

“A Bruise Still Tender”: David Chariandy’s *Soucouyant* and Cultural Memory Jennifer Bowering Delisle

David Chariandy’s highly acclaimed 2007 novel, *Soucouyant*, proclaims itself to be a “novel of forgetting.” But it is also a novel of remembering, of personal and cultural acts of memory that define the book’s second-generation Canadian protagonist. *Soucouyant* tells the story of a young man in 1980s Scarborough who returns to his mother Adele’s home after a two-year absence. Adele suffers from early-onset dementia, an illness that the book suggests may have been triggered by the traumatic fire that she and her mother survived when she was a young child in Trinidad. As Chariandy explains in an interview with Kit Dobson, Adele’s dementia

enabled me to explore the fragility and endurance of cultural memory, and, most particularly, the challenge of cultural memory for a second-generation immigrant. Obviously, because Adele is now forgetting her past in Trinidad, the burden of memory is thrust upon her Canadian-born and raised son. (“Spirits” 813)

Chariandy’s comments point to the particular relationship between cultural memory and a specifically second-generation subjectivity, a relationship troubled by the fact that the protagonist “doesn’t have anything at all like absolute or infallible access to the past” (813). The very term “second generation” signifies a belatedness in relationship to the past and the diasporic moment. Chariandy goes on to ask “what ... might his mother’s elsewhere past, uttered now in broken pieces, and in a language not entirely his, ultimately mean to him here and now, in apparently very different circumstances? What, indeed, might he owe to such an elsewhere past, really?” (“Spirits” 813).

The novel itself is a meditation on these difficult questions. *Soucouyant* demonstrates how second-generation Canadians often construct iden-

tities in the space between the dominating mythologies of multiple “homelands.” In this article I show how the protagonist negotiates inherited and unwilling diasporic memories, recuperating them into personal narratives that serve to witness his mother’s trauma and reinforce the bonds of familial belonging. These diasporic narratives are formed in tension with the troubled cultural legacies of the Canadian home, a tension that is at turns both damaging and creative. The “elsewhere past,” in other words, does not remain in the broken pieces spoken by others, but is reformed by the second generation and incorporated into a complex new narrative of identity.

My analysis here centres upon the concept of “cultural memory” as Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith articulate it in a 2002 special issue of *Signs* on “Gender and Cultural Memory.” Cultural memory is, for Hirsch and Smith, informed by what Paul Connerton calls “an act of transfer”:

an act in the present by which individuals and groups constitute their identities by recalling a shared past on the basis of common, and therefore often contested, norms, conventions, and practices. These transactions emerge out of a complex dynamic between past and present, individual and collective, public and private, recall and forgetting, power and powerlessness, history and myth, trauma and nostalgia, conscious and unconscious fears or desires. (5)

As an “act of transfer” cultural memory is central to the formation of identity in relationship to the group, whether family, nation, diasporic imaginary, or ethnic community. Cultural memory is not simply the same as public memory, but references the role of social relationships, including private family relationships, in the act of remembering. Cultural memory therefore has a particularly important role to play in the formation of second-generation identity, for those individuals whose earliest “acts of transfer,” the shared past invoked by their parents, are dominated by other spaces, by various “elsewheres.”

In Chariandy’s novel, cultural memory is embodied by the image of the soucouyant, a Caribbean myth used to convey the “**particular** generational condition, a particular state of sensing but not really know-

ing one's origins, and, consequently, a particular process of exploring one's origins without easy recourse to official meanings or narratives" ("Spirits" 811). This process of exploration involves an active negotiation in the present of both personal and inherited memories of the past. In the introduction to *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, Mieke Bal explains that cultural memory is "neither remnant, document, nor relic of the past, nor floating in a present cut off from the past," but rather "links the past to the present and future" (vii). It is, furthermore, "not merely something of which you happen to be a bearer but something that you actually *perform*, even if, in many instances, such acts are not consciously and wilfully contrived" (vii). In *Soucouyant*, cultural memory is performed in several important registers: inherited trauma or "postmemory," diasporic histories, national mythologies, and powerful nostalgias. All of these influences are received by the protagonist, often in the guise of the unearthly soucouyant, and are in turn refashioned into his own narrative.

