

Mental Illness as Cultural Narrative: Dementia, Im/migrant Experience and InterAmerican Entanglements in David Chariandy's *Soucouyant* (2007)

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David Chariandy's acclaimed debut novel, *Soucouyant*, published in 2007, deals with the Caribbean migrant experience in Canada in the second half of the twentieth century and tells a story of dislocation and migration against the backdrop of entangled Caribbean, Canadian, and US histories in the Americas.¹ *Soucouyant* is primarily set in Scarborough Bluffs, Toronto, and unfolds a narrative about the disintegration of a Trinidadian immigrant family mostly told through the first-person voice of the family's unnamed youngest son. The protagonist of the novel is the Black mother, Adele, who came to Canada as a domestic worker and eventually married Roger, a Trinidadian immigrant and factory worker of South Asian origin. Together they raise two sons. Adele has suffered from early-onset dementia for most of her youngest son's life, which also appears to be the main reason for the gradual dissolution of the family structure. After the death of the father in a factory accident and the disappearance of the older brother, the narrator is alone in confronting his mother's mental deterioration. Unable to deal with her diminishing physical and mental condition, he leaves, only to return home to Scarborough Bluffs two years later, hoping to reconnect with his mother. His return is further inspired by his desire to discover the endings of his mother's half-told stories. Most of all, he wishes to learn the truth about a central traumatic experience from Adele's childhood that occurred during a violent encounter with US American soldiers in Trinidad during World War II. Adele's erratic behavior with running water and fire, repeatedly leading to flooding in the Canadian family home, seems directly related to this event. In her fragmented memories, the assault by US soldiers gets entangled with a visionary sighting of a soucouyant, the vampire-like female monster

of Caribbean lore. The soucouyant derives primarily from Trinidadian folklore. While a withered old woman during the day, at night she would transform into a ball of fire, fly from house to house, and suck the life energy of her neighbors. In recent narratives by writers of African descent in the Americas, the soucouyant frequently becomes a tool for empowerment and anticolonial resistance.²

Prologue

The Americas in Chariandy's novel appear as a triangular web of geopolitical entanglements between the US, the Caribbean, and Canada. "America" then functions as a signifier that is configured in and by its presence outside and beyond the national borders of the United States of America. Hence, I think, an approach emerging from hemispheric American studies appears most appropriate for analysis. Hemispheric American studies is located within the broader field of transnational American studies. As a complement to and in dialogue with transatlantic and transpacific American studies, the hemispheric approach is characterized by its focus on relations, processes, and tensions within the Americas. With a nod to transnational and hemispheric American studies, I read Adele's story of migration and dementia within a conceptualization of "America" as a multiplicity of interpellations for which no single position has precedence and all interact in "a genuinely dialogic notion of cultural critique."³ The transnational entanglements of the narrator's and his mother's lives place dementia within a complex web of migratory moves, social as well as physical abuse, and unfulfilled migrant hopes. Adele's dementia unfolds as mental illness defined as a complex biohistorical phenomenon in which mind, body, and migratory experience are intertwined. The novel further explores mental illness as a signifier of forgotten migratory histories and interAmerican entanglements and expresses the authorial mandate to create a narrative of forgetting that makes dementia seem more than a loss in the context of migration, displacement, and failed integration into Canadian society.⁴

Chariandy deploys dementia in such a way that illness appears both as a medical and a cultural condition. In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag expresses how problematic the uses of metaphors to describe illness. To her, "the most truthful way of regarding illness ... is one most purified of, most resistant to metaphorical thinking."⁵ Military discourse used in the context of cancer, where cancer treatment becomes analogous to warfare and the cancer patient simply a civilian casualty, for Sontag is a use of metaphor that becomes a form of dehumanization. While most would probably agree that there are potential pitfalls in the use of metaphors for illness, there are voices, too, that see in metaphors a powerful way to express and reflect illness, especially when people write in first person about their own medical experiences. Kathlyn Conway, in *Beyond Words: Illness and Limits of Expression*, points out that many writers draw upon metaphor to find an adequate "expressive language for describing personal experience of illness or disability."⁶ While there is a conflation

of the medical and the metaphorical at the heart of Chariandy's novel, it is important to note that the narrator's main objective is not describing or expressing dementia as illness in literal terms; rather, he is concerned with understanding the complex web of social, economic, and biohistorical factors that trigger his mother's erratic behavior. Dementia becomes a human and historical gap that the narrator struggles to fill with meaning. Adele's visionary sighting of a soucouyant invites us to think that Chariandy's novel may just be another text full of "Gothic and apocalyptic portrayals of dementia" that Marlene Goldmann sees at the base of much Canadian writing dealing with issues of dementia.⁷ The Afro-Caribbean folkloric vampire-like figure of the soucouyant turns out a fiction in the end. This also means that a potential association of the Gothic with dementia collapses. What emerges instead is a narrative that comprehends dementia as real, both as illness with potentially erratic behavior and as biohistorical construct.

By drawing on autobiographical modes, Chariandy's novel enters the life-writing tradition that has long characterized Caribbean and Caribbean diasporic writing. As Lisa R. Brown maintains, "[i]n the corpus of Caribbean literature, autobiographical modes of writing serve a very important function."⁸ To her, "[t]he use and function of each mode has varied over time from the earliest writings by colonial subjects transplanted to the Caribbean as slaves, ... or indentured labourers, ... to the most recent writers residing in the region or in the diaspora."⁹ The first-person narrator in *Soucouyant* narrates a personal story of his mother's and his family's life and reflects on his own condition as diasporic subject. We as readers perceive these stories through a complex web of narrative modes. We encounter personal memories of the narrator and we are confronted with the reconstruction of the past in narrative sections in which primarily the narrator's mother but also his father and the caregiver Meeka function as focalizer or informant. Framing family history with larger history, the first-person narrator also shares his knowledge of Trinidadian folklore and his critical reading of colonial and neocolonial history in the American hemisphere. Life narrators often consciously use complementary modes of fact and fiction to intertwine history, personal, and collective memory, borrowed recollections, as well as myth. In this way, narrators are able to piece together fragments of past and present, as well as imagination and (historical) knowledge/reality to produce narratives characterized by multiperspectivity. Undoubtedly, life writing allows for various modes and models of self-representation, including the blurring between fact and fiction, the connection between the individual and community, and the relation between self and the larger social world. Relating life writing to medical issues, Mita Banerjee's *Medical Humanities* (2018) and Alfred Hornung's negotiation of life writing describe the need to think medicine and humanities in a dialectic.¹⁰ With a nod to these critics I read Chariandy's *Soucouyant* as a mental illness narrative embedded within interAmerican geopolitical and migratory contexts.

