Forgetting to Forget: Soucouyant and the Topography of the Migrant’s Mind

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Immigrants, particularly those who live in their host country as visible minorities, continuously balance between retaining and releasing memories of home. Mental imbalance, then, upsets this tightrope walk of personal and cultural survival. In an interview about his first novel, Soucouyant (2007), David Chariandy admits that one of his primary character’s struggle with dementia allowed him to “explore the fragility and endurance of cultural memory.” In the novel, the protagonist’s mother, Adele, suffers from increasingly severe pre-senile dementia. An Afro-Trinidadian who migrated to Canada in early adulthood, Adele should be her son’s primary entryway to memories of that “other place” that has shaped his life; but Adele’s dementia makes her an unreliable source about both Trinidad and her life in Canada – inescapable parts of the unnamed protagonist’s own story. For both herself and her son, Adele’s descent into madness results not only in the loss of connection to memory, but also in the loss of protection from some of those memories, as she progressively forgets to forget some of the trauma of her earlier life. The protagonist must deal with previously uncharted territories of his mother’s past while dealing with his own increasingly fragmented present (reflected in the novel’s non-linear form). As part of a larger project on representations of madness in Caribbean Literature, I am interested here in how dementia becomes necessary and formative in the telling of not only a Caribbean immigrant’s story, but the extension of that story in the second-generation’s understanding of place, history and belonging.