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**Abstract**: This article asks the question: “What does it mean to think about ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ when migratory experience is enmeshed with the story of depression?” by drawing on a life story narrated by a woman who migrated from the United States (US) to Australia and whose sense of disconnection and displacement in relation to everyday life is embedded within a narrative of depression. We locate our discussion of her narrative of emotional distress and migration within theoretical debates about depression, migration and the constitution of subjectivity. We argue that her emotional distress and the medical diagnosis of depression could be seen as a way ‘to experience oneself as a subject’ (Butler 2005) and they function as the precondition for providing her narrative of migration, Both of these narratives simultaneously provide retroactive order to her subjectivity. They function as double gaze for her own identity which is experienced as a loss (loss of her ‘home’, loss of oneself ) in a search for happiness.

**Keywords**: depression and migration; illness life stories; anxiety and subjectivity, Judith Butler; Jacques Lacan;

**Being marked as different: the emotional politics of experiences of depression and migrant belongings**

If anybody lives away from their homeland, no matter how difficult their experience is when growing up, you need to go home on a regular basis. I can say that unequivocally to someone…. I hadn’t been home for eleven and a half years and that’s when I developed a more sincere form of depression then. …eleven and a half years was far too long, and you actually feel you lose your grounded, you, you lose your grounding, you lose your fiber, you lose your identity. You lose everything when you don’t go home to your homeland. It’s a part of your identity, of who you are and how you identify yourself to yourself and to other people, you know. (Jane)

**1. Introduction**

What does it mean to think about ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ when migratory experience is enmeshed with the story of depression? What does it mean to talk about the ‘place of origin’ when experience of home is shaped by feelings of emotional distress that become central to the production of identity? In this article we explore such questions by focusing on a life story told by a woman, Jane, who migrated from the United States of America (the US) to Australia when she was eighteen, and whose sense of disconnection and displacement in relation to everyday life resulted in prolonged emotional distress and in receiving a medical diagnosis of depression. Jane’s story was collected as a part of a larger narrative study on experiences of depression in Australia. She was forty-seven years old at the time of the interview, and described herself as an immigrant, of German-American descent, to Australia. She is a qualified book-keeper, but was not in paid employment at the time of the interview through her own choice. She also described herself as an artist. Jane felt that she lived her entire life with the ‘spectre of depression’. She always tried to please her family, both in the US and Australia, but she felt nothing she did was ‘good enough’.

Until relatively recently, a focus on ‘narratives’ and ‘life stories’ about illness (Buchbinder 2010) have been notably absent from social science research, particularly in relation to migrant experiences and the constitution of subjectivity. Here we take the narrative account of depression as our starting point, in order to elucidate dynamics of depression and feelings of anxiety as specific practices that contribute to the constitution of subjectivity. Specifically, we demonstrate how the production of Jane’s life narrative as a constant search for ‘the authentic self’ is shaped by the telling of her story of depression as a medical condition. It is in this space that migration and longing for home are described in terms of a failure of the self and the loss of identity.

**2. Emotional distress as a basic social response**

According to Taylor, to know who we are is to be oriented to a ‘moral horizon’, where questions about what is good or bad, and what is worth doing are played out (Taylor 1989, 28). In postmodern culture, there is recognition that universal norms and values are not possible, but there is an emphasis on ‘self-understanding’ as a precondition for living a moral life according to one’s own moral horizon. In his seminal book, *The Weariness of the Self* (2010), French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg approaches depression as a key feature of contemporary individualism. For Ehrenberg, the modern depression ‘epidemic’ stems from personal feelings of inadequacy in a cultural context that demands success and achievement from autonomous individuals. The depression label brings together ‘in one pathological entity’, all the obstacles that prevent us from realizing our social ideals and contributing successfully to liberal society (Ehrenberg 2010, xiii).

Similarly, Ann Cvetkovich argues that in recent years there has been a tendency to discuss emotional distress and depression primarily along a ‘personal/medical’ axis, and this dichotomy both relieves individuals of responsibility for their emotional distress – it’s just genes or chemicals’ – and provides opportunities for agency – ‘you can fix it by taking a pill’ (2012, 24). Much of the social science literature raises concerns that the increasing emphasis on this dichotomy (personal/medical) fails to take account of the emotional, cultural, social and gendered contexts that shape experiences of emotional distress (see Horwitz & Wakefield 2007; Fullagar 2008; Kokanovic, Bendelow & Philip 2012; and Kokanovic & Philip forthcoming). Cvetkovich notes that while social explanations of depression usefully highlight the social and cultural context of emotional distress, they risk reducing subjects to victims of various forces such as racism, capitalism and so on. In other words, even when depression is thought of as a cultural or social phenomenon, the use of the term remains problematic because its complexity could be reduced to examinations of the effects of its naturalization and normalization. What is needed, Cvetkovich argues, are readings of depression narratives as narratives ‘that can mediate between the personal and the social’ (Cvetkovich 2012, 15) and that can explain the violence of culture that produces feelings of despair and anxiety.

