



## Review Article

# NAVIGATING THE SELF: DIASPORIC CARTOGRAPHIES IN THE FICTION OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE AND MEENA ALEXANDER

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## ABSTRACT

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The beginning of the twenty-first century was marked with unprecedented migrations in the world that has changed the concept of home, belonging, and identity. Bharati Mukherjee and Meena Alexander are two of the key characters who argue on the multidimensionality of the diasporic consciousness in this shifting environment. South Asian origin and sense of acute exile, although both of them share them, take different directions in literary paths. Mukherjee fiction is a radicalized acceptance of assimilation and self-inventing and fetishizes the innovation of a new American identity through breaking and remaking. In his turn, Alexander texts are done in the manner of the lyrical speculations on fragmentation, memory and emotion bargaining of existence between worlds. In this paper, the author draws parallels between the manner in which both authors trace two distinct different diasporic cartographies Mukherjee by producing narratives of radical cultural transformation, and Alexander a poetics of multiple belonging and without-homelandness. The two halves of the immigrant experience they share are the exaltation of renewal and the agony of being in a transitional state that casts light on the issue of identity under the most mobile world.

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## Introduction

The contemporary world can be described as a mobile world where locomotion of bodies, ideas and culture has occurred in such a manner that the identity and belonging is redefining. These new forms of the literary world are thought in the late twentieth century and early twentieth century in which the world is precarious with the advent of globalization and movement resulting in the diasporic self-becoming erratic (Hall, 1990). In this regard, the diasporic literature has adopted a critical writing genre of the search of the nexus of memory, displacement and belonging that has been transpire across boundaries (Brah, 2005).

Among the most controversial authors of Indian descent, who have taken part in this debate, we can mention the works by Bharati Mukherjee and Meena Alexander whose ideas of identity and exile are on the other end of the scale. Migration to Mukherjee does not only constitute a state of loss but also a process of constructing meaning because the immigrant assumes a responsibility of trying to make him/her an invention of a new creature (Mukherjee, 1988). The key aspects of immigrant experience which she glorifies in her fiction are assimilation and reinvention. Nevertheless, this is precisely the opposite of the assimilation line in the works by Alexander. The identity has also been reflected in the poems and memoirs in some form of

nightmarish and splintered and continuous negotiations between the memory of home and the displacement realities (Alexander, 1993).

The two authors share a powerful paradigm regarding the perception of the whole spectrum of the experience of diaspora by the resistance. The melancholy of lack of hope of a fragmentation and continuation of memories is what the characters of Mukherjee are living with and the hopelessness of Alexander in his writing (Bhabha, 1994). It is not difficult to find out how the two authors map out a literary cartography of belonging that follows the principle of rupture and rebirth and the other one follows the principle of remembrance and reconstitution by applying the diasporic cartography on their works (Clifford, 1994). This is why, this paper believes that, Mukherjee and Alexander are two essential extremities of the identity of the diaspora. These two texts allow us to position us to realise that there is conflict between assimilation and memory in that identity in the postmodern world is neither absolute nor definite but an endless negotiation between the past and the present (Mishra, 2007).

## Literature Review

The postcolonial literature has already passed the exile phase and the nostalgic aspect to a new level of the hybrid identity and cultural negotiation notion. The first theorized intervention that

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emanates is the identity as a process and not content whereby Stuart Hall (1990) indicates that the greater the identity is formed and re-formed as part and parcel of the process, the greater the identity of the diasporic self is formed. It was a conception of fluid identity that would establish a foundation that would be utilized in the creation of additional transnational subjectivity in postcolonial writings. This was advanced further by Avtar Brah (2005) who developed the idea of diaspora space that conjectures on the co-existence of the multiplicity of the history and identities of the migrant experience. Brah model attracts attention to the fact that, not only, diaspora is more than spatial dispersion, but is also a process of irreversible rearticulation of cultures, and, additionally, as well, is a power driven, memory driven and belonging driven process. This plays a critical role in the interpretation of the way the two Mukherjee and Alexander find their lead characters more than once, and even in some respects in an antagonistic culture.

