

“Go where the Love Is”: Failed Emotional Negotiations of Space and Identity in Tessa McWatt’s *This Body*¹

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ABSTRACT

Identity, space and emotions, although traditionally all traditionally naturalized and delinked from the construction of one another, might also be read as formed by intertwined processes that are guided and shaped by hegemonic powers. Nonetheless, as they delineating difference within and among themselves, the consideration of these three fields and the way they work together in these shaping opens up new ways to approach the split between normative categories of identity, assigned location and adequate feelings, and their subjective perception. Tessa McWatt’s novel *This Body* presents the reader with two Guyanese characters, Victoria and her nephew Derek, that undergo, at many different levels, this split between subjectivity and a socially and culturally given subject position. Challenging normative ideals, Victoria struggles with her categorization as Other; an endeavour marked by her trajectories and experiences as she negotiates and redeploys a physical as well as a social space of her own in the city of London. Still, her love relationship with a British man would make her drift towards assimilation inasmuch as this affair relocates Victoria within dominant gender, ethnic and class hierarchies.

Plenty of the fiction dealing with diaspora and displaced subjects often relays on narratives of love in order to achieve a sense of fulfilment and belonging for their migratory characters. With romanticism at the centre of their stories, these narratives, as non-conformist as they might be in other respects, seem to maintain a highly uncritical

attitude towards the processes of assimilation and erasure that love relationships entail, above all when they take place within certain well-established cultural, ethnic and gender hierarchies. Tessa McWatt's novel *This Body*, published in 2007, follows this current trend in westernized postcolonial literature. It tells a rather ambiguous story, full of contradictions and hegemonic pitfalls, as it recounts the diasporic experience of its two main characters – Victoria, an elderly Guyanese migrant, and her nephew, Derek. This work encompasses the difficulties that the main character, Victoria, tackles in her way to self-definition within a more traditional narrative of romantic love, still managing to offer a rather complex view of this emotion's entanglements with power, identity and place.

Contributing to the lack of criticism towards the workings of emotions, the Academy has recklessly focused on the observation of the mechanisms through which identity is constructed in the amalgamation and intersection of categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, or class. As the attention paid to representational politics and spatial affairs concerning diaspora seems to slowly but steadily be fading away - as if their limits had been sufficiently explored, or just maybe as if we had had enough of that already-, some freshly developed approaches try not to forsake the above mentioned issues incorporating new aspects to the study of the formation of group and individual identities. Recent philosophical trends temptingly point at those territories that have been shamelessly regarded as natural, questioning precisely what we are most prone to take for granted. Through theories such as Sarah Ahmed's feelings and emotions stop being regarded as uncontrollable and springing from the subject's deepest and most inaccessible inside. Rather they are brought into focus as discourses that help shaping the borders that define different ethnic, racial, gender, sexual, class, and even age, groups as well as they conduct the ways in which subjects categorized under different labels relate to one another (Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b, 2010). Such redeployment rather emphasizes the role of what Ahmed names "emotional economies" not only in the shaping of identities, but also in the arrangement of social and cultural hierarchies or power relations. This scholar defines her economic model of emotions as one sustaining "that while emotions do not positively reside in a subject or a figure, they still work to bind subjects together. Indeed, to put it more strongly, the non-residence of emotions if what makes them 'binding'" (Ahmed, 2004b: 119).

When intersected with the dialectics of space and a performative understanding of the subject, emotions seem to take on a new dimension that opens way for a study that locates them as one of the key discourses that shape everyday practices, as well as political and individual identities. If feeling is also constructed through the repetition of certain structures of meaning and has a productive capability itself, then it is not only brought about by the social and physical location of the individual. It also works in the modelling and limiting of space itself as well as in the evaluation of entities as intelligible or not, normative or non-normative, familiar or *unheimlich*.

