

Embodying the City: Tessa McWatt's This Body and Out of My Skin

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Introduction

A recurring theme in Tessa McWatt's work is how her female protagonists grapple with questions of origins, caused by colonialism and its aftermaths, in the multicultural city. In this essay I want to look at two of her novels, *Out of My Skin* (1998), set in Montreal, and *This Body* (2004),¹ set in London, Toronto, and Guyana to show how McWatt draws on embodied practices to construct a postcolonial identity for her female protagonists. The titles of the novels already point to a strong interest in corporeality, and link identity and belonging to the recognition and realization of one's own body. In addition, McWatt connects corporeality to urban space by correlating the making of subjects and the production of urban space. In both novels to be discussed, body and city become the contested sites for negotiations of identity. The novels use different strategies of embodiment which in different ways counteract colonial histories of displacement and self-estrangement and enable the respective protagonists to inhabit both body and city. In the following, I want to investigate how in two of her novels McWatt uses "walking" and "cooking/eating" as two strategies of embodiment in her fiction. Both cultural practices link knowledge to the body and allow an embodiment of place.

The term "embodied practice" stems from the field of mobility studies within human geography and looks at mobility as "a lived relation" (Adey, 2010 xvii) between subjects and places. Mobility studies emphasize, first of all, that mobility is never singular, but always plural, and secondly, that mobility is always bound to specific bodies marked by factors of race, sex, age, or class.² By transgressing spatial boundaries and their underlying parameters,

¹ Hereafter OMS (*Out of My Skin*) and TB (*This Body*).

² On the paradigm of mobility studies and on walking as an embodied practice see also sociologist John Urry 2007 and human geographer Tim Cresswell 2006.

Caroline Rosenthal

McWatt's female protagonist in *Out of My Skin* performs different enactments of sex and gender, race, and ethnicity. In *Out of My Skin* walking, or more specifically flânerie – the act of observing the urban spectacle while walking – is an embodied practice which reciprocally links the making of the corporeal subject with the production of urban space. In *This Body* the production, distribution, preparation, and consumption of food is linked to specific places and their distinct cultural practices. Cooking and eating become a “lived relation” which connects personal and collective identity to distinct places. The protagonist of the novel brings the many different locales of her diasporic existence – Africa, Guyana, North America, Europe – into the multicultural city. Through her cooking, the traditions and rituals of other places become part of the city as much as she can relocate and embody the different strands of her past. Cooking and eating are shown to be very physical practices which link knowledge and reflection to corporeality. Both walking and cooking/eating in McWatt's work, as I will show in the following, root identity in the body and at the same time define it in spatial terms which exceed notions of place.

Flânerie in Tessa McWatt's *Out of My Skin*

Tessa McWatt's novel *Out of My Skin* is set in Montreal in the 1990s at the height of the Oka Crisis when members of the Mohawk nation and Quebec police confront each other at the blockage of one of the city's main arteries, the Mercier Bridge. The novel's protagonist, 30-year old Daphne Baird, grew up in the sheltered middle class home of her white adoptive parents in Toronto and has just moved to Montreal in search of her birth parents. Daphne was born in the West Indies and people in Canada apostrophize her as “black” because of her skin color. This allegedly unequivocal marker of racial identity, however, is deconstructed in the novel alongside national identity. Daphne has African as well as Chinese, Caucasian, and Amerindian blood and as such embodies the complex colonial history of the West Indies. When the novel opens, Daphne is on a threshold not only because she contacts the adoption

agency to find out about her birth parents but also because she begins to hear a voice in her head with a distinctly West Indian accent and fears that she is going mad. At the agency Daphne learns that her aunt Sheila Eyre lives in Montreal and after some initial hesitation she goes and visits her. It is Sheila who tells Daphne that her birth mother gave her up for adoption shortly after they had landed in Montreal and then killed herself. Who her father is, her aunt does not reveal but she gives Daphne the diaries of her grandfather Gerald Eyre. They chronicle his growing madness during his stay at an asylum in Guyana and thus also bear witness to the scars which colonialism and postcolonialism left on the country and its inhabitants. In the spirit of what Franz Fanon called “internalized racism” Gerald dies believing he is a white man.³ By reading his diaries Daphne also learns that Gerald is not only her grandfather but also her father. This revelation of incest causes a deep crisis in Daphne from which she only emerges after a *rite de passage* at the end of the novel.

