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# Commuters, Wanderers, and 'international Mongrels': Resistance and Possibility in Post-immigrant Literature

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COMMUTERS, WANDERERS, AND 'INTERNATIONAL MONGRELS': RESISTANCE  
AND POSSIBILITY IN POST-IMMIGRANT LITERATURE

by

Leslie Anne Singel

A Dissertation Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
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August 2017

## ABSTRACT

### COMMUTERS, WANDERERS, AND ‘INTERNATIONAL MONGRELS’: RESISTANCE AND POSSIBILITY IN POST-IMMIGRANT LITERATURE

by

Leslie Anne Singel

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2017  
Under the Supervision of Professor Gregory Jay

The recognizable motifs of the immigrant tale have been upended, as the traditional narrative has been adapted to capture the multitude of directions, individuals, nations, and paths of the twenty-first century migrant. In four chapters, I examine selected works from the authors Colum McCann, Junot Díaz, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to argue for a new designation, “post-immigrant literature.” Post-immigrant literature treats critically the themes of loss, regret, and forced assimilation from perspectives shaped by post-colonial, post-modern and post-identity politics thinking. Rather than narratives stressing the limitations imposed by deterministic social forces, post-immigrant texts posit more agency, and anxiety, for their transnational characters. Post-immigrant literature departs from preceding generations by proffering possibility, empowering the subject, creating space for more voices, and disrupting traditional binaries, expectations or assumptions. Ultimately, I argue that the post-immigrant narrative detangles the strands of immigrant literature and disavows the “single story” so as to appropriately represent individuality.

To Jurko Czingley, who changed his name,  
Anna Walkuesak, who used a fake one,  
Thomas McGarry, who found Milwaukee,  
and Ellen McCarthy, our family rebel.

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To Chicago Jesuit Academy, not only taking a chance on my family in early 2012, which allowed me to go back to school full-time, but for reminding me every single day why education matters and what it means to serve the whole person. I am a much better teacher because of what I have seen and learned from CJA. I hope I can carry forth that mission once I leave UWM.

To the real world people who exist in these pages: as I have been working since the summer of 2015, the situation for immigrants in America has changed drastically. I have had to edit accordingly. I have spent almost two years thinking intensively about my own immigrant ancestors, those who escaped famine and war and never got a chance to look back. Jhumpa Lahiri writes that the quiet heroism of immigration is astounding...to die at 30 of black lung disease in the coal mines of Pennsylvania in the hopes that your children will thrive as Americans is beyond anything I could imagine. I’m not sure I would have the bravery. I am writing this very sentence because a certain combination of people left their homes and lives behind forever. So I thank them every day. And I hope that comes through in the following

chapters. Here's hoping that our system of checks and balances continues to come through for them as well.

Finally, to my family, above all. Every single time I have had a tough day throughout these past five years, I always think of my parents sandwiching me while screaming loudly when they heard I was going back to school. Most of all, I dedicate this to the Kemper men: Jay's pride in what I do, his willingness to contribute whatever he can to the process, has been my backbone this whole time. I've written close to 50,000 words in the following pages, but I can't figure out how to describe what it's like to have such a partner. My sons will have no memory of this time, but I will always have the memory of frantically studying for my prelims with Rory sleeping in my arms and of editing frantically as this dissertation and Seán raced each other into the world (to borrow a line from J.K. Rowling). They have definitely been worth every single exhausting day and grad school cry. I would do it all over again in a heartbeat. And finally, to Big Jay, who surely would have been the first to call me Dr. Singel. I may just be a guest, but I couldn't be prouder to be a guest of the Kempers.

Pronto llegará el momento  
Que se borre el sufrimiento  
Guardaremos los rencores, Dios mío  
Y compartiremos todos, un mismo sentimiento

Aunque el tiempo haya pasado  
Con orgullo y dignidad  
Tu nombre lo he llevado, a todo mundo  
Entero le he contado tu verdad...  
~Celia Cruz, "Por Si Acaso No Regreso"

## Introduction: Notes Toward a Post-Immigrant Literature

A considerable proportion of immigrants now coming are from races and countries, or parts of countries, which have not progressed, but have been back-ward, downtrodden, and relatively useless for centuries... There is no reason to suppose that a change of location will result in a change of inborn tendencies.

~Immigration Restriction League, 1894

The words recorded by the Immigration Restriction League in 1894 have been echoed by similar jingoistic, xenophobic, and dogmatic individuals and political parties consistently since the Jamestown settlement. Indeed, the IRL summarized the most American of qualities: a preoccupation with the unAmerican. Given the controversial executive orders emerging from the White House at this very moment in time, we can see that today is no different. However, despite backlash and discrimination, the United States continues to be a destination for millions. According to data collected by the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan and nonprofit think tank, immigration to the U.S. has quadrupled since 1970, from 9.6 million to an all-time high of 41.3 million in 2013. Statistics on undocumented residents is less official, though Department of Homeland Security estimates put the number around 11 million as of 2014. The human beings represented by these statistics have become more visible than ever before thanks in part to the proliferation of media and digital technologies. For example, in the recent situation of Syrian refugees fleeing their war-torn country, Americans continuously saw/streamed/downloaded

images and videos of capsizing boats and long lines of people walking through the Eastern European countryside at the same time they took to social media and news websites to debate what the rest of the world could do to alleviate the situation- in other words, unprecedented access to the immigrant state.

The above summary, though broad, raises some consequential questions: through what lens should immigration be viewed? By history? By statistics? By depiction in the media? How is it best to approach the representation of immigration and immigrants in the twenty-first century? Given the intricacies of migrancy, unsettlement, and identity formation, I argue here that it is the immigrant figure in literature that reflects the complexity of politics and history, thereby erecting a figurative bridge between the human experience of migration and storytelling. More specifically, I believe a new designation of and recognition for “post-immigrant literature” encapsulates the subject of immigration in literary works as well as the role such literature plays in producing new transnational subject in contemporary American culture.

The reciprocity between writers who create immigrant-centered fiction and immigrant characters shaping public perception of the new transnational subject resounds in the works of immigrant scholars and writers alike. In a lauded 2016 commencement speech at the University of Pennsylvania, Lin-Manuel Miranda, a child of Puerto Rican immigrant parents, stated that "stories are essential." Today's environment of anti-immigrant rhetoric exists at the same time his hit Broadway show, *Hamilton*, tells the story of an immigrant who shaped the nation, “a story that reminds us that since the beginning of the great unfinished symphony that is our American experiment, time and time again immigrants get the job done.” Likewise, Irish scholar Eóin Flannery agrees that the immigrant figure “who persists between languages and between homelands, throws into relief the contingency of all historical and political narratives of

possession, origins and authorship” (Flannery 2). Contemporary immigrant narratives shatter stereotypes of generations past and communicate to all readers that “my world [is] worthy of literature” (“Authenticity” 42).

Immigrant literature is a channel through which to humanize statistics for readers. However, an effective immigrant narrative requires an empathetic author. As Richard Gray explains in his work on American writing in times of crisis, the new generation of immigrant writers:

[offer] an overall narrative momentum, that [is] responsive to the syncretic character of American culture. They reconfigure language, the themes and tropes of American writing, in terms that go way beyond bipolar, biracial models. In the process, they become a lexical equivalent of the immigrant encounter, transforming their literary environs just as they are transformed by them. (140)

In other words, the new immigrant literary generation is leaving its mark on the canon of American literature, just as immigrants’ cultures pervade and contribute to American identity. Even more significantly, new immigrant literature does not necessarily recount past events alone. Rather, it is vital because it makes manifest what *is* happening and how the contemporary immigrant experiences the leave-taking, journey, and adjustment to a new life elsewhere or a continual feeling of displacement as he/she searches for “home.” It is a dynamic genre, always in motion and always expanding.

To more thoroughly explore the significance of a new generation, I turn first to the ambiguous category of “immigrant literature.” Not surprisingly, efforts to define immigrant literature encounter numerous pitfalls. The classification is disconcerting. Does it refer to literature about the subject of immigration? Must it be written by immigrants? First generation? Second? Third? How can we frame this genre of literature, especially in the twenty-first century? With identity less bound by geographic lines and national belonging, determining an author’s or book’s sense of “place” is more complicated than ever. Therefore, is it appropriate to change our language to clarify the break that has occurred?

A distinction between “old” and “new” immigrant literature only developed in the second half of the twentieth century. The binary of old/new refers not necessarily to date of publication but to thematic representation of migration. For instance, old or traditional immigrant texts are dominated by the theme of Americanization or the act of becoming Americanized, whereas new narratives are more engaged with the concepts of globalization, displacement, and movement among (potential) homes. And yet, such a binary does not provide clear-cut boundaries, nor is it sustainable in all contemporary works. For example, Heike Paul employs the term “neo-immigrant” fiction in her 2001 article, “Old, New and ‘Neo’ Immigrant Fictions in American Literature.” In this piece, Paul contends that the author of neo-immigrant fiction does not have to belong to the ethnic or racial group about which he/she is writing. She sees “traditional” immigrant fiction to be written by and through the experiences of immigrants arriving and settling in America around the turn of the twentieth century. However, the “neo” allows for authors of any and all backgrounds, including white Anglo-Saxon stock, to enter (and direct) the conversation. Her classification is debatable, considering the fact that some of the major “immigrant” texts of the early-twentieth century were written by the same demographic: Willa

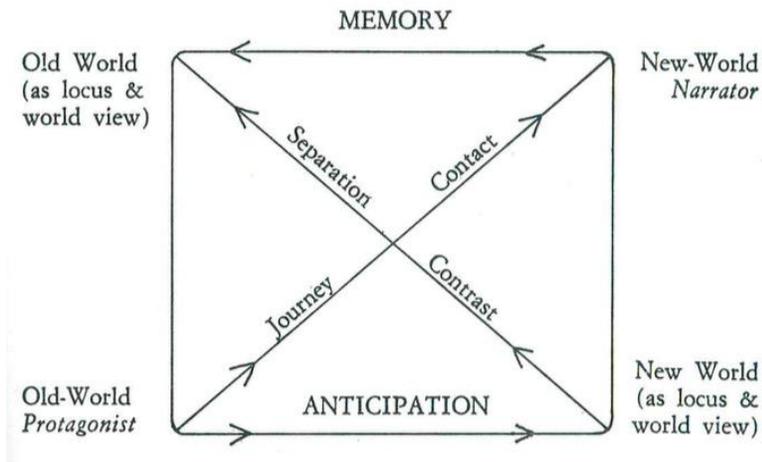
Cather's *My Ántonia*, Stephen Crane's *Maggie*, or various texts by William Dean Howells. One could argue that the "neo" narrative in Paul's view is simply maintaining its roots (Boelhower 16).