True to these statements, McWatt's text largely holds on to straight binary categories. It speaks as much through what it states about these concerns, as it does through its strategically placed and powerful silences. Lack and absence take on a voice

in the novel as what is not said and the fact that certain themes that are left unattended shifts the meaning of its possible readings. In line with this contrasting balance of dualities, the novel moves along to engage in a play of difference that is successfully executed through carefully constructed binaries that reflect the struggle between stable categories of normativity and Otherness. With heterosexual inter-ethnic love as one of its central issues, the novel provides the opportunity to analyze how emotion works to build up the frontiers that encircle these categories – normative/non-normative, self/Other – as they leave little space for the long-celebrated hybridity or in-betweenness.

Such dynamics are readily deployed in the space characters are provided in order to build themselves as individuals. Meanwhile Derek, as a child, is allowed some more space and freedom when constructing his not-yet-complete identity, Victoria’s narrative is much more restrictive in terms of both social and physical space. She is presented as an uncommon kind of woman: sixty-four, nomadic, dark-skinned and of Chinese ancestry, single by choice but sexually active, and suddenly endowed with maternity as her sister’s in-vitro son, Derek, arrives from Guyana after his mother dies in a car accident. Her singularities, far from being easily achieved ones, grant her a difficult place in her social environment. Meanwhile, following the play of binaries, Victoria is granted two relationships throughout the novel with men who are each other complete opposite, Lenny and Alexander: the first is a simple man about her own age and her partner in a catering business; the second a younger man, father to a friend of her nephew’s, with an exciting social life.

Within this framework and cleaving to the novel’s dual presentation, Victoria is defined mostly through difference, that is to say, through what she is or she is not when compared to other characters within the narration. In order to do this, a number of dichotomies are clearly established: the experiences of both main characters, Victoria and Derek, are juxtaposed; Victoria compares herself to her sister, and to other women around her; differences between her and the character of Alexander are carefully drawn setting both characters as opposite poles; feelings and experiences connected to movement (physical and emotional) and stasis are guilefully narrated. Building the character’s identity through binaries highlights the fact that “identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, [...] that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term – and thus its ‘identity’ can be constructed” (Hall, 2000: 17). In addition to the recognition of difference as central to the formation of identity, the idea that meaning is constructed precisely through lack is, as we will see, perfectly consistent with the author’s aforementioned use of silence. Noticeable omissions are used to convey ideas not only through their explicit exposition but also through their absence, thus highlighting the meaningfulness of what is not expressed.

Still, the emphasis on difference contrasts with a solid interest in overcoming such a divide. In order to tackle this complex task, the novel subscribes to a quite traditional narrative of love as a way to break through the borders drawn between subjects by

differences of class, race or age. Indeed, if love was presented in previous Western literature as a driving force able to weaken and dissolve well-established socio-economic barriers, in contemporary postcolonial literature, its potential seems to have expanded. Love is endowed now with the power to blur the borders that separate ethnic groups, granting the minority's member a way into dominant culture. As Sara Ahmed explains in her analysis of the circulation of emotions as discourses, "[t]he acceptance of interracial heterosexual love is a conventional narrative of reconciliation, as if love can overcome past antagonism and create what I would call hybrid familiarity" (2010: 145). The expansion of the love narrative to a postcolonial context entails a number of problematic points to be discussed, since it is inevitably grounded on romantic, Western ideals of love as an uncontrollable and almighty. In addition, this highly monochromatic vision tends to assume an uncontested assimilatory wish on the part of the migrant, disregarding any possible critique of power relations and social hierarchies.

In the opening chapter of the novel, as Victoria thoroughly observes a statue of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's prince consort, the narrator notices that "[h]er affinity with that queen has always been in name only, but now, as she examines the queen's husband, she feels surprisingly jealous. This is a statue to love, unlike anything else in this city of statues. [...] This statue is to love specific: a singular, consuming love for one man" (McWatt, 2007: 4). If the name parallelism is readily established between the main character and the British queen, the comparison above draws a stronger connection between them: one that seems to break through well established differences between cultures, age and social class. Love is then represented, from the very beginning of the novel, as a force, a universalizing discourse of attachment, not only between lover and beloved, but between those who equally experience an emotion that draws them closer to each other through mutual understanding.