On a personal level, these feelings can bring about what Taylor (1989, 27-28) calls ‘an acute form of disorientation’ or ‘radical uncertainty’. Individuals describe a sense of not knowing who they really are, or where they stand in relation to significant events and possibilities in life, which is painful and frightening (Taylor 1989, 27-28). But, as Joan Copjec argues, whilst experienced as personal and isolating, these feelings are also ‘a basic social response’ (2006, 165). In this context, emotional distress and the medical diagnosis of depression could be seen as a way ‘to experience oneself as a subject’, as one who is ‘fundamentally split from oneself’ (Copjec 2006, 167). In what follows, we draw on theoretical work influenced by psychoanalytic approaches and discourse theory that stresses that processes of *identification* underline the ways we narrate ‘who we are’ and ‘who we were’ (Ahmed 2000; Butler 2005; Copjec 2006; Laclau 2007; and Žižek 1997). In examining Jane’s life story our major aims are: (1) to understand the way she experiences her migration from US to Australia and (2) to explore the articulation of her account of that experience with her identification and experience of the medical diagnosis of depression.

**3. Subject as the lack of being**

According to Copjec, a subject is always split (2006, 167), ‘the lack of being’ (Laclau and Zac 1994, 32) that simultaneously demands the closure of an identity and prevents it. Here Copjec, Laclau and Zac rely on Lacan’s theory of the emergence of the subject in the ‘mirror stage’, where the primacy of the act of identification is stressed in the process of subjectification. For Lacan, the mirror stage is formative of the first image of the self as a unity. He explains that the child, in a series of fragmented movements, perceives itself in relation to the mirror world of reflections for the first time as ‘I’. This is an ideal ‘I’, a spatial imaginary identity since it cannot eliminate the real un-coordination of the body. So the child tries to accomplish in language a stable identity, to gain an adequate representation through the world of words (Stavrakakis 1999, 18). But by submitting to the world of words, the child is also submitting her/himself to the symbolic, and becomes a subject in language.

The symbolic is something that we usually perceive of as ‘reality’; it includes language, law, social rituals, science, customs etc., it is the world of words, of representations. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) argue that the symbolic (the social) does not exist as a given object, but is always a process, incompleteness, and a fissure. All societies and identities are constructed within specific discursive formations, and they are results of articulatory practices. The practice of articulation consists of different discursive attempts to fix the meaning of the social. Laclau and Mouffe call these partial fixations of the social ‘nodal points’. The full closure of society is impossible, but it is exactly the idea of closure that functions as an ideal.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the symbolic, the subject becomes a subject in language and accepts the laws of language: ‘[t]he symbolic provides a form into which the subject is inserted at the level of his being…[and it is] on this basis that the subject recognises himself/herself as being this or that’ (Laclau and Zac 1994, 35). But the world of words (signifiers) fails to represent the subject and in that way the subject becomes an effect of the word, of the signifier. As Laclau and Zac (1994, 32) put it:

Every signifier fails to represent the subject and leaves a residue: something fails to be reflected in the mirror-world of reflections. There is an essential asymmetry, between projection and introjection, for although the image is brought in, it remains outside; the inside ‘starts’ outside. In other words, not everything is reflected in the image-mirror, and what remains on the other side is the impossible, the primarily repressed. This asymmetry points to the faults that install uncertainty and trigger identifications. The moment of failure marks the emergence of the subject of lack through the fissures of the discursive chain.

The subject, ‘as the lack of being’, is constitutive, it constantly generates new identifications. All of these identifications are mis-identifications in the sense that they hold out a false promise of ‘suture’, of closure of identity formation. Our theoretical approach to understanding both, a migrant’s narrative and an illness narrative, the notion of ‘the good life’ and processes of re-imagining home mediated by the experiences of disruption and displacement as one tries to re-orientate, is informed by these assumptions and ideas about the self in society; that the subject experiences itself as lack and constantly tries to fill this lack through different identifications which are available in the social, but the social itself (the symbolic) is incomplete and lacking (Stavrakakis 1999). The feeling of anxiety in migrants’ narratives, or an illness narratives, like in any other narratives, could be seen as a result of the failure of the act of identification with which the subject submits her/himself to the power relations that exist in the social, to specific subject positions that are socially produced and into which the subject is never completely interpellated (Žižek 1994, 62).