Mental Illness Narratives in the Context of Migration

There has been a striking increase in the presence and awareness of mental illness in contemporary societies. Identity issues, gender and race conflicts, and migration and diaspora experiences are driving forces behind this phenomenon. Late twentieth and early twenty first-century migration waves from the global south to the global north created new dynamics of dislocation and relocation. Entanglements between North and South, changing forms of mobility and immobility, systems of (im)migrations, the coming together of human diversity, and changing contact zones in the Americas have also brought forth a current literary wave of “mental illness” narratives.¹¹ These narratives reflect the dynamics and tensions of interAmerican contact zones in which colonial past and conflictive present impact individual and communal lives. The effects of the legacy of four hundred years of systematic oppression in the Americas, associated with slavery, dispersion, (im)migration, and dictatorships, have not gone unmarked. Trauma, questions of belonging, racism, and sexism have shaped human encounters in the Americas.¹² The multiple and mobile contact zones are sites of emotional, psychological, mental as well as physical renderings of human experiences hailing from historical, sociocultural, economic, physical, and mental violence. These lived experiences are leaving an imprint on literary representations of mental illness. The dynamic and conflictive contact zones linking Canadian, Caribbean, and US cultures delineate the starting point for this article’s hypothesis, which argues that social categories such as gender, race/ethnicity, and community, as well as historical and lived experiences of racism, sexism, migration, and diaspora shape mental illness as cultural narrative in twenty first-century literatures from the Americas.

To come to terms with the complexity of im/migrant literatures in the Americas and their colonial baggage of trauma, displacement, disembodiment, sexism, racism, and alienation, this article links insights from hemispheric American studies and the medical humanities to read mental illness in Chariandy’s novel as personal and cultural narrative. Im/migrant literatures, including life writing and fictions, narrate the self as a traveling, nomadic, displaced subject that moves in between a multiplicity of cultural and social contexts.¹³ While critical about migration, im/migrant fictions by authors such as Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Divakaruni, and Jhumpa Lahiri narrate transnational migration as a process of immigration and assimilation with often positive outcome, telling transatlantic and transpacific stories of migration and integration.¹⁴ Im/migrant texts from authors of Caribbean origin such as Jamaica Kincaid, Edwidge Danticat, and David Chariandy tend to unfold trauma narratives which filter coloniality and global migration through an interAmerican lens.¹⁵ Their writings tell interAmerican tales of migration between the Caribbean and the US, and Canada. These writings challenge myths about migration, immigration, and transnational compliance frequently associated with geopolitical imaginaries of the US and Canada as nations welcoming to migrant populations. By pointing out the traumatic experience of multiple migrations in the Americas, these texts explore how the interconnectivity between

displaced body, traumatized mind, and discriminated subject propels migration and the subjective experience of uprooting.

Hemispheric American Studies and Canada's Absence

While it is noticeable that Canada is often absent from hemispheric approaches to the Americas, Chariandy's novel not only invites us but prompts us to place Canada within hemispheric entanglements in the Americas. As Albert Braz succinctly reminds us, "hemispheric studies have become increasingly oriented along a United States–Hispanic America axis."¹⁶ Studies of Canadian literature, culture, and history focus on the national framework or refer primarily to the relations between Canada and Britain, and to a lesser extent to France, if a transatlantic approach is taken. Winfried Siemerling's important book *Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past* (2015) includes the African dimension and examines transatlantic relations in the context of Black Canadian literature.¹⁷ That Canadian literature and cultural production is examined as an expression of interAmerican and hemispheric processes of influence and exchange, however, still remains the exception. This is all the more surprising since migration flows from the Caribbean to Canada show the strong hemispheric interconnections that have shaped the history, culture, and literature of Canada.

As John Carlos Rowe puts it, "the U.S., Canada, Europe, and their Greco-Roman Sources—are not 'areas' at all, but conceptualizations ... and the intellectual complements" of what Mignolo calls "modern/colonial world system."¹⁸ Seemingly with a nod to Walter Mignolo's ideas of coloniality and world system, Chariandy's novel makes clear that the Black Canadian experience is strongly intertwined with political, economic, military, and cultural exchange processes and (neo-)colonial power constellations within the American hemisphere. The connected geopolitical spheres of the Caribbean, Canada, and the US directly affect the migrations of Adele and the downfall of family life. Shelley Fisher Fishkin's famous question, "[w]hat would the field of American studies look like if the transnational rather than the national were at its center?" was a major step in challenging the "methodological nationalism" of American studies.¹⁹ Chariandy's novel forces us to continue in this transnational direction. As I argue elsewhere, an interAmerican approach helps us "envision a post-territorial understanding of area(s)."²⁰ Chariandy's novel puts Canada and its immigration policies on a hemispheric map and shows Canadian immigration programs entangled with the double continent's global history. The postcards of Lake Superior that lure Adele to migrate north visually express a natural border region linking the US and Canada. In the postcard images Canada and the US merge as North American imaginaries with the promise of a better life. However, as Adele's dystopian experience of cultural contact with people from both nations show, racism expresses a white supremacist ideology at work in both nations in the 1950s and 1960s, also leading to the marginalization and exclusion of Adele's family up North.

