

SEM10. Gender-ed representations and/in migration

12 September h. 14:00-16:00, PN 15

Convenors

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Abstract

The seminar seeks to explore the narratives and literary representations of migration and diaspora, spanning across both the temporal and geographical boundaries of the Anglosphere. By examining these stories with particular attention to the gendering of migrant identities, the seminar intends to investigate how migration experiences are portrayed and re-imagined. It brings together interdisciplinary fields such as travel writing, gender studies, and diaspora and migration studies to critically analyze how human migration is represented in various literary genres.

Incorporating the concepts of ‘humane’ and ‘human’ interaction, the seminar will consider how literary works about migration reflect the complexities of migrant experiences and identity formation. These literary texts often capture the struggles, resilience, and transformation of individuals as they face the challenges of displacement. With reference to the field of gender studies, the seminar will interrogate how gender shapes and redefines migrant identities.

Prospective speakers are invited to submit proposals that address the diverse modes of migrant identity formation and reformation, considering how these identities are circulated across different genres and cultures. By intersecting gender with diasporic and migration studies, the seminar will explore the various issues that arise from the representation of migrant identities, questioning the power of these portrayals to shape public perception and policy, as well as the ethical responsibility of representing such profoundly human experiences.

The aforementioned issues are represented in writings by a large variety of authors. Examples include diasporic writers from the global South such as Samuel Selvon, George Lamming, Buchi Emecheta and Imbolo Mbue. Their works show how, in relocating in their host societies, migrants are not only challenged to overcome ethno-cultural boundaries but also have to cope with thorny gender questions that complicate their identities and sense of belonging.

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SEM10. Papers

12 September h. 14:00-16:00, PN 15

- *The (Re)formation of gendered migrant identities: The literary case of Julia Alvarez’s How the García Girls Lost Their Accent* (Alessandra Di Pietro, Università degli Studi “G. d’Annunzio” Chieti-Pescara)
- *‘Debriefing the Rose’: the migrant body between identity, gender and memory in Mary di Michele’s poetry* (Concetta Maria Sigona, Universidad de Burgos)
- *Edinburgh’s Italian daughters: Gender, diaspora and identity in third-generation oral narratives* (Giuseppe Vitale, Università degli Studi di Napoli Parthenope)
- *Monisha Rajesh’s “hyphenated” cultural identity in Around India in 80 Trains (2012)* (Giulia Nonno, Università “G. d’Annunzio” Chieti-Pescara)

SEM10. Abstracts

The (Re)formation of gendered migrant identities: The literary case of Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accent*

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How the García Girls Lost Their Accent (1991) is a *Bildungsroman* written by Dominican-American author Julia Alvarez. Born in New York to Dominican parents, Alvarez grew up between the United States and the Dominican Republic. A novelist, poet, and essayist, Alvarez's literary works, which are written in English, often engage in the representation of the consequences of geo-cultural displacement upon migrant subjects: the fragmentation and reformation of cultural identities, linguistic assimilation, hybridity, the transgenerational divide caused by the experience of migration, as well as the resistance to gendered socio-cultural expectations in Latin America and the United States – these are among the recurring themes present in Alvarez's literary works. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accent* recounts the lives of four sisters who were forced to leave the Dominican Republic because of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo's dictatorship (1930-1961). Set between the 1960s and the 1980s, the novel is a semi-autobiographical, chronologically reversed *Bildungsroman*, which begins with the García sisters' adult lives in the United States and only then recounts their childhood in the Dominican Republic. The text is composed by various interconnected short stories narrated through shifting perspectives; the main narrative voice throughout the narration, however, remains that of the character of Yolanda, Alvarez's alter ego. This presentation particularly focuses on the second part of the novel, which narrates the family's collective experience of living in the United States as immigrants. By analysing the linguistic and cultural mechanisms of identity fragmentation and reformation represented by Alvarez, the presentation highlights how gender further complicates the ambivalence inherent in migrant subjects: while all four sisters display difficulties in navigating life in the United States, the character of Yolanda is the one who suffers the most from a loss of cultural identity. This is evident in the various nicknames Yolanda uses throughout her life: such an "onomastic displacement" (Luis, 2000) becomes representative of the multiple personalities Yolanda experiences as a female migrant. The aim of the presentation, therefore, is to investigate the modalities of identity fragmentation and reformation of migrant (female) subjects in the novel, while also looking at the role of a *mestizo* text (Benítez-Rojos, 1997), that is, the ways in which Caribbean diasporic literatures can offer a transnational perspective on migration.

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Monisha Rajesh's "hyphenated" cultural identity in *Around India in 80 Trains* (2012)

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The present paper sets out to explore the complexities of migration and identity formation by examining the writing of the British travel writer Monisha Rajesh, who investigates her multicultural origins and, what Carl Thompson calls, 'hyphenated' (2025, 258) cultural identity by travelling by train in the Republic of India. In 2010, Rajesh set out on a journey that would take her across India on board a selection of trains for four months to rediscover her Indian cultural heritage and a country she was becoming estranged from. This exploratory endeavour was deeply documented in *Around India in 80 Trains*, a travel book Rajesh published in 2012, in which she contemplates her interplay of belonging and estrangement from her family cultural heritage. This study shows how the distinctive nature of Rajesh's work is characterised by an in-depth exploration of Indian culture through a self-reflective lens. Rajesh examines her otherness, dual identity, and being constantly in between British and Indian cultures.

Around India in 80 Trains offers a profound insight into the search for authenticity and a meaningful dialogue between cultures. Rajesh illustrates the complexity and richness of migration experiences, from her non-resident Indian perspective, by studying the cultures, traditions, and communities of the regions from which her family originates.

