10.22439/asca.v57i2.7656

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Migrating Possibilities

Jonathan Escoffery's "In Flux" and "Independent Living"

ABSTRACT: The first- and second-generation immigrant characters in Jonathan Escoffery's short story collection *If I Survive You* (2022) struggle to belong as they navigate racism, a precarious existence in a foreign country, and familial conflicts. Both the precarity characteristic of the migrant condition and the histories of colonialism, with its enduring legacy in shaping contemporary migration flows from the so-termed Global South to the North, come to be highlighted by Escoffery through these works of short fiction. The eight stories, though they may be read as parts of a whole, are nonetheless separate, self-contained literary works. It is through his characters and their trajectories that Escoffery critiques institutionalized racism and the facile promises that the term "American dream" embodies. In this article two short stories from *If I Survive You*, "In Flux" and "Independent Living," are analyzed with a view to opening up a larger academic discussion on how writers such as Escoffery, reflecting deterritorialization through the form of the short story and the English language, may be seen as opening up the borders of what may be referred to as American literary fiction. The article also explores how the character/narrator Trelawny may be seen as an attempt at autofiction by the author, whose life has followed a similar trajectory, and how that becomes an important aesthetic choice for Escoffery's politics of literary representation of the transnational Jamaican-American community.

Keywords: American short story, migrant fiction, mobility studies, transnational fiction, globalization studies, postcolonial criticism, Anglophone short fiction

If I Survive You (2022), by American writer Jonathan Escoffery, is a collection of interlinked narratives of short fiction in which the principal characters in each of the eight stories belong to one immigrant family from Jamaica. The parents, Topper and Sanya, migrated to Miami in 1979 following violence back home in Kingston. The violence in Kingston and the factors leading to their migration are later revealed to be a direct result of interventionist policies of the US in Jamaica. Their younger son Trelawny, who was born in the United States, is the narrator in some of these stories and the focalized perspective in others. As an acclaimed American writer who has been awarded both the 2020 Plimpton Prize for Fiction and the 2020 ASME Award for Fiction for his literary contributions, Escoffery seems firmly planted within the genre of American literary fiction. And yet, as I will show later, the two short stories that this article focuses on, "In Flux" and "Independent Living," represent a kind of narrative that experiments with the notion of American literary fiction even as these stories become contemporary examples of it.

The most prominent question that this experimentation raises has also been taken up by Wai Chee Dimock in her essay "Deep Time: American Literature and World History," which asks, "[w]hat does it mean to refer to a body of writing as American?" (755). In highlighting the problematic assumptions underlying "American literature" and the ways the authors associated with the discipline are read and written about, the essay attempts to destabilize the Eurocentric and Global North-oriented understanding of how academic disciplines in general, and the category termed "American Literature" in particular, are pedagogically understood and defined. Writers such as Escoffery, reflecting deterritorialization through form, content, and language, may thus also be seen as opening up the borders and challenging the contours of what may be referred to as American literary fiction. Moreover, this article also aims to investigate the ways in which the very form of the American short story lends itself to a fragmented self-expression characteristic of contemporary Anglophone migrant literature.

In *If I Survive You*, Escoffery presents a nuanced, kaleidoscopic vision of migration in the US context. The author, much like his protagonist and principal narrator Trelawny, was born to Jamaican parents who migrated to the US and set up base in Miami, where the author also grew up. Consequently, the character/narrator Trelawny may be seen as an attempt at autofiction by the author, whose life has followed a similar trajectory.[1] Autofiction, as this paper will suggest, is an important lens with which to view Escoffery's politics of literary representation of the transnational Jamaican-American community. Sonia Weiner notes that in the past few years, "migrant writers seem to be less concerned with what makes them American, ethnic American, or hyphenated American, and more with the possibilities their complex identities offer personally, culturally and ideologically" (6). This article thus argues that Trelawny becomes a literary means by which Escoffery raises larger questions about identity, structural racism, and literary representation, experiments with what "American literature" is and can be, and examines his own personal experiences of being a Jamaican American.

As the analysis of the two works will show, the American short story as a form, in and of itself, becomes a means of literary engagement appropriated by Escoffery towards a particular aesthetic representation of the migrant figure in the Global North. As Martin Scofield writes regarding contemporary experiments with the form, "[t]he short story is perhaps the exemplary form for the perception of crisis, crux, turning point; and as such it has proved ideal for recording decisive moments, intimately private but often with broad social resonances, in the swift development of the psyche of post-independence America" (238). The two stories chosen for

analysis from Escoffery's critically well-received and bestselling short fiction collection provide comprehensive insight into the writer's aesthetic representation of the contemporary migrant condition, particularly in the American context. It is in Escoffery's "excess of roots" that one may encounter "new visions of American selfhood" inscribed (Weiner 6-7).