Critical Disability Studies

While a transnational approach is helpful to understand migration and historical entanglement in Chariandy's novel, insights from critical disability studies are useful to comprehend the connection between trauma, dementia, and narrative in *Soucouyant*. Disability studies, as a culturally critical branch of medical humanities, derived from disability activism in the US and Britain around the mid-1990s and emerged as a corrective and expanding discourse based on a health, medical, and clinical framework. The disability movement in the US was strongly influenced by the Civil Rights movement, which advocated inclusion and visibility, laws and regulation, access to public life, voting rights, and protests against discriminatory laws. As with the concepts of race and gender, attention to inequality and unequal treatment came through political activism and academia itself.

After long struggling to find a theoretical home, the academic field of critical disability studies has broadened to include the understanding of disability as a civil and human rights issue, as a sociological formation, and as a category of and for "critical analysis in culture and the arts."²¹ The definition of disability covers a wide range of physical, motor, mental, sensory, behavioral, and medical conditions that restrict function and participation and are understood as stigmatizing forms of inferiority.²² Although critical disability studies scholars understand the materiality of the body as embedded in the world, they also focus on issues of inequality, institutional integration, and historical exclusion of people with disabilities by locating embodiment in an intersectional approach.²³ Critical disability studies understand disability as an ontological question of self, agency, consciousness, representation, and being. This is one of the reasons for locating this article also in efforts created by critical disability studies, as the latter perfectly complements the literary conceptualization of embodiment signifying cultural traces on the body and the mind.

Dementia as Cultural Narrative

Beyond exploring the representation of dementia in David Chariandy's *Soucouyant*, the analysis here pursues a further theorization of dementia as cultural narrative. While dementia is present in a specific individual case in the novel, the narratives surrounding dementia's potential origins, development, and manifestation go beyond a focus on individual body-mind connections. As the storylines from different places in the novel suggest, a multiple chain of traumatic experiences may well be the catalyzing effect behind Adele's dementia, a point also explored in geriatric studies and aging studies.²⁴ A triad of colonial abuse, forced migration, and racist/gender discrimination appears as a complex explicatory web of intersecting experiences that paves the way for the evolution of individual dementia. Chariandy's novel evokes these explanatory patterns without postulating any clear evidence. To me, this seems a deliberate authorial choice

within the postmodern and constrainedly incomplete narrative of Adele and the narrator's family history. As Chariandy has stated in an interview with Charles Demers, "dementia ... became for me a way to explore the fragility of cultural memory, and how difficult it can be for us to know the past."²⁵

As in cases of dementia narratives used in geriatric psychiatric medicine, gaps and creative bridging form components of the novel's progression. However, because the novel presents dementia not exclusively as an individual narrative but as a narrative of transgenerational migration in the Americas, dementia takes on new meaning with regard to the representation of history, migration, and trauma. On the one hand, dementia describes the threat to the individual, familial, and collective identity of Black migrant women brought about by (enforced) dislocation; on the other hand, it takes on a metaphorical dimension that links the process of forgetting not only to the traumatization of the colonized subject but also explicitly to the fragmented cultural memory of nations such as Canada and the United States, which too readily forget their racist landscapes and celebrate their national imaginaries as immigrant paradises. Dementia in the novel mirrors a form of national historiography that consciously and unconsciously obscures and excludes aspects of colonial history and its impact on contemporary processes of migration and exclusion. To highlight this, Chariandy lets his narrator go beyond family history and narrate a subjectively reflected historical sketch of Trinidad's colonial history with Canadian and US involvement toward the end of the novel.

While transatlantic and transpacific connections to Caribbean coloniality are mentioned, the narrative on dementia unfolds in relation to the contact zones between the Caribbean, the US, and Canada. Zooming in through a hemispheric lens enables us to direct attention to neglected narratives of South–North migration as a microcosm of global history within the Americas.²⁶ Adele's story unravels poverty, sexism, racism, inequality, and exploitation as push factors for migration and exposes service shortage as pull factors for allowing immigration to countries like Canada. It is interAmerican migration that shapes the fate of Adele's family.

Migration, Colonizing Forces, and Canadian Diaspora

Adele arrives in Canada in the early sixties through a program that, after a year of completed household work, offered landed status to single women from the Caribbean. The Canadian government, as Dionne Brand points out, launched this scheme to compensate for the shortage of European immigrants and alleviate the lack of domestic workers in Canadian cities.²⁷ Among Caribbean people, it was primarily Afro-Caribbean women who were permitted to immigrate for the sole purpose of mitigating the lack of domestic service and accepting the offered low-paid positions. In this way, Adele's experience of colonial exploitation in Trinidad finds its continuation on Canadian territory. Benefitting from the economic crisis of Caribbean economies in the 1950s and 1960s and those people most affected by it, the Canadian government

resorted to exploitative labor and immigration programs to alleviate hardship at home. Referring to the historical roles of Black women in the Americas from times of slavery onward, Myriam Chancy emphasizes: “Since Black women had been forced to take care of white children or to clean up after white families for hundreds of years, the Canadian government appeared to believe that such jobs were a natural extension of Black women’s lives upon which to capitalize.”²⁸ Adele then arrives in Canada at a time when the implementation of official multiculturalism was still a project of the future. Not until the 1970s did Canada implement its multicultural policies on an institutional level. And Adele suffers from the racism she encounters in Canadian everyday life. “She knew, of course, how ever more conspicuously different she was. People everywhere would offer cold cutting glances on streetcars and sidewalks, or wrinkle their noses and shift away, or stare openly at the oddity that she had become in this land.”²⁹ Except for the Bernsteins, the white middle-class family she works for initially, Canada never seems to fully recognize Adele, as it denies her body’s presence and persistently relegates her to the margins of society.