This metaphorical arena was also stretched when James Clifford (1994) referred to the diasporas as paths (or routes) and not roots whereby the identity is created through travelling and embracing the change. His style concurs with the wave of Mukherjee as an aggressive style - a self-invention that brags about smacking the destinations and traditions of place of origin. On the one hand, the Poems by Meena Alexander reveal so called third space; the place of the mixing of the cultures and the loss of the place of home and exile. This is achieved by her fragmented forms of the story: at one point she is a poet or a prose writer, a memoirist or a speaker. The concept of the coherent self is being corrupted by the aesthetic displacement which is aesthetically achieved in works of Alexander, poetics of fragmentation (Alexander, 1993). Even with assimilation and change being celebrated by Mukherjee as well, critics like Vijay Mishra (2007) believe the positive meaning of the American immigrant dream is sharply contrasted with the depressing obstacle of locating Alexander of memory and loss despite being a globally celebrated event. The writing where the effort of going back to the lost home and the interrupted self are applied in writing is one of the paradigms of the diasporic mourning as described by Alexander in relation to Mishra.

Furthermore, Elleke Boehmer (2009) also draws our attention to the fact that the two authors are also devoted to the task of re-creating the female subject of postcolonial modernity but operate on different courses. We can also see that women are being offered as active subjects of the identity making and are, therefore, the feminist and diasporic discourses that mark each other in their writings. The emphasis on the convergence points at the more significant meaning of what they have written: the two reinvents the image of being a part of the world of postcolonial and globalization. Conclusively, scholarly writings about Mukherjee and Alexander make them the focus of the change of the diasporic history. Their divergent and complementary conceptions of identity to that which would require revitalization, the other exalt fragmentation, yet, they cling on to the modern conception of migration, memory and self.

### **Bharati Mukherjee: The Cartography of Creative Destruction**

Bharati Mukherjee shares a literary vision that is built on a raging belief in radical individualism and the capability of American ethos to be transformed. Her writing explores a systematic dismantling of this notion of a pre-determined identity, which has to be cultural, and instead encourages a course of voluntary self-invention in the process of immigration (Chatterjee, 2011). It is not a soft integration project but of what Joseph Schumpeter so infamously spoke of as creative destruction- something that Mukherjee applies as a metaphor to the self. Her heroes are discovered to undergo willful and in most

instances violent practices of self-invention whereby they eliminate inherited identities in re-inventing themselves in the symbolic space of the so-called New World (Mukherjee, 1989). This philosophy can best be described in her best novel *Jasmine* (1989). It is the geographical experience of the protagonist who begins as Jyoti in Hasnapur and Jasmine in Flushing and Jane in Baden, which is more reminiscent of a geographical biography of the process of identity transformation. The two names symbolize death and re-birth, which makes the fight of the immigrant to re-new more dramatic. The fatalistic prophecy of widowhood and exile, which the novel begins with is the widowhood and exile, which the husband will bring on himself under a banyan tree... a lifetime ago... this is a rebellious, not an obedient statement. Subversion of the inevitability of the prophecy is done through agency to show that Mukherjee is of the opinion that identity can be chosen and not predetermined.

Through the metamorphoses that Jasmine undergoes, Mukherjee exalted the privilege of reinvention as an American privilege. This has often been opposed by critics to the conventional composition of the postcolonial accounts of victimhood due to the fact that Mukherjee also reproduces displacement as a chance rather than a loss (Mishra, 2007). She devises a cartography of the radical rupture in her fiction whereby the cut of the immigrant with homeland becomes the central act of the creative liberation. Despite this, the progenies of Mukherjee cartography reinvention might be located in her first novel *The Tiger Dancing* (1971). Inversion of the movement occurs when Tara Banerjee who is the protagonist returns to Calcutta, her birthplace, having been taken to the West. This kind of inversion gives Mukherjee an opportunity to follow the psychological confusion of the self that is already-transformed (Cheung, 1997). Tara experiences her homeland as a member of herself, and alien, looking through alienated eyes. She flashes to her thinking that she was back, but nothing was the same. Or rather, she was not the same. The city was like a mirror and she saw a stranger in the city (Mukherjee, 1971, p. 103). This scene in a nutshell encapsulates the first phase of the what can be termed as *Mukherjeeian crisis*: the failure to reconcile a stagnant homeland with a moving developing self. It is the journey - be it to America or to India - which always alters the wanderer, as the old map of belonging loses its relevance. The conflict of Tara, therefore, is the beginning of her lifelong journey in the world of liminal space between the two worlds that her future heroine, Jasmine will walk much stronger and more decisively. Maps of this progressive course are even the constructions of Mukherjee narrative. Her stories are more likely to flow to the west, through entry points on the coasts - to the hub of the nation as a sort of figurative immigration on the national culture margins to the mainstream. She writes in her essay on Immigrant Writing entitled Give Us Your Maximalists! that she is an American. I am an American writer, in American mainstream, trying to extrapolate it... I believe it was the immigrant story because I had the American experience and I am an American (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 2). This ghost is omnipresent in her short stories collection, *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) among others in which she explains that the immigrants are paying a price of violence to reinvention despite their fierce urge to put on and take off selves (Mukherjee, 1988, p. 27).