I. Stories Buried Deep

For the elderly Adele, memory is pathologized, intertwined with her mental illness. As her dementia worsens, she "forget[s] to forget" (32), retelling past traumas in fragments that seem to emit from her mouth without her control. As Susan J. Brison writes, traumatic memories "are experienced by the survivor as inflicted, not chosen," they are often "uncontrollable, intrusive, and frequently somatic" (40). Traumatic memories therefore disrupt one's sense of oneself as made up of continuous memories, an ongoing narrative. By confusing the remembered past with the lived present, traumatic memories work to "undo" the self (41). Yet Brison also adds that the process of relating the traumatic experience to a suitable listener or "second person" can restore the self by reformulating that narrative. This is the work that Adele seems to be attempting, and, in this manner, her son, as that "second person," pieces together the story of her life.

In Adele's mind, and in her son's, the horrific fire is intertwined with the dream-like memory of seeing a soucouyant—a vampiric spirit that sheds a fake skin to visit her victims in the night as a ball of fire. The

image of the fiery soucouyant “gloving on” its skin (190) reflects the description of Adele’s mother’s horrible burns with her skin “gloving off” (8), her mask-like face “buckled with heat and then set into something senseless and hard” (115). The trauma of the fire has become distorted in Adele’s mind, resurfacing in the story of the soucouyant. Her son explains that “it’s not really about a soucouyant. It’s about an accident. It’s about what happened in her birthplace during World War II. It’s a way of telling without really telling” (66). Adele repeatedly tries to work through this trauma by telling the story of the soucouyant, using the same words and images, a recurring scene that she cannot seem to work out in her brain:

‘It happen...,’ she tries again. ‘It happen one fore-day morn-
ing when the sun just a stain on the sky. When the moon not
under as yet. Me, I was a young girl running...’

‘I know, Mother. It doesn’t matter. You’re here now.’ (47)

The fire and the soucouyant are intertwined traumatic events that Adele revisits in compulsive repetitions. Yet in an essay on melancholia and “epistemological cross-talk,” Daniel Coleman suggests that the soucouyant should be read here not as a mere trope or as folklore, but as “a gesture towards ultimately unrecoverable alternative epistemologies” (20). He argues that the story of the soucouyant places Adele’s trauma within a broader set of spiritual community practices and beliefs. This placement, for Coleman, “aligns personal or intimate family experience with collective cultural knowledge and thereby turns our focus away from assuming historical trauma will always settle into psychological neuroses and their privatized kinds of alienation” (21). Coleman’s reading affirms that Adele’s trauma and the image of the soucouyant operate here as important cultural memories rather than simply aspects of Adele’s personal pathology.

While the protagonist tries to reassure his mother that the story “doesn’t matter. You’re *here* now,” his own response to his mother’s past belies this claim that location in Canada reduces its import or influence. He is overwhelmed by memories that are not his own, by the cultural memories that link him to his mother’s birthplace and traumatic past.

Hirsch and Smith assert that cultural memory “includes the addressee or cowitness as well as the witness ... it acknowledges the unavailability of the original experience and the fragmentary and mediated nature of the reconstruction” (9). But this indirect receipt of memory, this “unavailability” of the original experience, does not mean that the memory is not important to the addressee. Early in the novel, in an attempt to explain why he returns to his mother, the protagonist muses:

During our lives, we struggle to forget. And it's foolish to assume that forgetting is altogether a bad thing. Memory is a bruise still tender. History is a rusted pile of blades and manacles. And forgetting can sometimes be the most creative and life-sustaining thing that we can ever hope to accomplish. The problem happens when we become too good at forgetting. When somehow we *forget* to forget, and we blunder into circumstances that we consciously should have avoided. This is how we awaken to the stories buried deep within our sleeping selves or trafficked quietly through the touch of others. This is how we're shaken by vague scents or tastes. How we're stolen by an obscure word, an undertow dragging us back and down and away. (32)

In this crucial passage it seems at first that the narrator is speaking of his mother, of the way in which her disturbed mind revisits things she never meant to reveal. But in the last three sentences the subject seems to shift to the protagonist himself, as he finds his mother's stories and memories buried within his own “sleeping self.” The “obscure word” that overtakes him is revealed in the subsequent lines, where we learn that the protagonist has been mumbling “soucouyant” in his sleep (32). He feels “stolen” by this word that overwhelms him in his unconscious state. Stories, we are told, can be “trafficked” simply through touch, and the mother's trauma, represented by the memory of the soucouyant, has been transmitted to the son, surfacing in these unbidden corporeal responses.

