

## **Stranded in a Border Zone: Traumatic Liminality in Black British Short Stories**

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### **Introduction**

As is widely known, “liminality” is a term derived from the Latin word *limen*, “threshold”; it designates an interspace to be crossed, a border between two locations to be traversed. In this chapter, I will be dealing with varying degrees of failure to go across the threshold or borderline between spaces, moments or situations in three short stories by contemporary black British writers: Koye Oyedeji’s “Home: The Place Where You Belong (Memoirs of a Modern-Day Slave)” (2000), Pete Kalu’s “Getting Home: A Black Urban Myth (The Proofreader’s Sigh)” (2015) and Valda Jackson’s “An Age of Reason (Coming Here)” (2015). The difficulties to cross, or, even more importantly, to cross back and forth, to negotiate an interspace are experienced by the stories’ central characters as traumatising obstacles on the way to find a desirable safe anchorage for the self, to reach a point of existential balance, a sense of belonging or feeling at “home”. The predicament of the migrant subject has itself been described as “interstitial” (Bhabha 1994, 4), intersectional (Brah 1996, 205), “in-translation” (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk 2005, 89) or “wavering between two worlds” (Wilson 2015). From a psychosocial perspective, Laura Simich, Sarah Maiter and Joanna Ochocka argue that immigrants are forced to come to terms with a mentally stressful situation of “social liminality” through what they call “cultural negotiation”—the achievement of a balancing resolution or synthesis of the tensions between conflicting sets of ideals, values and practices that requires their active engagement and allows them to “move forward” (2009, 262). In some cases, however, this negotiation fails, individuals feel “stuck” and “liminality becomes an enduring state of mind”, increasing mental distress (259; 261).

Art and writing have been singled out as productive ways for migrants to respond to situations of mental distress and identity dislocation. Thus, for Gloria Alzandúa, “[l]iving in

a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland is what makes poets write and artists create” (1987, 73). Homi K. Bhabha’s work revolves around the idea that it is through cultural production that liminal postcolonial subjects can expose and deconstruct notions of racial, ethnic and national originality and purity, and thus offer new hybrid and fluid configurations of identity capable of cutting the knot of immobilising polarities (1994, 4; 20; 172). Artistic production as agency is present in all three stories under inspection below, but its status as a medium for cultural negotiation is ambiguous at best. My analysis of the stories follows an order that goes from tragic irresolution of the protagonist’s predicament to a hint at some balancing outcome through creative expression. Thus, we move gradually from fatal identitary dissociation (Oyedeji’s “Home”) through a serio-comic contrast between racist prejudice and daydreams of literary fame (Kalu’s “Getting Home”) to the artistic expression of buried existential pain deriving from an unsolved generational dislocation (Jackson’s “An Age of Reason”). On account of its episodic scope related to brevity as its main defining feature, the short story emerges as a privileged vehicle for the representation of transitional moments of crisis such as those depicted in these stories. One of the explanations for Adrian Hunter’s appreciation that “the short story is, and always has been, disproportionately represented in the literatures of colonial and postcolonial cultures” (2007, 138) may well be that, as a liminal genre, it lends itself to the rendition of the liminality characteristic of migrant subjectivity. In the ensuing pages, I will begin with an elaboration on the genre’s liminality followed by a critique of the optimist view concerning the adversarial and transformative power available to the migrant before I move on to a discussion of the three stories.

### **Generic Liminality**

One of the most relevant developments in short-story theory and criticism to have emerged in recent times is that connecting liminality and the short narrative form. As Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann state in their introduction to *Liminality and the Short Story*, “[t]o a higher