This kind of violence is both literal and psychological in *Jasmine* (1989) as the protagonist adds, there are no harmless, compassionate ways of remaking oneself. We murder ourselves to go to pictures of dreams again" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 98). Her earlier novel *Wife* (1975) provides an opposition of the theme in a darker sense as failure of Dimple Dasgupta to pass through such a process of violent rebirth results in psychosis and murder. This unfortunate twist is used to highlight the harmful risks associated with the model of identity reconstruction by Mukherjee the

liberation of the immigrant can be as dangerous as it can be promising (Gonzalez & Oliva, 2015). Mukherjee revisits these themes decades later, in the more complex book, *Desirable Daughters* (2002), where she interwoven the stories of three Bengali sisters, with one of them, Tara having led a viciously independent life in San Francisco. The novel recognizes the ongoing tug of the past and the mazes involved with cultural inheritance more factually than Jasmine does. It nevertheless demonstrates the spirit of self-invention (Mukherjee, 2002). The main heroine of the novel cogitates about the weight of the dictated identity saying, we were good daughters and were conditioned to be submissive. But I desired something else. I wanted to have control over my life. This is the final rule of the Mukherjee cartographical project; this statement, which says: to be the author of my own life. It implies that identity is not a gift but a writing, authored and even mapped by the individual usually against the convention and anticipation. Although the past in *Desirable Daughters* is more stubborn and threatening, the will to maneuver out of its boundaries is the main, enabling one. The map to a new self is being drawn in the ink of audacity and annihilation in the world of Mukherjee, where, as she writes in *Jasmine*, God is a point of light, not a patriarch in a nightie. And this is not a circle, it is a straight line between birth and death (Mukherjee, 1989).

Dimple, in contrast to Jasmine, who is forcefully constructing her own fate, is a passive observer of her disintegration. The city makes her powerless; it freezes her. She does not act in an interventionist way but as a form of desperation as she tries to assimilate, and it is due to this that she envies the final act of violence not against her past but against her husband, which is the representation of her entrapment between two discordant worlds. The chilling ending achieved in the novel is the realization of this fantasy that gives not an inception but a regression into insanity. "She had done it. The story goes on to say that she had actually done it when Dimple stabs her husband. "Now she was free. This time she was indeed in America" (Mukherjee, 1975).

This narration of a painful ending is an unhuman commentary to the life of this very work by Mukherjee. It is known that the destruction and the creation of the self can also be an obsession, even, a freedom necessity. *Wife* (1975) is one of such stories and the tragic failure of assimilation and it exposes that the process of creative destruction of self could not result in creation in any way but destruction (Mukherjee, 1975). It leaves the reader wondering what is behind the very fabric that the latter work by Mukherjee is: does the success of Jasmine have a prototype or is it revealed on those who have a particular talent of perpetrating violence and not just to themselves but to other individuals as well?

So, Mukherjee has no meek cartography. It is a complex and menacing map, capable of accommodating two probable possibilities, liberated or free self, triumphant reemergence on the heartland (Jasmine) and the fractured self, which is annihilated in the restricted and untested world of the immigrant apartment (*Wife*) (Mukherjee, 1989). Such duality makes her work rather strong and rather depressing analysis of the threats and opportunities of the American assimilation.