In trying to come to terms with her ancestry and origins, McWatt’s protagonist endlessly and aimlessly walks through the city at night, gazing into other people’s windows and lives. On her nightly strolls through the city, Daphne looks into the illuminated apartments of strangers and reads them like a book. McWatt’s novel begins in medias res with one of Daphne’s voyeuristic forays: “Up close it was all disappointing” (OMS 1). Daphne looks through the window into the living room of a stranger’s apartment and becomes so immersed that she is taken by surprise when she reaches out to touch things and hits a window. The glass screen stands for what Daphne describes as “a gaping hole in reality,” her feeling of being “out-of-synch” with the world (OMS 2). Daphne feels like an outsider in the city and by observing other people’s lives hopes to find a blueprint for rites of belonging. Being part of a so called visible minority Daphne reverses an ethnic gaze on her prowls through the city. During the day it is Daphne who is exposed to a gaze which others her and which collapses her various origins into one visible racial identity via skin color. At night, in

³ Cp. Franz Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*, 2008 (¹1954).

contrast, it is Daphne who, hidden in the dark, watches, interprets, and appropriates other people. As an outsider who looks into illuminated homes on her nightly strolls, Daphne reclaims both the right to see and define others and the right not to be seen as Other. McWatt's protagonist also reverses a gendered gaze by turning woman from an observed object in the city into an actively looking subject. In *Out of My Skin*, McWatt can be said to transform the traditional figure of the flâneur by turning it into a black flâneuse who traverses urban space and reads other lives in order to gain a sense of her own being.⁴ In a coming-of-age fashion, Daphne's walks turn into cognitive, and at the same time corporeal, performances which help her to understand her place in the world.

To the same extent that Daphne investigates and questions the city, she explores her own body. She constantly scrutinizes her own image in mirrors and photocopies parts of her body in the copy shop *copie copie* where she works – another hint in the novel that Daphne regards herself as a fake or a copy without an original. Daphne feels like an invention, like a fantasy figure put together from the Greek myths and Amerindian trickster tales she reads – all of them tales of suffering, metamorphosis, and survival. Daphne shares this feeling with Surefoot, a First Nations Canadian woman she meets at the adoption agency. Like her, Surefoot was adopted and does not know much about her origins, not even which First Nation she belongs to. Daphne feels connected to her because she sees both of them as creatures “that made sense only in the imagination, that had to be invented like the improbable animals formed by clouds in a childhood game. Animals that floated against all odds. That belonged nowhere else” (OMS 149). With this quote McWatt spells out that “Indian” – whether Native American or West Indian – is an invention of the white colonizers, a misnomer, a misrepresentation, and an idea without an original. Daphne's disorientation in the world springs from the fact that she does not perceive herself as real. Surefoot, as her very name

⁴ On the traditional figure of the flâneur see Baudelaire 1982 (¹1863) and Benjamin 1969 (¹1939) as well as Tester's study on the flâneur (1994). On how present day writers transform the figure of the flâneur into that of a flâneuse see Friedberg 2002 as well as Rosenthal 2009 and 2011.

indicates, in her physical presence becomes Daphne's alter ego. Daphne suffers from anorexia and effaces herself from the city on her nightly strolls by hiding in the dark. Surefoot's obesity, in contrast, affirms her presence in the city which is emblemized when during the blockage it takes four white policemen to carry her off the bridge (OMS 180).