Travelling around India and dealing with feelings of belonging, estrangement and marginalisation constituted a pivotal moment in the formation of Rajesh's identity. This reinforces her complex relationship with her parents' place of origin, previously threatened by her geographical and cultural distance. The dynamic interaction with the train passengers facilitates Rajesh's acknowledgement of the foreign within herself, of her hidden, complex hyphenated cultural identity. As posited by Julia Kristeva, "the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity [...] and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners" (1991, 1). By immersing herself in a kaleidoscope of stories, Rajesh comes to realise how Indian nationals are concerned by perception and acceptance of Indians abroad. The direct speech gives voice to the passengers' desire to comprehend the extent to which Rajesh perceives herself as a foreigner or an outsider in Britain, and whether she has been the victim of discrimination. These questions facilitate Rajesh's introspection regarding her identity, compelling her to interrogate the concept of otherness in relation to strangeness and foreignness, and to contemplate its manifestation within the sociocultural contexts of the Republic of India and Britain.

This paper aims to demonstrate how travelling compels Rajesh to broaden and re-evaluate the intricacies and richness of migration experiences, thereby facilitating a more profound comprehension of her identity as an Asian British. In *Around India in 80 Trains*, Rajesh defines her sense of belonging both to Britain and India: to the former she belongs as a loyal and long-standing member; in the latter she feels at home and no longer a foreigner. *Around India in 80 Trains* provides an insider-outsider stance, in which Rajesh is not wholly external but to some extent speaks from, and for, the community she describes from a second-generation immigrant perspective.

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"Debriefing the Rose": The migrant body between identity, gender and memory in Mary di Michele's poetry

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In her collection of poems *Debriefing the Rose* (1998), Italian Canadian poet and writer Mary di Michele explores the most intimate intersections between migration, gender and corporeality.

In it, she explores the complex dynamics of identity as, coming from and belonging to a multicultural reality, Di Michele, through her poetry, examines the transformations of identity, lost memories and new forms of belonging that mark and characterise the diasporic condition.

My contribution analyses the representation of the migrant condition from the point of view of corporeality, which is in a continuous process of 'debriefing'. The poems belonging to this collection, as evidenced by various critical studies, reflect a feeling of uprooting and suspension between two worlds. The body in this sense represents vulnerability, memory and desire, echoing memories, traumas and desires that are often in conflict with each other.

The rose is, on the other hand, a recurring symbol in this work and evokes the beauty and fragility of the migrant identity always exposed to a process of search and redefinition.

In the exploration of the body and identity, language plays a crucial role in *Debriefing the Rose*, as it becomes a tool of expression, memory and resilience.

Di Michele uses a hybrid language, mixing English and Italian, formal and colloquial registers, which produces an effect of foreignness and familiarity at the same time. This linguistic mix reflects the complexity of the migratory experience. The body, in turn, appropriates language, expressing through gestures, sensations and symbols the most intimate truths of the individual.

Another key aspect of this study concerns the role of gender in the construction of migrant identity. Di Michele explores the challenges that migrant women are often forced to negotiate between the traditional expectations of their communities of origin and the new freedoms that the host society offers them. The female body thus becomes a battleground, where cultural identity, individual desires and power dynamics clash. The collection deals with topics such as sexuality, motherhood and body image and offers an intimate and often painful perspective on the construction of female identity in the context of diaspora. This collection represents a significant contribution to the literature of migration and diaspora, as it sensitively and intelligently explores the intersections of cultural identity, gender, language and corporeality. The work takes the form of an invitation to 'interrogate' our perceptions of migration and the body, recognising the richness and complexity of the human experience behind each story of uprooting and rebirth. The body, in

this perspective, becomes the privileged place to explore the most intimate truths of the individual and to build bridges between different cultures and identities.

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Edinburgh's Italian daughters: Gender, diaspora and identity in third-generation oral narratives

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Since its establishment in the early 20th century, the Italian Scottish community has generally been successful in integrating into host society over time in social, economic and linguistic spheres. However, this somewhat homogenous picture may not fully reflect the experiences of all within the community, particularly women, whose integration pathways and societal roles might have differed significantly from those of their male counterparts. As highlighted by Sandra Chistolini's longitudinal socio-anthropological study, *Donne italo-scozzesi* (2011), which explored issues of womanhood, maternity, family dynamics, marriage and roots among Italian Scottish women in Edinburgh from the *Ciociaria* region, female integration into Scottish society varied considerably across generations. Despite gaining some level of emancipation over time, first-generation women often remained primarily dedicated to managing their households, marriages and their children's education. In contrast, the third generation, growing up in a more integrated societal landscape, showed a greater inclination to pursue opportunities outside the domestic sphere, with some expressing a desire to leave home for personal and professional development and potentially return to Italy to explore their ancestral heritage. Drawing upon these compelling findings, this paper aims to explore the intricate intersection of gender and diaspora issues as experienced by third-generation Italian Scottish women in Edinburgh from the Comino Valley, located in the same geographical area investigated by Chistolini. Specifically, it focuses on a corpus of four oral narratives gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted in Edinburgh during March and April 2025 with prominent third-generation Italian Scottish women from the Comino Valley: Anna Alonzi, Carina Contini, Mary Contini and Anne Pia. Through a corpus-driven approach, this proposal investigates the discursive and rhetorical construction of self and group identity in the stories shared by these Italian Scottish women. It pays particular attention to key narrative devices such as positioning, self-presentation, categorisation and indexicality. The analysis of these categories ultimately demonstrates that these women have not only integrated successfully into Scottish society but have also achieved significant milestones across a diverse range of fields, most notably in education, the catering business and the contemporary literary scene.

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