Or, put another way, the soucouyant of the past has returned to prey upon him, to “suck his blood as he sleeps, leaving him with little sign of her work except increasing fatigue, a certain paleness, and perhaps, if he were to look closely on his body, a tell-tale bruise or mark on his skin”

(135). Adele herself is at times a kind of soucouyant, a strange and terrifying creature. Yet the protagonist continues: “I wanted to see her again. I wanted to see the life in her face. I longed for her as any son would for his mother, even so frightening a mother as she had become” (33). The protagonist does return to his mother, and attempts to rebuild a relationship with her. But Adele remains a kind of monster, a distortion of the woman she once was, sometimes screaming when touched, soiling herself, destroying the kitchen in attempts to make old recipes. After his mother dies, a mysterious bruise appears on the son’s forehead (141). In this mark on the skin the image of memory “as a bruise still tender” (32) comes together with the bruise as the sign of the soucouyant. The spirit, then, represents both Adele herself and the ancestral traumas from which the protagonist is unable to escape despite his birth in Canada; the myth seems “to be attached to a very different space” and yet is “hauntingly present at the same time” (“Spirits” 811). The soucouyant is a symbol of both personal and cultural memories, a vampiric force that is both frightening and compelling, and that cannot be escaped.

The son’s relationship to his mother’s story is a form of what Hirsch calls “postmemory,” a second-generation memory “distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection” and mediated “through an imaginative investment and creation.” Postmemory “characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (22). While Hirsch developed the concept of postmemory in relationship to Holocaust narratives, she recognizes its useful application to other traumatic contexts, such as the violences of colonialism and the ruptures of diaspora (22). In Chariandy’s novel, the son feels “dominated” by the postmemories of wartime Trinidad, the horrific fire, and the mysterious soucouyant. His postmemory is a defining aspect of his second-generation identity, a force that becomes an “undertow” dragging him back to other distant pasts. While the experiences of the fire and the soucouyant are not his own, he is overwhelmed by this postmemory, and the unbidden affect that accompanies it.

Over the years Adele has told the tale of the soucouyant and of her own childhood in fragments; “she told, but she never explained or deciphered. She never put the stories together. She never could or wanted to do so” (136). The protagonist, however, attempts to “put the stories together” for her, to take these pieces and reconstruct them into narrative. Toward the end of the novel, we flash back to two years before, when the narrator first left his mother. As he is about to leave he begins to tell his mother her own story, which he frames like a fairytale, beginning “there was once a girl named Adele” (180) as though the main character is a third person and not the listener. Bal explains that “to enter memory, the traumatic event of the past needs to be made ‘narratable’”; the second person who listens to the memories “generates narratives that ‘make sense’” in contrast to the confused and fragmented traumatic memories. But the protagonist cannot complete the story on his own. As he tells his mother about how her burns were treated, he asks her the name of the plant they put on her skin: “Can you remember it now, Mother? Can you tell me this last thing? Today, before I go?” Then he asks “did you really see a soucouyant?” Here Adele dismisses the tale that her son has been telling: “‘Oh dear,’ she said, still smiling. ‘Whatever you think you want with some old nigger-story?’” (194). The protagonist’s story fails to overcome Adele’s dementia, and he admits “I don’t understand anything” (195). But this lack of perfect access to the past also leads to what Hirsch calls a mediated “imaginative creation” whose significance lies as much in Adele’s interruptions and the story’s confused timeframe as in the facts of the event. The ruptures and unreliable developments highlight the distance between the protagonist and his mother’s experience, a distance felt by all children but exacerbated here by the rifts of trauma, mental illness, and diaspora. His postmnemonic tale is a defining aspect of second-generation experience.

After telling his mother her own story the protagonist explains,

‘please listen to me, Mother. Please believe me. I didn’t want to sadden you or betray the spell. I didn’t want to tell a story like this. I just wanted you to realize that I knew. That I was always close enough to know. That I was your son, and I could hear and understand and take away.’ (195).

The son is crying, and she responds “why you crying, child of mine, child of this beautiful land” (195). For Adele, her son is a “child of this beautiful land,” of Canada, and should not be disturbed by the traumas of the past. But despite her efforts to forget, her son is burdened with carrying the remnants of her memories. It is a burden but also a kind of blessing, proof of a deep and intimate familial connection despite the rift that mental illness has opened between them.

