

Shadow Sounds: an Original Collection of Poetry

and

An Essay on Questions of Femaleness and Diaspora in Meena Alexander's
Illiterate Heart

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This dissertation is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

University of Kwazulu-Natal

College of Humanities

School of Arts

English Studies

Durban

2013

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Declaration:

I affirm that

- This dissertation is my own work and that all acknowledgements have been properly made.
- This dissertation has not been submitted in part or in full for any other degree or to any other university.

Signed: _____

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Abstract

Shadow Sounds: an Original Collection of Poetry and an Essay on Questions of Femaleness and Diaspora in Meena Alexander's Illiterate Heart.

The thesis comprises two parts: an original collection of poetry entitled *Shadow Sounds*, and a critical essay exploring the issues of diaspora and femaleness in Meena Alexander's *Illiterate Heart*. *Shadow Sounds* is a compilation of poems which examines the interrelations of a South African Indian familial structure, the emergence of a strong female sexual identity, and the open, even experimentally processual approach which influences the exploration of lyric voicing. The critical essay on Alexander investigates two major thematic concerns in the collection *Illiterate Heart*, namely, diaspora and gender. I postulate that the diasporic experiences of the writer have inflected all aspects of her identity, occasioning both rhizomatic compositions and the ongoing composition of a dispersed subjectivity. Alexander's hypothesised 'selves' are observed and identified as constantly shifting and changing throughout *Illiterate Heart*, and effectively recast the popular conceptualisation of identity as singular and coherent.

Shadow Sounds

Francine Simon

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of poems from this collection have been published in:

The Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Anthology Volume II

The Park Bench

BooksLIVE

I would like to express my immeasurable gratitude to Professor Sally-Ann Murray.
I cannot say how much her guidance gave me purpose.

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Naming places

When they came on the boats
one name was Sing(h).
The other, said and sung
– lost.

Both left in faith
expecting us not
to come back.

Nair (Nayar).
Gabriel. Pillai. Placed here,
those names still carry but
we cannot feel them.

And since we don't know
my father's family
we are the last of the Simons.

Nothing left for his daughters
but to be girls.

Granny. Called 'Ma'

At my gran's funeral, many people knelt
to the knee, crushed in prayer. Others stood,
stared down into her coffin. I could not stand
to go see her. See her go. Sat in the pew, avoided

mom's hisses to pay my respect. Bitchbitchbitch. Reading
the eulogy would be enough. The necklace Ma gave me
before she went was tied on a ribbon round a dead neck
though it was mine. I told everyone I wanted it back

since it wasn't hers anymore. They were afraid of ghosts, like
she had been. We had that in common, she and I. Chose
my black clothes thinking of a quiet grandmother, all black
when I looked down but Ma, she would have scolded

"Too much black! Why you don't wear more colour?
Don't know who taught you how to dress. Go put
something else..." I stood at the pulpit, lowered

the mic

began

Amma

Something funny
in my womb.
Old pygmy ape?
Botthil Gaviscon?

It climbs to my stomach
to play each night, anvilled as
I sleep in cardboard
tears dress my face
in old lace dawn

hard shell grows from my back
to carry along Prince Edward St.
Shuffling offering a bag of kisses:
Amma, please, please.
Buy one, one only!

Little fan

one little fan held still
in the hand of a girl
pearl drops, neat curls, a clicking tongue
she may have been my grandmother
in her youngest days

this fan has a choice
as the hand fans
its wealth equal to a tickey
nothing now in this country
nothing in Asia or India

my grandfather
his great love in her loveliest
sighing the fan hasn't
much love left now
yet cooling her face still seems easiest

Sheep's head

Because of my aunt I have grown so fat
even fox terriers smell like butter bread
and garden birds of smoked, dried duck.

She feeds me tripe and beans,
trotters and gram dhal. "Your favourite!
Dish, dish. Don' worry, girl."

Eat eat eat. It would be Christmas soon,
I thought, and she'd buy sheep's head to cook.

How I hated those dull, blunt eyes
offered to me like onyx.

"One day maybe she'll talk but."
I heard her say to my mother.



Betel-nut

I am dark but
they say I'm bluffing.
I snack on tamarind seeds

sucking while Mom makes brinjal.
Black tongue mangrove mud between my toes.
She's not like us but.

This is why I am not like them.
I wouldn't say *that*,
but I would say that

when she tells me all about climbing
jackfruit trees at auntie's house, she calls me
girl, losing my name.

Lately, I try out their voice: oiyoh, but it's so hard eh!
She, she don't fright for nothing.
She don't know nothing too.

It's ayyo when I check
my brand new dictionary
a book to mark bed-made words.

The Indians, they put eyes on me except
when I go to Chatsworth
then my sentences end but.

What happened to my English degree?
That's what I wonder anyway,
spitting betel-nuts, white husk.

Gathering

Everything gathers dust
I learnt that from my mother
while she wiped every surface,
metal frames, paper, wood.

But she doesn't know everything about
dust. The box of rippled photos
under my desk, stolen
so that they can breathe.

She guards the others.
Obituaries frame our walls.

Ma 1. Ma 2.
Little sister. Family portrait.
Woman in that brown dress
beaded velvet long sleeves
we never wear brown
but she pictures really well
holding a baby. Twice.

All are broken clocks
and candle stumps,
dust watching
in a settlement.



Vetala-pachisi

1987

and when you lit that candle
it was hard enough to ask so instead you burnt

Hail Mary's into your hands. Black dot
on your forehead. Rice mouse in your teeth.

1943

she knew that he watched
her steps when they rippled
like river waves.

But then she caught his eye.
He looked away. No mouth.
He was much too old either way.

2012

it has been many years

since	I came back here
dead	zoo vetala

head	leopard with his catch
feet	pool of plastic blood

I always thought	
	looking around
he was above me	

but the museum	is inside.
----------------	------------

They say a sorcerer
once asked King Vikramaditya
to capture a vetala who lived in a tree

that stood in the middle of a crematorium.

The only way to do that was by keeping silent.

But each time the king caught the ghost
the ghost would enchant the king
with a story that ended
with a question.

No matter how much he tried
the king found himself
unable to resist giving
an answer.

Tamil familiars

Grandmother used
to warn me not to whistle:
I'd call the snakes.

She forbid me
to sleep with my hair open:
I'd wake up looking like a pichachi,
gone to hell and back.

She said not to eat
out of the pot or it would rain
on my wedding day.

I did and I do.

My mother tells me not to
pick from the curry leave tree
when it's that time of month.
It will die, she says.

Funny. It hasn't died yet.
And I never give a thought
to my wedding.

Rombu unbu

I say mi amor.

I think I should say
rombu unbu. But
I do not know the words

so I close my eyes.

I wish for rabbits' whiskers
as his lips grow
a tongue touching

a stitch for unlearnt thuni.

His beard makes
small holes in me,
drawing blood.

R o m b u u n b u

words ghost my lips
in a split second that stirs
my mother tongue.

Immaterial

Every day I slip into my clothes
this morning they hung gaunt
I noticed
I was still small and grainy
but

I stepped out
shook them
once twice
ironed them again
three times

I put them on
looking dire
my skin too poor to walk in



Late beach

Girl of seven when I saw the skeleton.
Afternoon at the beach across from the hospital,
a ghost, paled by the sun.

My father sat on the breaker line
waiting for a wave. A she-whale the elephant bones
of a baby cupped beneath her spine.

I walked around head to tail
mother and calf beached picked clean.
I stretched to touch the baby, skull white as an unlit wick.

Then my father was calling, board in hand, and I ran,
presented him with a half-shell story. Asked him
if lady whales had a hospital and if man whales

were allowed to visit. Maybe, he said. She could have been waiting
for her husband. Maybe when I swam he said
I'd hear the deep, long echo the man whale sang, promising his mate
never to be late.



Burial

Spade after spade
I dig a wooden box,
soiling your skin.

Hack wash
half limbs with
old blood,

the brain bent
with bruises
steeped in rain.

Opened, your box
would spill gold,
useful but ill spent.

I cannot store enough
to be closed
by you

White elephant

He takes her out,
sets her on the mirror
but she chips the glass.

Moves her to the TV
in front of the world
smiling at white eyes.

Uses her as a door stop
but she walks around
letting the door close.

Leaves her to extinction
but she waits
knowing white elephants

are hard to come by.

Like this

It was a day like this when you told me
there are only eight ways
to love someone.

I carried your guitar pick in a red pocket
(like this) and bent it in my fingers.
Red for love. Love for guitar.

Like there are only seven stories to tell?

That old smile on the back of my neck,
using hands to back down... (like this)
there were two loves already.

Seven stories. We were two of them.
So I slept. And I wrote. For eight days
(like this). When I woke I knew what I had to do.

Bane

Your mirrors cover me
seeing the road.

A still thick vein
beats open.

It runs away fast.
I stall.

I try the key
but you won't start.

Every so often your radio
lends me words.

Love letters

1.

I sit on a bench smoke a Vogue
think it makes me look pretty
I remember what it felt like
when you used to touch me
now I am gone not knowing you
knowing you only feel her
as she grows in me
you turn up looking away
pulling out strings of pearls peeling pelts
unwinding me bare
I trail words curled flimsy and little
and girl as me hanging
on burnt paper

2.

Standing at the back of a white tent
the sign reads Congratulations!
a pastor woman goes on and on
preaching about biblical relationships
how after waiting seven years
Jacob got a second chance with his first love.
The two families look on
("Eh but the breyani was good!")
their beloveds who do not hold hands
love being patient
They listen but I withstand
in high heels and a grey dress
otherwise engaged

3.

In the year of the dog
we met and played
ended up lovers
months of mouths mounting
but in seconds we forgot
like only dogs could
dug down deep and hid
that year bone altogether.

Little house

We say little.
Instead, we build
this house thick

as risen dough, tongue
words stuck in the batter.

The roof of a mouth
caves in in the wind,
floor lettered in sounds

which do nothing
but whimper.

There is nothing here
only dust

on our words in want
of a wiping hand.

Maybe the door can give
us away or shut us in?

sms

Ur msg sed
we r c creatures

I scrolled down.
There your cursor said
typing...

...and while I waited for you to finish
I remembered the lines:

but reach for each other
remaining in the river down
one or two continents here –

You replied. Sed
last msg
wsnt 4 me.

Really? I suppose
Durban is that small
a city.

Indigo dogfire writer's block

While you were smoking I watched,

tracing over my note book. The time
and date were speechless and I wanted
to wrap that up, shuffle it away in
a jack of clubs. I wrote down your name
amongst others with three hearts beside
it, and one diamond. I had twenty
talents. You read and smoked without
looking up, and your glasses never
seemed to slip down as you ashed or
turned a page I went back to my work.
Only ten talents left. Ten 10 10 10 10
the others smoking.

Creature

If I could put you on
my belly like an otter
does a crab

and crack you open
with a smooth
dark stone

I would eat you
your grey flesh raw
as a split dawn clam

I would lap up
your small smile
and lick your lips

your sensitive entrails
dripping from my arms
without a word

Licence

Caramel on the cone. Your mouth
on mine. Sugared lips.

I was redoing my driver's. You told me
no secrets. Sent me to be tested.

You had been driving eleven years. I stood
on an X, waited for the examiner. White

woman with biblical hair. Eyebrows drawn on.
Couldn't see your monster eye. I lost

one point. Then got in the instructor's car.

I smelt this body there. Single
woman crying like a fish.

Want

Give me a man who lives
on a beach far from home,
diver at bay who listens
for the ocean's salt ears.

Give me a man who says
petite chou, reste avec moi
chaque matin et soir
pour toute la vie.

Give me a man who wishes
with shark eye bones,
without want of warning,
laughing with no deceit.

Dholl

“You will receive
rations as follows:
Dholl – 2 lbs per month,
Salt Fish – 2 lbs per month.
Ghee or oil – 1 lb per month,
Salt – 1 lb per month.

Acting Protector of Immigrants
Notice to Coolies Intending to Emigrate to Natal,
17 August 1874”

We sit together
at a table smoking

pickled words
small oval leaves

fall never fitting
into a sentence

green shirt
one square button

it does not suit him
yet his arms come faster

till I have a face
with four fingers

and an itch of hair
wisps loose

lit match, he stops
draws from the well

says *My lover never called me Dholl.*

I look up, one eye
sideways to the sun.

Billy goat

I think of sex and only
sex since he
became my neighbour

in the flat next door.
And you, in the garden outside,
a goat named Marley.

He adores you,
milks you in the early hours
for his morning porridge.

I watch in my nightie,
confused by hands
on your soft, uddery skin.

It reminds me of nights
he touched me,
not a skinny billy goat.

My lips turning half pages,
exposing pink marrow
bones for him to lick.

But you I would never wear
for a thick waistcoat.
I'd miss your fat eyes

in my doorway at night
asking to eat from
my chilli tree.

Time

in which you speak

hot
blank

slow drip
leaves worn

wooden hammer
and fish hook

blackened lung
or tripped instep

Trial and error

Knead me down
divide me thirty
palms of dough
your fingers sting
yet you know:
take your time

lay me turn
me with fingertips
use the curl of your hands
making me
a circle

each time you rolled
and pressed
I grew more round
each one of me
ready to be
pan oiled

then suddenly stop
you come to
a standstill

oh

my mother never told me
it comes with practice.

I never told you either.

a lover

to eat drink from him
nibble

to take his hand
clutch

to be yourself
or not

to love him

to touch him
is another thing
entirely

Second skin

I.

A week of six days
you wandered snakeless
split hand navigation
stick to ward off interpreters.

The hollow of Snake Palace
pasted a soft worth
holding your bareness
inside a hand.

Coral snakes greeted you
many times over, a pit viper
companion curled around
your wasp waist.

Not them or the spiders
inheritor of double bed
a parcholather (pear-cholla-there)
“Don’ say his name!”
in the middle.

I came back different
gave and ate you there
shook you occasionally
that kept you still.

II.

You are not good
enough if I cannot
take you
into my mouth

I am a man
who likes teeth
their brittle white
core sucking sounds

they call me Naga
a bright green
light leads you to me
the rain so slightly wet

I charm the fortune
from you with ant
tics and snow white feet
here they are inv_s _ble

I could be satisfied
by you if I swallowed
you whole and
fat chicken in

a baby's breath
I have hands but no nails

what would be the point?



Kali

Once I met Passio

my tongue couldn't worm a y
he liked my ankle bells
then he said
Kali
(etc)

his hand already to my mouth.

*

I woke like a candle
straddled between two fish.

His voice the sound
of my name

Kali. Kali!

How could I know him?

*

Later he walked me to church
belly to hand to skirt.

I told him. I loved him.
He kept my lion tail.

Cup and saucer

I. dreamscape

without
panties on

it was damp
and yes

I was under
the ironing board

cordless
umbilical tower

horse headed
off-white

it was you in there
palm of stubby cat

II. wakescape

This poem got me up at ten
I lay on my side out of water

closed my eyes to speak
when I was dry.

Remembered how you held out
a glass jug. I put my saucer down

raised the cup to my lips
a cold linen tea
then left

Red string, missing

You heard me come back.
Windows could not keep isels out
or the berg wind
or the whistling man.

In early Durban hours,
I remain by the door
wings scattered

red-stringed arm
hands in pockets
can I make you something?

I talked, you at the stove.
Mentioning him
a third time, my voice grew itchy.

If your nose tickles
and you scratch, expect a fight.
But mothers aren't always right.

Bride

I.

I am putting on my wedding
dress clipping
white hooks.

Dad comes after
the Nikah, tells me I'm married
shouldn't keep from

meeting my husband
now

ten tables set. I am ready
with the tea tray
between one Indian Moon moth

and boiled veil
milk cups
warmed

his name begins with a lingual bone
dressed in an eggshell suit
bent double by mother

twosugar hot water
extra milk

he waits on a soft
serve chaise

II.

Your kitchen had a strong white breath.
Fixed with pots, it was husband and wife
a pipe
a kettle
(broken) so its second element.

You are a man of no shape
especially in the early morning
bat neck
cow feet
a spiracle love of pools.

She takes the teabag out her cup
squeezes it leaves it
at the windowsill to age
soft as skin
dark as cum

Now she is with me.

We picnic often.

You always thought
you knew too much.



Scavenger

I paced in shells for days,
chewing them under my boots like sand.

Impossible that a creature
could live inside.

The bay had collected
a grave.

The beach became a hole
drinking me up

searching weeks over rocks
hands blind in an open pool

I picked a pink cowry,
perfect holes,

then left the sand,
knowing nothing could be enough.



Void

he fills up holes
thick blue concrete
never free
of men holders
brushing edge
and edge
heart on tongue
his skin stitches
sewn by factory
women rand buttons
he checks in
the right idea
things itch
twigs mix
bring up the past
like a father

Room

There was a man
who dreamt up
a one roomed house,

small and warm,
dust and love
shaving off his skin.

His kitchenette
held the smell
of chicken blood.

He let it touch him,
clothe him choke
his breath while

he washed the air
leaving grey mould
on walls and bed.

Sitting at his little table,
plate and knife and fork,
tucked into his brain.

Baby

He dreamt of a baby
that could not suckle
from him. Thin birthmarks,
beauty spots,

her cries struck his head
one after another.
She was so small;
how could she be this loud?

He looked at his child
a handful light
as dried mustard seed.

How easy it would be
to tie her up
with the rubbish.

She was always so hungry
without her mother, but he could
only watch. Sing. Stuff it down.
Pretend he was not a man

who would've killed the child already.

Shade

I see a drought soaked in gold:
My feet seared into brittle edibles.

No name or thoughts,
only hunger for things I've yet to know.

My eyes are famished,
eating at their fever.

This gold is dust
I grind drought's skin.

Flight

Doves walk into me,
squeeze through glass,

never reaching my fingers.
I sleep bandaged

in the feet of Egyptian
geese, giving my harsh

ears nowhere to fly.
Birds are misshapen

larks and act friendly
yet they never stop stabbing

at the pictures of my eyes.
Inked beaks ready to peck

air bones bare.

Words of stone

I walked like a stone rolling
with no legs, the ground rolling,
a dead weight my only company.

He took my body and began
to grind off unsightly ridges.

Feeling my blood run
round white pebbles

crowded my veins. My body
slowed to swollen drops.

In each step was a silence
that could only be a stone
silent as only a stone could be.

Opaque window

No one knows how many dead crocodiles are here.
The frame sees black boxes of fish forgotten in the airport.
I scramble any kind of pronoun for them. (Add anything, ok.)

The trembling carpet watches me when I eat the runway
and subdivide dusty puns from bottled glass.
Waiting for my crocodile's body to arrive. I paid black money for him.

Lucky, his eyes were fresh and juicy. I was famished.
His taste was mine; everything made sense when I sucked on his bones.
In the window, crocodile babies all wear white idioms.