In *Soucouyant*, Chariandy embeds the narrator’s attempt to reconstruct his family’s migratory routes and cultural roots in a grander picture of hemispheric interconnectedness. The storylines span the early 1960s through the 1980s and, in doing so, frame the official institutionalization of multicultural policy in Canada in 1971. As Lily Cho explains, “[d]iasporic subjects emerge in turning, turning back upon those markers of the self—homeland, memory, loss—even as they turn away from them.”³⁰ This “turning back upon” and “turning away from” is often experienced as contradictory and the result is often a sense of simultaneous (social) location and dislocation. Set in the Greater Toronto area, a hub for Caribbean immigration from Jamaica, Trinidad, and Tobago, *Soucouyant* reflects on Caribbean origins and “the migration experience” in Canada. As a child, Adele and her mother are already displaced from Chaguaramas to the fishing village of Carenage as US American soldiers set up a military base “full of white soldiers” in Trinidad during World War II. In Carenage, Adele and her mother experience violence, abuse, exploitation, and discrimination at the hands of US American soldiers who leased the site near the port from the British for military training purposes.³¹ Already at a young age, Adele is exposed to violence and destruction as part of military training: “In Carenage, a young girl watches as a fighter plane crashes into the sea.”³² The narrator further reflects the colonial and neocolonial history of Trinidad: “[T]here were tropical staples on the island to protect. Sugar and chocolate. Coffee too. But, especially, there was oil.”³³ There is specific economic interest that makes the Caribbean attractive as a site for extractivism and exploitation. The American engineers “are not interested in the archaic names for the island ... They need to ready the harbour for modern ocean-going vessels, and so they enlist immense mechanical shovels to dredge the shallow lagoons of Chaguaramas.”³⁴

In Carenage, Adele and her mother’s existence is shaped by extreme poverty. As a single parent and Black woman, Adele’s mother cannot access economic

opportunities to support her daughter except by working as a prostitute. Adele is exposed to her mother's activities as a sex worker when soldiers come to their home. "Adele always lies as if asleep on her cot, her back to the sounds coming from her mother's bed."³⁵ This experience already triggers a mechanism of repression in Adele and presages her later processes of forgetting, also geared toward self-protection. Adele's situation increasingly deteriorates as she repeatedly witnesses sexual violence in her own home, and faces assaults by US American soldiers: "Creatures who enter in the night and ravage flesh" ³⁶ Mother and daughter are shunned by the neighbors in Carenage with devastating consequences for Adele: "No handful of rationed meat, no oil nor salt, no simple meal of ground provisions. 'I hungry, Mother' said Adele."³⁷ After her mother's attempted suicide, the relationship continues to deteriorate under the burden of their unbearable living situation.³⁸

The US presence in Trinidad stands for imperialism and exploitation. The most traumatizing experience is certainly an assault by one of the soldiers from the military base in Chaguaramas who empties a bucket of oil and tar over the mother. When Adele realizes that some of the oil has splashed on her as well, she knows that "[t]hey will forever stink of something shat from the bowels of the earth and cooked in hell. They will never be clean again."³⁹ In this particular scene, the soldiers not only physically assault Adele's mother but use oil—an exploited resource taken from Trinidadian soil—to taint Adele and her mother. Adele and her mother's traumatic past is marked by exploitations of not only the female body but also the homeland. Seduction sets in with the presence of the US dollar and images of Hollywood actors and North American landscapes that promise a better life elsewhere. Adele, in Carenage always dreaming of elsewhere, is intrigued when one of the soldiers, the Okie, appears at her house with a box of gifts. Adele feels noticeably attracted by this strange new world packed up neatly in a box: "Treasures from afar. Five more dollars tightly rolled and secured with a muddy elastic band. A package of chewing gum. A thin bar of chocolate. A postcard from some part of America showing deep green pines and a lake that looks to any sensible eyes like a sea. Lake Superior, the postcard says. There are also three pictures she recognizes instantly: Gary Cooper, Humphrey Bogart, Marlene Dietrich A promise that something else is possible."⁴⁰

Having lived with the US military presence in Trinidad, she easily recognizes the faces of famous Hollywood actors. The postcard's image of Lake Superior, the largest and northernmost of the Great Lakes in North America, which is shared by the Canadian province of Ontario and several states of the United States, connects her with the natural beauty of North America. This synthesis of cultural success and the natural sublime evokes a promising future up North. The fact that Lake Superior straddles the border between the United States and Canada establishes an important connection between the two nations, at once separated and connected. And, as the symbolic presence of the apple in the gift box suggests, both are capable of promising better futures despite the shortcomings within their nations when it comes to politics of race and immigration.

To the AfroCaribbean woman Adele and her husband, Roger, Trinidadian of South Asian descent, Canada initially offers a physical escape from the oppressive histories, psychological traumas, and colonial legacies that continue to haunt the Caribbean. As their marriage shows, living in Canada also allows two ethnic populations extremely hostile toward one another in the Caribbean context, to live together. The novel reminds us, “[t]here were mildewed explanations for why they shouldn’t ever get along,” and it explains, “[a]n African and South Asian, both born in the Caribbean and the descendants of slaves and indentured workers, they had each been raised to believe that only the other had ruined the great fortune that they should have enjoyed in the New World.”⁴¹ As the narrator reminisces, “[t]hey met in a city that doesn’t exist anymore. A city that perhaps never really existed, though you’ll sometimes hear people talking about it. A city where people cared for each other A city before the new dark-skinned troubles and the new dark-skinned excitements.”⁴² However, as the novel tells us, the psychological demons of the past tend to follow migrants and are often transferred to the next generations. Furthermore, Canada—as an imagined safe haven—is wrought with its very own demons of historical oppression, dispossession, colonial legacy, and trauma, all deeply entangled with the colonial and neocolonial histories of the Americas. And the race struggles in the turbulent 1960s exposing the racial divide in North American societies fueled conflicts further.