degree than the novel, the short story can be considered the liminal genre *par excellence*" (2015, 4). It is important to point out that the genre's defining liminality is already manifested at the formal level, the short story being a type of hybrid, interdiscursive practice. As Achilles and Bergmann argue, the short narrative form occupies a "middle ground" as a literary mode that "develops out of, and mediates between", many genres (4). Even from this formal point of view, it must be asserted that the short story is a "liminal" rather than a "marginal" genre. Following the founding theorists of liminality,<sup>1</sup> Manuel Aguirre, Roberta Quance and Philip Sutton insist on the crucial difference between "liminality" and "marginality". While marginality presupposes a dominant centre of which the marginal constitutes the surrounding border on account of its exclusion, liminality "necessarily suggests the existence of a second territory on the other side" (2000, 5): it has to do with what goes on in the space between two areas. The difference that Aguirre, Quance and Sutton establish between marginal and liminal texts can be applied to the short story. In their view, "marginal" are such texts or representations that border on "discourse" yet are "excluded from it", whereas "liminal" are those "texts or representations generated between two or more discourses, [in] a transition area between two or more universes which thereby shares in two or more poetics" (2000, 9). The three pieces of fiction chosen for discussion bear the marks of formal, generic liminality or hybridity. Categorised as "stories", two of them already announce their formal liminality in their title (Oyedeki's piece is labelled "Memoirs", while Kalu's is branded "Myth"), whereas Jackson's "An Age of Reason (Coming Here)" articulates its narrative in dramatic form, constituted, as it is, by a series of monologues spoken by characters who are, as in a playscript, initially identified by their names.

Yet, when we talk about the short story's liminality or its formal hybridity, a very basic question must also be asked: what do we mean by "short story"? For the generic label "short story" has a history which should not be ignored as it carries along with it a set of formal, thematic and characterological presuppositions which are relevant for any approach to

particular stories. Jacob Ross—the editor of *Closure*, the anthology of contemporary black British short stories in which the pieces by Jackson and Kalu appeared—highlights the transcultural and transhistorical dimension of the short story (2015, 9) and underlines the general fact that “humans have always understood and valued its role as a way of making sense of the world, and their place in it” (10). Ross is nevertheless aware that the short-story mode has adopted different forms throughout history and that different authors from different socio-cultural backgrounds have contributed to its transformation. Thus, he establishes the outer limits of the short story’s development “from the oral ‘folktale’, myths of origin, parables designed to caution, instruct or merely stimulate insight, through to the contemporary written narratives of encounter, trauma, self-exploration and discovery that we find in an anthology such as this” (9). Furthermore, Ross celebrates the ways in which the black British writers that contribute to *Closure* were “capable of bringing a distinctive and striking fluency to the form” (10).

The modern short story’s elasticity and particular use of shortness account in the last instance for its liminality. Jochen Achilles neatly condenses this argument when he states that “the liminality of the short story as a genre that adopts features of and mediates between fable, sketch, essay, novelette and novel” is grounded on its “brevity and episodic structure, which privilege the depiction of processes of transition, threshold situations, and fleeting moments of crisis and decision” (2015, 41). The stories I will discuss present liminal situations and exhibit the defining features of the modern short form. They are, as Ross puts it, “[l]iterary fiction” (2015, 11), appropriated and remodelled by contemporary postcolonial literary producers.

### **The Dark Side of Postcolonial Unbelonging**

While stating that postcolonial reality is not more aptly rendered in short stories than it is in novels, Adrian Hunter nevertheless refers to critical claims that short fiction “is particularly

suitable to the representation of liminal or problematized identities” (2007, 138). Postcolonial subjects can, indeed, be defined as “threshold people”, borrowing Victor Turner’s phrase (1969, 95). In terms of identity, postcolonial, migrant or diasporic subjects inhabit a space between heterogeneous and often conflicting cultures, traditions, ethnicities, nations and, in many cases, races which interpellate them in ways they are forced to negotiate. In the contemporary world of transnationality and migrant mobility, postcolonial, diasporic subjects may be better equipped to actively redefine individual or collective identity as they are not embedded in a singular national or ethnic culture whose artificiality they are conscious of and may, even, expose (Bhabha 1994: 172). Bhabha conceives the threshold that the postcolonial subject inhabits, above all, as a space of liberation and possibility (4), yet has been criticised for his overconfident stand concerning the adversarial and transformative power of the migrant’s liminal position of enunciation. Janet Wilson cautions that the threshold for postcolonial subjects may not be just the place of opportunity and openness, as Bhabha holds, but one of traumatic identity loss, existential disorientation and thwarted agency (2015). For critics like Aijaz Ahmad (1995) or Raihan Sharif (2016), Bhabha’s celebration of hybridity as empowering agency for constant subjective refashioning free of alienating binarisms and polarities depoliticises the real, historical situation of postcolonial minorities as such refashioning is available only to the privileged few, to those with enough cultural skills, material resources and social impact. Some may succeed in what Simich, Maiter and Ochocka (2009) refer to in the context of mental health as the process of “cultural negotiation”, but many others do only partially or not at all.

