Moreover, I emphasise how, although the novel ends on a hopeful note, Truong does not provide Bình with any practical or psychological means to face his sense of marginalisation in Paris. I also probe the limits of Truong's 'translation' of Bình's story, which, however, do not completely undermine her endeavour to make visible a marginal character and give him voice. Finally, I discuss in detail the formal nature of the novel, which has been mostly overlooked by scholars. In particular, *The Book of Salt* is an example of postmodern fiction as indicated by

[1] See, however, Wai Chee Dimock's project "American Literature in the World" at Yale University, which includes *The Book of Salt*. The project aims to broaden the scope of American literature, "opening it to more complex geographies, and to a variety of genres and media", and is articulated through an undergraduate seminar, a web-and-print anthology and an annual graduate conference (*American Literature in the World* 2019).

its genre – namely, "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon 1988) – and literary techniques, including intertextuality and metafictionality.

"A SOUTHERN GIRL, TWICE OVER"

Truong was born in 1968 in Ho Chi Minh City – formerly Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam – and migrated to the United States with her mother in 1975 as a refugee of the Vietnam War. Her father, who was working as a high-level executive for an international oil company, joined them shortly after, following the fall of Saigon on April 30 of the same year. The family initially lived in a relocation camp, Camp Pendleton in California, before moving to North Carolina, then Ohio and finally Texas, where they settled. Because of her South Vietnamese origins and her upbringing in the Southern United States, Truong defines herself a "Southern girl, twice over" (quoted in Jolly 2010). With this comment Truong not only highlights her Southern origins but also her sense of belonging to two countries and therefore her transnationality vis-à-vis Vietnam and the United States – although it has to be noted that the Souths she refers to are very different.

Truong did her undergraduate studies at Yale University, obtaining a BA in English Literature in 1990. After graduating, she worked as a paralegal and went on to obtain a further degree in 1995 at Columbia University where she specialised in intellectual property law. She then worked as a litigator at a large firm in New York, but she felt "miserable" (Truong quoted in Ng 2012).

Although Truong was never enthusiastic about pursuing a legal career, she did so nonetheless because she did not see how she could earn a living from writing (Truong quoted in "Interview with Monique Truong" 2003). The turning point was a poetry reading in New York by the Vietnamese American poet Barbara Tran: Truong found it so inspiring that she resolved to give up her legal work to become a writer (Shea 2010, 50). After that, she collaborated with Tran and Luu Truong Khoi on the anthology *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose*, published in 1998 by the Asian American Writers' Workshop. Her co-editors suggested that she apply for a Van Lier fellowship, which she obtained.[2] Thanks to this fellowship, Truong was able to take a two-month sabbatical to write a short story that later became one of the chapters in her debut novel *The Book of Salt* (2003).

The Book of Salt was a national bestseller and the recipient of many prizes, including the 2004 New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award, the 2004 Bard Fiction Prize for Young Writers, the 2004 PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction, the 2004 PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles National Literary Award for excellence in multicultural literature,[3] the 2004 Asian American Literary Award and the 2005 Association for Asian American Studies Poetry/Prose Award. Moreover, in 2003, *The Book of Salt* was honoured as a *New York Times* Notable Fiction Book and a *Chicago*

[2] Van Lier fellowships are meant for "low-income and minority artists at two critical points: pre-college, for training to help prepare for admission to a college or conservatory; and post-college, to develop a body of work and make the transition from student to professional artist" ("Edward and Sally Van Lier" 2018).

[3] PEN America is an organisation that aims to protect free expression in the United States and worldwide (*PEN America* 2020).

Tribune Favorite Fiction Book, among other recognitions. The novel was also translated into various languages, including Chinese, Dutch, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Portuguese, Slovenian, Spanish and Turkish.

Truong's second novel, *Bitter in the Mouth* (2010), contains more explicit autobiographical details and follows in the footsteps of *Monkey Bridge* (1997) by Lan Cao, which is the first Vietnamese American novel to be set in the Southern United States – specifically, in Virginia.[4] Truong tells the story of the biracial Vietnamese American Linda Hammerick, her experience of growing up in the small town of Boiling Springs, North Carolina, in the 1970s and 1980s and her return to her childhood home as a 30-year-old woman. The novel recounts how Linda deals with growing up, marginalisation, sexual abuse, family relations, friendship, love, cancer and synesthesia – namely, her ability to 'taste' words. *Bitter in the Mouth* received the 2011 American Academy of Arts and Letters' Rosenthal Family Foundation Award and was named the 2010-2011 adult fiction Honor Book by the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association.

Truong also edited *Vom Lasterleben am Kai* (2017), a collection of reportage by the Greek-Irish (naturalised Japanese) writer and journalist Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), best known for his books about Meiji-era Japan

[4] Yet a short story by Truong titled "Kelly" and dealing with a Vietnamese American girl's experience in North Carolina was published in 1991 on *Amerasia Journal*. Literary works by non-Vietnamese authors set in the Southern United States and featuring Vietnamese characters include Robert Olen Butler's *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992), Mary Gardner's *Boat People* (1995) and Wayne Karlin's *Prisoners* (1998) (see Gray and Robinson 2004; Yousaf and Monteith 2004; Gray 2007, 2011).

and, in the United States, for his writings about New Orleans. Hearn is also the subject of Truong's latest novel, *The Sweetest Fruits* (2019), in which three women – Hearn's Greek mother, his African American first wife and his Japanese second wife – narrate their life with Hearn. Truong's essays about "the things [she] love[s]: food, memory, and differences" (quoted in Shea 2010, 49) have appeared in *O* Magazine, *Marie Claire*, *Saveur*, *Food & Wine*, *Gourmet*, the *New York Times* and its *T Magazine* for which she wrote "Ravenous" – a monthly online food column – amongst other publications. Her wide-ranging literary production also includes the lyrics for a choral work, a song cycle and a libretto for an opera, which Truong has written in collaboration with the composer and performer Joan La Barbara.

Truong has received various fellowships, such as the 2007-2008 Princeton University Hodder Fellowship, the 2010 Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts (U.S. and Canada) and the 2015 U.S.-Japan Creative Artists Fellowship. She was a Visiting Writer at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies in 2012 as well as the Sidney Harman Writer-in-Residence at Baruch College in 2016. She has also participated in various writers' residency programmes such as at Hedgebrook (Washington) – for which she serves on the Creative Advisory Council – Fundación Valparaíso (Almería, Spain) and Santa Maddalena Foundation (Reggello, Italy). Thus, although Truong is based in Brooklyn, her artistic activity has developed on a transnational scale. Indeed, *The Book of Salt* "was written on two islands, in two countries, three states, and five cities" (Truong 2003a, vi). Such a transnationality also permeates the content of her novels, which span Asia, America and Europe.

While the Vietnamese American author Viet Thanh Nguyen has repeatedly referred to himself as a refugee *tout court* (2017, quoted in Khan and Paneda 2018 and Wiener 2018), the biographical section of Truong's personal website reports that she is "a *former* refugee" (*Monique Truong* 2020; emphasis added). This might be a way to acknowledge that her life has become privileged in comparison; yet it also seems that Truong wants to relegate this part of her identity to the past, as if it were too painful to retain it in the present. Indeed, although Vietnam has left a permanent mark on her, which Truong describes as an "S-curve stretch of land that [she] bear[s] on [her] body like a tattoo" (2003b), she initially preferred to think of such a mark as a hidden one, "[her] secret scar to keep" (2003b). The metaphor of the tattoo, also employed by Meena Alexander, who indicates in her works how border crossings tattoo us (1997, 2003), and that of the scar, also used by Nguyen, who has declared: "I still remain scarred by my experience" (2017), both indicate the indelible nature of the mark that Truong bears. The metaphor of the scar, however, also conveys connotations of violence, hence Truong's desire to keep the unwanted sign of inflicted violence hidden or buried in the past.

Having declared that the Vietnam War was "a war that the land of [her] birth waged against itself" and having accused "[her] own flesh and blood" of these crimes, Truong refused to claim her Vietnamese origins for a long time (Truong 2003b), and she did not return to Vietnam until 2007. Yet here Truong fails to recognise the role that the United States had in promoting the division

of Vietnam and in fueling the Vietnam War (see Stur 2017; Nguyen quoted in Khan and Paneda 2018). At the same time, the marginalisation that she experienced as a Vietnamese American girl growing up in North Carolina (quoted in Jolly 2010, Silverblatt 2010 and Ng 2012) and the U.S. involvement in the Gulf Wars made it difficult for her to accept the United States as her home (Truong 2003b). As she rejected transnational ties to both her country of origin and her country of settlement, she felt "lost somewhere in between Vietnam and the U.S." (2003b), that is, in that in-between space that leaves the immigrant and postcolonial subject with a sense of homelessness.

Having eventually decided to return to those places that left a "scar" on her – Vietnam and Boiling Springs in North Carolina – Truong was able "to forgive and to forget" (2003b) and to accept her hybrid identity as a Vietnamese American, hence becoming transnational. Her journey to Vietnam in 2007 helped her both to reconnect to her originary homeland and to become aware of her Americanness. Indeed, if she delayed her journey back to Vietnam also to preserve the fantasy that once there she would feel "normal" again – that is, not different from the people surrounding her – she realised that, despite her appearance, she did not look Vietnamese anymore because of her clothes and manners (Truong quoted in Shea 2010, 54). Returning to Boiling Springs, she was able to see the place from a different perspective, that of "an adult, a happy person", capable of replacing her "anger" with "acceptance" (Truong quoted in Shea 2010, 54). Writing also served as a "therapy" (Truong quoted in Jolly 2010) as her novels address the issues, places and things that have shaped her

life: Vietnam, Boiling Springs, Paris, exile, racism, marginalisation, food and literature.[5]

Vietnamese American literature emerged with the intense flows of migration that, between 1975 and 1985, saw approximately 500,000 Vietnamese people seek asylum in the United States just before and after the end of the Vietnam War. The first Vietnamese American writers recounted, often with the collaboration of a white co-author, their experience of war and exile (see Truong 1997).[6] The wider American public has expected Vietnamese American writers to deal exclusively with these themes as a consequence of the fact that "[i]n the American imagination 'Viet Nam' is synonymous with the Vietnam War" (Nguyen 2014, 365). Hence, "the Vietnam War renders Vietnamese Americans visible so long as they speak of the war, and invisible when they speak of other matters" (Nguyen 2014, 365-66; see also Pelaud 2011, 59). In this respect, Truong's debut novel represents an exception: in 2013, Y-Dang Troeung asserted that *The Book of Salt* was "the most nationally and internationally acclaimed novel written by a Vietnamese American author to date" and that it "[stood] out as one text that markedly depart[ed] from the conventions of previous Vietnamese [American] literary works" (117; see also Pelaud 2011). Indeed, *The Book of Salt* is one of the first Vietnamese American works not to deal with the Vietnam War or the Vietnamese refugee experience – but rather with the French colonisation of Vietnam (1887-1954), which

[5] Truong visited Paris as a sixteen-year-old and "fell in love" with the city (Truong 2003c).

[6] An example of such a collaboration is *Shallow Graves: Two Women in Vietnam* (1986) by Wendy Wilder Larsen and Tran Thi Nga. Other (non-collaborative) titles include *Monkey Bridge* (1997) by Lan Cao and *Catfish and Mandala: A Two-Wheeled Voyage Through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam* (1999) by Andrew X. Pham.

predates but also paves the way for the Vietnam War – and yet it managed to become a best-selling and award-winning book.

The presence of Stein and Toklas in the book might have attracted readers familiar with the famous writer/couple. However, food has a wider appeal to a more general audience, and so it is likely to have played a more prominent role in the great success of this novel. The centrality of food in the book is suggested visually by its cover, which, in its various editions, often explicitly displays food or evokes it. The UK edition's cover, for instance, contains the photograph of a cook in his uniform whose face is hidden – thus suggesting his marginalised status – and who is holding a tray with the blue and white china bowl of yellow quinces mentioned in the novel. The Turkish edition's cover shows the "meal *en famille*" eaten at Stein and Toklas's flat at 27 Rue de Fleurus: "a platter of fried eggs and a loaf of bread" (102). Other covers conjure the title with images of salt, such as in the French and Italian editions. Less overt references to food include images of set tables (as in the Dutch and Italian editions), of tea- or coffee-cups (as in the U.S., Israeli and Brazilian editions), or other kinds of kitchenware (as in the Japanese edition). The cover of the Slovenian edition is the one that best conveys the link between pain and food in Bình's life as it hints at his habit of self-harm by portraying the stylised image of a man holding a knife in one hand and gesturing toward a lime with the other hand.[7]

[7] From the age of nine, Bình has had the habit of injuring his hands with a knife. When it first happens, he is in the kitchen with his mother, who then heals his wounds with lime juice.

As Anita Mannur indicates, "Food writing has always enjoyed a certain level of popularity, but in the early twenty-first century, culinary narratives and their concomitant imaginings of otherness have become far more prevalent within the literary marketplace" (2009, 84). Through its luscious descriptions of food, as well as through its Vietnamese and Parisian settings, *The Book of Salt* satisfies readers' appetite for what they perceive as exotic otherness. U.S. reviews of the book confirm this: "Truong's narrator ... tells his story with a lush and exoticizing expansiveness" (Benfey 2003); "there is perhaps no place so romantic as colonial Indochina or antebellum Paris" (Champeon 2003); "Truong imbues food with ... danger and darkness" and "weaves a sumptuous tale of gastronomy, language, cravings, and cruelty around ... [a] mysterious Vietnamese cook" (Press 2003). Clearly, reviewers insist on the exotic quality of the novel and adopt an Orientalising perspective, employing stereotypical formulations about Asia to describe the book and its protagonist as inscrutable and sinister (see Pelaud 2011, 126-27).[8]

Wenying Xu observes that "[w]hen it's not representing Asian food as disgusting, mainstream culture exoticizes and romanticizes Asian food" (2008, 8). Yet the book's title, which is reminiscent of biblical language and presents a non-stereotypical Asian ingredient (given its long-established use in certain Western cuisines as well), proposes a more nuanced understanding of Asian food. Moreover, the novel exhibits a cosmopolitan taste for not only Vietnamese delicacies, such as *phở* (24), but also French ones, including *omelette à la*

[8] The appeal of the exotic might explain why *Bitter in the Mouth*, which is set in North Carolina and portrays mainstream American food, has been less successful than *The Book of Salt*, both in the United States and abroad.

bourbonnaise (14), *oeufs à la neige* (46), soufflé (78), *pâte brisée* (86), *pré-salé* lamb (178), *filet de boeuf Adrienne* (209), *canapés* (223). As I suggested above in relation to the Parisian setting of the novel – emphasised on the covers of the Israeli and Spanish editions through the picture of a Parisian café and of the Eiffel Tower, respectively – France, through its landscapes, culture and food, is often seen as exotic in the United States (see Herlihy-Mera and Koneru 2013, xii) and elsewhere, thus becoming an object of desire.[9]

Asian American food writing has become popular also because it is perceived as "safely ethnic, and apparently nonpolitical" (Mannur 2009, 86). Isabelle Thuy Pelaud argues that "[t]hrough the prism of food, the postcolonial space is reduced and controlled, and Truong's novel is turned into a sophisticated pleasure accessible to a trendy elite and well-traveled reader" (2011, 127; see also Cruz 2013, 355). It is precisely because food renders Asian American novels palatable to a mainstream audience eager to consume ethnic difference safely that some critics have dismissed food writing. Those critics include Frank Chin, who famously labelled Asian American food writing as "food pornography" (see Mannur 2009, 85-86). However, as Mannur points out, "while the 'acceptable,' even palatable, narrative is one that enjoys popularity, such writing is not ... automatically apolitical" (2009, 86). As for *The Book of Salt*, I agree with Pelaud (2011) that the novel has much more to offer than an exotic showcase of appetising recipes prepared by a "mysterious"

[9] In the United States and in the United Kingdom, people's taste and fascination for French cuisine was particularly influenced in the twentieth century by figures such as Julia Child (1912-2004) and Elizabeth David (1913-1992) through their cookbooks and, in Child's case, TV shows.

(Press 2003) Asian character living in Saigon and glamorous Paris – much as Toklas's *Cookbook* is more than just a cookbook.

Indeed, as claimed by Truong herself, food and cooking in her novels acquire a symbolic meaning (quoted in Nimura 2011). The metaphorical function of food in literature has been highlighted by Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien, who have affirmed:

> food and consumption have the ability to channel and reflect a variety of contextual and historical preoccupations.... [F]ood, cooking, and eating are linked to both cultural anxieties and desires in relation to human experience, from economic and political constructs, to symbolic transmigrations of gender, class, ethnicity, family, race, and of course, the body. (2018, 1-2)

As I discuss in more detail later, in *The Book of Salt*, food and cooking stand for labour, exploitation and colonisation as well as representing ways of subverting the hierarchies that subtend these realities (see Cruz 2013; Fargione 2013, 2016).

Furthermore, similarly to Ruth Ozeki, whose novels develop the idea that "you are what you eat" (quoted in Ty 2013, 162), Truong also connects food and identity formation (quoted in Fargione 2016, 3). Indeed, "food operates as one of the key cultural signs that structure people's identities and their concepts of others. Although commonplace practices of everyday life, cooking and eating have far-reaching significance in our subject formation" (Xu 2008, 2). Ruth Maxey notes, for instance, that the idea that "eating the foods

of a particular cuisine will equal social and national incorporation" is common among second-generation South Asian Americans and British South Asians (2012, 182; see also Mannur 2009). Similarly, as a child recently arrived in the United States, Truong thought that if her mother knew how to cook American food, she "would somehow become *more* American" (quoted in Fargione 2016, 3; emphasis in original). Her passion for food started at this point, as she decided to learn how to cook food whose consumption would facilitate her assimilation into U.S. society. Thus, despite being "food obsessed", Truong refuses to label her work as "food writing" – that is, writing about food and eating or "culinary-themed" writing (Mannur 2009, 84) – since food means much more than just bodily nourishment or a recipe ingredient (quoted in Nimura 2011; see also Truong 2010). As we have seen, scholars of food writing and food studies have also highlighted the polysemic nature of food in literature and society.