Her argument that "neo" narratives can be written by *anyone*, while carrying a burden of political meaning, highlights the influence of immigrant writing on the field of postmodernism (Paul 251). Paul questions whether the appropriation of immigrant characters or literature by non-immigrant writers is indeed unethical or problematic, or is it merely evidence of the mainstreaming of immigrant voices? While traditional works were relegated to the margins at the turn of the twentieth century, encountered only by those who shared an author's national or ethnic background, have immigrant voices "made it" through the funnel of WASP sentiment? I will broadly address Paul's re-classification throughout these chapters, not only in terms of questioning the identity of the "immigrant writer" but also in building upon her argument that previous categorization no longer suffices. In Paul's views, her authors are basically theorizing ethnicity or race, which has deeper implications politically and culturally, a point Paul is clear to highlight. In my categorization, I want to return the narrative to writers from the ethnic, racial, or national group about which they are writing. One could say my argument here about new immigrant identity would complement Paul's interpretation, in that we both agree that contemporary immigrant literature is more multifaceted and political than its predecessors.

Returning to the framework that distinguishes between "old," "new" and "neo" immigrant literature, Paul designates "old" texts as those primarily from the middle of the nineteenth century through the beginning of the twentieth century, which emerged from the large-scale immigrant waves from Ireland, Italy, Eastern Europe and Asia. Canonical texts would include, for example, Mary Anne Sadlier's *Bessy Conway: or the Irish Girl in America* (1861),

Abraham Cahan's *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896), or Anzia Yeziarska's *Breadgivers* (1925). In his 1982 book on early-twentieth century immigrant narratives, William Boelhower begins by tracing the formula or configuration of the "traditional" text. To introduce his argument that immigrant autobiography contributes to the American literary canon, Boelhower reveals how the immigrant narrative, the gritty manifestation of social realism, became popular through mostly Anglo-Saxon male writers, though we are to commend them to a degree for "promot[ing] the ubiquitous presence of immigrant themes, settings, and characters" (17). Boelhower makes a case for the value of reading the immigrant experience through first-hand knowledge of the culture. After all, as he puts it, the immigrant-written narrative has been historically "outshouted" by the white writers of social realism (like Cather, Howells, or Crane, referenced above); it was scattered across eras and demographics, and it has taken time for it to be considered "part of mainstream literature" at all (18).

Throughout his introduction and first chapter, Boelhower traces the clear trajectory of the traditional immigrant narratives he is championing. He argues that certain literary formulae allow the narrative to transgress cultural lines. "After all," he states, "every narrative journey is to a considerable extent only a repetition, a reworking, of the culturally stored repertory of journeys that both reader and author must appeal to in naturalizing the specific experience that brings them together in the text they in different ways share" (21). Boelhower illustrates the precise journey motif that defines traditional texts. In fact, he concedes that there is an understanding that these narratives, on some level, "tell *a single story*, project a network of paradigmatic relations" (30) (*italics mine*). The paradigm is so distinctive, he even includes a diagram.



From *Immigrant Biography* by William Boelhower

The paradigm includes the revelation of the protagonist as a double-self (an idea that translates well to post-immigrant literature as I argue below), the position of the protagonist as a representative self of the larger cultural population, the journey motif that splits the narrative in two, and themes such as “New-World Ideal vs. New-World Reality” or “New-World Reality vs. Old-World Reality” and so on (46). Such a breakdown reveals the macrotext of the traditional narrative and yet argues that it provides a unique perspective in the American literary canon and should be honored as such. The definable path of immigrant literature, in Boelhower’s terms, reflects the path of ethnicity R. Radhakrishman famously sketched out in 1991: as the immigrant arrives in America, they “suppress ethnicity in the name of pragmatism and opportunism,” meaning that they assimilate while evoking nostalgia for their lost homelands and cultures. Following that phase, there is a revolution in which immigrants reassert their ethnicities as a reflection of autonomy. Finally, they seek a hyphenated identity so that they are not forced to “privilege the ‘national’ at the expense of the ‘ethnic’” (121). Though approaching “traditional” immigration from different directions, Paul, Boelhower, and Radhakrishman share a common perception of the predictability of migration and identity formation in the past.

Moving forward in the chronology, the “new” immigrant texts are those that emerged as a result of a national exploration of “multiculturalism” and “diversity” during and following the 1960s. Examples include Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), Maxine Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976), and Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* (1984). The journey from the old immigrant texts to the post-1960s generation includes a shift in attitudes toward the author and the material. For instance, as Heike Paul mentions, Abraham Cahan, a turn of the century Jewish writer, was criticized for being “too realistic” in his depiction of the Jewish slums of New York. His Jewish critics thought he did them a disservice by making his Jewish characters impoverished, dirty, and clannish. More recently, Maxine Kingston was criticized by fellow Asian Americans for taking liberties with Chinese myths and stories. Thus, “while Cahan was admonished by American critics to step out of the Jewish ghetto in terms of his literary themes, it was held against Kingston...that she had left the enclave of her ethnic culture behind” (Paul 251).

I use “post-immigrant” because what is urgently needed at this moment is a term that suggests that we have moved beyond the traditional form, style or functionality of the previous immigrant narrative in American literature. Some recent literary scholarship and criticism supports my argument that “immigrant literature” is an antiquated term. For instance, Gracie Jin of news website *Mic* titled a review, “Lahiri’s *The Lowland* Shows Immigrant Literature is Obsolete.” She goes on to argue that the term “immigrant literature” or the mere categorizing of Lahiri’s work as such does three things: it inaccurately broadens the parameters of immigrant literature (technically, all American literature could be considered immigrant literature), it oversimplifies the richness and texture of the narrative, and it reduces the universals of the story to particulars. Jin insists that since Lahiri herself resists the term, so should her readers. Likewise,

in her piece on new Russian narratives, Natalie Friedman also argues that what she is reading does not come close to resembling what would be considered immigrant literature a century ago. As stated above, it departs from the traditional narrative because it is not “about” Americanization but more concerned with other, more universal and entertaining, plotlines. We should be cautious with a dichotomy of Americanization vs. universality as we map the new terrain of post-immigrant literature, yet Friedman reasons that characters are free to remember the past without clinging to nostalgia or completely rejecting the homeland in order to assimilate. She ends by stating that the “new narrative of Americanization, then, needs a new name. The twenty-first century will surely invent one” (11). Likewise, in citing Suzanne Oboler, Daniel Bautista points out that “historians and social scientists have begun to recognize the need for a new and more flexible vocabulary to describe the dynamics of immigrant identity in the US, especially with regards to Latinos who are facing new challenges to their incorporation in American society” (Bautista 82). New terminology is not limited to the field of literature alone.

A new designation partially becomes a process of elimination: what I examine here does not resemble “old” immigrant literature, nor is it analogous to the post-1960s wave. If we turn to theory, it may somewhat resemble cosmopolitanism. In his formulation of cosmopolitanism, Kwame Anthony Appiah notes that contemporary “rootless cosmopolitans” are marked by a loyalty to all humanity rather than a loyalty to one tribe, nation, or people (Appiah xvi). Here, I diverge, in that I see post-immigrant figures as free to develop fealty with groups or nations outside of the one into which they were born. In other words, instead of no loyalties or homes, they have many, such as identification with multiple nationalities (Jhumpa Lahiri and Colum McCann), races or ethnicities (Junot Díaz and Chimamanda Adichie), or groups of people within and outside their immediate families. Like Appiah, who felt the need to rely on

“cosmopolitanism,” an imperfect term, to explain his philosophy, I too am relying upon an imperfect term to argue for a renewed examination of what contemporary literature of immigration is and does. “Post-immigrant” is the most appropriate because it covers that “globalization” or “hybridity” cannot. As Appiah states, he too rejected words such as these:

Under what rubric to proceed? Not “globalization”- a term that once referred to a marketing strategy, and then came to designate a macroeconomic thesis, and now can seem to encompass everything, and nothing. Not “multiculturalism,” another shape shifter, which so often designates the disease it purports to cure. (xiii)

As Appiah points out, the overuse of these two terms has rendered them meaningless. Likewise, I find “hybridity” or “liminality,” two words so often used to describe the contemporary immigrant figure in literature, to be too restrictive. They relegate a character to a place, even if that place is a nebulous in-between. As Lisa Lowe states in echoing Homi Bhabha, hybridization “is not the ‘free’ oscillation between or among chosen identities” but is instead a more uneven, isolating, and even violent classification system (Lowe 151). Likewise, in terms of the rhetoric of immigration and migration in these pages, I will avoid “exile” or “diaspora” as much as possible, as these words are overused in discussions of immigrant literature and are “being emptied of their histories of pain and suffering and are being deployed promiscuously to designate a wide array of cross-cultural phenomenon” (Krishnaswamy 128). Terms like “diaspora” can dangerously homogenize the migrant experience, taking for granted the blend of refugees, self-exiles, political exiles, intellectuals, laborers, and those in search of economic opportunity (130).

No term can perfectly capture all that these four authors share in terms of themes, stylistic innovations, and personal experiences, yet “post-immigrant literature” serves two purposes here: first, it is an attempt to navigate the terminological quandary presented by the new generation of immigrant writers. “Transnational,” “commuter,” “wanderer,” and “neo-immigrant” are also of value in my discussion and will be used as warranted. The term “international mongrels” in the title comes from Michael Ondaatje via Colum McCann; McCann defines such an individual as “a peculiarly twentieth and twenty-first century condition- the person who wanders through different geographies and cultures, somewhat lost, and yet invigorated by curiosity” (qtd. in Tucker 30). Second, “post-immigrant literature” resonates with the postcolonial, postmodern, and other posts- that have influenced the writers of this sub-genre. Revathi Krishnaswamy refers to both postmodernism and postcolonialism as “space-clearing gestures,” aimed at rejecting the exclusive vision of modernism and colonialism (144). Given this helpful though broad definition, “post-immigrant” has a similar goal, rejecting the exclusivity of previous definitions and refusing concepts of “centrism, linearity, [and] fixed hierarchies” (Elboubekri 259). The texts I analyze in the following four chapters is also “post” in the sense that the authors are familiar with the writings of their predecessors. The following chapters will, in part, address contemporary immigrant authors’ awareness of and appreciation for their literary genealogies.

The ten books I reference in the following four chapters were written by four authors from four continents, across ethnic and racial lines; they present a diverse range of characters who experience and convey what contemporary migrations of place and cultural identities look like from the inside. Post-immigrant characters do not consider their situations in terms of homeland/new land, a more traditional binary, as they do an incessant mobility among geographical, cultural, and social identities. From the inside, they resist being rigidly categorized

by imposed ethnic boundaries and are able to embrace both the exhilaration of possibility and the anxiety of rootlessness. Post-immigrant literature treats critically the themes of loss, regret, and forced assimilation (themes that codified *immigrant* literature in the American canon) from perspectives shaped by post-colonial, post-modern and post-identity politics thinking. Rather than narratives stressing the limitations imposed by deterministic social forces, post-immigrant texts posit more agency, and apprehension, for their transnational characters. The post-immigrant story is one of movement across national and ethnic, racial and class boundaries, of new identities and the ability to move among them. It is concerned with an understanding of racialization as it applies to imaginary borders. It is a text about the abstract conceptualization of home and family and how they are formed and re-formed throughout one's life.