As postcolonial criticism has also repeatedly pointed out (Cuder-Domínguez 2005; Wilson 2015), liminal negotiations frequently develop in fiction as characters’ processes of homecoming and acquisition of a sense of belonging, of finding out who they are and where they fit in. The desirable outcome of these processes would then be the satisfaction—however fluid or dynamic—of what Avtar Brah calls “homing desire”, which is to be distinguished

“from a desire for a ‘homeland’” (1996, 16)—the latter still strongly attached to memories of the country of origin in first-generation migrants in contrast with succeeding generations born and/or bred in a *host* country such as Britain (190). In this context, the attainment of a sense of “home” entails the favourable resolution of existential tensions through the subject’s active engagement in the construction of a space of belonging, a state of mental wellbeing and the achievement of social integration. In sum, the goal is “to feel at home” in every sense the phrase may have.

In the stories I discuss the characters’ sense of dislocation and unbelonging is particularly acute so that their conflicts remain unsolved. In different ways and to different degrees, they get stranded in a painful state of permanent liminality, which thwarts their agency and compromises their ability to move freely across or back and forth the border zone that separates different sociocultural structures. The short story’s privileged capacity to depict moments of crisis adds intensity to the representation of these characters’ predicament. Although the power of artistic production to counteract discontents, negotiate tensions and mitigate the pain may be said to grow as we move on from story to story in the order discussed, the satisfaction of a homing desire is achieved only ambiguously in the last one.

### **Koye Oyedeji’s “Home”**

In Koye Oyedeji’s “Home: The Place Where You Belong (Memoirs of a Modern-Day Slave)”—as in Pete Kalu’s story discussed in the next part—not so much cultural or ethnic difference but racism *tout court* is a major determining factor in frustrating the characters’ homecoming. Raihan Sharif criticises Bhabha’s depoliticised celebration of postcolonial hybridity for, among other things, its blindness towards the systemic racism affecting migrants’ daily experience (2016, 162). In her phenomenological approach, Linda Martín Alcoff warns that race as a category continues to determine people’s lives in contemporary Western societies in spite of all the sceptical declarations and institutional denials that this is

the case (2006, 181). Visible bodily features (nose, hair, skin colour, etc.) along “other markers such as dress, customs, and practices” produce racialised identities that condition social recognition and interaction (191). “A body that is racialized,” Alcoff states, “is overdetermined through racial classifications and their associated attributions” (197). What Nikesh Shukla, editor of the collection *The Good Immigrant*, has recently denounced as “the systemic racism that runs through this country [the UK] to this day” (2016) determines the experience of the central characters of Oyedeji’s and Kalu’s stories.

Oyedeji’s “Home” was collected in an anthology of new black writing in Britain entitled *IC3*—“the police identity code for Black”, as one of the editors informs us (Newland 2000, x). The repressive connotations of this racial category apply in a very substantial manner to the central character’s predicament. Speaking in the first person typical of autobiographical writing or “memoirs”, the female protagonist proclaims: “I’m not mad, I’m just alone without a real home” (Oyedeji 2000, 361). The character’s experience is liminal, but not in the sense of an active engagement with enabling differences, but of confinement to a state of traumatic immobilisation that concludes with her death, itself the final transitional passage to which liminality is frequently linked (Turner 1969, 95; 107). She is led into a state of utter existential suffering and mental imbalance that ends in suicide, and persisting racism plays a determining role in this tragic outcome.