In this view the subject is in its inception a kind of fantasy construction; it is split, a lack that constantly demands the closure of an identity. Yet all demands of the subject for closure (different identifications) do not guarantee a stable identity; ‘I’ is always threatened by something beyond identity, by something in me that is both not me and more than me, something that cannot be represented by signifiers, but at the same time is at the base of each representation. For Lacan this is the ‘real’, a phase of the subject before or ‘after’ being written and overwritten with signifiers. By entering into the symbolic, the subject sacrifices an immediate access to the real, to the *jouissance*, it becomes alienated and this ‘alienation constitutes the subject as such’ (Vrbančić 2011, 17). This lack of the subject is productive since the subject continuously tries to fill it, to close it with different identifications, but there is no identification in the symbolic, in the social that can restore the real. The sacrifice of *jouissance* causes desire for it and in that context *jouissance* becomes posited as an external object, the ‘first outside’, which remains desirable but still impossible (Žižek 1989, 170).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Judith Butler agrees that all subject positions are necessarily incomplete, but, contrary to the argument that even before the process of subjectification starts the subject is already lack, she argues that the lack is the result of ‘the failure of any particular articulation to describe the population it represents’, hence ‘every subject is constituted differentially’ (2005). In her work *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Butler argues that the self is formed within a set of social conventions, through cultural norms, so the way one makes sense of one’s own experience is dependent on the presence of others – an account of oneself ‘is not simply a mode of communicating the content and intentions of a self to the other’, it ‘is simultaneously the precondition for a subject naming and providing retroactive order to its own subjectivity’.

We suggest that these theories enable us to understand that what we call the subject’s experience does not reflect an objective pre-given reality (Brah 2005). This means that the way the subject experiences reality and gives an account of that experience is already structured by the subject’s relationship to the other. Moreover, as Butler argues, in the process of giving account of oneself the structure of ‘address’ becomes constitutive, it underlines the account giving (2005).

Jane’s narrative was collected upon her volunteering to participate in a study on experiences of depression. Ethnographic narrative interview allowed her to reflect on and hypothesize about her identity, and the cultural and social circumstances that have shaped it (Manderson 2011). Merleau-Ponty (1962) suggests that the goal of narration in the interview context is to establish a sense of validity, an accommodation of the present as a true way of being-in-the-world. In that context, Jane presents an account of ‘my illness and me’, but the nature of the interview provided her with a space to contextualize this experience in broader social relationships and the complexities of her life that were not confined to her ‘depression’. Her narrative of depression was a way to describe her past and current life and provide insight into social and cultural processes determining her agency in social relationships, concerning her family of origin, her migration from USA to Australia, her intimate relationships and relationships with her broader social network. In that context, as Butler argues, ‘moral questions not only emerge in the context of social relationships but the form these questions take changes according to the context, and even that context, in some sense, inheres in the form of questions’ (2005, 3).

Here we discuss how her narrative about depression becomes an umbrella to talk about ‘home’ and ‘homing desires’ (Brah 2005): desires to feel happy and secure achieved by a self-narration that becomes a ‘strategic and selective process’ in the quest for ‘rectification of perceived injustice’ (Buchbinder 2010, 108). First we discuss pertinent issues relevant to migration and the meaning of home in migrant narratives. Second, drawing on Jane’s narrative on depression we examine how her story about migration and geographical displacement is articulated within narratives about emotional displacements and subsequent disappointments. Finally, we conclude with the idea of home as a space of continuous negotiation of identity in search of the happy self.

**4. Migration and ‘the promise of happiness’**

According to Ahmed (2010, 41) we live in a time when ‘the promise of happiness’ structures and regulates our life, and when we hear terms like ‘happy families’ or ‘happy citizens’ we ‘register the connection of these words in the familiarity of their affective resonance’. We feel alienated ‘when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attributed as being good’, when we are not ‘aligned with others’, or when we ‘are not facing the right way’ (Ahmed 2010, 41-45). The labour of making yourself in a way that leads to ‘the good life’ can create feelings of failure and disappointment and make an anxious narrative of self-doubt.

For Brah, issues relating to migration and settling down are often related to questions of (dis)placements of ‘home’ and a movement to the establishment of ‘the good life’. But the notion of ‘the good life’ is mediated by memories of what was left behind ‘and by the experiences of disruption and displacement as one tries to re-orientate, to form new social networks, and learns to negotiate new economic, political and cultural realities’ (Brah 2005, 194). ‘Moving out of home’ is always embedded in particular maps and histories, within relations of power and ‘differential movements of subjects who do not share equal entitlements to claim a space as “home”’ (Fortier 2003, 132). It is simultaneously about ‘dislocation’, ‘displacement’ and ‘location’. But when we talk about migrants’ location, as Ahmed argues, the question is not just about how migrants are located within a new social space but also about how ‘bodies re-inhabit space’ and even how ‘spaces re-inhabit bodies’ (2000, 90). The issue is that leaving ‘home’ involves leaving the lived experience of everyday life, but it also involves leaving space which was not only outside the subject. As she puts it, ‘being-at-home suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, *inhabit each other*’ (Ahmed 2000, 89). So, migrant narratives express a triple dislocation: spatial (home as a particular place), inner spatial (home as a place we are inhabited by) and temporal (home as the past).