More specifically, post-immigrant literature is marked by four distinct characteristics: it is inclusive and expansive, it emphasizes themes of opportunity over loss and assimilation, it speaks to increased self-awareness and the individualized experience of identity formation, and it reflects the modernization of the immigrant experience. First, it encompasses and represents more ethnic, racial, and gendered identities than previous generations. Because of technological advances, mass media, and increased rates of literacy, there are more opportunities for authors to transmit the immigrant experience and more audiences to appreciate it. Immigrant books a century ago were primarily published for two main purposes: they were written to be read by an author's fellow immigrants to commiserate or to educate them about how to get by in America, or they were published to elicit sympathy and aid from those outside the immigrant group. For example, Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* would perhaps not typically be considered a traditional immigrant text, and yet it attempts to fulfill the goal of the secondary group of primary texts, memoirs and novels.

Today, the traditional American immigrant novel, written by a literate English-speaking author representative of his/her demographic, could be replaced by a blog published piecemeal from an internet café in any city or town. The immigrant story is everywhere and anywhere. It is constructed tweet by tweet, through YouTube videos, through long-form essays, short stories, and novels. As I will revisit in chapter four, Chimamanda Adichie's protagonist in *Americanah* not only communicates her immigrant experience via an online blog but also profits handsomely from it. My focus in this dissertation is commercially- and critically-successful short and long fiction published from large publishing houses, but I would like to emphasize that the new immigrant has many more avenues to share or publish his/her story than ever before.

Along the same lines, the immigrant experience in literature is not limited to a single population, particularly at a given point in time. For example, the first Irish American novel, *The Irish Emigrant, An Historical Tale Founded on Fact*, was published in 1817, a time when other immigrant groups were not emigrating from their homelands to America at the same rate as the Irish<sup>1</sup>. With such a large population, there was more of an audience for published material. Additionally, the Irish, with their English-language skills and eventual patronage within the publishing industry, were at an advantage.

Second, in terms of literary themes and narrative elements, post-immigrant literature is marked more by opportunity rather than loss and assimilation. While I do not subscribe to the idea that post-immigrant literature is idealistic, I believe that it offers an understanding of what is possible with migration. Bill Ashcroft summarizes something similar when he refers to contemporary African literature as “the most consistent expression of the anticipatory consciousness that characterizes human thinking” (96). While it does not present an ideal world

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<sup>1</sup> To be more specific, roughly 800,000 to 1 million Irish men, women, and children left the island in the decade before and two decades following the publication of *The Irish Emigrant*.

for its characters, the post-immigrant does manage to explore *what could be*. Unlike an image of utopia, “anticipatory consciousness” remains undefined, available only in features such as rebirth, plural identity, and dislocation, as explored in the following chapters. As McCann’s fellow transplanted Irish writer, Emma Donoghue, writes in her first novel, *Landing*, “Didn’t you see *Winged Migration*?...they spend most of their lives on the wing, back and forth; it’s like this secret pulse throbbing through the planet...It’s even written into our language. *Uplifted...Moved, transported, carried away...*” (84).

The immigrant tale in large part has transmuted from one of tragedy and the attempt to overcome economic adversity or religious, racial, ethnic, or linguistic discrimination, to one of fluidity and possibility. Boundaries are more abstract and more frequently crossed. Colum McCann has even stated that he originally left his homeland of Ireland “because I was curious.” As Elizabeth Cullingford has argued, the “potential gains” that emigration allows for seem to balance the emotional losses (84). For example, when the female protagonist of Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers* leaves her native Cameroon in anticipation of permanently settling in New York, she recounts her unadulterated joy: “she had smiled and waved at the neighbors...who had gathered on the front lawn to enviously bid them farewell...she wouldn’t be missing them for too long, wishing them the same happiness she knew she was going to find in America” (13). This is not to suggest that a nostalgic turn towards “home” has disappeared from immigrant literature altogether. However, post-immigrant texts are more often driven by a literal and figurative movement forward, either evident in a character’s mobility or through symbolism of possibility. Opportunity is not necessarily romanticized or permanent, yet an emphasis on mobility and retention of one’s culture has broken from the assimilationist genealogy of the immigrant tale. In

addition, if the new immigrant is in (potential or perpetual) motion, he/she is not solely reliant upon new world communities as extensions of the homeland.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, the immigrant figure is more self-aware or realistic about his/her position as a migrant/commuter/wanderer. Because adaptation to a single culture is neither a decisive sentence nor is it necessarily permanent, the immigrant figure is more conscious of his/her place within the American cultural hierarchy. While I am not claiming that past immigrants were not entirely cognizant of their situations, I suggest that given the increase in information about immigration, access to technology, and greater social emphasis on multiculturalism, the post-immigrant figure is more conscious of his/her individual position rather than feeling beholden to the needs of the community, the weight of history, or the mythic quality of the homeland that generations of immigrants past experienced. Though they may still be driven by socio-political and cultural developments in their regions of ancestral origin, he/she is responsible for creating a new identity on his/her own, as well as balancing any prejudice or preconceived notions they might encounter from other Americans or immigrants.

Finally, the journey itself has changed, becoming dynamic and “revocable” (Cullingford 69). Characters in the following chapters enjoy the modernization of the immigrant journey, complete with cheap air travel and Skype. They can stream photos and videos of loved ones at home and communicate via free smart phone applications. Some of them even return home for holidays or to renew their visas, a journey that takes a matter of hours by plane rather than days or weeks by boat. Put another way, post-immigrant fiction most often reflects a twenty-first century culture of artistic “commuting” rather than the exile that existed in the previous era (Flannery 3).

The four authors offer differing visions of and reasons for migration: just as McCann emigrated from Ireland by himself and explored America before settling, so too do his characters wander, often alone, attempting to find the right fit rather than remaining somewhere (like Ireland) because of certain expectations. Junot Díaz's characters frequently travel back and forth between the Dominican Republic and New Jersey; as temporary residents of both nations and cultures, they adjust identities in an attempt to thrive. Jhumpa Lahiri's characters are dislocated, often purposefully so, both in terms of a lack of physical home and in their personal lives. Finally, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's characters carve out observational standpoints within the historically-entrenched racial hierarchy of a new country. The four patterns of migration represented in the following chapters underscore the complexity of contemporary immigration; the journey has become secondary as characters become the subjects, rather than the objects, of the immigrant experience. Additionally in the following chapters I will return to a distinct connecting thread in all four authors' texts: the revealing of the hidden or making the invisible, visible. A shared theme of exposure, of *revealing* an immigrant character, or making himself or herself *known*, implies a deeper and more imperative purpose behind the post-immigrant text. These works are not simply "different" from the past in certain narrative features but are essentially more resistant, even subversive, as immigrant writing. The post-immigrant text has become empowered.

One of the ongoing battles in the approach to globalization is a tendency to emphasize the significance of cultures or peoples, rather than individuals. As Kwame Anthony Appiah contends, a movement toward "protecting" cultures around the world should begin with individuals as the "proper object of moral concern" (3). Appiah's argument, to privilege individuals over nations, is why I will make a case for the post-immigrant tale in the following

four chapters. An examination and analysis of personal stories in the novels and short stories, alongside national history and cultural influences, allows us to resist essentialism, homogenization or over-representation, no matter how inadvertent.

## Chapter One: Colum McCann's Irish Wanderers

“Even though she let these thoughts run as fast as they would, she still stopped when her mind moved towards real fear or dread or, worse, towards the thought that she was going to lose this world forever, that she would never have an ordinary day again in this ordinary place, that the rest of her life would be a struggle with the unfamiliar.”

~*Brooklyn* by Colm Tóibín

In Colm Tóibín's 2009 bestselling novel, *Brooklyn*, the protagonist Eilis Lacey leaves her small town in Ireland to seek economic opportunity in New York City. She acutely feels the loss of her “ordinary” life but the novel leaves us with a sense of tentative hope for Eilis's future as an American. As Elizabeth Cullingford has mentioned, novels about emigration have recently resurfaced in Ireland. She cites Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole, who observes that several of the most critically- and commercially-successful novels since 2009 have included a narrative of emigration to America (67). O'Toole speculates that the recent return to a preoccupation with the emigrant past comes from the “brief respite” the Irish have enjoyed following a prolonged period of emigration. It has allowed Irish writers, both in Ireland and abroad, to reflect on what it means to be a new resident of a strange country (qtd. in Cullingford 67). Historically-speaking, the Irish have been verbose and prolific when it comes to sharing stories of the migratory experience. A substantial portion of Irish emigrant memoirs, fiction, poetry, and songs, from “The Shores of Amerikay” to *Angela's Ashes*, is overwhelmingly consumed with the pain of departure, exile, nostalgia, and the challenges of assimilation.

However, a noticeable shift has occurred recently in the discussion of Irish migration<sup>2</sup>: Irish literature on the subject has refocused on contemporary Irishmen or –women, those who have left for educational or economic opportunity or simply because, as Colum McCann admits, they are “curious.” Many of McCann’s characters are wanderers or “international mongrels” who challenge the simple categorization of “Irish immigrant.” Therefore, when we talk about the new Irish immigrant character, it is necessary to identify not only how he/she breaks from the genealogy in general but also the Irish literary tradition in particular.

Irish literature about emigration and immigration enjoys one of the longest traditions in the Western canon. This chapter will examine McCann’s first published texts, namely his short story collection, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, and his first novel, *Songdogs*, to both establish a timeline of the post-immigrant as well as lay claim to a contemporary chapter in the Irish immigrant literary tradition. More specifically, I argue that in establishing characters whose pattern of migration is never fixed, permanent, or one-way, McCann accomplishes three things: first, he undermines traditional immigrant narrative dichotomies of nostalgia/assimilation or immigrant/native, as characters reject settlement in exchange for a continuous search for self and home. Second, his narratives resist the completeness desired in older texts. For example, as we see in the image of the Boelhower paradigm in the introduction, the traditional narrative is envisioned as a closed, complete circuit. The ultimate goal was a place within the hyphenated American community, with financial opportunities and potential advancement for one’s descendants. McCann’s texts, on the other hand, view wandering as emancipatory and resistant to the homogenizing structure of previous immigrant literary traditions (Elboubekri 252).

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<sup>2</sup> In this chapter and the three that follow, I use both “immigration” and “emigration.” The former will refer to narratives that specifically reference arrival, settlement, assimilation, adjustment, etc. The latter will refer to narratives of departure or stories that focus on the preparation of leaving home.