The protagonist, Nicky, is a character at the end of her tether. The foster-daughter of white parents in Sheffield, Nicky later moved to cosmopolitan London and, as she tells her counsellor, she “felt worse” (Oyedeji 2000, 359). In London, her efforts to acquire a sense of belonging—a “home” in existential terms—are hindered by the impossibility of reconciling two conflicting poles into a consistent cultural framework and derive from this framework a sense of identity. Generalising her plight, she tells her counsellor that black British people “have no culture” as they either assimilate that of the West, or “Westernize” that of their home country. (359). There is for her no way out of this deadlock: she could neither feel at

home in Africa (a place she has never been to), nor in Britain, where, as the story elaborates, her daily experience is one of alienation on account of her race, the colour of her skin and other racial features. Society has no place for her and communicates its rejection either in subtler terms or in a more openly violent manner, as with the bouncers at bars and nightclubs who dehumanise black people by treating them like animals, pushing them “into line like they’re cattle [...] British beef” (355). This lack of recognition as full British subjects with rights equal to those of other sectors of the population is criticised from a calmed distance as the continuity of slavery (“nothing much has changed”, 356), but also experienced internally as guilt and its companion feeling shame, two major components of Nicky’s state of mental distress which derive from her interiorisation of racialised identity.<sup>2</sup> Social discrimination based on physical appearance thus engenders disabling self-hatred; Nicky hates the way she looks. Critics like Linda Martín Alcoff (2006, 189) and Susan Stanford Friedman (2004, 191) have underscored the importance of the gaze in contexts of racialised subjectivities. Gazes and the prejudices inscribed in them (whether verbalised or not) impose on physical bodies the attributes of racial identities. For these dynamics of domination and discrimination to succeed, a process of what psychoanalysis calls “symbolic identification” must take place (Žižek 1989, 105–107). In ideological subjection, it is not enough for subjects to identify with a certain image and the set of attributes it entails: the gaze on behalf of which that identification takes place must also be considered (106). One identifies not only with a self-image but also with the gaze that imposes it.<sup>3</sup>

Oyedeji’s story depicts a character’s tragic failure to undo the alienating dynamics of racist symbolic identification. As a little girl she had tried to scrub the black colour off her skin. As a woman now she finds that the only features left in stock for her to identify with are either “slave”,<sup>4</sup> or animal, more specifically, a black bird. In the transitional moment of her death by gas, she has a sweet dream (a recurrent one, a compensation for daylife suffering, we are made to understand) in which a raven flies in search of dry land over “the earth covered in

water” (Oyedeji 2000, 361). In an oneiric scene unequivocally reminiscent of the biblical flood, the raven sees on a mountain top a (proverbially white) swan and both live in harmony for a while, the raven nursing the disabled swan and the swan sharing his food with the hungry raven. A dove appears, plucks a leaf from the olive tree and flies off. In the biblical narrative of the Deluge, we read how after rainfall ceased, Noah decided it was the moment to find out if there was dry land anywhere on earth so that he released a raven (Genesis 8:7 [KJV]). Immediately afterwards, Noah freed a dove, who, after an unsuccessful first attempt, came back to the Ark with “an olive leaf plucked off” (8:11). The raven never returned, presumably because, as a scavenger bird, it could feed on the abundant carrion floating on the water. Oyedeji rewrites the biblical narrative by divesting the black bird of its negative connotations. In the story, the raven flies over dead animals floating on the water’s surface without preying on them and takes care instead of the crippled swan. And when the time comes, the raven decides to follow “the dove towards the rainbow” (Oyedeji 2000, 361). In the Bible, the rainbow is the token of God’s covenant with Noah and his people: they will populate the earth and live in harmony with the rest of the creatures. In Oyedeji’s story, the raven flies away with the dove towards the rainbow, a threshold to a new world, in an amiable context of fine weather and the promise of upcoming historical change. Fixed identities and their discontents are suspended and a fluid harmony reigns: “I have often asked myself if I was the raven or the swan, now I know that it no longer matters”. The story ends with hints at the woman’s death by suicide and a call to the reader to enter the conflict-free realm portrayed in her dream: “Follow me toward the rainbow” (361).