At that window, I learnt to dress the same without phrase.
And I would love those scaly babies but reptiles are always out to get me.
You know how little boys can be.

Bouquet

It was after her aunt's wedding. Standing outside the flat, you held the bouquet. I came to the window, called down. You wore a blouse unbuttoning at the back and the bra your mother bought you yesterday. I couldn't move my head and as I held the edge, no smile either. You looked down, taking out cigarettes

The dew would give you hayfever so you decided to blame her. But she came down with damp hair, a bare freckled face and straying necklace. You reached out, moving the clasp to the back while her breath tongued out. The charm was a boot, her brain soft and flammable. She took your hand, into hers while seconds lapped my chest. We were in the same skirt. And her blonde laugh was large and faded.



Errors

I can't spell cried,
she says,
It's too hard.

Why? I ask,
Its only five letters.

Because.
She stares aloud.
Because?

It's not the same thing
as crying.

I smile.
Just remember there's no y
in cried, only i.

She nods and writes it
three times for luck.

When she looks
up at me,
we are the same age,
all fingers.

Our moon

Our dog was the moon.

At night, Mother said
we were free to
play with him because
he was asleep
in our treasure box.

We tried to play with him
in the day but Mother warned
he was like a cat,
slinking away from us,
loose tail trailing the air.

He wasn't ours but
we hoped he wouldn't
one day vanish.
We didn't believe Mother,
until he did.

As Mother always said:
dogs often leave
when they're going to die.



She

paced one shoe another

down sand to that flat space where river

meets the sea
two wet lips.

water would not say anything if he could.

toes dug in soft damp

the coldness beside herself talking

in long stones, pierced tongues

wheezing out the wind

as he dries in night thirst

sit there think stand

dust my jeans

empty my pockets



To begin, again

We have a black sideboard in our house. A piece of furniture that's been with us at least twenty years. That's what I remember. Where is it from? Where does anything come from? It is difficult to say.

Four photos stand on top of the cabinet. My grandparents, young and excited, holding a ballroom dance trophy. Them again, sitting close together on a couch, many years later. (The flat in Carlyle Street, it must have been.) The portrait of Ma on her eightieth birthday is shadowed by the print of the Last Supper, which is framed, in turn, by the glow of our yellow wall. And then a photo of my sister and I. Me. She was two; we'd been rolling down the grassy slopes at Mitchell Park. That fun never got old, though now my sister has grown up and gone to study animal medicine. She has wanted to be a vet since she was a child. For as long as I can remember.

I look at that photograph of two small girls. Their dark eyes. Hair. Skin. But the picture cannot look back at me; it cannot glance out the window, or look around inside the house.

"Your sister's room is too bare," my mother says to no one in the passage. She misses her youngest daughter.

My mother goes to the kitchen. She coughs. She must be cutting onions. She watches the curry then turns, returns to a book while she waits, then back again to the stove. She tastes for salt. I wonder what she is reading. Her back faces the sea, moving and restless. She is never still enough to face me. But then I sit so quietly when I work, perhaps I am invisible.

The black sideboard keeps me company, and the photographs. Plus two brass holders, one lamp, half a dozen crosses and other Catholic icons. Mostly Our Lady, Mary. Sometimes she is blue and white, Mary is, sometimes silver. At other times Mary is brown. I look at the brown Mary and think of everything that might mean.

So many Marys. Her hands are held together in prayer, or extended palms up in gentle invitation. Come, she says. Head to toe, she is always covered, and however different she appears each time - eyes slightly sadder, head a little more inclined, narrow shoulders just a little more humble - still her image is constantly the same. Mother Mary. I remember our priest saying that she is on high, her status higher even than the angels. Our Lady is over and above. "Flesh and blood," says the Bible, "cannot possess the Kingdom of God." Which makes Mary quite some role model, whatever her colour.

We have orange everywhere in this house. Orange table cloths orange carpets orange pillows. Bright. Burnt. Deep, the entire spectrum. I sit in an orange chair. My mother says that orange is the colour of the Holy Spirit. If that's true, our house must be filled with it.

Ours is a house of statues. Until my friends said something, I didn't really notice. But it's true. The house is set with six wooden statues. Equal numbers of men and women; each the size of a person, or maybe a surfboard. There is also a lion, nearly the size of a small dog. It isn't a dog though, or even a lion. It is a doorstep. A door stop stops a door from banging shut or opening wider. Which is it? I'm not sure. Either way.

There's a small tree growing in the middle of the dining table and a wooden Mary lamp on the other table, in the entrance. But this Mary doesn't work and there isn't a plug point. So she's just there.

My father buys them, these wooden sculptures, from black men who walk around the city hauling art on their backs. Like everyone, they are trying to make a living, and this is the city we live in. All of us.

I don't know exactly how it happens. I suppose my father sees the men walking with their wooden loads. Carved faces. Sculpted bodies. I imagine he must know the hawkers a little by now, because we have so many examples of their work.

Or maybe they are all different men, so each time my father is always a stranger. Maybe he is stopped at the robot, waiting for it to change. Perhaps he leans out the window and says "How much?" and the man shrugs, smiles. Says, "Name your price." Perhaps that's how it starts. With questions and what pass for answers. Then sometimes he brings them home, the statues, and they stay with us like part of the family.

Sometimes, Dad comes home with mielies and bananas because he's thought of me. That's how well he knows me. That I am always hungry. Though as a girl – a woman – I have learnt to watch myself.

Right now, my father is not home. He is surfing, I think. I like to think he is surfing. How he paddles out to the breaker-line and sits there for a long time, almost weightless, waiting where sharks are a threat. His best friend was nearly bitten by a Great White. Though

probably he tries not to think about things like that, suspended. Most likely he isn't surfing now anyway, but working, selling ladies' clothes in town. *Women's* clothes. (I almost forget to remember what I am supposed to: "In English," my tutor explains, "in the English language, not every woman is a lady." This seems a strange notion, but I must make a point of remembering it.)

When my father is home, he is never quiet in the house, even though he doesn't listen to his music much at night. Jazz is for daytime, mostly weekends. Then he is wakeful, alert to the free-spirited riffs and extemporising that sync and swirl among subtle patterns of structured sound. When he is tired he cannot hear music; he prefers the soccer matches on TV. The commentators' voices form an endless loop, building up and sinking down. Heightened. Lowered. When he is very tired, he slides down the couch and falls asleep, snoring, with the TV still on. I mustn't turn it off because the noisy voices soothe his sleep. Often the sound is so loud I put on headphones. Today though, eventually, it is quiet.

A faint draught sounds from the city.
I sit with the wind

from the windows
ready to work.

A sea of uneven drafts
on my desk.

It is not a desk
it is a table. A surface

which cannot be used for dining
because it must work for words.

The room is quiet.
No one is home.

I listen to the rice
boil – that thick pop

as I start to write
I am home

I am the only girl left in the house. The first girl. I know I am to take care of things. I am to put the table cloth on. I am to watch the rice. When it is done, I must drain it, wash it with cold water, and leave it to dry.

“You must write until the very end of the page,” a teacher said to me once. Even then I wondered why. Was it to make sure I was really finished? Was it to not waste space? But what if I don’t know the end and if I like that space? How it lets the tongue tip and the ear cup to catch whatever is missing. I never understood the point of ruling off.

We had to cover our school exercise books. The class teacher didn’t like them bare. It looked careless, she said, untidy. I hated covering my books. I could never fold them the same on each side. Before the white paper disappeared the words, I used to read the printing on the front. ‘Feint and margin’, it said. I knew what margin meant. It was for starting out with a capital letter, and for lining up the numbers in rows. But what was ‘feint’? No one ever explained. Something to do with lines and rules, I’ve come to understand, though I’m still not exactly sure.

The wind is rising. Faintly, at first, then more briskly, until I have to hold the page down with my fingers because the breeze is making it trip and flicker.

The papery sound of a trapped moth flapping.

Why must I do this, I wonder?
Holding down. Struggling against

writing.

Poetry of all things.

And why must my family's hands
wring out the paper like a wet

rubbish dish cloth?

Finding Patterns

Facing the kitchen, I read a passage. It is early afternoon and no one is home but I cannot focus. Here are my papers. Here is my tablet. There are portraits of a female poet on every page. The same one.

She looks right at the camera, pursed lips, dark, unreadable eyes. They are the eyes of my ocean, a familiar stranger. The first time I saw her was in a YouTube interview and she spoke about her poems as if they were lives in themselves. Now she is my work. I have read too many interviews to remember. I have read. I have listened. I have worked

at her
like a troubled child
uncertain about letters
the meanings of shape sound
a muffled clatter
slubbing soft
picking and scraping
my busy mother
busy with the pot
she fills with grains of rice.

This poetry, I ask myself, why? The answers shift, depending on where I decide to place provisional emphasis, italicising different words: *this. poetry. why.* Of course I offer scholarly justification, as in the MA proposal: I write these poems because there is an acknowledged scarcity of published poetry by writers of Indian-South African heritage (see Govinden 2008, for example). The names that come to mind are those of older ‘protest era’ poets Shabbir Banoobhai and Achmat Dangor (who are these names? I had not heard of them before), while the emergent young Turk Dashen Naicker remains as yet better known for his

unusual slam performances than for his subtle lyric poems on local Indian cane-cutting history. When one factors femaleness into the publication equation, the lack of ‘Indian’ South African poets is further evident: Gabeba Baderoon is the only name with real currency. Few know of Sumeera Dawood’s outspoken writing: “...His bit bobs/inside my mouth. I don’t move on the toilet seat”. (Dawood has published a substantial number of poems in the group anthology *isisx* [Horwitz 2005].) And as for Francine Simon? Well, hers is still an emergent voice, even though she (no, say *I*. Say it) has had poems shortlisted for the Sol Plaatje European Union Literary Award, and two of these poems, “Rombu Unbu” and “Tamil Familiars”, have been published in an anthology by Jacana (2011).

Perhaps that is why I write, I say, to fill the gaps. Is that it?

The window is empty from where I sit
the bedroom is still
the Mary candle is dark
the pot is always being emptied
being filled.

Yet another academic response to the question of poetry writing by a young South African woman of Indian descent might lie in *The Hybrid Muse* (2001), where Jahan Ramazani discusses the neglect of poetry both in scholarship on postcolonial literatures and in research into contemporary poetics, a marginalisation he attributes to poetry’s difficulty, its generic refusal of transparently direct meaning. As Basu and Leenert explain, “the overarching paradigm for reading postcolonial literature has been that of mimesis”, in terms of which literary “works have been largely read as representations of the social and political realities of their societies of origin” (2009: 3). Similarly, Huang remarks the persistent “subcanonical status” of that diverse group of writers huddled under the unstable conceptual parameter ‘Asian American poetry’, where expectations of a subject matter comprising “political

exigencies and ethnographical concerns” has worked to keep such poetry in a marginal, subordinate position relative to the mainstream (2002: 1). Ramazani might point out, here, that in fact poetry is “less favorable than other genres for curricular expeditions into the social history of the Third World; and consequently it is harder to annex as textual synecdoche for the social world of Nigeria, Trinidad, or India” (Ramazani 2001:4) – or South Africa, I could add. Poetry, instead, tends to filter and mediate ideas and experience using a “language of exceptional figural and formal density” (Ramazani 2001:4), often linked to the highly nuanced, personal mythopoetics developed by individual poets.

This is not to claim that poetry is a discourse entirely enclosed or separate from quotidian reality, but that poetic thought and expression often reconfigure any uni-directional correlation between ‘thing’ and ‘meaning’, ramifying and proliferating through sound, image and idea in such ways that meaning is elusive and obscure, rather than immediately legible in terms of social and political contingencies. Yes, I think, there is something in this idea as a prompt to my own writing: poetry as a form of ‘impression’ which is indirect and oblique. It draws on the known, transfiguring experience into something more tangential, less obvious. I think about the tendencies in South African poetry: on the one hand, the lyrical expression of one’s own troubled experience; on the other, the insistent clarion-call for protest against social conditions – racial oppression, gender violence, government corruption.... And I think of those many local poets who have shown me how even these claims for forms of ‘identity’ cannot ever correspond in one-to-one ways with a poet’s interest in language and shape and the open-ended relationship between image and idea. Perhaps this, then, is the appeal of poetry for me: that it inclines language, word, the very processes of thought and meaning, towards exploration and uncertainty, instead of relying on either over-embellishment or denotative ‘fact’.

Such ideas not only seem apt analogies for the gradual, entangled routes of reading and thinking which inform my own writing, but which led me, as a young woman writer of so-called Indian extraction living in South Africa, to settle after long looking on a small study of some of Meena Alexander's poetry. Her work speaks to my own circumstances, even though I do not share her extremely dispersed, migratory history.

My thesis hopes to offer a small contribution to local poetry and scholarship. The study comprises two related components: the main body of work is an original poetry collection, entitled *Shadow Sounds*, a title which implies the culturally and linguistically elusive, shifting aspects of the collection as I attempt to imagine female self in relation to family circumstance, fragmented history, sexuality, a world of myth and idea. The second component charts my critical-imaginative encounter with selected writings of the poet Meena Alexander, a woman writer of Indian heritage now resident in the USA, and widely read as a writer of diasporic identity. A few examples of Alexander's poetry from the collection *Illiterate Heart* offer key nodes for my discussion, prompting me to address questions of location, gender, and form. Considered in relation to this essay, my own poetry, while still only nascent, aims to help counteract the dearth of culturally-specific women's voices in South African poetry, and several of the poems in *Shadow Sounds* clearly intersect with the areas of linguistic, gendered and cultural interest which occupy me in the essay component of the degree.

In a conversational, relaxed interview with Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, Alexander echoes the question that has been posed, musing:

Where are you from? It's a question that has haunted me. Sometimes I think I come out of my mother, and out of her mother, and out of her

mother before that. And in the female lineage is a great sense of comfort. A comfort in that these boundaries of the flesh have been there, well before my consciousness. But there is also the poignancy of that thought that fills me. The radical instability thrust on us as creatures of the flesh. I have written a poem called “Migrant Music”, in which I imagine seeing my father's father, muscles squat, standing on the cliffs of New Jersey that see across the river. And he is calling, calling my name. So something of the ancestral self gets reworked, drawn out, comes home, here in America to haunt us. (1998: np).

Where does that leave me? I am South African born and bred. I live in Durban, a multicultural port city on the eastern seaboard of Africa, and yet my appearance marks me as so-called Indian, and I carry with me, through the relation of extended family, a welter of disparate cultural currents.

My religion, slightly unusually in the context of Durban's ‘Indian’ communities, is neither Hindu nor Muslim, for example, but Catholic. My father's family was converted to Catholicism in Greytown and inherited a new surname, Simon. The other name, we do not know. Nor do I know exactly when ‘our’ name changed, only that it might have been in the time of my grandfather's grandfather. I ask. My father. Other relations. I can never get an exact answer. So all is relative.

In my mother's family, my grandmother's sister tells the story of her grandmother, who was a missionary in India. This woman saw her people boarding the ships and followed them, convinced that she needed to spread the word of God to them, both on the sea and further abroad in the new land, wherever that might be. She too was Catholic. My mother told me that our surname then, that side, was Singh. Which is a vast and culturally complex tree, our branch but a small part of the invisible and dispersed whole.

Catholicism is important to me. At the same time, though, it makes me conscious of being subject to the pulls and tugs of several traditional claims and expectations – variously resisting, submitting, uncomprehending, and intrigued. I also feel myself constantly addressed by (and written in to) gendered narratives of modernity that do not sit comfortably alongside religion.

For instance, I am conscious of my femaleness, aware of living in and between cultures as a young woman, knowing that the female body and psyche are habitually the targets of commodity discourse. Adverts, television, movies...everywhere women are shaped and smoothed into models I am expected to emulate, or aspire to. I do. I don't. I do/don't. Must. Mustn't. (Who is speaking here? What expectations are being expressed? The links are conflicted.) Similarly, I feel the longings and desires associated with romantic love – and however much I might attempt to question and deconstruct these, they lure and whisper, promising me the earth, bringing me strange poems marked by a desire that takes its own curious cues from the cultures that have made me. Are making me. I feel this making (aching taking waking breaking loose) veer between the closed sense of a fiat, or edict, and the ongoing form of lived poesis that is creative process.

In the other ear, too, the mind's inner whorls, are the calls and murmurings, sometimes the loud hailings, of scholarly articles and e-libraries and the subtle pleasures of 'school knowledge', offering access to what sometimes looks like another, (im)possible life planet. (However skeptical I sometimes become, worn down by doubt and female doings, I still want to believe that all is possible for me...For all I know, I might go to live in China.)

Given the mixed mulligatawny McDonalds masala of my own circumstances, along with the plethora of questions I carry as life baggage, Meena Alexander seemed a poet possessing apt analogies to my own context as a poet, as well as productive differences. The present essay is not intended as a major, comprehensive survey of Alexander’s poetic and prose writings; it is rather an uneven map of my own tentative beginnings as a female poet and youthful scholar. The wide discursive-experiential range of Alexander’s work as a diasporic woman writer of South Asian heritage has offered me an excellent imaginative foil for my own thinking and writing: a place to start, and places to go.

I am	NAME
South African?	(Check Y <input type="checkbox"/> /N <input type="checkbox"/>)
Indian*?	(Check Y <input type="checkbox"/> /N <input type="checkbox"/>)
**Note: classification required for statistical use only”. Quote.)	
Indian South African?	(Check Y <input type="checkbox"/> /N <input type="checkbox"/>)
South African Indian?	(Check Y <input type="checkbox"/> /N <input type="checkbox"/>)
And what about	
religion and	
class and	
education and	
gender and...?	
what what what	
am I	
is there even ‘I’	
in all	
at all?	

Relevant to questions of ambivalent belonging is Jain Anupama’s study, *How to be South Asian in America* (2011). She refers to identity as “provisional and consistently multivalent”, marked by “multiple inventions” (2011:227). Thus, even “identity stories” – or in Alexander’s case, poems, written under the received sign of the ethnic affiliation ‘South Asian’ or ‘Indian’ “are always and already intertextual”, influenced by a welter of cultural

traditions, stories, way of thinking, both from the past and the present. Thus “it is possible to seek out the layered meanings...of belonging rather than flattening out dynamic and fluid processes” (Jain 2011: 227) along with “a lingering sense that the ‘becoming’ is never a completed process but rather a vital redefining in constant flux” (Jain 2011:228).