II. Diasporic Identity

The narrator’s reconstruction of this fragmented history reveals the work involved in what Stuart Hall calls the “process of identification” (15). As Hall argues, reflecting on second-generation identities,

we tell ourselves the stories of the parts of our roots in order to come into contact, creatively, with it. So this new kind of ethnicity—the emergent ethnicities—has a relationship to the past, but it is a relationship that is partly through memory, partly through narrative, one that has to be recovered. It is an act of cultural recovery. (19)

Hall’s use of the contested term “ethnicity” involves not just affiliation with a “minority” group in the birthplace, but a second-generation identity construction that draws on diasporic memories as well as a relationship to that birthplace through difference (19). For Hall, this is the “new ethnicity. It is a new conception of our identities because it has not lost hold of the place and ground from which we can speak, yet it is no longer contained within that place as an essence. It wants to address a much wider variety of experience” (20). For Chariandy’s protagonist, the “place and ground” from which he speaks is both Canada and Trinidad—place, here, is not an “essence” or a perfect origin, but an identity reconstructed through cultural memory.

When Meera, the mysterious young woman who cares for Adele, accuses the protagonist of being “eternally sad,” he responds by asking her “You’re connected to Trinidad, aren’t you, Meera? ... I mean, you probably weren’t born there. You probably aren’t any more attached to that place than I am, but you’re connected, aren’t you?” (119). This dif-

ference between “attachment” and “connection” illustrates the strange position of the second generation, as strangers to their parents’ homeland, but involuntarily connected to it through language, narrative and genealogy. The protagonist recognizes in Meera, the daughter of another Trinidadian immigrant, his own ambivalence towards a powerful cultural memory inherited from his ancestors in the incongruous context of a Canadian home.

While postmemory references the memories received from a direct ancestor and the secondary witnessing of trauma, second-generation identity also often involves much older narratives, the cultural memories that link individuals in diaspora. The protagonist is part not only of the postcolonial Caribbean diaspora, but also the African diaspora launched by slavery, and the Indian diaspora spurred by indentured labour. These much older migrations and traumas—this history of “rusted blades and manacles” (32)—also haunts the novel. It is woven through Adele’s story, as she recalls being moved as a young child to a village named Carenage, named for the Spanish slave ships that once anchored there (23). Her move to Carenage is forced by the British-American Land-Lease Agreement that brings the American base to her home during World War II. This history is recounted toward the end of the novel in what Dobson calls a “more official tone or discourse of history” (812), a voice that represents the official history that the protagonist absorbs from books. This clinical voice of imperial historiography justifies the measures taken by the Americans as necessary to the war effort, and describes the benefits that the base brought to Trinidad. But this voice is juxtaposed with what Chariandy calls the “unofficial story” (“Spirits” 812), Adele’s story of the devastating effects that the American base had on the lives of poor Trinidadians like her and her mother. We finally learn how, forced from their home, Adele’s mother resorted to prostitution to support her and her daughter. In a confrontation with the American soldiers one of them doused her and Adele with gasoline. Adele, afraid and too young to understand, set them both on fire with the lighter a soldier had given her. This horrific event dramatizes the broader cultural impact that the base had on the community, an intruding force that regarded its women as mere whores and destroyed existing

social and economic structures. Cultural memory, then, as it is passed on between generations, is crucial for preserving these unofficial stories and exposing the human impact of colonialism and military occupation. As Adele tells her son in what may be a moment of striking lucidity, “they does always tell the biggest stories in book” (175).

Fragments of diasporic memory also linger in the protagonist’s father, Roger, a Trinidadian of South Asian descent. He recalls hearing “hushed stories of desperate flights, of cutlasses and sweat. Bodies broken in the canefields. Some surviving rituals of belief” (79). Roger remembers the words to an old song brought from Madras by his ancestors, but he does not know their meaning. They are “just a scrap of something gone” (79). Yet these “scraps” nevertheless bear witness to the fragmented cultural memories of indentured labour and displacement. As Lily Cho argues,

One *becomes* diasporic through a complex process of memory and emergence. Thus, to be black, for example, does not automatically translate into a state of being within the black diaspora. Blackness is not inherently diasporic. Black diaspora subjectivity emerges in what it means to be black and live through the displacements of slavery and to carry into the future the memory of the losses compelled by the legacy of slavery, to be torn by the ambivalences of mourning losses that are both your own and yet not quite your own. (21)

For the protagonist, these losses that are both his own and not quite his own—these cultural memories pieced together through the fragments of narrative and his interest in history—**contribute to a diasporic subjectivity**. They speak to multiple affective connections and ruptures that reach beyond multicultural identities toward a long and troubled past. But the legacies of slavery and indenture, racial conflict and colonialism, are not inherent; they are conveyed through stories and experiences, the cultural memories passed down to him and reconstructed in Canada.