The presence of art as a way to cope with hostile reality is very limited in Oyedeji’s story. Nicky gives expression to her suffering partly through doodles which she draws on her counsellor’s Post-It pad during their meetings. The story achieves some degree of intermedial expansion through the reproduction of two of these drawings in black ink on the page: the image of the raven she identifies with and her own self-portrait hanging from a rope, an

announcement of her decision to take her life. These proto-artistic pieces of visual art are forcefully conspicuous to the same degree that they are completely useless in the protagonist's attempt to satisfy her desire for home and a sense belonging. They are images of defeat, and, as such, they reinforce visually the critique of contemporary racism articulated verbally in this short piece of testimonial fiction in which death figures as the only way out.

### **Pete Kalu's "Getting Home"**

Pete Kalu's "Getting Home: A Black Urban Myth (The Proofreader's Sigh)" was collected in *Closure: Contemporary Black British Short Stories* (2015). The editor, Jacob Ross, places *Closure* in line with Newland and Sesay's *IC3*, yet perceives in the stories and their authors a smaller degree of racial and ethnic consciousness than in the seemingly more politically vindicatory *IC3*: "There is less of an attempt by writers—overtly or through their characters—to self-define" (Ross 2015, 11). Certainly, there are stories in *Closure* in which racial and ethnic issues are seemingly secondary or peripheral, including Koje Oyedeji's "Six Saturdays and Some Versions of the Truth".<sup>5</sup> Black Britishness is, indeed, just an implicit or absent theme in many of the pieces in *Closure*, where it may figure, as Ross argues, as simply "a lived reality that is like air or breath or blood". And he elaborates: "'Black Britishness' is [...] hardly at the forefront of one's consciousness except in moments of confrontation or self-assertion, and even then, it is not always recognised as such" (11; my emphasis). However, both Kalu's "Getting Home" and Valda Jackson's "An Age of Reason (Coming Here)", also included in *Closure*, depict characters in critical moments of confrontation with identity conflicts in which the racial and ethnic component is far from irrelevant.

Kalu's "Getting Home" is, at the literal level, the story of a person getting back to the place where he lives, while at the more metaphorical and existential level it deals, like Oyedeji's "Home", with the obstacles to feeling at home the narrator-protagonist encounters when he is assailed by white people's display of racial prejudice. As phrased in the story:

“The navigation of public space by a lone black male in the night is problematic” (Kalu 2015, 85–86). The story can be read, on the one hand, as a realistic piece made up of plausible detail linked to real places, yet on the other, as a generalised “myth” in which the character’s experience stands for the contemporary predicament of black city dwellers as a whole. Kalu found that the stories that black people told one another about their vicissitudes walking down the streets of cities were seldom written down so that, as he told me in a personal communication, his intention in writing “Getting Home” was to create “a myth based on those stories and my own biography/experiences” (Kalu 2018). The individual idiosyncrasies of the central character are rhetorically overdetermined by what his experience is made to represent: a whole set of negative attributes attached to racialised identity on account of visible physical features in the public space.

The unnamed protagonist of “Getting Home” (a story narrated in past tense and historical present aptly combined) is a black British poet getting back to his home in Oldham, Manchester, from London, where he went to meet a publisher. His life project is to become a celebrated author and he daydreams of it while carrying in his bag a set of “poet publisher’s proofs” (Kalu 2015, 85). However, his project of social recognition clashes with an experience of hostility and prejudice he undergoes in the public space on account of his race. It is Friday night as he reaches the bus station, being the only sober person around. He is first approached by a “tattooed knucklehead”, probably “ex-military”, who asks in an imperative tone when the next bus will be coming, a piece of information that is also demanded of him by other people around (84). His skin colour makes him a bus conductor in the eyes of the drunk white people who are unable or unwilling to read the timetables. He muses that this misinterpretation of his identity derives from a preconception that has its roots in the early history of post-war immigration as “[t]he Windrushers arrived in Britain and became bus conductors” (84). To avoid getting involved in a fight, he decides not to wait for the bus and walk the ten miles that separate Manchester from his home. It is 2 a.m. when he sees a woman