The political heft of Escoffery's experimentation with autofiction in the American short story form lies in the connections he draws between histories of imperialism and contemporary migratory flows from the Global South to the North. Through his short narratives, Escoffery places the history of violence in Jamaica within a larger context of US interventionist foreign policies. As Gilbert H. Muller has written, the "immigrant tide in American fiction" in the post-World War II period "is global, flowing across diasporas, borders, and postcolonial terrains" (1). Through his fiction Escoffery presents an example of the transnational character that American fiction in the contemporary era embodies. More than personalized narratives of immigration from the Caribbean to the United States, Escoffery provides a literary response to a narrativization of these migrations in the popular imagination and an attempt at unearthing complexities shaped by the history of colonization and slavery often overlooked in accounts of the same. This "refraction of reality" (Carpio 72) that Escoffery's fiction offers, as this article highlights, investigates the ways in which the rhetoric of the nation state continues to endure in a globalized world marked by cross-border movements.

The article is divided into three sections. The first section will take up a close textual analysis of the first story in Escoffery's collection, titled "In Flux," with a view to situate how the author employs autofiction as a mode of political critique of the narrativization of the American nation state, showcasing the story's inherent transnational character. The second section will explore in a similar manner Escoffery's story "Independent Living," wherein the author both highlights and problematizes the complex trajectories of migration that are inextricably linked to America's past and present as an imperial force. The third section of the article will address how Escoffery's experiments with the short story form and autofiction as a mode of literary composition are important aesthetic tools for his politics of representing the migrant condition in the American context.

Mobilizing Mobility

"In Flux" is the first story in *If I Survive You*. Though each of the stories in this collection is a self-contained literary work and can be read separately, "In Flux" sets the tone for Escoffery's project in general and the collection in particular. The story takes the reader through Trelawny's formative years as he navigates institutionalized racism in the United States. This includes experiences at his junior high and high schools in Miami, along with those at his university in the Midwest. As much as the narrative focuses on Trelawny's personal journey to adulthood, it also becomes a commentary on how the question of "where are you from?" is laced with a complexity that makes it unfair for those whom it comes to be asked of, specifically in the context of citizens of color in powerful Global North countries such as the US.

Certain narrative points in the story that shape Trelawny's view of the place he occupies in the world have been inspired by Escoffery's own life. Karen Ferreira-Meyers writes that in autofiction, the writer, "through his/her writing style, transforms an instance of personal reality into a public literary work" (40). She also goes on to explain how, in the Anglophone context, autofiction is conceived of as "a 'modus' of writing," as opposed to a genre, which is how Francophone literary criticism approaches it (Ferreira-Meyers

40-41). This autofictive modus of writing presents, in Ferreira-Meyers's words, a "literary puzzle" to its readers as it "vacillates between biographical fact and outright fiction" (42). This section of the article attempts to show how Escoffery's refraction of his reality in the form of Trelawny represents a particular mode of autofictive writing that is integral to the author's decolonial poetics. Escoffery chooses to fictionalize the events of his own life in order to draw out a larger trajectory of migrant histories in the context of the United States. This, as this article will highlight through a close textual analysis of "In Flux," is the author's attempt to make American literary fiction more nuanced and representative. The autofictive mode of writing allows Escoffery to highlight the inherently transnational character of both the nation state, as well as the characters who occupy the urban landscapes of the United States.

The narrative voice in "In Flux" directly addresses Trelawny as "you" yet makes the reader aware that it is the inner voice of Escoffery's narrator-protagonist himself and not an external character or a third-person narrator. The addressed "you" of the story is Trelawny, and everything he comes to experience, from boyhood to adolescence and adulthood, is articulated through his perspective and inner voice. This second-person narrative voice presents the story to the reader, narrating the experiences that shape Trelawny's coming-of-age. It also, more importantly, acts as an interpreter who shares how these external events translated into the growth of Trelawny's self-consciousness as a non-white citizen of the US.[2] This voice switches to the first person in "Independent Living" when an adult Trelawny becomes the narrator.

For Escoffery, showing Trelawny's coming-of-age in "In Flux" through a narrative structure that highlights the protagonist/narrator's inner world thus becomes a way of highlighting the crisis of identity formation for a second-generation immigrant of color in the US. The choice of a second-person narratorial voice lends an intimate tone to the narrative. One may read the narrative voice as that of an older Trelawny bearing witness to his own coming-of-age. In addition to this, one may also infer that the inner voice addressing him as "you" is in effect the author articulating the struggles of his younger literary persona. The opening line of the story sets the stage for the short narrative and also the collection as a whole: "It begins with What are you? hollered from the perimeter of your front yard when you're nine–younger, probably" ("In Flux" 3). The question that is asked, that of what he is, echoes throughout Trelawny's adolescence and adulthood. The narrative voice, addressing Trelawny, notes, "[y]ou're a rather pale shade of brown, if skin color has anything to do with race. Your parents share your hue" (10). When he does ask about his ethnic makeup, the narrative voice explains the mother's response to his question in the following words: "[y]our mother tells you that you are made up of all sorts of things. She lists countries," and "[m]ost of the countries she lists are European, and though she's sure to add Africa as though it were a country or an afterthought, she never mentions race" (9). This creolized texture of Trelawny's ancestral past negates the possibility of his affiliation to a homogenous identity.