Daphne is unsure of her body and reads her physiognomy – her broad nose or the hues of her skin – as signs and evidences of her past and her “true” identity. In her seesawing gait, she sees “a trace of Africa” (OMS 5), in her face the traces of various other identities: “She touched her cheek and drifted in and out of the ingredient colours [...]: yellow, white, black. *Yellow, white, black* – it reminded her of the game with the variable winner: *scissors, stone, paper ...scissors, stone paper...paper* [...] her mind sticking on *black*, on *paper*, and wondering how it ever won” (OMS 15). While the Asian and Caucasian parts of her identity are rendered invisible in a gaze that appropriates her simply as “black,” Daphne tries to uncover those hidden elements of her identity. As a child, Daphne feels disoriented because she does not know her “proper hyphenation” (OMS 81). Out of love and an urge to protect her, Daphne's adoptive parents do not tell their daughter anything about her ethnic origins but rather substitute racial for national identity in accordance with Canada's official policy of multiculturalism.

In second grade her teacher asks her, “[w]hat are you anyway, Daphne?”, and when she cannot answer the question adds: “I mean, are you, say, Brazilian? Mexican? Now dear, people are certain things, like Japanese, Chinese...things like that” (16). Back from school, Daphne asks her father about her ethnic identity and he replies: “You're a Canadian, and don't you let anyone tell you otherwise” (OMS 16). Daphne's father underlines the official national discourse which claims that in Canada's multicultural mosaic everybody can keep their distinct ethnic identity and nonetheless have equal rights. For his daughter however, the gap between the official ideology and her day to day experiences grows: “It had begun that day: the appearance of the crack, the question *what are you* nudging it wider each time she
Canada & Beyond 4. 1-2 (2014): 27

asked it of herself” (OMS 17). As her aunt Sheila tells her later, even after having lived in Montreal for 30 years people still wonder about her origins because “[i]n dis country it’s important to have de propa’ ‘hyphenation.’ Funny, makes it sound like havin’ the propa papers, but it’s just what you call yourself when someone asks you where you’re from” (OMS 81). As a grown up, Daphne watches others to feel as though she herself were in their skin and to test what it means to be “certain things.”

Her walks in the city explicate her inner geography as well as the topography of her body and the city of Montreal to the reader. *Out of My Skin* elaborates on the idea that subjects and places are interrelated in complex and reciprocal ways. As, for instance, the work of Elizabeth Grosz has shown, bodies do not simply exist in space but the relationship between bodies and spaces can be understood as a way of co-building.⁵ Such a co-building implies that bodies are made in specific spaces through specific cultural practices – one of which is walking – and in turn shape that space. In McWatt’s novel, walking reveals Daphne’s history as much as Montreal’s specific urbanity, in which various ethnic groups vie for the right of representation and belonging. Because of its multiethnic structure, Montreal at first seems ideal to Daphne for probing a new cartography of her body and self. Daphne describes the quarter she lives in, the “Plateau Montreal,” as a “cocoon” (OMS 157) – in contrast to the glittering and cold metropolis of Toronto. In Toronto she understands every word on the subway, “words dart at her,” while in Montreal she is able “to live in her head” and “block out chatter” because she does not understand every word (OMS 158). It is this immersion into the mix of languages and cultures that makes Daphne think that she can follow her entwined roots in Montreal in contrast to other, smoother cities. When Daphne walks through Montreal at night, she notices how the buildings of the city themselves, in their *bricolage* character, mirror the ethnic make-up of its inhabitants: “The materials [of the houses] clashed and knotted, all the decades since they’d been built layered on one another

⁵ See, for example, her article “Bodies – Cities” (1992).