Besides departing from previous Vietnamese American literary texts that centre on the Vietnam War and the refugee experience, *The Book of Salt* is also one of the few literary works by an Asian North American writer to be set in Europe – including Chuang Hua's *Crossings* (1968), Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992), some of the poems in Meena Alexander's *Quickly Changing River* (2008), Chang-Rae Lee's *The Surrendered* (2010) and Jhumpa Lahiri's *In altre parole* (2015). As Troeung observes, *The Book of Salt* "expands the concerns of Asian American literature into a wider theoretical register (to intersect with issues of postcolonialism) and into a wider geographical register (beyond North America and Asia to include Europe as a site of diasporic Asian

American identity formation)" (2010, 114). Troeung correctly emphasises the novel's postcolonial dimension as well as its contribution to expanding the transnational perspective in Asian American studies, which, so far, has been dominated by a transpacific approach (120). However, *The Book of Salt* underscores transnational connections that go beyond not only North America but also the Americas as a whole, which is important to note given that, thanks to writers like Karen Tei Yamashita, Asian American literature encompasses South America as well.

As for postcolonialism and Asian American studies, it is not just *The Book of Salt* but also Vietnamese American literature in general as well as South Asian, Filipino and Korean American literatures that introduce a postcolonial dimension in this field, owing to imperial ties between Japan and Korea, between the United States, Vietnam and the Philippines, and to more nuanced and less territorially oriented imperial relations between the United States and South Asia (see Nadkarni 2016). Pelaud indicates how the Vietnam War and Vietnamese immigration to the United States constitute "a phenomenon situated along a historical continuum based on an infernal logic of foreign interventions, invasions, and conquests" that forms the basis of U.S. imperialism (2011, 59). What distinguishes *The Book of Salt* from other Vietnamese American texts is that it focuses on European colonialism, which Truong implicitly places in relation to U.S. imperialism.

She does so both through her identity as a Vietnamese American writer and through the American characters of Stein and Toklas. Troeung notices how, "[i]n something of a historical slippage, Truong evokes [the] 'future'

[Vietnamese] refugee history [in the United States] in her narrative about Binh [*sic*] and the hardships he endures in the home of his American employers" (2010, 119). Michelle Peek also argues that "in his Mesdames' home, Binh [*sic*] is neither afforded unconditional entry or belonging, nor is he free from disciplinary rule, mimicking the delimited hospitality that will be afforded to Vietnamese refugees on American soil" (2012). Another cross reference to the Vietnam War is made through the character of "the man on [the] bridge" (85), who is a fictionalised version of Ho Chi Minh. Thus, Truong "brings U.S. history into conversation with a larger dynamic of global history", challenging U.S. exceptionalism (Magosaki 2016, 107; see also Eng 2008, 1480).

Truong's interweaving of French colonialism and U.S. imperialism and her portrayal of U.S.-Vietnamese relations that do not evolve within or around the context of the Vietnam War but at the centre of the French Colonial Empire constitute a move toward a worlding of American and Asian American literatures as they point to the interrelation of the United States and Asian America with other parts of the world. Hence, *The Book of Salt* stands as an example of world literature.[10] Indeed, Wai Chee Dimock, in her introduction to *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (2007) and to the anthology *American Literature in the World* (2017), urges us to read American literature as world literature, which means decentring the United States by revealing its interconnections with and interdependencies on other literatures

[10] The process of globalisation and the consequent crisis of nation-based paradigms have led to a revival of the idea of world literature. This idea had already been introduced in 1827 by Johann Wolfgang Goethe as *Weltliteratur* and – as I have argued in the Introduction – largely overlaps with cosmopolitan literature.

and geographies. Truong also demonstrates that Asian American writers' transnational links comprise not only country of birth and country of settlement, or country of birth and ancestral country, but also other countries located outside Asia or America. In the case of Vietnamese American people, connections to Europe – namely France – are established because of French colonialism in Vietnam and through the awareness of a common diasporic feeling with people of Vietnamese origin in France.

While Dimock's depiction of American literature as world literature coincides with definitions of transnational literature as well (see Goyal 2017b), the existing concept of transnationalism is inadequate to describe connections to countries other than the immigrant's country of origin and settlement. Therefore, it is too limited to express the geographical and cultural reach of literary works such as *The Book of Salt* – while 'postcolonial' is still a useful theoretical tool. Truong's link to France requires a broader and more inclusive definition than transnational, hemispheric, transpacific or transatlantic, and it is this better definition that the notions of world, worlding and world literature are able to provide.[11] Susan Gillman and Kirsten Silva Gruesz explain how a "worlded analysis", besides embracing other "localities" beyond the nation, and in particular beyond the United States as the basis for comparison, "would map out a network of crosshatched, multidirectional influences rather than drawing one-way or even two-way lines of comparison" (2011, 230-31). It is only by

[11] While Truong's link to France might justify the reference to a transatlantic model, this would overshadow the transpacific ties between the United States and Vietnam.

extending our field of analysis to the planet that such networks become visible as they exceed more restricted fields, such as the transpacific.

Another definition of world literature is the one provided by David Damrosch, who describes it as "multiple windows on the world" (2003, 15), because it consists of "literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (4), thus enabling readers to access another world or culture. It is in this sense that Timothy K. August understands *The Book of Salt* as a work of world literature, given its international reception through translations in various languages (2018, 321). August also asserts that by reading *The Book of Salt* as a work of world literature, it is possible to recognise "how the author shifts the temporal and spatial sites, as well as the reading practices, involved in thinking about Vietnamese American literature and subjectivity away from the effects of the 'Vietnam War'" (2018, 306). More broadly, as we have seen, *The Book of Salt* also helps us think about Asian American literature beyond its prescribed geographical boundaries – those of Asia and America – and as the novel crosses these boundaries, it offers to Asian American literature "a window on the world".

One might argue that Truong does not actually move that far away from the United States as 1920s Paris could be regarded as an American space owing to its sizeable and lively American population. This included writers of the Lost Generation – like Stein, Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Dos Passos – but also a ten times more numerous population of U.S. bankers and businessmen who lived

on the Right Bank (Green 2014).[12] However, such an argument contributes to buttressing U.S.-centrism as it focuses on the Americans living in Paris and overlooks the presence of not only French citizens but also other immigrants and colonial subjects, as indicated in the novel: "the Russians, Hungarians, Spaniards" (7), "the Algerian ... the Moroccan ... the Madagascan" (19) and the "*asiatique*" like Bình (152).

While *The Book of Salt* – together with Hua's *Crossings* – represents an exception within the Asian American literary field owing to its relation to France, various U.S. and British writers have established links to France and set their novels in this country – particularly in Paris – as highlighted by Carolyn A. Durham in *Literary Globalism: Anglo-American Fiction Set in France* (2005) and by Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera and Vamsi K. Koneru in their edited volume *Paris in American Literatures: On Distance as a Literary Resource* (2013). Yet the novels analysed in these critical studies do not necessarily underscore connections between the United States/Britain and France or their empires – as in the case of the popular novel *Chocolat* (1999), written by the British writer Joanne Harris and set in France but with no references to the writer's own country. Moreover, for the majority of the (white) American and British writers whom we might relate to Paris, France is just an "exotic location" (Herlihy-Mera and Koneru 2013, xii), deliberately chosen as the destination of their expatriation. "Traveling or moving abroad – and to Paris in particular – is an

[12] In the mid-1920s, Paris had a population of almost 3 million people (Dittgen 2005, 4), of which approximately 40,000 were Americans (Green 2014).

artistic rite of passage" for these U.S. artists (Herlihy-Mera and Koneru 2013, xv).

Instead, Truong's tie to France is of a postcolonial nature given that it is forged through her identification, while she was reading Toklas's *Cookbook*, with the Vietnamese cooks hired by the American couple at 27 Rue de Fleurus (Truong quoted in Nimura 2011). The character of Bình is based precisely on the descriptions that Toklas provides in her *Cookbook* of the two cooks who worked for Stein and her, and we could read *The Book of Salt* as a postcolonial rewriting of this underground classic. I return later – and in greater detail – to the issue of how Truong *re*tells, and therefore subverts, an episode of official history from the point of view of a marginal, colonial figure. In any case, Truong and others, such as the African American writer James Baldwin (1924-1987), who lived in Paris for many years, help reconfigure Paris from a white European and American space to a colonial, postcolonial, African American and Asian American one.

Despite her planetary outlook, Truong's literary influences are mostly American and include authors from the Southern United States like Harper Lee, William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, whom she considers "the best writers in the American canon" (quoted in Shea 2010, 52). Her "literary heroes", however, are the transnational (vis-à-vis France and the United States) writers Stein and the French (naturalised American) Marguerite Yourcenar (Truong quoted in Zilka and Woan 2013, 78). While the absence of Vietnamese authors here certainly does not enhance Truong's transnationality, it does not diminish it either; her transnational connection to Vietnam cannot be easily erased. Her

experience as a Vietnamese refugee, in particular, has informed, to various degrees, all of her works. In *The Book of Salt*, "[t]he departure, the loss of home, that act of refuge-seeking" are central themes (Truong quoted in "Interview with Monique Truong" 2003), and as Truong deals with them from the point of view of a diasporic Vietnamese subject living in France, she establishes important links between Asian America and Europe that are able to expand the transnational perspective in Asian American studies further.

"KITCHEN, SWEAT, TEARS OR THE SEA"

The Book of Salt embroiders the life story of two renowned historical figures, Stein and Toklas, and, at the same time, it recovers marginal figures who accompanied and sustained the couple during their Parisian stay from 1910 to 1934. Toklas mentions them in her *Cookbook*, which consists of "a mingling of recipe and reminiscence" ([1954] 2004, xi). When Truong first read the *Cookbook*, she was drawn to Toklas's description of the "Indo-Chinese" men ([1954] 2004, 186) who worked as cooks at 27 rue de Fleurus ("Interview with Monique Truong" 2003; Truong quoted in Ng 2012). *The Book of Salt* opens with a quotation by Toklas concerning the cooks whom she and Stein hired, thus revealing from the very beginning that the *Cookbook* is the main source of inspiration and intertext for the novel, which makes *The Book of Salt* an example of postmodern intertextuality (see Žindžiuvienė 2007). But if the book begins with Toklas's memory of the cooks – and therefore offers her perspective

– this point of view is then reversed as Bình is the one talking in the chapters that follow. In the first chapter, he is at the Gare du Nord with his Mesdames, helping them prepare for their departure for the United States: "[o]f that day I have two photographs and, of course, *my memories*" (1; emphasis added). Hence, Bình is the subject of the narration and the homodiegetic narrator of his own story, and so the novel might be read as his fictionalised memoir.

The novel's first-person narration enables Truong to develop a limited point of view, framed by the specific subjectivity of the protagonist as well as by the boundaries set by the character as to what he will tell and share with the reader (Truong quoted in Jolly 2010, Nimura 2011, Zilka and Woan 2013). Indeed, Bình is an unreliable narrator who conceals things, lies about them or speaks half-truths (Truong quoted in Silverblatt 2010; see Jones 2014, 105). For instance, he never tells his real name and lies about the ingredients used in his recipes. He expresses himself mainly through interior monologue, hence the fragmentation and non-linearity of the narration, which develops along two temporalities (past and present) and geographical references (Saigon and Paris). In fact, the narrator misleads his readers as he mixes past and present tense to tell events that all happened in the past. Essentially, the whole narration is a long flashback. As we realise that there is no consistency in the use of tenses, we understand that all that is being narrated is in the narrator's head and therefore subject to his (selective) memory and emotions.

The "provisional and limited" narrator is another postmodern feature, a "consequence of [the] ... postmodern inquiry into the very nature of subjectivity" (Hutcheon 1988, 11). By employing an unreliable, limited first-

person narrator, Truong conveys her idea that "for every story there are many other versions of that story that are not being told" (quoted in Jolly 2010), which is essentially postmodern as well as central to her literary project to relate Bình's *un*told story. Yet "[p]ostmodernism is careful not to make the marginal into a new center" as it is critical of "centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems" (Hutcheon 1988, 12, 41). Indeed, Truong does not essentialise Bình's perspective, warning her readers that his version of the story is as subjective and limited as that of Stein or Toklas.

Truong thus gives visibility to a figure that would otherwise be an overlooked and marginal one within the context of Euro-American Modernism. This "decentered perspective" has informed postmodernism considerably as postmodernism "involves an energizing rethinking of margins and edges, of what does not fit in the humanly constructed notion of center" (Hutcheon 1988, 12, 42). As Chris Coffman states, "Truong's novel importantly forces Stein, Toklas, and 'Paris Modernism' out of their well-established, Eurocentric line and traces out their intersections with the colonies on whose laborers the metropolis and its artistic networks depended" (2014, 169; see also Edwards 2012). Reading Toklas's *Cookbook*, Truong was

> surprised and touched to see a Vietnamese presence … in the lives of these two women.… But in the official history of the Lost Generation, … these Indochinese cooks were just a minor footnote. There could be a personal epic embedded inside that footnote, I thought. *The Book of Salt* is that story. ("Interview with Monique Truong" 2003)

But beyond the fact that, as a writer, Truong saw a potential "personal epic" to tell, she felt especially disheartened by the way Toklas portrays the cooks: "[s]he described them as liars, drunks, and child-like. I wasn't going to leave them in Paris like that" (quoted in Nimura 2011). As also shown in the novel, Stein and Toklas, despite their ostensibly progressive outlook, nurtured racist preconceptions toward people like Bình – and Stein, who was a supporter of the Vichy regime in France, is also known for her reactionary views (see Dowse 2012; Will 2012).

In the *Cookbook*, for instance, Toklas ([1954] 2004) does not bother to identify the nationality of the "Asiatic" (188) men hired as cooks and vaguely labels them as "Indo-Chinese" (186). Although the cooks whom she describes go by the name of Trac and Nguyen, which are common Vietnamese surnames, Toklas refers to their cooking, behaviour and language as Chinese (186-93), employing stereotypical images about "Orientals" that depict them as "unreliable" (186), "childish" (187) and as acting "suspiciously" (188) (see Linzie 2006; Xu 2008). In *The Book of Salt*, Bình affirms that white people in France "do not care to discern ... whether I hail from Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos. Indochina, indeed. We all belong to the same owner, the same Monsieur and Madame" (152). Thus, Truong's novel becomes an intertextual response to Toklas's *Cookbook*, able to reiterate and rearticulate the earlier text's content (Linzie 2006, 184; see also Fargione 2013, 134). In particular, *The Book of Salt* realises what Daniela Fargione identifies as one of the main concerns of Truong's literary production: "the demystification of enduring colonial

fantasies" (2016, 1). Indeed, the novel offers a postcolonial counter-narrative that deconstructs Toklas's stereotypical and superficial portrayal of these men by asking Bình, whose character is based on both Trac and Nguyen, to (re)present himself and tell his own story.

This is especially difficult for people like Bình, a colonial subject and a labourer both in Vietnam and in France. Usually, even today, such labour remains concealed behind the scenes. For Truong, Bình particularly embodies today's "undocumented workers" whose exploitation enables chefs to become celebrities and restaurants to keep prices low: "[n]o one wants to talk about that. They only want to focus on the pleasure that's on the plate" (quoted in Fargione 2016, 4). Or, as Bình says, "Most Messieurs and Mesdames are too engrossed by the food on their plates to take a good look at the hands that prepared and served it" and at the "scars and burns" on these hands (65). Hence, *The Book of Salt* has contemporary political relevance: by choosing Bình, an invisible labourer, as the protagonist of her novel, Truong raises people's awareness of those who live at the margins of today's society – from cooks to workers in textile factories – and whose exploitation enables more privileged people to satisfy their consumerist needs. Therefore, the "Salt" of the title is also "the salt of ... labor" (88): indeed, "salt is another way of saying labor" (Truong quoted in "Interview with Monique Truong" 2003). The term 'salary' originates precisely from the word 'salt', and, as Bình observes, salt can be found in "[the] kitchen, sweat, tears or the sea" (5), that is, in the labourer's work, effort, suffering and migration.

There is, however, another important reason why Truong decided to write Bình's story: the comment that she was "surprised and touched to see a Vietnamese presence ... in the lives of these two women" ("Interview with Monique Truong" 2003) highlights her identification with these Vietnamese diasporic people, due to their shared experience of exile (quoted in Hansen 2003). Yet they did not migrate for the same reasons, and so Truong wonders: "What would make a person leave their country and their family behind if not for war?" (quoted in Hansen 2003). Bình's story provides the answer. The fact that Bình is not a political exile does not mean that his experience of mobility is less traumatic than Truong's: mobility causes him as much, if not even more, suffering as compared to Truong, and his story is a perfect example of how mobility and transnational ties can be negative.

In fact, the novel explores both positive and negative forms of mobility and transnationalism by presenting a range of characters whose different experiences depend upon their class and race (see Fargione 2013). In general, for the white, middle- and upper-class characters – such as Stein and Toklas in Paris, the Governor-General and his wife and Chef Blériot in Saigon – mobility is an opportunity to develop their freedom or upgrade their social standing. These characters have the means to exploit the non-white, lower-class characters – such as Bình, his friend Bão and Marcus Lattimore (a middle-class mixed-race African American man) – who are forced to migrate and do not benefit from their mobility, hence finding it difficult to forge transnational ties to homeland *and* host land.