Nonetheless, the similarity promised by this first scene is nowhere to be found in Victoria's situation. Instead of holding a site of power within British society, the character hopelessly struggles between the different subject positions offered to her. Significantly, parallelisms are also drawn between Victoria and other characters only to highlight the differences that make equivalence impossible. Such is the case of the two characters that stand as representatives of the available ideals of femininity within Western culture. These appear embodied in the Bluebird of Piccadilly, a homeless mad woman that circles the famous statue, and Christine, Alexander's former girlfriend. The Bluebird takes, in this dichotomy, the place of the alien, the Other in the city. As Edensor puts it in his article "Moving Through the City: Moving/Performing in the City", where he analyzes the connections between movement and performance in urban spaces, "[t]he denial of any place which homeless bodies may dwell in or pass through generates a condition of 'perpetual movement' born of placelessness, movement undertaken by the homeless not 'because they are going somewhere, but because they have nowhere to go'" (Edensor, 2000: 126). The Bluebird then represents a subject who is denied a space in society. Her attachment to a long gone past makes her unable to fit into expected female categories, or even human ones, thus remaining always placeless, deprived of a position within normativity and located on its margins. In contrast,

Christine is described as the ideal of Western modern femininity: she does not roam through the city but she is mostly represented driving her car around and knowing exactly which her next destination would be.

Undoubtedly, Victoria cannot ever completely fulfil the second position. Not only does her skin colour mark her as an outsider but her non-normative femininity also locates her on the margins of both British and Caribbean societies, granting her a placeless subject. For instance, although she is a woman and an immigrant, and knows it might be harder for her, she shows resolution in tasks such as finding a job, creating her own catering service; she works hard and for hours kneading bread and other dough in spite of her age; she has never had a husband or even wished she had one. On the one hand, her marginality is subscribed and reinforced, by the attitude white middle class British characters adopt towards her, which highlights their rejection. After a meeting with her nephew’s teacher, the narrator asserts: “It was after talking to Mr. Darling that she felt most like the Bluebird of Piccadilly. Derek’s teacher had chastised her, implying with all his puckered politeness that she wasn’t fit to raise a child” (McWatt, 2007: 61). On the other hand, her inadequacy is not shown as something necessarily inherent to Victoria as an individual, but rather as something that is procured also by the society she inhabits. This is clearly reflected in one of the events narrated at the beginning of the novel. In contrast to Christine’s representation as an independent woman who possesses and drives her own car, even before she comes on stage, the narrator relates how Victoria was deprived of her driving license. Furthermore, the withdrawal of her license is directly linked to Victoria’s ability to move within the city of London and the fact that she circulates mostly through very specific areas of it. Although she is continually walking and moving about, her movement seems somehow restricted to the parts of the city that are marked as immigrant’s territory - such as her neighbourhood or Dalston Market – and to those means of transport assumed to correspond to her social class, namely public transportation. Just as Liz Bondi asserts in her essay “Gender and the Reality of Cities: Embodied Identities, Social Relations and Performativities”:

Cities are places where embodied meanings and experiences of gender are not necessarily produced according to dominant norms, but can be challenged, reworked and reshaped: they are not intrinsically oppressive or libertary for women but present complex and variable pressures and possibilities for gendered embodiment. (Bondi, 2005: 6)

The ambiguity of the urban space is reflected in the above mentioned fact. Even if Victoria is a mobile character in the city, this does not necessarily entail freedom or exoneration from the constraints imposed on her by the intersectionality of her subject position as working-class migrant woman.

The house where she lives stands as another example of her confinement to marginality. Shared with other foreigners (a German guitarist and a couple of second generation Romanian immigrants), the place does not come across as her home. Quite on the contrary, it strongly highlights her inadequacy and her lack of agency: “At Victoria’s home things are very different. There is little she can do with the rooms she