like the siltstone of a mosaic city” (OMS 73-74). Similar to the city, whose face bears the traces of historical periods and conflicts, Daphne’s body bears the marks of colonial battles. When she looks at herself in the mirror, she thinks: “She was ugly. Generations of submission and rebellion still battled for position there. Were hers the eyes of the victors or the vanquished? The ears of slaves or masters?” (OMS 186). By traversing the city, Daphne acts out the various layers of difference that make up the space of her body. McWatt’s protagonist is not ‘out of her mind’ but ‘out of her skin’: She is out-of-sync with her body and her place of belonging.⁶

The book ends with a scene that contrasts the urban realm with a wilderness, in which Daphne undergoes a *rite of passage* and emerges with a new identity. Together with her colleagues from *copie copie* she spends the weekend at a cottage where they are all “shedding their city bodies” (OMS 188). After a few drinks, Daphne gets into a fight with one of her co-workers, who accuses Daphne of always hiding and trying to become invisible. Daphne gets into a canoe and paddles across the lake where she falls asleep and badly sunburns herself – a foreshadowing that she will shed her old skin and experience a mythic reincarnation. McWatt’s protagonist experiences a significant blurring of boundaries and spaces: “something was orchestrating this moment. A strange presence on the lake was blurring the lines that normally divided the earth, the sky, and the water. A wind. Surefoot’s Chinook met Gerald’s hurricane” (OMS 200). In the following ritual, she buries her mad father’s/grandfather’s diaries in a bed of moss. The act turns into a ritual in which Daphne again and again repeats the word “Bansimande,” a word her aunt Sheila taught her that back home stands for the unspeakable, so that for Daphne it evokes both the unfathomable and her ungraspable past. Daphne smears her skin with dirt, eats moss, and falls asleep. When she awakens the next

⁶ The novel’s title also refers to Gerald’s last diary entry: “*When they release me, the spring from the precipice will be a plunge/into the bright crimson fire of silence in the world beyond the/dripping walls, in the time beyond the drums/where each night I am dancing out of my skin*” (OMS 150). In contrast to her father/grandfather, who only dreams of freedom and redemption, Daphne frees herself at the end of the novel.

morning she is at first lost and cannot find her way back until she spots “an enormous, a wide human figure – many forms in one – travelling through the bush with the ease and speed of a deer. [...] she followed the apparition. It was taking her home” (206). Daphne feels that in following the tracks “she was beginning to grasp what her father and mother never could. She was closing the cracks of time” (206). This ritual of running wild serves as a threshold which Daphne has to pass over in order to return to society renewed and ready to take up her place. Her rite of passage allows her to let go of her past and her fears and to take an affirmative stance in the present.⁷ Daphne hitchhikes back to the city and it is hinted that she enters into a relationship with the Italian-Quebecker Michael Duchesne, whom she met one night when he caught her looking into his apartment. When Daphne arrives at the market where Michael works she greets him by saying “I’m here” (207) – words that in a performative act finally root Daphne’s diasporic identity to a specific place.

Out of My Skin explores how walking, as an embodied practice, changes Daphne’s perception and embodiment of self. Bodies are informed by factors such as race, sex, or age – factors that render them marked or unmarked, visible or invisible in urban space and hence determine a body’s ability to move freely or restrictedly in the city. As a visible minority Daphne stands out in the city but effaces herself in order to blend into the urban landscape on her nightly strolls in which she also reverses the gaze. Like the waning and waxing moon, which structures the novel in the chapter headings, Daphne’s body changes between embodiment and disembodiment, between visibility and invisibility. Daphne’s walks make her an insider/outsider of urban space and allow her to shift the boundaries of self in the city, mentally as well as physically. As an embodied practice, walking critiques, as John Urry has put it, “a humanism that posits a disembodied cogito” independent of the material world (Urry 45).

⁷ See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (1909) and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969).

In *This Body*, cooking serves a similar function. Unlike walking, cooking is not directly connected to mobility but nonetheless food makes and changes space. Yet, cooking also becomes a vehicle, in the sense of a lived relation between subjects and places because it enables the protagonist to physically incorporate the many places and histories of her past into her present life in London, England. As does walking in *Out of My Skin*, cooking in *This Body* relates the subject to urban space. The city becomes the node for overlapping localities and transnational encounters captured in food practices.