The first article I read for my research concerned a Mauritian poet of Indian extraction. In “Transoceanic Echoes: Coolitude and the Work of the Mauritian poet Khal Torabully”, Veronique Bragard uses the concept of rhizomatic self to describe Torabully’s poetic voice which traces the sprawling, unfixed identities of the descendants of Indian indentured labourers who settled in Mauritius. Bragard argues that this poet invokes in his verse branching, rhizomatic images of the sea and of coral in order to symbolise his culturally experimental translation of diasporic selfhood. She also quotes Torabully’s remark that “there wasn’t any word to evoke the multiple self” in terms of which he was attempting to conceptualise his cultural subjectivity (2005: 220).

Rise home. Eyes home. I’s home. Rhizome. The word plays on the many tongues of my imagination. ‘Rhizome’, I discover, is derived from the ancient Greek word ‘*rhízōma*’ which means ‘mass of roots’ and Torabully chooses the specific image of sprawling adventitious ‘roots’ growing concurrently in order metaphorically to depict his dispersed Mauritian-Indian identity. (It’s interesting, isn’t it, that seaweed has no roots, plant though it may be?) In my own study, I will suggest how rhizomatic imaging and imagining can assist a reader in conceptualising the multiple selves which Meena Alexander articulates in her poetry. As Sam Naidu claims, if migration occasions the “fracturing and the loss of self” which we find in Alexander’s writing, it is also this restless movement which leads productively to “Alexander’s seeking solace in her imagination”, making connections which were not there

before (2010: 91). She uses the inventive capacities of language and imagination to recast 'loss' as the necessary material of life.

A migrant life lived through continents, across waterways and islands
creates the space where I write – a space that infolds memory, marking
whorl upon of whorl of time, mutating palimpsest I have learned to
reckon with. (Alexander 2009: 177)

This passage is from Alexander's *Poetics of Dislocation*, a book of poetic essays discussing the life experiences and language labours of Alexander as a woman writer in the vortex of multiculturalism. Here, Alexander conceptualises her writing via two highly evocative image structures which bear relation to the rhizome – the whorl and the palimpsest.

As I see it, the 'whorl of time' may be translated as a lotus, the most recognisable icon of Asian culture, one which invokes the notion of non-linear time and the convoluted workings of memory that are fundamental to Alexander's verse. Rustomji-Kerns might see this as a variation of the "constant pattern of a spiral or a mandala" that she perceives in Alexander's work. "At the center," she suggests, "is an intense self-reflection. And from that center there is an extraordinary expansion of concern for other people" (1998: np). The figure of the 'mutating palimpsest' also seems visually and conceptually to echo the whorl, in the sense that it entails subtle layering and enfolding. As Jain observes (2011:236), Alexander refers to "a palimpsest of self" in her interview with Zainab Ali and Dharini Rasia, and this is also more broadly a metaphor which the sociologist Pnina Werbner has found useful in theorising the "'multiplex' identity struggles" associated with diaspora (2002:236).

The palimpsest can be thought of, literally, as an old manuscript containing multiple texts, many of them incompletely erased or scarcely visible. The term is also applied in the visual

arts to refer to a painted canvas in which various layers of picture glimmer through the present, visible surface. For Alexander, the palimpsest is a metaphoric reworking or textual ‘mutation’, one in which the writer’s surface expression has been layered with text upon text, idea upon idea, image upon image. The result is nuance and complexity, meaning and intention virtually untraceable. In such an over-layering, Ur questions of origin or originating source become occluded, both purposefully and fortuitously obscured. For Alexander, the present page, as it were, the ‘page’ of the present moment which encapsulates writing...thinking...reading...being, is never a single isolated instance. Instead, it is composite. The ‘page’ is a layered engagement with past and present histories and selves, a series of uneven striations that draws on both personal biography *and* on ill-defined, even aspirational bodies of collective identity which might derive from cultures as diverse as ‘Indian’ or ‘English’ or ‘American’. Alexander’s poetry shows that her life is envisaged as not solely her own, as some enclosed, self-sufficient entity. Rather, it is erratically and inconstantly inflected by the lives of others, and by the weight of cultural memory as it tries to discover meaningful relation with emerging cultural claims. Rustomji-Kerns remarks that Alexander’s poetry considers “what lies beneath the surface of lives caught in different varieties of colonization and exploitation,” especially focussing on “[g]enerations of women, houses and cultures” (1991:370), and yet when I read the poems, I find that even this evident, serious interest in socio-political issues can take more elliptical and obscure turns through the poet’s personal mythology, her mixed familiarity with many languages, and her weighty academic learning.

As subsequent discussion in my essay will indicate, these challenges the poet seeks to explore and render in the image- and idea-based languages of poetry, as well as in an English language that tussles with questions of linguistic authority and authenticity. In some poems,

for example, Alexander invites a reader to consider whether the 'I' written in English is fully synonymous with the 'I' expressed in the partial linguistic memories of the Malayalam of her childhood. Further, she wonders, what is the implication when part of one's adult self is persistently imagined through a vernacular that the poet knows only as an oral language and which she must necessarily render, on the page, in the written script of an angular, anglicised alphabet rather than being able to communicate this element of self to her audience through the spoken sussurations of the tongue? The 'self', as it emerges in Alexander's poetry, is thus not a coherently monadic entity but rather a 'synonymous' accretion, such that both self and page are whirling, palimpsest reverberations of a poet's place in the processual unfolding of the various cultures which comprise her life.

Appropriately refusing simple notions of access, cultural entry and assimilation, Alexander's United States debut was a collection of poems and prose published by Three Continents Press under the title *House of a Thousand Doors* (1988), a collection in which she began to shift her focus from India per se "to the Indian diaspora" (Kich 2005: 126), exploring "themes associated with migration", among them "the immigrant's continuing sense of geographical and cultural dislocation" and "the need to find compromises between competing cultural values and demands"(Kich 2005: 126). However, throughout, even when tussling with ethnic and national identity markers, it is feasible to claim that her poetry has evidenced an interest in "postcolonial concerns about borrowed identity, cultural uncertainty, and linguistic and literary autonomy" (Kich 2005: 126). I notice that in her essay on Meena Alexander as one among other South Asian women writers, for example, Shilpa Davé uses the title "The Doors to Home and History", emphasising the links between self and society, the domestic and the national, which are especially important negotiations in the representations of identities offered by female writers of the 'Indian' diaspora (1993).

As I read Alexander's writing across various genres, it became clear that along with the notions of whorl and palimpsest, the rhizome was a useful tool for understanding the analytics informing the identity negotiations of a migrant, female poet. Such physical structures become metaphors which pertain to the patterns of thought and expression which inform Alexander's writing. The metaphors accommodate an array of imaginative tensions: between opening and closing, revealing and concealing; the difficult balance of acceptance and struggle, silence and articulation. "The borders of the visible are always lit by the light of what we cannot see," Alexander writes (2006: np), and to understand the 'Meena Alexander' of the collection *Illiterate Heart* (2002), I discovered, is to rub thumbs and thought against the tender sections of her life that she has transmuted into words. My process of exploring Alexander's poetry, albeit limited to an engagement with poems from only one of her collections, has obliged me to accommodate the paradoxical energies which inform her thinking and writing.

Here, I have to acknowledge a contradiction: the emotions and ideas which structure her verse have in some respects become more clear to me, layers gradually peeling back and unfolding, branches – roots and routes – forking in ways I have become better able to follow. Yet, at the same time, these continue to be marked by facets of meaning and purpose which elude me; there is always, in the poetry, elements which remain frustratingly obscure. I want to understand the poetry and its relation to Alexander's life, but try as I might, not all is illuminated; 'Meena Alexander' escapes me. Here, my response to her writing diverges dramatically from the conclusion of Megan Adam in an informal review of the memoir *Fault Lines* posted on the Web: "If she got rid of her whole first half it would make the book a thousand times better" (2012: np). Reading this statement, I was annoyed by the facile hyperbole of the assumptions, the facility with which such unthinking views could be made

public as if they were unquestionably legitimate, the equivalent of informed critical opinion. (That's the downside of social media and the Net, perhaps, that anyone may freely represent even slight, ill-judged remark to a wide audience as if it were well-judged fact.) How could Alexander be so misunderstood, part of me wondered? Nevertheless, Adams' misguided comments also managed to prompt in my mind a curious frisson of language and idea. For in the context of my small study of Meena Alexander's poetry and 'selfhood' – the latter referring to the obscure or hooded qualities associated with self, rather than simply the expressive articulation of identity – I also found myself taking pleasure in the paradox: "her whole first half"; the possibility of any half ever being whole...the odd notion of any self being half this, half that. However, I thought, maybe it is the curious imagination that makes such incongruities of 'self' and 'identity' perfectly possible, and able to be explored.

There is something in Alexander's insistently exploratory expansiveness of identity, I maintain, of the characteristic pattern of diasporic dispersal, a necessary escape from the convenient certainties upon which a univocal, conventional Cartesian metaphysics of the subject insists:

In seeking answers
the hardest script will do.

A child's upright hand –
stony syntax, slow work

in part-time English,
trying to forge an honest sentence

such as:
Someone has cut her cords.

Or: *Someone will swim farther
and farther from what she feels is the shore.*

(Alexander 2002:53)

Such uncertain degrees of transparency – between “what we cannot see” and the intuition of erratic comprehension – will be developed a little further in my discussion of autobiographical dis/closure and the ‘art’ of concealing which Alexander employs in *Illiterate Heart* (2002), a collection which won the 2002 PEN Open Book Award. What can I learn of the poet ‘Meena Alexander’ from *Illiterate Heart*? I set out to ask; a question which cannot easily be answered, even after months of studious engagement with the poems and with the growing body of critical scholarship around her work. At times, tired of tussling with the slippery inconsistencies of the voices and personae which characterise poetry as a discourse, I wanted to believe that Alexander was speaking (more) authentically and directly in interviews, her voice unmediated. And yet even such fora, I have come to appreciate, are not unproblematically expressive or communicative. Rather, they are instances of the poet’s self-reflexive performativity, a subtle public re-presentation of the various selves which have come to be associated with her as a poet, a woman, a daughter, an academic...; an Indian, an American, an scholar versed in ‘European’ languages and Anglo-French cultures.

In trying to understand ‘Meena Alexander’ and her poetry, I latch on to the opinions of others’, trying to merge them with my own emergent understandings. For example: “Meena Alexander's poetry emerges as a consciousness moving between the worlds of memory and the present, enhanced by multiple languages. Her experience of exile is translated into the intimate exploration of her connections to both India and America..... Drawing on the fascinating images and languages of her dual life, Alexander deftly weaves together contradictory geographies, thoughts, and feelings”

(http://books.google.co.za/books/about/Illiterate_heart.html?id=0zRaAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y).

A dual life. Duality. I suppose this is true, in part, for Alexander is culturally and linguistically both this and that, she gestures here and there. And yet I find myself wondering, in this convenient binarism, where the relative weightings fall. Because Alexander *does not*, in her poetry, offer the US ('us'?) as some comfortably proximate 'here', and India ('them?') as a distant cultural 'there'. Nor is there some simple vice versa to be invoked. Instead of such neat versions and inversions, she offers a reader experience depicted through more culturally unstable metaphors, just as I have implied in my discussion of the figures of the rhizome, the palimpsest, the whorl. Furthermore, as various commentators have pointed out, for instance, the cultural-ethnic category 'Asian American' is itself "increasingly characterized by diasporic identities and transnational allegiances" (Shankar 2001: 285). Indeed, "Asian Indian immigrants in the US often do not identify themselves as (Asian) American, exhibiting instead...a sensibility that Arjun Appadurai has described as 'postnational'. Indian Americans face the identity dilemma of not being American enough, but also not being Asian enough to easily fit the...equation" (Shankar 2001: 285).

Not surprisingly then, Alexander's questioning of self in relation to culture unsettles the binaristic categories of identity implied by Adams' notion of 'duality'. The 'Meena Alexander' I have now so often encountered in her poetry far more widely and diversely embodies the challenges of diasporic writing than any convenient polarity can convey. "What beats in my heart?" writes Alexander, "Who can tell? I cannot tease my writing hand around / that burnt hole of sense" (2002: 65).

What, really, do I know of Meena Alexander? What can a biographical synopsis convey when a woman has lived such an intricate life, geographically and culturally? Not knowing how to proceed, I am inclined to lapse into the conventional blurb-type paragraph; wanting

something else, I borrow from everywhere in order to imagine the diasporic articulations of her life history thus far, a medley of voices re-doubling my ventriloquism in order to conjure for a reader an embodied sense of Meena Alexander as a writer whose biography is “intimately connected with her literary output” and which “has spanned four continents and...[a] myriad passages across oceans and borders” (Basu and Leenerts 2009: 2). This “geographic multi-locality” is explicable as a “transnationalism” that, as Sam Naidu points out, is tied to a subversive aesthetic through which the woman writer reconfigures the demands of cultural belonging (2010: 87).

Allahabad was the city where Alexander was born in 1951, the second oldest city in India. She spent the first five years of her life moving between two regions in India – Allahabad, in the north, site of her parental home, and Kerala in the south, where her grandparents lived. Alexander mentions that at a young age she felt herself a ‘migrant’ between two cities, two regions, two cultures. Additionally, she writes of Allahabad as a place where three major Indian rivers meet: the Ganges, the Yamuna and the Saraswati, and she acknowledges this confluence as emblematic of cultural meeting, of fluid points of encounter. In the title poem of *Illiterate Heart*, she writes of paging through “Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* / thinking why should they imagine no one else / has such rivers in their lives”? When asked in an interview about her use of water as a repeated image in her poetry, Alexander remarks:

My father was a meteorologist...Appa was very involved through his work in the flow of monsoon air and certain wind patterns that related to the flow of water in the Indian Ocean...I grew up in a household where the flow of natural storms, often very unpredictable, was something that my father tried to predict, to pattern. (Joseph 2010: 111)

The quotation introduces the concepts of chance flow and conscious patterning, both of which are pertinent to Alexander's poetry. In many of her poems, images of deliberate order, expressed in highly turned language and line arrangement, are set in relation to looser, more happenstance approaches to event, emotion and idea, the poet attempting to honour memory and the present as unsettled, motile bodies of meaning.

When Alexander was five, her father was seconded to Khartoum in Sudan by the Indian government. This move I try to understand as having a complicated impact upon a girl child's emergent, already socially-compromised sense of agency: the child's growing sense of herself *as* a self, an 'I' which 'is' an 'I am', but which is nevertheless still subject to the control of adult demand and shaping, so that the 'I' is also repeatedly experienced as an 'I am not'. And for Alexander as a girl child, I wonder, how was this sense of split even further separated? I think of Alexander's comment that she began as a ten-year old "writing in snatches" in the toilet under the neem tree, experiencing this space as an illicit escape from the conflicted expectations and constraints to which she was subject as a girl, even as she continued to feel guilty shame at the paradoxically secret expressive freedoms she decided to undertake for herself (Alexander 1996:10).

There are poems in *Illiterate Heart* which attest to the troubled, ambiguous bonds of love and duty even when these are not intended to tie one fast to any rigid, paternalistic hierarchy – even the good father has his preferred definitions of what is 'good', and the small girl clearly internalises and develops her sense of self in relation to such parameters and possibilities. This is especially complex given that, as we discover in Rustomji-Kerns' interview, Alexander did not definitively relocate from India to Sudan. Instead, she moved to and fro between two different geographical locations and their associated cultural contexts. "Right

from childhood,” says Alexander, “because of my father's job, we were always moving back and forth.... As a child I would spend six months in India and six months in North Africa. I became used to that shifting” (Rustomji-Kerns 1998: np).

However accustomed she may have become to such necessary accommodations, this pattern of movement is hardly the clear, directional teleology of self in place and time that is conveyed in the convenient Google publishing descriptor of *Fault Lines*. Here, for example, a potential reader is informed that “From India to Sudan to England, and finally to the island of Manhattan, poet Meena Alexander traces her growth as a writer and a woman”. Instead, the ‘self’ of which Alexander writes is, as Singh and Chetty would point out, complex, hybrid, and interstitial (2010). “For South Asians in diaspora around the globe...dramatic reorderings of the subcontinent combined with their own migratory journeys...result in complicated matrices of identification and affiliation” (Jain 2011: 5 - 6), and for the writer this tangle of interconnection – pasts and presents, experience and invention, mobile versions of ‘I’ dentity – is powerfully shaped by imagination. “Sometimes I think that at the heart of what I write is a struggle to define the self,” says Alexander as she converses with Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, and “for people like us, Indian-Americans, that self is complex, multiple, fissured”. And yet, she continues, despite this mobile convolution of meaning, “the delights that move are so simple really”. In the next breath, a whorl of thought, Alexander reaches for an image which might embody this simple idea, although she does not explain the links for a reader, inviting a reader to fill the suggestive gaps between the rhizomatic synapses of the poet’s sensibility, minuscule physiological ‘roots’ which have the paradoxical capacity to effect connection via tender touch as well as to prompt inspired leap: “I have no picture of the heart, the soul, except a rich fruit. Skin and all it is fit to eat. There were monkeys at the edge of my childhood garden, eating passion fruit, green globes that hung on the vine” (1998: np).

The move to Sudan prompted two imperatives I would like briefly to discuss. The first concerns the crucial feature, in Alexander's writing, of transoceanic and trans-national displacement due to immigration. The move from India to Sudan (and then to and fro), comprises an early, formative instance of Alexander's diasporic identity, a mobile network of repeated departures and arrivals that would go on to be further extended and re-routed as the adolescent and then older Alexander moved again and again to different continents, memory and experience accruing both layers and gaps. What I wish to emphasise, really, is also how such travelling entailed not only actual, physical relocation but the development of a determined habit of interior dialogism through which 'self' was obliged constantly to (re)negotiate the parameters – whether boundaries and/or extensions – through which it could be envisaged. Over time, it seems, the very familiar act of movement has led Alexander to imagine her identity as a defamiliarised entity, something constituted in, by and through dispersion, rather than cultural fixity or rootedness. (Such fluidity, as her poetry demonstrates, is crucial to her willingness to attempt to identify with a range of cultures and people, many of them othered and dispossessed.)

Secondly, it was from these criss-crossings between India and the Sudan that the multiplicity of languages shaping her ear and consciousness grew: Malayalam, Tamil, English, Hindi, Arabic, French.... This explicit emphasis on the flow from one place to another has also patterned her movement through literary and creative discourse. All these languages began to impinge on the young writer's consciousness, an earful sound-scape and a noisy mind-scape which would, over time, influence the linguistic repertoire of her poetry and, again, the versatile reach she has developed across cultures, geographies and, indeed, even *genres*.

