I think what I consider home depends on any given day, and it depends on what it is you are referring to. If you talk about where do I physically live, I live in the States. If you're talking about where does my heart identify with home, it will always, or at least for now identify with Jamaica because that's my birthplace. That's important to me. (Zadie, 23)

This article discusses the construction of home and identity among West Indian female labor migrants living in the US cities of Baltimore and New York. By employing Flores' term of "re-membering" (1997) in connection with a discussion of the American Thanksgiving Day celebration, we see how these migrant women's handling of food, music and reciprocal bonds are not merely results of long-time traditions, but rather are reinventions of customs and the embodiment of new sets of living conditions, used as tools when negotiating and shaping female identities in new contexts.

Thanksgiving re-membered

Louise's basement fills with voices and laughter blending together with the inviting smell of different foods spread out on the dining table, simmering in aluminum pans. Slow reggae tunes are turned up a notch, and people are getting comfortable, swaying to the music. The teenagers, watching their parents dancing, grin to each other and one of them asks Louise to put on something else, preferably hip-hop. "This music was very popular when I was young", our 57-year-old hostess states—ending any further debate, smiling yet firm. The youngsters shrug their shoulders. Louise's tapes provide the soundtrack for the rest of the night, and while children, parents and grandparents dance, the youth sit and talk or play dominos while keeping an eye on the dance floor. Occasionally they move their lips to the lyrics and their bodies to the rhythm—protests aside, it is clear they also enjoy Louise's tunes.

The seven self-appointed women in charge, all friends from Jamaica, take turns dishing out seemingly endless portions of jerk chicken, Escovich fish, macaroni pie, patties, pumpkin pudding, curry chicken and goat, coco bread, fried dumplings, plantains, and sorrel, as well as an aphrodisiac soup made of goat testicles known as "manish water". Preparations for this gathering have been going on for weeks; who will bring what has been agreed upon and carefully noted in writing, ensuring that everything worthy of a self-respecting Jamaican kitchen is present for the occasion. The women claim that the food is of utmost importance tonight, bringing together close and distant relatives, neighbors, in-laws, ex's, friends, and friends of friends from all over the US to partake in the festivities in Louise's New York home.

On the walls decorative paper turkeys fight for space in between cut-out paper crosses and framed quotations from the Bible. In the midst of all this, sitting on a white paper tablecloth covered with small printed turkeys, is an actual roasted turkey (ideally on "everybody's" dinner table in the United States this evening).

"Well, this is the American Thanksgiving Day, not the Jamaican, so we make the turkey. When in Rome, you know", Louise explains while arranging every dish over small burners spread out on the table.

"And the kids want it", her friend Sophie adds, "They like to mix everything. I actually like it too, because it’s not as greasy as Caribbean food". Sophie pats herself on the hips, and the women laugh.

Louise's sister who is visiting from Canada chips in: "Really, it's true—here we can choose the best of both worlds".

This Thanksgiving Day gathering in New York reveals the breadth of the cultural frontiers being negotiated and renegotiated by West Indians living in the United States. Through rituals, as contrasted to "everyday life", mixes of old and new customs come more noticeably to the fore, actively being recreated and embodied. People thus take part in what Flores (1997) refers to as "re-membering" of the social body.

Inspired by Turner's analysis of ritual incorporation, Flores advocates integration into US society through the establishment of equal cultural rights, (a cultural citizenship) independent of their official legal status. While Flores discusses the use of minority cultural expression to allow members of mainstream society to "re-member" other, marginal, cultural values, it is also possible to see how my informants actively utilize mainstream US rituals in order to create a migrant lifestyle.

Does the Thanksgiving celebration function as a uniting factor, creating a feeling of having "come home", of enjoying equal cultural rights, or does this day create the opposite effect among these West Indians, underscored by the fact that many do not have the opportu-
nities or economic means to celebrate the day according to the frameworks put forward by middle-class US values? Is their way of participating in this Thanksgiving ritual indicative of their integration into US society, or of their rejection by it?

One people, one love?