and Derek share, as they are lodgers, not owners. She has grown so used to the presence of old chairs, framed Edwardian prints, and carpets stained from the spills in other people's lives that she can't imagine waking up without them" (McWatt, 2007: 7). The contrast drawn here between Victoria's and Lenny's houses enunciates both her belonging to a very specific subject position, that of the Other, and her lack of ability to change what is imposed on her from the outside. Moreover, although the mobility granted by the feminine models mentioned above – that embodied in the characters of Christine and the Bluebird of Piccadilly – might seem to challenge gender roles traditionally associated to the public/private binary, Victoria is located just outside this very binary. Deprived of a place she can call 'home', she is denied a private space. And since her movement is restricted to those places her diasporic condition grants suitable for immigrants, her access to the public space is also limited. Victoria is then presented as a placeless subject, who has abandoned her homeland and who is now allowed to inhabit only the marginal spaces of a society that constantly reminds her of her inability to truly belong. As the idea of 'home' becomes dislocated in this way, she can only be recognized as a subaltern² character in her double alignment through the intersection of the categories of ethnicity and gender.³

Even if, on the one hand, the emphasis placed on difference through the narrative construction of all of these binaries underlines Victoria's marginality, bringing forth her feelings of loneliness and placelessness. On the other hand, it conveys that this situation arises both from the uniqueness of her identity – in fact of each identity – and, consequently, from a complete lack of possibility for total identification. As Stuart Hall states "they [identities] emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more a product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are a sign of an identical, naturally constituted unity" (Hall, 1990: 17). Thereby, Victoria's impossibility to find anything but a few temporary points of identification with other characters and situations might be read as both symbolic of the instability of her own identity and of the general idea behind this concept. On the other hand, the fact that the character she identifies with the most is the Bluebird of Piccadilly underlines the existence of a normative system that unequivocally locates her outside hegemonic discourses and imposes on her an othered identity which places her on the margins of society. In addition, both ideas are reinforced by the explicit performative view of identity displayed in the novel. As Victoria tells Derek family stories, she "would see herself as a doll inside a doll inside a doll of all the people in her family and where they came from, where they went" (McWatt, 2007: 32). Thus her identity is seen as the result of a chain of experiences and signifiers that go back in time to an unreachable origin. The very act of telling and re-telling these previous lives summons the idea that they are never left untouched but reworked, reinterpreted in each generation. Victoria's self is then constructed through the repetition of a certain pattern even if such pattern allows for the instalment of difference. This view of how subjectivity and identity are built coincides with the performative conception of identity and it creates a space for agency, a place where change is possible (Butler, 1999). In tune with current theories of performativity, the novel champions a need for change that is grounded in an urge for

survival. As Victoria herself asserts: “Everything changes. To keep changing: that’s perfection” (McWatt, 2007: 314). If her never-ending task of self-definition might have seemed pointless in her inability to fulfil it, her persistent attempts underlying constant changes, is what allows her to keep on living and to maintain her, even if somehow claustrophobic and restricted, place in society.

Nevertheless, if Victoria feels relatively comfortable in her marginal position, that is to say within the space she shares with other migrants, the bomb that blows up Dalston Market sets her in motion towards assimilation. In fact, this event marks a turning point in the narration of the novel. Victoria escapes the new lack of security and danger she now perceives in her subaltern position, and starts a race towards the more secure space of normative British society, which can be reached only if she manages to assimilate into this culture. Such a change is perceived once more not only in what the novel tells the reader, but also in what is silenced from that point on. The recipes that populated the text at the beginning of the novel and that served as a way to express part of Victoria’s identity disappear after the event. Through these Guyanese, African and Chinese recipes, she had remained attached and had partly performed her mixed Caribbean identity. Not only are the lists of ingredients far from ordinary British ones, but the cooking directions themselves were always retold attached to memories of her past in Guyana and to a variety of local traditions, as well as to her re-discovery of African identity in Canada. While these recipes are present in the novel, we are reminded of Victoria’s un-Britishness, as they disappear, her ethnic side is pushed to the background as the character herself tries to leave it behind.