In Vietnam, Bình has to endure his father's disdain toward his brothers and him: "[b]y the time we were able to walk, we had learned our name. 'Stupid' was shared by us like a hand-me-down" (43). Moreover, Bình is subjected to his father's physical violence: "[i]t began long ago with his thumb pressed into the soft spot of my skull. Then a stick of wood thicker than my arm splintered into my shin. Lately, a chair leg shoved into my Adam's apple" (164). His already conflictual relationship with a contemptuous, violent and alcoholic father completely deteriorates when Bình, by then twenty years old and working as a *garde-manger* (pantry cook) at the Governor-General's household, has a love affair with chef Blériot. When Bình's father finds out, he disowns his son. Hence, Bình's flight from Vietnam is caused by his father's definitive rejection, which produces a painful rupture within the family, as well as being caused by his dismissal from the Governor-General's house. Bình's departure is not "brought about by desire", but it is "a consequence of it" (57), that is, of his love for another man as well as the lack of love from yet another man – his father.

The scene that relates Bình's goodbye to his mother is particularly suggestive of his attachment to her as well as his mother's deep affection for him, which make Bình's departure particularly painful:

> [i]nside her kitchen, ... I sat down on the dirt floor ... My mother ... wrapped herself around me, pressing my stooped back into hers....

> I know, Má. I know. I have never left your womb, is how you want me to feel. I will always be protected, safe inside of you, is what you want me to remember. (174)

The kitchen, a room where "it became clear that he [Bình's father] would never go" and that therefore "belonged solely to her" (169), is a feminine and specifically maternal space where male violence has no access, and it is a metaphor for the womb. Sitting on the floor of this secure space and wrapped in his mother's embrace – which also recreates the uterine space – Bình finds safety and anchorage. The kitchen, and so his mother, "is for Bình the real 'home'" (Priotti 2018, 128) and, possibly, the only one.

The goodbye scene between Bình and his mother invalidates Bình's assumption that he left home because he was blind to his mother's affection: "I ... looked at the abundance [of love] around me and believed that there was something more" (249). Towards the end of the novel, however, Bình realises, "I never had a desire to see what was on the other side of the earth. I needed a ship that would go out to sea because the water is deep ... I wanted to slip into it and allow the moon's reflection to swallow me whole" (250). Thus, it is not desire for "something more" but the pain inflicted by his father, who has disowned him and "[taken] away [his] home" (196), that forces Bình to leave, to travel. Bình's story belongs to a model of narratives of queer migration that "locate estrangement in the original home" and in which the movement "is a movement away from being estranged, which has triggered the migration in the first place" (Fortier 2003, 118). Yet he simultaneously feels attached to his

home owing to his mother's presence, a process that Anne-Marie Fortier names "motions of attachment" (2003, 118). Bình's sorrow is so great that he wishes to be "swallowed" by the deep expanses of the sea, to which he is drawn because they promise annihilation and not because they will bring him somewhere else (see Priotti 2018, 128).

Bình never accomplishes his journey into the deep waters of the sea – the underworld – but reaches Paris and starts looking for a job. Here, he works as a cook in various homes before being employed by Stein and Toklas, who, like Bình, are queer diasporic subjects, "unable to recognise or develop their sexual identity" at home (Priotti 2018, 127). However, while the two women are expatriates who have left their country by choice, "in search of artistic and bodily freedom" (Coffman 2014, 152) and motivated by their "wanderlust" (*The Book of Salt* 4), Bình was forced to leave his home (see also Edwards 2012). Moreover, Stein and Toklas are "white, educated, and privileged Americans" while Bình and his African American lover, Marcus Lattimore, are "visually and/or socially marked racial subjects" (Troeung 2010, 120; see also Peek 2012).[13] Bình, in particular, belongs to a lower, underprivileged class position. As he accompanies his Mesdames aboard the ship that will take them to the United States, Bình observes: "there is nothing about my Mesdames' suite of rooms or the boulevard-wide decks of the SS *Champlain* that remind me of my previous voyages at sea" (256). Thus, even the type of ship they travel in – and the name, with the SS *Champlain* paying homage to the seventeenth-

[13] Despite being Jewish, Stein and Toklas did not have to leave France during World War II, probably as a result of Stein's overt support of the Vichy regime.

century French explorer Samuel de Champlain – indicates their different status, which determines the positive or negative nature and outcome of their migrations.

Indeed, because of his social and racial identity, Bình encounters in France the very same prejudices that wounded him in Vietnam, which undermines any chance to feel rooted in either country, that is, to establish transnational ties to both homeland and host land. His marginalisation from French society continues at 27 rue de Fleurus due to "the asymmetrical relation of power" between Bình and the American women (Troeung 2010, 125). Stein and Toklas treat Bình according to racist preconceptions that belittle him (see Edwards 2012, 157): Stein, for instance, mispronouncing Bình's name, devises a humiliating nickname, "Thin Bin" (32), probably with reference to his small stature as suggested by his other racist moniker, "Little Indochinese" (142) (see Xu 2008, 129). Bình is sad to notice that, from his father, who named him "Stupid", to Marcus Lattimore, who calls him "Bee" (111), to his American employers, "[n]one of them ... has called [him] by [his] given name" (32), thus making him the object of their scorn, desire or derision. In fact, even 'Bình' is not his real name but a nickname that he chooses after leaving Vietnam. This detail makes Bình a nameless and therefore universal and symbolic character able to embody "countless other global migrants in servitude" (Magosaki 2016, 107; see also August 2018, 320). Furthermore, the pronunciation of the name 'Bình' is similar to the English word 'being', and so the name might indicate any human being.

Stein and Toklas ultimately prefer their dogs' to Bình's company: the dogs travel with them in their car while Bình is given a second-class train ticket. Bình will never be allowed at his Mesdames' "meal *en famille*" (102) and although, "[e]very day, my Mesdames and I dine, if not together, then back to back[,] ... there is always a wall between us" (209). Thus, as much as he sometimes deludes himself, Bình does not find a new home and family at 27 rue de Fleurus: were he considered part of the family and, therefore, irreplaceable, the women would have asked him to go with them to the United States, which they do not. Bình declares: "I, like the two dogs, was never going to see America. Not with GertrudeStein [*sic*] and Miss Toklas, that is" (258-59). But if tears are shed for the dogs, the same feelings of sadness are not directed at Bình. Hence, Bình's memory is always projected toward the only home that he has ever had: his mother. Nonetheless, "for subjects such as Bình, unhomeliness is a condition that can precede migration" (Troeung 2010, 123). Indeed, his memories of home are stained with the dark colours of patriarchal violence and colonial exploitation.

To Stein and Toklas as well as to his past and potential employers, Bình is just an object that they are eager to consume. Bình calls these employers "the collectors" (18), which is particularly appropriate for Stein, who is indeed an art collector and seems to consider Bình as one of the many artistic objects that she acquires. Aware of his employers' taste for exotic scenery and knowing that satisfying their appetite is his only way to get their attention, Bình "grudgingly reveal[s] the names ... of the cities that have carved their names into [him]"

(16) and gives them "a story filled with *exotic* locales" (17; emphasis added).[14] Yet Bình notes how these people

> have no true interest in where I have been or what I have seen. They crave the fruits of exile, the bitter juices, and the heavy hearts. They yearn for a taste of the pure, sea-salt sadness of the outcast whom they have brought into their homes. And I am but one within a long line of others. The Algerian orphaned by famine, the Moroccan violated by his uncle, the Madagascan driven out of his village. (19)

The painful stories of these colonial and racialised 'Others' are rendered meaningless as they are offered to the white employer on a silver platter, that is, prepared specially to suit their tastes – only slightly "bitter" (19) or "intriguingly spicy, yet not too hot" (Shankar 2009, 32).

Thus, Bình simultaneously experiences hyper-visibility and invisibility, or in/visibility, as described by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* ([1952] 1967). Fanon explains the process of objectification that black people have to undergo under the gaze of white people. He speaks of the "attention" that he receives in France because of his black skin, which at first seems like "a liberation" from a state of "nonbeing" until he realises that his being has been "fixed" in a shape that he does not recognise and that demeans his true self, making him feel like an object "in the midst of other objects" ([1952] 1967, 82-

[14] As readers, we might ask ourselves: are we, in our turn, collectors? The reviewers' emphasis on the exotic nature of the story seems to suggest so. As I argued earlier, the international success of the novel might be linked to the presence of 'exotic' elements in it; namely, Vietnamese and French food and settings.

108). Bình states: "[my body] marks me, announces my weakness, displays it as yellow skin. It flagrantly tells my story, or a compacted, distorted version of it" (152). His body, in other words, conspicuously reveals his origin: seeing that he is an "*asiatique*", "an Indochinese laborer" (152), people either dismiss him or ask for the "distorted", exoticised version of his story. No one is interested in what is behind his "yellow skin": his emotions and intellect. Hence, Bình is excluded and marginalised from society, rendered invisible because of his race and class, and simultaneously included in it for brief moments during which he is made visible through objectification.

Bình is rendered further invisible by his muteness, resulting from his inability to speak French fluently. While this might be partly due to the complexity of the French language, Bình mainly rejects a language that was imposed on him, the language of a people that have colonised and subjugated his people: "there are some French words that ... I cannot remember *not* knowing. As if I had been born with them in my mouth, as if they were the seeds of a sour fruit that someone else ate and then ungraciously stuffed ... into my mouth" (11-12). Bình's comment reveals the forcible and insidious nature of colonisation, which affects not only territories but also, through the tool of language, people's minds and imagination (see Ngũgĩ 1986; Xu 2008, 140). Thus, by rejecting French, Bình simultaneously rejects this process of colonisation of the mind and what he considers to be a "vocabulary of servitude" (13), a servitude that, in Bình's case, is double. Indeed, he is a colonial subject *and* a labourer at the Governor-General's house.

Nevertheless, in Paris, Bình's limited French constitutes a great disadvantage and renders him even more foreign. As Fanon indicates, "The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is" ([1952] 1967, 25). Since Bình refuses to master the language of his servitude, he will not become "whiter" and therefore will be subjected to discrimination and marginalisation in Paris: "for every coarse, misshapen phrase, for every blundered, dislocated word, I pay a fee. A man with a borrowed, ill-fitting tongue, I cannot compete for this city's attention" (18). Thus, Bình "construes the use of a foreign language as a source of debilitation, conflict, and struggle" (Chan 2011, 77). As Bình is far away from that "side of the globe" where "[he is] fluent" (8) and "no longer able to trust the sound of [his] own voice" (19), he has to "carry a small speckled mirror that shows me my face ... and assures me that I am still here" (19). Here, Bình underscores the link between muteness and invisibility, states of being that undermine his very humanity.

Indeed, Bình feels that he is "becoming more like an animal" (19) or, worse, an object: "[a]lways discreet, almost invisible, I imagine that when the guests look my way they see, well, they see a floor lamp or a footstool. I have become just that" (149). Hence, to feel alive and human, Bình inflicts physical pain on himself through his "habit" (72), that is, by injuring his hands with a knife. While this habit started when he was a child in Vietnam, it has acquired a new function in France: it helps Bình gain consistency in a context where he is ignored by those who surround him, and it makes him feel close to his mother – who used to cure his wounds – in a sort of homecoming (see Xu 2008, 141-

43). He says: “Red on my fingertips, Má, means that I am still here.... Red is what keeps you here” (191). Another way to cope with his loneliness and marginalisation is drinking, which Stein and Toklas condemn without realising that they help to trigger such a habit through their own behaviour.

Why would Bình stay in Paris then? Truong bases Bình’s decision to stay in Paris on his encounter with “the man on [the] bridge” (85). Bình is yet to be employed by his Mesdames when, during a night spent considering suicide while looking at the moon’s reflection in the River Seine from a bridge, he meets a Vietnamese man. His real name, like Bình’s, is never revealed. Although Bình is not given many details about his new acquaintance, he is drawn to him by the simple fact that they are both Vietnamese and speak the same language as well as by their shared experience of migration. Importantly, they both feel “lost” (87) and in between places: “two men on a bridge that connected us to neither here nor there” (92), that is, neither to Vietnam nor France. The man is basically a kindred spirit whose presence eases Bình’s sense of loneliness and marginalisation: “I am lonesome ... for another voice to say my name” (32).

To the man’s question: “what keeps you here?”, Bình replies, “I have no family left in Vietnam” (93). Although Bình pretends, throughout the narration, that his father is dead – so as not to feel guilty for having left his mother with such a despicable man – he nevertheless has his mother and brother in Vietnam. His declaration thus simplifies a more complex reality: despite his attachment to his mother and brother, he has lost his father’s love, his home and his job. It is significant that, as they are both unprivileged migrants, neither Bình nor the man on the bridge need any further contextualisation for a question like “what

keeps you here?": the background for such a question is one where the migrant finds him or herself marginalised and exploited. Therefore, it becomes natural to ask: why not return home? However, many immigrants' stories, like Bình's, complicate any simplistic approach to a return or homecoming narrative as 'home' can be as fraught with violence as the host country – or even more so.

Nonetheless, finding a new home away from home is not an easy undertaking, and this might generate feelings of nostalgia. According to Truong, nostalgia, which is

> a longing for the past, ... is often triggered by something that's lacking about the present.... [I]t would be a more gratifying experience to live fully in the present, but ... that's very difficult to do for immigrants, refugees, ... because the present is often harsh and not welcoming, and so we end up creating a fantasy of what the past was like. (Quoted in Fargione 2016, 4)

Hence, Truong suggests that looking back might be "treacherous" (Fargione 2016, 4) and questions the feeling of nostalgia that characterises many migrants' experience. She does so also through the title of the novel, which evokes an episode narrated in the Book of Genesis, in which Lot's wife, after leaving Sodom, is turned into a pillar of salt as a punishment for having looked back to the city – her home ("Interview with Monique Truong" 2003). Yet Bình's longing for home is actually weakened by memories of violence and by regret: nostalgia "honors the past. I am merely regretting it" (226) (see Edwards 2012, 180). In other words, he has not developed a diasporic attachment to his

homeland, nor has he been assimilated into the host land. He is on a bridge, "neither here nor there" (92), unable to forge transnational ties to either Vietnam or France, thus experiencing a negative form of transnationalism and mobility.

Various scholars, despite recognising that Bình is invisible, silent and forgotten, both in Paris and in Saigon, have nevertheless idealised his status as an outsider and his liminal positioning. They have argued that the in-between is a positive space where Bình can find freedom, develop a fluid identity and gain agency as well as an alternative and comparative perspective (see Durham 2005; Eng 2008; Edwards 2012; Peek 2012; Fargione 2013; Stefani 2015; August 2018; Priotti 2018). Yet these arguments overlook the negative effects of Bình's liminality on his inner self: his sense of marginality, in/visibility and muteness, all of which lead him to his habits, namely self-harm and drinking, but also to suicidal thoughts.

To these scholars, the novel's romantic ending does not seem contradictory. Truong makes Bình decide to stay in Paris only on the basis of his hope of encountering love again, that is, someone like the man on the bridge: "Paris gave him to me. And in Paris I will stay, I decided. Only in this city, I thought, will I see him again" (258). The novel closes on these lines: "'What keeps you here?' I hear a voice asking. Your question, just your desire to know my answer, keeps me, is my response" (261).[15] Hence, although Truong acknowledges the hardships that immigrants have to face, she

[15] Here, through the second-person possessive adjective, Bình might be addressing – in a very postmodern way – the narratee as well, implying that his very existence depends upon his story being read or listened to (see Jones 2014, 118).

nevertheless romanticises Paris as the city of "possibilities" (Truong 2003c) and of "promise" (*The Book of Salt* 258), based on her own experience as a sixteen-year-old girl visiting the city and "[falling] in love" with it (Truong 2003c). This ending and scholars' positive responses to it largely downplay the issues that Bình has been confronting in Paris: his exploitation – which also involves objectification, a process that deprives Bình of his very humanity – and his exclusion from French society as well as the smaller circle of the Stein-Toklas family.

As Edward Said argues, "Paris may be a capital famous for cosmopolitan exiles, but it is also a city where unknown men and women have spent years of miserable loneliness: *Vietnamese*, Algerians, Cambodians, Lebanese, Senegalese, Peruvians" (2000, 176; emphasis added). Bình himself declares that Paris makes him feel "like he's a poor relation, tolerated but not necessarily welcome" (93). After receiving the news of his employers' departure, Bình feels so desperate that his final decision to stay in Paris seems quite inconsistent. During the moments leading up to his resolution, Bình's heart is "beating a hard, syncopated rhythm, like those of the approaching trains" and all he can hear is "a simple refrain: I do not want to start all over again. Scanning the help-wanteds. Knocking on doors. Walking away alone. And, yes, I am afraid" (10). It is therefore overly idealistic to believe that Paris will become a home for Bình. Moreover, like Alexander in *Manhattan Music*, who does not elaborate on how Sandhya will, in practice, build her future in the United States, Truong does not provide Bình with any practical and psychological means to fight his marginalisation and exploitation in Paris, except a very flimsy one: hope for

love. In fact, Bình does not choose to stay in this city: he simply has no alternative given that he does not have a home to return to and other places would be just as foreign, and so just as alienating, as Paris.