The Thanksgiving Day I shared with my informants took place two months after the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. For many people across the country, and particularly on the East coast, Thanksgiving celebrations this year were laden with extra symbolism, reinforced by media commentary emphasizing a return to “family values” and countless reminders of how “being united” was at the core of this celebration. Newspaper stories claiming that “the American people” had finally been united across ethnic and religious lines as a result of the crisis appeared side by side with stories of estranged families finding back to each other, and once alienated singles opening up to each other and forming couples. While the stories were indeed heartening, most of my informants, however, had in fact cancelled their plans to visit their out-of-town families out of fear of heavy traffic due to roadblocks or danger due to further terrorist attacks.

After decades of considerable debate, the US Congress sanctioned Thanksgiving Day in 1941 as a secular state holiday to be observed every fourth Thursday in November. Through a ritualized meal featuring turkey, corn, cranberries, pumpkin pie, sweet potatoes and cornbread, families and friends are encouraged to come together in “remembrance” of the first (British) pilgrims’ escape from religious persecution in 17th-century Europe, and the pilgrims’ sharing of a meal from the first harvest with the native population of their newly adopted land. Perhaps this celebration of an idealized past was originally intended to foster an all-embracing, (national) solidarity, regardless of religion, ethnicity, and citizenship. For those I spoke with, Thanksgiving seemed to be about “bringing people together” despite their differences, and a day to “give thanks” for what they had been given. This holiday can thus be interpreted as a celebration of a new home in a new country, of people coexisting in harmony, with the theoretical possibility of making people feel included as equals in what Anderson (1991 [1983]) would call an “imagined community” of the United States.

Although Thanksgiving Day for many “Americans” and migrants has come to represent a chance to express family togetherness, and, on a larger scale, of being “one people under the flag” (especially in the wake of the September 11th attacks), some West Indians mentioned feeling particularly strange about celebrating a “united” US as they had been experiencing increased prejudice by strangers on a daily basis, being mistaken for being “Arabs”, and, by extension, “terrorists”.

In the months following September 11th it seemed for a brief moment that many African-Americans—languishing at the bottom of mainstream US society’s not always unspoken social hierarchy—had high hopes of finally finding inclusion in the society their ancestors had played such a vital role in building. Inspired by media slogans and “United we stand” banners decorating what seemed to be every gas station and storefront in Baltimore and New York, quite a few African-American people commented to me that “unfortunately it had to take a national crisis to finally unite all Americans”. Although some might have caught a temporary glimpse of acceptance, new categories of outsiders were formed, pushing people with Arabic backgrounds, as well as my informants and other ethnic groups, further down the rungs of acceptance.

My informants interpreted this moment in history differently. Some claimed they felt more out of place in the US now than before, but “didn’t care”, as they had never wanted to be a part of US society anyway. Others saw the new slogans as a long awaited opportunity to become “real Americans”, only to be disappointed when it became clear that the inclusion of “foreigners” would continue to remain an elusive promise. “I don’t think I will ever feel American”, said Tracy from Trinidad when discussing her upcoming citizenship test. “There are just so many things I do not embrace—I cannot. They [Americans] are just too ignorant towards all other people. I will never understand their exclusion and complacency. It is not how I envision my home”.

When in Rome

Many migrants have high expectations when coming to the US even though these ideals and dreams might become strenuous to live up to. In their search for acceptance within the “established” society, many of the women I met found it hard to “reach up to Americans”, and experienced that in order to be treated as equals, they had to be more of everything. They felt they had to know more, own more, and work more in order to take part in what “real Americans” would “take for granted”. Zadie from Jamaica felt herself to be even more of an outsider in the US society because, in order to gain citizenship, she had to memorize historical facts and undergo tests that, in her experience “not even real Americans know the answer to”. Many of my informants’ struggle to live up to the cultural and economic middle-class ideals which frame the “traditional” Thanksgiving celebration, highlight the struggles of both foreigners and working class people in the United States.