One of our key concerns in this article is to consider dislocations in Jane’s narrative and how boundaries of what is perceived to be ‘home’ are interwoven with particular forms of ‘crisis over identity’. In addition to Ahmed’s triple dislocation we discuss how the temporal dislocation often include ‘homing desire’ - processes of re-imagining home. In her analysis of queer migration and remembrances of home, Fortier points out that ‘homing desires’ ‘are not only the effect of migration, but are part and parcel of the daily practices of making home’. These practices may be ‘a labour of love, or hatred’; ‘it may be haunted by fear of loss or filled with hope for different, more peaceful and equitable futures’ (2003, 10). In other words, the idea of home is never fixed, it is constantly redefined and ‘reprocessed’ in relation to a set of social norms, institutions and so on that will or will not constitute its recognizability. In that respect we could say that migrant narratives, like all other narratives, are results of constitutive incompleteness, of the continual desire for meaningful selfhood. When they are embedded within the narrative on depression, they become in-between sites of multiple dislocations, negotiated again and again in the constant search for the happier and better life. As Butler argues, in relation to the other we are always dispossessed from ourselves, always incomplete, always strangers to ourselves, and that is why it is possible to give an account of oneself in the first place, to offer a story in which selfhood is (re)produced in the very act of telling, always partial and continuously undergoing revisions (2005, 27).

In the next section we analyze Jane’s narrative of herself in order to examine the ways her story of depression intermingles with her story on migration. What happens when all identifications with ‘desired ways of life’ fail and when a new place of residence, due to migration, perpetually fails to deliver feelings of ‘belonging’? Further, what happens when a lack of good feeling or happiness is experienced as a cause of despair and anxiety, when self-images are always incomplete and relate to the place of origin, when emotional (de)attachments are articulated between stories about life remembered and retold, imagined and desired, and where ‘here’ and ‘there’ are constantly re-negotiated in the formation of ‘new beginning’ and a ‘good happy life’? Happiness in this context is how the subject deals with her own lack, and with the lack in the symbolic.

**5. Jane’s life-story: my illness and me**

Jane’s life story presents complex family circumstances. She was born in the US, to a Dutch mother and an English father. She began her story with a description of her childhood. According to Butler our effort to give an account of our own life is to make ourself recognizable and understandable (2005, 26). And for Jane, in order to tell her story, her illness became the main signifier that structured her narrative. As she explained she was very ill as a toddler, spending prolonged periods in hospital where her mother was rarely allowed to visit her. She says this impacted badly on her relationships with her older brother and sister, who she believes were resentful that their mother gave Jane special concern and attention at home on account of her illness. Growing up, Jane felt she always tried to please her mother and her siblings, but she felt nothing she did was ‘good enough’, particularly not in the eyes of her brother and sister. Her parents divorced when Jane was twelve years old, and her father died by suicide a few years later. In hindsight, Jane and her family believed that he suffered from ‘some type of bipolar condition’. She struggled to come to terms with his suicide for a long time. She clearly remembered him coming to see her at her school and taking her out for the afternoon just shortly before he committed suicide.

Actually I’ll back up - when I was 15 years old my father suicided. My mother and father had been separated for a few years at that stage and the last time I saw him, he came into the school and I was called into the office and he wanted to take me out for lunch. And he took me out from my classes for the afternoon, took me out for lunch and about a few weeks after that he actually suicided. He had depression. He was, he was actually, we feel - back then they didn’t diagnose them this way - but we feel that he had, what’s it - manic depression when? Bipolar - manic bipolar disease. Because he’d be up, up, up one second and he’d be optimistic about life and had all these great ideas about making money. And then he’d just plummet and he wouldn’t, couldn’t do anything. So I suppose I have a family history there of depression.

According to Jane her brother and sister were both treated for depression for many years. Living surrounded with prolonged emotional distress left a lasting impact on Jane’s adult life. In talking about her teenage years, she ‘justified’ experimenting with drugs and being quite a ‘rebellious teenager’ by attributing her risky behaviors to her family circumstances.

Jane migrated to Australia from the US when she was eighteen years old, at the suggestion of an American friend already in Australia. Soon after, Jane married a former schoolmate of hers from the US, but four years later they divorced. Jane then met her second husband, an Australian, and had two children, who were aged 8 and 14 at the time of the interview. Jane described her second marriage as largely ‘depressing’. Most of the time she felt ignored, abandoned, oppressed, humiliated and excluded from her husband’s life. She described him as emotionally distant, unwilling to talk to her about his feelings. She felt rejected by him, and most of her efforts for intimacy and sociability with their circle of friends were met with further distancing from her husband. She described a marriage devoid of intimacy and affection:

It wasn’t a conducive relationship for my husband, for myself or my children. We weren’t affectionate. We were sleeping in separate beds for five years. There was no sex, sexual activity between my husband and I any more, it was a dead relationship unfortunately. When you enter marriage you like to think you’re going to be married for 50 years and that's the exception. You have to both work at it.