It is true that Bình is given "a small measure of agency" (Xu 2008, 143) to fight against his subalternity: his cooking becomes a means to "write back" – or "cook back" as August suggests (2018, 318) – and so to overcome his muteness and invisibility (see Xu 2008; Cruz 2013; Fargione 2013; Jones 2014; August 2018; Priotti 2018). Yet it is not his ability in the kitchen "that is rewarded" (19), given that his employers attribute the quality of his dishes to secret ingredients instead. In addition, his "limited agency in the kitchen comes with a price" as he "must tell his stories to feed curiosity" (Xu 2008, 141), a process that involves both objectification and exploitation. Exploitation therefore concerns not only his manual labour but also his inner self. In the novel, Stein steals his story from Bình and appropriates it to write a manuscript that, like Truong's book, is titled *The Book of Salt* and whose protagonist is Bình – a gesture that also highlights the dependence of Modernism in the metropole on (invisible) colonial labour.[16] When, toward the end of the novel, Bình finds the manuscript and realises that it is about him – although he cannot read English, he recognises his misspelled name appearing repeatedly in the text – he feels betrayed as he deluded himself that he was part of the Stein-Toklas family.

[16] Stein's appropriation of Bình's story parallels her appropriation of Toklas's voice and identity in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) (see Linzie 2006; Troeung 2010).

As Truong attributes *The Book of Salt* to Stein, she resorts to two time-honoured literary devices, that of the *mise en abyme* – which has become a typical postmodern technique – and that of the re-discovered manuscript. The re-discovered manuscript enables the realisation of the *mise en abyme* as it constitutes a miniature version of the novel that we are reading, but the two literary devices have antithetical aims. The re-discovered manuscript is usually employed by writers to conceal the inauthenticity of their work. Through the *mise en abyme*, however, Truong reveals the fictionality of Bình's story and, in particular, his inability, as a marginalised subject, to speak. Indeed, when Bình finds the manuscript, we realise that the story that we have been reading – despite the use of the first-person narrator – was not written by Bình but by Stein. In yet another twist, Truong attributes to Stein a book that she never wrote, hence implicitly claiming her authorship in relation to *The Book of Salt*. Besides, Bình's sarcastic portrayal of Stein and Toklas and the inclusion of his discovery of the manuscript with the description of his feelings of betrayal suggest that it is unlikely that Stein wrote the story – not to mention that the style of the novel is not at all Steinesque.

As an immigrant and postcolonial writer, Truong seems to be Bình's rightful spokesperson, and she has that degree of privilege that enables her to redeem Bình from his invisibility and silence (see August 2018, 311). Nonetheless, Truong's use of a "beautifully crafted English" (Jones 2014, 105) somehow undercuts her project given that Bình cannot express himself in English. He is therefore silenced again as well as excluded from his own story, which, according to Ho Alan Chan, undergoes yet another process of

misrepresentation: "[l]ike Stein and Toklas' works, Truong's novel submits itself to the process of textualization, in which the phenomenological world is turned into a narratable and marketable one in an increasingly international marketplace" (2011, 79). Susan Shin Hee Park further argues that Truong might be "complicit in a form of coercive mimetism by presenting Bình's voice and thoughts without calling into question the implicitly imperialist narrative convention [the English language] to which she uses to do so" (2010, 110). Yet, as I demonstrate below, Truong seems to be aware of the impossibility of translating Bình's story faithfully, given the historical, psychological and linguistic distance between her and the protagonist of her novel (see Kase 2018, 30-31).

As Catherine Fung affirms, *The Book of Salt* "does the work of 'historiographic metafiction,' which ... is distinct from historical fiction in that it does not rely on verifiability" (2012, 97). Linda Hutcheon first defined "historiographic metafiction" as novels that are "intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (1988, 5). These novels are characterised by their "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historio*graphic meta*fiction)" (Hutcheon 1988, 5; emphasis in original). Through their "metafictional self-reflexivity" (Hutcheon 1988, 114) as well as through their intertextuality, they "call attention to both what is being contested and what is being offered as a critical response to that" (Hutcheon 1988, 13). Although Truong bases her novel on historical characters and events as they are narrated in Toklas's *Cookbook* (intertextuality), she creates an unreliable narrator, thus refusing to offer a

completely mimetic, realistic or 'authentic' narration. The exposure of her tale's fictionality and inauthenticity is further achieved through the use of the metafictional device of the *mise en abyme*.

Here is another example of how Truong implicitly acknowledges the limits of her narration or, better, translation, a process that is often about the loss of meaning and cultural specificity. The following scene is "entirely about translation" but "no actual translation is ever provided" (Fung 2012, 102) as what we read is a succession of English words:

> 'Tell me the word for "sweet,"' the *chef de cuisine* commanded in French.
>
> 'Sweet,' the *garde-manger* obliged in Vietnamese.
>
> 'Sour?'
>
> 'Sour.'
>
> 'Bitter?'
>
> 'Bitter.' (240-41)

The use of the English language has a homogenising effect that neutralises the voice of the speakers and therefore erases their specific cultural identity and personality. Other examples include Bình's comments about his limited knowledge of French, which are ironically expressed in English – a language that he does not know at all: "I have no idea how to say 'enthralling' in French" (15). These passages particularly reveal the fictionality of Truong's narration as they draw attention to the languages that Bình *can* speak (to various degrees), but they are conveyed in a language that Bình *cannot* speak. Hence,

The Book of Salt "is less an instance of the subaltern writing back than an exploration of the limits of such writing" (Eng 2008, 1481) and of the impossibility for the subaltern to speak, which is rendered visible by the narrative (Magosaki 2016, 113; see also Troeung 2010).

Like Stein, Truong ultimately betrays Bình, who believed with regard to his own story, "I alone am qualified to tell it, to embellish it, or to withhold" (215). However, as we have seen, the novel reveals the impossibility for a marginal subject like Bình – a colonial labourer – to speak. Nonetheless, as Salman Rushdie asserts, "the real risks of any artist are taken in ... pushing the work to the limits of what is possible ... Books become good when they go to this edge and risk falling over it" (1991, 15). Truong takes on the task of making Bình's impossible narration possible. Thus, while Truong's version of Bình's story is neither authentic nor reliable, she nevertheless manages to make visible a marginal figure and to provide him with a voice and an inner life, which had been denied to him through processes of objectification. To accomplish her task, she could only use English as this is the only language in which she is fluent (Truong 2010). As Rushdie argues in relation to British Indian writers, they "simply [do] not have the option of rejecting English" (1992, 17). Yet he adds: English can be "rema[de] for our own purposes" and "[t]o conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free" (17). While English is undoubtedly a colonial language that silences Bình as much as French does, Truong succeeds in appropriating it "for [her] own purposes" (Rushdie 1992, 17), that is, to tell the story of those whom imperialism and global capitalism have tried to hide and forget.

6 THE PURSUIT OF LIGHTNESS:

JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *IN ALTRE PAROLE*

> In Italian, despite the constant effort, I'm more joyous, lighter.
>
> — Jhumpa Lahiri, "What Am I Trying to Leave Behind?" (2017)

The issue of language and of how it can mute, bind or free its speakers is also central to Jhumpa Lahiri's Italophone work *In altre parole* (2015). Lahiri is a very successful Bengali American writer: her works about the Bengali American experience have been read not only in the United States, where she was awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), but also internationally. Her recent choice to write in Italian has been disapproved of or completely overlooked by Anglophone readers and scholars outside Italy. In the first part of this chapter, I redress the gap in the reception of Lahiri's Italophone writing by analysing it within an American and Asian American critical framework. I highlight the significance of her Italian creative production, which belongs to the domain of world literature and, as

such, contributes to a transnational and translingual understanding of American and Asian American literatures.[17]

As an 'interpreter' of the Bengali American community, Lahiri found a consolidated, acclaimed position within the Anglophone literary realm. Yet she has chosen to give up all the advantages of such a position to become a writer in Italian. In the second half of this chapter, I explore in detail the underlying reasons behind Lahiri's choice to write in Italian. Scholars have failed to comprehend them fully, mainly because they have overlooked her specific background as a second-generation Bengali American, placing her Italian-language writing within a European or Italian/Italophone framework (see, for example, Monaco 2014, 2017, 2019; Groppaldi and Sergio 2016; Federici and Fortunati 2017; Lutzoni 2017; Frigeni 2019). In particular, while some scholars mention Lahiri's need to become 'invisible' and anonymous, they do not explain such a desire in relation to the Anglophone context, where her reception has been shaped heavily by the perception of her as ethnographic guide (see Chetty 2009). Lahiri's sense of imperfection and failure toward literary expectations in this context as well as her aspiration to free herself from the weight of a definite (ethnic) identity – which I call 'the pursuit of lightness' – have played a fundamental role in her rejection of English.[18] I indicate how such a pursuit has

[17] For a discussion of the significance of multilingualism in American literature and culture, see Werner Sollors's 1998 edited collection *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature*; *La Babele americana: Lingue e identità negli Stati Uniti d'oggi* (2005) by Sara Antonelli, Anna Scannavini and Anna Scacchi; and Maria Lauret's study *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature* (2014).

[18] Only Raffaella Malandrino (2018) discusses Lahiri's positioning within the Anglophone context, mainly focusing on the tension between ethnic and aesthetic in Asian American literature. Although we share the same argument that Lahiri needed to free herself from literary categorisation, I focus on how this need emerges in *In altre parole* and in Lahiri's

led Lahiri to endorse a sort of postnationalism that releases languages from any essential link to a particular culture or country and vice versa.

JHUMPA

Lahiri is a writer of essays, short stories and novels, a translator and a professor. She was born in 1967 in London to Bengali parents who had migrated from Kolkata. Her father was a university librarian and her mother a schoolteacher. When Lahiri was two years old, the family moved to the United States, eventually settling in South Kingston, Rhode Island, where she grew up. In a 2003 interview, Lahiri stated: "I wasn't born here, but I might as well have been" (quoted in Minzesheimer), thus implying that despite being born in London she does not consider herself British Asian but rather Asian American. She is, more specifically, a Bengali American, and much of her work recounts the lives of Bengali and Bengali American characters. When Lahiri was at school, her teacher started to call her by her pet name 'Jhumpa' – because she thought that her official first names, Nilanjana Sudeshna, were too long and difficult – and since then Lahiri has employed this name. While she was growing up, she often visited her relatives in Kolkata, thus splitting her time between the United States and India.

interviews as a quest for 'lightness', engaging with the 'worlding' effects of such a quest on American and Asian American studies.

Lahiri earned a BA in English Literature from Barnard College at Columbia University in 1989 and, during the 1990s, multiple degrees from Boston University: an MA in English, an MFA in Creative Writing, an MA in Comparative Literature and a PhD in Renaissance Studies, which she completed in 1997 with a dissertation titled *Accursed Palace: The Italian Palazzo on the Jacobean Stage (1603-1625)*. She then held a fellowship at Provincetown's Fine Arts Work Center (1997-1998). In 2001, Lahiri married Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, a U.S. journalist of Latin American descent with whom she has two children.

Lahiri has taught Creative Writing at Boston University, Baruch College, Barnard College, The New School and the Rhode Island School of Design. In 2015, she joined the Princeton University faculty as a Professor of Creative Writing in the Lewis Center for the Arts. Lahiri has been vice president and has served on the board of trustees of the PEN American Center in New York. In 2010, she was appointed by President Obama as a member of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. Since 2012, she has also been a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Lahiri is the recipient of numerous fellowships and awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship (2002), a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (2006) and a National Humanities Medal (2014). In 2015, she received an honorary doctorate in Italian Language and Culture from the University for Foreigners of Siena.

While she was in graduate school, Lahiri published a number of short stories in magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *Harvard Review* and *Story Quarterly*. Some of those short stories were published in her debut collection

Interpreter of Maladies (1999), which was named a Best Debut of the Year by *The New Yorker* and won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the 2000 PEN/Hemingway Award for Debut Fiction. The title story was selected for both the 1999 O. Henry Award for short stories and *The Best American Short Stories 1999*, edited by Katrina Kennison and guest editor Amy Tan. *Interpreter of Maladies* was an international bestseller, translated into more than 30 languages. Thus, Lahiri was able, more than such predecessors as Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Amitav Ghosh, to put Bengali Americans on the literary map. The stories in this collection focus on Bengali and Bengali American characters and deal with migration, exile, dislocation, homesickness, human relationships and life between worlds – namely, India and the United States.

Her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), also portrays the immigrant experience through the story of a Bengali family in the United States and particularly through the figure of the American-born son, Gogol, who is caught between Bengali and U.S. culture. The novel was a *New York Times* Notable Book and a *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize finalist. A film adaptation of the novel directed by Mira Nair and written by Sooni Taraporevala was released in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and India in March 2006. Lahiri has a cameo appearance as 'Aunt Jhumpa'. Issues of migration, in-betweenness and generational conflict among Bengali Americans are also at the centre of her subsequent works: *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and *The Lowland* (2013). *Unaccustomed Earth* is Lahiri's second collection of short stories, and it was awarded the 2008 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. *The*

Lowland is Lahiri's second novel: it was a 2013 National Book Award finalist and was also shortlisted for the 2013 Man Booker Prize for Fiction and the 2014 Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction, and it was awarded the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2015. Lahiri was also a screenwriter for the final season of the U.S. TV series *In Treatment* (2008-2010).

Despite this success, in her more recent body of work, Lahiri has abandoned the English language to dive into Italian instead. The collection of essays *In altre parole* (2015; translated into English by Ann Goldstein and published in 2016 as *In Other Words*), which deals with issues of language and identity, was published after Lahiri's three-year stay in Rome, from 2012 to 2015. The collection won the 2015 Premio Viareggio-Versilia Internazionale, which is awarded to world famous personalities who have devoted their lives to culture, the understanding between people, social progress and peace. Lahiri also wrote the book-length essay *Il vestito dei libri* (2017; translated into English by Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush and published in 2017 as *The Clothing of Books*) and the novel *Dove mi trovo* [*Where I Am*] (2018) in Italian. Lahiri has also translated two novels by the Italian writer Domenico Starnone into English: *Ties* (2017) is a translation of *Lacci* (2014) and *Trick* (2018) of *Scherzetto* (2016). In 2019, a collection of Italian short stories, edited and introduced by Lahiri, was published in Italian as *Racconti italiani scelti e introdotti da Jhumpa Lahiri* and in English as *The Penguin Classics Book of Italian Short Stories* (with selected translations). Lahiri now lives between New York and Rome.

A WINDOW ON THE WORLD

> 'American' literature is quite often ... a simplified name for a much more complex tangle of relations. Rather than being a discrete entity, it is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures. These are input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment – connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world.
>
> — Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents* (2006)

Lahiri is a second-generation Bengali American,[19] and much of her writing portrays the experience of being caught between two worlds, specifically between India and the United States. She explains: "In India, I'm told, 'You look Indian, you speak Bengali, but you're really American'. In America, I'm told, 'You sound and act American, but you're really Indian'" (quoted in Minzesheimer 2003). Indeed, immigrants' descendants are often considered foreigners when they visit their ancestral country (see Tsuda 2009c; Dutt-Ballerstadt 2012). The same happens in the country where they have been raised although they were born there or moved there at an early age (see Moore and Barker 2012). Thus, especially when they belong to racial minorities, immigrants' children are, in Mia Tuan's words, "forever foreigners" (1998),

[19] Although Lahiri considers herself second-generation, she more correctly belongs to the "1.75 generation", a term used to describe individuals whose migration occurred during early childhood (ages 0-5) and whose "experience and adaptive outcomes are closer to that of the U.S.-born second generation" (Rumbaut 2004, 1167).

placed in an in-between, liminal space where "one plus one [does] not equal two but zero" and "conflicting selves" erase each other (Lahiri 2006), that is, where national or cultural identity is lost. Hence, while Lahiri was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s, she felt neither American nor Indian, and, for a long time, when she thought of herself, she did not think of a nationality: "I don't think of anything" (quoted in Langer 2003, 55). Therefore, Lahiri initially refused to be transnational as she was not able to reconcile the two sides of her identity and thus rejected both.

It was through writing that Lahiri was able to face her duality as a Bengali American as she wrote her first published stories about Bengali and middle-class Bengali American characters,[20] representing particularly her parents' generation and her own: "[w]hat drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life" (Lahiri 2006). Furthermore, as Ruth Maxey observes, for many writers, including Meena Alexander, Mukherjee and Salman Rushdie, "language becomes another means of securing a home for oneself" (2012, 60). Lahiri has affirmed: "for much of my life, I wanted to belong to a place, either the one my parents came from or to America.... When I became a writer my desk became home.... I belong to my work" (2011). Thus, Lahiri has found an identity and a home in writing, a place where she does not have to choose one world over the other as the two worlds can coexist. Lahiri's

[20] Lahiri's works also portray white American characters, and, according to Lavina Dhingra Shankar, *Interpreter of Maladies* "is among the few South Asian American texts that depict several Euro-American characters who are not merely flat, marginal prototypes, but are well-rounded" (2009, 38).

transnational work therefore testifies that transnational links are established not only by immigrants but also by their children, contrary to many social scientists' assumption that transnationalism does not concern second- and third-generation nationals (see Portes 2001, 190).

However, as Lahiri has stated, "authorial freedom is limited to the process of writing itself, in the private sphere of creation. Once made public, both my book [*Interpreter of Maladies*] and myself were immediately and copiously categorized" (2002). Indeed, Lahiri has been variously defined as an American, Indian American, British-born, Anglo-Indian, NRI (non-resident Indian) and ABCD (American-born confused desi) author,[21] and her writing as diasporic (mostly by Indian academics) and immigrant (mainly by U.S. academics) (Lahiri 2002). Lahiri's desire to escape this categorisation – by publishers, readers, reviewers and academics – in the Anglophone world is one of the main reasons why she has recently chosen to write in Italian (Lahiri quoted in Maggiorelli 2015), an idea to which I return later.