The narrator’s father exposes the incompleteness of his immersion into Canadian society when he tells his wife, “[y]ou know girl ... thirty years, and I still don’t know how to celebrate in this country.”⁴³ With revelations like this, the novel at hand poignantly recreates the complex connections between the personal, the historical, and the political in migratory experiences in the Americas. Regarding Adele’s first apartment, which the government sets up for her on her arrival, she still tolerates the dwelling’s insect infestation: “[T]he cockroaches ran and ran when the overhead bulb was turned on, but she didn’t mind.”⁴⁴ Together with her husband, however, she hopes to create “a decent place for themselves.”⁴⁵ In the couple’s family, peace is disturbed by angry visits from the new landlord that demonstrate the couple’s outsider status. The family is rejected by neighbors and landlord alike, who consider them undesirable tenants and destroy any sense of feeling at home in Canada.

Adele’s traumatic experience with the oil and tar attack in Trinidad and her need for running water to heal keeps haunting the family’s Canadian home. As the landlord argues with Roger, “[t]his isn’t a place where water grows on trees, you know And there’ve been bathtubs overflowing. Leaks in the ceiling and down the walls.”⁴⁶ For Adele, water represents a purification and a kind of rebirth. Repeatedly, she tries proverbially and also symbolically to wash herself free from the burden of the past. “Pumping and waiting for the sensation, over and over again. The cold weight and flow through her fingers. The dropping away ... the liquidity of this freedom.”⁴⁷ Water, in the form of a view of Lake Superior, also seems to motivate Adele to accept the last family home on a dead-end street in Scarborough Bluffs. The view seems to represent

a kind of last hope and purification. For the son and narrator, it remains incomprehensible how his parents could accept this kind of self-chosen isolation. Reflecting on the run-down house on the edge of suburban Ontario, he ponders, “[t]his lonely cul-de-sac in the midst of ‘a good neighbourhood,’ this difficult place that none of our neighbours would ever have settled for ... any fool could see that the lake was slowly advancing, eroding inches of the backyard each year.”⁴⁸ Adele’s waste of water is just the beginning of more erratic behavior estranging her from the neighbors, the landlord, and eventually her own family.

Dementia and Narrative

According to Paul Ricoeur, narrative and time belong to a hermeneutic circle in which “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of narrative.” Defining the role of narrative, he contends that “narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of experience.”⁴⁹ The novel unites the mother’s and the narrator’s experience in the attempt to reconstruct past memory and a stable sense of self. Chariandy quite tellingly calls his novel “a novel of forgetting.” In reflections on migration and Caribbean diasporic writing, he stresses that “the challenge of exploring African Caribbean diasporic identity cannot be limited to an analysis of the persistence of cultural memory, but must also confront the implications of a violently inflicted condition of ‘forgetting.’”⁵⁰ It is precisely in this sense that the mother’s illness appears as a combination of biochemical and posttraumatic reaction in response to imposed forms of migration and uprooting. The process of forgetting that accelerates with the progression of Adele’s dementia also complicates the narrator’s effort to reconstruct family history and give cultural foundation to his own diasporic identity. The tricky combination of a patchy but still partially functioning long-term memory and advancing processes of cognitive loss haunt his desire to learn more about his mother’s past and make sense of his family’s history. “Mother can string together a litany of names and places from a distant past. She can remember the countless varieties of a fruit that doesn’t even grow in this land, but she can’t accomplish the most everyday of tasks.”⁵¹ The novel progresses as a dialogue based on a troubled call-and-response between son and mother. “You arrived, Mother. You told me the story, remember? There were lights”⁵² And the conversation is strongly guided by the question “how does one listen ethically when the sufferer can no longer testify?” as Amelia De Falco so poignantly asks.⁵³

As the narrator’s unfinished statement above suggests, his memory suffers from fragmentation as well. The process of remembering is further complicated by the fact that prior to his repentant return, the narrator had been unable to cope with his mother’s growing dementia and, as a consequence, had abandoned her. With a nod to Ricoeur, I like to add that the narrative in *Soucouyant* is complex to the extent that it includes a frequently broken negotiation between the narrator’s and his mother’s features of experience. Still, through dialogue, the mother can reconnect with her son

and leave oblivion temporarily behind; and the son's fragile immigrant self also draws strength from his reconnection with the mother. While they cannot reconstruct the past in its totality, the memory work enables them to reconnect through empathy.

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra proposes a particular definition of empathy, one that refuses its common association with "identification or fusion with the other Empathy should rather be understood in terms of an affective relation, rapport, or bond with the other."⁵⁴ This is precisely what happens in the novel; narrator and mother remain separate yet emotionally connected. Throughout the novel's numerous storylines tracking life experience in Trinidad and Canada, the narrative deals with memory and forgetting as intricately connected processes which affect constructions of self, place, and belonging in numerous ways and on various levels of experience. Remembering becomes an act always potentially traumatic and stifling as well as liberating and expanding.

Significantly, the narrator refuses to use the term dementia himself. Rather, he explains: "The WORD IS OLD" (emphasis original) and explains that the term is nowadays often associated with aging processes.⁵⁵ He refers to medical discourses and explanations about the disease and refers to related terms such as aphasia, agnosia, and apraxia, all loosely associated with mental disorders and the aging process.⁵⁶ However, he also points out results from critical studies that show that the clinical picture and diagnosis must be differentiated according to patient groups. He cites medical brochures that point out that when the Standard Word Recall test is applied to people from poorly educated and minority groups, cognitive dementia is very often diagnosed without this being specifically present. The narrator tells us that his mother's condition appears to be a very rare and strange case and lets us know that the causes may be manifold: "toxins or physical injuries or known illnesses or even less tangible factors such as depression and psychic trauma."⁵⁷ The narrative responds to these multiple possibilities of origins, describing, on the one hand, the mother's conspicuous behavior in the narrated present and, on the other, seeking patterns of explanation from scraps of the mother's accounts of experiences in Trinidad. What the mother's fragmentary narratives seem to reinforce are traumatic experiences Adele went through with her mother in Trinidad that left a lasting mark on her.