In addition, Jane’s stepfather with whom she was emotionally close died shortly after the birth of her first child. She struggled with her grief and looking after a newborn:

But the marriage was challenging to me from the beginning, constantly. It was me that was bending and it was me that was compromising and that in itself caused a great deal of stress for me. I mean, I wasn’t unhappy but I wasn’t happy throughout my marriage. I had my son when I was 33, so he’s 14 now, and I had some postnatal depression. Around that time my stepfather passed away as well, and he was a very, very dear man to me…. I don’t know if that’s a common said thing or not, but I think I developed depression because I was missing my homeland and my stepfather and my family in the US. And it happened to be within that, coupled with having a child. It was the two things together.

In her early 40s, Jane decided to make some life changes - she lost weight, returned to work, and informed her husband she wanted to separate. For the first time, she ‘was putting herself first rather than trying to please others’. However, her marriage separation was postponed because at around the same time she came to the decision to end the marriage, Jane’s mother back in the US was diagnosed with terminal illness. She travelled to the US and spent two months with her mother, although this cost her her job in Australia. Jane had always remained close to her mother and her death left her with a profound sense of loss, compounded by feeling unsupported by her brother and sister who both still lived in the US.

Upon return to Australia, Jane finally separated from her husband. Their relationship became increasingly acrimonious and she found herself temporarily homeless. She was also saddened to see many friends ‘abandon’ her and ‘side with her husband’, leaving her feeling isolated and alone. The combined effect of the estrangement and animosity caused by the breakdown of her marriage, the illness and death of her mother, and the loss of her job left Jane feeling ‘overwhelmed’. She describes the experience as a ‘nervous breakdown’. Unable to get out of bed and feeling distressed, sad, isolated, and thinking about suicide, prompted Jane to visit the GP who diagnosed her with depression, prescribed antidepressants and referred her to a counselor. She accepted the diagnosis and recommended treatments.

After the diagnosis, Jane returned to the US for 12 weeks in the hope that she would be embraced by her friends and re-establish old connections. When her expectations were not met, and upon return to Australia, she felt for the first time that Australia was her home and set about establishing a new life:

I went home in July of last year and I stayed at home for two months. And my hope was that I would get the US out of my system and stop dreaming about living there again and wondering if it was a better country and that's where I was. I kept thinking I want to go home, I need to go home. It was like an absolute craving and a necessity to me, and I knew if I didn’t go home that I wouldn’t be here today. I wouldn’t, I feel, I have no doubt in my mind. So I went home for two months and in a, exactly what I wanted to have happen around the six week mark I woke up one morning and thought, I want to go home. And for the first time in my life Australia was home. So I feel very content being here. I feel very calm being here. I know it’s a better place for me to live at this time.

Jane’s statement, ‘so I feel very content being here. I know it’s a better place for me to live at this time’ shows the investment she has made in the place of her settlement. In the next section we analyse how geographical space comes to be place and how it articulates different meanings within the narrative about depression.

**6. Moving to Australia from US and distancing from family**

When I was 18 I moved out to Australia. I came out to Australia on a working holiday and I actually came out to see my girlfriend. She said that the men in Australia were fantastic and I had to come out and find one for myself and I believed her…I was very naïve at 18. I’d never paid a bill, I’d never lived on my own, my mother had wrapped me in cotton wool and all sorts of challenging things happened to me when I was out here […]I actually was here for an entire year. I met my first husband when I was out here. We actually went to school together in the US and we sort of ran into each other when we were out here. Which was really ironic and at the age of 19 you think it’s just fate and that you’re meant to be together if you run into someone when you’re 13,000 miles away.

Jane was distanced from everything that was known and familiar, so, her relationship to an American man was largely mediated by memories of what was left behind (‘13,000 miles away’), and, most importantly, by a sense of familiarity. She divorced her first husband after four years of living with him (they lived for a year in Australia, then for two years in the US, and then again for a year in Australia). She met her second husband, an Australian man, just few months after her divorce.

I met my second husband not long after, probably six or seven months after I’d split up with my first husband. And he was a very nice man and we dated for years… we moved out together and then somebody sort of starts saying, so when are you two going to get engaged? And, oh, we’d better get engaged and then when are you going to get married? And you get married and I can honestly tell you that I walked down the aisle of my wedding with a voice screaming at me in my head that this is not the right man and I shouldn’t be doing it. But my parents had come out from the US, or my mum and my stepfather had come out from the US. And everyone was there and I’ve always been the type of girl that does the right thing, I try to please everybody around me…

The statement, ‘I try to please everybody around me’, shows the moment when Jane again introduced the narrative about depression in her life-story. It also shows Jane’s inability to cope with her own desire, for ‘the promise of happiness’. According to Ahmed ‘the promising nature of happiness suggests happiness lies ahead of us, at least if we do the right thing…If happiness is what we desire, then happiness involves being intimate with what is not happy’ (2010: 29). So, there is always some kind of intimacy between desire and anxiety. Jane’s desire to satisfy her family and friends shows her relation to the symbolic, which was based on constant feelings of guilt, her inability to feel integrated with herself, which contributed to her gradual descent into misery and desperation.