In particular, Lahiri is seen as "the acclaimed chronicler of the Bengali-immigrant experience" (Chotiner 2008), "the indigenous ethnographer *par excellence*" (Cardozo 2012, 8), "the current luminary of the 'ethnic' authorship in the United States" (Srikanth 2014, 342) and "the interpreter of the new Indian diaspora" (Monaco 2015). As Raj Chetty indicates, Lahiri is perceived in the United States – but also in other Western countries as well as in India – as

[21] 'Anglo-Indian' is an especially inaccurate label given that it indicates individuals of mixed Indian and white British ancestry while 'ABCD' is "an acronym coined by Indian nationals to describe culturally challenged second-generation Indians raised in the U.S." (Lahiri 2002). In South Asia, the word 'desi' indicates an indigenous person or thing; outside South Asia, it denotes a person of South Asian origin or descent (*OED Online* 2020).

"a native ethnographer-informant" who fulfils (in an either 'authentic' or 'fake' way) "her responsibility to interpret between India and America" (2009, 62-63). Thus, Lahiri's Anglophone works have been read as anthropological, ethnographic and sociological guides or as guided 'Little India' tours.[22]

Lahiri's great critical acclaim in the United States is precisely related to her perceived position as the 'interpreter' or 'guide' to what is marketed as an exotic reality that, moreover, is not too political or "spicy" (Shankar 2009) and therefore appeals to mainstream audiences. This is true for other South Asian American writers such as Mukherjee and Divakaruni, whose works have been exoticised commercially in accordance with Orientalising discourses. This can be seen even from their book covers, which often display flowers, spices and South Asian dresses and ornaments (see Leyda 2011; Rahman 2013). When *Interpreter of Maladies* was published in 1999, it portrayed an America that was "ethnically marked as different, exotic" and that therefore met the needs of the American literary market (Chetty 2009, 61).

Other factors that have certainly contributed to Lahiri's great success are her Ivy League degrees – which she could obtain also thanks to her privileged class position – and her identification with the American literary establishment. Lahiri's collaboration with *The New Yorker* has been particularly crucial: indeed, as Lavina Dhingra Shankar argues in relation to South Asian American women

[22] This definition is modelled on Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's description of mid-twentieth-century second-generation Chinese American autobiographies – such as those written by Jade Snow Wong and Pardee Lowe – as "guided Chinatown tours … providing explanations on the manners and mores of the Chinese-American community from the vantage point of a 'native'" (1992, 262). It has to be noted, however, that the Indian American sites explored by Lahiri are not exactly metropolitan enclaves but mostly suburban Bengali American households in New England.

writers, their "American (and global) audience would have been much more limited had the same contributors and articles appeared in ethnic American publications such as *Amerasia*, the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, the *South Asian Review*, or *MELUS*" (2009, 27). Finally, her "primary choice of genre", that is, the short story collection, has facilitated the popularity of her work since collections offer heterogenous perspectives – in terms of age, gender and ethnicity – through which readers can see (Shankar and Cheung 2012a, xiii).

Shankar and Floyd Cheung, whose 2012 edited book was "the first full-length literary analysis" of Lahiri's body of work, note how, despite her international success, scholarship on Lahiri in the United States had until then been "sporadic" (2012a, xiv). If Shankar and Cheung's book marked an increase in scholarly attention toward her *oeuvre*, Lahiri's shift to Italian has alienated Anglophone scholars of her work outside Italy. Both readers and scholars in the United States were so accustomed to reading Lahiri's works as 'interpretations' of the Indian American community that since she changed subject matter and language, "[è] come se avessero smesso di nutrire un interesse verso i [suoi] lavori" [[i]t's as if they had lost interest in [her] works] (Lahiri quoted in Di Virgilio 2018; my translation). Indeed, her Italian-language works have been discussed mostly by Italophone scholars or by Italian Anglophone scholars (see Monaco 2014, 2017, 2019; Concilio 2016; Groppaldi and Sergio 2016; Adami 2017; Federici and Fortunati 2017; Lutzoni 2017; Reichardt 2017; Saroldi 2017; Spagnolo 2017; Grutman 2018; Malandrino 2018; Frigeni 2019). They have not received any attention from Anglophone scholars outside Italy, with the sole exception of Steven G. Kellman, who describes Lahiri's work in Italian

as a “humiliation” and a “mortification” of her “command of language” (2017, 125). Kellman’s comments reveal his discomfort with Lahiri moving to Italian and betray Anglocentric anxieties toward other languages.

Other Anglophone readers share Kellman’s unease, which we see in the very different responses to *In altre parole* and *In Other Words* of those reviewers and their Italian counterparts. Italian reviewers of *In altre parole* (Adami 2015; Bonvicini 2015; Frau 2015; Lauro 2015; Gosetti 2016; Spagnolo 2017) are enthusiastic about Lahiri’s writing in Italian because they see it as an enrichment of Italian language and literature and as a positive example of openness toward foreign cultures that everyone, in Italy as well as elsewhere, should follow. They also praise Lahiri’s linguistic choice and style. A few Anglophone reviewers of *In Other Words* are equally positive, with Michael F. Moore (2016) – who has read both the Italian and the English text – looking forward to reading other works in Italian by Lahiri and Joseph Luzzi (2016) describing the book as “gorgeous”. Others are more neutral (Tearne 2016) and most quite negative: the unfavourable reviewers describe Lahiri’s prose as “flat” and “banal” (Downing 2016), the book as “unilluminating” (Finch 2016), “tedious” (Hadley 2016), “repetitive” and “self-dramatic” (Garner 2016) and hope that she will return to English.

While these negative comments might be justified on account of the limits of the English translation – which, as I show later, does not effectively convey the ‘freshness’ of Lahiri’s Italian – as with Kellman, they also expose an insular attitude, pointing to a difficulty within the English-speaking world to open out to other languages. Already in the 1990s, Werner Sollors had

identified a tendency among U.S. scholars – which still seems to be widespread – to overlook literary works written in languages other than English and to assume that the United States is a monolingual country (1998, 5-6). This approach originates from U.S. and British imperialism and exceptionalism, that is, from the real and imagined power of the United States and the United Kingdom over other countries and their need to protect their position. Within such Anglocentrism, languages that have fewer speakers, like Italian, are perceived as "strange" and lacking the potential of languages spoken world-wide, including the global circulation of cultural products, such as books and films (Kellman 2017, 123-24). Overall, the critical comments on Lahiri's use of Italian ignore, or dread, the less material benefits that acquiring a foreign language can bring about, which include access to other cultures and viewpoints. Moreover, promoting language diversity is instrumental in countering the hegemony of languages, such as English in the United States, that try to 'mute' other linguistic and cultural models.

While some Anglophone reviewers have responded negatively to Lahiri's Italophone work, they have at least reflected on her choice to write in Italian. By contrast, Asian Americanists have completely neglected her since she started writing in Italian, notwithstanding the English translations of her Italian works. A similar case is represented by Alexander, whose (albeit less sustained) Italian connections have been largely overlooked by scholars who have otherwise acknowledged and examined the transnationality of her life and work. Such a parochial attitude is at odds with the by now widespread emphasis on the transnational dimension of Asian American studies and the need to consider its

positioning beyond the United States and the English language. It seems that Asian Americanists and Anglophone scholars more generally, despite their calls to decentre the United States and include it within a global network, are not truly ready to embrace more radical attempts to place "American literature in the world" (Dimock 2017).

Analysing Lahiri's adoption of the Italian language answers Wai Chee Dimock's appeal to read American literature as world literature, that is, to decentre the United States by exposing its interconnections with and interdependencies on other literatures and geographies (2007, 2017). According to David Damrosch's definition of world literature as "multiple windows on the world" (2003, 15) – that is, literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin and therefore enable readers to access another world or culture – Lahiri's work was part of world literature even before she employed Italian. Indeed, her works have been read internationally through translations in various languages. In contrast, her Italian-language works have struggled to reach an Anglophone audience even after being translated. If "[a] determining feature of world literature … is that it does well in translation" (Damrosch and Ning 2011, 176), *In altre parole* does not satisfy this requirement given that its English translation, *In Other Words*, has not received many positive reviews. Yet Lahiri's Italophone writing, like Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, is still an example of world literature insofar as it crosses prescribed geographical boundaries – those of Asia and America – and so provides Asian American literature with "a window on the world". Hence, Lahiri's Italophone writing constitutes a move toward a worlding of American and Asian American

literatures as it points to the interrelation of the United States and Asian America with other parts of the world. Lahiri also shows how Asian American writers' transnational links might go beyond country of origin and settlement – or country of origin and ancestral country – to embrace other countries located outside Asia or America, such as nations in Europe.

As I argued in relation to *The Book of Salt*, Dimock's delineation of American literature as world literature parallels definitions of transnational literature (see Goyal 2017b). However, the existing notion of transnationalism is inadequate to describe connections to countries other than the immigrant's country of origin and settlement. Therefore, as with Truong's link to France, Lahiri's link to Italy requires a broader and more inclusive definition than transnational, hemispheric, transpacific or transatlantic that the notions of world, worlding and world literature are able to provide. As Silvia Albertazzi argues, it is impossible to contain world literature within the narrow confines of any label, "fosse pure quella, multisemica e polifunzionale, di 'postcoloniale'" [not even the polysemic and multifunctional 'postcolonial' label] (2013, 186; my translation). Indeed, not only the concept of the transnational but also that of the postcolonial (see Lutzoni 2017, 110) are too limited to express the geographical, cultural and linguistic amplitude of literary works such as Lahiri's writing in Italian.

The concept of transnationalism also fails to describe the variety of literary influences that have informed Lahiri's work: from Britain, Shakespeare and Hardy; from Ireland, Joyce and Trevor; from the United States, Hawthorne and O'Connor; from Canada, Gallant and Munro; from Russia, Tolstoy and

Chekhov; from Italy, Moravia, Pavese, Pasolini and Starnone (Minzesheimer 2003; Chotiner 2008; Leyda 2011; Lahiri 2013; Piepenbring 2018). Like Alexander, Lahiri takes inspiration from writers across the world. Yet, within this global group of writers, Indian authors are missing – probably owing to the Eurocentric education that she received in the United States. If, on the one hand, this seems to diminish Lahiri's literary transnationality, on the other hand, her interest in Italian or Russian literature expands her transnational perspective further, beyond her two main reference points – India and the United States.

Lahiri's contribution to the worlding of American and Asian American studies is one reason why she should still be included within these fields. Moreover, her choice of writing in Italian is rooted in her experience as a Bengali American – as I discuss in more detail later. Lahiri's use of Italian also complicates issues of language and identity within both Asian American and postcolonial studies, which so far have only involved two languages and processes of hybridisation between them. Indeed, Lahiri refuses to employ a hybridised version of English, using instead a third language that she tries to protect from the influence of her other languages. Italian and Italophone scholars have neglected these contributions to Asian American studies as they have placed Lahiri's Italophone writing within a European or Italian/Italophone framework or within the field of exophonic and/or migrant literatures, hence the need to discuss Lahiri's Italian-language creative production within the context of American and Asian American literatures.

Eleonora Federici and Vita Fortunati, for instance, affirm that transnational literary studies "analyse not only migration of writers from one European country to another, but also from countries around the world" (2017, 68), thus centring the transnational (literary) discourse on Europe. Moreover, they place Lahiri next to Italophone postcolonial writers to whom Italian represents "the language of the oppressor" (74), such as Igiaba Scego, an Italian writer of Somali origin, thus mistakenly conflating the Anglophone postcolonial context to which Lahiri belongs with the Italophone. If Lahiri's works in Italian belong to "letteratura della migrazione italofona" (Reichardt 2017, 219) or "Italophone migrant writing" (Lutzoni 2017, 109), Italian does not represent for her an *esolingua*, that is, a colonial language. Indeed, Lahiri does not come from a former Italian colony such as Eritrea, Somalia or Libya. Her choice to write in Italian is therefore better understood by examining her Indian American background and the connections between India and the U.S. empire.

While I examine the link between Lahiri's choice of a third language and her status as a postcolonial Indian American writer in the next section, it is important first to discuss why she is postcolonial at all. David Lynn contends that "[t]here's nothing postcolonial" about Lahiri's work (quoted in Shankar and Cheung 2012a, xiv). Rainier Grutman notes that Lahiri does not "write back" to the United Kingdom and writes instead from the United States (2018, 3), thus implying that her writing is not postcolonial. Silvia Lutzoni also claims that Lahiri cannot "be easily included into a postcolonial discourse, since she is not interested in reaffirming her Bengali tradition" and because of her privileged position (2017, 110-17). These comments naturalise English as an

American language and overlook “the longer histories of connection and disconnection (imperial and otherwise) between the United States and South Asia” (Nadkarni 2016, 361). Asha Nadkarni’s argument that “the postcolonial is always already within the South Asian American” (2016, 365) is based precisely on the existence of these dis/connections.

Nadkarni mentions, for instance, U.S. developmental aid to India, which “was merely part of a two-pronged attack, which included military alliance with Pakistan to counter the threat of Indian nonalignment” (Nadkarni 2016, 362). Such aid included the transfer of technical knowledge to India, hence the creation of “a new generation of Indian scientists through the expansion of technical institutes in India” and ultimately of “the pool of talent for the ‘brain drain’ to North America post-1965” (2016, 362). Another reason behind South Asians’ migration to the United States is that they “are tantalised by the prospect of America as a mythic land built on immigration and a country which offers the promise of personal reinvention. They also respond to the international pervasiveness of US culture in a globalised world” (Maxey 2012, 66). Lahiri’s parents thus moved to the United Kingdom and then to the United States because of former colonial and ongoing imperial relations between India and these countries. Therefore, albeit indirectly, Lahiri has experienced postcolonial migration, which has resulted in her writing in English.

Her subsequent rejection of English and her adoption of Italian is significant not only within the field of Asian American and postcolonial studies but also in the domain of world literature. Her choice of writing in Italian resists the threat of an English monolingualism, or “Anglo-globalism” (Arac 2002),

that risks reducing world literature to a homogenised field where linguistic and cultural particularities are erased. Such a risk emerges, for instance, in Franco Moretti's approach to the study of world literature, which, as Jonathan Arac points out, implies an acceptance of the "imperialism of English" and "the diminishment of language-based criticism in favour of a monolingual master scheme" (2002, 44). It is a fact that "world literature still relies on English as the main global vehicle for its institutionalization and dissemination" (Tsu 2012, 161). Indeed, English is spoken by 1.1 billion people while Italian is spoken by only 67 million people (both figures include native and non-native speakers) (*Ethnologue*, n.d.). Therefore, Lahiri's choice to produce her recent works in Italian challenges the supremacy of the English language in world literature and in the global literary market. Although the reception of her Italian-language work in Anglophone contexts depends upon its English translation, Lahiri's decision to present *In Other Words* in a bilingual version, with the Italian parallel text (the left-hand pages are in Italian and the right-hand pages in English), forces the reader to at least notice the Italian origin of the text and leads to comparisons between the English and Italian versions (see Malandrino 2018, 151).[23]

The outcome of Lahiri's effort, however, depends on critical and scholarly responses to it, which so far have been mostly negative, absent or shaped by Eurocentric concerns. Thus, my aim is to highlight the importance of analysing Lahiri's Italophone writing within the context of American, Asian

[23] *In Other Words* is also available as an audiobook recorded by Lahiri herself in both English and Italian.

American and world literature. Her embracing of the Italian language and her relocation to Italy indicate once more that Asian America has to be understood as part of a larger geography – indeed, the world itself – and in connection with other cultures and languages. Hence, Asian American literature can be seen as part of world literature, understood not merely as a mode of circulation and reading that goes beyond the borders of a single nation (Damrosch 2003) but also as a type of literature that is "aperta al mondo" [open to the world] and in which language is freed from its exclusive contract with a particular nation or culture (Albertazzi 2013, 165-66) and vice versa.

FIGHTING THE MEDUSA

Lahiri's fascination with Italy predates her Italophone literary production. It began as a child when she learned to read with a simplified version of a book on Roman mythology, which she particularly loved (Lahiri quoted in Antonelli 2012, 4). Lahiri then studied Latin at college: having already chosen to major in English literature, she decided to focus on Medieval and Renaissance authors whose works are particularly informed by Classical Greek and Latin literatures and cultures (Lahiri quoted in Leyda 2011, 68). In 1994, while Lahiri was pursuing her PhD on the representation of the Italian palazzo in Jacobean English drama, she visited Italy for the first time with her sister. In *In altre*

parole,[24] Lahiri describes her encounter with Italian as "Un colpo di fulmine" [Love at first sight] (23): she senses that although she does not have to learn Italian for any cultural or social need (23), learning it will make her feel whole (22) – like a romantic partner might do.

This is a romanticised, utopian vision of Italy that Lahiri shares with a longer tradition of writers and philosophers who travelled to Italy and were fascinated by its language, literature and culture: Montaigne, Milton, Goethe, Chateaubriand, Stendhal, Byron, Shelley, Christina Rossetti, Twain, James, Wharton, Forster, Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence, Pound, Hemingway and Ellison. Some of them also adopted Italian for their writing. As Silvia Lutzoni points out, the artistic privilege of Lahiri's journey to Italy should be compared to that of Byron and Shelley rather than to the experience of Italophone migrant writers such as Amara Lakhous or Anilda Ibrahimi, who left their native countries of Algeria and Albania in the 1990s for political reasons (2017, 117; see also Groppaldi and Sergio 2016, 95; Reichardt 2017, 227). Furthermore, as I explained previously, Lahiri cannot be compared to postcolonial Italophone writers such as Igiaba Scego, whose parents migrated – also for political reasons – from Somalia, a former Italian colony, and who therefore tend to have a conflicted relationship with Italy and the Italian language. When Lahiri left the United States for Italy she did so voluntarily, her ties to this country were purely literary – hence her idealised vision of Italy – and once there she enjoyed a privileged position thanks to her status as a successful writer. Yet figures such

[24] Henceforth, the page numbers without other indication are from *In altre parole*, and, unless noted otherwise, the translated quotations are from *In Other Words*.

as Lahiri and Alexander both belong to and disrupt a tradition of writers who deliberately invested in Italy in order to enhance their artistic inspiration as well as cultural capital. While sharing their privilege, Lahiri and Alexander claim for themselves a tradition that would otherwise be mostly white European and North American and male (with a few exceptions, including Ellison, Rossetti, Wharton and Woolf).