While official medical discourse attempts to categorize Adele as suffering from dementia, the literary narrative opens up a therapeutic view of Adele's forgetfulness and responds to the narrator's own disillusionment with medical assessments. "My parents never felt satisfied with how the medical specialists were articulating Mother's new being. I too never felt satisfied after recovering the pamphlet from the trash."⁵⁸ As the narrator puts it, forgetting is not necessarily a bad thing. It may be a healing response to the traumas of the past and present. The son's behavior suggests that he views his mother's condition as a process of subconsciously willed oblivion. In this context it is noteworthy to mention that the mother's physical senses such as smelling, tasting, and hearing are intact, and also that the physical memory concerning dance

can be recalled by the mother. They provide a certain comfort zone, as do Caribbean song lyrics that she can remember.

Reminiscent of geriatric memory work, the narrative progression of the novel is puzzling. There is no linear sense of time. The novel's narrative structure stresses the importance of space over time. *Soucouyant* is in many ways a transnational narrative, a narrative of multiple entangled locations. In accordance with James Clifford's specification of "location ... [as] an itinerary rather than a bounded site—a series of encounters and translations," the mother's home in Toronto remains connected to other places and journeys from the past.⁵⁹ Chariandy himself describes the narrative as progressing "in a non-linear and associative fashion—through *seemingly* random evocations of feeling, touch, memory and official history."⁶⁰ Events from the past are sometimes told in the present, at other times in the past tense. Similarly, the sections of remembering and telling past events from the family's life in the Caribbean and in Canada tend to stop abruptly. A space left blank on the page indicates a jump into another time, frequently the present describing the complicated interaction between the narrator, Adele, and the domestic caregiver Meeka. The literary form appears eclectic and playful, reinventing the acts of forgetting and remembering that characterize Adele's condition.

The troubled call-and-response between son and mother reads like a life story in dialogue with the patient, which is often used in geriatric care to restore memory and identity in the battle against a complete loss of memory and personality. Research shows that people with dementia can reclaim identity through telling and writing stories.⁶¹ As Anne Kari Tolo Heggstad and Åshild Slettebø stress in their empirical geriatric research, "[w]e interpret this life-story telling as a way of trying to make coherence in a chaotic world and a way to be seen and heard—and hence a way to maintain and promote the dignity of identity or social dignity of the teller"⁶² Here, the focus lies mostly on positive aspects such as strengths and successes in the patient's life. The patient can assume different roles in the process: protagonist, storyteller, or reader and is seen as an active collaborator.⁶³ Traumatic experience in the past and the refusal to express it certainly complicate the dialogue and may actually lead to silence rather than narrative. This may be one of the underlying reasons why we hear Adele's voice mainly in fragments and mostly through the narration by her son, which also shows the complexity and ambiguity of the narrator's endeavor to trace his mother's traumatic experiences. As I argue, the narrator is in a therapeutic double function in Chariandy's novel. There are two main motives that guide him in creating the narrative. On the one hand, he is guided by the desire to understand and reconstruct the identities of his mother and thus to restore her lost dignity. As geriatric research has shown, life-story work might help caregivers to see persons with dementia as individuals. For the narrator himself, on the other hand, the memory work represents a means to compensate for lost connections and to see his mother in a new light as an individual traumatized by neocolonial, migratory, and diasporic experiences of rejection and exclusion.⁶⁴ And, perhaps most of all, it is an act of autotherapy, as his

own disorientation in the Black Canadian diaspora drives him to understand the family history and to give shape to his own identity.

Cultural Understandings of Dementia

As Hillman and Latimer point out, “[t]here are many ways of unlocking and challenging the assumptions that underpin cultural understandings of dementia.”⁶⁵ Chariandy’s novel examines dementia from a complex perspective that combines medical diagnoses with psychological and postcolonial explanations. The latter fuse traumatic experience, poor nutrition in poverty, forced dislocation, migratory uprooting, and unfulfilled migratory dreams to understand Adele’s loss of memory and the resulting fragmentation of her personality. Many phenomena that threaten migrant and immigrant identities turn out to be the result of complex transnational conflicts and biochemical processes that need to be thought of as interrelated. Similarly, it is not sufficient to place memory work on the cognitive and linguistic level alone. Touch, smell, and musical memory emerge as alternative energies to revive past experiences and give shape to Adele’s identity. It is moments of physical touch between mother and son, Adele and Mecca, moments of singing together, and the recognition of the smell of spices and fruits that bring the past to life and reveal connections between life in Canada and in Trinidad. Singing the Calypso song “Rum and Coca Cola” (1943), both son and mother accomplish a moment of reconnection with present and past experience. Adele’s agency seems most restored in those moments when she sings songs from the past.

The above song not only recalls Adele’s past in Trinidad. It also directly illuminates the American involvement in the history of Caribbean exploitation during the US military presence in Trinidad during World War II. By linking US imperialist presence with Adele’s traumatic childhood experience, the song—“Rum and Coca-Cola/ Go down Point Cumana/ Both mother and daughter/ Working for the Yankee dollar”—exemplifies how Chariandy lets his narrator connect different locations of the Americas in his memory work.⁶⁶ As Mae M. Ngai reminds us, a dialogic, contextualizing, and performative use of theory in hemispheric American studies enables us “to understand contact, translation, exchange, negotiation, conflict, and other dynamics that attend the constitution of social relationships across cultural and national borders.”⁶⁷ The narrator can only reconnect with his mother through a transnational form of memory work that allows him to connect his Black Canadian self with the Afro-Caribbean history behind migration routes to Canada. Singing, as one example, becomes a way of transgressing spatial and temporal boundaries and linking experiences in a translocational way. “Rum and Coca-Cola” was a popular calypso song during the 1940s composed by Venezuelan Lionel Belasco with lyrics by Lord Invader, a musician from Trinidad. The Lord Invader lyrics lament that US soldiers are corrupting local women who “saw that the Yankees treat them nice/ and they give them a better price.”⁶⁸ The final stanza of the calypso song describes a newly married couple whose

marriage is ruined when “the bride run away with a soldier lad/ and the stupid husband went staring mad.”⁶⁹ The song evocatively recalls Caribbean history during World War II and Adele’s experience of witnessing her mother fighting poverty with prostitution. Finally, the song also evokes memories of Adele’s own experience of abuse and rejection during her domestic services in Canada. And it reminds us that Adele’s dementia is partly a product of uprooting, dislocation, abuse, and exploitation, the understanding of which may best be approached by looking at its embeddedness in a series of complex border-crossing processes involving individuals as well as nations.