Her narrative about her wedding is embedded within the frame of a wider narrative on depression. In a way, depression here dislocates Jane’s own responsibility for what was going on in her life, but that dislocation does not mean that her narrative serves just as subjective delusion, or presents fantasies that are designed to transform her life story in some meaningful order. On the contrary, as Zizek (1997) argues, fantasy is not just the subject’s most intimate and idiosyncratic possession; but it subverts the standard form locked in opposition between the subjective and the objective. Fantasy belongs to what Zizek calls the ‘objectively subjective level’; ‘it sustains our sense of reality’ (1996: 24). And moreover, as Zizekargues, there is no reality without the fantasy frame.

In Jane’s case, the reality was framed by a narrative about depression, with what she felt was the burden of the past, the burden of her family history in terms of depression. With her first husband, Jane was constantly moving in between the US and Australia, these journeys between places created a new sense of belonging, ‘in-between belonging’. But with her second husband the link with the US became her own private zone, and the link with her American family become a link with family history in terms of illness.

It could be argued that Jane can only understand herself as partly constituted by a language of depression and as situated in her family history of depression:

I’ve fought depression all my life because of my family history. I was really, really, really reluctant to give in to it. I did not believe that people had depression. I believed it, like a lot of people think, that it was an over-medicated state, it was an over-diagnosed state. I was, I dug my heels in big time because of my family history because I didn’t want to go down that path. Both my sisters have been on medication - I don’t believe they are now - but they’ve both of them been on medication for like 40 years. All of their lives they’ve been, including I know that they were on Prozac at one stage and different ones. But I really was reluctant to allow myself to have it because I saw it as once I’d admitted that I had it, once I gave in to it, that it would spiral out of control - which it has to a degree….

Jane presented her fight with depression through language that distances her from her family history. As Taylor argues (1989), a language only exists and is maintained within a language community. Jane articulates this through a narrative account where language serves to confirm her inseparable links within a ‘language community’, in this case her own family. Taylor suggests that ‘one is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it’ (1989, 35). Her brother and sister were older, and Jane presented them as mechanisms that created her feeling of being ‘lost in life’ or ‘not good enough’. Jane understood her close relationship with her mother, partly created by her being sick as a child, as creating challenging relationships with her siblings. In her narrative, she was in ongoing ‘conversation’ with those who brought her up - her mother, brother and sister, and reflecting on feelings of love, anger and anxiety that she learned through her own family members’ experiences.

My siblings and I have always had a very challenged relationship, and I often wonder if it’s because of those times when I had more of my mother’s attention when I was a baby. Because she was worried about me and perhaps I took a lot of her attention away from them when I was unwell. I’m very different to my brother and sister in a lot of ways. I’m more of a pacifist, they’re more assertive and dominant and controlling, I feel. They, I felt, I often refer to myself as the **chicken in the henhouse with no feathers** because I sort of felt like nothing I did was good enough.

Jane tries hard to show her understanding of the way she felt she was treated by her siblings, speculating they did not intentionally try to undermine her as a person. However, Jane’s sense of herself was shaped by her desire to be different from her family, to distance herself from them by being experimental, including with drugs:

And I know that that came from me, they probably didn’t want to make me feel like that. But that’s how I ended up feeling, like I couldn’t do anything right and nothing was good enough. And I always tried very, very hard to please my brother and sister and tried very hard to please my mother throughout my childhood. But I was never much of a drug or alcohol person, I still am not very much inclined that way at all - drugs not at all any more since I was very young. So probably for two or three years I went through a rebellious stage.

She strived to develop her own understanding of herself in sharp contrast to her family and background. However, her resistance could only take shape in the common language she shared with her family - she could not be a self on her own, she could only be herself in relation to certain interlocutors. As Taylor puts it, one can only become a self through ‘webs of intersection’ with others, there is no self prior to social relations:

It is this original situation which gives it sense to our concepts on ‘identity’, offering an answer to the question of who I am through a definition of where I am speaking from and to whom. The full definition of someone’s identity thus usually involves not only his stand on moral and spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community’ (1989: 36).

Even though Jane wanted to distance herself from her family, physical separation after migrating to Australia brought more angst than a resolution. Her striving for individuality and freedom and physical distance from the family ‘have conspired to produce’ a ‘depressed self’. Jane’s striving for independence from her American family has not resulted in the kind of independence she desired, but in the self-realisation that she only exists among other selves – that is, her family. They were described as creating her anxieties, but separation from them, instead of resolving these, contributed to the creation of a more intense sense of isolation compounded by an unhappy second marriage. Jane defines herself by speaking from a particular geographical and social space, from the position of being a member of her American family and from a position of living in an unhappy intimate relationship with her second husband. She also speaks from ‘the space of moral and spiritual orientation’ (Taylor, 1989: 35) within which Jane’s most important relationships are lived out.