Several of the West Indian women would independently of each other use the phrase “When in Rome... ” when discussing their plans for Thanksgiving Day, explaining that they would like to celebrate it “like Americans do”. Ironically though, the seemingly inclusive “all-American” day, designed to invoke feelings of togetherness and unitedness, provided many of my informants with a pointed awareness that their lifestyles did not in fact conform with the officially sanctioned picture of US society. Although Thanksgiving is a national holiday, most of the women I got to know did
not get free from work that day, and therefore did not get the opportunity to plan and celebrate a dinner with family and friends. Arlene from Trinidad spent her Thanksgiving working late, caring for a disabled man in his family’s home in Baltimore. Returning home at midnight, she was greeted by a big (curried) turkey dinner prepared for her by her boyfriend. Ginger, working double shifts at her family restaurant, “completely forgot about the whole thing until it was too late to start cooking”, and her small Jamaican family in Baltimore did not do anything special that day.

Notions of home

Until recently, “home” was not a much discussed concept in anthropological research, mostly referred to in terms of “house” or “household” (cf. Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995, as noted in Rapport & Overing 2000:157). Today, anthropologists have begun to explore the nature of home as something more than a physical space or economic/corporate unit, using the term in reference to a state of being, or awareness of the interrelated self. As theoretically less static notions of “home” have developed, “home” has come to refer to the social comfort zone and sense of self that people eventually acquire “whenever they decamp” (Rapport & Overing 2000:158). Following Wright’s conceptualization of “home”, it “must encompass cultural norms and individual fantasies, representations of and by individuals and groups”. He emphasizes “memory and longing, the conventional and the creative: the ideational, the affective and the physical: the spatial and the temporal: the local and the global” (cf. Wright 1991:214, as noted in Rapport & Overing 2000:157–58). The concept transcends traditional ways by which identity is analytically classified and defined (according to locality, ethnicity, religiosity or nationality) and is sensitive to allocating of identity which may be multiple, situational, individual and paradoxical”. (Wright 1991:214, in Rapport & Overing 2000:157–58)

This particular theoretical approach to “home” as something both ideational and behavioral clearly found resonance among my informants. Most of them had become US citizens, while several renewed their green cards (resident alien permits) every ten years, and some traveled to and from the US on holiday visas for periods of three to six months. Only very few who had taken—or contemplated taking—the citizenship test, expressed any emotions regarding the acquisition of US citizenship. In fact, the reasons that were shared with me by the women were pragmatic and to the point. To be in possession of a US passport would ease the process of going ”home” for visits, as this would guarantee the passport holder re-entry into the US after a long stay abroad. Owning this passport, a few pointed out, would also prevent them from being mistreated in customs on arrival to Florida or New York as “they [the custom authorities] always think Caribbean people carry drugs”. Being treated and enabled to live like “everyone else”—read: “Americans”—was stressed as important by all. While naturalization obviously could make their lives easier, the women nevertheless placed greater importance on their experience of what Flores calls a cultural rather than a national citizenship (Flores 1997).

“For a world of travelers”, author John Berger writes, “... home comes to be located in a routine set of practices, in a repetition of habitual social interactions, in styles of dress and address, in memories and myths, in stories carried around in one’s head”. (Berger 1984, as summarized in Rapport & Overing 2000:159). What and where my West Indian female informants in Baltimore and New York considered “home”, differed greatly, and it was evident that the distinctions of home were multiple and not easily defined. The importance of family, networks, food and music was, however, strongly stressed by all my informants, and always among the first things mentioned when talking about what they considered vital aspects of their lives. It was clearly something that they saw as a primarily defining factor for their individual identities and sense of belonging.

Some of my informants were born in Baltimore, while others had come to the United States as children, teenagers or adults. Most of them either dated or had married men with West Indian backgrounds that they had met in New York or Baltimore, and many expressed reluctance towards finding an “American” spouse or boyfriend. “He doesn’t have to be Trinidadian, but I prefer him to be Caribbean!” Charlotte, from Trinidad explained to me and a group of her friends at Arlene’s party, “I am not a racist or anything, I just have never met an American guy who is interested in what is important to me, like the food and the music”. Mary, Charlotte’s friend and single mother nodded vigorously, adding, “That’s right! He has to love the food and the music. He must understand me”.