walking ahead of him along the road. As he approaches her, he perceives that she is “alabaster white” (86) and notices how the woman starts to get nervous and eventually turns around in the opposite direction convinced that he must be a rapist. Later, a white man who lies on the pavement and cries for help rejects the narrator’s helping hand, his face turning into “a mask of horror” (87–88). The *crescendo* of racial prejudice has turned the protagonist into a horrifying black monster. Cabs pass by him and do not stop, and, as he is trying to withdraw some cash from an ATM he is stopped and interrogated by the police in the belief that he is a thief. Though there is a terrible car accident yards ahead, the policemen continue “frisking” him and eventually keep his “little bag of herbs”, believing, of course, that he may be a drug dealer (88). The story closes before he arrives at his place with other cabs passing by without stopping even though they are driven by ethnic-minority people: a Pakistani, “a huge Rasta” and a “bald-headed, olive-skinned guy” (89). As the last cab drives past, the narrator sees inside the woman who had escaped from him and the man who had rejected his help waving, respectively, his ATM card and the bag of herbs probably thrown away by the policemen. Bus conductor, rapist, monster, thief, drug-dealer: the protagonist is invested with the whole set of negative identitary features pertaining to black Britishness along the different stations of his nightly pilgrimage.

As in Oyedeki’s piece, though without its tragic outcome, there is no getting home in Kalu’s “Getting Home”. The author himself describes the connection between the story’s formal open-endedness and the postcolonial subject’s predicament in the following way: “Diaspora people are never home. The completion of the story is impossible in the same way that getting home is impossible” (Kalu 2018). The migrant is left in a state of liminal irresolution, his homing desire unsatisfied, stranded in a border zone between what Niklesh Shukla, following Musa Okwonga, generalises as the racial categories of the *bad immigrant* versus the *good immigrant* established by dominant white ideology in present-day Britain:

the biggest burden facing people of colour in this country is that society deems us *bad immigrants*—job-stealers, benefit-scroungers, girlfriend-thieves, refugees—until we cross over in their consciousness, through popular culture, winning races, baking good cakes, being conscientious doctors, to become *good immigrants*. (2016)

With regard to his future prospects in life, the black character in Kalu's story may be said to oscillate between the two categories: a *bad immigrant* at present, he may become a *good immigrant* once his poetry is published and praised, as he desires. However, the promise of public recognition and social acceptance through cultural production does not really entail the disappearance of markers of otherness. Access to universality is denied the racialised subject because, to quote Shukla again, "universal experience is [still] white". Under the present circumstances, the poet in the story may become a good immigrant but not *yet* a fully universal human subject. Even after acquiring the status of good immigrant, a walk on the racist underside of the diasporic subject's existence as the one portrayed in Kalu's story would make evident that, as the protagonist of Oyedemi's story laments, "nothing much has changed" (Oyedemi 2000, 356).

The story's structural degree of metafictional irony makes its message ambiguous and undercuts any unitary interpretation of the text, political or otherwise.<sup>6</sup> "Getting Home" includes, literally speaking, a sub-text: namely, a series of footnotes containing the comments of a proofreader and his or her revisions in derisive, fastidious, demagogic, ridiculous and insulting language. Such comment along with the mythic dimension add to the story's generic hybridity, yet both elements stand in an unsolvable tension. For, all in all, "Getting Home" is formally a draft of a narrative under revision, so that it actually tells two stories at once: one told by the Mancunian poet in a mythic key and the other which registers the process of the proofreader's critical reactions to what he/she reads. They are respectively predicated on two incompatible discourses, the second one limiting the creative freedom of the first on account