**7. Jane’s depression narrative and narrative about what it means to be a migrant**

Ahmed argues that ‘happiness is an expectation of what follows, where the expectation differentiates between things, whether or not they exist as objects in the present…This is why happiness provides the emotional setting for disappointment, even if happiness is not given: we just have to expect happiness from ‘this or that’, for ‘this and that’ to be experienceable as objects of disappointment’ (2008, 7). Thus Jane’s depression narrative strives to grasp the anxiety about the inability to feel happy, but it is this inability, this disappointment that becomes a site of ambiguity; it simultaneously acts as the support of the construction of reality through the construction of the narrative about what it means to be a migrant, to live in a place which is not the place of origin and to long for the fullness of identity:

Having an accent is just having a, you know, like living in another country you’re always going to have an accent to everyone here and it's always going to be a part of your identity. And I won’t say I was denying it but to not nurture that and feed that aspect of yourself - you actually lose another part of your identity that way. And that’s a really negative thing, particularly when you are fighting depression.

Here we notice double gaze in the narrative. Firstly, there is the gaze of the past that in one way testified to her ‘difference’ in Australia. She felt ‘different’. However, through attachment to this difference she sharpened the sense of who she is. There is also a second gaze inscribed in her narrative, that from depression. To experience fighting depression in this narrative is to experience oneself again as ‘different’, but different to oneself. Therefore fighting depression means fighting for her own identity which is experienced as being lost. That experience is accompanied with the feeling of anxiety. According to Copjec anxiety is always dependent on ‘a condition that is not’, not an actual condition. To experience it, is to experience waiting for ‘something that has not happened’ (Copjec 2006: 170). Jane never experienced the feeling of ‘being at home’ in Australia. Her emotions about the US deepened and cultivated nostalgic links with her home country. She created her own mental pictures about homeland which Rushdie (1991: 66) calls ‘homelands of the mind’. These homelands of the mind were created through the Internet. She began a very intensive communication with her friends on Facebook creating her own social network:

I’m very, very big on Facebook and mainly like, you know, people turn their noses up at it. But for being from another country it’s perfect. I get to see my friends’ photographs of their children. They see what I’m doing. They see what’s happening with me and everything else and they get to actually it’s like a connection…. It’s a profound connection when you’re living in another country. It’s fantastic. I think it's a great thing Facebook, in that instance. Sometimes it’s detrimental. There’s been negatives associated with it, but mainly positives, like 80 per cent positives for me.

We can say that in one way Facebook functioned as a site of desire for Jane. It was necessary in order to create the feeling of participating in ‘real life’ in the US, the ‘real life’ that never existed—that never had referents in reality. It served as a reflection and vision of the ‘better life’ she could not have. But her first visit to the US was not to see her friends, not to visit her ‘homeland of the mind’, but to see her mother who was dying and to say goodbye to her:

I hadn’t been home in eleven and a half years. My brother and sister picked me up at the airport, they were late. I came out of the glass doors and anyone that comes from a foreign country will know when those glass doors open you want everyone to squeal and scream and throw their arms around you and I got none of that. There was the sound of crickets. Then they came down. …It had been eleven and a half years since I went home. I didn’t see any of the US when I was there because I was with my mother. I didn’t do anything. I didn’t catch up with my relatives as much as I’d wanted to. I didn’t catch up with any of my friends and I have, I have 360 friends on Facebook and they’re all American mainly. And I wanted to see each and every one of them and connect with them again, you know? I felt like I, I feel like I have very, very good friends there.

So, Jane’s ‘imaginary homeland’ was not experienced in a way she desired. And this inability to experience it represented itself as a continuous search for full identity, playing with things ‘lost’, and things ‘lived’. And things ‘lived’ – divorce, loss of her job, depression – contributed to a self-centered anxiety about her identity and romanticized picture of ‘home’. But it was exactly in the US that she finally realised Australia as a new home. As Brah argues, ‘home is a mythic place of desire…it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin’ (Brah 2005: 172). Jane returned to the US, but her feeling of being at home was missing. In Australia she was affected by her thoughts about ‘home’, a home which, after her visit, suddenly failed to make sense of belonging and resulted in the subversion of the idea of home.

**8. Conclusion**

In this article, we have argued that emotional distress and the medical diagnosis of depression can be seen as a way ‘to experience oneself as a subject’. We have shown that claims of identity always involve the exclusion of certain possibilities, and that the fullness of identity is unachievable. According to Laclau, all identifications could be seen as failures of identity and given that totality always excludes something, neither individual nor collective identities can reach a stable point of a total completeness. Nevertheless, each identification functions in such a way as to imply it were possible to reach this fullness. In Laclau’s words, ‘although the fullness…is unachievable, its need does not disappear: it will always show itself through the presence of its absence’ (1996:53). And this presence of the absence of fullness is noticeable in every single ‘narrativisation’ of the self. As Hall (1996:4) states:

Identities are constantly in the process of change and transformation…. They arise from the narrativisation of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the ‘suturing into the story’ through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmic field.