The main character’s struggle to be accepted as part of the society and the culture she inhabits is perceived in the fact that she establishes relationships with already normative characters, that is to say, local individuals that are mostly considered good and even exemplary. This kind of attachment grants Victoria the possibility to access not only new spatial settings but also new social grounds, some of which she had been denied before. It is only when her relationship with Lenny, her business partner, is tighter that she and Derek manage to visit, for instance, some of the typical London tourist sights and spots. Later on, she embarks in a love affair with Alexander, a younger Englishman, and father to Derek’s best school friend. With him, she goes to different restaurants and events, even on holidays to France; all of which seemed completely out of her reach before meeting him. However, the affair between Victoria and Alexander builds just another obvious binary. In fact, the characters can be easily read as representatives of hegemonic images of their cultures of origin, always as expressed from the point of view of the Western imaginary. Alexander comes across as a calm, disciplined and rational technological man, successful in his work and with an interesting social life. In contrast, Victoria is utterly preoccupied with genetically modified food and the wrongs caused by excessive uses of TV, computers and mobile phones, while she struggles to make her catering service work and finds herself out of any kind of social interaction. The power relationship between the two characters/cultures is established in their very first encounter when Alexander brands

Victoria “irrational”, stating then that their affair is, of course, governed by Western dominant codes.

In spite of that, this relationship is presented as the door through which Victoria may truly enter British society. On the one hand, perhaps Lenny appeared as too much of a British character, – too embedded into a normative one-way discourse – for her to feel comfortable, while Alexander’s character displays just enough diversity in his story to allow Victoria developing a feeling of proximity. Still, this diversity, as well as the character’s interest in otherness, reflects “the *productive* ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse – that ‘otherness’ which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity” (Bhabha, 1994: 67). Even if Alexander is presented as quite a cosmopolitan character, and just as Victoria might be assumed to share this feature too due to her mixed heritage, it is important to stress the fact that, as David Ley hints at in his essay “Transnational Spaces and Everyday Lives”, progressive ideologies and open-mindedness are neither intrinsic features of cosmopolitan identities, nor are they always necessarily related to a complete undoing of dominant hierarchies. The existence of a hierarchy between the two characters and their respective cultures not only dissolves the fantasy of their relationship being built out of the goodness and understanding of cosmopolitan ideology, but it further allows Alexander to set the price Victoria must pay in order to come through as part to British society. He asks Victoria to let go of her past. In consenting to part with her past, Victoria might be submitting to a rather different ideology, one of teleology in which what is left behind is always stripped of all positive value. Therefore, her paying this price, which mainly and basically means leaving behind all those experiences and memories that belong to her identity as an African-Chinese-Guyanese diasporic character living in Canada and London, irrevocably entails assuming that all these cultures that have influenced the formation of her identity are in fact a weight that keeps her from moving on with her life. Starting from Massey’s theory of space and place intersections with society,

[...] one way of thinking about place is as particular moments in such intersecting social relations, nets of which have over time been constructed, laid down, interacted with one another, decayed and renewed. Some of these relations will be, as it were, contained within the place; others will stretch beyond it, tying any particular locality into wider relations and processes in which other places are implicated too. (2007: 120)

Along these lines then, Alexander’s request does not only entail letting go of her previous experiences in other cities, such as Toronto and Kitty, and of the memories of her relationship with other important male characters in her life such as her father or Kola, a Kenyan activist that allowed her settle in Canada and connected with African identity – as a broad category. Victoria would also be separating herself not only from all that constructs her own subjectivity but from what shapes and mediates her current view of London as a physical and social space. In this light, the enormity of the process of ‘letting go’ is such that when faced with this choice, Victoria decides going back to Guyana, her ‘home’, in an attempt to find a self she feels she has lost in the process:

Victoria searches for something to ground her. If she came here for anything it was to gather them up, not to unravel. If only she could rally the forces of all she ever was before Toronto and London, and before that moment in France, the Victoria that first left this place in defiance, and to whom the world was a wide plain of opportunity. (McWatt, 2007: 293)

This quote does not only suggest the idea of Guyana as origin that persists in Victoria's imaginary, but it also connects with a discourse of aging as a process in which one loses the capacity and the energy to change and to stand against those things one does not like. Still, as Victoria feels that she can no longer call Guyana 'home', since she has become a stranger to the place and its people, she decides to go back to London, just as she produces a new definition of what 'home' is: "Go where the love is, not where it's not." The repetition of this new mandate is like opening and closing, again and again, a newly discovered door. Like finding a new room in a house she's lived in all her life" (McWatt, 2007: 314). The idea of an origin from which her identity springs and which she can come back to in order to somehow recover or reassert such identity, is quickly forsaken in the face of her new position as a stranger in her motherland. This way, Victoria decides that if 'home' cannot be defined as the place in which one was born, then 'home' would be the place in which one is loved, once more providing love with the particular power to break through cultural and spatial boundaries.