Culinary Transmigrations: *This Body*

Tessa McWatt's novel *This Body* deals with the troubles of finding a place of belonging in contexts of continuous displacement. The main protagonist, Victoria, was born in Guyana and comes to London via Toronto. McWatt uses food in the novel, on the one hand, to draw out her main protagonist's emotional geography and on the other to map out the routes of the middle passage and the resultant migratory spaces of her protagonist's diasporic identity. Food thus has a function similar to that of architecture in *Out of My Skin*; it is a *bricolage*, a mix of different materials that mirrors the protagonist's origins. Victoria is of mixed Asian Caribbean and black Caribbean descent with an Amerindian grandmother on her maternal side and as such embodies the different histories of enslavement and colonization in the Caribbean. Victoria has inherited the slanted eyes of her father's Chinese side of the family, and so have the many illegitimate children that her endlessly philandering father begets with his mistresses in the tomato patches in front of their house. Victoria's mother and her siblings never get to officially meet those other children but are surprised more than once by yet another pair of slanted eyes in the streets and the market – another uncanny and undeniable sign of their father's indiscretions. The recognition of the unfamiliar, the uncanny, within the

home applies to personal as well as national contexts in the novel.⁸ Victoria describes Guyana after British rule as “an ethnic soup of people, trying to find a common ground upon which to be governed” (TB 31). McWatt intertwines the personal with the political and individual fate with collective history: Victoria is grappling with the aftermath of Guyana’s colonial history as much as with her own family history and her father’s ‘misplaced seeds.’

When the novel opens, Victoria, who is well into her sixties, has just taken in Derek, her 10-year old nephew, and is grappling with their complicated relationship and her new role as mother. Derek is the offspring of Victoria’s sister Gwen and an anonymous sperm donor and becomes an orphan when Gwen dies in a car crash in Guyana. Victoria tries hard to be a good mother to him but feels insecure because she does not really understand the boy’s needs. In her attempt to protect and nurture him she cooks up a storm of healthy organic foods which the boy rejects because he feels sickened by her over-protectiveness. Food plays a significant role in how aunt and nephew relate to each other and to their past, to their places of origin, and to their new home in London.⁹ Edibles become invested with meaning well beyond their actual status as food items and come to signify the characters’ respective anxieties and hopes. As Roland Barthes puts it: “To eat is a behavior that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up, and signaling other behaviors, and it is precisely for these reasons that it is a sign” (33). For Derek, food becomes a sign for identity. He wants to ingest the new culture of “Inkland,” (TB 13) as he calls it, with all its culinary markers of coolness and of belonging. Once, the downstairs neighbor buys Derek a hotdog. He stuffs it with ketchup and greedily gulps it down because it is something his aunt would never allow him to eat and because it is

⁸ On how the specters of colonialism and racism haunt nations see Sneja Gunew *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalism* (2004) and Cynthia Sugars *Unhomely States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism* (2004).

⁹ All of Victoria’s love relationships are fleshed out through food in the novel: Lenny, her dependable British lover with whom she runs a bakery, is characterized through very basic foods, except when he tries to seduce Victoria and win her back; Alex, Victoria’s younger, wealthy, and sophisticated lover towards the end of the book, takes her to Sushi restaurants. The cold and raw food signifies their initially difficult relationship which has to overcome a lot of gaps and the restaurant itself stands for gentrification in the city as only wealthy people in London can go to such a restaurant. Alex and Victoria’s relationship changes when she teaches him how to cook at her apartment. Kola and his cooking stand for simple and filling dishes on the one hand and for the complexities of colonialism as he was the one to explain “the underside of Africa to her” (TB 85).

a signature dish of his new home. When Victoria later sees the ketchup marks from the hotdog on his T-Shirt she is instantly horrified because these things are “made of the worst” (TB 141) elements.