As the protagonist reflects on these diasporic histories he recounts his mother’s insistence that he had received a blessing from his grandmother on a trip to Trinidad as a young child, a blessing that he does not remember. His mother tells him that it was an “old, old gesture ...

older than any church or religion, older than anything recorded as history" (117). The blessing connects him with a broader cultural memory that survives or even counters recorded history—or it would connect him, if he could remember it. Coleman argues that as a ritual that mixes allusions to Christian baptism with *Kala Pani*, "the black waters that contains the remains of slaves and indentured workers who jumped ship or died at sea," the grandmother's blessing enacts "a ritual confrontation with the pain of history." For Coleman, this means that the protagonist "has something more than losses to recall, memory that does not skirt or sidestep the trauma of the past, but retains the gesture of a blessing," a gesture towards a kind of healing (23). But the protagonist repeats that he does not remember the blessing on the last page of the novel. He feels disconnected, severed from this cultural and spiritual past. This lack of memory, however, is juxtaposed with what he does remember—the intimacy of Adele holding her own mother's hand as they walked along the beach. The missing cultural memory, then, is replaced by this intimate gesture that enacts forgiveness and connects the three generations across the divides of diaspora.

III. Tell-tale Marks

Being a "child of this beautiful land" means that the protagonist's black body also confronts white visions of Canada that bracket black Canadians as perpetual outsiders. As Rinaldo Walcott and others point out, blackness in Canada has been characterized by a simultaneous "invisibility and hyper-visibility" (48), an assumption that blacks in Canada are always new immigrants. Even within literary criticism, as Chariandy points out in *Callaloo*, "the idea of black Canadian literature has oftentimes quietly assumed or privileged the experiences and concerns of new immigrants" ("Fictions" 820). Experiences of diaspora in black communities, both for the first and second generations (and often the third, and fourth), are frequently characterized by an alienating racism that eschews any acknowledgement of the actual birthplace or of the complexities of diasporic memory. Derek Walcott contends that to be black in Canada is to occupy an "in-between position." For Walcott, this "in-betweenness" applies to both newcomers and what he calls "indig-

enous blacks,” and involves both state-sanctioned practices of exclusion and chosen diasporic identifications (49). But this concept of living in-between as a defining characteristic of the black diaspora in Canada also usefully articulates the way in which second-generation black Canadians in particular are positioned between inherited diasporic legacies *and* national Canadian narratives.

The novel’s timeframe, set in 1989 and reflecting back to the Ontario of the early 1960s, allows Chariandy to both represent and critique the development of Canadian policies and attitudes towards immigration and diversity. Adele arrives in the early sixties as part of a program offering landed status to single Caribbean women after a year of domestic work, a few years before the revised Immigration Act that allowed visible minorities to come to Canada in large numbers. Her life in Canada begins in a period of government-sanctioned racism and parallels the development of an ideology of multiculturalism, from the 1971 Multiculturalism Policy, through the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The novel is set just one year after the 1988 Multiculturalism Act. The protagonist, then, also bears the cultural memories of this fraught history of immigration and exclusion.

These cultural shifts are reflected in their Scarborough neighbourhood’s “Heritage Day,” a parade that celebrates the “*Traditional* Community by the Lake.” The italicized “traditional” is read as a euphemism for “white.” As the protagonist grows up the celebration is revamped “to recognize ‘people of multicultural backgrounds,’ and ‘not just Canadians’” (60). “Multicultural,” here, seems to be a euphemism for people of colour, and the overt exclusion of these citizens and neighbours from the category of “Canadian” is disturbing. The community of Port Junction actively performs its heritage, shifting its “traditional” focus to a contrived self-congratulation about its diversity. But this constructed cultural memory of accommodation and tolerance merely exacerbates the protagonist’s sense of alienation in his birthplace as it contradicts his own personal memories of racism and exclusion, of feeling “in-between.”