of its expectations. In Kalu's own words: "The storyteller is the mythmaker. The proofreader is the logician—a puncturer of myths and mere rhetoric. The proofreader venerates accuracy" (Kalu 2018). Thus, for instance, when the narrator says that "McDonalds had placed a security guard on their floor", the proofreader comments in a footnote: "Sic. Fact check: there is no McDonald's between Manchester Piccadilly and Oldham Street" (Kalu 2015, 82). The proofreader demands not only factual veracity from the storyteller, but also logical consistency, grammatical correctness, and, even, mathematical accuracy, noting that "Maths is not this writer's strong point I suspect" (84n14). Which of these two discourses is to be given pre-eminence, which one occupies the upper level of the hermeneutic hierarchy are unanswerable questions. As Kalu points out: "this is a postmodern text that admits no completion/perfection—no episteme—no closure! There is no definitive meaning or 'take' or 'side' (storyteller's side or proofreader's side etc.) It is open to interpretation" (Kalu 2018). As there are sides to choose, the reader is free to pick one. In this chapter I opt for the mythmaker's perspective, that of the literary artist who must be free to reshape his material in order to produce a work of fiction that provides a mythic condensation of black people's experiences in the urban space, instead of the objective, accurate, factual stand of the proofreader-logician, whose criticism of the text, though not in racist terms, seems to reduplicate the hostility surrounding the protagonist as he walks home at night.

### **Valda Jackson's "An Age of Reason"**

Valda Jackson, the author of "An Age of Reason (Coming Here)", is above all a visual artist, a painter and a sculptor, now living in Bristol. She was born in Jamaica and came to England at the age of five with her two sisters to join their parents, who then lived in the Birmingham area (Jackson 2015b; "Valda Jackson"). She experienced first-hand the racist attitudes of some teachers and pupils at school in the 1960s and 1970s, and her art aims at dismantling the stereotypical representations of black people as subaltern that were still dominant in the days

when she started her career. All these biographical details are relevant for a reading of “An Age of Reason”, a remarkable story which in the space of barely a dozen pages condenses the history of an immigrant family of the Caribbean diaspora. Instead of using summary, the plotline is constructed *dramatically*, as a series of five monologues in which both the parents and three of the sisters address Julia, a painter whom we may safely consider the author’s fictional counterpart and whose only statement comes in the form of a picture of a family scene at home in England to which the last two sisters, Elaine and Rosie, react in a revealing way. The first three sections—“The Father”, “Sarah, First Born” (the elder sister) and “The Mother”—give testimony to the reasons and circumstances of their coming to Britain: of how the father could not stand living in Jamaica after the death of their baby son Michael, of her parents’ desire to save money to buy a piece of land in Jamaica, of the influential figure of her grandmother in these proceedings, of the strong personality of the female characters, of their difficulties in finding a place to live due to racist prejudices of the “English people” (Jackson 2015a, 115), of the trip across the Atlantic on a plane with her elder siblings Sarah and Elaine, and of the birth of another sister (Rosie) and a brother (George) on English soil—everything leading up to the scene Julia paints many years later of her family during the early years of their life in Birmingham. This is neither a picture of immigrants leading a life marked by discrimination, grief and nostalgia for their former home country, nor a depiction of unmarred familial harmony. The image of apparent familial bliss is spoilt through the inscription of traces of discontent. We know from Elaine’s description that Julia’s painting depicts a seemingly happy scene of home life in which the father is shown “singing and swinging the little ones on his legs”. In her monologue, Elaine praises Julia’s talent for capturing “the likeness of everyone” yet insists on asking her sister how she could and why she should want to remember something which she, Elaine, “need[ed] to forget” (117). It is at this point in the story where we touch upon the central topic: an unexpected experience of discrimination and disorientation at the heart of their home life as immigrants. This experience affects Julia most

intensely, and it is, as we infer from Elaine's words, the reason why Julia can remember and wants to remember, or rather, cannot forget what seems to have coloured her entire existence. Julia includes herself in the picture, but not as someone taking part in the happy scene but as a silent and anxious spectator who longs to join in the fun. While for British-born Rosie, who speaks the last monologue of the story, the picture brings happy memories of her childhood, for Elaine it does not. It is also to Elaine that we owe the insight into Julia's troubled positioning at an identity crossroads:

You really *did* want to be one them, didn't you?