Significant here is Alexander's shifting relationship with the English language. As Alexander explains, for example, "I have never learnt to read or write in Malayalam, and turned into a truly postcolonial creature, who had to live in English, though a special sort of English, I must say, for the version for the language I am comfortable with bends and sways to the shores of other territories, other tongues" (1996: 11). Clearly, as Purvi Shah notes, she envisages this version of English as a potential tool for reworking colonial hierarchies, and her poetry mingles in its "undercurrents... the many languages by which she has been surrounded" (2002:24). If, in Alexander's "migrant narrative," as Shah claims, "language offers a home" (2002: 23), it seems important to understand that this 'home' is heterogeneous and unsettled, rather than some narrowly-defined geographical or linguistic locatedness.

That this process of 'homing' is difficult rather than painless is explained by Sneja Gunew, who cites Meena Alexander's "conceit of language as skin" (2007: 102), observing that she has to tear and rip in order to speak her "discrepant otherness" (Alexander 1993: 73). When at age ten Alexander began secretly to write in English, she experienced shame, a corporeal sense of betrayal. Gunew describes these clandestine labours as the young girl's attempt "to create a prosthetic intellectual self" shot through with the paradoxically growing recognition of the "need for the subjugated writer to 'unselve' oneself, involving a deliberately violent and disjunctive movement between the private and the public" (Gunew 2007: 102).

Alexander came to understand that her poetry entailed "a deliberate incursion into and destabilization of the complacently monolingual indifference of the English-speaking context" (Gunew 2007: 102). Writing of her relation to English, Alexander observes, "I was well aware that the language itself had to be pierced and punctured lest the thickness of the white skin cover over my atmosphere, my very self" (1993:118). Yet working through such difficulties, Alexander has come to consider English, a once colonial language, an

appropriate medium for her own culturally-varied expression, rather than as some hierarchical imposition which cancels out her voice. She remarks:

I do think that now, for all intents and purposes English is an Indian language and is put to powerful use as such. And yet of course it is important to realise that it is the language of an elite. So many of us speak in our mother tongues, Malayalam, Hindi, Bengali and so forth and also write in English. I do not think that one crosses out the other. And certainly I am deeply aware of the great river of Indian literature into which so many streams of language flow (Hussain 2007: np).

Linguistic diversity as an intriguing cultural palimpsest has been part of Alexander's life since she was extremely young. In addition to what we know of Alexander's relationship with Malayalam, in "Portrait of Meena Alexander", for example, Erika Duncan explains that the young Alexander was homeschooled, in English, by a Scottish tutor; and that when she finished high school at just thirteen, she went to Khartoum University to study English and French literature. Here, the poems that she had been writing in English were translated into Arabic, and "published in the main newspaper in Khartoum" (1999: 26). "It made a lot of sense to me," remarks Alexander, "that my first poems were published in a language that I couldn't read, keeping up somehow the safer sense of invisibility" (Duncan 1999: 26).

Yet the writing and publication also confirmed the girl's sense of a different, emergent identity as a poet. Consider here the importance of naming, and the highly personalised modulation of cultural-linguistic norms which accompanied publication. Alexander's given name, endowed by her Syrian Christian parents, was Mary Elizabeth. 'Meena' was merely a pet name. "I was only called Mary in school," she remarks, "and I found that quite irritating, so I returned to myself, or so I felt, in losing that other name which felt not mine really and of course there was the colonial burden, in the sense that my grandmother after whom I was named was Mariamma, which is the Malayalam of Mary, and I should have been that really,

formally”. Then “I wrote poems under the name Meena and published them and once that happened I felt it was truly my name” (Hussain 2007: np). What do I notice, in this phrasing? The girl’s motivated decision to write her self as herself under a name that was but wasn’t hers, at once revealing and concealing - despite the certain sound of ‘truly’, the inflections attest to the unsettled nature of self and naming that would become Alexander’s writerly *métier*.

Further permutations of identity – a combination of exilic alienation and cultural expansion – occurred when Alexander decided to pursue doctoral study in England at the age of eighteen. Her research focused chiefly on English Romantic literature. One could propose that this field of research, coupled with her arrival on another continent, once again triggered the pattern of unsettlement, prompting the young Alexander further to question the nature and meaning of her identity. Shah points out that Alexander’s first academic publication was *The Poetic Self: Towards a Phenomenology of Romanticism*. This study emanated from her doctoral research into British Romantic writing at the University of Nottingham, a degree which had compounded (and confounded?) her profound sense of dislocation. “Alexander began to feel acutely the distress and dislocation of her position as a postcolonial subject”, her own experience and cultural background highlighting the incongruity of her intellectual field of study. The sensations of such tensions, Shah explains, “she would later weave into her work” as a poet and memoirist (2002: 22)

Attaining her doctorate in 1973, Alexander re-turned to teach in India for five years, further complicating her sense of diasporic belonging. In these five years, Alexander lived a fairly nomadic life, moving from one university to another within India. She was also a visiting fellow of the University of Paris-Sorbonne, her life marked by what one might call an internal

pattern of diaspora in which she had repeatedly to become aware of herself as split between foreign and familiar lands and languages. The young woman writer's increasing awareness of her variously mobile and stalled linguistic repertoire is well articulated in the following quotation which, in an aptly fluid, rapidly-moving rush of words, idea and recollection, reflects on the experience of moving amongst languages while attempting to locate for oneself a liveable sense of place:

Motion. When I first moved to Hyderabad in 1975, I had that little moped and I loved going faster than anyone else. And all those signs in Telegu would go by and I couldn't read them. Devanagari I can read but others not keeping free of scripts, something to do with this constant motion and traveling. I remember that when we went from Khartoum to Bombay the minute we reached Bombay the part of my brain that had Arabic in it would completely disappear and I would have Hindi in it. But Malayalam and French never went. But Hindi and Arabic would overlay each other. (Rustomji-Kerns 1998: 27)

Such mobility, I maintain, forms a clearly identifiable pattern of movement that is also, paradoxically, able to morph and shift in order to accommodate constantly changing circumstances and tongues. It is such shift which informs Alexander's poetry. Further, if the willingness to inhabit linguistic uncertainty is implied in the figure of the very first boat trip which Alexander took with her mother to Sudan, it is already latent in the varied languages which made up the cultural environments of her childhood in India. Alexander's writing correlates with her nomadic life; the writing and the living are necessarily exploratory and processional. As I have suggested, the patterning developed is linked and accentuated by the number of languages gathered into consciousness by Alexander, the uneven levels of fluency becoming less a hindrance than a creative provocation towards the recognition, in her poetry, of multivocality and the conception of 'self' as situated across multiple selves. I will explore such issues further in the course of this thesis.

Although she has settled at the English department of Hunter College in City University of New York (CUNY), Alexander was and still is an unmistakable traveller rather than envisaging her life in terms of one place or another. In *The Shock of Arrival*, her collection of lyrical-critical essays which explores forms of South Asian experience under post-colonialism, for example, she writes: “Coming to America, I have felt in my own heart what W.E.B Dubois invoked: ‘Two souls, two thoughts...in one dark body’. But now, at the tail end of the century, perhaps there are many souls, many voices, in one dark body” (Alexander 1996:1). Her tendency is to speculate. To pose multiple questions about embodied consciousness. “What multifoliate truth,” she wonders, “is stirring here”, referring to both her embodied particularity as “an Indian woman”, and within the cultural-geographical space which is ‘America’ (1996:2). Importantly, however, in her comment to Ruth Maxey in an interview, she contends that “there is a distinction between one’s life being *shaped* by postcolonial realities and its being dictated by them. The whole question of labels is very complicated because the historical moment into which I was born (just after the middle of the last century), was part of a postcolonial era” (2006: 25).

I find that this is the epitome of Alexander’s writing; it is inflected by a complex attempt variously to integrate and off-set multiple languages, cultures and selves. An interesting version of my proposition is invoked by Alexander when she observes “I know that when I am in the writing, ‘I’ will be eaten up. And only when it’s ready will it spit me out. So I hold myself back, I resist, because once I’m in the great wave, there’s no turning back; I have to lose myself, till finally I am washed to shore” (Alexander 2009: 1). Two questions strike me most from this particular quotation. Which self appears ashore after the poem is ready? Is this the autobiographical or the fictitious, the poetic or personal, the individual or communal? Am I mistaken, even, in imagining that these identities remain distinct? As Alexander observes

of the poems she writes, one and another may “seem[] to come from another world entirely,” yet “one and the other help map out this moving world I inhabit, a world of migrant memory and multiple languages at the rim of the twenty-first century”

(<http://sfoonline.barnard.edu/wth/alexanpo.htm>).

When reading *Illiterate Heart*, questions and comments such as these drift and swirl in my mind. I am reminded of my own writing and the analogies of identity that Torabully struggles to materialise in his poetry. This fluid and fractured self – the very metaphors paradoxical – is something that a poet could spend his or her whole life exploring. The rhizome, after all, is always growing and remaking itself, turning in one direction and then another. Indeed, it sometimes grows in many directions simultaneously. There, possibly, the ‘whorl’ makes another appearance, and the ‘palimpsest’ – which might otherwise imply an original, authentic source, mutates and shifts so that authenticity is cast into question.

As I have suggested, Alexander’s experience of a life lived in many different cultural-geographic locations is very intimately connected to her identity. Maxey asks Alexander in an interview, “As part of the migrant experience you mention, you have multiple homes; even as child, home took many different forms. Is home a garden or four walls of a house or the text itself or your New York apartment?” Alexander replies: “Well, it has to be the text itself, but the text itself cannot be sprung if you don’t have somewhere to be or sit or stand for a little bit...Perhaps the poem is in an attempt to make up a home from what was lost. Maybe that’s why I started writing” (2006: 37).

Diaspora

Amma, I am dreaming myself into your body.
It is the end of everything.
Your pillow stained with white
tosses as a wave might
on our southern shore.

“Rites of Sense” (Alexander 2002: 72)

When you write something down, it is a way of saying, I am remembering.

“The Poet in the Public Sphere” (Basu 2002: 37)

From my first reading of *Illiterate Heart*, it was impossible not to notice that Alexander is intrigued by the idea of migration; the difficult movement across ideas and languages and cultures repeatedly informs her poetry. Further, I kept finding the word ‘diaspora’ used in relation to Alexander, and needed to explore the meaning of this term. Diaspora, I came to understand, is one of the fundamental critical theories used in postcolonial literary studies. The word derives from the Bible, and initially relates to the dispersing of the Jews from their original homeland to foreign territories. However, diaspora has evolved from this selected event into a concept describing the movement of people away from their origin. Today diaspora may be recognised as the cultural mobility of so-called postcolonial subjects, and it is often the subject of representation in their literature. This writing (whether prosaic or poetic) is examined and given emphasis in postcolonial literary studies as it explores the changing nature of entering a new territory, leaving one’s home, and the disjunctive journey between these two aspects. In reading many academic and creative literatures on this particular subject, I especially noticed that diaspora was envisaged as a schism, a sudden

separation which causes an acute sense of nostalgia for one's native land. (I cannot reference the expansive critical scholarship on diaspora in the present paper; however, Stefanie Kron and Birgit zur Nieden's work [2013] offers an extremely useful account of the term 'diaspora', as well as the shifts in meaning and applicability, especially among scholars of women's writing.)

To expand on the definition: diaspora is a migration from a homeland and/or birthplace to an unfamiliar cultural space, a movement that occasions the isolation or dislocation of an individual or a people. This severance may be voluntary or forced but nostalgia for the 'home' is one of the key effects. However, not all scholars are comfortable with the term. Since the world is increasingly characterised by the varied movements of people across the globe, some argue, so "plentiful is the 'diaspora' material gathered in the last two decades that the word has almost lost its critical punch" (Lal and Kumar 2007: ix). Yet I believe that the word retains some useful critical-conceptual inflections, among them Avtar Brah's term 'diaspora space'. Brah's idiosyncratic coinage highlights "the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes" (2003:615). As Kron and zur Nieden explain, "Brah distinguishes her concept of diaspora space from notions of diaspora" that emphasise solely the "idea of territorial 'homeland'" (2013:np). Rather, Brah's "concept of diaspora offers a critique of discourses of field of origins, while taking account of a homing desire which is not the same thing as desire for a homeland" (Brah 2003: 614).

This is a subtle but important difference, and assists me when I try to understand the entangled patterns of forward and backward movement of ideas, places, and references which mark Alexander's poetry. It prompts me not to fixate on origins and destinations, but to find

ways to accommodate poetry as a way of thinking *through*, and being *in*, rather than necessarily expressing unequivocal loss of national belonging. Lal and Kumar aver that the “literature emerging from...diasporic experience tends to be a remembering of the world through a backward glance”, the intuition that “the journey would be transformative and irrevocable”; however, using Brah I can understand Alexander’s sense of identity becoming more clearly a processual making that finds ways to live by relating the contingencies of empirical location to the possibilities and constraints of “dwell[ing] in the realms of the imaginary” (2007: ix) that live beyond narrow national borders.

This outwardly intricate yet simultaneously internal action of memory is conceptualised in many of Alexander’s poems and could be said to overarch the entirety of *Illiterate Heart*. In effect, patterns of schism-cum-disjuncture set up against the quest for innovative re-connection have followed Alexander throughout her life and have become prominent as influences on all of her writing. Relevant here are Alexander’s Notes to a poem cycle from *Illiterate Heart*. She writes of trying “to catch something of the internal architecture of sense... - a trajectory from the pitch of memory to the possibility of a shared existence” (2002:101). The space to which she refers might be a country, yes, but also invokes the poem itself as a “metamorphic life” (2002:101) in which widely disparate elements are invited by the poet to find unusual accommodation.

Bruce King suggests in his article, “To be or not to be diasporic”, that all artists draw from the memories of their formative years (2006: 139-140). This is a signpost of much autobiographic and semi-autobiographical literature. Maxine Hong Kingston’s autobiography, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, for instance, illustrates this precept, and I find that there are many similarities between Alexander and

Hong Kingston as differently nationalised yet diasporic writers, particularly the fictionalising of the self to create many selves. If Alexander's diasporic formative years can be said to provide her poetry with a diverse structure, Alexander also holds that one's life may be "shaped by postcolonial realities" without "being dictated [to] by them" (Maxey 2006: 25). Other major concerns – such as language and gender – are also linked to diaspora, and my short study will touch on these. As John Oliver Perry argues in his article "Exiled By A Woman's Body", "without disingenuously complaining of historically enforced social and personal and esthetic alienations, [Alexander] probes the actualities of her given and constantly changing situations and their relationships to other equally shifting conditions of living, past and present" (1986: 126). "Diasporic subjects are often associated with a mobility not of their choosing and frequently find themselves 'unhoused' in ways that may mean being dislocated from one's own body", writes Gunew. The "mechanisms of racism," for example, or gendered discrimination, "shock" an individual into an unexpected "consciousness of the corporeal" (Gunew 2007:100), which is almost a betrayal of the accustomed self, in that the body 'looks back' at one sceptically, or strangely, rendering the gaze of supposed *difference* from assumed selfhood. A flash of re-cognition. As I see it then, Alexander is not only concerned with the exterior trial of migration but the internal feat that migration catalyses; namely, the diaspora of the self as an uneven, ongoing intersection of interior and exterior experiences. Instead of treating diaspora as a 'logistical' occurrence – a movement from 'here' to 'there' – this poet uses diaspora to negotiate the exploration of her internal identity and how this deep embodiment relates to the places in which she finds herself.

Bruce King, for his part, suggests rather provocatively that "Alexander struggles with her possibly imagined memories for possession of herself, an insecurity of identity and history which she blames on 'migrancy'" (2006: 148). I am uncomfortable with this poor phrasing,

because ‘blame’ implies a pejorative, a necessarily negative value judgement in comparison, say, with the verb ‘attributes’. Nevertheless King’s claim leads me to my own question informing this essay: to what extent can poetry contribute to the ‘housing’ of a diasporic poet’s dispersed identity? I propose that diaspora has become one of Meena Alexander’s core generative devices that she uses to produce an evocative, postcolonial homing. I suggest that Alexander widens the definition of diaspora to *accommodate* difficult questions of unresolved identity, rather than simply searching for ‘home’. In *Illiterate Heart*, as my brief discussion of several poems will shortly show, home and exile are not stark binaries which coexist to classify diaspora. They are complex and explored subjects that are not only about relative external location/s, but relate to one’s internal locations (or selves), the individual’s imagination and experience constantly making and remaking affiliation, testing, through both creative projection and empirical reality, what forms of ‘selving’ are possible.

This brings me back to Torabully’s concept of a rhizomatic identity which, we recall, is discussed by Bragard in relation to the sea and coral as analogues of forms of personal-historical entanglement in this Mauritian poet’s work. Bragard, remember, suggests that Torabully’s poetry manifests a migrant identity that is “multiple and rhizome-like...characterized by multiple crossings: crossing between culture, heritage, places, generations, gender historical assertions and mythical references” (2005:228-9). This strikes me as apt for Alexander’s writing too. It is worth recalling that Alexander considers her writing across genres to be “not just autobiography but also history” (2010: 112) in that generic fluidity speaks to changes in the location of self in time (and place). She says, “I think that the first theatre, for me, was the ocean and it was a very scary thing because it didn’t have any landmarks. It didn’t have a house; it didn’t have the streets; it didn’t have the

garden; it didn't have any of the roads and the patterns that I grew up to the age of five, living in India" (Joseph 2010: 111).

In speaking about Alexander, Joseph proposes that "this preoccupation with the Indian Ocean allows for penetrating analyses into the tectonic shifts of migrancy between land masses and bodies of water, between childhood and the Indian Ocean", and past and present (2010: 111). This speaks directly to my own study. For Alexander, diaspora is much more than a necessarily unsettling separation; she constantly shifts between ideas, motifs, places; between inside and outside, thought and action... meaning, for me, that the very textures of her poetry echo restless diasporic, which in turn is echoed in her sense of self as in formation, rather than nationally or culturally determined. One might even suggest that her 'diaspora' can be defined as an ongoing, querying adaptation to the foreign land, a series of often unanswered questions which leads her, paradoxically, to make otherness her home. The United States, France, Sudan, India, England – Alexander's identity adapts and adopts, sometimes adeptly, sometimes through error, overall attesting to identity as a curiously intertwined combination of the strange and the familiar.

Interesting at this juncture is Benzi Zhang's view on identity and diaspora in "Diaspora in Writing". In this article, he proposes that "with all its complexity and ambiguity associated with the experience of multi-home mediation, diaspora, as both a 'process' and a 'relationship', suggests an act of constant repositioning in confluent streams that accommodates to multiple cultural habitats/homes" (2010: 126). This description of diaspora as a relationship is similar to my notion of Alexander's diaspora as adaption-cum-adoption. Both Zhang's and Bragard's conceptualisations advocate diaspora as *relatability* rather than the older, more traditional sense of diaspora as *dislocation*. In adapting and forming bonds to each land she lives in, Alexander collects a multiplicity of cultures, as well as geographies,

which become embedded within her identity, creating a ‘web’ of rhizomatic and diasporic axioms.