For Adele, in her confused state, the march that passes her cul-de-sac is frightening: “Why the costumes and uniforms and semi-orderly

marching? Was it serious? Was there a war or a violent expulsion underfoot?" (60). The march calls up the traumas of World War II that shattered her childhood. While her son repeatedly explains that it is a "performance," the militant tone of the march is genuinely alarming. Chariandy's Heritage Day, then, acts as an indictment of official multiculturalism and what Smaro Kamboureli effectively calls its "sedative politics": "a politics that attempts to recognize ethnic differences, but only in a contained fashion, in order to manage them. It pays tribute to diversity and suggests ways of celebrating it, thus responding to the clarion call of ethnic communities for recognition. Yet it does so without disturbing the conventional articulation of the Canadian dominant society" (82). The novel contends that for black Canadians and other "visible minorities," official multiculturalism did not wash away racism but in some cases enabled new forms of racial exclusion or marginalization. Furthermore, despite its prominent position as a defining Canadian ideology, it fails to accommodate second-generation experience by operating as, in Sneja Gunew's words, a "coded way to indicate racialized differences" (16), differences drawn into simplistic binaries of inside and outside.

As R. Radhakrishnan states, whatever their relationship to the "hometown," the second generation is "*marked* as different by virtue of their skin color, their family background, and other ethnic and unassimilated traits" (206, emphasis original). This idea of being "marked" by race and culture is evident throughout *Soucouyant*. As the protagonist reflects,

at a crucial and early point in my life, something seeped into me. (Is that how to explain it?) Some mood or manner was transmitted, though my parents tried their utmost to prevent this from happening. Afterward, things became a bit more complicated. I couldn't always control the signals that my body gave off. I couldn't always produce the feelings that were expected of me, or else translate my thoughts into meaningful statements. At the very least, I picked up my parents' accent. (101)

This intangible quality transmitted from his parents makes him different, Other. As a result of the accent that he inherits he is placed with

the special-needs teacher, and teachers make comments at his expense in class (102). The deep-seated racisms and prejudices of his birthplace and the failures of multiculturalism as a policy of inclusion combine with this “mood or manner” that “seeps” into him, together alienating him from his Scarborough neighbourhood.

Soucouyant demonstrates, then, how the dual influences of racialization and diasporic memory together can contribute to feelings of unbelonging in the second generation. The protagonist reflects on his boyhood friendship with the local librarian Miss Cameron, who undertakes to share with him both her love of local history, and her interest in his Caribbean roots. Miss Cameron orders a book about Trinidad for him, which turns out to be a travel guidebook “for people who planned on visiting this tropical getaway,” this “curious land” (137). In the book’s glossary of local sayings and legends, he finds “soucouyant.” The familiar word in this foreign context is jarring. While Miss Cameron attempts to instill in him that “Your history is a living book Your history is your blood and flesh. Your history is your grammar for life,” the protagonist’s response is cynical: “My history is a travel guidebook. My history is a creature nobody really believes in. My history is a foreign word” (137). The response highlights the way in which he is alienated from both his own history and his Scarborough home through the mediation of white Canada and its orientaling gaze. If history is his “grammar for life,” it is a grammar that is disjointed, traumatic, even degrading—mired by the legacies of slavery and colonialism, and misplaced in this white Scarborough neighbourhood. The soucouyant simultaneously represents the protagonist’s relationship to his mother’s traumatic memories, and the way in which he is marked as different by culture and race in a prejudiced society, where multiculturalism is often privileged as a showcase for the foreign and exotic rather than as a form of genuine belonging.

Meera is similarly marked by the sign of a soucouyant. The birthmark on her neck is one of the first things that the protagonist notices about her, a red “puzzle against the light brown of her skin” (10). Later in the novel, we are told that Meera’s mother had always wondered why her daughter did not have friends in school, asking “It’s your birthmark, isn’t

it, dear? ... People tease you about it" (161). But we learn that Meera's isolation and dark mood had a much deeper source; she "looked at good neighbourhoods, 'traditional' neighbourhoods, places where parents might raise their children in safety, places at a happy distance from the people who don't share our values and ways of life, and she saw sadness and anxiety. She saw violence. She saw war" (161). Meera's birthmark, then, stands in for her real marginalization through race. As a small difference in the surface of the skin it becomes almost a metonym for a much deeper anxiety about racial conflict and xenophobia—anxieties that are similar to Adele's confused panic. Like the protagonist's bruise, it is the mark of the soucouyant, of a connection to a Caribbean history as well as the racialized alienation of the second generation.