McCann's vision of migration is one of empowerment, since wandering characters "reverse the symbolic direction of power by defying the law of settlement" (Elboubekri 263). They do not merely stand in contrast to older narratives but directly challenge readers' assumptions about the immigrant journey and how it should be portrayed. Third, in resisting structured national belonging and identity, unfixed migration departs from national or ethnic essentialism and instead offers a space for reinvention, re-birth, and exploration of identity, often symbolized in McCann's texts by disinterment and/or baptism.

### Background

I choose to begin a larger examination of and argument for post-immigrant writing with Colum McCann because his work originates within the early post-immigrant timeline. That is, his writing from the 1990s can point us toward a more precise understanding of the origins of the post-immigrant, which I will discuss in-depth below. Born and raised in Dublin, Colum McCann enjoyed a brief journalism career in Ireland before moving to the U.S. in 1986. He burst onto the literary scene in the mid-1990s, with his short story collection *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* (1993), followed by his first novel, *Songdogs* (1995). But it was with his novels *This Side of Brightness* (1998) and *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) that he gained the most international acclaim. *Let the Great World Spin*, in particular, won the prestigious National Book Award in 2009 as well as the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2011. The same year of its publication, McCann was also granted the *Chevalier de arts et lettres* by the French government, thereby solidifying his popularity and regard outside of Irish and American circles. It's not surprising that McCann won both American and Irish prizes for *Let the Great World Spin*; while

he still very much considers himself an Irishman, he has lived in New York City for most of the past twenty years. He does not see a conflict with this arrangement, stating in an interview, “I was born in Ireland, I was raised in Ireland. I’m still an Irish writer. I can’t really be anything else...[but] I’m also a New Yorker, definitely” (Lennon 99). His self-consciousness is well-suited to a discussion of his place as a post-immigrant writer and the journeys of his characters.

Both *Let the Great World Spin* and *This Side of Brightness* center on New York City, the former on the building of the World Trade Center towers and the latter on the sandhogs who dug the New York subway tunnels and the homeless people who live in the abandoned tunnels at the end of the twentieth century. While some critics have read these books as a sort of alternative New York history, McCann is quick to clarify that the novels are about connections that link a seemingly-dissociated group of people (Lennon 99). For my purposes here, I will be focusing on his earlier works, those published before the turn of the twentieth-first century. The reason is twofold: first, his earlier works have not received as much critical attention and deserve a more in-depth survey. But more significantly, I consider McCann to be one of the earliest examples of post-immigrant writing. His exploration of migrant characters who are neither assimilationist nor nostalgic, Irish nor American, helps us date the emergence of the new immigrant character and how he or she breaks from an earlier tradition.

Though his writing takes a different path than his predecessors, Colum McCann made the journey from Ireland to New York that millions of his countrymen and –women made over the course of centuries. As far back as the early-nineteenth century, Irish writers in America began writing and publishing shortly after arriving on American soil. While early publications were histories of Ireland or collections of folklore, the first official Irish American novel was entitled *The Irish Emigrant, An Historical Tale Founded on Fact* and was authored by “An Hibernian” in

1817 (Fanning 39). Although there was a notable presence of Irish in America prior to the mid-nineteenth century, the largest wave arrived with the failure of the potato crop in 1845. For the next several years, as the crop continued to fail and the British colonizers did little to assuage the rampant hunger and disease that resulted, nearly one million Irish men, women and children died and more than two million fled to the United States, Australia and England<sup>3</sup>. Although there were ebbs and flows, the stream of Irish people migrating to America remained steady through the 1980s.

The literature they produced in response to their circumstances naturally grew and expanded. In the mid-nineteenth century, Irish immigrant writers composed for three particular purposes: they wrote Catholic literature to encourage fellow immigrants to remain strong in their faith, particularly in a new land of Protestantism, they wrote what would be considered “immigrant guidebooks” to help others get along in America, and they wrote nationalistic-political fiction to encourage national unity and anti-British sentiment (Fanning 75). The immigrant texts were rarely pure entertainment but rather cautionary moral tales or helpful tracts that were almost exclusively read by Irish or Irish American audiences.

The writing from these generations of Irish immigrants is steeped in an understanding that America was their new and permanent home. Besides the occasional optimistic or idealistic text that featured characters who returned home to Ireland to rescue forlorn family members suffering from the long-term effects of the Great Hunger, such as Mary Anne Sadlier’s popular 1861 novel *Bessy Conway; or, The Irish Girl in America*, the majority of immigrant literature spoke a common language of loss and acculturation, a language that its target audience would

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<sup>3</sup>The exact numbers have always been debated and continue to be contested to this day. The number of dead may have been much higher than 1 million, as estimates of deaths and departures come only from pre-famine census data, which was notoriously unreliable. The estimates here are from the resources of the Great Hunger Museum of Quinnipiac University.

understand and with which they could commiserate (Corporaal). For example, in Dillon O'Brien's 1866 novel *The Dalys of Dalystown*, even the narrator admits he can never leave such a land as Ireland despite the story that follows. He states that he is grateful to America for taking in millions of his countrymen but he can never join them because his "roots are too deep in my native soil to allow of their taking hold with the vigor of new shoots in another soil" (qtd. in Fanning 89). The flashbacks to Ireland that follow are overwhelming sentimental and romanticized; the characters revel in a vision that existed before the famine struck and made exiles of them all. Even Studs Lonigan's father, Patrick, who emigrated as a child, is sentimental about the motherland. He dreams of taking his wife on "a trip to the old sod" to "look up all his relatives" (Farrell 17). As his day-dream continues, he begins to sing softly to himself: "Where the dear old Shannon's flowing/Where the three-leaved shamrock grows/Where my heart is I am going" (17).

Characters typically have left home permanently, and the tempo of their new lives is often overwhelmed by nostalgia, tragedy or grief, mainly because the characters fully feel their "exile." In fact, in the Irish language, the word used for emigrant is *deoraí*, which actually translates as one in exile (Miller 105). In Old Irish, the word translates as one without property, or even one "without kinfolk or social 'place' - an outsider, a stranger, even an outlaw" (105). Two additional Irish words used to describe those who had left, *díthreabhach* and *díbeartach*, describe someone who is homeless and someone who has suffered banishment, respectively. The two concepts of emigration and exile are linguistically and historically intertwined<sup>4</sup>. A feeling of exile, of being forced to leave one's home, often transformed into bitterness towards the evictors. For example, Dion Boucicault's version of "The Wearing of the Green" in his 1864 play *Arrah na Pogue*:

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But if at last our colour should be torn from Ireland's heart,  
Her sons with shame and sorrow from the dear old Isle will part...  
O Erin, must we leave you, driven by a tyrant's hand?  
Must we ask a mother's blessing from a strange and distant land?  
Where cruel cross of England shall nevermore be seen,  
And where, please God, we'll live and die still wearin' of the green.

However, a correlation between emigration and exile is no longer congruent with the contemporary Irish immigrant narrative. By the end of the twentieth century, the longstanding, entrenched narrative of the Irish emigrant transformed into one with looser structures of form, content, and subjectivity. McCann himself states, "We [Irish writers] are not in exile anymore... You don't have the church to fight against. You don't have the sort of oppressive social regime... you can't be in exile anymore- you just commute back and forth. Exile is political" (qtd. in Lennon 100). McCann's characters, after all, are not Irish peasants, forced to leave their rural communities to settle in the tenements and factories of New York City. They often do not even self-identify as immigrants within the confines of the stories. Rather, they are New Yorkers or travelers or priests or photographers who happen to be Irish too.

McCann captures an exodus that does not align with "the traditional narrative of colonial victimization," partially because many of the emigrants are not victims of an unjust economic system but the potential beneficiaries (Cullingford 66). In fact, a 2012 survey conducted by *The Irish Times* found that 60% of people who had left Ireland since 2008 left voluntarily. Even those who felt forced into departing were "not necessarily miserable" (72). In other words, a change in

Ireland's economic and cultural global presence, often attributed to the Celtic Tiger economy, has led to a shift in how the Irish journey abroad is both undertaken and depicted in literature.

The term "Celtic Tiger" refers to the 10-12 year period of extreme economic growth, mainly attributed to foreign investment, throughout Ireland at the end of the twentieth century. It resulted in a large-scale housing and building boom that abruptly ended with the onset of the worldwide recession several years later. The term emerged from a comparison to the boom in Asia, known as the Asian Tiger economy. However, while it created an impression of prosperity across the island, many people suffered in the aftermath. Laborers lost their jobs after the housing boom as unemployment peaked at 15%, while entire housing developments were abandoned (Boland). While fears of wide-spread emigration and sustained unemployment did not materialize, it's important once again to not be blinded by a "single story" of the Celtic Tiger. Even in the statistics above, Elizabeth Cullingford does not define "voluntarily," nor does she mention if the original *Irish Times* survey did so. Are readers to interpret that the remaining 40% of emigrants who responded to the survey felt forced out? While I won't pursue a more in-depth discussion of Irish economic issues here, it is important to note that this decade-long period influenced- and continues to influence- Irish artists and writers.

Scholars like Susan Cahill (*Irish Literature in the Celtic Tiger Years*) consider McCann as part of a generation of writers, including Anne Enright, Sebastian Barry, Éilís Ní Dhuibhneand, and Colm Tóibín, who initially achieved notoriety following Ireland's economic boom. These writers are known for veering away from Ireland of the "grand tradition" and instead focusing on globalization and the painful realities of the early twenty-first century recession. Such a categorization often draws a sharp distinction between pre-Celtic Tiger literature and post-Tiger literature. For example, in a 2015 article published in *The Guardian*,

Justine Jordan defines the split as follows: Celtic Tiger writers primarily embraced nostalgia and deprivation. Historical novels became more popular, as boom novels were “smug and self-congratulatory” about the terrible Irish past rife with sexual repression and poverty. Once the recession plunged the nation into self-doubt and negativity, post-boom literature took on a quality of darkness, experimentation, troubling change and internal examination, distinctly “dynamic, radical [and] often female.” Irish authors who have captured or embraced the post-boom ethos and have subsequently prospered include Tana French, Kevin Barry, Donal Ryan, and Claire Kilroy.

The Tiger/post-Tiger dichotomy as it applies to McCann is provoking, if not incorrect, because he technically came of age as a writer during the boom. But rather than turning backward or inward for material, as with many of his contemporaries, he turned to themes endemic to the post-boom culture. While McCann left Ireland as a young adult, prior to the onset of the Celtic Tiger economy, many of his contemporaries named above have remained on the island, writing from the perspective of a culturally-changing Ireland. Their literature is more preoccupied with contemporary Irish identity, from Roddy Doyle’s *The Deportees* (2007) to Donal Ryan’s *The Spinning Heart* (2012) to Anne Enright’s *The Green Road* (2015). As I have stated before, and as McCann has stated, his status as strictly an “Irish writer” is ambiguous, and his migratory characters do not fall neatly into pre/boom/post classification.