Zhang also comments that “since diasporans develop multiple relationships that cross and span cultural and national borders, the trajectories of their identities, as a result, would occupy no singular cultural/national space but are situated in a web of social, economical and cultural links encompassing both global and local discourses” (2010: 126). Here, it seems that Zhang views identity rhizomatically as he advocates that diasporans “are situated in a *web* [my emphasis] of social, economical and cultural links”. Rather than emphasising the pre-eminently linear direction in terms of which identity is traditionally thought to develop, Zhang’s idea intersects with the notion of dispersed yet tangentially linked rhizomatic identity which Bragard theorises in her scholarship on Torabully’s poetry.

Bragard suggests that the sea “epitomises borderlessness” (2005: 224), pertaining to Torabully’s work, and Alexander, too, states that the Indian Ocean was “a first space” for her. She comments that this sea can be a “liminal space...you might be able to think out things that are difficult in one place differently once you cross the margins, just across the borders” (Joseph 2010: 113). In other words, I am suggesting that Alexander has developed her internal structures of thought, emotion and identification through the external experience of multiple diasporas. She asserts, “I suppose, if you wish, what I am doing is a kind of mapping in my head that allows for the world as I live it – in my life, and my personal history” (Joseph 2010: 113). Alexander’s prose and poetry reflect this multiple ‘self’ in the same disaggregate, yet advantageous way, eschewing linearity and fixity. Through the development of these numerous diasporas, “the articulation of diasporic identity is therefore situated in a process of transrelation between two or more cultural formations” and as Zhang suggests, cultural

differences are accommodated. “[T]ransrelation, which is by no means a simple combination of different cultural and historical elements, does not mean to assert differences as an end in itself, but to form differences into a new discourse in opposition to totalizing politics” (Zhang 2010: 129). This concept of transrelation can be useful when analysing Alexander’s poetry as it conveys “the recognition of our own differences [which] transform foreignness into commonality” (Zhang 2010: 127). I am unsure of the use of the word ‘commonality’ here; however, this ‘cohesion’ of difference (for lack of a better phrase) is a recurring concern in *Illiterate Heart*.

I encounter such multiple meanings when I read “Provenance” in *Illiterate Heart*, noting, too, that the poem placement at the beginning enables Alexander to question, with gentle irony, a reader’s inclination to search for origins and original truths, to fix on certainty rather than leaving things unsure.

Consider the title: the word ‘provenance’ is defined as “where something originated or was nurtured in its early existence”, and this naming of the poem, then, is applicable on several levels in relation to the ‘defining’ of this poet’s identity. Firstly, the title suggests to a reader that this piece constitutes the beginning or site of setting out of the subsequent poems and the journey of reading and understanding. Yet it is precisely such surface readings and assumptions that are subject to deeper, more nuanced treatment in the body of the collection. Secondly, the title might be thought to connote the place of origin, the mythical ‘birth’ space, from and in which the poet’s ‘I’ arrives in the world. However, the collection goes on to show that if the ‘I’ is personal there is nevertheless a prevalent collective, cultural aspect to the speaker’s voicings, and that it is this ability to accommodate the many in the one that offers an invitation to a reader. The implication is that Alexander’s speakers (overlaid as these are with versions of the poet’s personal tones as well as with the varied signs of cultural

difference), enable poet and reader to find connection through the language of the poems, despite individual and cultural differences. This implies that poetry has the latent capacity to shift borders, to break barriers. A reader may enter *Illiterate Heart* from some far point on the earth, distant from Alexander, and this, too, may be some consequential form of beginning, of beginning to find tentative ways in which difference may come to be together using the languages, images, and ideas of poetry.

I lead you into the page.
With you I enter a space where verbs

have little extension where syntax smolders.
I hear you murmur:

*What consciousness takes
will not survive itself.*

(Alexander 2002: 3)

In articulating questions of identity and origin, Alexander demonstrates her ‘self’ in “Provenance” as shifting between the present and both the personal and the historic past. For example in the quoted section above, the ‘I’ is shifting between the unidentified ‘you’ in a temporal space where she develops her poetry. One has to wonder who is murmuring to the speaker. Is the mysterious ‘you’ a part of the speaker or a ghostly historic past? Are they all mixed together? It is a ‘self’ which is aware of being split or diffuse, and always the verge of splitting into diffusion time and again.

What remains resonant is the speaker’s movement back to an imagined history which can only be processed in a temporal space. Here, Alexander is processing the history of a collective ‘unvoiced’ much like the “intricate ruins” of the real Mohenjo Daro. She infuses this with her own history of progressive writing or her “Mohenjo Daro of the mind” (2002:3). In Alexander’s case, this kind of history is imagined yet plausible. She is part of the collected

history and thus, can access and use its memory though it is not from her personal past. One could further propose that “it is this ‘foreignness’ [of an imagined history] that gives an extra-national or global dimension to the trajectories of diasporic identity” (Zhang 2010: 136).

As the poem “Provenance” implies, the complex ‘self’ which Alexander imagines is not just the border between past and present positions; it (she?) simultaneously embodies the past and present through the device of rhizomatic identity. A poet, it seems, can imagine, project and attempt to inhabit whatever spaces s/he chooses.

Like Torabully, Alexander, too, “rejects the concept of linear time in favour of cyclicity” (Bragard 2005: 223). Within the collection, she often recalls the past in her poems, always in the form of an imagined conversation, an on-going exchange with the aforementioned collected history and even herself. She is the “woman”, the “you”, and the ‘I’ in “Provenance”. If the diasporic subject is in part nostalgic for the homeland, I notice that Alexander’s provisional constructions of ‘self’ seem also to wish to hold on to, or not to forfeit, the possibilities of identity represented by the past internal locations of memory and imagining - her previous ‘selves’ in their preceding linguistic homes. In addition, I find, the poem “Provenance” connotes a place from which each individual identity might emerge, en route to merging with the other selves of Alexander’s persona. Again, these may be communal and/or individual. Thus, it is important to recognise that Alexander’s identity is compounded by so many different cultures, languages, academia and geography that it has evolved to the level of ‘selves’. One could suggest that as a poet she has used diaspora to mediate the rhizomatic identity we see in her poetry. The poem “Provenance” mixes different ideologies of self that are pertinent to Alexander’s identity. These ideologies of western individualism and Eastern collectivism are not represented exclusively in “Provenance”. Another such poem, “Translated Lives”, is a heightened event of diversified ‘selves’ where

Alexander employs the plural 'we'. This poem is clearer in demonstrating being a part of a collective but includes a western, French influence upon Alexander, in the form of the poet Arthur Rimbaud. The phrase she uses, "*Quick! Are there other lives?*" (repeated twice in the collection) could be said to identify the issues both of other, 'unvoiced' people *and* Alexander's performative sense of her various 'selves' (2002:45).

"Provenance" is the first poem in the collection. In addition, it stands alone, deliberately framed on either side by a series of blank pages which highlights the significance and introductory function of the poem. The subject matter of the poem is the replication of self into selves, identity for the poet being not a coherent finished object or artefact, but a 'thing' – something – that she is making in the varied process of poetic exploration. 'Provenance' begins with (indeed *opens* with) the metaphor of a 'bowl', and this vessel is purposefully being left empty by the speaker:

The bowl on the ledge has a gold mark
pointed like a palm.

I leave the bowl empty,
its pallor pleases.

(Alexander 2002: 3)

Ever so briefly, the poet gestures towards potentially satisfying my expectation of self and poetry – that it will enlarge, enrich, expand by making imaginative connections: she interprets the gold mark through a pointed simile, testing me to see whether that will be satisfaction enough. But then she states, decisively, her creative decision to elaborate no further, valuing the paleness of the bowl for the pallor it is, that and nothing more – for the moment. Strangely enough, this emptiness then holds the promise of fullness. These two

stanzas prompt a sense of anticipation in me as a reader, a desire for the ‘bowl’ to be filled. At the same time, the phrasing begs many questions – Will the bowl be filled? With what? And by whom, if not by the speaker’s ‘I’? This anticipatory tone is also emphasised further on “where the syntax smolders”. The ‘bowl’ (is it, really, a bowl? Is anything, in poetry, ever *really*...) is always waiting to be filled, the anticipation is burning, intense. One could expect the ‘syntax’ to burst into flame from the implication of this phrase, as if it is the beginning of something greater, and greatly more animated. The speaker goes on to address the reader directly - “I lead you into the page”, introducing an explicitly metafictional, self-reflexive address into the poem, one in which the speaker is conscious of the role that the poet plays in staging the self and its relation to place and objects. (In these terms, even the ledge on which the bowl sits might be understood as a liminal space ambiguously precarious and poised.) However, it is clear from the next stanza that the speaker has trouble with this assumed agency. Can a poet – especially a woman poet – lead as confidently as her words purport to project?

I repeat this as if knowledge
were its own provenance, as if the sun
had never risen on intricate ruins,
Mohenjo Daro of the mind: cool passageways.

(Alexander 2002: 3)

The convolution of agency, here, entangles history and imagination, the pragmatics of action and invisible intellectual pathway. It is clear, for instance, that the speaker does not believe in one complete truth, and she goes on to remark that “What consciousness takes/will not survive itself”, a phrasing which could also suggest that an unconscious or perhaps subconscious intuitive knowing may form a more elusive, implied knowledge than the force of explicit learning. Here, knowledge itself becomes changed and diversified in ways similar

to the poet's imagining of 'self'. The poem refers to Mohenjo Daro, an archaeological site in Pakistan, which is historically one of the first large urban settlements in human history. The name can be translated directly as 'mound of the dead'. It is also close to the Indus River which significantly (in the case of Alexander) follows to the Arabian Sea. This reference can be said to be a metaphor for the mind as the poet is dealing with subjective knowledge, consciousness, and the un/subconscious. Could the speaker mean that through her thought processes, her older memories, contained in the ruined yet significant figure of the Mohenjo Daro heritage, are not entirely forgotten or abandoned? If so, this could be said to create an internal diaspora between Alexander's present location and past memories. Furthermore, one could suggest that the truth (in both present and past) is differentiated as the intuitions of imagination are constantly inflecting on and through and over the writer's conscious creative deliberations.

An interesting turn occurs in the last two stanzas as the dominating 'I' in the poem morphs into "a grown woman". This change can be seen as the shift from an individual, strongly poetic self, to a more communal acknowledgement of the poet's identity:

A grown woman might stoop to enter,
Gazing at walls stuck with palm prints,

and on damp ground, pitchers of gold
holding clear water.

(Alexander 2002: 4)

In the final four lines, the "woman" sees "palm prints" in the "intricate ruins" of the mind and consequently finds "pitchers of gold/holding clear water". The contrast of an empty bowl in the first stanza with the full gold pitchers of water in the last may imply that her poetic

identity is relevant in its individuality as well as in its community, and that the process of thinking and writing the poem itself has been a vehicle for explaining the possibility of such an intricate confluence of identities. In a sense, what matters is not the decorative filling of the bowl (the 'self?') with some object or a reified poetic idea of an appropriately poetic thing such as fruit, flowers, old letters (or, in terms of identity, Me, My, 'I-ness')...but the working through of emptiness until a provisional endpoint is reached, relationally, with the poet-speaker understanding the value of the making process as fundamental to both her fulfilment and her fulfilling of herself as a poet. Additionally, the poem implies that Alexander's subjectivity is enlarged and made fuller by the imaginative link to the pasts of others, imagined lives she has collected and kept at the back of her mind while writing.

The shared self can be seen as a theory pertaining to Alexander's "Provenance" that is undeniable and an essential aspect of this poet's mind and body born from diaspora. It drives her to reach for and explore extremely obscure territories of poetic discourse. "Provenance" can be said to serve as an opening or entering into the paradoxically known and unknowns of identity in *Illiterate Heart*. As part of an introductory poem, Alexander's choice of short, two line stanzas demonstrates her prowess as a poet through an exacting weight of words bringing to light the issues developed through a life of diaspora. In a review of *Illiterate Heart*, Maureen E. Ruprecht Fadem advocates that "the central theme of the collection is introduced through the dual significance of the word provenance, for Alexander will show how identities are made by and in language, how languages merge with and inscribe female bodies" (2003:1). (I will discuss femaleness in more detail subsequently.)

I have proposed that Alexander represents, indeed even enacts, a myriad of selves rather than one easily identifiable, coherent self. How is this multiplicity articulated or even performed in

the selves that comprise in her poetry? This section of my short essay will briefly engage with elements of autobiographical and fictitious self or ‘selves’ as negotiated in *Illiterate Heart*.

Many of the critics who have examined Alexander’s poems acknowledge that her work draws on the autobiographical. It is a well known fact, too, that she has written an autobiography called *Fault Lines*, first released in 1993. It is not a fault that numerous interviewers question her on this autobiographical aspect that permeates both *Illiterate Heart* and her collections, and Zoe Randall advocates that *Illiterate Heart* is “Alexander’s most intensely autobiographical collection of poetry, one that crosses multiple borders” (2002: 26). In *Illiterate Heart*, Alexander draws from personal experience in order to create a poetic discourse apt to the depiction of her diasporic life.

However, the notion of ‘self’ representation still bears some investigating in relation to autobiography as a genre. In *The Changing Nature of the Self: a Critical Study of the Autobiographical Discourse*, Robert Elbaz suggests that “autobiography is an imaginative arrangement of the world, and at the same time it repeats experiences as they were lived” (1988: 9). Further, encompassing the gender question, Helena Grice in the *Encyclopaedia of Life Writing* states that “women’s life writing is often fragmented, rather than chronologically developmental, in line with the fragmentary nature of both memory and selfhood” (Jolly 2001: 360).

Clearly, even such brief quotations imply that autobiography is a paradoxical form of literature on many levels, rather than any simple or direct depiction of experience precisely as it was lived. Pertinent here too must be the porous parameters of memory and the processes of remembering. This porosity is then further inflected - variously heightened or flattened or

veiled - by the complex entanglements of the writer's impulse to use language, image, and other literary devices sometimes to reveal, at other times to conceal. All of which means, then, that the autobiographical is not to be confused with the empirical.

Alexander, in using the genre of poetry to explore the self, complicates this even further, since *Illiterate Heart* is not in any declarative sense 'an autobiography'. Yet Elbaz's notion of the genre can be adapted in viewing the collection as a whole or reading a poem like "Illiterate Heart". One aspect of the poem "Illiterate Heart" involves a repeated tension between the poet-speaker attempting to retrieve and "repeat[] experiences as they were lived" even as she recognises that any sense of self also come into being precisely through the framing and filtering of experience via an 'autobiographical' imaginary which comprises "an imaginative arrangement of the world". In the poem, the speaker moves to and fro so often and so rapidly that it is difficult to keep track of time frames and places, of the real and/or fictitious nature of locations.

A significant feature of Alexander's autobiographical impulse, one which shifts her repeatedly between present and past, is education. The speaker reflects on her English literature education that has entrenched her in a life of varied writing. In this, she recalls instances of her childhood, using colonial fiction as a poetic measure of self-naming and the stirrings of identity.

I was Marlow and Kurtz and still more
a black woman just visible at the shore
I thought, It's all happened, all happened before.

Alexander (2002: 63)

The speaker is recalling her reading of *Heart of Darkness* as a girl and comparing herself to the two main characters in the novel. However, she also names herself differently, as “still more/a black woman just visible at the shore”, making a direct reference to the mysteriously exotic black female figure who paces the shore, staring at the steamer.

The stanza is intriguing. This tension brings to mind the curious way in which literature prompts and accommodates identifications and complicities. A book can encourage you to identify *against* yourself, counter to your own best interests. If the speaker is Marlow and Kurtz and the elusive black woman, what does this mean? Does this identification with both the agents of colonialism *and* with the singular embodied figure of colonialism’s objectification constitute a fractured and displaced form of selfhood that is limiting or enabling? Is it perhaps, paradoxically, both the one and the other, since identifications in both literature and life need not cancel each other out, as contrary as this may be? I cannot determine if Alexander means that the ambivalent identifications of the female speaker of her poem (a woman who is also, remember, depicted as a *reader* of Conrad’s narratively tangled novel) diminish the black woman’s poetic voice and/or carry the potential to enlarge the scope of empathetic projection that is offered by literature. Has the speaker’s ‘becoming’ as a poet, her growth into that part of identity which she recognises as literary, occurred *despite* the dominant, colonial characterisations of novels such as *Heart of Darkness*, or (and?) has it been oddly enabled by the multiplicity of imaginative empathies which tend to characterise the literary, however counter-intuitive this may sound? I remain unsure. The poem “Illiterate Heart”, however, does seem to imply Alexander’s awareness that she has become a poet partly in and through the cultural form we name ‘literature’, whatever its received limitations in (post)colonial contexts.

Through the explicit literary reference Alexander is commentating retrospectively on the manner in which her identity has been shaped, much as an autobiographer might. I note that the example above is just one mention of literature as an influential mediator of the identities that go into the making of a writer. Besides Joseph Conrad, the speaker of this poem also mentions Wordsworth, Gandhi, Marx, and quotes from the biblical Gospels. In other poems in *Illiterate Heart*, Alexander references T.S.Eliot, Paul Valéry, Rumi..., and acknowledges inspiration from Octavio Paz, Kasuya Eiichi, ninth-century Japanese woman poet Ono no Komachi, children's picture book author Maurice Sendak, Noh theatre, Indian folktales, as well as the Song of Solomon, and railway station posters. Interestingly, here, Alexander's notion of the literary is clearly not that of an enclosed, High Cultural precinct; instead, literature is cut across by forms and figures not conventionally considered literature 'proper', being rather a wide, polyphonic sociocultural inheritance beyond fictional texts per se. Further, even with all this learning, there remains a sense in which Alexander considers her 'heart' illiterate, which seems to mean not *lacking*, but rather necessarily having to rework received cultural structures and strictures in order to discover, in the process, the poet's own affective and imaginative affinities. As she says, "I am haunted by what my words can barely mark" (2002: 101). In this poem, too, I find myself hearing not only the teasing fragments of cultural citation, not always sure of what has been taken from where, and through whose voices Alexander is filtering her own poetic articulation. I also keep returning to the intriguing soundscapes of the poem, where Alexander recollects – in fact, physically recollects in new form – the linguistic melee of her childhood. I hear the "aa ee ii oo uu", "sweet vowels of flesh...mouthed to perfection" (2002: 64). I read aloud, stumbling, listening closely to familiarise the strangeness of ear and tongue figures like "aa I ii u uu au um aha ka kh / ga gha nga cha chha ja ja nja" (2002: 66). And I find readerly relief in the brief moments in which Alexander literally translates for me, helping my imagination to re-

orientate and gather itself to persevere into the further spaces of the poem's unsettling world: "njana (my sole self), njaman (knowledge)" (2002: 67). As a reader, I am analogous to the child of the poem; I feel Alexander's evocation of her uncertain embodiment in a context where "Letters grew fins and tails. / Swords sprang from the hips of consonants, / vowels grew ribbed and sharp"(2002: 65) and where the adult poet admits the awakening consciousness of an unusual "movement toward self definition", this being the need "To be able to fail. / To set oneself up / so that failure is also possible" (2002: 68).