Mary equates the ability of a man to be able to understand her, with his being able to take an interest in what she sees as her cultural frame of reference. Although Mary and her friends clearly categorized potential husbands and boyfriends according to their nationality, it is also likely that these women’s relationships with men were not defined by the men’s actual national identification, whether American or Trinidadian, Jamaican or Bajan, but rather the men’s openness towards West Indian music, food and their desire to partake in the women’s networks of friends and families. In other words: his participation in her daily life. “Being American”, the women claimed in other contexts, was of little emotional importance or value. Exhibiting the same rights and being able to partake in daily life on equal terms, however, was given much empha-

3Emic term, referring to males born in the US with a non-Caribbean background.
sis, within this context it is interesting to note that nearly all the women shared a wish to participate in "American" events and rituals such as the Thanksgiving celebrations.

Collective becoming: Liminality and cultural identity

"Home is any given day"

Oyvind Fuglerud (2001) describes the diasporic condition as a double bind; on the one hand, an individual can harbor social and emotional connections (sometimes thought of or described as "roots") to a place one is physically cut off from, while on the other hand simultaneously feel an investment in one’s place of residence, and a total lack of acceptance. Zadie, quoted at the beginning of this article, provides this double bind with a face. When her mother migrated to Baltimore with Zadie and her sister, Zadie felt cut off from a physical place which she referred to as her "safety zone". Now, eight years later, Zadie still feels strongly connected to her birthplace, although admits that going back to Jamaica now would be difficult.

Do I think I would fit in at home if I moved back to Jamaica tomorrow? Probably not. My friends that I knew there, most of them live now here in the States and only their parents are there, you know, we are all growin’ apart. . . But I can’t identify with friends here. I don’t have long-time friends here. I don’t have memories here. [S]o . . . Home is any given day; it depends on the reference when you use it. (Zadie)

With the majority of her childhood friends currently scattered across the United States, Zadie no longer feels she has connections to "real life" in Jamaica, except for memories which, despite being formed at an early age, are still extremely important to her. She claims to feel out of place both in Jamaica and Baltimore, and “home” to her—at age 23—is a set of stories about "good old days" and "my homeland", built around her childhood in Jamaica. Many of Zadie’s childhood friends who shared her family’s middle-class aspirations and opportunities have also experienced relocation, but Zadie, not currently part of a well functioning social network in Baltimore nor in the West Indies, has had to explore her migrant identity on her own.

When I asked Zadie during an interview if she thought her feelings of home would ever change, she replied:

I will quite possibly identify with here if I eventually meet the man of my dreams, marry someone who lives here, and again if my newer memories become more important to me such as marriage and kids and a great job, you know. Do I think that Jamaica will ever lose the place in my heart that it has? No, I still intend to take my kids back and show them where mom came from, and we still have our home, own our homes in Jamaica, both my grandmother’s house and my mother’s home. I still have a best friend that lives down there, so there’s still people I can identify with, but right now I’m in that quasi mode state, because I’m even thinkin’ about moving to London. So—who knows . . .

Zadie is open to the idea that changes in her perception of home can occur if she eventually sees that there is a place for her, her dreams and her values in Baltimore. She is seeking acceptance for who she is, and for now this is represented by a dream of marrying "an American" and of feeling appreciated at her work. She refers to being in what feels like a "quasi mode state" which bears striking resemblance to Turner’s descriptions of liminality, of finding oneself in a situation of in-betweeness (Turner 1969). In his discussion of the three stages of rites of passage, Turner describes the individual as standing outside known society and in a sense also outside of itself, in a state "betwixt and between", influenced by van Gennep’s process of three identity-forming statuses (1984 [1960]). Turner labels the phase after the individual’s separation from a traditional society during ritual rite of passage, yet before its final incorporation [aggregation] back into society, as liminality.4