Besides reading McCann through the prism of the Celtic Tiger, we can also position McCann alongside a parallel of “transmigration” in the 1990s. In their seminal piece on the shift from immigrant to transmigrant, Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Szanton Blanc define transnational migrants as “immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in

relationship to more than one nation-state. They are not sojourners” (48). Similar to my conceptualization of the post-immigrant resistance to the assimilation/nostalgia binary, transmigrancy is “best understood as a response to the fact that in a global economy contemporary migrants have found full incorporation in the countries within which they resettle either not possible or not desirable” (52). Essentially, home is established in a new country, but networks and connections to elsewhere persist and thrive. The definition implies multiple loyalties, or a “doubling” of identity rather than an erasing, as William Boelhower would put it. They go on to add that the shift from immigrant to transmigrant has occurred because of three factors: changing capital resources, racism, and political loyalties, not to mention the aftermath of colonial withdrawal. The intersection of these factors supports Krishnaswamy’s “third wave” of migrant literature, explained below.

The authors are careful to clarify that transmigrants, though moving beyond and between borders, enjoy a more permanent state of belonging to multiple places, rather than continuing to migrate whenever they so choose. As they put it, transmigrants are not “sojourners.” The authors contend that transmigrants establish settled lives in the countries where they reside and engage in local institutions or organizations, at the same time they “maintain connections, build institutions, conduct transactions, and influence local and national events” in the countries from which they have emigrated (48). An insistence on double-rootedness contributes to a distinction between the transmigrant and the post-immigrant: Schiller, Basch, and Blanc stipulate distinct patterns or modes of migrancy, whereas post-immigrant literature does not necessarily require such restrictive, unambiguous categorization, similar to expectations and assumptions about immigrant texts of the past. While I find their definition helpful in terms of a post-immigrant timeline, we can see from *Songdogs* and *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* that McCann’s migrants

*are* often sojourners, and they seemingly reject any distinct expectations about their paths or (re)settlement.

Finally, McCann's early work aligns with the more considerable literary and sociological trend of de-homogenization, beginning with the late-twentieth century. A de-homogenization of the immigrant experience, a leading characteristic of post-immigrant work, appears in Revathi Krishnaswamy's "Mythologies of Migrancy," which, published in 1995, makes a compelling case for a tangential rendering of what I'm calling post-immigrant literature here. Early on, he makes a case for a "third wave" of immigrant writing following the global surge of de-colonization of mid-century. The first generation includes texts written/published immediately following de-colonialization, which turn inward in an attempt to legitimize nationalism and return to tradition; the second wave of the 1970s and 80s includes more cynical and introverted works that reject Western ideas (126). A third generation, emerging in the 1990s, features an idealized (and generalized) version of the contemporary migrant. He or she is:

cross-pollinated by postmodernism and postcolonialism...this itinerant intellectual becomes an international figure who at once feels at home nowhere and everywhere. No longer disempowered by cultural schizophrenia or confined within collectivities such as race, class, or nation, the nomadic postcolonial intellectual is said to 'write back' to the empire in the name of all displaced and dispossessed peoples. (125)

While Krishnaswamy's article is much more concerned with the postcolonial text and the new path of the "Third World" intellectual, his emphasis on the danger of de-materializing the immigrant narrative and neglecting the individual resounds throughout my chapters here (132).

The above context provides multiple frameworks through which to view McCann's work. Is he primarily an Irish writer? An immigrant or transmigrant writer? Or a representative of a "new" Ireland? The majority of existing McCann scholarship is focused on these three identities: first, several scholars, including Miriam O'Kane Mara, Rebecca Oster Bach, and Sylvie Mikowski, read his work as reflective of Ireland in the 1990s through today. To these scholars, he is first and foremost an Irishman, writing characters who manifest the realities of late twentieth/early twenty-first century Ireland in the wake of globalization. Eamonn Wall has pointed out that Ireland has endured a vast amount of international influence in a short amount of time. As a small island, Ireland has historically relied on travelers to share experiences of the outside world, as its own emigrants rarely returned (284). However, with the advent of air travel and Ireland's membership in the European Union, the country has come into contact with more peoples and new ways of life than ever before. All of these cultural factors are indeed relevant if we choose to look at McCann solely as an Irish writer.

Despite his global perspective, McCann's writing style displays flashes of Irish identity. As discussed below, *Songdogs* and the short stories of *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* are rife with Irish references, from the brief Irish language exchange in "Sisters" to Padraic's tales of the Tuatha Dé Danann that he shares with Dana. Michael in *Songdogs* hunts a ghost salmon, similar to Fionn mac Cumhaill's Salmon of Knowledge, and Cathal frees the spirits of victims of Northern Irish violence in "Cathal's Lake." Although his stories are more extroverted than many of his predecessors- and even many of his contemporaries- McCann's allusions to Irish culture return him to his roots.

A second set of scholars, such as Amanda Tucker, Eóin Flannery, and Sinéad Moynihan, considers McCann's work as occupied with place. That is, they see a marked difference between his "urban" novels that have been published more recently and his deep exploration of migrancy and location. In this set of scholarship, we see the broadest discussion of immigration and emigration as they pertain to both Irish and non-Irish characters. Articles and chapters about McCann's aesthetics, globalized Irish migrant characters, urban symbolism, and cultural performativity, just to name a few examples, dissect McCann's approaches to multicultural identity and national belonging.

Most significantly, while many of the scholars named above have identified McCann as a "voice of a new Ireland," they do not define what that means, other than Ireland has become increasingly globalized. For example, Eve Patten states that McCann's "writing as a whole marks a turning point at which the horizons of literary Irishness are being radically redrawn and expanded" (qtd. in Flannery 7). And yet, the *how* is often left in vague terms. Several critical pieces on McCann have drawn attention to the fact that most if not all of his texts produce some sense of hopefulness, which connects to my second element of the post-immigrant story: a move away from loss and toward opportunity. For example, Mara and Bach refer to McCann's tone of "unusual hopefulness" (9), Amanda Tucker points out that as Juanita leaves her hometown in Mexico in the novel *Songdogs*, she does not "base her conceptions of home on nostalgia, like many diasporic notions of the Old Country" (34), and Eóin Flannery posits that *This Side of Brightness* carries with it the "possibility of hope...pregnant with redemptive silences" (4). Yet, very few of these scholars go beyond stating what this hopefulness denotes. In his book, Flannery cites Fatima Vieira in pinpointing McCann's "utopian notion:"

There is no doubting that such a [utopian] desire is present in McCann's work as it narrates microdramas of trial, hope and redemption. His work does not offer any macrostructural solution or alternative on a grand utopian scale, rather it tracks the displacement and the possibilities of recovery in scattered local lives and cultural networks. McCann's utopianism might be profitably described as 'a matter of attitude, as a kind of reaction to an undesirable present and an aspiration to overcome all difficulties.'

(17)

Flannery makes two important distinctions here that align with my vision of the post-immigrant. First, he agrees that the hopefulness present in McCann is small-scale, available to individuals and their "local lives," but not necessarily indicative of a move toward any type of grand global harmony (or even national, for that matter). Second, he emphasizes that local, internal utopianism is not apparent in one's conditions but in one's attitudes toward them. Pragmatically-speaking, "utopia" takes on the form of easily-crossed borders, non-discrimination, open doors, or reinvention. As I will establish below, the sense of possibility and potential for redemption explicitly expressed and represented through symbolism in McCann's works are, indeed, products of individualized experience.

### Songdogs

McCann's texts privilege characters' senses of becoming over closure, opting "for a continuous changing identity to interrogate the already existing definition of belongingness" (Elboubekri 259). The continuous rebirthing or reinvention defines how one "belongs" to a given

cultural or national identity as an immigrant. It is ultimately symbolic of the fluidity of immigrant self-redefinition. Given the context above, we can see how the trajectory of McCann's immigrant characters, their "wandering," is resistant to previous paths of both immigrant characters and narratives. They invite the reader to ask: are they considered "homeless"? Or originless? What are they seeking if not permanent settlement? These questions, or the uncertainty of characters' state "constitute an adequate literary space to put up resistance against some of the identity discourses which are centered on fixity and oneness" (Elboubekti 252).

The pattern of wandering appears from McCann's earliest works. *Songdogs*, published in 1995, traces the literal and metaphorical steps of the Lyons family. The story begins as the narrator, Conor Lyons, returns to Ireland for a visa renewal that will allow him to maintain residency in Wyoming. With a week to kill, he stops by to see his estranged father, Michael, with whom he has had no contact in years. They did not even know if each other is still alive. And yet, they fall into a routine fairly quickly, with Conor cleaning the house and aiding his father, an attempt to take care of a man who seems to have given up on himself. In a series of flashbacks, we learn that Conor's mother, a Mexican woman named Juanita, left her photographer husband years ago when he published suggestive photos of her without her consent. Once the book of photographs is circulated, the reaction from her neighbors in Mayo makes her life miserable. Several years after her departure, an adult Conor embarks on a quest following his parents' path throughout Mexico and America prior to their settlement in Mayo. Along the way, through his own journey and narrative flashbacks, we are exposed to the beauty, pain, and yearning associated with an immigrant's search for belonging. The longer the Lyonses stay in one place, the less happy they become; the story is a multi-generational search for home as they are all propelled forward.

The novel heralds an era of post-immigrant narratives because it features three central characters, two generations, who are all wanderers in search of new lives. Raised an orphan in Mayo, Michael Lyons picks up and leaves following the deaths of his guardians. His departure echoes McCann's own reasons for leaving: "He left on his twentieth birthday, no politics in the leaving, simply bored" (18). After photographing the Spanish Civil War, he follows a fellow soldier to Mexico and stays for years after marrying Juanita. With her mother's death, they move to San Francisco briefly, stop over in Wyoming for a summer, and end up in New York following a potential job offer for Michael. After several more years, Michael decides that they should return to Ireland, promising her that they will make their way back to Mexico eventually<sup>5</sup>. Juanita recognizes his essential need to be on the move. In the early days of their marriage in Mexico, she knows it is "strange" for him to "stay so long in one place, and he wondered where the two of them should go next" (52). Even his language speaks to his restlessness: his first comment upon disembarking in San Francisco is, "Great day for a wander" (80).

Conor inherits his father's desire to seek out new existences. He flees Mayo after his mother's disappearance and alludes to a stay in London. His quest to find his mother takes him first to Mexico for a while, then onto San Francisco to see an old friend of hers, and finally to the open expanse of Wyoming. He does not choose to return to Ireland but he does decide to return to his home. Even during his first evening back, he thinks, "I am home now, and a million possibilities may still lie outside my window, curlews resurrected to the night if I want them to be"<sup>6</sup> (26). Although he resides elsewhere and never plans to stay more than the week, he is able

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<sup>5</sup> One dated detail at this point of the novel: Michael only has to bribe an Irish immigration official with a \$20 bill to sidestep any problems with Juanita's lack of visa. It's not only the fluidity and patterns of migration that have changed.