Concluding Remarks

Dementia as a signifier with multiple meanings expresses a complex understanding of mental illness in *Soucouyant*. As Stephen Katz stresses: “one of the benefits of human brain plasticity is that it allows us to filter, change, interpret, negotiate, and even forget our memories in order to create coherence and stability in our lives.”⁷⁰ Hence, for the sake of our own wellbeing, we may react instinctively to negative experience and shape our own life stories by forgetting and simply dwelling on positive memories. This self-protective reactionary strategy seems to help Adele cope with trauma and filter her colonial baggage. Touch, taste, smell, and her musical memory remain intact, recalling the pleasures of food, love, and music while her cognitive range continues to decline and evade the traumatic and negative experiences of the past.

For the narrator, his mother’s dementia is both a trigger and a fogged window to his family’s past. It is the therapeutic exchange between he and his mother that permits him to connect his diasporic self with a larger family history and Black historical experience in the Americas. Adele’s dementia is presented as the aftermath of trauma, poverty, poor nutrition, and unfulfilled migrant desires in her new home country of Canada. A transnational reinvention of self is ultimately denied to Adele by her experiences of isolation, exclusion, and racism in Canada. The climatic shock that marks her arrival in Canada finds its extension in the social coldness that she is confronted with as an Afro-Caribbean immigrant. As Giselle Anatol has it, “[t]he real demon here is Canadian racism, and the myth of a contentedly multicultural nation is revealed to be as much of a fantasy as the soucouyant.”⁷¹ Both push and pull factors reveal Adele’s wish to escape from physical and economic exploitation; however, while her migratory routes show minor improvements in her social situation initially, Adele cannot break free from her past experiences of bodily trauma and social and economic exploitation that haunt her from the Caribbean to North America.

Notes

¹ David Chariandy, *Soucouyant* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007).

- ² For a discussion of the figure soucouyant in the context of gender and coloniality, see Giselle Liza Anatol, *Things That Fly: Female Vampires in Literature of the Circum-Caribbean and African Diaspora* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), especially chapters 4 and 5.
- ³ Günter H. Lenz, “Toward a Dialogics: Transnationality, Border Discourses, and Public Culture(s),” in *The Futures of American Studies*, ed. Donald E. Pease and Robyn Wiegman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 461–85, 474.
- ⁴ Anatol, *Things That Fly*, 200.
- ⁵ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 3.
- ⁶ Kathlyn Conway, *Beyond Words: Illness and the Limits of Expression* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 79.
- ⁷ Marlene Goldmann, *Forgotten: Narratives of Age-Related Dementia and Alzheimer’s Disease in Canada* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queens University Press, 2017), 269.
- ⁸ Lisa Brown, “Caribbean Life Writing and Performative Liberation: Beyond the Boundaries,” in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. Michael A. Buckner and Alison Donnel (London: Routledge, 2011), 276–84; 276.
- ⁹ Brown, “Caribbean Life Writing,” 276.
- ¹⁰ For the intersection of American studies and medical humanities, please see Mita Banerjee, *Medical Humanities in American Studies* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2018); Carmen Birkle, “Introduction,” in *Communicating Disease: Cultural Representations of American Medicine*, ed. Carmen Birkle and Johanna Heil (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013), ix–xxxiv; Alfred Hornung, *Auto/Biography* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2010); and Rüdiger Kunow, *Material Bodies: Biology and Culture in the United States* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2018).
- ¹¹ For examples, see Caminero Santangelo and Joachim Michael, “Trauma Literature,” in *The Routledge Handbook to the Culture and Media in the Americas*, ed. Wilfried Raussert, Giselle Anatol, Sebastian Thies, Sarah Corona Berkin, and José Carlos Lozano (London/New York: Routledge, 2020), 239–51.
- ¹² See also Giselle Anatol, Wilfried Raussert, and Joachim Michael, “Slave Narratives,” in *The Routledge Handbook to the Culture and Media in the Americas*, 226–38; Giselle Anatol and Tamara L. Falicov, “Plantation Literature,” in *The Routledge Handbook to the Culture and Media in the Americas*, 1170–181. See Maryemma Graham and Mercedes

Lucero, "Life Writing," in *The Routledge Handbook to the Culture and Media in the Americas*, 121–35.