It is assumed that Mukherjee creates her map with the very heavy lines of a bluish, pale blue plan of a new life, Meena Alexander would create her map with bandwidth fine and intricate palimpsest sheet of papyrus that beneath the surface of the present the traces of the abandoned homelands and languages and memories are graphically alive (Alexander, 1993). The compression of identities which succeeds to the poet-novelist Alexander, is not a sequence of identities, but the amassing of the identity which is synchronic, and in most cases painful. It is in these fault lines, the psychic fractures, the fault lines of

displacement her work is found, not to congeal them into any coherent whole, but to explain a politics and poetics of existence in the very fracture (Gopinath, 2005). This is the fashion she adopts most effectively and is recapped in her later poetry particularly the book *Atmospheric Embroidery* which is framed in some form of an end to her lifetime cartography (Alexander, 2018). On the theoretical level, her memoir *Fault Lines* (1993) is established on the basis of this project. The title is a gorgeous metaphor: the self is a geological place, the land of which is created and shaken by the common impact of the tectonic plates-India, Sudan, Britain, America- bumping into one another. She writes: I am a poet who writes in America and she is born in India and I am a woman and broken a thousand times, by the migration and you have to make your ground (Alexander, 1993, p. 7).

the artificial soil of the nation-state, the boiling plateau of language and memory, not the solid soil of the nation-state, but the airy plateau of the language and memory, what she in *The Shock of Arrival: Reflections on Postcolonial Experience* (1996) is offering to write are the syntheses of the syllables cutting the body, the syntheses of the syllables cutting the body, with which she is proposing to write. This interdimensional method has the poetic narrative version, which is the most poetic narrative version in the novel *Manhattan Music* (1997) of Meena Alexander. The protagonist Sandhya Rosenblum is a victim since it appears to be erased by Jasmine in Mukherjee. Sandhya is an Indian immigrant marrying a Jewish American and she is being unveiled to the mazes of the city of New York City which will eventually become the palimpsest of the history of immigrants (Alexander, 1997). Unlike the self-discovery linear process through which Jasmine is experiencing, Sandhya is undergoing recidivism and gradual self-destruction. She is stalked with a memory of her childhood in India and she is stalked with the memory of communal violence and this haunts her mind all the time.

The city life fails to provide her with the blank sheet, in fact, he is the mirror image of her interior disintegration. Manhattan streets were gridded as Alexander claims, but there was old island down there and the water and that which had been before (Alexander, 1997, p. 54). It is a figurative image of a cartographic process of Sandhya (and Alexander) to the modern self the modern self is made of silt of the memory and of the past, its stability is constantly threatened by the movement forces that are boiling under the feet. The journey Sandhya chooses to follow is not the renaming and rebirth way but the way of having to cope with the ghosts of the past. Not even killing her old self as is the case of Mukherjee Jasmine, it is not she who does it; in fact, it is the thing itself that kills her, it is almost the haunting of her. It is not an assimilation process which can redeem her but solidarity with the other marginalized characters artists, activists, fellow immigrants etc. which can assist her to re-establish new sense of belongingness. It is a synthesis and not substitution. She would be forced to impose a new world upon herself and form a citizenship of mind and body of the discontinuousness with the revelation of Alexander (1997, p. 213) in the novel. Very unlike in the terms of Jasmine that she is a self-producer that is independent which involves re-production of the self which is the reconstruction of the group, which is an intellectual and physical citizenship, which is founded on the acceptance and not the denial of fragmentation.

The story machine of Meena Alexander is this palimpsestic writing in her *Nampally Road* (1991) novel. Dr. The most important character of the novel is a character named Mira Kannadical, who is completing her studies in England and her story is a classic example of returning gaze (Alexander, 1991). The familiarity is now non-familiar exiled consciousness prisms. The city is being written upon by the history, as well as by the memory and trauma, and transformed by them into a text, that is, the

geography of the city. Mira knows, that the past was not a peaceful, almost perfectly ordered place, where people could get lost in it. It was a whirl pool, and it would swallow you in it (Alexander, 1991, p. 87). This is the direct opposite of the linear model of progress as being constructed by Mukherjee where Alexander the past does not exist, but is instead a living magnetic force that constantly pulls the subject into its vortex. Rather the political exposition of the novel is founded on meanness and dehumanization of a small girl named Rameeza and asks Mira to spread her own experience of individual dislocation to the larger canvas of the social injustice. This is attributed to the fact that personal and the political sphere cannot be isolated and one is distorting the other one. Even the impression that Mira develops as she walks down the titular road is much more than a multi-layered and fluid one: Nampally Road was not a road anymore. The river was one and the shadows of everything that ever happened there were flowing on it (Alexander, 1991, p. 142). This scene is the utopia of the cartographical method adopted by Alexander, where this location will never remain a blank space, but rather an overlap of time, memory and haaving.