<sup>6</sup> Yet another one of McCann's references to birds in his texts. The birds he references- the curlew, the heron, the swan- are all at least partially-migratory. They never "complete" their journeys.

to recognize more than one home. His stopover is merely one part of his journey, one that offers up many possibilities of renewal.

Conor's week in his home country abounds with experiences of rebirth, both for himself and his father. Michael, on the one hand, continues to seek what has been lost. As Conor quickly discovers, Michael spends a large portion of each day fishing in the polluted stream behind their house. He claims that he once saw a giant salmon there and insists on hooking it. As Amanda Tucker has pointed out, Michael's search for the "ghost salmon" is emblematic of his search for redemption for how he treated his wife (Tucker 38). The novel presents several moments of water and symbolic rebirth, from cleansing rainstorms, cathartic swims, and even a bath that Conor gives his father as they make amends. Only after his father has dunked his entire body in the bath, in a symbolic baptism, can they talk about the past and how much they both miss Juanita. Conor, too, comes to shed his fear of "half-emergence." While dangling his feet in the river by his father's house, he laments "A life of half-emergence. A consistency of acceptance" (101). He dreads such an existence, one he associates with his stagnant father:

I got up from the bank and shook the water from my toes, pulled on my things, walked towards home, a factory horn ringing out behind me. The old man was there [at the stream] with the familiar routine, and a bitterness sped its way through me as I watched him casting. Something nestled in my stomach and gnawed at me. He lives his life now in the grip of some comfortable anesthetic. (101-2)

Conor's disgust is not for the man who chased Conor's mother away but for a man caught in a cycle of predictability and repetition. He sees what happens when a wanderer stops moving.

Conor's swim in the river is disrupted in the above example, but he immerses himself in the dirty water shortly after, just to show he is not subject to that which he resents in his father's situation. "Enough nothingness, I said to myself. Enough of this half-emergence" (125). He comes up laughing, feeling "strangely light in the holiness of silence as the water lapped over me" (125).

Finally, Michael's photography career not only determines his path- to the Spanish American War, to a job in America, etc.- but the photographs themselves provide space for Conor's temporal wandering. When he returns to Mayo, Conor narrates his habit of meandering through the tableau of his father's photographs in the evenings. He recalls:

I would walk my way slowly into old photographs...[my mother] remains looking at her hands as I ghost my way through the photograph and try to say things to the people around her. They are busy with their bottles and their dreams of appliances, so I step back through the shot and up the street...I step out again, onto a black rim and into a night scene...I cannot help wandering backwards. (141-3)

Likewise, Michael's photography serves as a position of observation for the outsider. His effort to record what he witnesses, the everyday existence of those around him, is disruptive to many of his subjects, including Juanita's mother. When he spends a summer taking photos of the wildfires in Wyoming, the chief firefighter expresses his severe dislike of photographers, asking Michael, "You can see around ya with your eyes, can't ya? No sense in using that thing" (105). The permanence of the record and his interest in capturing images without interference or contamination resonates with other post-immigrant characters that I will examine in later chapters, such as Ifemelu in *Americanah* and Kaushik in *Unaccustomed Earth*.

## Fishing the Sloe-Black River

While the entire narrative arc of *Songdogs* is preoccupied with migration and the search for a home, McCann's first published book, a short story collection called *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, does more to extract symbolism and themes of movement, rebirth, and resurrection in order to address more complex individualized legacies of immigration. The collection actually resulted from McCann's first experiences in America. According to McCann, he left Ireland to set off for America and write the "great Irish-American novel." Influenced by Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Tom Wolfe's *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, he and his friends decided to drive and cycle across the country. After a series of odd jobs, many of which he uses as settings in his stories, he earned his B.A. in English and history at the University of Texas before moving to New York. His characters are both based on his own experiences as well as the many people he met in his travels. And as he freely admits, "I had the courtesy of being Irish, full of blarney, of being nonthreatening, and many were amazed that I'd be traveling across their country. They asked me the same questions, but ultimately what they wanted to do was tell me their story" (Kaufman).

The stories of the collection are connected primarily by a cast of characters searching for a place of belonging. Half of the stories are set in Ireland, while the other half takes place in America or split between the two. Three different stories, "Stolen Child," "Around the Bend and Back Again," and "Through the Field" feature a protagonist who works at an institutional home, a setting drawn from McCann's own work at a juvenile detention center in Texas. While only one story, "Sisters," addresses the unspoken trauma of immigration, the title story depicts the families of emigrants left behind and "Basket Full of Wallpaper" confronts the rising presence of

the non-Irish in Ireland. Despite the fact that there is no single character, setting, or event that connects the stories together, the sense of rootlessness offered by the characters unites the short story collection as a post-immigrant text.

In the course of *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, McCann explores burial or submersion and reemergence to proffer a symbolic rebirth to certain characters. Whether or not the resurrection is permanent or successful is debatable, but McCann offers a theme that signifies new beginnings for the wandering Irish figure. The first story in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, simply entitled “Sisters,” has received the most critical attention for its treatment of immigration; it is one of the few McCann stories not only to directly address the choices and fates of Irish émigrés in America but also to explicitly confront the risks and rewards. The story, narrated from the perspective of the younger sister, Sheona, and covering a few decades of her life, details the sisters’ strict upbringing in rural Ireland and how it impacted their future lives. Both of the sisters have traveled far from their childhood home. Brigid becomes a nun, stationed first in Dublin, then Central America, and finally a convent on Long Island. Sheona escapes her promiscuous past in Ireland and explores the west coast of America, only to be gang-raped and deported from California. She returns to Dublin and a secretarial job for over a decade before itching to wander again. As the story opens, Sheona is crossing the Canadian border in the boot of a car in an attempt to visit her critically-ill sister at the convent.

Nowhere else in McCann’s work is there such a vivid description of migration-in-progress. Sheona details the physical and psychological discomfort of crossing into a new land, one that has mistreated her in the past and yet one she willingly faces again for her sister:

Squashed in the boot of a car, huddled under a blanket, I ask myself why I am smuggling myself across the Canadian border to go back to a country that wouldn't allow me to stay...It is dark and cramped and hollow and black in here. My knees are up against my breasts. Exhaust fumes make me cough. A cold wind whistles in...The car shudders to a halt. My head lolls against the lid of the boot. I would rather pick my way through a pillar of stone with a pin than go through this again. (3-5)

Later in the story, Sheona recounts her deportation journey as well, briefly mentioning how the guards escorted her onto a plane at JFK. Her comfortable flight courtesy of the U.S. government stands in direct contrast to her return journey, one that requires her to be momentarily buried due to her "illegal" status.

Sheona goes to great lengths to enumerate the vast differences between herself and Brigid. They are polar opposites, one having chosen a life as an earthly saint and one living without concern for consequences, either in this life or the next. Brigid is so fragile from anorexia and focused on her spirituality, she is practically ephemeral. Sheona, on the other hand, is firmly rooted in the earth. For example, she associates herself with bogs from the first sentence of the story: "I have come to think of our lives as the colors of that place- hers a piece of bog cotton, mine as black as the water found when men slash too deep in the soil with a shovel" (1). When she receives a loving letter from her former lover, Michael, following her return to Dublin, she says, "I thought of going back to Mayo and striking a shovel into a boghole, seeping down into the water, breathing out the rest of my life through a hollow piece of reed grass" (10). Her earthiness is something she desires to share with her sister, something that she believes continues to bind them together. When she reaches the convent, Sheona wishes she had remembered to

bring her sister “a sod of soil. Or a rock. Or something” (20). The past, or a digging up of the buried, also functions as a type of shibboleth between characters. The rock or sod of turf is a physical reminder, but language plays the role as well. When she arrives at the convent and is initially turned away from seeing Sister Brigid, Sheona detects an Irish accent in the speech of the nun at the door and begins to speak in Irish to attempt a commonality.

She begins to close the door, smiling gently at me.

“Is mise a dhreifeur,” I stutter. I am her sister.

The door opens again and she looks at me, askance.

“Bhfuil tú cinnte?” Are you sure?

“Sé,” I laugh. “Táim cinnte.” Yes, I’m sure.

“Cad a bhfuil uait?” she asks. What do you want?

“I want to see her. Sé do thoil é. Please.”

She stares at me for a long time. “Tar isteach. Come in, girl.” (17)

The Irish language, thought to be dying or already dead by some writers<sup>7</sup>, is exhumed to build a bridge between two Irish immigrants far from home. McCann rarely uses Irish in his texts, as it is something shed or left behind when the Irishman or woman leaves home. But here, in one narrative moment, the Irish wanderer has the opportunity and the freedom to return to her past and revisit her origins to provide for her present. Brigid’s illness provides Sheona with the chance to be reborn now that another border has been crossed. She stands vigil for her kin, but dreams about how she “will ride through a flurry of puddles to a place where a waterfall is frozen. I will stay here for now...But when she recovers, I will go to Quebec and climb” (23).

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<sup>7</sup> For example, see Reg Hindley, Andrew Carnie, Joe Mac Donnacha, and journalist John Spain, amongst others.

Her stopover is momentary, her journey will continue, just as the frozen water of the waterfall will thaw and travel once more.

Also caught in a moment of stasis is Padraic from “Stolen Child,” a story developed from McCann’s own experiences working in a group juvenile home. Padraic is a young man stopping over in America and is anxious to move elsewhere. Near the middle of the story, his wife Orla reminds him that they can leave in six months when she is finished with school; they can return to Ireland or even pursue a job opportunity in Oregon (79). Padraic works hard for the children he serves in a juvenile institution, yet he despairs at the depressing, hopeless cases that get lost within the system. Near the beginning of the story, he befriends a teenager named Dana, a blind African American girl whom the authorities found locked in a cupboard while her mother smoked crack cocaine and forgot to feed her (74). In interacting with Padraic, Dana is introduced to the Celtic mythical goddess who shares her name. She becomes enraptured with the stories of the Danu and her tribe, the Tuatha Dé Danann, who “made tunnels in vast mounds” and built fairy forts (76). Though divided by age, race, and economic circumstances, Padraic connects to this young woman through the history of his homeland.