This lack of an easily accessible identity that the story opens with is shown to be complicated by Trelawny's African-Caribbean roots, because of which his skin color makes his geographical and cultural associations ambiguous and not readily available. When he asks his mother point blank, "'[a]re we Black?'" then "[a]gitation grips her" (9). She again begins listing the ethnic backgrounds of past generations, hesitantly making a reference to a possible Arab heritage, yet never speaks confidently about an African ancestral lineage. Only when Trelawny goes to his older brother Delano, the only other person who can understand the "entrenchment in this liminal

space" (14), is he told that for America and its white Anglo Saxon populace, Trelawny, and by extension his family, is unquestionably Black, but that is not the case back in the Islands. The narrator explains, "[t]he Jamaicans, some of whom are in your classes, look nothing like your family," which makes "[y]ou wonder if there are two Jamaicas" (14). It is through Trelawny that Escoffery presents the complexities of migration and colonial histories that have shaped the twentieth- and twenty-first-century transnational American urban landscapes.

Through Trelawny's experience at school, both inside the educational institutions where he learns, as well as at their peripheries where he is socialized, Escoffery paints a nuanced portrait of American life through an immigrant of color's eyes. Muller notes of the African-Caribbean diaspora that it was "[f]ormed concurrently by English colonial models and African traditions," and that "West Indian voyagers to the North American mainland enter a new world where their efforts at self definition require the incorporation of yet another metahistory within their consciousness" (143). Escoffery writes his protagonist's experience of the ways the "metahistory" of America comes to be inscribed at his school in the eighties, where "in class, you pledge to one and one flag only, the Stars and the Stripes" (4). At his school, the "[*g*]*reatest country on earth* is the morning anthem" (4). The greatness of America, as a young Trelawny notes, is drilled in "day in, day out" at the school, like a mantra, wherein "the implication that all other nations, though other nations are seldom mentioned in school, are inferior" (4). When in history class students are taught about America's founding and the slave trade, "[a]n air of shared discomfort infiltrates the classroom" (8). While confronting America's past of the slave trade becomes an uncomfortable experience for the mixed classroom, teachers practicing racial discrimination is shown to be a norm. The narrator, in mentioning that a teacher had asked Trelawny to resubmit an assignment as it didn't sound like he had done it, tells him, "[y]ou might talk and dress Black, but you still write White and there's a discrepancy to account for" (21). His response to the teacher is resubmitting the assignment on Newton, which now says, "[t]hat was one scientific nigga, my nigga" (21). This assignment is dutifully graded and returned with "an emphatic checkmark and a D minus," but without any further questioning (21). In an interview, Escoffery has noted that this incident was inspired by his own life (Gross). Escoffery's narrative, which moves in a linear fashion through Trelawny's coming of age in the diverse space of Miami, is also a tale about the structuring of American society.

Escoffery, through Trelawny's search for belonging in the US, highlights how his otherness was not only owing to his second-generation immigrant identity. This search was also a result of the difficulty in ascribing to himself a fixed, stable cultural and racial nomenclature that would make it easier to be categorized as either one or "the other." This comes to be showcased particularly in the ways in which his narrator-protagonist is initially unable to find friends or a social group with whom he shares a similar heritage at school. While he points to the complex nuances of a Jamaican American heritage, Escoffery also draws attention to how the racial other within the landscapes of the Global North is made to define their ethnic makeup in order to be legible through an already available vocabulary of social affiliation. Trelawny, who was born in the US and has "got the paperwork to prove it" (5), is made to confront this lack of clarity throughout his childhood. Relocated to a new school after the destruction wreaked by Hurricane Andrew on the most vulnerable members of the population, Trelawny must once again find his place among groups divided on the basis of common cultural and linguistic backgrounds. He feels a "double exclusion" (15) which makes him wish he were invisible. "If no one can see you, no one

can realize tú no entiendes, that you don't quite fit" (12). Through his infusion of Spanish, as well as the patois that Trelawny's parents speak to him in, Escoffery uses language in the stories in his collection to showcase the transnational character of the US that his immigrant characters experience. In an interview, Escoffery spoke about his own experience growing up in Miami. He said, "[t]here wasn't necessarily this rush to assimilate into an idea of mainstream America. It felt more like you had to maintain your family culture, and the more successfully you do, the more you tend to be rewarded by your own family and your own community" (Elliott). Through his protagonist, who is a refraction of Escoffery himself, the author also points to how a history of colonialism and present-day neo-imperialist rhetoric have paved the way for an exclusionist society where survival depends on an affiliation to clearly defined racial identities, even though the truth is often more complicated than a one-word response to "where are you from?"