But you weren't born here were you?

You were one of us.

One of the bigger ones. (118)

Inscribed in the scene depicted in the painting is a whole set of factors like age, birthplace and sibling relationships that excluded the older children still born in Jamaica. While Elaine is aware of this and accepts it with resignation, Julia has not and could never come to terms with the fact that she is neither a second-generation immigrant, nor a first-generation one because, unlike her older sisters, she came to England at too young an age, before her "age of reason" and discernment. She was forced by the circumstances to occupy a liminal position between two identity poles, which was very hard, not to say impossible, for her to negotiate. The silent protagonist carried with her an experience of generational dislocation which was traumatic to the point that it was incomprehensible. Through Elaine's monologue, the verbal/textual supplements the visual by providing an explanation that the reader and, above all, Julia herself as the primary addressee of her sister's words need to make sense of the picture, to bring to light its otherwise hidden content.

In the fictional rendition of the history of an immigrant family, the buried and silent experience of a child's (and, perhaps, a woman artist's) conflict of identities is *shown* through the work of visual art described in the story and *told* through the explanatory monologue of the painter's sister. The opposition between *us* and *them*, often used to express past and present interracial antagonisms at work in not-so-harmonious multicultural societies, acquires a new unexpected meaning in Jackson's story. The main character gives expression through art to the dissociation installed at a very early age in her life, yet whether or not art works as a resolution for her conflict remains untold as we do not hear her break her silence.

### **Conclusion**

While Oyedji's and Kalu's stories feature the useless search of their characters for home in a context of racist discrimination, Jackson's piece shows how for migrant subjects "[h]ome too can be a place of loss, of being lost" (Friedman 2004, 203). These three writers make use of the modern short story's generic hybridity and formal capacities to depict the liminal situations of characters who, as postcolonial subjects, inhabit a psychosocial threshold. In the three cases under inspection, the characters' negotiation of heterogenous and conflicting interpellations at work in the borderline is far from being successful so that the satisfaction of their homing desire is at best left in suspension. The stories have been arranged in the preceding discussion according to a diminishing degree of failure in negotiating conflicts that goes hand in hand with an increment in the power of art to cope with identity dislocations. If Nicky's doodles enhance her tragic predicament in Oyedjeji's "Home", we know nothing about the unnamed protagonist's poetry in Kalu's "Getting Home" apart from the fact that he attaches to it his hopes of future fame, while Julia's picture gives expression to a conflict whose solution is nevertheless withheld. To different degrees, the three stories sharply expose the trammels faced by diasporic subjects to undermine alienating polarities through enabling reconfigurations of the sociocultural structures in whose midst they live, or try to live.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The work of anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1969; 1974) must be mentioned in this connection.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud repeatedly argued that “guilt” derives from the lack of recognition or love from the Other, from the social order in which the subject is inscribed (see, for instance, Freud 1961, 78–83).

<sup>3</sup> One of Žižek’s examples is a woman’s identification with the image of the hysteric: her hysterical outbursts are performed for the patriarchal gaze as a confirmation of the latter’s conception of femininity as fragile (1989, 106). She tries to appear likeable to the paternal gaze.

<sup>4</sup> Hence the parenthetical part of the subtitle, “Memoirs of a Modern Slave”. Oyedeji’s story could thus be thus considered *in nuce* as the narrative of a neo-slave, rather than a neo-slave narrative. Neo-slave narratives “revisit the original slave narratives, that is, the first-person texts written or dictated by the former slaves themselves” (Muñoz-Valdivieso 2012, 45). Oyedeji’s story is not a first-person presentation of a fictional slave of the past, but the “memoirs of a modern-day slave”.

<sup>5</sup> Oyedji returned, however, to the theme of racist prejudice and (police) oppression in a piece published online in the same year, 2015, entitled “Postscript from the Black Atlantic”. For a book-length discussion of how black British short stories have frequently adopted a post-ethnic stance stand see Jansen (2018).

<sup>6</sup> On Kalu’s use of metafiction see also his own chapter in the present volume.

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