For Victoria, processed food does not signify belonging but the obfuscation of origins because global economies make it difficult to identify the provenance and ingredients of produce. The only way she knows how to keep her nephew safe is to feed him things of known origin. Derek, on the other hand, wants to forget the past and fit in with his peers in his new life in England. He yells at his aunt that a hotdog is just a hotdog and that people eat them all the time. The hotdog becomes a contested object that signifies different values and needs for both parties: For Derek it represents everything his old Caribbean aunt and her food are not and everything he craves instead, namely to fit in seamlessly, to get rid of his accent and the organic dark rye bread sandwiches with roasted peppers, eggplant, and goat cheese that his aunt packs him for school lunch. For Victoria, the hotdog on the surface spells out the horrors of processed food and on a deeper level her anxiety for Derek. Ironically, Victoria’s cooking does not make Derek’s life safer but more dangerous at school because the other boys make fun of his ‘sissy’ sandwiches and make Derek prove his toughness and coolness in other ways. Unlike Derek, Victoria is anxious that she will never find a place of belonging because of her twisted origins, and time and again in the novel this is expressed through her attitude towards food and produce. Victoria is constantly seeking truth and authenticity. Victuals and eating orders become a touchstone for the state of the world as much as for her own state of mind. Until she learns at the end of the novel that there are no authentic places and no uncomplicated, straight origins, Victoria is obsessed with food.

At the beginning of the novel, Victoria is also still coping with the death of her former lover Kola, whom she met when she left the island for Toronto. Kola is a Gikuyu refugee from Kenya who introduces her to political theory, to the rebellion in Kenya, to the troubles and tribal problems of Africa, and “it was Kola who had taught her how to really cook” (TB Canada & Beyond 4. 1-2 (2014): 33

34). They lived together in Toronto for six years, where Victoria worked as a cook, and “ate the finest foods of many cultures” (TB 92). Toronto is home to neither of them but they turn this transmigratory space into a food microcosm of the world and create a new locale and temporary subject position for themselves by bringing in food practices from different places of the black Diaspora. The many “theres” of their existence are transported into the “here” they are presently dwelling in. While cooking traditions often serve to signify local identities and origins, in McWatt’s novel food becomes a signifier for migratory routes. Kola’s and Victoria’s happiness is fragile and temporary because it arises from the sutures of global conflicts which eventually come to haunt them in Toronto as well. Due to entangled family matters related to the Kenyan revolution, Kola one day disappears without a word and returns to Kenya. There he is imprisoned and tortured but eventually makes it to London from where he sends Victoria a letter. She goes to England and while still searching for him receives a phone call that Kola was executed in the streets of London by a Kenyan rebel from an opposing camp.

That the world’s conflicts can no longer be kept out of the city becomes apparent when Victoria and Derek are almost killed in a terrorist attack while shopping at Dalston market. After the explosion, the first thing Victoria notices is “mangled metal that once was a car. Then shattered glass, strewn paper, and disheveled cloth. Yellow. Everything is covered in yellow powder. Exploded heads of yellow lettuce and yellow-powdered beans, yellow-powdered tomatoes oozing their seedy flesh” (TB 112). The market space is literally turned yellow because with the explosion turmeric from an Indian spice shop rains down on it; metaphorically this shows how the conflicts of other places change the urban space of the metropolis. The devastating effect of the bomb is captured in terms of food imagery again as the exploded lettuces and the tomatoes oozing flesh stand in sharp contrast to Victoria’s

careful handling of food throughout the book.¹⁰ The market scene can also be read as a comment on how present day metropolises commodify ethnic identity and exploit their image as a multicultural city for the tourist industry by means of exoticizing the Other. As Sharon Zukin has argued in her book *The Cultures of Cities*, cities nowadays compete for images, for visual representations of their identities. Neighborhoods become distinct, conspicuous places not only because of their history but also because their scenic fruit markets or coffee shops turn into “a set of marketable images” (Zukin 262). In *This Body*, such an allegedly harmonious coexistence of cultures within the city literally blows up and emphasizes the instability of the multicultural city.