It is proposed that the multiplicity acceptance exists in the self- navigation of the diasporic condition by mapping the Nampally Road. To move about in the world, to move about, according to Alexander, is to excavate an archaeological dig of successive- unmaking of the same sort of strata of personal and collectively memory which is identity. This is the same consciousness that is manifested elsewhere in the poem when Mira is explaining what she sees in her head: I was walking through a big map, it is a palimpsest in fact, and the lines of so many other journeys had been drawn on it, and then erased, and then drawn again, etc. (Alexander, 1991, p. 163). Here is the point through which Alexander tells us the most appropriate metaphor of her project. It is the self and it is the map that it is a palimpsest, a surface on which have been written down, by way of imperfect erasure, all the journeys (between Hyderabad and England and back) which have been read, and which make up the whole. This map is never lost, and altered, to Alexander; it is the map, on which he writes, on which he moulds, on which he paints the histories of movement and of memory.

This overlay is the awareness that is made in her poetry to the utmost extent. She has stated in her book *House of a Thousand Doors* (1988) that she belongs to fragmented cities in the world, / A woman split open, the past a child / Not yet born (Alexander, 1988, p. 47). The fracturing of a migrant self that is a fractured self and at the same time the generating power that brings the past to existence is actually powerful as it is visualized in this image: the incarnation of diaspora. The Cartography of Alexander, therefore, lacks the compliance with the Western idea of linear progress, which the work by Mukherjee is grounded in. It is quite recursive, circulatory and an active document that she constantly revises with what she describes in *Poetics of Dislocation* a memory that bodily knowledge has (Alexander, 2009, p. 28). The last place of cartography inscription in this presence and where geography and memory are brought together is the physical self.

This aesthetics is reduced to bare minimum in the *Atmospheric Embroidery*. Even her title is a protracted metaphor of her works, of the air of them, of the mood of emotion and history, where a person is an outsider, is so beautifully, but certainly, interwoven of the strands of memory, trauma and identity. The poems are so needle-woven, to have shot a discourse, bits and pieces, interwoven, into a thin, but a solid medium. In *Triptych in a Time of Violence* Alexander writes that,

I compose that day which shatters the glass,  
On my skin a map of the world,  
Where the blood flies A flow of letters.

The body of one of the women is a globe that has been pierced.

Here the body is a canvas, continent is a colonized map of the exile and survival and the writing is a process of physical survival. This is where the body is not of such a place of struggle but of a parchment, the diasporic map has been drawn on it - a map of the world (Alexander, 2018, p. 42). The river of letters is the manner, through which the words and experience impress themselves, and in the majority of cases in a painful way, in which the blood circulates. It is the most expressive of the palimpsest cartography that the world is sewn on her body as it were: DIY inside out by sewing an outside tattoo into her:

The next poem of the same collection, *Name*, extends into the head of the matter of the identity, which Jasmine in her work dramatized by Bharati Mukherjee, to some other philosophical end. However, unlike the main character of Mukherjee whose name is altered to show the new start and forgetting about the old one, Alexander is a speaker, who recalls the mud of the past which is unavoidable and is inherent to a person in his/her name:

Is it that it lowered my name in the mid-Atlantic?

It has glowed in the foreign ray,

Something, rags and tatters, needlework.

Other languages, by other names. (Alexander, 2018, p. 56)

Its name is not forsaken here as it is made - an amalgam, a kind of creature sewed / With other names, other tongues. It is a reaction to the bloodshed of self-renewal of Mukherjee that, however, do not occur as it is a needlework which is insensitive and sensitive at the same time. Not a murder that has taken place but a repetitive embroidery to the living canvas of the present of it.