In spite of the positive reading this quote may suggest, the truth is that Victoria's final subsumption into what British society, through the figure of Alexander, asks of her leads to ambiguous readings of her story. Even if it offers small hints to the hope of breaking through established barriers, the narrative seems to finally fall under dominant narratives as it presents a character that seems to attain a space of her own but that is really just occupying the place she is reluctantly given by hegemonic powers – precisely the position that they have designed for her, and not one she had negotiated and defined on her own. As Sara Ahmed asserts: "It is important to note that the melancholic migrant's fixation with injury is read as an obstacle not only to his own happiness but also to the happiness of the generation to come, and even to national happiness" (2010: 144). This dominant perception of the migrant's inability for happiness is reflected in the trouble her nephew Derek goes through when adapting to his new school and the British society and way of life: somehow Victoria stands as an obstacle in his way to assimilation, constantly representing an inescapable link to what he must forsake. Furthermore, she becomes more clearly the source of his distress as her unsettled notion of home causes Derek nothing but confusion. At first, as their trip to Guyana drew closer, Victoria asserts: "We're going home, love, two days time" (McWatt, 2007: 284). Later on, after finding out she is no longer recognized as a local by those on the island, the location of 'home' changes: "I want to go home, child," she says softly. Derek is confused by the word. How many places can home be? He quickly realizes she means London..." (McWatt, 2007: 311). The fact that ideas such as 'home', that are supposed to have strongly rooted univocal meaning, are presented as fluid and changing, is perceived as a menace on the part of the dominant culture, as this weakens its control

over the very definitions that grant its power in the fixity of a meaning that is imposed from above instead of negotiated from below. Nonetheless, we should also notice that Victoria's integration is not carried out in a normative fashion. The family she's meant to build with Alexander and his half-Indian daughter is quite a subversive one, not only due to the ethnic mixture in which it results but also because of the age difference regarding typical gender roles.⁴

Furthermore, both the act of letting go and the process by which love becomes the only driving force that may effect Victoria's inclusion in society, are driven by a narrative of emotional movement. But not any kind of movement, one that inevitably propels the subject forward towards a better state of being, towards happiness. Thus Victoria goes from 'being dead' at the beginning of the novel and before Derek's arrival to experiencing an emotional state of turbulence that leads to a desire for peace and stability in stasis. As Sara Ahmed theorizes,

[...] happiness becomes a forward motion: almost like a propeller, happiness is imagined as what allows subjects to embrace futurity, to leave the past behind them, where pastness is associated with custom and the customary. [...] To become an individual is to assume an image: becoming free to be happy turns the body in a certain direction. (Ahmed, 2010: 137)

This very dominant idea of happiness as irrevocable forward motion is, in fact, found in McWatt's novel. The traditional temporality past-present-future and the need to leave the past behind in order to be able to be propelled towards a more promising future, is strengthened also by a narrative of bodily motion that can be found in to run throughout the core of the text. In associating the past with suffering, loss and lack, the narrative is also adhering these connotations to Victoria's ethnic identity as partly Caribbean, partly African and partly Chinese. Moreover, the notion of the past as something static that can be anchored in a certain temporal space and left behind is tied to the teleology of social promotion and of the achievement of freedom that Ahmed points out. The need to forsake the past and everything it implies arises precisely from the promising anticipation of a happiness that can only be achieved after such a move. As I mentioned above, this is sustained also by a narrative of bodily awakening, of what was still getting into motion. Just as Victoria's feelings come back to life, so does her awareness of her own body, one that seems to have aged without notice: "I miss being dead, she thinks as she stares into the palm of her hand, examining the criss-cross of lines. Her thighs and buttocks leak through the spaces between the wooden slats of the bench, her flesh bulging like a lean rump roast tied with string at the butcher's" (McWatt, 2007: 3). The body as meat from the butcher corresponds to that of the emotionally dead, carrying with it all the dreadful connotations attached to the idea of lifeless, motionless, meat. Therefore, just as she wakes up from her emotional stagnation, Victoria's body is thrust in the direction of assimilation through a need to accomplish certain feminine ideals. Furthermore, although this might be read as a path towards self-definition and the negotiation of an identity of her own, it seems to coincide easily with just one more