Not only does Trelawny's inability to fit in with the Dominican diaspora, the Puerto Rican crowd, the African American one, or even the Jamaican group at school posit a challenge to his being able to answer questions of "what" he is, but it also opens up a literary space to question whether the act of identifying and the quest for cultural belonging for a non-white American citizen are both flawed given that they rely on the assumption of available one-word answers in a world shaped by histories of the slave trade across continents. Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, a Ugandan writer residing in the UK, was interviewed about her works exploring the Ugandan diaspora in the UK and shared that she categorizes them as "expat experiences" instead of immigrant ones as the latter term plays into the West/others binary (Underwood). When nomenclature itself is conditioned by a hierarchy that privileges the white Anglo Saxon subject position, any attempt at categorization on the basis of race is an exercise in maintaining the status quo. This, then, opens up a space to cast light on the ways in which the discourse around what vocabulary is used to differentiate a cosmopolitan subject from an immigrant alien can be said to replay the West/others binary that globalization upholds in the neoliberal world order.

With Escoffery's narrator, who was born in the US, the search for a racial marker of identity and the way in which his Caribbean heritage is made the subject of scrutiny both become aesthetic tools employed by the author to two specific ends. The first is to map the ways in which certain parts of the American urban landscape, such as Miami, are marked by diversity yet prone to ghettoization, which is a direct consequence of national policies that cause certain members of the population to lead a precarious existence. This is the case even if their migration to the United States is a result, as in Trelawny's parents Topper and Sanya's case, of the host country's interventionist foreign policies.[3] The second aesthetic strategy is to trace the less metropolitan parts of the United States, which remain untouched by an awareness of the problematic assumptions that underlie the population's understanding of race and colonial history. This becomes evident when, during the course of the narrative, Trelawny moves to the Midwest for university, where no one assumes his comparatively lighter skin makes him "Puerto Rican or Dominican. Here you are simply, unquestionably Black" (25). All ambiguity is gone in a predominantly white geographical setting that is far less diverse than Miami.

At the formal events he attends at the university in the Midwest, he is "surprised that the only Black people present are there to serve" (32). Here he is not faced with a plethora of groups asserting their racial and cultural heritage and shaming Trelawny for not fitting in, but instead encounters privileged classmates, many with hyphenated identities, asserting their whiteness. This assertion stems from their need to highlight

their Americanness over readily available racial features, a need to be treated "'how White people treat White people'" (27). At one point in the story, Trelawny's Chinese American friend Caitlyn declares that she feels "too privileged not to be White" (27). In another instance, Trelawny meets a group of his fellow students at a party, standing in a circle reassuring each other that they are white (28). This group includes a woman from Mexico, who declares that her "family's bloodline goes directly back to Spain," an Argentinian student who wants it known that she is "more similar to Europeans than to South Americans," and a third character who complains that because her "mother is Jewish" she is treated like she is not white (28). This scene ends with the three women declaring, in unison, "[w]e're White" (29). Trelawny thus undertakes a DNA test to trace his roots scientifically and empirically, even though he notes at one point in the narrative, "[r]ace, you know, is a social construct" (45). But then, on receiving the results, the narrator, which in effect is Trelawny addressing himself, states, "[y]ou, Negro, are mostly European" (45). Trelawny's need to have an acceptable answer for what he is reflects a need for self-definition, which constantly eludes him throughout the narrative, even when he visits Jamaica, where he realizes that "everything is relative," on a research project (35).

Escoffery's fiction can thus be seen as an attempt at self-assertion, or, in Weiner's words, an attempt to "discursively create the self" (7). However, as the next two sections will elaborate further, Escoffery's carefully crafted literary self is one that contains multitudes. Through Trelawny's individual experiences, Escoffery opens up a larger discourse on identity crises of non-white US citizens and the social ramifications of the same. His narrative and protagonist both work to undo the national myths that the idea of America as a nation thrives upon. In her 2004 Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, Shelley Fisher Fishkin made an observation regarding how the celebrated American author Mark Twain's anti-Imperialist writings were relegated to the periphery of his works in order to preserve an acceptable version of the writer in the national popular memory.[4] Had that not been the case, Fishkin reasons, then it would not have been false to assert that "criticizing your country when you know it to be wrong is as American as Mark Twain" (19). Migrant or immigrant fiction in the context of contemporary American literature is a genre that, through its embodiment of a transnationalism that is aware of the histories of colonization and contemporary neo-imperial policies, may thus be seen as truly representative. Herein, as Yogita Goyal points out, "[a]t its best," a transnational approach may be a way to "offer an analysis of past and present imperialisms" (9). It is through a discursive self-reflection that Escoffery produces a literary text that challenges meta-narrativization at the individual level of the immigrant US political subject, at the formal level through his literary experimentation with autofiction and the short story, as well as at the national level, by throwing a light on the contradictions in the very foundations of the narrative of the American nation state as "the land of the free."