What many of these artists have in common – from Montaigne to Lahiri – is their exophonic writing, that is, writing in a language different from their mother tongue.[25] Therefore, although Lahiri often refers to her writing in Italian as something "controcorrente" [against the current] (74) and "un'impresa folle" [a mad undertaking] (134), her exophony is nothing extraordinary or particularly new, given that this is a very old practice shared by many writers (see Lauret 2014, 13). Other exophonic writers (in languages other than Italian) include Beckett, Conrad, Nabokov, Kristóf, Kundera, Martel, Mukherjee, Xiaolu Guo and Ha Jin. In fact, "[i]n the context of the global economic and political migration of the late twentieth century, this attitude has now generalized itself" (Suga 2007, 27), although writers' reasons for using a language other than their original one may vary considerably.

[25] The term 'exophony' was initially used to indicate African literatures written in European languages, especially French (see Heinrichs 1992). In 2003, the German-speaking Japanese writer Yōko Tawada published a collection of Japanese language essays titled *Exophony: Journey to Stepping Out of the Mother Tongue*. The term was then popularised in the field of German-language literatures thanks to scholars such as Susan Arndt, Dirk Naguschewski and Robert Stockhammer (2007); and Chantal Wright (2008). According to Wright, compared to terms such as "immigrant", "postcolonial" or "post-national", "exophonic" "has the advantage of describing a linguistic state of being rather than prescribing any theme(s)", and it "does not imply anything about a writer's background" (2008, 39).

Lahiri started to learn Italian in the United States, first as an autodidact, then attending some courses at university and later with private teachers of Italian origin. Her sporadic visits to Italy to present her books at various literary festivals provided her with an extra motivation to study this language. She read many Italian writers, including Moravia, Pavese, Quasimodo and Saba (38). Then, eighteen years after her first visit to Italy, Lahiri returned to this country with her husband and children (18, 35, 49). Lahiri decided to settle in Rome because on her first visit to the city in 2003, "h[a] provato ... un'affinità. [Le] sembrava di conoscerla già" [[she] felt ... an affinity. [She] seemed to know it already] (37). Such feelings very likely arose from Lahiri's notion that Rome is somehow similar to Kolkata: "[c]redo che Roma e Calcutta abbiano in comune una specie di energia e anche un modo di vivere.... [H]o l'impressione che Roma sia una versione di Calcutta, come se fossero cugine" [I think that Rome and Kolkata have a sort of energy and way of life in common.... I have the impression that Rome is a version of Kolkata, as if they were cousins" (quoted in Antonelli 2012, 4; my translation). Thus, Rome offers to Lahiri – like Venice to Alexander, who compared the Italian city to her native Kerala – a familiar environment that is, at the same time, new and therefore stimulating.

After her three-year stay in the capital from 2012 to 2015, Lahiri published her first work in Italian, *In altre parole*, a collection of essays that – with the exception of "Penombra" ("Half-Light") and "Postfazione" ("Afterword") – had been previously published in the news magazine

Internazionale.[26] These essays form together "un'autobiografia linguistica, un autoritratto" [[a] linguistic autobiography, a self-portrait] (156). Indeed, Lahiri declares: "indagando la mia scoperta della lingua, penso di aver fatto un'indagine su di me" [investigating my discovery of the language, I think I have investigated myself] (134). Already in 2002, Lahiri was "preoccupied with language" and particularly "with the presence in any given character's life of two languages and sometimes more, in different sorts of equations". *In altre parole* is a meditation on Lahiri's own relationship with language and on the relations between the languages that have marked her life: Bengali, English and Italian. She explains her passion for Italian, recounting by way of metaphors the process of learning it and what it means for her to set aside English and write in Italian.

Lahiri's shift from English to Italian is already hinted at in the title of the book: *In altre parole*, or *In Other Words*, refers to the book being written 'in another language'. Literally, the expression 'in altre parole', or 'in other words', indicates the act of saying the same thing in a different way. Lahiri, however, is not repeating words that she has already formulated in English, which is why her writing in Italian hardly constitutes an act of self-translation, not even in Susan Bassnett's understanding of it as "rewriting" (2013, 23-24). Indeed, Lahiri has completely changed subject matter since she started to write in Italian: she has produced personal reflections on themes such as language (*In altre parole*) and the art of the book jacket (*Il vestito dei libri*), and she has

[26] Every week, *Internazionale* publishes articles from the foreign press translated into Italian together with articles written in Italian.

explored the conflict between movement/change and immobility/rootedness from a more abstract perspective (*Dove mi trovo*).

Nevertheless, if we take the notion of self-translation in its broader, more metaphorical meaning to indicate "the ... ways in which writers' identities ... are remolded by the move to a new country and the integration into a new language-culture, a physical [and psychological] 'translation' that can be accompanied or not by actual translations" (Grutman and Van Bolderen 2014, 323; see also Besemeres 1999), then we can effectively employ this term to describe Lahiri's writing in Italian. Indeed, she started to employ Italian in order to satisfy her need to refashion her sense of self and to replace the defining themes of her work. Therefore, if, at first, Lahiri was driven to Italian by an irrational love or desire, she then used it to satisfy some specific ontological and artistic needs that I outline below.

Writing in English seemingly enabled Lahiri to face her duality as a Bengali American as well as to bridge a gap between herself and her parents (Lahiri 2011). Yet a persistent, unresolved tension between her Bengali and American identities and the need to fashion her writing as her own "domain" rather than as "a response to [her] parents' cultural nostalgia" (Lahiri 2002) – and perhaps also an exhaustion of her artistic inspiration – prompted Lahiri to look for "un'altra direzione per la [sua] scrittura" [another direction for [her] writing] (52). Hence, she decided to move away from her successful and consolidated identity as a Bengali American writer as well as from the 'ethnic' subject matter with which she has been widely identified.

As Chetty observes, "many 'ethnicized' authors struggle against an audience eager to define, behold, know, and consume 'ethnic' others" (2009, 57). Both readers and scholars of Lahiri's *oeuvre* have greatly contributed to the solidification of her identity as an Anglophone Bengali American writer. Indeed, Lahiri has been strongly associated with the Bengali American community and repeatedly presented as its 'interpreter'. However, given her ongoing struggle to accept her Bengali American identity, Lahiri considers the categories into which she has been pigeonholed to be inaccurate and constraining (Lahiri, Sabrynex and Taji 2018). Moreover, she was occasionally subjected to criticism for not fulfilling the task assigned to her by her readership of interpreting between India and the United States, generating a sense of failure and imperfection in her (Lahiri 2002; see also Shankar and Cheung 2012a, xv).

In a letter to Elena Ferrante, Lahiri praises the Italian writer's decision not to appear in public and to keep her identity secret (2014).[27] Lahiri's praise of 'invisibility' in this letter especially reveals her anxiety toward readers' and publishers' expectations about her works and persona. Therefore, when Kellman asks why she gave up English, a language that "can provide access to the most influential publishing houses ... as well as the largest number of readers and the most glittering prizes of any contemporary language" (2017, 123), the answer is: to avoid all this and become somehow invisible to the eyes of her Anglophone readers, thus escaping their literary expectations. Therefore, in contrast to Bình, who is condemned to be invisible, that is, marginal and

[27] Lahiri read this letter at the 2014 literary festival "Festival delle Letterature" in Rome in order to acclaim Ferrante publicly for her choice as the Italian writer has been sometimes criticised on this matter.

lonely, Lahiri has actively sought 'invisibility'. Yet the critiques from Anglophone reviewers of her Italophone work indicate that she has not succeeded in becoming 'invisible'.

These ontological issues are strictly related to linguistic ones. As Graziella Favaro highlights, "Il legame tra lingua e i processi identitari è intricato e inscindibile" [The link between language and identity formation is complicated and indissoluble] (2013, 33; my translation). In a 1985 essay, the literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov (1939-2017), who migrated from Bulgaria to France as an adult, describes his experience of linguistic "schizophrenia" – notwithstanding the rather problematic use of this metaphor as has been indicated by Disability studies – that is, the feeling of having two personalities (or selves) as a consequence of having two languages.[28] Similarly, Lahiri believes that her "identità divisa" [divided identity] is due to "una causa linguistica: la mancanza di una lingua con cui [lei] possa identificar[s]i" [a linguistic reason – the lack of a language to identify with] (85-86). Therefore, she affirms: "Più che mai mi sento una scrittrice senza una lingua definitiva, senza origine, senza definizione" [I feel more than ever that I am a writer without a definitive language, without origin, without definition] (98). Here, Lahiri highlights the nexus between language, homeland and identity and her feeling of emptiness towards them.

Lahiri writes in English as a consequence of her parents' relocation from India to the United Kingdom and then to the United States, chosen as the

[28] In addition, "while multiple or dual personalities may be a symptom of schizophrenia, schizophrenia encompasses a much broader range of disorders, multiple personalities being one possibility" (Martin 2006, 363).

destinations of their migrations because of postcolonial and imperial relations between India and these countries. Thus, although Bengali is Lahiri's mother tongue, the only language that she could speak and understand until the age of four (109; see also Lahiri 2002), she did not learn how to write or read well in this language. Indeed, once she started school in the United States, her mother tongue somehow died, and English became like a "matrigna" [stepmother] (109-10). The Italian word "matrigna" usually has a negative connotation, and so it effectively conveys Lahiri's troubled relationship with this language that displaced her mother tongue.

As Favaro explains, the second language can gradually erode second-generation children's mother tongue, but the mother tongue is not like a dress that can be taken off and put aside in order to wear a more fitting one: it is a protective and essential shell that defines and shapes us (2013, 32-33). Therefore, second-language acquisition is never an easy, sequential, fixed path: this process is affected by contrasting emotions, rejections and attractions, and by mechanisms of power that exclude and push the individual to the margins (Favaro 2013, 30). Often, "having to 'translate oneself' from one's mother tongue into a foreign language" means "losing part of oneself in the process" (Besemeres 1999, 1). Eva Hoffman's autobiography *Lost in Translation* (1989) is an example of "the potential loss of self, of key aspects of what a person has been, in the course of migrating between languages" (Besemeres 1999, 1). Yet the second language often becomes an adopted language, a means to communicate not only facts and events but also emotions, thoughts and expectations (Favaro 2013, 31).

Lahiri has used English precisely to express herself through writing: English has given her "una voce pulita, corretta, per sempre" [a clear, correct voice, forever] (116). However, English is for Lahiri a *step*mother tongue, a language that was imposed on her and separates her from her origins. Her relationship with Bengali is no less complicated: despite being her mother tongue, the language of affection, Lahiri has not mastered it. As a consequence, she thinks that "la [sua] lingua madre sia anche, paradossalmente, una lingua straniera" [[her] mother tongue [is], paradoxically, a foreign language, too] (26) – and it is considered as such in her own country, the United States (25-26). Moreover, given her limited skills in Bengali, Lahiri cannot use it to write.

Ultimately, Lahiri is "una scrittrice che con appartiene del tutto a nessuna lingua" [a writer who doesn't belong completely to any language] (26). Such a linguistic privation is also symptomatic of Lahiri's privation of a homeland, which she also expresses in her latest work in Italian, the novel *Dove mi trovo*. Although the title ("where I am" or "where I find myself") is not posed as question, the nameless protagonist cannot decide where to be and experiences an inner conflict between movement/change and immobility/rootedness. She eventually realises that she can locate/find herself "da nessuna parte" [nowhere] (*Dove mi trovo* 159) as she is destined to move constantly. Even when she is staying in one place, she is just passing through, waiting to go somewhere else.

Because Lahiri feels that she does not have a homeland, in *In altre parole*, she rejects the very notion of exile:

> chi non appartiene a nessun posto specifico non può tornare, in realtà, da nessuna parte. I concetti di esilio e di ritorno implicano un punto di origine, una patria. Senza una patria e senza una vera lingua madre, io vago per il mondo … Sono esiliata perfino dalla definizione di esilio.
>
> [those who don't belong to any specific place can't, in fact, return anywhere. The concepts of exile and return entail a point of origin, a homeland. Without a homeland and without a true mother tongue, I wander the world ... I am exiled even from the definition of exile.]
> (100)

Yet Lahiri's rejection of "the definition of exile" is not based on her awareness that 'exile' has a specific political meaning that does not apply to her case. In fact, when she says "I am exiled even from the definition of exile", Lahiri presents herself as the quintessential exile as she not only lives in a state of separation but also does not even have a place to return to (see Concilio 2016, 119).

While Lahiri's metaphorical use of the term 'exile' throughout the book to describe the state of separation that she experiences with regard to Bengali, English and Italian might be accepted, her appropriation of it to express her feelings of homelessness is rather problematic.[29] As I explained in the Introduction, exile "is resonant with ideas of forced emigration, displacement, social and political marginalization of an individual or a group of refugees"

[29] The word 'exile' is also used by some critics and scholars (see Moore 2016; Monaco 2017) and by her publisher Bloomsbury.

(Baumann 2013, 19). Despite being postcolonial subjects, Lahiri's parents are not exiles, and neither is she. If it is true that Lahiri did not choose to uproot herself from India – her parents did – her sense of marginalisation cannot be compared to that of an authentic exile. Furthermore, as I pointed out previously, Lahiri was not forced to migrate to Italy because of political reasons: she is a voluntary traveller. Besides, only a few privileged individuals can afford to move to a faraway country – taking with them the whole family – just to satisfy their "estro" [fancy] (32) to learn a foreign language.

Certainly, exile and other experiences of migration can generate similar feelings of uprootedness. Migration seems to have estranged Lahiri from any national and linguistic space, causing an existential crisis accompanied by an overdramatically expressed sense of void: "credo che il vuoto sia la mia orgine e anche il mio destino" [I think that the void is my origin and also my destiny] (117). Therefore, despite her claims that she found an identity and a sense of realisation through her writing in English (69), Lahiri was not able to resolve the "scisma" [schism] (26) between her Bengali and American selves and has actually perceived her identity in terms not even of duality but emptiness.

Italian thus serves as the solution to the conflictual, stagnant relationship between English and Bengali, "obliterat[ing]" or "at least [masking] ... the painful memories and associations of a past lived in the first [language]" (Lauret 2014, 64) – in this case, in the first and second language:

> [l]'arrivo dell'italiano … crea un triangolo[,] … una figura dinamica. Il terzo punto cambia la dinamica di questa vecchia coppia litigiosa [inglese e

> bengalese]. Io sono figlia di quei punti infelici, ma il terzo non nasce da loro. Nasce dal mio desiderio, dalla mia fatica. Nasce da me.
>
> [[t]he arrival of Italian … creates a triangle[,] … a dynamic figure. The third point changes the dynamic of that quarrelsome old couple [English and Bengali]. I am the child of those unhappy points, but the third does not come from them. It comes from my desire, my labor. It comes from me]
> (113)

If English and Bengali are, for Lahiri, like parents who cannot be chosen, Italian represents an independent choice, the beginning of her adulthood. While she wrote her Anglophone works to bring back to her parents a lost world, in *In altre parole* Lahiri finally writes for herself and about herself (161; Lahiri, Sabrynex and Taji 2018): "in questo libro io sono, per la prima volta, la protagonista" [in this book I am the protagonist for the first time] (158). This is why, although *In altre parole* is Lahiri's fifth work, it also represents a debut (155).

Hence, through Italian, Lahiri is able to move away from the themes of her previous literary works and from her rather rigid identity as a Bengali American writer. Italian constitutes a way out of an existential and artistic impasse: "una *fuga* dal lungo scontro, nella mia vita, tra l'inglese e il bengalese. Un *rifiuto* sia della madre sia della matrigna. Un percorso indipendente" [a *flight* from the long clash in my life between English and Bengali. A *rejection* of both the mother and the stepmother. An independent path] (113-14; emphasis added). Lahiri's "flight" from and "rejection" of both English and Bengali and

her efforts to "difendere il [suo] italiano" / "protect [her] Italian" from English (91) are immediately visible in the text. Contrary to many migrant, postcolonial and Asian American literary texts – such as those by Alexander, Ruth Ozeki and Karen Tei Yamashita – *In altre parole* is not written in a hybrid language: it is entirely in Italian and those very few words in English are linked to upsetting episodes in Lahiri's life (107-8). If by employing the image of the triangle, Lahiri suggests a connection of all the three elements that form its vertices (114), her translingualism[30] (see Adami 2017; Monaco 2017, 2019) actually corresponds to a mere coexistence of more languages whose "interconnection, overlapping and integration" (Adami 2017, 86) are not deliberate. The "polyphonic expressivity" (Adami 2017, 89) of *In altre parole* is simply an effect of a stage in language learning that is called interlanguage. During this phase, learners develop a temporary linguistic system characterised by the interference of the mother tongue, which, however, gradually disappears (*Nozionario di Glottodidattica*, n.d.). Indeed, if in the first chapters of *In altre parole* the influence of English is quite visible (for instance, in the very short sentences), in the following chapters, and especially in the "Afterword", Lahiri shows a higher command of the Italian language (with longer sentences and less idiosyncratic word choices) (see Groppaldi and Sergio 2016, 92; Moore 2016).