Global identity, liminal identity

Food is vital to the continuation of cultural identity. Its preparation, gestures, and labor recalls traditional ways of being and relating. The taste, smell, and texture of food carry us home, and sharing food with family and friends in traditional ways reinforces the memories, emotions, and legitimacy of the old ways. (Mortland 1994:22)

The goal and dilemma of my informants is to maintain West-Indianness while cultivating agency within US society. As discussed above, adaptation to US society can be understood as a state of perpetual liminality in which both West Indian and US cultural ballast are negotiated and contested within transnational contexts and networks. Facing the relative exclusion of having to work on Thanksgiving Day, being overworked and having few nearby friends, the West Indian women established their own environments for celebrations, spicing things up with familiar customs and traditions from the West Indies. Their American-born children were made aware of their West Indian heritage in Baltimore and New York through the West Indian food, music and customs incorporated into supposedly “all-American” days of celebration. This integration of

4Referred to as a period of transition or merge by van Gennep (1984 [1960]).
cultural knowledge is thus *embodied*, says Connerton (1989), and comes to play an important role in identity formation.

At a holiday party at Arlene’s house in Baltimore, Bell, the five-year-old daughter of Arlene’s brother’s African-American girlfriend, was encouraged to “whine” with Arlene and her friends. “Are you a real Trini?” Arlene asked the little girl while the upbeat Caribbean Christmas carols pumped out of the speakers in their living room. “Then show us that you can ‘whine’!” The 5-year-old girl took her cue and moved her body like she was supposed to, receiving enormous positive attention and appreciation. In this way she was welcomed into the “social memory” (Connerton 1989) of being a ”Trini” shared by the other people at the party, increasing her embodied knowledge of the culture. Through music, food and body language Bell will learn both explicit and unspoken values and rules of conduct.

Closely related to Connerton (1989), Turner (1969), and Flores (1997), Mortland (1994) uses the term “collective becoming” (coined by Guidieri and Pellizzi, 1988) to describe how Cambodian refugees re-establish ties with family and friends as part of the process of maintaining “fundamentals of Cambodian life” or a sense of “Cambodianness” expressed through language, social relations, food, music, and rituals in the United States. Mortland argues that food and rituals concerning food are essential for preserving and shaping a diasporic and personal identity in the United States. Quite similar to my informants’ approach to being betwixt and between, Mortland’s Cambodian refugees “bounce back and forth between attempts at Americanization and struggles to re-establish Cambodianness” (Mortland 1994:5).

My informants experienced being simultaneously both “outsiders”, and to some extent, “insiders” in both US and West Indian society. While Zygmunt Bauman (1990, 1991) refers to the age of modernity as one of ambivalence, Elisabeth Fürst (1994) makes use of “ambiguity” in her description of the modern life of women in general. Migrant women’s processes of breaking from their societies of origin, relocating, and keeping “one foot in each place” while undergoing integration into a new society, forces them into what could be described as a kind of perpetual liminality. Many reported a sense of non-belonging in line with Fürst’s notion of ambiguity, finding themselves “betwixt and between” clearly defined normative cultural statuses. Among these lines, Turner’s liminal individual can be seen as a migrant, and vice versa.

Although the notion of liminality can be employed to gain an understanding of the individual experience of migration, Turner’s original usage is not entirely commensurate with the reality of the situation, as these women did not have a geographically defined “home” to be “reintegrated” back into. Most find themselves excluded from Anderson’s “imagined community” (1991) framed within nations of “West Indians” or ”Americans”, having spent decades away from their birthplace, most never having returned other than for short visits. Meanwhile, the societies they left have been steadily changing, and returning would for most of my informants mean yet another readjustment to yet another new and different society.

Returning to Baltimore after a three-week visit to Trinidad where I had stayed with Arlene’s family, I showed Arlene a videotape from the country she had left behind 15 years earlier and had not been back to since. To her surprise, she was unable to recognize the layout of the city or the bustle on the streets. Even the house she had grown up in was unrecognizable to her, having been altered extensively over the years. ”It all looks so different”, she commented quietly, while her Trinidad-born boyfriend teased her for her ignorance. “But”, Arlene struck back, giggling quietly and pointing to the interior of her parent’s house on the screen, ”it is just as much my home now as then, because I remember buying almost everything I see in that house!”