A Literary Homecoming

The other story by Escoffery that this article examines is titled "Independent Living," which, like "In Flux," found publication in a literary journal before *If I Survive You* came out as a collection in 2022. "Independent Living" is the sixth story in the collection, which has a total of eight short narratives. While "In Flux" is the story that opens the collection and sets the stage for the narratives that come later, there is no linear progression to the stories as such. In fact, Escoffery's chosen genre of interlinked short stories that can still be read independently of one another offers a potent form through which the author

highlights the fractured self of the non-white immigrant subject in the US. There is never a resolution to the narrator-protagonist's search for an easily recognized and recognizable selfhood. Trelawny's trajectory, as mapped out in the collection, rather showcases the fact that there are a plethora of narratives of immigration and oppression that may never find neat articulation. In other words, Trelawny's coming-of-age as a second-generation immigrant of color struggling to survive in late-stage capitalist America is told through a genre that reflects this struggle through its fractured storytelling.

"Independent Living" follows Trelawny's life after he finishes his degree at the university. The reader becomes acquainted with a graduate Trelawny, who finds himself unhoused.[5] The other stories in the collection, as well as "Independent Living," touch upon the circumstances that led to Escoffery's narrator-protagonist living out of his car. These include his mother deciding to move back to Jamaica, leaving the United States, resulting in Trelawny's choices after graduation being asking either his father or his brother if he can move in with them. Trelawny then briefly attempts living with his father, who stays in the US and is separated from his mother, but it does not turn out well for either of them. He notes that he "didn't last three weeks at his house before the beef got too thick to choke down" (137) and ended up living out of his car using the utilities at fast food restaurants.

As "Independent Living" opens, Trelawny is working as a staff member at a "federally subsidized senior housing scheme" (134). The inhabitants at this senior housing complex mostly comprise refugees, as well as asylum seekers. His job at the subsidized elderly living complex, called Silver Towers, is to cull out details about the lives of residents that may be helpful for his senior colleagues in the administration in making decisions regarding increments in rent or making the inhabitants leave in case they are found not to be complying with the complex's terms and conditions. The opening line of the narrative shows Trelawny explaining to the reader that his job is to "hunt elderly people" (133). This he does by ensuring that they are not obfuscating their sources of income, which may make them ineligible for the low rent. One of the other factors that he must check up on is whether these residents, in the absence of family members, are able to prolong living independently without any hired help, which, given their precarious economic situations, they will not be able to sustainably afford. A tenant by the name of Carlos Rodriguez is his next target as he suspects the resident has a day job working at Walgreens, the proof of which he is tasked with acquiring.

In short, Trelawny is promised a promotion if he can help to make the enterprise more profitable for the Silver Towers administration, which translates to higher rents for these vulnerable senior citizens of color. He clears up misconceptions one might incur as to how subsidized housing functions. He notes how people "erroneously figure it's in our interest to charge the elderly as little rent as possible" (135) while the truth is that the threefold mission of Silver Towers is to "increase the property's value, maintain high occupancy, and keep rents climbing" (135). The irony of the situation is aptly presented to the reader that in order to be able to afford his own place of residence, Trelawny needs to hold his job and get a promotion interrogating vulnerable senior citizens out of their already precarious living situations. As the story moves forward, Escoffery paints a grim picture of life in the United States, for both the young immigrant members of the workforce as well as the ageing refugee population barely managing a life of dignity in an oppressive system where the odds are forever stacked against them.

With an adult Trelawny as the narrative's focus, he himself becomes the primary storyteller

addressing the reader directly. Unlike "In Flux," in which the narrative voice addresses Trelawny as "you," here he takes the reins as the first-person narrator, addressing the reader and directly becoming the voice sharing his myriad experiences. While the narrative voice in "In Flux" guides the reader through the inner landscape of Trelawny as a child, addressing him as "you" and delineating his experiences, in "Independent Living" it is Trelawny himself who takes over as the storyteller and interpreter. As Weiner notes regarding migrant writers, one of the common linguistic features of their works is the "creation of narrators who double as storytellers, drawing attention to the very art of storytelling as they struggle with responsibilities, limitations and ethics that storytelling entails" (31). The agency bestowed upon a mature Trelawny as narrator in this story is perhaps given to make the readers, who become the addressed "you," complicit as silent beneficiaries of a capitalist society that is adept at maintaining the status quo, particularly at the cost of its most vulnerable members, and to draw attention to their own culpability in making this predatory system thrive. Escoffery's narrator/protagonist does in fact at times turn to the reader directly to ask what they would have done were they in his position.