I have read this poem through a loosely diasporic cultural frame, and it takes me back to Elbaz's understanding of autobiography as necessarily an "imaginative arrangement of the world". In short, as much as the title poem of *Illiterate Heart* is an expression of the literary formation of Alexander's sense of self as a writer, it is at one and the same time an acknowledgement that boundaries are permeable, that categories morph and shift. So too, I maintain, for Alexander's conception of her 'autobiographical' self as an unstable concatenation of formative influences and cultural inheritances. In effect, this is a recognition of the extent to which a 'self' is fictionalised or invented, negotiated through a maze of rhizomatic roots rather than being coherently and constantly present in a single, singularly recognisable form.

If I may be permitted a slight detour in order better to illustrate this point: Maxine Hong Kingston is useful in this regard. In America, she writes, "I could not understand 'I'. The Chinese 'I' has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American 'I', assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, only have three strokes, the middle so straight?" (Kingston 1976: 150) Kingston's surreal autobiography, stranger than fiction, has had enormous influence on me as a reader and writer as she uses memoir to represent the many facets of her identity, often

inventing and merging cultural myth and her childhood. In the quoted passage, Kingston's trouble with English functions as a metaphor for her identity. To paraphrase, Kingston embodies in her text the self that she is creating through the autobiographical act, and in addition, these difficulties are inherent in the process of self creation (Miller 1983: 14). In what language, I wonder, is self-expression not only possible but adequately encompassing of multiple vectors and imaginings? To what extent is it sufficient to envisage 'I' as coherent and constant, indeed as 'singular' rather than inherently manifold?

I find that this quotation is applicable to Alexander's *Illiterate Heart* as well. Kingston's "I could not understand 'I'" could be seen as a reminder of Alexander's trouble with self as at once individually 'self-evident' and severally imagined. In an interview with Lopamudra Basu, I note, Alexander metaphorises her relation to self and history using the trope of an indigent, peripatetic female figure: "the personal past is knotted in the present. I must carry it as a bundle, bear it as a migrant might a blanket tied up with all her worldly possessions" (2002: 33). What rights (and wrongs?) of self-hood are operationalised here? Does Alexander arrogate to herself the suffering of marginalised women, neatly reconfiguring female hardship as rhetorical device? Does she, rather, project through the imaginative use of language and image a connection which, albeit as unreal in literal terms, hopes to effect, or perhaps to test out, the possibilities of identification beyond the circumscribed narrows of individualised Self? Again, I find myself unable to decide.

Alexander comments that the title poem in *Illiterate Heart* "is about a woman who falls between languages, and has no script" (2002: 34). She does not refer to herself directly as the speaker in this particular poem, however, she and the woman are comparable. Alexander carries her "personal past" in a "blanket tied up with all her worldly possessions", and the

woman in “Illiterate Heart” “falls between languages”. It should be pointed out that Alexander is not explicitly calling herself a migrant because she says “bear it as a migrant...” subtly dissociating herself from migrancy. One might suggest that this is just one of the disjunctions of the ‘autobiographical’ self that she has developed, and is consciously using (invoking through self-reflexive analogy) even in an interview where she is being invited to speak ‘as herself’.

My last point on Alexander’s ‘autobiographical’ self is that the genre of poetry emphasises this particular part of her identity. These two literary genres, autobiography and poetry, located together in the space of a woman writer’s literary project, could be said to make the writer extremely conscious of boundaries, whether of self or of genre. What is ‘one’, and what is the ‘other’? (Indeed, *who* is this ‘one’ – is it synonymous with ‘I’? Can ‘I’ also be more than one, deliquescing into an other?) Alexander is deliberately chary of deciding, since this would entail establishing definitive boundaries. In *Metaphors of the Self*, James Olney proposes that “the self is (like the autobiographical that records and creates it) open-ended and incomplete: it is always in process or, most precisely, is itself a process” (1980: 25). Alexander’s words can be seen as similar to this suggestion by Olney when she speaks about writing a poem:

It’s a precarious art and then while you’re making it, you’re completely in thrall with it. Then it’s finished and what do you do? You have to get on with your life, right? And your life hopefully will include writing another poem.

(Maxey 2006: 23)

Writing poetry, then, is somewhat like the shaping of self in autobiography – “open-ended and incomplete”. It seems for Alexander that the process of writing is never resolved and, in

writing her poetry, she accentuates the infinite process of rhizomatic identity exploration. The writing and the defining one's self is continual and projective.

I find this connection between forms of self is prominently explored in Alexander's poem "Fragments":

I start to write fragments
as much to myself as to another.

(Who lives in my mind?
Can the mind hold its hope?)

I want to write:
The trees are bursting into bloom.

I felt it, though it did not come
in that particular way, the sentence endstopped.

Could sense come in feverish script
finicky with rhyme, sharp as a wave?

Or was that the wrong way around?
The hold of things was perpetually askew,

hard as I tried to figure it through:
a branch surprisingly stout

thrust out of the main trunk
level with my ankle,

the slash in it bright gentian
cupped in a bracelet of dew.

(Alexander 2002: 27)

"Fragments" is a poem which takes as its subject matter the progression of thought in writing poetry, which is often as much erratic and surprising as gradually procedural. But the poem also teases a reader towards autobiographical interpretation by using a first person, 'I' self as the speaker. She (Alexander?) begins speaking in the present tense, a tactical move which

suggests the ongoing, advantageous nature of inconstant, processual identity that is evident in *Illiterate Heart*. The speaker then shifts to the past tense from the fourth couplet onwards.

Why this change? One could propose that it demonstrates how writing and the self are both susceptible to unpredictable fluctuation. In writing poetry, the writer is constantly shifting from speaker to poet and from poet to reader in order to try and represent the poem's subject successfully. The speaker's tone is initially affirmed, in the opening lines, by her cause – to write – even if this writing comprises “fragments/as much to myself as to another”. These lines imply the layering of various selves, the writer's awareness of identity as a palimpsest of extended making. Olney suggests that “autobiography is a self-reflexive, a self-critical act” (1980: 25), and in “Fragments”, the poet voices through an ‘I’ which is conscious of writing, of being a writer who is struggling to philosophise and produce an ‘autobiographical’ self in a self reflexive act. The ‘I’ is thus doubled and compounded in this poetic moment.

In the fourth couplet, the tone is less assertive, almost unsure, and couplets five and six extend this querying, being characterised by the speaker's insistent searching into the metaphysics of how poetry is written. The speaker focuses on whether sense informs the poem or the poem informs sense and once again, I observe, we have Alexander tussling productively with the paradox of the creative act. The final five lines offer a reader an image of a blooming, branching tree, and emphasise the speaker's feeling that “I felt it, though it did not come/in that particular way, the sentence end-stopped”. The image begins with a branch and continues to the trunk, then back. The ‘it’ is a beautifully’ indeterminate pronoun which seems to refer to the branch, seeping a startling blue colour, and yet also invites correlation with the poet-speaker's leg, her limb which may have been slashed and wounded by the branch. (We know from the “Notes” to another poem in *Illiterate Heart* that Alexander is familiar with “the tale of the girl who turned into a flowering tree” [2002: 102].) The blue

gentian colour, of course, only heightens the uncertainty of the reference, the impossibility of fixing meaning, as does the displacing image of the bracelet of dew, which might be around the branch or the leg – whereas the word more usually encloses a wrist. The branch is perhaps that elusive triggering subject which Alexander wants to develop and follow in order for meaning making to occur with the poem, linking outside world and inside reflection, the body of nature and that of the poet contributing to the creation of a poem. This image is particularly sensual, as one might anticipate from the previous focus on sense. At the same time, however, the phrasing draws attention to the arboreal branching of ideas.

Thus, the “bright gentian” colour which the ambiguous ‘limb’ exudes may be seen to be the reason of and for the poem; the life blood. Alexander says “I can spend forever thinking, “I must write a poem,” but unless that sense comes, it’s dry, dead” (Maxey 2005: 23). The tree image, however, is in bloom, meaning the poet has written – something creative has happened, and perhaps continues to happen. (This liveliness occurs despite the image echo of ‘gentian’ with ‘indigo’, and Alexander’s acknowledgment, in relation to a different poem from *Illiterate Heart*, that in “parts of India, peasants were forced to grow Indigo by the British colonizers” [2002:102].) It seems to be, also, that however the poet seeks to manage and control the writing process of the poem, creativity develops its own, surprising life, one in which ‘branch’ and ‘flower’ and ‘ankle’ momentarily occupy a congruent space, one that vibrates at once with the viscerally embodied being of things *and* with the words and ideas which enable things to be thought, to be thought of. (What comes to mind, as quickly as the memory flickers away, is Ezra Pound’s suggestion that an image is that which presents an emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time). The poem “Fragments”, I think, highlights the need of the poet’s creative self to search for an image which embodies both the physical and the cerebral, the passages of walking through the making of a poem being linked

to levels of peripatetic mental wandering. It is through this layered combination of mind and body, of autobiographical experience with self-reflexive poeticising self that the poem comes into being. The self is thus fissured and fragmented, split into many different versions of being in order for the poet to discover some form of self-actualisation through poetry, and to enable the writer's sense of herself as a writing self.

Such processual movements occur not only through interiorised self-examination, but also through the poet's present recuperation of past events, such as her journeys to other lands. "Port Sudan" is an especially striking poem which brings together linguistic diversity, mythological and biblical reference, and the poignancy of recollection at a high point in the poet's adult life. In this autobiographical poem, I propose, we find evidence of Zhang's "transrelation between multiple locations of cultures [which] may suggest a co-belonging dialogue that situates diasporans at the same time both inside and outside a culture" (2010: 128).

In essence, the poem emulates the form of an erratic memory which is itself a journey, travelling back and forth, further into the past and then into the present. "Port Sudan" clearly also works from the premise of the literal journey, in which Alexander returns to her father while she is in America, even while playing off the poet-speaker's figurative journey deep into early memories. (As previously mentioned, Alexander's father moved his family from India to Sudan because of his career.) "Port Sudan" functions as a moving prelude for the poem which follows, the title "Elegy for My Father" making explicit Alexander's loss, and the ways in which this nudges her towards the curiously creative reconfigurations of memory. "Port Sudan" eddies and drifts around memories of the figure of Alexander's father, meaning to signify his worth, to capture his life and importance. It is clearly a poem which shows the close cathection between Alexander's own experience and the self's implication in the life of

a significant other, blurring elements of autobiographical and biographical writing. Important, too, is the location of these elements in the geographical place of Sudan as a paradoxical place of initial strangeness and subsequent familiarity. As Shah notes, Alexander's poems "explore the position of the immigrant, postcolonial, or marginalized subject," illustrating "the difficulty of maintaining a cohesive self that does not betray the fragile ties of identity and place" (2002: 22). Her poetry, "juxtapose[es] the sundry places in which she herself has lived in order to chart" (Shah 2002:23) a working 'geography of displacement' (Ali and Rasiah 2000: 72).

Alexander's "Port Sudan" uses diaspora in two related ways. It establishes the crucial connection between father and daughter in language and, creating two different yet connected selves, it points to the familial self and the question of lingual identity. In the first stanza, the speaker says, "I hear my father's voice on the phone. /He wants me to come from America to see him". Using the present tense for dramatic immediacy, the poem begins with Alexander's memory of a phone call from her father. He wants. She feels summoned. The phrasing in part reduces the father to his voice, acknowledging the disembodiment of distance, and yet admits the power of this familial invocation. I find the poem to be ambivalent. There is love, but also interruption. There is distance, but also longing for closeness. From the sixth stanza onwards, the speaker reflects on "the image of Pharaoh":

Where voices cease
And I face the image of the Pharaoh,

the one who murmured at the hour of his death,
throat turned towards the restless waters:
If I forget Upper Egypt,

cut off my right hand.
Here lies memory.

“Port Sudan” is a poem about arrival, and departures. (The poem also shadows the age-old poetic tropes of life, and death, beginnings and endings). The port signifies a liminal space associated with inauguration, and perhaps even a shift in identity. For Alexander, this seems to be envisaged as a form of in-between space, variously expanding and contracting, alienating and sustaining. The Sudan beyond the port became an important place of her girlhood growth and adolescence, where she grew into the early self of the published writer. Sudan for Alexander is between the India of her early childhood and the Anglo-European and American spaces of her adulthood, all of which she maps through the movement of actual journey and the travelling of ideas which takes her repeatedly across continents. These land masses, themselves, are separated by the mysterious waters of multiple oceans, and the even more nameless inconstancies of the sky, marked by meteorological clouds blooms and cold, flat astringencies. And that is to say nothing of the vast continents of culturally diverse ideas from which she draws her creative repertoire.

If I may be permitted a brief detour: “Port Sudan” reminds me of another poem, “The Call”, written by the South African poet Gabeba Baderoon. “The Call” appears early in her debut collection called “The Dream in the Next Body” and also begins with a similar phone call. In contrast, the call is from the speaker’s mother. Just like the speaker in “Port Sudan”, this speaker is far away from her family – “I am leaving for a new place,/ each further from where I started” (Baderoon 2005: 15). Although Baderoon’s poem revolves around the instance of the memory of this call, I feel both poets are conceptualising the notion of leaving but still being integrated as a part of their familial identity. Both poets seem to ask: when ‘I’ come back, who will ‘I’ return as and how will ‘I’ relate to ‘them’? At the beginning of ‘Port Sudan’, Alexander could be said to be processing this very question and through her imagined poetic explorations, provides a provisional answer.

By allowing the dispersed energies of diaspora to inform her writing of poetry, Alexander also makes relation a necessary tool for the reader to understand her poetry as well. Her rhizomatic ‘selves’ are able to transrelate and accommodate, to settle, provisionally, without refuting the ongoing necessity of the process of change. As Alexander says:

There’s a whole way in which the world is compressed in our twenty-first century experience...the world as we live it is very thick and dense. It’s not like this thin thing with only one meaning; there are multiple meanings in everything we encounter. And history’s like that. (Joseph 2010: 114)

In moving to Sudan, Alexander is physically distanced from her homeland of India, even if in her mind she does not completely dissociate from the place, and even if she still returns to India every so often. In Sudan, she is aware of needing to integrate into her new country with the learning of another culture and another language, Arabic; the place makes her newly aware of her difference. The poem tackles a different aspect of diaspora as it could be said to explore transitional spaces – whether physically or mentally – and “which opens up new spaces for cross-cultural negotiation, creates radical effects of dislocation upon identity articulation” (Zhang 2010: 126). One could propose that Arabic becomes one kind of “extra dimension” for Alexander in this particular poem. The “cultural otherness” of the new language makes her “recognize and appreciate the value of alterity – the ‘unknown and unknowable presence’ in the articulation of identity” which, over time, becomes a part of her linguistic ‘self’ (Zhang 2010: 129).

This snapshot of memory demonstrates possibly the first awareness of Alexander’s division of self. The poem is an example of diasporic ‘instantiation’:

Someone cried *Kef Halek!*
My skirt spun in the wind

and Arabic came into my mouth

and rested alongside
all my other languages.
Now I know the truth of my tongue

starts where translations perish.
Where voices cease

(Alexander 2002: 10)

In this new, strange context, far from the natal home, Arabic takes preference over English or Malayalam and the new language is incorporated into the poem as a poetic marker of how the language began to infuse the speaker's earscape and mindscape at that particular time in her past. English is the primary medium of the poem "Port Sudan", but a reader also encounters, as suddenly and abruptly as would have the young girl, the shout *Kef Halek!* What does it mean? Who is calling? No answer is given. The call in a new tongue created a disturbance in the speaker's identity and the self, again, was shifted into the space of stranger by sounds that were to her ear strange. Here, the languages interact with each other and produce a poetry that is swirling, struggling to accommodate difference, very much like a whorl in its circular quality. The self is no longer *a* self but a multi-functioning, rhizomatic identity that has temporarily prevailed over "the sense of unbelonging" that diaspora inevitably creates (Zhang 2010: 133).

The phrase "*Kef Halek!*" (translated as the female form of 'how are you?' in Arabic) is a significant locution in the location of the poem. The poet spells out this untranslated phrase phonetically rather than using the properly marked script "kayfa hālik". This could signify the practicality of learning a new language through combinations of phonemes. It demonstrates how sounds, and senses, are crucial in the first memories of this new land. Sound, of course, is essential in language and culture. The image of the port in the poem offers a reader a

bombardment of the senses. It is also apparent that the Arabic spoken is probably a kind of dialect as the phrasing is slightly deflected from the received norm. The point, perhaps, is that the new language is as shifting and mobile as the new self that is coming to terms with its unsettled location. Notice, too, that the line “Now I know the truth of my tongue” is enjambed with the next, left without a full stop, leading me to believe that Alexander is proposing that even this truth is not complete and whole but *in medias res*, much like the girl child’s identity. At the same time, though, the adult speaker is reflecting painfully on the question of death, as her father’s telephone call ‘calls’ her back to the memory of arrival, though the impulse for *his* call is that “he does not want to die and be put in the earth” (2002: 10). Present and past are tenderly entangled, the multiple voices in which Alexander summons the memory of arrival now, abruptly, narrowing down to the one voice that has summoned her to thoughts of home, the voice of “my sweet father”. This voice is beyond translation. It is in the adult’s powerful memory of the five year old child’s re-connection with the father upon arrival in Port Sudan that Alexander locates the crucial imaginative truth of herself as a poet, able to connect past and present, self and others. (“My father”, she notes in the Acknowledgments to *Illiterate Heart*, “...taught me to hope that lines scribbled in a secret notebook might one day enter the world” [2002: 105].)

Seeking to understand “Port Sudan”, Gunew might draw our attention to the subtle macaronics of Alexander’s poetry, those untranslated morsels of a foreign language left embedded in a text as if to imply that there is no authentic translation possible “for the specificity of these meanings” (2007:107). Expressions like “*Kef Halek!*” may occupy the smallest, passing space in the poem – elsewhere in *Illiterate Heart* we have *Kya, kya* and *Namal ivide*, “renderings in colloquial Hindi and Malayalam, respectively, of the questions ‘Who are we here?’ and ‘What are we here?’” (Alexander 2002:102) – but they create a

subtle hint of polyphony, of many other voices and cultures that potentially reside in the poem and in the world of Alexander's imagination, segueing into brief, haunting presence.