It is recursive and circulatory, and hence, the cartography of Alexander is subversive of the Western and linearism idea of progress onto which Mukherjee is building her narrative paradigm (Bhabha, 1994). The map is not unconditional as it is a living writing as Alexander comments is a living writing that is ever-renewed as she writes in *Poetics of Dislocation* (2009), the knowledge of the body, which already has some memory (Alexander, 2009, p. 28). This renders the corporeal self the most end destination of geographical war a geography, language and emotional locale. *Atmospheric Embroidery* is at one point proposing that to become in diaspora is to become a cartographer and canvas, self-propositively at work of a perpetual poetic sewing of a DNA of the atmosphere of here and tracing elsewhere. In such a manner the work by Alexander is a poem of survival, identity is not given or deprived it is always pulled on the threads of displacement and belonging.

### Theoretical Interlude: Dialectics of Visions of Diaspora.

These stylistic and philosophical dissimilarities in between Mukherjee and Alexander are expressed not just in the reverse concept of agency, memory and the nation-state. The battle is highly graphic as a result of the comparison of Manhattan music (1997) and Jasmine (1989). In its turn, the Mukherjee vision is rather practical and it suits the classical description of American exceptionalism (Rowe, 1998). The diaspora of her process has a very obvious telos: to give birth to a corporeal, self-assured, self-assertive American. The diaspora is in this instance a monitoring place - a transitional vessel - on the path to assimilation and, presumably, to final belonging. Even though this model by Mukherjee might sound empowering, critics have come forward with the fact that this model might actually create a narrative of assimilation whereby the disappearance of culture must be encouraged and the boundaries between race, class and ethnicity might always exist in the American society. It is rather an eye opener when she puts forth her arguments regarding the

mightiness of the new culture that it will swallow the past (Mukherjee, 1989, p.). 72) can thus be imported as the statement of success, and simultaneously a culminative cognition of failure, a warning that empowerment can be achieved without historical and cultural being.

### Conclusion

It would be only comparing Mukherjee and Alexander in order to miss the larger sense of their dialectical relationship. Their work is not cancellative of one another, but an imperative discursive intermediate of two extremes of experience. They symbolize the chief dialectic of the epoch of the world, the push and the pull of the future of the desire towards re-invention, the richness of the strongly rooted grip of memory and history. As a vital process which requires space and voice in a new society, Mukherjee provides the agentic, empowering process of becoming to the story. She introduces us to the language of possibility, the dream of self-realized person not burdened by the past. Alexander provides the profound, ethical topography of existence, a history crucial in the understanding of the psychological aggregation of displacement, in the valuing of the cultural memories constituting a self. She gives us the language of profundity, relatingness and truth of the dismembered subject. When put together, they create a composite 21<sup>st</sup> -century cartography. In their view, the diasporic experience (and, as a result, the modern condition) does not lie in a decision between the old and the new, remembering and forgetting. It is rather the tiring, demanding, and imaginative work of keeping these tensions in fruitful equilibrium. In the brilliant and wholly necessary opposition of Bharati Mukherjee and Meena Alexander we have all the instruments of navigation: he who knows how to acknowledge the fearless future, the other one who knows how to make her calculations by looking at the fixed stars of the past, the compass. All selves are places to explore in this venture they repeat, all lives are voyages. The vision of diaspora introduced by Alexander, in its turn, is more focused on continuity than on erasure and the co-existence of the plurality of homelands, as well as historical periods. It is not at any point that herself is totally out of touch with the past and yet is continuously being re-constituted with memory, language and body (Alexander, 1993). Unlike Mukherjee, who takes a lineal approach to rebirth in the American setting, Alexander takes a palimpsestic awareness, in which there is overlap of the layers of India, Sudan, and America, which can sometimes conflict with one another, but never subjugate or annihilate each other (Spivak, 2023). The notion of the self, in the books *Fault Lines* (1993) and *Manhattan Music* (1997) is outlined as a fault line, a site where cultural, linguistic and corporeal forces intersect and cause vulnerability and

wisdom. Her stories are discontinuous, recursive, which is a result of the perceived reality of displacement, which could not be integrated into the traditional paradigms of assimilation and glorifies in the creative potential of multiplicity (Srikanth, 2019). The option Alexander has adopted makes it evident that diasporic agency does not preclude the annihilation of previous selves, but perhaps has evolved as a consequence of comprehensive, ongoing negotiation with memory, identity and materiality of the body.

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