Time and again McWatt’s novel highlights political and ethical questions connected to the production and consumption of food. Victoria muses on how cows were fed ground up beef and bones and got sick and surmises that this will happen to chicken and salmon next. Geared to continuously raising the profit made from food, the global food economy genetically modifies and manipulates produce so that in Victoria’s opinion “[e]verything [is] eating itself in a lunatic coyote dance” (TB 30). This lunatic dance not only refers to genetic manipulation in the book but also to perverted global economies which alienate us from natural produce and subdivide the world into those who can and those who cannot afford healthy foods. It is Kola who makes it clear to Victoria and the reader that the recent preoccupation with organic food is a prerogative of the Western middle class. Kola mocks Victoria’s obsession with organic food by cynically remarking ““Organic? Everything is organic in Africa, we can’t afford pesticides”” (TB 109).

McWatt renders the history of colonialism not only in the production but also in the preparation of food. Five detailed recipes appear in the book which function as miniscule

¹⁰ Igartuburu has argued that the Dalston market explosion “sets [Victoria] in motion towards assimilation” because Victoria afterwards strives “towards the more secure space of normative British society” (7).

narratives, or “culinary memoirs,”¹¹ that preserve and enact cultural identities and memories from other places: The first recipe is for a Pissaladière, a tart-like dish from Southern France, signifying Europe; the second recipe is for Red Pesto Potatoes aux Épinards, a dish that mixes European and Caribbean traditions; we also find a recipe for Dry-Braised YI Noodles which evoke Victoria’s Chinese background; and there is a recipe for a Matoke and Lamb Stew, a simple and filling dish which Kola taught her to cook and which calls up her African origins; and finally there is the recipe for a traditional Caribbean Pepperpot which Victoria rediscovers when she returns to Guyana. These recipes from different cultural realms encode knowledges that provide alternative histories and epistemologies as well as a different sense of being in the world and hence ontological security for Victoria. Throughout, McWatt uses cooking as a sensual practice that overcomes the Platonic body-mind split of Western philosophy. Cooking, as Lisa Heldke maintains, requires “bodily knowledge” (quoted in Curtin 10) and, as Deane Curtin maintains, “food stands in a special relationship to the self” (9) as the food we eat literally builds our flesh and bone. The title *This Body* already spells out that this is a book about a protagonist growing into her own body concomitantly with coming to terms with her transmigratory history. Her growth and development is captured through distinct food practices, and cooking becomes a form of self-empowerment which allows Victoria to preserve tradition and embody her home at the same time. In the third part of the book when Derek is in trouble at his school in London and when Victoria is scared to enter a new relationship with Alex, a sophisticated Englishman, she returns home to Guyana. In Guyana Victoria realizes, however, that belonging is not place-bound but has to be renewed in social interaction and that “home” cannot be linked to a definite place but has to be embodied.

Before the protagonist can return to London, she has to undergo a rite of passage similar to that of Daphne in *Out of My Skin* in order to feel comfortable with and at home in her own body. Victoria takes her nephew to a steep cliff in Guyana, Pico Tenerife, where a

¹¹ See Tracy Marie Kelly (2001) who maintains that recipes are stories which either affirm or challenge cultural orders.