In terms of spatial orientation, the poem has other interesting facets. For example: in the sixth stanza, Sudan is directly below Egypt; however "*Upper Egypt*" may refer to Sudan if the speaker is reflecting from America, once again marking the locational uncertainty of diaspora, and also the fluidity of memory. Further, the three lines "*If I forget Upper Egypt, / cut off my right hand. / Here lies memory*" could be a reference encompassing both the speaker's father and Sudan, because if she forgets the loss of memory will be similar to the loss of a hand. In addition, "*my right hand*" may imply a dominant and writing hand, making it highly symbolic. The idea is that the hand and memory are joined; the severing of this tie would affect the writing process. (Could this also suggest the support of Alexander's father in her writing?) Furthermore in terms of biblical reference, "*cut off my right hand*" is a mediated echo of the gospel of Matthew (chapter five, verse thirty) – "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away! It is better for you to lose a part of your body than to have your whole body thrown into hell". Alexander has used this famous phrase to her advantage in that she reassures a reader that the loss of memory would be perilous for her own identity as a poet; however much she has moved from place to place, there is always the claim of memory to locate her imagination, and through which she may further create the present space of a poem. I notice here that while Alexander gestures subtly to the original 'shame' of writing, as a girl, she also subverts the religious orthodoxy in that if memory is not always benign or benevolent, it ought nevertheless not to be excised. Instead, she (and her analogous speaker) needs to stay with memory, to return to it, then to leave, and again come back. The range of Alexander's phrasing at this point of the poem also implies the difficulty of any polarised, cultural other and response.

In the last two stanzas, Pharaoh's giving of knowledge ("underwater moorings") to his daughter parallels the place of the speaker's own father who has anchored memory for her as an essential, remembered knowledge. The phrase, "underwater moorings", also brings to mind the notion of the 'Kala Pani'. In an interview, Alexander speaks about the Kala Pani, literally, the 'dark waters' in Hindi:

The old notion that if you cross the black water that's around India you lose your caste; you lose who you are if you cross the black waters. It becomes a trope for diasporic people going away... Right from when I was very young, this idea of losing ... was very powerful to me. That you might amass something and then suddenly lose it in the black water, in *Kala Pani*. And of course, you could lose your identity.

(Joseph 2010: 113)

If the wide 'Kala Pani' is conventionally associated with losing one's self, of being cast adrift from familiar shores, in "Port Sudan" Alexander reconfigures this action through the trope of arrival and also *complicates* the notion of identity as a coherent entity always under threat of loss. The thematic concern in the poem is with the defamiliarisation of looking back into a now distant past. It is in this port where the poet recognises her learning of a new identity, and consciously imagines herself embarking on a new phase of identity formation. The layers of her current identity have not been sloughed off, no, but they are shrouded in uncertainty, unsettled by the novelty of this new land. Sudan, the northern gateway to Africa, is the land where she has to envisage her identity for the first time across national borders. Noteworthy, too, is that the adult Alexander is also reflecting on this process from the vantage point of the present, where the putative event of arrival is in the past. As Zhang suggests "cultural transrelation indicates an act of cultural defamiliarization whereby one may see one's own past and culture as foreign otherness" (2010: 130), a positioning which is evident in the temporal framing of the speaker at the beginning of the poem. Therefore, one can propose

that both the “paradoxical transposition between two cultural frames” and the point of view of the present (where her father implies his death) have caused Alexander to review her experiences and “interpret them from a fresh perspective” in “Port Sudan” (Zhang 2010: 130).

Alexander writes:

The shock of arrival forces us to new knowledge. What the immigrant must work with is what she must invent in order to live. Race, ethnicity, the fluid truths of gender are all cast afresh”, becoming the emptiest and most “contested of signs”. And the “old question ‘Who am I?’ returns – I am what others see me as, but I am also my longings, my desire, my speech”, and ‘I’ am confronted with the difficulty that “what they see me as cuts against the grain of what I sense myself to be. (1996: 1)

Reading “Port Sudan”, one understands that the movement prompts necessary questions and revisions in the speaker’s consciousness. However, it is also clear that the *poem* becomes a provisional settling space, so that even the fearful ‘dark waters’ may have a certain anchoring capacity for Alexander as an instance of that “first space” mentioned in her interview with Joseph (2010: 113). The water was the first conscious place where her identity began to be conceptualised and felt as fluid and shifting, like the Indian Ocean.

“Port Sudan” as a poem can be seen as a liminal space for the poet to illustrate the process involved in mediating different identities. Her lingual identity is highlighted in two intersecting liminal spaces – the poem *and* the port (Joseph 2010: 113). The port is a place of transition as it contains people of different cultures, languages and places. They all work together to support the system of exchange (or importation and exportation) and in addition, exchange the certain aspects that make each of them different. In short, a port is a space of movement and crossing through human interaction. The poem itself embodies this spatial mobility, giving a further dimension to the notion of being in-between. Alexander comments:

I'm very comfortable writing in airport and transport lounges
– the margin between places. Actually in transit lounges, the laws
of the land do not hold...so this idea of being outside the law in a
fashion is also very powerful for me in terms of my own writing.
You know, writing as a woman, writing as someone who doesn't
quite fit into a particular place, I have to invent a world. And the
world that I write is the world that I need to come into existence.

(Joseph 2010: 115)

If “Port Sudan” is an actual, geographically mappable location, in the frame of the poem the actual place is also animated as a creative invention, a space of creativity that has been called into being by Alexander's memory as she works this into poetry. (Interesting, too, is that the father's summons is not completely inimical to the daughter's creativity; there is a strange ‘call’ and ‘response’ that the telephone call represents, as it also causes the deep, limbic ground-waters of memory to rise to the surface of consciousness. Alexander's words make clear that the poem is her internal liminal space where no law or threat of arrest exists. In the space of the poem “Port Sudan”, unlike in the actual location, she is completely free to write what she likes, without the pressures of having to make a particular impression, or to please anyone (Joseph 2010: 113). “Port Sudan” reminds us that a port is also a place of return as this is a poem of memory. Zhang states that “diasporans travel not only in space but also in time and, as a result, diasporic identity is not only multilocal but con-temporal as well” (2010:132). Thus, Alexander returns to the site where she became highly conscious of her diasporic identity and presents “a double desire to reinhabit the past and to reintegrate the flow of time and tradition” (2010: 132). Father. Daughter. Age. Youth. The mature female poet rethinking her relationship with her ageing – dying? – father....? One may suggest that Alexander is looking back to the links of family and tradition which have become integral to the tangles of her rhizomatic identity.

Thus, ‘Port Sudan’ can be seen as a poetic glimpse of a formative instance of diaspora space in Alexander's identity. In the collection *Illiterate Heart*, this is a recurrent movement, “a

travelling-back-and-forth that reveals itself as caught up in the space between home and habitat, imagination and immanence, and between past and present” (Zhang 2010: 135). Alexander’s ‘selves’, perhaps, can be seen as versions of the liminal space which characterises ‘Port Sudan’. I notice, for example, that while this is purportedly a poem of place, it is highly unsettled. Importantly, too, it is located very early in the volume as if to frame an initiating impulse, a starting point, or an overarching tone – and yet the very fluid nature of the poem at the same time undermines or destabilises any assumptions about directionality and certainty, emphasising instead that “diasporic identity is not fixed or given, but has to be redrawn and re-negotiated in relation to each instance of cultural transrelation” (Zhang 2010: 140). Hence, ‘Port Sudan’ can be said to show the reader the erratically processual formation of the poet’s sense of identity, self and selfhood emerging in a rhizomatic criss-cross of linguistic, emotional and conceptual tangles. As Alexander says in an interview:

I trouble the very act of naming itself, by pointing out that expectations of an authentic fit (ie seamless belonging) are always bound to meet with disappointment because identity categories are themselves always unstable constructs which work only as shorthand in specific moments and sites”, especially given that “individuals and communities continue to migrate across the globe as well as symbolically. (Jain 2011: 229)

House.Sitting

I am back in their house again. There is nothing on the stove, no wind from the sea.
Everything is carefully draped in cream and blue. Cream couches. Blue chairs. In the middle of the table is a heavy, empty silver tea tray. It is very shiny. I imagine it must be polished at least once a week by somebody or other. My face is a brown shadow in its mirror.

At home, we have no tea tray.

Tea is served in each hand one by one by hand cup balanced on saucer
everything all in already added.
No one asks “Milk and sugar?”
Tea is simply served.
Though it must be brought to the guest properly
accompanied by Marie biscuits or Eat-sum-mors.

Tea is my job. I know it well.
my godfather – tea black, two sugars
my aunt – tea (hot milk!) and quarter sugar
my father – tea double sugared, two sugars boiled
he takes his tea with the bag in milk, then more boiled water added after. He told me his grandfather warmed the cups with hot water before making tea, which apparently is the proper way.

He never said which grandfather, which side.
Was it his father? I don't know
why I wonder about that.

I take tea but never drink it.
You can always find a cold cup and know it's me.

In this strange room are many shells: smooth and striated, pale pink and tortoiseshell, the emptiness of absent bodies. I have seen some of them in books, but never found them on the beach of our Indian Ocean. Their names I don't know, except for maybe 'cowrie'.

The room is also home to books, many and surrounding.

French cooking

Larousse Gastronomique

Ma Gastronomie

Je Sais Cuisiner

and next to this last one, also in English: *I Know How to Cook* , “The Bible of Home Cooking”...

Country travel guides, mainly *Lonely Planet* and *In Your Pocket*

Lonely Planet France

Lonely Planet Italy

Lonely Planet Brazil

Paris in Your Pocket

Peru in Your Pocket

Light philosophy

Chicken Soup for the Soul

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families

Self Matters: Creating Your Life From the Inside Out

Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential

Women Who Love too Much

Other people's books confuse me.

I am strewn among all this

on the coffee table the couch the side tables the floor even every surface.

The photographs of strangers raise familial eyebrows.

Ten days and I cannot write. Meena Alexander? We are no longer related, she and I. Our words share no relation, not even in English. And I am not a poet nor anything like a writer. I am just a waiter. I wait.

I wait for the kettle. It is teal or turquoise. I have never known the difference. Who cares?

I cannot write. (Who cares?) The house is not my house. In this other house there are only walls and walls. Bedrooms spread with flowers, blue and white. No orange.

I think of our kitchen at home. Me waiting for the kettle to click and sigh.

My mother would be standing by the heated stove. It would be late afternoon. My sister would be back and because I am here I wouldn't be with them.

In this house, in the bathroom, on the mat: a dead green butterfly. The wings are broken into three pieces. I remember seeing the butterfly before, settled on the tap, wings opening slowly then slowly closing. I gave it a wide berth, looking only long enough to notice two brown spots.

I have seen a dead butterfly melt. Well, melted. First I saw it dead on the tarmac, and left it there; then much later – don't ask – I went back for it. All I found was a scorched, sticky smear. Orange and black. Or red and blue, I can't really remember. Only the unbutterflied shape of it.

In this house there is no one to make and serve up my memories. My mother came to visit, briefly. She said the place reminded her of a small museum, everything as poised as if a woman had placed it there and left without worry, no doubt that all would stay the same. I wonder what that must be like. It is cold comfort to imagine that immaculate woman. Is it even possible?

woman, again

Out of the corner of my eye, the door seems to be swinging on its own. It is not late. I have moved to my room since I have been merging with the couch. My books are behind me. My gran's dressing table in front. It is white and pink with three large mirrors. I have littered it with photos, old birthday cards, toiletries and a cross that holds hair accessories.

I have never got ready in front of it, though Ma, my gran, used to sit on the matching chair in front of the dressing table and do herself up for special occasions. Putting on her make up. I remember. It was only on special occasions that she wore base, and always Revlon ColorStay. She touched up the grey in her hairline with a black tube she said was grandpa's. I could never understand what she was doing. The reasons for staring so long into that mirror. Carefully covering, placing, pattering. Her shoes must match her outfit, her bag must match her shoes. She must match herself. She carried around a rectangle. It was a tan bag, a perfect colour for matching. She never forgot it. Everything was inside, she said, so that was why. Why? My mother does the same things, standing while she puts on her ColorStay and listening to Morning Live. Smoothing and stroking. She has impeccable taste in shoes. I am barefoot for as long as possible. And I am allergic to anything Revlon.

Once my mother told me
*There are things you can say
and things you can't. You must know
how to talk otherwise...*

I forget the rest. Was it,
*otherwise you won't or
otherwise people will think?*

My mother said why
must you disagree?
Why be disagreeable?

On the page. From my mouth. Why shouldn't I? Articulate my body through words? This too is a difficult art to master, making up, slowing. Standing, thinking. Sitting, thinking. A bag of tricks that must not look too tricky.

I was fourteen when an English teacher gave me Sylvia Plath. She taught us the poem "Mushrooms". Something in me grew, and grew, grew suddenly aware of what might be all the words in the entire world, in worlds I didn't know. I read "Ariel". I saw that a poet could make her body appear, disappear. Her voice was hers, and also it wasn't. It was many things, it touched many untouched confusing things. A body came into view then shape shifted, reappearing as someone else. And a woman, I found, was not always a woman, or even only.

My word of mouth is different from Alexander's. Why doesn't she write about sexuality?

This is such a popular topic among modern women poets. In *The Dream in the Next Body* and *A Hundred Silences*, Baderoon reminds me of how important sexuality is to a woman writing about herself:

Cinnamon

I fall outside
the warm stole
of history.

Eyes run down my skin
like a single finger.

I find you

open as a tent.
You are cinnamon
curved around me.

(2005: 17)

Does Alexander avoid this topic because of the personal vulnerability? I admit that I was disappointed at first to find nothing specifically about female sexuality in *Illiterate Heart*. I was longing to find a guide, a fellow female feeling. But it is a tall order to strip oneself down in front of an audience, even on the page. There are eyes that track you everywhere and the exposure is acidic. Audre Lorde suggests that fear is the catalyst for silence saying “and of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger” (2007: 42). I muse on Alexander’s silence, the reasons she might prefer to evade the explicit question of sexuality in *Illiterate Heart*.

Is this her way of keeping certain aspects of her ‘selves’ private, rather than being declaratively confessional? Speaking is also, as Lorde puts it, a danger, and perhaps the poet should be allowed some degree of silence, not merely to conceal, but also to emphasise poetry as an indirect form of expression, a textual form which is only partially interpretable by the reader.

I remember reading, in the interview with Maxey, that Alexander is asked about her sexual abuse at a young age and its influence on her writing. What did she say? Must I return to that and find out?

Alexander certainly treats diaspora in her poetry as a complex network of gaps and connections. While she does not tackle female sexuality with the frankness of many contemporary women poets, she *does* turn to embodiment within diaspora, insisting that readers understand this splitting and separating and constantly shifting search for connection as more than merely a theoretical ‘postcolonial’ concept. If she relies least on sexuality to show her ‘selves’ as diversified in poetry, she does explore questions of ‘self’ as they are depicted and shadowed through forms of articulation and silence: “a child babbling / at the

gate splitting into two, / three to make herself safe”, writes Alexander in the poem “Illiterate Heart”, “These lines took decades to etch free” (2002: 68).

*

In reading *Illiterate Heart*, what becomes exceptionally intriguing to me is Alexander’s approach to matters of gender in relation to shifting subjectivity. It’s true that an analytical commentary on gender issues is by no means Alexander’s principle project in *Illiterate Heart*. However, she does grant that as an immigrant woman poet who writes through forms of lived experience the topic of gender is an embedded thematic concern of her writing. Here, it is necessary to remember that ‘identity’ has only fairly recently been conceived of as an eclectic, erratic concatenation, contrary to conventional assumptions of linear development and experiential coherence that clusters into a ‘self’. In the previous section of this essay, I have discussed such dispersal and disaggregation using ideas of diaspora, and in this section I will use ideas from gender and subjectivity theory further to explore Alexander’s notion of self and identity as rhizomatic.

Alexander is not overtly feminist and does not push the feminist project of female equality in her poems. She is not named, for example, in the company of contemporary feminist poets, critics preferring to locate her under the sign of ‘diaspora’. Nor, as I have said above, is her poetry marked by the emphatically sexual physicality of many current female poets.

However, Alexander’s poetic work *does* repeatedly exemplify the tensions associated with identifying one’s self as both diasporic *and* female. If Alexander does not herself take up a feminist agenda, she does examine the differentiating gender assumptions of social structures and received behaviours, locating them in cultural context. As she writes in *Poetics of Dislocation*:

this day-to-day life is scored by the burden of discrepant nationalisms, fevered ethnicities. But it is here and nowhere else that the invisible life goes on, the life of dream and imagination that seeks its sustenance in and through the sensual body. *A woman's body* [my emphasis], tracked through space, intact and bloodied, drawing out bit by bit in lived time, blossoming words, rare geographies of longing. (2009: 177)

The “invisible life” that “seeks sustenance in and through... a woman’s body” is noteworthy as it is a metaphor for Alexander’s interior imaginative space. This ‘self’ can be seen as “the invisible life” because it mediates through elusive feelings and idea the social and cultural structures which shape the external demands of Alexander’s life. As the prompt for the poetic ‘self’ she tussles with in her writing, she names “a woman’s body”.

What could she mean by this? One could propose that as a woman, Alexander has always had to prove herself. Hence, approval might be the initial fuel for the young girl’s nascent imagining of her ‘self’ as a poet. This is akin to the “first space” of the Indian Ocean which she speaks about in the Joseph interview. Approval is not only painstaking, but one of Alexander’s first challenges which she must try to mediate as a poet, even conquer. I say conquer because proving oneself as a woman is as difficult as it is necessary. King suggests that “the modern artist often feels oppositional or an outcast; even if there is no social or economical reason for such alienation, there is something basic about creating – the isolation, the need for fancy – which makes the artist feel rejected” (2006: 140). However, in Alexander’s case, as for many female authors, the writer is consciously aware that it is her femaleness, the fact of being a woman, which contributes to her actual and perceived marginalisation. One could say that Alexander recognises the inheritance of gender disadvantage and works within this framework to articulate a critical engagement with identity. In addition, I would even suggest that a contradictory stance towards gender norms

formed a triggering subject for Alexander as a poet: in part, she became critical; and yet she also longed for approval from precisely those influential family figures who constrained her expression. In an interview with Maxey, for example, she states that “my mother didn’t approve of me writing at all...Mothers don’t want their daughters to write because this is against a model of womanhood of some sort, right?” (2006: 25). Women themselves have long been housed in the private sphere – the designations of the home, the family, the marriage, all of these have especially female significances, their meaning being especially constituted *for* and *by* women, even as this occurs in relation to male authority. Although I clearly oversimplify, here, writing is historically an opinionated profession in which the writer is projected into the public sphere, and in the case of women, this tends to have conflicted with the entrenched assumption that a woman’s proper position is in the private sphere. Within the intricate social relationship of mother and daughter, one could suggest that Alexander sought the approval that her mother did not give, and this has led the poetic ‘self’ to develop, “blossoming words, rare geographies of longing” (2009: 177). In extending the boundaries of the self, Alexander may be seeking a way to gain approval as writer *and* daughter. These two aspects of identity are both integral and pertinent and thus, they may both be necessary for the exploration and extension of Alexander’s ‘selves’.