Clearly, the absence of a hybrid language in *In altre parole* is not due to a lack of originality on Lahiri's part (Groppaldi and Sergio 2016) but to a

[30] I employ this term as it has been defined by the linguist Suresh Canagarajah: "The term translingual conceives of language relationships in ... dynamic terms. The semiotic resources in one's repertoire ... interact ... closely, become part of an integrated resource, and enhance each other. The languages mesh in transformative ways, generating new meanings and grammars" (2013, 7-8).

specific existential and literary need: the need to move beyond the two languages and cultures that have anchored her work and identity to the Bengali/American binary. Italian represents "a third direction, a third way, a way out" (Concilio 2016, 119), although not in Homi Bhabha's sense of a third, hybrid space (1994, 56). Indeed, Lahiri does not create a hybrid space where her multiple cultural and linguistic references – Bengali, American, Italian – coexist. Already in 2002, Lahiri declared that she had stopped "incorporating Bengali words into [her] stories," thus refusing to employ a hybridised version of English. With *In altre parole*, she makes an even more radical choice as she uses a third, adopted language and tries to exclude both English and Bengali from her Italian textual space.

This urge to find a 'third place' or dimension had already emerged in Lahiri's previous work: for instance, through Moushumi's stay in Paris in the novel *The Namesake* and through Hema's sojourn in Rome in the short story "Going Ashore" contained in *Unaccustomed Earth*. Lahiri has argued that "the second generation ... leads lives where there can be a third or a fourth place, for whatever reason – career, marriage" (quoted in Leyda 2011, 76). Lahiri's choice of a third place is evidently less practical than this, but it is certain that the second generation's condition of "double displacement" (Dutt-Ballerstadt 2012, 172) – in the United States and in India – leads them to explore new spaces in which to feel at home. When in Paris or Rome, neither Moushumi nor Hema "share the kind of alienation ... and nostalgia for America (their home) in these foreign cultures, as the first-generation women ... feel in America (about their past nation India)" (Dutt-Ballerstadt 2012, 172). Although in

Europe they are still foreign, they do not feel "obliged to fit in[to] either the Indian or the American cultures" (Dutt-Ballerstadt 2012, 172) and therefore they feel liberated. In this cosmopolitan context of voluntary mobility, migration acquires a positive meaning as it offers liberation and a new identity (see Dutt-Ballerstadt 2012; Monaco 2014; Reichardt 2017).

In Italy, although she is labelled as a migrant writer (Lutzoni 2017; Reichardt 2017), Lahiri is freed from literary and cultural expectations toward which she always felt a sense of failure and imperfection (85, 122-23). At the same time, she realises that imperfection plays a positive role in the creative process. Therefore, while her sense of imperfection toward India and the United States – their languages and cultures – represents a great source of anxiety, in Italy her imperfection "dà lo spunto all'invenzione, all'immaginazione, alla creatività" [inspires invention, imagination, creativity] (86). On the one hand, not knowing a language perfectly means having to improve constantly, "implica uno stato di perpetua crescita, di possibilità" [[it] implies a perpetual state of growth, of possibility] (43). On the other hand, lacking complete control over the language means that Lahiri reads and writes in a less passive way as she goes back to an elementary stage that requires more effort but also more awareness of words and linguistic processes; it is as if she were rediscovering language itself and the pleasure and wonder that accompany writing (38-39; see also Leyshon 2013).

Lahiri defines such an imperfection also as a deprivation: writing in another language is like climbing a mountain with poor equipment (52). At the same time, however, she feels "libera, leggera" [free, light] (52). In an

interview, she quotes the writer Italo Calvino (1923-1985), who emphasised the ethical value of lightness (De Villepin 2016). In his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988; Italian: *Lezioni americane*), Calvino ([1988] 2016) explains that literature has "an existential function, the search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living" (32). Lightness is the sole antidote to "the heaviness, the inertia, the opacity of the world" (4), to the paralysis or stagnation of social and political structures. Such a state of "petrification" (4) is personified by the mythical figure of the Gorgon Medusa and her "inexorable gaze" (4). Yet Perseus, who flies on winged sandals, manages to cut off her head by avoiding looking at her directly and looking instead at her image reflected in his shield. Calvino sees in Perseus the embodiment of the future intellectual, who should not adhere completely to reality, providing mimetic representations of it (such as in historical and autobiographical accounts), but rise above it and look at it from a distance. The intellectual can thus gain the necessary detachment from reality and the vantage point from which he or she can still observe and interpret reality without crystallising him or herself in a given position (Calvino [1988] 2016, 3-36).

The idea of fighting the fixity and hardening of one's position is very much present in Lahiri's approach as well. Indeed, she has stated that giving up her authority as an Anglophone writer

> risponde alla [sua] ricerca di leggerezza nella scrittura e nella vita. [È] uscita volontariamente dal contenitore autrice anglosassone per non sentire più il peso di un'identità precisa.

> responds to [her] search for lightness in both writing and life. [She has] voluntarily left the container of Anglophone author not to feel the weight of a definite identity anymore. (Quoted in De Villepin 2016; my translation)[31]

Thus, Lahiri follows Calvino's advice to face "heaviness" by "fly[ing] like Perseus into some other space," that is, "chang[ing] approach, [...] look[ing] at the world from a different angle, with different logic, different methods of knowing and proving" ([1988] 2016, 8). Lahiri is able to reach this "other space" – the third dimension that I mentioned earlier – and change her "approach" through Italian: "[s]crivendo in italiano, non mi sento più con i piedi per terra" [[w]riting in Italian, I feel that my feet are no longer on the ground] (161). Hence, she is deprived of a weight that was sinking her, and the lightness that she acquires enables her to move on and to take on a new identity, "[u]na nuova voce" [[a] new voice] (56). Italian becomes Lahiri's "filtro, [... i]l distacco senza il quale non riesco a creare niente" [filter, [... t]he detachment without which I can't create anything] (162), and so, her 'shield', her means to distance herself from a readership whose 'gaze' petrified her and her art.

The link between lightness and the Italian language can also be seen in Lahiri's descriptions of Italian as "evanescente" [evanescent] (33); words

[31] In Italian, the term *anglosassone* [Anglo-Saxon] also refers to the English-speaking/Anglophone world, particularly to the British Isles and North America (and it does not have a negative connotation). It is within this meaning that Lahiri employs this word.

“evaporano nell’aria, colano come l’acqua tra le dita” [vanish into thin air, they flow like water between my fingers] (46); the authors’ writing in this language is “impalpabile. Vaporosa come la nebbia” [impalpable. Nebulous, like the fog] (79). English, instead, is an aspect of her past that is “pesante” [heavy] (123). Lahiri sometimes combines lightness with heaviness, thus evoking Calvino’s idea of their complementarity ([1988] 2016, 18). For instance, when she learns new words, she feels “frizzante” [in high spirits [or ‘effervescent’]] but also “carica” [loaded down] (45) and declares that when “si vive senza la propria lingua ci si sente senza peso e, allo stesso tempo, sovraccarichi” [you live without your own language you feel weightless and, at the same time, overloaded] (97). Lahiri therefore experiences a paradox: she feels lighter writing in Italian but also “inchiodata” [confined [literally, ‘nailed down’]] because of the weight of this whole new linguistic baggage that restricts her ‘movements’ (70, 122). Lahiri wonders “come una prigione possa somigliare al paradiso” [how a prison can resemble a paradise] (70). Here, Lahiri compares her Italian to the confining space of a prison because it is limited. Yet it is through limitation and imperfection that she can rediscover language as well as the pleasure and wonder that accompany writing (52).

Of course, this is not always an exciting process: it is, in fact, often frustrating. Lahiri says of her writing at an early stage: “Scrivo in un italiano bruttissimo, scorretto, imbarazzante” [I write in a terrible, embarrassing Italian, full of mistakes] (51). While this is certainly not the case with *In altre parole*, it is true that Lahiri’s Italian, especially in the first chapters, reveals her lack of command of the language. For instance, she makes an extensive use of

synathroesmus,[32] which reveals her linguistic insecurity – since she is unable to handle a new and vast linguistic repertoire – but also her linguistic appetite, as suggested by Luigi Spagnolo, who speaks of "bulimia linguistica" [linguistic bulimia] (2017; my translation). Lahiri herself believes that the problem with her Italian is not a lack of style but an excess of it (132). Lahiri also employs the rhetorical figure of correctio,[33] in an effort to find "la parola ... più azzeccata" [the [word] that is most exact] (130) but sometimes with an estranging effect for an Italian native speaker (see Groppaldi and Sergio 2016, 92; Saroldi 2017, 77).

Here are some examples of synathroesmus: "incarico *zelante* e rilassante" [this task ... is both obsessive and relaxing] (41; my emphasis);[34] "una lingua straniera, antica, esigente" [an ancient and demanding foreign language] (120); "in modo privato, frammentato, spontaneo" [in a private, fragmented, spontaneous way] (152). Examples of correctio include: "entro in un altro territorio, inesplorato, *lattiginoso*" [I enter another land, unexplored, murky] (38; my emphasis); "mi sento carica, arricchita, *frizzante*" [I feel loaded down, wealthy, in high spirits] (45; my emphasis); "sembra un compito *contraffatto*, innaturale" [the work seems counterfeit, unnatural] (69; my emphasis); "le parole sono elusive, imprendibili" [words are elusive, ungraspable] (47). The

[32] Synathroesmus is the conglomeration of many words and expressions either with similar meaning – synonymia – or not – congeries.

[33] Correctio consists in the amending of a term or phrase just employed or a further specifying of meaning.

[34] The adjective "zelante" is translated as "obsessive" by Goldstein; yet '*zelante*' does not necessarily imply obsession although it certainly indicates dedication to a certain task. It is usually employed to refer to a hardworking and meticulous person who puts a lot of effort into a task. Lahiri loosely uses the word in relation to the task itself, probably to indicate that it requires effort. I would therefore translate "zelante" as 'demanding'.

words in italics are those that stand out for a native speaker of Italian, who is unaccustomed to seeing them in those contexts. As a result, Italian readers somehow rediscover their own language as they are stimulated to dwell on words that appear in unusual contexts and therefore acquire new shades of meaning. The English translation neutralises the oddness of these words and their estranging effect – or "domesticates" them (Lauret 2014, 31) – which may explain why many Anglophone reviewers of the English version of *In altre parole* have deemed its language as too plain.[35]

Lahiri is also aware of a "muro" [wall] (101) that separates her from other Italians as her name and appearance lead to the assumption that she is a foreigner who cannot speak the language. For the artist, this condition of separation and estrangement that places her "ai margini dei Paesi, delle culture" [on the margins of countries, of cultures] (75), neither inside nor outside, is an existential one. Thus, the artist has to endure it but also take advantage of it since it is precisely in this intermediate, grey zone that artistic creation becomes possible ("Jhumpa Lahiri, Dove mi trovo, Guanda" 2018) – as Ozeki has also contended but without attaching any negative emotion to her being "in the middle" (quoted in Lee 2013). For Lahiri, living in the in-between space is both a source of anguish and inspiration ("Jhumpa Lahiri, Dove mi

[35] I have asked two Italian speakers to comment on a list of words taken from *In altre parole* and two English speakers to comment on the same words as they are translated in *In Other Words* (some of these words appear in the examples above). The Italian speakers, myself included, found the words 'odd' – sometimes inappropriate – because of the context in which they appear or because they are not very common or clash with the general tone of the text. These lexical choices might be due to the fact that English remains the writer's dominant or matrix language. The English speakers instead described the words as sometimes literary and heightened but stated that they did not sound strange to them.

trovo, Guanda" 2018). The wall becomes a necessary barrier, in-betweenness a necessary status for the artist.

Therefore, Lahiri presents herself as a "forever foreigner" (Tuan 1998) and wanderer who suffers because of her state of outsiderness and mobility – indeed, the movement between countries and languages causes "straniamento" [estrangement] (26, 98), "angoscia" [distress] (95), "annientamento" [annihilat[ion]] (96). Nevertheless, she romanticises this state as she ultimately depends on it as the very source of artistic inspiration. Such a dependence might explain why, despite her great success and privileged position in the United States, Lahiri was unsatisfied and kept feeling divided or empty, or, having settled as a Bengali American writer, she decided to rethink that position in order to further uproot herself and feel "on the margins" (75) – hence artistically inspired – again.

Yet Lahiri seems to have found, at least provisionally, a new home in Italy. Indeed, as learning Italian makes her rediscover words, "la ragione per cui scriv[e], la gioia insieme all'esigenza" [the reason that [she] write[s], the joy as well as the need] (52), thus providing her with new inspiration and creative energy, Italian and Italy have become her adopted language and homeland. In 2015, Lahiri stated that Rome was the only place in the world where she felt at home and rooted. But then she added: "quello che mi radica veramente è sempre la letteratura, sono le parole" [what makes me feel truly rooted is always literature, words] ("Le parole per dire 'Casa'" 2015; my translation). Again, language is Lahiri's true home. Her feeling of rootedness in Rome has less to do with the city or the country itself, its culture, than with its

language.[36] Because her link to Italy is more linguistic than cultural, Lahiri does not "reinvent herself ... as an Italian writer but as a writer in Italian" (Moore 2016), that is, as an Italian-language writer. Hence, Lahiri worlds both the Italian language and Asian American literature, opening Italian to other cultures and ethnicities and Asian American literature and the United States to other languages.

Lahiri's desire for rootedness and her claims that she found it in Rome, together with her rejection of hybridity, might indicate a trend toward localisation rather than an expansion of one's boundaries. However, Lahiri does not become attached to Italy as a concrete, localised reality but rather as an abstract, linguistic space, whose language enables her to transcend national borders. Indeed, she asserts in the "Afterword": "In italiano mi muovo verso l'astrazione" [In Italian I'm moving toward abstraction] (161), and in a recent interview she has declared: "I am working to free my work from geographic coordinates, and to arrive at a more abstract sense of place" (quoted in Leyshon 2018) and identity. Lahiri has not adopted the Italian language in an attempt to become more local than global but because through Italian she can, to a certain extent, free herself from identity labels that are too specific.

Lahiri's aspiration to abstraction is evident in *Dove mi trovo*, a postnational and postethnic novel, in which the author somehow appropriates Calvino's understanding of lightness as writing characterised by abstraction

[36] The great importance that Lahiri attaches to language might explain her recurrent use of familial metaphors to describe it and the fact that she personifies it, comparing languages to parents, children, married couples and lovers. Hence, for Lahiri, language seems to have the same significance as human beings.

([1988] 2016, 20). The nameless protagonist lives in a similarly anonymous city, devoid of specific features that might help the reader identify it. Therefore, the reader does not know exactly who or where the protagonist is. Here, namelessness coincides with statelessness as names often indicate one's belonging to a certain culture or nation. Lahiri's omission of the protagonist's name is thus an attempt to erase her nationality. In addition, the protagonist is not marked by her ethnicity. Lahiri's new identity as an Italophone Bengali American writer grants her identity more fluid boundaries and her readers greater interpretative possibilities as to whom her characters might embody.

Lahiri has thus developed an alternative way to expand her identity: not by multiplying her national links as in transnational practices but through a subtraction of them that is not necessarily nihilistic but responds to a quest for "lightness". As Esterino Adami argues in his review of *In altre parole*, the very concept of language – which testifies to one's belonging to a certain cultural context – should be revised in the light of the migratory movements and postcolonial transformations that are reshaping our contemporary world (2015, 168). In a world where people are increasingly crossing borders, and where it would be obtuse to continue to keep literatures and languages within closed national compartments, Lahiri endorses a sort of postnationalism that releases languages from any essential link to a particular culture or country and vice versa.

However, Lahiri says that *In altre parole*, even translated into English, will always have "radici specifiche, localizzate" [specific, localized roots] (168). Moreover, she has admitted that she cannot write in Italian unless she is in Italy

(99; quoted in Leyshon 2013): *Dove mi trovo*, for instance, was written after her return from Rome to the United States, but Lahiri composed it in those times when she visited Italy ("Jhumpa Lahiri presentazione del libro 'Dove mi trovo'" 2018). If, with this novel, Lahiri has reached "a more abstract sense of place" (quoted in Leyshon 2018) and identity, she nevertheless had to be in Italy to write it. Lahiri feels that outside of Italy her Italian sounds "stonato, trapiantato" [jarring, transplanted] (96). This is because she is convinced that "ogni lingua appartiene a un posto specifico" [every language belongs to a specific place] (25). Lahiri's "need to spatially anchor languages" (Grutman 2018, 7) – in particular, to anchor her Italian, the language of abstraction, in Italy, a specific, concrete location – is at odds with her aspiration to complete abstraction, to deracinate languages and writing from the concepts of nation and culture. This is perhaps a 'conservative' side of Lahiri that clashes with her progressive vision of a cosmopolitan literature and society. Yet, by pursuing an ideal of "lightness", Lahiri has expanded her horizons as well as those of Asian American, American and Italian literatures, an achievement that will be more effective once scholars acknowledge her Italian-language literary production and its great potential to world American and Asian American literatures.

CONCLUSION

Truong's and Lahiri's 'European' works clearly indicate that the transnational perspective in Asian American studies needs to be expanded in order to include connections between multiple and distant geographies that comprise and, at the same time, exceed the Americas and Asia. As neither the transpacific or the hemispheric paradigm can describe such ties, we need to adopt a world or planetary perspective, which can be taken as the basis to establish planetary Asian American studies. Despite both being works of world literature, Truong's and Lahiri's texts offer two very different experiences of mobility, one negative and the other positive. In Truong's story of a colonial labourer who encounters violence and marginalisation in both his host land and homeland, which he was forced to abandon, Bình experiences, like Mulberry and Sandhya, a form of negative transnationalism as he finds himself on a "bridge": "neither here nor there" (*The Book of Salt* 92). His alienation and solitude within both the French and Vietnamese contexts are rendered through images of invisibility and muteness, the latter enhanced by Bình's conflicted relationship with the French language. Lahiri, in contrast, embodies the privileged and voluntary traveller who benefits from her mobility and settlement in a foreign environment. If, like Bình, Lahiri also rejects transnationalism – as her attempts to exclude both English and Bengali from her Italian textual space demonstrate – in favour of a

kind of postnationalism, she nevertheless forges a link to Italy by adopting its language. The Italian language does not mute her but rather gives her a new voice and so a new identity. The contrasting mood of Truong's and Lahiri's narrations warns us that Asian America's connections to the rest of the world are neither neutral nor uniform. Rather, they have been generated within very different historical, cultural and social contexts that are able to determine the nature of such planetary connections.