At the end of the story, Padraic walks her down the aisle as she prepares to marry a homeless veteran who “lived in a small hovel...a black hole of other refugees and veterans” (81). Both Will and Dana are redeemed in being disinterred; they are removed from their lonely, isolated, liminal existences by people who help them move forward. As in the rest of McCann’s work, their symbolic resurrection into a new life is not guaranteed. The reader is not privy to a glimpse of Dana and Will’s marriage or home. But McCann’s snapshot narrative is one of second chances, of the possibilities that figurative movement forward can provide for the Irish immigrant protagonist as well. Dejected by his job and frustrated with New York, Padraic is

transformed, albeit subtly, by the end of the story. Even though he misses his chance to admit to Dana that “strange things often happen, that certain moments are all too rare to be lost,” he glances up at his own wife with her champagne glass poised in the air and “nods back, slowly at first, like a bird beginning to peck at a few crumbs lying on the ground” (86-7). Despite the desperation all around him at the institutional home, despite his dissatisfaction with his life in New York, Dana’s new beginning provides a space for him to reflect on the possibility that he, too, can begin again.

As both “Sisters” and “Stolen Child” demonstrate, McCann is adept at using imagery to signify a resistance to fixity. One of his most consistent images is ice, particularly a breaking free of it. Sheona in “Sisters” dreams of fleeing to the “frozen waterfall” at the end of the story, a return to her adventures climbing frozen waterfalls years ago in Quebec. The final story in *Fishing the Sloe-Black River* introduces the frozen-bird-in-ice imagery. It is the only story set in Northern Ireland in the time of the Troubles. Although McCann touches on the war throughout his other short story collection, *Everything in This Country Must*, he has generally steered clear of discussing the conflict elsewhere in his fiction. And here, in “Cathal’s Lake,” war is merged with the fantastic. In the story, an old farmer digs a swan from the frozen lake after hearing news of another young man’s death in the North. The circumstances are rather vague; the man wonders about the victim as well as the intent (or lack thereof) of the British soldier who fired the shots. The story could be read at face value, though plenty have interpreted the story to exist in a realm of magical realism: the swan is the young victim, and the man must free him so his spirit can be at peace. It is a myth of Sisyphean expectations, that the man must free a swan every time he hears of another casualty. After all, upon hearing the news through the crackling

radio, he thinks, “but it’s a sad Sunday when a man has to go digging again and the lake almost full this year” (186).

Likewise, McCann’s novel following *Songdogs*, entitled *This Side of Brightness*, opens with an image of a bird frozen in ice. The main character, Treefrog/Clarence Nathan, “knew it must have been a goose or heron, but he decided that it was a crane. Its neck was tucked under its wingpit and the head was submerged in the river...The bird’s legs were spread out and one wing was uncurled as if it had been attempting to fly through ice” (3). He proceeds to throw bricks at the ice, freeing the frozen crane from its grotesque position. In the final paragraph of the novel, he mimics the description of the crane, metaphorically freeing himself from the ice: “But for now he stretches both arms wide and he puts one leg out in front of him and he tucks his head into his armpit and lifts it again and, changing the structure of his body, Clarence Nathan smiles at his own ridiculousness...and he says once again as he stretches his arms wide, he says, ‘Our resurrections aren’t what they used to be’” (289). With the frozen bird motif, McCann links Padraic, Treefrog, and Cathal, all characters who seek redemption in unexpected places by confronting immobility.

The escape from ice, the symbolic freezing/thawing/re-freezing implied by its presence in his stories, suggests the continuous motion of McCann’s characters, their refusal to exist in a grounded, permanent state. The same can be said of the title story of the collection, a brief tableau of how emigration has affected a small village in Ireland. The women of the village cast their lines in the river for young men and women, as all of their children have left the country. The narrator notes that there are twenty-six women in total, representative of the twenty-six counties of the Republic of Ireland. As they cast their lines, one woman hums a bit of a song: “Flow on lovely river flow gently along, by your waters so clear sounds the lark’s merry song”

(138). The perpetual motion of their fishing and the flow of the water speaks to an argument made by Mara and Bach; the water carrying away their children (“the Thames or the Darling or Hudson or the Loire”) mirrors the water of this Westmeath river (139). If one body of water took them away, perhaps they will be return in another.

While the “fish” or children have gone and there may be nothing left below the surface, the women are not engaging in a futile activity. Their fishing is not a one-time affair but rather something the men and women do continuously; there is hope left as they wait for their children to return. Indeed, Mara and Bach refer to McCann’s tone in “Fishing the Sloe-Black River” as “persistently hopeful” (25). Like Michael Lyons in *Songdogs* who spends a portion of each day, fishing for an imaginary salmon in polluted water, the mothers and fathers of the small village strive for redemptive possibilities (Tucker 38). The river combines the continuous movement of change with the potential to cleanse and renew, a perfect symbol for McCann’s post-immigrant wanderers and their decentered existence.

## Conclusion

In 1908, Israel Zangwill created a metaphor for immigrant identity in America that remains entrenched in classroom discussions of American history and culture. While his play may be considered a romanticized story of life for new Americans, the literal melting pot for graduates of Henry Ford’s English School continues to be confronted and resisted in post-immigrant work. As the Henry Ford Museum explains, “Graduates of Ford’s English School wearing their ‘native dress’ descend into a large pot labeled ‘The American Melting Pot.’ After going through a virtual smelting process, the immigrant’s identity was boiled away, leaving a

new citizen to emerge from the pot wearing American clothes and waving American flags.” They were symbolically immersed to be reborn “real” Americans.

I cite the “Melting Pot” here not as an elementary connection between contemporary immigration and its symbolic predecessor but as a final lens through which to view McCann’s conceptualization of the post-immigrant narrative. His characters are not resigned to a one-way journey, to full emergence indicative of forced assimilation and abandonment of nostalgia, to a firmly drawn boundary between home and away. They are not subject to expectations of forced settlement, effectively “completing” their journey to a new life. The Melting Pot is not only antiquated in terms of modern-day subjectivity of the immigrant and multiculturalism (no matter how flawed) but also out-dated in its assumptions about how and why migrants arrive and depart a location or home.

The Irish immigrant characters examined in this chapter embody the contrapuntal nature of twenty-first century migration. However, the anxiety/pleasure they exude comes not from forced exile or assimilation but from their refusal to permanently relocate. That is, they continue to wander expectantly, seeking the potential for new identification and in control of where and when they move. They are, as Edward Said says, “nomadic [and] decentered” because they have developed the agency to make themselves so. As pointed out by Eamonn Wall, McCann’s immigrants’ view of Ireland is not of something lost. Rather, Ireland is seen as a stopping off point, perhaps a place to start or a place to break the action. Ultimately, McCann’s work is not concerned with Irish characters exiled from the homeland but “posits migration as a modern social condition” rather than being endemic to the Irish (Tucker). His wandering characters appear in almost all of his works: Fr. John Corrigan in *Let the Great World Spin*, the women of

*Transatlantic*, Conor Lyons and his parents in *Songdogs*, Padraic in “Stolen Child” and Brigid and Sheona in “Sisters.” Continuous migration promises new beginnings, ones not limited to one location or one time: Sheona emerging from the trunk of the car, the swans breaking free of the ice and flying away, Conor’s visit to Mayo, are all representative of the new-immigrant search for utopian possibilities and the power they wield to begin anew.

## Chapter Two: Immigrant Commuters in the Works of Junot Díaz

I emigrated from the single greatest little place  
in the Caribbean  
Dominican Republic  
I love it  
Jesus, I'm jealous of it  
And beyond that  
Ever since my folks passed on  
I haven't gone back  
Goddamn, I gotta get on that.  
~*In the Heights* by Lin-Manuel Miranda

In 2008, the Broadway musical *In the Heights* was nominated for thirteen Tony Awards, winning the coveted trophy for Best Musical. It became a smash hit with critics and audiences alike on account of its use of hip-hop, an unconventional narrative style in the world of musical theatre. The show takes place in Washington Heights, the New York neighborhood whose residents largely hail from the Dominican Republic. The popularity of the show reaffirmed how quickly and staunchly Dominican culture had permeated the twenty-first century mainstream<sup>8</sup>. However, only one year before *In the Heights* opened on Broadway, another unconventional Dominican text took America by storm: the bestselling, Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. With a streetwise young protagonist narrating with untranslated

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<sup>8</sup> The creator of *In the Heights*, Lin-Manuel Miranda, and Junot Díaz also share the connection of returning an historical figure to the public eye: with Díaz, it was the Dominican dictator, Rafael Trujillo. Lin-Manuel Miranda, on the other hand, has recently won great acclaim for resurrecting the story of Caribbean-born Alexander Hamilton in his Pulitzer Prize-winning Broadway musical, *Hamilton*.

phrases of Spanish, including curse words and Dominican slang, this book educated non-Dominican readers not only about certain facets of Dominican culture but also the island's tragic twentieth century history. Most of all, it transformed its young author, Junot Díaz, into the mouthpiece for Dominican writers and the Dominican immigrants who had been living somewhat invisibly within the larger Latino population. As preeminent Dominican scholar Silvio Torres-Saillant has pointed out, up until the early twenty-first century, Dominicans had often been excluded from the larger conversation about Latinos in America. In fact, even up until 1997, "major panoramic vistas" of U.S. Latino literature, such as *The Latino Reader* and *The Hispanic Literary Companion*, failed to include even one Dominican literary figure (251). Junot Díaz has been the one to change all that.

His work has broken away from the "predominantly nostalgic, insular-oriented, and Spanish-language literary tradition" of the Dominicans from the twentieth century, whose work was published exclusively for the consumption of small Dominican immigrant communities (Moreno 104). But what has signified this break? How and why was the barrier crossed? I argue here that Díaz's work, in its use of one continuous narrator, the code-switching between Spanish and English and vernacular language and academic prose, as well as the characters' consciousness of their racial and ethnic identities in multiple locations, reflects post-immigrant self-reflexivity and the assertion of agency, both in terms of the characters themselves as well as the narrative form. With the characters commuting between New Jersey and the Dominican Republic, Díaz allows the reader to regard race and ethnicity as performative, that the characters are strategic about external perceptions, as is Díaz (Bautista 83). Díaz ultimately questions what Dominican identity looks like, both internally and externally, for a new generation of commuting immigrants and their children. The central theme I analyze in this chapter as it pertains to post-

immigrant identity is masking. As expounded upon below, Díaz uses physical, metaphorical, linguistic, and racial masks to not only explore identity formation but also generate a discussion of resistance. The resistance created by masking, “entails merging double awareness, an instantaneous feeling of belonging and un-belonging or (dis)identification...it involves a continual movement backward and forward,” movement that I argue is symbolized by characters’ commute between the Dominican Republic and the United States (Elboubekri 258). In essence, masking provides a reclamation of difference: of appearance, origins, language, or racial and national identification. More importantly, it allows for *control* of difference and marginalization.