- ¹³ See Miriam Brandel and Luz Angélica Kirschner, "Migration Literature," in *The Routledge Handbook to the Culture and Media in the Americas*, 147–55.
- ¹⁴ See for example Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* (New York: Grove Press, 1989); Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee, *The Mistress of the Spices* (New York: Doubleday, 1997); Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (Boston: Harcourt, 2003).
- ¹⁵ See Edwidge Danticat, *Brother I'm Dying* (New York: Knopf, 2007); Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990); David Chariandy, *Brother* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2017).
- ¹⁶ Albert Braz, "Outer America: Racial Hybridity and Canada's Peripheral Place in Inter-American Discourse," in *Canada and its Americas*, ed. Winfried Siemerling and Sarah Philipps Casteel (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queens University Press, 2010), 119.
- ¹⁷ See Winfried Siemerling, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past* (Montreal, QC: McGill University Press, 2015).
- ¹⁸ John Carlos Rowe, "Areas of Concern: Area Studies and the New American Studies," in *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies*, ed. Winfried Fluck, Donald Pease, and John Carlos Rowe (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2011), 321–36; 322–23.
- ¹⁹ Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures. The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005), 21; and Saskia Sassen, "Globalization or Denationalization," *Review of International Political Economy* 10, no. 1 (2003), 5.
- ²⁰ Wilfried Raussert, "Mobilizing 'America/América,' Toward Entangled Americas and a Blueprint for Inter-American 'Area Studies.'" *FIAR* 7, no. 3 (2014), 61.
- ²¹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Critical Disability Studies: A Knowledge Manifesto," in *Manifestos for the Future of Critical Disability Studies*, vol 1, ed. Katie Ellis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Michael Kent, and Rachel Robertson (London: Routledge, 2019), 12.
- ²² Garland-Thomson, "Critical Disability Studies," 12–13.
- ²³ See Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (*University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989), 151–54. See also Annamma Subini, Beth A. Ferri, and David Conner, "Cultivating and Expanding Disability Critical Race

Theory (DisCrit),” *Manifestos for the Future of Critical Disability Studies* (London/New York: Routledge, 2018), 232–36.

- ²⁴ Asa Gransjön Craftman et al., “Caring for Older People with Dementia Reliving Past Trauma,” *Nursing Ethics* XX(X) (2019), 1.
- ²⁵ Charles Demers, “Forgotten Son: David Chariandy on ‘Soucouyant,’” *THE TYEE*. 1 January 2007.
- ²⁶ A hemispheric approach is one among a rich spectrum of transnational approaches by American studies scholars. See the transnational works by critics such as Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Alfred Hornung, Udo Hebel, Donald Pease, and John Carlos Rowe. For transcultural approaches, see American studies scholars such as Günter H. Lenz, and for hemispheric approaches Marietta Messmer, Josef Raab, and Wilfried Raussert.
- ²⁷ See Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry* (Toronto: Women’s Press of Canada, 1991), 24. At this time, Canada had not yet begun to implement its politics/policies of Official Multiculturalism. It was not until the 1970s that Canada slowly began to assert its narrative of multicultural nation, of being an inclusive and immigrant-friendly nation which welcomes, respects, and treats everyone according to the same standards. Although the implementation of Official Multiculturalism has in many ways diversified Canada’s national image, it has also failed to (truly) establish equality among members of society. Those members of society who are referred to as “visible minorities” have continuously been excluded from mainstream society, and racial/ethnic discrimination in Canada continues to be alive and well.
- ²⁸ Miriam J.A. Chancy, *Searching for Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 85.
- ²⁹ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 49.
- ³⁰ Lily Cho, “The Turn to Diaspora,” *TOPIA Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 17 (2007), 11.
- ³¹ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 183.
- ³² Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 174–75.
- ³³ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 175.
- ³⁴ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 176.
- ³⁵ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 184.
- ³⁶ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 184.
- ³⁷ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 185.

- ³⁸ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 186.
- ³⁹ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 192.
- ⁴⁰ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 188.
- ⁴¹ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 70.
- ⁴² Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 69.
- ⁴³ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 15.
- ⁴⁴ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 48.
- ⁴⁵ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 75.
- ⁴⁶ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 76.
- ⁴⁷ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 181.
- ⁴⁸ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 58–59.
- ⁴⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
- ⁵⁰ Chariandy, “Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary Caribbean Literature: ‘No Nation Now but the Imagination,’” in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. Michael A. Buckner and Alison Donnel (London: Routledge, 2011), 247.
- ⁵¹ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 47.
- ⁵² Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 47.
- ⁵³ Amelia DeFalco, “Uncanny Witnessing: Dementia, Narrative, and Identity in Fiction by Munro and Franzen,” in *Alive and Kicking at all Ages: Cultural Constructions of Health and Life Course Identity*, ed. Ulla Kriebner, Roberta Maierhofer, and Barbara Ratzenböck (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014), 224.
- ⁵⁴ Dominick La Capra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 212.
- ⁵⁵ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 38.
- ⁵⁶ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 41.
- ⁵⁷ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 38.
- ⁵⁸ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 40.
- ⁵⁹ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1999), 11.

- ⁶⁰ Demers, “Forgotten Son.”
- ⁶¹ See Lars Christer Hyden and Linda Örvulv, “Narrative and Identity in Alzheimer’s Disease: A Case Study,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 23, no. 4 (December 2009), in particular 206–08.
- ⁶² Anne Kari Tolo Heggstad and Åshild Slettebø, “How Individuals with Dementia in Nursing Homes Maintain their Dignity through Life-Story Telling—A Case Study,” *Journal of Clinical Nursing* (2015), 2324.
- ⁶³ Cindy Rinaldi, “Telling Their Stories: Working with Older Adults,” 2013. <https://fielddeducator.simmons.edu/article/telling-their-story-working-with-older-adults/>.
- ⁶⁴ For geriatric research, see Catherine Russell and Stephen Timmons, “Life Story Work and Nursing Home Residents with Dementia,” 2009. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19472596/>.
- ⁶⁵ See Alexandra Hillman and Joanna Latimer, “Cultural Representations of Dementia,” *PLoS Medicine* 14(3): e1002274, (28 March 2017).
- ⁶⁶ Chariandy, *Soucouyant*, 179.
- ⁶⁷ Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 60.
- ⁶⁸ Lord Invader, “Rum and Coca Cola,” 1943. <https://genius.com/Lord-invader-rum-and-coca-cola-lyrics>.
- ⁶⁹ Lord Invader, “Rum and Coca Cola.”
- ⁷⁰ Stephen Katz, “Embodied Memory: Ageing, Neuroculture and the Genealogy of the Mind,” *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*, vol 4. May 31, 2012. <https://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/embodied-memory-ageing-neuroculture-and-genealogy-mind>.
- ⁷¹ Anatol, *Things That Fly*, 203.

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