To understand how Jane constructed narratives about herself, we have analysed her narrative on migration, on her moving from the US to Australia. As Brah (2005) argues, to migrate is to experience disruption and displacement, but when the story about migration is enveloped in narratives on depression it becomes invested with additional dimensions of loss and unhappiness. As we have seen, Jane’s narrative account depicts a life characterized by serious losses over a long period of time: the loss of her health as a child, the loss of her father due to her parent’s divorce and later to suicide, her estranged relationship with her brother and sister, the losses of two marriages, the deaths of her step-father and mother, the loss of friendships, and significantly, the loss of ‘home’ due to migration. Her sense of feeling displaced in the world started with the loss of her father, and increased by her migration to Australia, where instead of having the ‘new start’ she was hoping for, she experienced another set of emotionally challenging circumstances and her inability to cope with them culminated in medical diagnosis of depression.

In narrating her depression, her grief, her hopes and her ‘failures’, Jane struggles to give meaning to life’s disappointments and reminds herself that life is worth living. According to Butler when we give a story of ourself we always tell a story about norms as well, when we learned them, what we thought about them, which ones become incorporated and in what way (2005, 27). We give a sequential account for something that can only be displaced when it assumes narrative form. We give a story of our origin which ‘mirrors’ our constitution, which try to explain why we emerged in this particular way. The account is always partial, since we cannot explain exactly why we have emerged in the particular way, so it is constantly undergoing revisions. In Jane’s case, her narration shifts from things ‘lost’ to things ‘lived’, or we could say she attaches herself to new objects of happiness in order to create new openings for how to live:

I love, love, love where I live…. I’ve got a beautiful home. I’ve bought all new belongings. I’ve bought them in my own taste, I didn’t think about anyone else’s, which was kind of cool. I didn’t have to buy the right colours for my husband, I bought what I wanted. ….I’ve recently – I’ve always liked motorcycles and when I went to the US, I used to ride with a friend of mine in the US on the back of his Harley and I’ve always liked them. My first boyfriend, when I was 17, had a motorcycle. I’ve always liked the feeling of being on them. I've never been afraid of them or frightened by them or anything…

Here, we could say that the motorcycle stands as an object of happiness in Jane’s narrative, as an object that fill the gap, the lack caused by desire to achieve the full identity, ‘the real identity’. However, because of the impossibility of the ‘real identity’, a motorcycle experience illustrates inaccessible *jouissance*. It is the mediator between different desires and possible realities, both in the US and Australia. It unleashes uprooted desires to negotiate all forms of life, but, perhaps most of all, the desire for ‘the good life’. In this way, the dream of ‘the happy life’ touches the core of the unbearable presence of the very roots of Jane’s identity, it becomes the object cause of her desire, of her ‘I’. It is apposite to end with a quote from Jane’s narrative that nicely illustrates her belief that she is worthy of fighting for:

So I have this new sense of freedom and independence. I go out and ride my motorcycle. I’m getting better and better at it every day. I’m loving it. Some people can be negative about it but I don’t care…. You know, if I get a little bit of joy out of riding my motorcycle and if it gives, makes me smile and makes me stronger and more independent. Stronger emotionally… It’s brought me a lot of joy. It’s made me - and again this is another thing, along with the loneliness and me trying to please other people - I lost sight of myself. I had - I like to say I had an identity crisis when I went through a lot of this stuff. I was something to my husband, to my children. I was something to my bosses, to everyone in my life, my friends. I was pleasing everyone around me but I lost sight of who I was and I wasn’t being true to myself. The motorcycle is not a midlife crisis, that’s me being true to myself. I’ve always liked them, I’ve always wanted to ride them and I’m finally doing what I want to do.

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1. It is a fantasy that emerges in support of this ideal, and it is a fantasy that covers over the impossibility of any closed system. In Žižek’s (1996) words, it is through fantasy that we experience our world as a wholly consistent and transparently meaningful order. Hence we can say that fantasy structures our social relations. On the one hand fantasy has a stabilising dimension, ‘the dream of the state without disturbances out of reach of human depravity’ (Žižek 1996:24). On the other, fantasy’s destabilising dimension creates images that ‘irritate us’, images that try to conceal the lack in ‘reality’ itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The point where the symbolic fails to represent the real Lacan calls *objet a* – an object cause of desire. The real is sacrificed or castrated when the subject enters the symbolic but nevertheless it is exactly this loss of fullness that forces the subject to try to find it in the symbolic. For Lacan, this lack of the real is the lack of a pre-symbolic, real enjoyment, a lack of *jouissance*. This first apprehension of reality through the desiring of the impossible *jouissance* forever obscures intersubjectivity (Vrbancic 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)