While discussing the diverse makeup of Silver Towers, Trelawny apprises his reader of the circumstances under which his parents migrated. He explains that his parents migrated not seeking economic advancement, but as a means to flee the American government-funded violence in "Jamaica throughout the 1970s as part of its war on socialism" (136). Thus Trelawny, a second-generation unhoused immigrant in Miami, states that it "might be hyperbole to say" that he identifies with the tenants at Silver Towers, "most of whom are asylum seekers and refugees," but he can "empathize well enough" (136). In "In Flux," and more prominently in "Independent Living," Escoffery explicates Trelawny's family history of migrating to the United States. Trelawny's experience as a second-generation immigrant was shaped by the choices his parents were forced to make when they left their homes in Jamaica for the United States.

However, as the reader is subsequently also apprised, years later, in the present time, Trelawny's mother has left the US for Jamaica to experience, in his words, "the privilege of relative racelessness" (137). The narrator/protagonist notes, "[i]n 2009, Kingston's murder rate reached the highest ever on record, and my mom returned there so she could finally feel safe" (137). The liminal space that the category of "home" occupies for the migrant of color in the US is highlighted by Escoffery throughout his stories. "Home" is a signifier caught in a constant negotiation between referring to the one that the migrants in Escoffery's literary universe tenuously occupy in the US and simultaneously always to the one that is carefully curated and retained as the signified in the collective imagination. Trelawny also makes an attempt to distinguish his predicament from that of his parents as immigrants based on his own experience with this constant negotiation. He states that in their case, as opposed to his, and as opposed to that of those exiled in the US, such as the Silver Towers residents, his parents "have a homeland to which they can return" (136). However, even this statement is proven to be a facile proposition since his mother returns to the US not long after her move back to Kingston proves to be unsuccessful.

The author, through Trelawny, thus presents a nuanced view of immigration in the American context, complicating the categories of forced and voluntary migration from the regions riddled with conflict in the so-termed Global South by highlighting the historical, colonial nexus and present interventionist, neo-imperial policies that have shaped contemporary transnational movement flows to the Global North. Escoffery

also highlights how this violence, which led to large-scale displacement, as well as death and destruction, has not been made a part of the public/popular national memory. As Trelawny puts it, "when I say Jamaica to non-Jamaicans, no one thinks of CIA operatives, or puppet prime ministers, or historical continuity" (136). Instead, Escoffery, through his narrator/protagonist, describes how "they break into free association, as if they'd been tossed into a rap cypher: *Bob Marley, irie, ganja, poor people, Sandals, 'ey mon!*" (136). Escoffery's short fiction draws attention to and critiques how the Jamaican American migrant, and by extension the non-white US citizen, has become a citational presence, reflecting cultural stereotypes ideologically embedded in a popular culture that has hitherto been made a tool for invisibilization of colonial legacies that have shaped the current political and economic instabilities in erstwhile colonies.

Escoffery's overall project is to highlight the invisibilization and false narrativization of America's inherent transnational character owing to its past and present as an imperial force. Trelawny, in another portion of the story, also dons the role of ethnographer as he notes the diverse, multicultural and multilingual "mix of racial ambiguity" (153) that characterizes the young workforce at the eating establishments along the beach. Here, he finds "impossibly beautiful" hostesses "displaying phenotypes that, according to American media outlets, should not co-exist" (153). Escoffery's short story becomes a means of narrativizing Miami and its inhabitants through a native informant, that is, his narrator/protagonist. In "In Flux," Trelawny is a child who constantly is made to confront his otherness through unanswered questions and experiences of exclusion. In "Independent Living," Trelawny can now aptly perceive the varied lives shaped by histories of migration resulting in a reality that is not containable in easy-to-consume categories promoted by the American media.

What Trelawny means by the "phenotypes" that are not highlighted by the American media is explained in detail in what can be described as a montage of the many shapes and forms of multiracial existence that make up the young population of Miami. As he walks past these establishments, he is greeted with "[b]ronze and brass-colored flesh" that "make[s] aqua eyes glow like jewels in their faces" along with "blonde coils" that "spiral out above plush brown lips" (153). Trelawny further makes a mention of how "American men," qualifying this category by adding, "Southerners and Midwesterners," are the ones who "stop to ask where these young women are from," often drunkenly asking them "what" they are (154), echoing the question asked of him in "In Flux." Bringing the focus back to his own mixed heritage, he states that his own loneliness makes him play into the fetishes of those American tourists "who think every light brown thing in Miami is exotic" (154). Here, in a reversal of the narratorial voice in "In Flux" addressing and advising Trelawny on how to navigate these situations growing up, he takes the baton and tells the reader, "[a]nything they ask, just nod along; be the surface onto which they can project their colonial desires" (154). Escoffery simultaneously investigates racist and cultural stereotypes while showcasing the inexplicably diverse urban milieu of Miami.