After 15 years of diligently sending remittances to her family in Trinidad, Arlene feels a partial claim of ownership towards her childhood home. For Arlene, home represents a material as well as emotional investment. Through remittances and daily phone conversations with her extended family in Trinidad, Arlene sees herself as a vital part of and participant in their everyday lives, despite not having been able to be there with them in person. Through material gifts, Arlene enforces feelings of solidarity with her family. In fact, Arlene’s material investment in her family seems to have facilitated her ability to “cash in” emotionally, to sustain “her place” in the extended Trinidad-based household.

Karen Fog Olwig makes a similar observation concerning long-time off-island migrants’ claims to the “family home”, describing the relationship within the context of a history of slavery, colonization and the structural, economic and social difficulties for African descendants to work and buy land in the West Indies (Olwig 1993, 1997).

**Is home where the heart is, or where you hang your hat?**

Peter Berger’s description of the migratory process as “a spreading condition of homelessness” (Berger et al. 1973:138) corresponds well with Zadie’s perception of having lost her home, and finding herself in a “quasi mode state”—betwixt and between, non-belonging—struggling to find new “safe zones” in Baltimore. In contrast, as part of a functioning transnational family network, Arlene found that reciprocal family ties played a dominant role in her understanding of self, her life situation and her sense of home and belonging in the US. Thus she did not try very hard to “fit in” or become integrated in Baltimore society, surrounding herself instead with people she felt gave her the sense of safety that she needed for her own individual devel-
development, people who appreciated her role within a West Indian context as a caretaker and provider, a "hard worker".

Zadie, on the other hand, sought attention and acceptance among middle-class people who did not share her background, who viewed her with skepticism and perhaps also as a source of competition at the office. Evening out the contrast between the comfort (zone) of a home where one can feel safe, and other people’s feelings of safety with regards to one’s person and intentions, is an ongoing challenge faced by these migrant women every day of their lives in the US. Their takes on “home” thus appear more fluid and relational, rather than static and geographical, their actions and statements underscoring the importance of feeling themselves as part of a group of people with whom they could share a meal, dance with—or talk to on the phone.

Whether one, like Zadie, views home as "where the heart is", or like Arlene, sees home as "opinions, gestures, . . . even the way one wears a hat" (quoting Berger 1984:64), for most of the women “home” existed within the space of reciprocal bonds, in the feeling of belonging and being part of a larger fellowship—and eventually in the feeling of being accepted. Whether these bonds or networks of families and friends existed within transnational, national or local neighborhood quarters seemed to be irrelevant. The women who were enmeshed in close reciprocal bonds in both the US as well as in the West Indies came across as feeling more adjusted and content with life and their everyday situation in the US than other West Indian women lacking these reciprocal bonds.

Ironically, by existing somewhat on the margins, as “outsiders” in the West Indies and in the US, while still maintaining their place within the social memory through sending remittances and keeping in touch with people in the West Indies, many of the women in Baltimore and New York served in a fundamental way to support and reinforce West Indian society’s traditional structures. Simultaneously they also seemed to be revitalizing historic and contemporary structures within the US. Connecting old traditions and cultural references with new ones, these women create spaces for themselves within their families and workplaces while at the same time shaping their independent selves.

Composing oneself, or as Giddens (1991) puts it, building a biography of the self, is an integral part of creating new identities, homes and feelings of belonging. It entails processes of incorporation, embodied knowledge, and unspoken rules of conduct. In addition come personal memories, preferences and individual choices. Participation in Thanksgiving Day rituals is merely one arena in which West Indian women are adapting new customs and experiencing impulses of a new culture, while at the same time upholding and recreating old traditions from their countries of origin. Exploring the meanings and praxis of the Thanksgiving ritual can nevertheless provide us with insights concerning people’s

lives and notions of home—although these might not reflect the same understandings of home and belonging expressed by the normative or mainstream society.

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