of the ways in which Victoria tries to fit into Western society by approaching its ideal of femininity by slimming or dying her gray hair.

Victoria’s lack of agency in this uneven negotiation and the novel’s use of easy-going ideals cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism are supported by the fact that curiously enough colour differences are seldom narrated through the novel and when they are, they concern only dark skinned characters: they relate Victoria and Kola, Derek and his mother or his unknown father, Derek and Victoria. Together with Alexander’s statement that although he may look white he is not so because “[c]olor is a position you adopt” (McWatt, 2007: 206), the text seems both to erase the importance of skin colour as a feature for staging difference and to highlight the constructed character of a skin-colour-based identity. This move does not only place more weight on the gender features of the characters’ identities, but it also shows once more the deceptive ways in which the ideals of the colour-blindness of multicultural societies and identity as performance work. Victoria cannot get rid of her skin colour and, even if Alexander tries to conceal it, it is one of the many markers that draw her difference.

In spite of this, much more significance is ascribed to the way Victoria speaks, which is commented upon by both Lenny and Alexander as a curious, hybrid one, that they cannot quite recognize as related to a clearly defined space. Their incapability to frame Victoria within a specific position as Other, to ascertain where she is exactly from on the grounds of her appearance or her accent, makes her difficult to read for these British characters, dislocating the position she occupies in relation to them within their society and their culture. The promise of happiness related to the act of letting go can be read then as a way of making her an intelligible subject. In this light, the erasure of the importance of colour appears as a false promise of assimilation since Alexander’s view of difference is presented as a fascination with the exotic rather than any truthful acceptance of it. At the same time, the attention that Victoria’s accent gathers is just one sign, not only of the many different aspects by which ethnic identity is constructed, but also of her inferior status. Her far from normative English reveals her as a stranger, as an Other, and as inferior in her inability to achieve dominant standards of what is considered good and proper expression. If her accent is ever read as appealing is only because it is a marker of a difference that locates her precisely where she ought to be. Moreover, the fact that Alexander is presented as the guide that leads her into British society coincides with patriarchal ideals of heteronormative romantic love. It is a man who takes on the essential role as a kind of social breadwinner, providing Victoria with the chance to develop a healthy and interesting social and cultural life regarding British prospects.

That this promise of happiness is closely related to the body – and all that it entails such as colour – is clearly seen in Victoria’s strict surveillance of her own body while she is in London. Once she has set assimilation as her goal, the character starts a process of bodily transformation in order to fulfil Western standards and ideals of femininity. Moreover, self-scrutiny and outside observation connect directly with the feelings of fear that Victoria experienced after the explosion in Dalston Market. As Ahmed points out when describing the economies of fear, “[i]n fear the world presses