What Escoffery achieves therefore is an interrogation of both the narrative of empire in the Anglo-American context, as well as any homogenization of the histories of migration in a postcolonial, globalized world in the neoliberal world order. Weiner states that the texts of migrant writers "speak in multiple voices, encompassing within them multiple subject positions and revealing suppressed histories and stories" (27). The many subject positions Escoffery encompasses within his short narratives I analyze here consistently challenge any homogenization of migrant narratives emanating from similar geographical locations in the postcolonial Global

South. Walking on Washington Avenue, Trelawny notes that the horde of shoppers "provides an even more diverse backdrop of languages" (163) than he witnessed in Silver Towers. Escoffery's text itself becomes a montage of different ethnicities mingling, where "French and Arabic and Japanese join Spanish and the myriad variations of English spoken in the crowd" (163). As Weiner writes, the "migrant perspective is apparent in the translingual, transnational and multi-perspectival dimension of their novels" (13). Language, thus, is an important tool through which Escoffery also destabilizes the centrality of English in the American context.

Escoffery's use of language and his poetics of representation become evident through an interesting character: Trelawny's boss, who is called El Jefe, a Spanish term translating literally to "the chief" or "the boss." El Jefe, in what may come across as a parody of the assimilationist narrative arc, purposefully makes a show of not knowing how to speak English properly. Trelawny, whom his boss asks to teach him English in exchange for help with his Spanish, notes that he has stopped helping him with the language because he believes that El Jefe "goes out of his way to exaggerate his English deficiency to appear foreign, or local, depending how you look at it" (140). Escoffery points out, through his narrator-protagonist's assertion, that to appear foreign was a requisite in order to be seen as local to Miami's urban landscape. In fact, for Trelawny to excel at his new job, he must learn Spanish in order to communicate with the residents at Silver Towers.

Thus, in this story Escoffery also plays with the tropes of the assimilationist narrative by highlighting the diverse ethnic makeup of Miami wherein to fit in means one needs to appear "foreign." The many languages that populate the text also showcase Escoffery's exposition of the urban Miami milieu, which becomes an important aesthetic venture. Helle Egendal notes that "multilingualism is a key autofictional strategy in transcultural autobiographical literature" (141). This strategy, as this textual analysis of "Independent Living" attempts to showcase, is therefore a means through which Escoffery problematizes populist and xenophobic rhetoric surrounding migration by bringing to the fore the inherent transcultural and transnational character of America.

Throughout the short fiction narrative, Trelawny's inability to have a firm grasp over Spanish is shown to be an anomaly, more so than El Jefe's affected bad English. Egendal's concept of "multilingual autofiction" describes the role that "language plays in enabling these literary works to question social norms and power relations" (156). Egendal also notes that such writing "enables authors to showcase and mobilize their multilingual capacity and to address political discourses on migration, transculturality, and racism" (145). Escoffery gestures to the many languages Trelawny encounters on a casual evening stroll and also makes ample use of Spanish words and phrases thrown into the text for good measure. The author thus makes his text a multilingual, transcultural artefact, employing language as an aesthetic tool to destabilize essentialist notions of the cultural and linguistic makeup of a diverse American urban landscape such as that of Miami.

Mirroring Truths

The final section of the article will analyze two other characters from each of these two stories in order to examine how Escoffery's characterization and appropriation of the short story form work to further his decolonial project of diversifying American literary fiction. The first is Justin from "In Flux." He is a theatre major who is a writer himself and encounters Trelawny during his university days. When we meet Justin in the text, Trelawny is taken by how similar he looks

to him in terms of appearance, going so far as to call him his mirror image. Trelawny's constant curiosity regarding Justin, whom he describes as a "very light-brown young man" ("In Flux" 39), is mistaken by the latter for flirtation. However, when it becomes clear to Justin that all of Trelawny's feigned interest in his writing and in his person was a ruse to uncover his racial makeup, Justin is rightfully taken aback.

At their second meeting, Trelawny asks him about his "background," to which Justin answers by asking if he means "educationally?" (41). Trelawny replies with, "I mean where are your parents from?," to which Justin responds by pointing out the oddness of the question and then saying, "[t]hey're from here. As were their parents before them" (41). This exchange continues until Justin asks Trelawny if he has a fetish. In effect, Justin, who is figuratively and literarily Escoffery's protagonist's mirror image, comes to be asked by Trelawny the dreaded question that has plagued Trelawny himself throughout his young adulthood: that of what he is. Moreover, Trelawny's fear of a lack of an acceptable answer for what he is makes him put Justin in the same uncomfortable position that he himself has hitherto occupied. Thus he becomes both the victim and the perpetrator of racial bias through his constant struggle for social as well as self-acceptance.