sublime and supernatural atmosphere sets the stage for a mystic experience in which Victoria becomes one with the natural forces and in a dream like state realizes her own physicality. When they arrive, Victoria muses that “[t]he otherworldly presence on this ridge is palpable” (313). While Victoria climbs the rock, a strong breeze “seems to hold her” (314), she is overwhelmed by the sound of the Atlantic, by the gusts of wind, the tremendous surf, “the crashing waves” and “jagged rock face” (314). In this primeval landscape, there suddenly appears a “feral goat, not like anything farmed on the island” (315) which underlines the otherworldly atmosphere noted earlier. Victoria’s perception of the place becomes increasingly unreal as the rock suddenly seems to resemble pictures she has seen of “Greece,” “Chile,” “New Zealand,” “Wales,” or “France” (315). Victoria thinks: “Is this rock so indistinct as to be everywhere? With all the moving, place to place, everything starts to blur” (315). At that precise moment she slips and sprains her ankle. Derek, who on the cliff has had an epiphanic moment himself and emerges transformed, decides to get help. He ignores his aunt’s worries and with a “new certainty” (316) takes off. Victoria sits on the rock all by herself facing the sea and the dimming light: “But she’s surprisingly unafraid. Could this be her moment to defy all the bogey’s and invisible things she’s picked up along the way? Should she raise herself up on one leg to do a little jig in honour of what she knows? She knows deep down that this is as much as we have: this body, this air” (319). Mindful of the elements and her own body, Victoria gathers new strength and confidence. She realizes that “her body is made for love” (320) and that “[t]here is still time yet for this body” (320). When Derek gets back to her with help hours later, Victoria is found “in the blackness, on the edge of consciousness, muttering words that sound like condolences in a foreign language” (322). As in *Out of My Skin*, the words in her mother tongue obtain a ritualistic, transformative quality and bind her more closely to her own body. She emerges from this subconscious state when she awakens in the hospital and with a new clarity asks Derek to call Alexander and tell

him that they are coming home. Just as in *Out of My Skin*, Victoria needs to learn how to embody her identity and find a place of be/longing that allows her to enter a relationship.¹²

Conclusion

In this essay, I have analyzed walking and cooking/eating as two quotidian practices which engage the body in understanding the world. Walking and cooking are, on the one hand, signifying practices which invest space with meaning and reflect as well as produce difference in urban space. On the other hand, they are physical practices to experience, feel, and sense oneself and the world. In McWatt's fiction, the body is not simply a cultural sign or projection screen but a realm of sensual experience. This realm is not static, however, but malleable. The body, just like the city, is represented as a contested space where past and present, hegemonic and marginalized discourses vie for power. The representation of walking and cooking in McWatt's novels provides her female protagonists with physical as well as intellectual tools to find their place of belonging in the multicultural metropolis. In their respective rites of passage Daphne and Victoria reclaim their bodies from various colonial inscriptions and stake out a place for themselves in the city. The physical practices and ritualistic transformances in both books counteract displacement and reenact an identity that embodies various places. As Liz Bondi has stated, by focusing on the embodiment of gender, "cities are places where embodied meanings and experiences are not necessarily reproduced according to dominant norms, but can be challenged, reworked and reshaped" (6). Embodiment, as Bondi elucidates, is always geographically patterned. This means that different places, which themselves are socio-spatially patterned in different ways, inscribe a different corporeality. In "processes of globalisation" or "transnational migration" (ibid.), Bondi continues, the "geographical

¹² As Igartuburu puts it: "Victoria decides that if 'home' cannot be defined as the place in which one was born, then 'home' would be the place in which one is loved" (9). Igartuburu is quite critical, however, of how love is rendered and linked to the body in the novel. By entering a relationship with Alex, she claims, Victoria continues her process of assimilation to a normative heterosexuality and to stereotypical ideals of women's bodies and relinquishes her mixed ethnic background in favor of a British identity.

specificity of embodied gender identities is [especially] complex” (ibid.) because different patterns of places and the concurrent embodiment have to be brought together. McWatt’s fiction illustrates how in diasporic contexts of multiple displacements and transigrations, people grapple with and have to negotiate different forms of embodiment and emplacement.

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Caroline Rosenthal

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