As I see it, the formation of Alexander’s poetic self, the formation of her self in and through poetry as a facet of her multiple selves, has been facilitated not only by her diasporic relocation across continents but also by the various, often culturally contrasting, forms of female identity that have inflected her lived experience and given rise to her understanding of femaleness as rhizomatic rather than narrow. Alexander’s subjectivity is nomadic, then, due not only to diaspora which prompts the self to grow and change, accommodating culturally multiple identities, but her identity is disaggregated also on account of her female

embodiment, and the ways in which this enters her imagination. ‘Meena Alexander’, then, is multiple in the inflections of diaspora and femaleness which shape her identity.

Relevant here is Rosi Braidotti’s critical theory on sexual difference, in particular her commentary on identity as multiple rather than singular. Femaleness, for this scholar, is yet another form of the nomadic. “[B]ecoming nomadic”, electing to understand your embodied relation to social structures as variously made across cultures, institutions, relations, languages – “means you have to reinvent yourself and you desire the self as a process of transformation. It’s about the desire *for* change, for flows and shifts of multiple desires” (2003: 53). Braidotti proposes that “the feminist subject of knowledge is an intensive, multiple subject, functioning in a net of interconnections. I would like to add that it is rhizomatic (that is to say non-unitary, non-linear, web-like), embodied” (2003: 44). This is a phrase one could have found in Bragard’s article and applies frankly to my argument. The interconnectional, rhizomatic character of women’s consciousness that Braidotti describes can be said to also emphasise the body as key to “the feminist struggle for the redefinition of subjectivity” (2003: 44).

This ‘body’ which Braidotti writes about is similar to that which Alexander engages in *Illiterate Heart*. It is a body of struggle in spite of itself; a body of ideas and being, the “sensual body” which is also freighted with critical and cryptic consciousness:

The body has marks on her,
body marks.
In the discrete music of the furnaces
leaves lilt and pour.

(Alexander 2002:8)

Braidotti seeks to redefine subjectivity for women without placing weight on its previous male-dominated nature. This in itself is a mammoth task as “the subject of feminism is not Woman as the complementary and specular other of man, but rather a complex and multi-layered embodied subject who has taken her distance from the institution of femininity” (Braidotti 2003: 45). Certainly, if I have found no clear answer to the question of whether it is accurate to call Alexander’s a feminist subject, I *have* seen in her poetry a highly sophisticated gendered consciousness and questioning which accords well with Braidotti’s thinking.

One of the ways which Alexander examines femaleness is through explorations of the female body. In *Illiterate Heart*, she represents differentiating bodies – the bodies of girls, women, mother and daughter. She is all of these kinds of femaleness and one could suggest that she is showing that a feminist perspective of women’s identity may present the self as rhizomatic. The poem “Civil Strife” describes the conflicted femaleness of a girl’s body, her ‘self’ at once coming into its own, and subject to the depredations of received cultural patterns:

In the mirror I saw a girl turn into a tree,
her fingers blossomed freckled petals,
greedy hands tore at her,
she fell handless footless into a ditch of dirty water.

(Alexander 2002: 31)

Further along in the poem, the speaker asks, “Yet what could this mean to me?”, when speaking about the “tale” of “the girl-tree”. An interesting question. The transformation of the girl’s body and what it represents is even unknown to the speaker. The female body seems

unstable and difficult to define. A woman's body is known to be the primary, declarative identifier of her gender, yet Braidotti insists that even this embodiment is constructed:

the body is then an interface, a threshold, a field of intersecting material and symbolic forces, it is the surface where multiple codes (race, sex, class, age, etc.) are inscribed; it's a cultural construction that capitalizes on the energies of a heterogeneous, discontinuous and unconscious nature. (2003: 44)

This description of the body aptly symbolises the body of poetry which Alexander presents in *Illiterate Heart*. The poetry collection comprises a relatively structured exploration of the difficulties of defining self, a textual space in which Alexander investigates identity as shifting and exploring. However, one could suggest that the "interface" is similar to the "mapping" which Alexander describes in her interview with Joseph. The above definition is part of a bigger reinvention of "the feminist subject as a multiple, complex process...[which] critiques dualistic oppositions, linking instead body and mind in a new flux of self" (Braidotti 2003: 46). The body in this context reminds us that to a woman poet, the body is of great significance. It represents the pressure point of various contacts: between gendered oppression and liberation, between the constraints of assumed norms and the paradox of norms which are nevertheless experienced – or imagined – as potential.

And when it comes to femaleness and the body: a body can be silent or it can speak. She can. What is the space occupied by the female body as a subject of poetic discourse? This is obviously an extensive, complex question, one which I can barely brush against. Braidotti suggests that "women must...speak the feminine" as a culturally revised category of being; "they must think it, write it and represent it in their own terms" (2003: 45). I maintain that this is part of what Alexander attempts, in terms of gender, in *Illiterate Heart*.

In the concluding section of this essay, then, I will discuss the body as an element of the poetic 'self' which Alexander creates as a space for female expression, and investigate the importance of sensual memory in Alexander's poetry.

Most of the poems which treat this subject matter concentrate on a female subject, whether it be the poet and her family relations, or imagined women. In "Muse", for instance, Alexander revels in the memory of her body and how language has grown her from girl to poet (2002: 23–24). "Rites of Sense", similarly, is a familial poem which demonstrates the tensions attached to being both daughter and writer (Alexander 2002: 71–72). Emerging from these poems is an accreted, layered identity which creates tension within Alexander as a female poet. Alexander as 'the daughter' is an image which is repeated in more than one poem. The structure of the family is an integral part of Alexander's womanhood because it was the first place where she learned how to act as a female. Her mother, I've said, did not approve of her writing – but her father did. And yet even here Alexander locates the limits and possibilities of her mother's femaleness in the context of social expectation, rather than perverse, idiosyncratic authority:

it was enormously helpful to me...he was saying: "What you make ought to end up in the public sphere in some fashion." Otherwise I had no encouragement from my family. It happens a lot in patriarchal societies that fathers encourage their daughters because they're the ones who *can* encourage them or are willing to do so. There's no easy way the mother could encourage the daughter to go into the public domain – but she might. (Maxey 2006: 25)

Alexander's depiction of the familial structure implies the extent of parental influence on her identity. Her role as a daughter to her parents was a set and fixed identification, even while the daughterly role was also differently defined in relation to the male and the female parent.

I would like to call this ‘daughter’ construction, the familial feminine ‘self’. I will try to point out instances of this identity in *Illiterate Heart* and suggest that the familial feminine identity is often put in opposition to (or perhaps in tension with) the poetic and potentially feminist ‘self’. This idea is taken from King who suggests that Alexander’s poetry functions under “two symbolic grandmothers” which are, namely, the “bearer of tradition” and the “proto-feminist”. While King’s notion proves useful to me, I also find this conception to be unduly narrow. Instead, as I have done throughout this essay, I wish to emphasise that Alexander’s sense of gendered ‘selves’ is not confining or mutually exclusive. She does not write in terms of ‘this’ against ‘that’. Rather, her poetry is an excellent example of a female writer who seeks to extend the boundaries of tired dichotomies such as those offered by King. Alexander’s work, conceptually, is more in keeping with Braidotti’s understanding “of the feminist subject as a multiple, complex process” which is associated with “an attempt to rethink the unity of the subject” (2003: 46). (This effort of not having a true or complete identity as a woman is important to remember when analysing Alexander’s poetry, for it is a tiring as well as a productive uncertainty. For instance, I remember hearing, somewhere, that at just that moment in which the postmodern subject is supposedly relieved of the burden of coherent identity, so women of colour find themselves denied the hope of ‘self’ which postcolonialism has seemed to promise.)

In discussing some of Alexander’s poetry through the lens of gender, I will examine the familial feminine ‘self’ by using two of Braidotti’s three spheres of sexual difference, as signposted by Lisa F. Kall in “Sexual Difference as Nomadic Strategy”. The “three spheres of difference Braidotti distinguishes are: 1) the difference between men and women; 2) differences among women; 3) differences within each woman” (Kall 2006: 197). Using the

latter two spheres, Alexander's poems can be thought of as intersectional and transrelational in terms of femininity and sexual difference. The subjectivity that emerges through process in Alexander's poetic work should then be seen as varied and contrasting, rather than as a unified ideology that is inherently natural. Adapting the idea of transrelation: this may account for the shared notion of difference which women can recognise in each other and process while intersecting with one another. The third sphere, "differences within each woman", links directly with my project in this short essay as it creates the idea of different social structures shaping a woman's fluid identity.

The female body has been a subject of extensive debate in feminist critical studies, considered ambiguously as a source of power and as a source of oppression. Women have generally been considered oppressed within their bodies, labelled as the lesser sex and marginalized in a category that paradoxically is socially defined, and yet always somehow is marked by a lack of definition and agency. However, the female body can also be seen as a mobilizing, inspirational subject that can encourage a woman to break down the barrier of a one dimensional sex. Audre Lorde explains that in transforming silence into language and action, poetry becomes a way of explaining this difference of our bodies in the public sphere of writing:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predict our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless...

(1984: 37)

Lorde complicates the body as the site of speaking effortlessly. In essence, poetry is against the dominant vision of women as they occur in the private domain. Elspeth Probyn's article,

“This Body Which Is Not One: Speaking an Embodied Self” suggests that “bodies can empower different modes of speaking” leading her to acknowledge that the body has a kind of doubledness (1991: 111). She also echoes Lorde in proposing that “we can use the body in two registers: in one, the body is positioned as a concept, and in another, we can think of the body within the strategies of enunciation” (1991: 111). Even further, I suggest, these categories can blur.

In writing the body into her poetry – writing her poetry *through* her body - Alexander seems to demonstrate such re-doubledness through sensual memory. The past memories, conveyed and connected via the limbic system of brain and senses, appear differentiated from the present location of her identity. This begs the question, “who am I? and who is she?”. The body is thus relational to itself through temporal space (much like the rhizome), as well as being relational to other women’s bodies (Probyn 1991: 112).

Additionally, the body should not be thought of as unified because this displaces those women who do not fit the conventionalised description. Probyn suggests that “the body is at best a compromised concept...[and] has no inherent right to proclaim the truth” (1991: 116). This suggestion leads me to acknowledge the notion of a diversified subjectivity which depends on the subject’s position, positing that “rather than getting closer to a unified and authentic body, the best we can do is to hold its doubledness in tension; to construct it as a ‘structure of feeling’” (Probyn 1991: 116-7). Because of this, we may think of the concept of the body in terms of a problematised subjectivity. It is certainly not the body thought of as the unsophisticated “second sex”.

This is the body one may find in the poem, “Muse”. This poem holds a particular position in *Illiterate Heart* because it is about the articulation of silence into language and action through

the poet's first device – the body (Lorde 1984: 40). The word which forms the title of the poem, *muse*, is a popular subject amongst poets throughout the ages, and for female poets has become a form of writing back, or speaking against. The question may be: what was the first inspiration for Alexander to begin writing? This is difficult to answer. Alexander, in looking back to her past, mediates her reply through the personification of the 'muse' figure. At the back of the collection, in the "Notes" section, Alexander states that "for want of a better term I invoke as *muse*, that invisible space where meaning is made and unmade" and the body is an essential part of this process as the site of articulation (2002: 101).

In the poem, the speaker is in conversation with the muse. The poem is divided into two parts, each of six line stanzas. The first three stanzas have the speaker reflecting on past events where the unidentified muse first came to her; this is written in the past tense. From the last two lines of the fourth stanza onwards ("Centuries later worn out from travel / I rest under a tree"), the speaker goes back to the present tense, and the present time (Alexander 2002: 24). As the muse is the "invisible space", the body acts as the device to enact the inspiration within the speaker. The poem progresses into sensual memory and uses language or the speaker's mother tongue (Alexander 2002: 101) to enable a better understanding of the poet and the muse in the "invisible space". The muse is constantly giving the speaker inspiration, whether in the past or in the present in saying "those were the words you gave me", "you murmured the word, sliding it on your tongue" and "you set a book to my ribs" in an act of creation.

"I was young when you came to me" may suggest a new awareness of the speaker's body as a child. The physicality of the body translates the muse into words or a poetic subject. This is a very physical poem in terms of the material used as its body and utilises the linguistic 'self'

to relay the “invisible space”. Using Malayalam, the speaker translates three English words into her home language. The physicality of the two languages in the space of the poem could be said to illustrate the distinguishing social constructions between who “she” is and who “I” am in the speaker. These three words (girl, book and tree) are also explained and can be seen as the first instances of poetic inspiration for Alexander:

A pencil box in hand – *girl, book, tree* –
those were the words you gave me.
Girl was *penne*, hair drawn back,
gleaming on the scalp,
the self in the mirror in a rosewood room,

(Alexander 2002: 23)

The image of the girl implies that the third sphere of difference (or the “differences within each woman”) may be used to interpret this section. The image of the ‘girl’ is the speaker as she calls herself “a slip of a thing/dressed like a convent girl –/white socks, shoes,/dark blue pinafore, white blouse”. The speaker – in the present – is recalling her physical image in the past as a girl and acknowledges the difference in herself by using another language saying “Girl **was** [my emphasis] *penne*”. In the last two stanzas where the speaker is back in her present, the girl has disappeared. The other images (book and tree) still exist but are in the speaker’s now chosen poetic language of English:

trying to get how a girl could turn
into a molten thing and not burn.
Centuries later worn out from travel
I rest under a tree.

You come to me,
a bird shredding gold feathers,
each one a quill scraping my tympanum.
You set a book to my ribs.
Night after night I unclasp it
at the mirror’s edge

(Alexander 2002: 24)

Thus, one could propose that the girl has turned into a woman. Yet this turning is also not fully achieved, the becoming is unfinished. I notice, for example, that the ‘muse’ is now a bird, and the two lines “a bird might have dreamt its shadow there / spreading fire in a tree *maram*” invoke the image of the phoenix – a figure which is in a continuous state of change and rebirth (Alexander 2002: 23). The muse, as quoted above, is trying to get the speaker to turn into “a molten thing” just like itself or a ‘self’ which is constantly remaking its identity. Interestingly, where “the self in the mirror” seems distant from the speaker, the ‘girl’, the woman who exists in the present knows exactly where her ‘self’ is – “at the mirror’s edge”.

How does the gendered self interact with this image of the body? The “who am I? and who is she?” question is demonstrated in the shift from a past image of ‘girl’ and the speaker becoming a woman in the poem and through the ‘muse’ figure of poetic inspiration. The difference of who the poet was and who the poet is presently shows the delineation within one person as Kall suggested. The third sphere of difference is essential to Alexander as it confirms that through diaspora and differentiating female social structures, it is possible to inhabit a rhizomatic, non-linear identity. This production of several ‘selves’ is encouraged by the social differences in language. The body is thus a location and container for connected but varied identities. These ‘selves’ interact with the poetic ‘self’ which leads to the conceptualisation and production of a poem such as “Muse”. This poem is a demonstration of rhizomatic identity in a gendered self as the ‘I’ and ‘she’ are the same and also clearly different.

Ending. Beginning

I am leaving in two weeks. My mother tells me I must sort out my clothes. She says it for the third time. “What are you taking? What must you leave?” (I hear an echo, here, that sounds like ‘why’: Why must you leave? I shake my head. The sound is still there.)

I don’t know. I don’t know how many pairs of shoes I will take, or what I will wear on the plane. Whether I should take a change of clothes. What it would mean about me and my knowledge of the world if I take a change of clothes, or don’t. Where would I change into these clothes? Would I change?

Inside my head. Whirling. Outside, there aren’t many questions, but even these seem so many. There are more than enough questions to be answered with the same simple reply. I don’t know.

I don’t have a suitcase yet, or a backpack. Which is better? I leave on a Saturday. Now it is this Saturday. I do know that my shoulders must always be covered, because a teacher should dress respectfully. She is not there for herself, she is always about others.

I am uncertain, but not that nervous. I have eleven things still to do before I go. Silly things. Serious things.

1. Get three months’ supply of medication
2. Draw most if not all my savings from the bank
3. Make certified copies of my documents. Degrees. Work permit. Passport. ID
4. Buy transparent vanity bag and 100ml plastic containers. (Travel regulations.)
5. Find thermal tights for - 1° C weather

I have a list but I can’t think of everything.

I open my cupboards. Close them. Write the list in my head. It’s a mess. My MA drafts are spread and misshapen. My makeup bag is tatty. My box of brushes thin. My drawers are full of receipts, pens and packets. They will just have to stay behind.

Late at night, midnight, I am awake. Stars. Stare. Shuffle. In the passage a wooden man reminds me that he won't be there, across the sea. No familiar statues. And no family of saints and crosses and prayer books. I kneel down. Put an ear to the statue's varnished lips. He is very small, and old. Yet the wood is smooth and secret.

*

The Chinese Consulate in Durban is tiny. The Chinese people inside are tiny. I am tiny too. I feel smaller than usual.

I have been here twice in two days. The waiting room has no line; a few people sit around on grey chairs. There are women behind glass, one older, one younger. Dark, sharp hair. Another woman comes back and forth, pausing to call out. It must be names. I have no idea what she is saying, for they do not seem to speak English. I wait. Listen as they slip Mandarin to each other without smiles and almost without words. There are no hills to my ears. Hearing that level sound, I expect their tongues to be square and flat, with no line in the middle.

The older woman doesn't look up at me. The younger one looks for my passport. After a minute, she gives it to me and I thank her. In English. She looks at me. Replies in Mandarin. I look at her. I say Xie xie. Shi shi. Thank you. And feel my tongue, turning.

*

The paper is brittle in my hands. I see Chinese characters. It's only when I get back home that I check. The visa says X. Which doesn't mark the right spot.

I go back, apologising. "It supposed to be Z visa," she says crossly. I nod. She points me to another lady (*woman*) and I hand over my passport.

"Why you are going to China?"

"To teach English."

She looks up, as if there must be some mistake.

There is a mistake. So points me to wait. There is no clock.

Slowly the Z visa grows into my head like a brown skull cap. The X visa is there too. It cannot be taken out of my passport, only cancelled, as if I have already been, in disguise, and returned. As if I am going back.

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