Within their stifling "traditional" community, the few black families are lumped together by race. While Meera's mother assures her that "this is Canada. What you look like is completely beside the point" (157), throughout her childhood Meera is nevertheless racially associated with Adele and her troubled family living close by. In reaction to this unwanted association, Meera crank calls Adele, informing the confused woman that her family has been killed in a horrible accident, with "charred flesh and guts that spilled like rope" (165). Meera's call, made at a party with her classmates, is an attempt to reject the racial connection that binds Meera to Adele and her family. Yet Meera unknowingly describes horrors that resemble the childhood fire that scarred Adele and disfigured her mother, and the industrial accident that will kill her husband. Reflecting on the event years later, Meera tells the protagonist

that she doesn't understand that thing called memory. She doesn't understand its essence or dynamic, and why, especially, it never seems to abide by the rules of time or space or individual consciousness. She doesn't understand how a young woman, in the midst of some small crisis, can remember catastrophes that happened lifetimes ago and worlds away, remember and proclaim these catastrophes as if she herself had witnessed them first hand. She doesn't understand that at all, or else how the very same young woman, offering only what she

imagines to be a cruel joke, can in fact end up remembering a catastrophe that is yet to happen. (166)

During her cruel call Meera tells Adele that had they lived “your family would have survived only to be monsters in this place, forever scarred, forever proclaiming a violence that nobody in their right mind would ever want to remember” (165). What Meera does not realize is that Adele herself is already scarred by such violences—her body bears the marks of racism, the displacement and destitution caused by wartime occupation, and the sexual exploitation enabled by racial and colonial hierarchies. While nobody wants to remember these horrors, Adele “forever proclaims” them with her psychological trauma, her physical scars, and the very race that marks her body as Other in Canadian space. Meera’s “remembering” of these events, then, sounds dangerously like a kind of “racial memory,” a concept that problematically privileges the biological and “endow[s] black flesh with special cognitive capacities” (Gilroy 263). Yet while Meera’s connection with the family is one that is forced upon her by racism, it is not race itself that allows her to “remember” these horrifying images, but a received affect, a sensing of fear, abject violence and trauma.

These unbidden “memories” also seem to enter her mind in an almost supernatural way. The morning after the phone call she finds bruises on her ear “that were caused when she had pressed the receiver of that phone so unforgivingly against herself” (166), bruises which once again evoke the presence of a soucouyant. The soucouyant of the past and her heritage has visited her, reminding her of the cultural memories of colonial violence, leaving both traumatic images and more tell-tale marks through the bruises on her ear. Meera of course has given herself the bruises; she is responsible for her own act of cruelty. It is an act that displays the effects of racism, the internalization of a hatred that she has faced every day. This damage, then, is inflicted by both the terrors of history brought by the figure of the soucouyant, and by her second-generation alienation in Canada. The image of the soucouyant thus conveys Meera’s liminal position between her Trinidadian roots, the racial identity that this heritage imparts, and her Canadian birth. While

her experience as the daughter of an “immigrant success story” (155) is different from the protagonist’s upbringing, they are connected by the struggles of racism and this sense of other narratives intruding into their lives. This “thing called memory” that she doesn’t understand is a kind of cultural memory created not by direct experience, but through narrative fragments, troubled histories, and the mutual recognition of marginalization in diaspora.

IV. Reconstructed Narratives

Soucouyant painfully articulates the ways in which the second generation, as Chariandy writes,

possesses intimate and lifelong knowledge of Canada as a complex and sometimes outright painful space to grow up in as a visible minority. The second generation is Canadian—intimately so. And yet, as recent polls suggest, they appear to identify far less with Canada than their parents At the same time, the second generation stands to inherit, consciously or not, the cultural legacies of their parents, legacies that ultimately stem from geographic spaces and contexts that the second generation may never have directly experienced to any real extent. (“Spirits” 810)

For these second-generation “visible minorities” the “cultural legacies of their parents” are inextricably intertwined with their own experiences of growing up in a contested Canadian space characterized by its own cultural myths. But this encounter between “homeland” and “hostland,” between the black diaspora and Canadian space, is not always painful. The protagonist demonstrates other possibilities as he recounts the story of his parents’ meeting:

They met in a city that doesn’t exist anymore. A city that perhaps never really existed, though you’ll sometimes hear people talking about it. A city where people cared for each other and children were allowed to play outside unattended. A city before the new dark-skinned troubles and the new dark-skinned excitements. A city where rice and pasta were still considered ‘ethnic

foods,' and one of the few places where a newcomer might have a chance of getting her hands on breadfruit or fresh coconut or the sunny heft of a mango was at the Kensington Market. (69)

There is a two-headed nostalgia here; the ironically recounted white nostalgia for a safe Toronto before the “dark-skinned troubles,” and an immigrant nostalgia for the lively community of the Kensington Market, a place where Adele feels “alive” with the richness of different voices and smells (69). The ironic tone of the passage darkly references the racial conflict arising out of increased immigration, but the racist nostalgia for a sedate, whitewashed Canada is undercut by a more critical, nuanced nostalgia, the protagonist’s nostalgia for the romantic moment of his parents’ meeting in the lively and sensual space of the market. His parents’ relationship, we learn, would likely not have even been possible in Trinidad, due to the animosity between their two ethnic groups, a fact that roots the protagonist’s very being in Canadian space.¹ Cultural memory, then, also has the power to re-appropriate the past and write an alternative history for mid-twentieth-century Canada, and to make a space for the protagonist’s hybrid origins. This moment demonstrates how the second generation participates in an active construction of the past that does not preserve racial difference but witnesses and memorializes its wounds, and provides rich alternative memories to whitewashed versions of Canada.

The son also retells the story of his mother as a young single woman, “borrowing” her boss’s car and getting lost in rural Ontario with her friend Mrs. Christopher. Their carefree adventure ends when they accidentally end up at the customs checkpoint for the American border, as two black women without driver’s licenses or any identification, in Canada on temporary work permits in a car that does not belong to them. “And that’s where the story always ends,” we are told and that “Mother never explained to me how they got out of that mess” (91). The lost ending is a jarring moment that returns us firmly to the present, and to the narrative gaps that characterize cultural memory. Yet ending the story at this exciting moment also preserves the mood of carefree adventure. The customs officer is denied the final word,

and Adele is neither “helpless or afraid” but impresses her son with her bravery and daring (92). This idealistic memory serves a critical personal and political function; Adele’s nostalgic, exciting story is reconstructed and imagined by her son as a counter to her trauma and mental deterioration, and in contrast to colourless histories of 1960s Canada.

V. Forgetting to Forget

As Ernest Renan famously states in his 1882 essay “What is a Nation?,” “forgetting ... is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation” (11). This national forgetting is what makes critics like Kamboureli, Walcott, and others so wary of official multiculturalism, which often “dehistoricizes the social and political conditions that have discriminated against many Canadians, the same conditions that, through colonial history, contributed to the formation of the Canadian state” (Kamboureli 101). Chariandy’s novel counters this process by documenting both diasporic histories and Canada’s racist past. Chariandy contends that the painful “legacies of displacement and racialization” mean that for the second generation “we have moved into a moment in which belonging has been revealed as a fiction” (“Fiction” 828). Despite this bleak assessment of the racism of Canadian society, *Soucouyant* also shows that belonging is still powerfully possible through the connections of family and diaspora. While the cover proclaims this as a “novel of forgetting,” it is a novel not of convenient national forgettings, or immigrant assimilation. Rather it is a novel of “forgetting to forget,” of the process of constructing identity through cultural memory.

As Gunew provocatively suggests, “it may be time to consider the role of the writer as inventor of community where community is conceived not in the sense of the nostalgic return to the past and a lost place but as the impulse forward, the potential carried by the seeding of diaspora in hybridity.” She adds that “the attempt here is to analyse the components and strategies of a kind of belonging that has not yet been established which ... is assembled precariously out of the shards of individual lives and their ‘imagined relations’ to genealogies (private histories) and public events, that is, global or national histories” (109). This new

“kind of belonging” based on the “shards” of memories inherited from both birthplace and ancestral homeland offers a way of thinking about second-generation identity in Canada beyond the fraught discourse of multiculturalism. Cultural memory has a key role to play in the articulation of new narratives of second-generation identity, narratives that in themselves become a kind of belonging.

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Note

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