Much like the liminal space that Escoffery's protagonist, as well as Justin, are seen as occupying racially in "In Flux," in "Independent Living" it is El Jefe who proves to be the mirror image for both the author and his narrator. With his Cuban and African heritage, El Jefe is similarly shown to be mistaken for a member of the Dominican diaspora although he actively asserts his Cuban roots every chance he gets. He insists on his Cuban heritage even though he's admitted, Trelawny tells us, "that his almond skin, his too-round nose, and his tight curls are viewed among many of his brethren with distrust and contempt" ("Independent Living" 140), almost mirroring a young Trelawny's inability to fit in and ascribe to himself a stable, homogeneous identity in "In Flux." Here, El Jefe tells Trelawny about this discrimination: "[t]hey act like Africa doesn't pump through Cuba's veins" (141). Discussing the works of Jamaica Kincaid, Muller highlights how "the large-scale arrival of non-Europeans" in the US after World War II helped foster a postcoloniality which allowed "an interrogation of the Anglo-American narrative of empire" (159). It is this interrogation of the narrative of empire that Escoffery's mirror images within both these texts embody and also help uncover for the reader of his short fiction. Herein, Escoffery employs the form of the short story to reflect the fragmented self that itself may never be geographically traced, yet becomes a member of a new class of dispossessed individuals working within oppressive structures of power.

It is not the coherent, cohesive and linearly progressive form of the novel that enables such a politics and poetics of representation for Escoffery, but the short story, which finds publication across literary platforms apart from the traditional book publishing circuit. In an NPR interview about his collection of interlinked short fiction, Escoffery opened up about why *If I Survive You* does not fulfil the characteristics of an assimilationist narrative with an ending that would make his protagonist Trelawny turn out to be a successful writer if he in fact had been based on the author's own life. The writer responds that "I was writing about my fears. I left Miami in 2011, and I never moved back. And I was thinking about what it might have been like had I actually moved back to Miami" (Gross). The mode of multilingual autofictional writing, then, becomes a way for Escoffery to refuse to play into composing stories that in any way, shape, or form can be characterized as "redemptive narratives of global trade, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism" (Gikandi 28). No story within the collection is exclusively meant to be a chapter of a

larger whole. Each is a self-contained work that opens up more questions than it answers, and that never presents one homogenous assimilationist narrative of migration, of displacement. Rather, as this analysis of the stories and the characters who occupy Escoffery's literary universe has shown, his collection of short fiction entails multiple narratives of migration and exile. These short narratives are replete with characters mirroring one another and the author, yet each has their own separate trajectory of transnational heritage. What brings them together is a shared history of colonization and imperial domination.

This article has discussed how Escoffery traces histories of migration that continue to be determined by American and Western European hegemony on the global stage. The author achieves this through both the genre of interlinked short fiction, as well as telling his narrator-protagonist's coming-of-age story, which in itself becomes a mirror for contemporary American society. For Escoffery, the mode of autofiction writing allows for a mapping of the complex trajectories of migration in the American context through his literary persona, Trelawny. What Escoffery thus achieves through these short narratives that make up *If I Survive You* is a playing out of "what if" scenarios that fictionalizing his own life allows him to do. He does so in an attempt to lay bare the intricacies of oppression and suppression of colonial histories in the making of the national myths of America as a signifier of a land where migrant dreams can come true, thus making his stories truly American in the way that both Fishkin and Dimock have envisioned.

Notes

1. The term "'autofiction'" has been credited to Serge Doubrovsky and has been used by French scholars since it came into being in 1977. It is a relatively new theoretical construct in the Anglophone literary context, particularly for transcultural writing.

2. I have opted to use lower-case *w* when mentioning white as a racial identity and upper-case *B* when mentioning Black. For a discussion on why this has become common practice, see Laws. When directly quoting from the stories, I have retained the author's use of upper case for white.

3. Scholars such as Edmonds have examined how "the roots of Jamaica's current crime epidemic" have deeper connections "to the CIA, the Cold War, and the efforts to marginalise the 1970s democratic socialist government of Michael Manley and his People's National Party" (54). This nexus of American Imperialism, which has been responsible for violence in Jamaica following its Independence, particularly in the 1970s, and the subsequent migration of those affected to the United States, is constantly alluded to and highlighted by Escoffery, and forms an integral part of his politics and poetics.

4. Fishkin mentions Jim Zwick's *Mark Twain's Weapons of Satire* (1992) as an exposition of Twain's anti-Imperial writings, in which readers get "to confront in one place Twain's uncensored condemnation of the lies the government told about the Philippine-American war" ("The Transnational Turn in American Studies" 19).

5. I have used the term "unhoused" instead of "homeless" because the former points to the failure of the government in providing affordable homes for its citizens. For a nuanced engagement with this terminology, see Abrams.

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