against the body; the body shrinks back from the world in the desire to avoid the object of fear. [...] Such shrinkage is significant: fear works to contain some bodies such that they take up less space. In this way, emotions work to align bodily space with social space” (Ahmed, 2004a: 69). Regarding Victoria, if British society could be considered, at first, the object of her fear and the reason why she remained within the marginal space designed for immigrants, as the possibility of another bomb becomes a greater object of fear, she is triggered towards what she first dreaded. Nonetheless, both economies do control the social and physical space of her mobility, and her body does literally shrink as she starts getting thinner to fulfil Western standards of beauty under the vigilance of Alexander’s social circles. In contrast, in Guyana, Derek notes that: “Auntie Vic looks straight ahead; her face now looks more like his mother’s, and less like the face of someone out of place. [...] They both seem to have expanded in the heat and humidity of their three-hour stopover in the Barbados airport” (McWatt, 2007: 290). Seemingly, the familiar environment and the familiar bodies free both Victoria and Derek, allowing their bodies to escape constant observation. Since as Elizabeth Grosz points out “the city is, of course, the site for the body’s cultural saturation, its takeover and transformation by images, representational systems, the mass media...” (Grosz, 1998: 49), this recess in Guyana, where an normativity regarding ethnicity, body and gender operates, provides both characters with space and time to re-think their own identities and positions, and also with the opportunity for an epiphany. As Victoria breaks her ankle as they climb some rocks near the coast of Barbados and Derek runs for help, she realizes that “[s]he is still making discoveries. Ancient things arrive in the body through the trajectory of others who came before it. Things we must absorb and interpret, in order to move ahead. But move ahead to where? Into love, she concedes. Alexander, or someone else. Because her body is made for love” (McWatt, 2007: 331). The quote sums up the ideas about the concept of identity dealt with throughout the novel: identity built by the historical accumulation of meanings, but always once more changed and accumulated due to circumstantial interpretations and constructions. And just as it did at the beginning of the novel, love appears as the force that provides a way through which the character may achieve a sense of belonging.

At this point then, it could be said that *This Body* suggests a story of defiance and resistance that is always tackled down by dominant powers, reflecting the potential of their technologies and the difficulties found in overcoming them. Even if we follow Victoria’s struggles to negotiate her way into the physical, social and cultural spaces she inhabits, hers seems to be a narrative of failure in terms of resistance inasmuch as she is finally and somehow driven to comply with what she is asked for. This complex struggle offers the possibility of reading the entangled ways in which different discourses work together in order to place individuals in their normatively appropriated positions. If more obvious mechanisms did not take the expected effect in Victoria, the more subtle and naturalized discourse of love and the promissory idea of happiness play the trick in getting her to conform to already established hierarchies of power. Emotions, and the objects towards they are directed, are then shown to perform an essential role in the construction of identity, not only in what is deemed good or

desirable through them, but also in the way they conduct relations by establishing points of difference and identification. The novel sets up a reading in which Victoria’s achievement can be understood as a struggle against the grain of British society inasmuch as she eventually manages to create a space of her own and redefines at least for herself a traditional notion of family that did not satisfy her. Still the observation of the emotional economies in the novel and how they work in relation to social and physical space and identity leads to the conclusion that her struggle is useless as long as these feelings remain regarded uncritically within postcolonial texts.

Notes

1. Research for this paper was conducted within the national R&D project “COSMOPOLIS. La Ciudad Fluida” FFI2010-17296, financed by the Spanish National R&D Programme (Ministry of Science and Innovation), whose support is gratefully acknowledged.

2. I use the idea of subalternity drawn by Gayatri C. Spivak in her famous article “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, due to the character’s lack of ability to, for instance, start the catering business on her own, needing always an intermediary, someone that acts as both a kind of tutor and a cultural translator for her identity and her position within British society. Victoria is set as an eternal subaltern since she seems completely unable to gain access to self-representation and self-definition.

3. It is important to highlight that even if Victoria owns, together with Lenny, her own business, and therefore economic independence, this fact does not grant her the same freedom of mobility that the character of Christine does show. This restrictions then are not only prescribed by her being female, but also to the intersection of this category with that of migrant subject (cf. Flanagan and Valiulis, 2011: xviii).

4. Still, as Lay points out “[a] detailed ethnography in gentrified North London concluded that middle-life class life exists in a bubble and that values of social inclusion and cultural diversity are honoured in the breach in an everyday lifestyle better described as ‘one of social exclusivity’, where others are valued ‘as a kind of social wallpaper’” (Ley, 2004: 161). This kind multi-ethnic family then would rather correspond to the above-mentioned bubble, taking into account Alexander’s demands towards Victoria, rather than to any true incorporation of new values and cultures into British society.

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