CONCLUSION:

BEYOND TRANSNATIONALISM, TOWARD PLANETARITY

This dissertation has explored the theme of mobility and the related concept of transnationalism through an analysis of contemporary Asian American literary works. My study of the life and works of Meena Alexander, Jhumpa Lahiri, Hualing Nieh, Ruth Ozeki, Monique Truong and Karen Tei Yamashita has shown that Asian Americans' transnational links include the United States and their originary or ancestral country in Asia but also other countries located all around the world – in North and South America, Africa and Europe. Thus, this study contributes to what I argue is a fruitful critique of transnational Asian American studies as, in our increasingly interconnected and mobile world, it would be myopic to cling to the East-West, U.S.-centred transpacific perspective that has dominated the field. What has also emerged is that, from negative to multiple, from transpacific to hemispheric to planetary, from first-generation to third-generation, the cross-border links described and established by these authors exceed traditional, standardised notions of transnationalism, which therefore prove to be inadequate to represent such a wide range of ties. While original formulations of transnationalism in the social sciences still constitute valid points of departure, it is necessary to look beyond them in order to gain

awareness of much more complex and diverse processes of interconnection that involve not only multiple nations but also continents, oceans and hemispheres and that are not necessarily positive and enriching for the individual. The study of these particular authors and texts has also highlighted what in 1994 Doreen Massey called the "differentiated" nature of mobility (149), thus anticipating a core idea of the later "new mobilities paradigm" (Sheller and Urry 2006). Indeed, while all these authors exemplify, though to different degrees, a model of privileged and positive mobility that enriches the individual, the protagonists of their works mostly experience negative forms of mobility that bring them suffering.

Such a difference is dictated by the individual's age, gender, class and ethnicity as well as emotional sensitivity and by the circumstances that initiated their movement away from home. Discourses on mobility and transnationalism should always consider this intersectionality (see Levitt and Jaworsky 2007, 144). Nieh and Alexander left their native countries, China and India, for the United States of their own volition: Nieh to take an opportunity at the University of Iowa, Alexander to follow her Jewish American husband. Ozeki and Yamashita were born in the United States, travelled to Japan and moved to other countries by choice: Ozeki to Canada to be with her German-Canadian husband and Yamashita to Brazil to do academic research. Lahiri's relocation to Italy was motivated by her desire to learn the Italian language. Only Truong was forced to migrate to the United States as a refugee of the Vietnam War, but she was later able to travel to France as a tourist. Some of these writers, especially Alexander, Lahiri and Truong, are particularly sensitive in their

writing to the negative effects of their relocations: images of rupture, fragmentation and emptiness abound in their works. These three writers particularly have denounced the racist behaviour that they have encountered in the United States. Yet all the writers in this thesis occupy a relatively privileged position within U.S. society, most of them having worked in academia and some of them having been internationally praised for their works.

Furthermore, all of them have established positive transnational links to those countries that have marked their lives. Nieh has described herself as a tree with roots in China, the trunk in Taiwan and the branches in the United States. Alexander conceived her work as an "embroidery", able to "stitch" together the fragments of her "broken geography", which encompasses four continents. Ozeki speaks affirmatively of her hybridity as a mixed-race Japanese North American, and transnational links have enabled her to give expression to her pluralistic sense of self. Yamashita also regards hybridity and transnationality very positively, something that she learned to appreciate during her years in Brazil – although, unlike Ozeki, she does not consider hybridity the result of genetic mixing but rather of her encounter with a plurality of cultures. Truong has constructed her transnationality by identifying 'the South' as a common element of her early life in Vietnam and the United States, but she has also looked to the European destinations of the Vietnamese diaspora. Finally, Lahiri has overcome her sense of in-betweenness vis-à-vis her Bengali and American selves by attaching herself to Italy and especially to its language.

As second- and third-generation Asian Americans with ties to their ancestral countries, Lahiri, Ozeki and Yamashita are proof that immigrants' descendants can be transnational, too, contrary to what some social scientists have theorised. Moreover, the patterns of all these writers' mobility, mainly voluntary and in any case not prompted by the capitalist system of production, contradict social scientists' assumption that transnationalism is a typical phenomenon of the capitalist era as people migrate from peripheral countries to the centres of capital in order to find employment. This is also true for the characters of their works, with the exception of the Brazilian Dekasegi in Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles*, whose mobility is dictated precisely by the cycles of a capitalist mode of production. In addition, these writers demonstrate that modern technologies do not always play an instrumental role in the creation and development of transnational ties. For instance, Nieh was part of a group of writers who relocated from mainland China to Taiwan after the Communist takeover in 1949 and then to the United States: their "obsession with China" (Hsia 1971) was certainly not encouraged by technologies such as the Internet given that these were introduced later. In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki provides an example of transpacific interconnection and friendship that originates and is sustained by the medium of a physical diary, brought from Japan to Canadian shores by the ocean waves. The Internet is presented in opposition to the diary as a lonely space of disconnection and disengagement from the rest of the world. As for Sandhya, the protagonist of Alexander's *Manhattan Music*, being able to travel between the United States and India

within the span of a few hours does not help her establish ties to both countries: rather, it contributes to her mental instability.

Contrary to these writers' own lives, the characters in their narratives – with the exception of Lahiri who is the subject of her linguistic memoir *In altre parole* – experience negative forms of mobility: they are refugees fleeing war, like Mulberry in Nieh's *Mulberry and Peach*; they escape violence in both homeland and host land and cannot decide where to settle, like Mulberry and Sandhya; they are forced to return-migrate to their ancestral countries where they confront social marginalisation, like Nao in *A Tale for the Time Being* and the Dekasegi; or they have been excluded by their family and lost their job because of their sexual orientation but are equally marginalised in the host country, like Bình in Truong's *The Book of Salt*. As a result, they all reject transnational ties that would have linked them to nations where they are marginalised and/or subjected to various kinds of violence: physical, psychological and institutional. In some cases, such as with Nao and the Dekasegi, they look nostalgically at their homeland (the United States and Brazil respectively), still refusing to establish transnational ties.

Hence, all these characters find themselves in a liminal, in-between space: neither here nor there. As Takeyuki Tsuda explains, liminality "can be highly problematic, ultimately producing a disorienting state of 'homeland-lessness' abroad, where neither the sending or receiving country serves any longer as a stable source of social belonging" (2003a, 122). Such a state can cause mental disorders, such as split personality (Mulberry/Peach), a persecution complex (Mulberry and the Dekasegi) and depression, leading to

self-harm and suicide attempts (Sandhya, Bình, Nao and her father). To describe these cases, in which mobility and transnationalism are coerced and/or have negative consequences on the individual and in which transnationalism is rejected and so actualised in its negative version (that is, the process by which immigrants *do not* forge relations to *either* country of origin *or* settlement), I have coined the terms 'negative mobility' and 'negative transnationalism'. These terms aim to critique celebratory or neutral and universalist understandings of mobility and transnationalism.

However, just as the authors of these texts sometimes have ambivalent feelings toward their transnationality – since this is a source of inner enrichment and artistic inspiration but also of internal fragmentation and confusion – so too some of their characters learn how to embrace transnationalism. Moreover, these texts challenge any idea of cultural distinctiveness and purity through their form, even when their characters seem to support such ideas. *A Tale for the Time Being*, for instance, is based on the Buddhist concept of interconnectedness, which enables Ozeki to express her vision of "planetary relatedness" (Milne 2015). The 'Chinese box' structure of the novel, the presence of heterogeneous materials as well as the combination of fact and fiction aim to represent this idea. Nao, who initially clings to her American identity and refuses to forge any link to Japan because of her negative experiences as a *kikokushijo* kid ('repatriated child'), eventually finds a way to connect to Japan thanks to her great-grandmother Jiko, who teaches her about Zen Buddhism, providing her with a tool for overcoming her issues. Nao also unexpectedly develops a link to French language and culture, which positions

her next to Truong but also Alexander and Lahiri as they have all established connections to Europe. The form of these texts, of course, does not only reflect hybridity, interconnectedness and multiplicity – as in *Manhattan Music*, *A Tale for the Time Being* and *Circle K Cycles* – but also the fragmented and plural subjectivities of the characters, affected by negative mobility and transnationalism. Nieh, for instance, employs modernist and postmodernist techniques to create a fragmentary, non-linear narrative that echoes Mulberry's multiple personality disorder. Thus, form has a central function to the narration, given that it strengthens the messages that these works seek to convey.

In order to problematise and expand the concept of transnationalism further, I have highlighted its limitations and pointed to the ways in which these authors' and their characters' transnational ties can be described by more inclusive and, at the same time, more specific terms. These terms propose other territorial divisions beyond the nation, and especially beyond the United States, as the basis for defining connections between different geographical and cultural locations. In particular, 'transpacific' foregrounds the Pacific Ocean as the connective tissue between a number of nations on the so-called Pacific Rim; 'hemispheric' considers the American continent as a whole; with 'world' (adj.) or 'planetary', any kind of boundary dissolves definitively, and with the planet as a field of analysis, it is possible to identify and define connections between places that are only partially included in the above categories. I have also sometimes employed the term 'postcolonial' where relevant: regarding Alexander's and Lahiri's relationship with the English language and Truong's

link to the United States and France. As I have discussed, the concepts of postcolonialism and transnationalism do not exclude each other. I have adopted the terms 'transpacific' and 'hemispheric' to define Ozeki's links to the United States, Canada and Japan. The hemispheric paradigm also applies to Yamashita, who has decentred the United States by looking South, to Brazil, as well as East, to Japan. Alexander's, Truong's and Lahiri's ties to Europe call for more planetary definitions. All these writers' connections to nations other than their country of origin and settlement, or country of origin and ancestral country, defy established definitions of transnationalism that focus on the immigrant's bilateral ties to homeland and host land.

This multiplication and diversification of transnational links is significant for Asian American studies as well. The field has seen a transnational turn that has not, however, signalled a move from its initial transpacific formulation. While in theory the term 'transpacific' includes countries in both North and South America, in practice Asian American studies scholars have employed it mainly to indicate U.S.-Asian relations (see Nessly 2019, 74). They have therefore neglected Asian Americans' ties to places and cultures that are not part of this axis, or they have dismissed such ties to the point that they have excluded literary works such as *In altre parole* from the Asian American literary field. The hemispheric paradigm represents a first step toward expanding such a limited perspective and, importantly, toward decentring the United States and countering its exceptionalism and provincialism. Indeed, the hemispheric model stresses this country's positioning within the larger geography of the Americas. Hence, the United States is understood as a country among many

others that constitute the American continent and the Western hemisphere. Such a vision can be found in Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* and in Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles*. Yamashita's work, in particular, brings Asian American studies South, adding a North-South perspective to its conventional East-West perspective that is able to promote a "minor transnationalism" (Lionnet and Shih 2005) between Asian North and Asian South American communities and thus better reflect historical realities.

Yet a hemispheric outlook is inadequate to analyse Asian Americans' links to countries that lie outside the Americas: for instance, in Europe. Alexander's, Nao's, Truong's and Lahiri's ties to Europe cannot be defined as transpacific or hemispheric – and, in Lahiri's case, not even postcolonial – and so they require a wider category: a world or planetary one. These terms, however, do not simply indicate a category of literary works that have crossed multiple borders: they are even more significant insofar as they describe a paradigm or a perspective able to enlarge the vision of research fields such as American and Asian American studies. While transnationalism has represented a first step toward developing a critical method able to reflect on the progressive interconnectedness of the planet, its focus on bilateral ties between nations has obscured other types of multilateral connections that happen at a regional, continental, oceanic, hemispheric and planetary level.

This is why I agree with Susan Gillman and Kirsten Silva Gruesz (2011) that we need to move beyond the transnational turn in American studies and implement a "worlded analysis" (231). Such an analysis "would map out a network of crosshatched, multidirectional influences rather than drawing one-

way or even two-way lines of comparison" (231), showing how the nation, and the United States in particular, is "simply one point on a scale rather than the determining unit of analysis" (230). Wai Chee Dimock was one of the first scholars to emphasise such a shift of focus in the world or planetary paradigm: "[r]ather than taking the nation as the default position, ... we come up with alternate geographies that deny it [its] totalizing function. Forging such geographies might be one of the most critical tasks now facing the field" (2007, 3). Not only American studies but also Asian American studies should face this task: that is, to go beyond transnationalism and its transpacific version in order to recognise the significance of Asian America's links to other geographies beyond the United States and a country in Asia. As long as the focus is on transnational ties, other kinds of connections risk going – and have gone – unnoticed: it is only by extending the field of analysis to the planet that such ties, which exceed more restricted fields such as the transpacific, become visible. If necessary, it is then possible to narrow down the view and adopt more specific terms such as hemispheric, transpacific or transnational. A worlded analysis also enables us to study literary texts beyond their contexts of origin by concentrating on their international circulation and reception (see Damrosch 2003). These aspects reveal the transnational nature of literary works that are apparently rooted in a single culture and language, such as *Mulberry and Peach*.

Moreover, as indicated by Gillman and Gruesz, a worlding approach "would attend to the way that texts move between multiple forms of language usage – native and foreign, dialect and register, Creole and patois" (2011, 230-31). Such an attention to language variation and translingualism has been

lacking in Asian American literary studies, to the detriment of literary texts originally written in other languages such as *Mulberry and Peach* and *In altre parole*. As this study has demonstrated, the fact that these texts are not written in English should not be considered a reason for exclusion but rather for enrichment of the Asian American literary field. These non-Anglophone literary works underscore Asian American writers' investment in other nations' cultures *and* languages. Furthermore, acknowledging and promoting the use of languages other than English within a predominantly Anglophone context represents a further step toward decentring the United States and countering Anglocentrism. In other words, translingualism is an important aspect of worlding American and Asian American studies: namely, the process that reveals and simultaneously builds connections between (Asian) America and the rest of the world (see Dimock 2007, 2017).

Lahiri's attachment to the Italian language is, in this sense, very significant. Yet her Italophone creative production has been largely overlooked by Anglophone readers and scholars outside Italy. This is also due to the absence of specific Asian American themes in her Italian-language works. In her latest novel *Dove mi trovo*, for instance, Lahiri gives voice to an anonymous character, devoid of ethnic and national traits. Similarly, Yamashita's works on the Japanese Brazilian community have also been neglected by Asian American scholars because of their deviation from typically Asian American themes and characters. Nevertheless, as I have argued in relation to the use of languages other than English, these authors' focus on other ethnic communities than the Asian American or on more 'abstract' characters is significant for Asian

American literature (see Sohn 2014b). Indeed, through their postethnic attitude, that is, their aspiration to overcome ethnic boundaries – which for Yamashita means going beyond *her own* ethnicity and for Lahiri beyond ethnicity *tout court* – these writers have been able to express their artistic individuality and expand their own horizons as well as those of Asian America. The 'postethnic' can therefore be understood as an expression of artistic freedom and an attempt to be more inclusive.

Rajini Srikanth notes how socio-political and economic forces have confined ethnic minority and postcolonial writers to ethno-specific themes (2004, 151). This is especially true for Lahiri, who has been described as the 'interpreter' of the Bengali American community many times. Writing in Italian has released her from the weight of a definite, ethnic identity; as a result, she has been able to move away from the ethnic subjectivity with which she has been associated and find new artistic inspiration. Yet "the ultimate political limitations of ethno-particular writing" is "the impossibility of breaking down institutional structures of racism that thrive on keeping people divided from one another by emphasizing their differences in the guise of 'celebrating diversity'" (Srikanth 2004, 152). It is precisely against this multiculturalist ideal that the "postethnic perspective" has been introduced: this perspective, inspired by cosmopolitanism, promotes solidarities and affiliations between different ethnic groups, able to address global issues (Hollinger 2000, 12-13). Yamashita's portrayals of the Japanese Brazilian community represent a tool through which to establish connections and comparisons between this

community and Asian North America and so to develop a "rooted cosmopolitanism" (see Cohen 1992; Appiah 2005).

In our interconnected world, nurturing a cosmopolitan sensibility and a "capacity ... to engage with the lives of 'others'" (Srikanth 2004, 151) is essential to the construction of a peaceful world community. Indeed, interconnectedness has both positive and negative consequences on humanity and the planet as it means that what happens in one place affects many others – if not the whole planet, as the recent case of the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated. Therefore, we have to learn to be responsible for each other, that is, cultivate a cosmopolitan sensibility or planetary consciousness, which we can also learn to do through literature. The creation, circulation, reading and studying of literary works are important processes as those people who are involved in them come into contact and are encouraged to empathise with other people who are distant in geographical, cultural, linguistic and psychological terms. Hence, through their form and content, literary texts such as those analysed here are able to make us aware of and, simultaneously, produce planetary interconnectedness.

The authors and texts considered in this study, however, constitute only a portion of a whole body of planetary Asian American literature. Future research in the field of Asian American literature might focus on works in which links are established to the same areas that I have included in my study or to different areas – such as Australia or a country in Africa – and works originally written in or including other languages than English and/or other communities besides those examined here. Therefore, research into the planetarity of Asian

America is initiated rather than exhausted in this study and is worth pursuing given that it opens the field to other territories and languages, thus challenging U.S. provincialism and exceptionalism (and that of other nations) as well as creating coalitions with other communities and fostering a planetary consciousness.

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