As he has come to embody an increasing awareness of and/or attraction to Dominican culture in the United States, Díaz’s work has plenty to impart about immigration, specifically how a new generation represents post-immigrant trends. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the character of Lola suffers from “the inextinguishable longing for elsewhere,” a phrase strikingly similar to what we hear in Colum McCann (78). Lola’s brother, Oscar, passes the entire arc of the narrative trying to find his “place,” ending with his escape to Santo Domingo. The narrator, Yunior, admits that he loves “coming home” to the island every summer. And yet, these young Dominicanos’ movement from place to place ignites an awareness of their shifting identities. While they learn to balance their twoness, the exchange is inevitably uncomfortable at times. In an interview from 2008, Junot Díaz likens the experience of immigration, and as I argue the commute between nations, to science fiction, stating:

I was thinking about how in the world to describe the extreme experience of being an immigrant in the United States, the extreme experience of coming from the Third World and suddenly appearing in New Jersey... But science fiction, fantasy, and comic books are meant to do this kind of stupid stuff, they're meant to talk about these extreme, ludicrous transformations, and so I really wanted to use them. I felt a great kinship to these narratives, which served as a backbone for so much of what we call "America" but are completely ostracized; it felt like the history of the immigrant, the minority, the woman. (qtd. in Sepulveda 15)

It's no surprise that Díaz and his most famous protagonist, Oscar de León, both feel at home in the world of science fiction, fantasy literature, role-playing and other "geek" activities and environments. The self-consciousness of the post-immigrant experience- and a movement away from inevitable assimilation- emphasizes a sense of marginalization in immigrant commuters and wanderers.

Díaz's own multiplicity in terms of the range of his writing style has complicated how his work is categorized. As Torres-Saillant suggested during an interview with Díaz in 2000, books from an author like Díaz can appear on many different shelves in a bookstore: Latino writing, contemporary fiction, writing from authors of color, immigrant writing, etc. (Bautista 81). In most of the reviews of his books, he is referred to as a Dominican American writer, or oftentimes a Latino writer, given that his books include Spanish. Yet, at the same time, a 2008 British review of *Oscar Wao* is titled "Junot Díaz: a truly all-American writer" (Jaggi). As in the case of Colum McCann, many people seem preoccupied with debating where his writing belongs. His

literary rootlessness, or the ambiguity of his literary heritage according to critics, marks him as part of a new generation, one he personally terms the “postmodern plátanos<sup>9</sup>.”

### Background

Born in 1968 in Villa Juana, a barrio of Santo Domingo, Junot Díaz moved with his mother and siblings to New Jersey at the age of six. His father had moved to the United States years before to find work, but it took several years for him to earn enough money to bring his wife and children stateside. Díaz uses his childhood as material for several of his semi-autobiographical stories, from recounting his father’s absence in “Aguantando” from *This Is How You Lose Her* to capturing his adjustment to life in New Jersey in the story “Invierno” from *Drown*. Growing up as a young Dominican American and the child of immigrants has heavily influenced Díaz’s writing; he even created an avatar, the character/narrator Yuniór<sup>10</sup>, who ages in his works and expresses many of the same concerns and challenges that Díaz faced as a young “Dominican-York” or “DoYo.” Like the title character of his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, he admits he was a “ghetto nerd supreme,” even though he was forced to endure plenty of “aggressive... ‘man’ training” because his father was violent with his sons in an attempt to make them more masculine; Díaz admits that, “Oscar was who I would have been if it had not been for my father or my brother or my own willingness to fight” (qtd. in Danicát 90).

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<sup>9</sup> Díaz is especially sensitive to the influence of the “plátano curtain” between Haiti and the Dominican Republic and around the island as a whole. The postmodern plátanos are those like Yuniór who have grown up outside of the curtain.

<sup>10</sup> Elena Machado Saez points out that there are technically two Yuniórs. In the collection *Drown*, the reader encounters Ramon, Jr. in the Dominican Republic, the boy whose father leaves his family and disappears to the U.S. for years. Once established there, he marries an American and fathers another son named Ramon, Jr. There is some debate as to which Yuniór is telling a given story.

After attending Rutgers University for college and receiving an MFA from Cornell University, he began publishing in earnest. After only two collections of short stories, *Drown* in 1995 and *This Is How You Lose Her* in 2012, as well as one novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in 2007, Díaz has already collected an impressive number of accolades. *Oscar Wao* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 2008, and Díaz received the MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Fellowship four years later. He has won or been shortlisted for almost every major writing award in the United States as well as several other countries. With such public attention turned upon him, Díaz has become more outspoken about pressing global issues, including immigration policy in the United States. He is also passionate about his connection to his home and community. Even when he spent 2007-2008 at the American Academy in Rome, he returned to New Jersey every single month, stating, “I’ve travelled far from where I grew up, but I’m still stubbornly attached to it. Migration was so hard for me; I felt I’d lost so many worlds that I didn’t want to lose another” (qtd. in Jaggi 2).

Currently teaching at MIT, Díaz has become somewhat of a rock star of a new literary generation. His writing is considered edgy and contemporary, yet heartfelt and self-aware. The response from the scholarly community has been rather swift as well. Besides numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals, two new collections of scholarship on his work were published recently: *Reading Junot Díaz* by Christopher Gonzalez in December 2015 and *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination* from Monica Hanna, Jennifer Harford Vargas, and José David Saldívar in January 2016. One can only expect that there will be more critical texts to follow as Díaz continues to publish.

However, Díaz is quick to contend that his success story is not typical. Just as Colum McCann promotes movement as a redemptive action but does not necessarily equate it with

progress, so too does Junot Díaz refrain from romanticizing immigration as a linear trajectory that hurdles an individual or community toward guaranteed success (Sepulveda 19). He even admits that, while he is a poster child for the success of immigration, he's "not so sure that that myth is something we should be so happily embracing" (qtd. Miranda 30). His interviewer agrees, stating that the "narratives of uplift cannot be normalized" (32). He is one of the first Dominican writers to question the immigration-as-progress narrative, an idea expounded upon in the analysis below.

While Díaz may be thriving, he is, after all, only one writer. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the success of Dominican writers in the United States was minute and scattered. This can be attributed to two factors: first, many of the texts were published in Spanish and often focused on the insular Dominican culture, limiting the audience stateside. Some writers were immensely popular in their home country, yet they met with very little success when their works were translated into English. This would include writers such as Mercedes Mota, Pedro Henriquez Ureña, José M. Bernard, Carmita Landestoy, and Angel Rafael Lamarche. Second, the largest wave of Dominican immigrants began arriving in the United States after 1965. While immigration to the United States slowed to a trickle during the Rafael Trujillo dictatorship<sup>11</sup>, it increased to about 1,000 a year during the 1950s and up to 10,000 a year in the first part of the 1960s (Levitt 234). As one Díaz character observes as she sits on a plane, waiting to leave Santo Domingo during the Trujillo years, "On the plane there were other First Wavers. Many waters waiting to become a river" (*Oscar Wao* 164). That river would become an ocean as the migration expanded.

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<sup>11</sup> Trujillo, a very paranoid dictator, was naturally afraid of enemies. He did not want people leaving to plot against him and therefore banned most travel to and from the island.

After Trujillo's death in 1965, with American authorities fearing that the Dominican Republic could become another Cuba, large waves of Dominicans flocked to the United States with the government's blessing. There were no issues of visas, quotas, or threatened deportation. Migration to the United States in the second half of the twentieth century became a rite of passage and a necessity, as better economic opportunities beckoned. By 1987, the minimum income in the United States was six times higher than what a Dominican worker could earn back on the island (Levitt 237). The Dominican government only began reaching out to migrants beginning in 1996, referring to them not as *migrantes* or *Dominicanos Ausantes* but as "Dominicans Residing in the Exterior" (Levitt 249). Even Díaz's mother identifies with the latter; he stated in an interview, "My mother doesn't think of the Dominican diaspora, my mother sees herself as Dominican. Who just happens to live in fucking New Jersey" (Miranda 24).

Unlike Colum McCann, the literary heir to generations of English-speaking Irish writers who recounted their immigrant experiences and lives in the New World, Díaz has perhaps met with so much success because he does not have many shoulders upon which to stand. Although Díaz might contend that he is in fact very influenced by past Caribbean authors and is in no way a completely unique product of Dominican American culture, the only Dominican American fiction writer to enjoy mainstream critical attention prior to Díaz's rise in popularity has been Julia Alvarez. Both authors have been groundbreaking in detailing aspects of Dominican immigrant identity for non-Dominican readers. And yet, Marisol Moreno maintains that Díaz is one of the only Dominican writers who theorizes what it means to be Dominican both on the island and in the United States. Set in both locations, his stories interrogate Dominican American

identity and how it is both reinforced and problematized when the characters return home (Moreno 106).

Additionally, when Díaz appeared on the literary scene with *Drown*, critics were quick to dissect one overarching subject that separates the two authors' texts: class. Alvarez writes narratives set within a very specific upper-middle class social circle, whereas Díaz is unafraid to set his stories in the midst of poverty and crime-ridden urban neighborhoods. He has been lauded for presenting a more "authentic" Dominican experience, a deeply problematic situation, both for Díaz and for the issue of authenticity in immigrant writing. Díaz insists that his settings are merely reflections of the historical moment; the sheer number of Dominicans in the United States living within a certain economic class has affected external perceptions of the culture. He specifies that the increasing popularity of *bachata*, *merengue*, and Dominicans in American baseball coincided with a Dominican population of over one million in New York alone, creating a "certain consciousness of the nation as a possible entity that casts all these things in a different light" (qtd. in Miranda 24). The good news is that since Díaz has begun publishing, there has been a surge of new Dominican and Dominican American voices rippling through the industry, including Loida Maritza Pérez, Angie Cruz, and Nelly Rosario. It has not been lost on critics that Díaz has been followed by so many women writers, particularly those who question his "street epistemology" and reclaim a very male-dominated culture (Moreno 105).

In fact, male dominance/masculinity is the foremost interpretative framework that scholars employ in analyzing Díaz's work. Many of his protagonists are notorious womanizers, often unapologetic about the ways in which they objectify or abuse the women in their lives. A review of *This Is How You Lose Her* in *Commonweal* pronounced that the collection plays "nine variations on the theme of faithless Dominican-American men and the women they betray"

(Sayers 24). Women are often depicted or referred to only as wives, mothers or sexual partners. Yunior uses crass terms to describe their looks and behavior and continuously cheats on his partners throughout all three texts. And yet, Yunior is painted as a sympathetic character as he attempts to assuage his self-destructive attitudes toward women, or if nothing else, his life experiences, heartbreak, and attempts at self-improvement collectively outweigh his sexist ways<sup>12</sup>. Particularly in the final story of *This Is How You Lose Her*, entitled “Cheater’s Guide to Love,” Yunior literally spends years trying to overcome his last self-inflicted heartbreak and cultivate peace within himself. In article after article, critics have asked: to what degree is the misogyny reflective of what Díaz is trying to accomplish? Is he being chauvinistic and sexist himself or merely attempting to represent some of the views of other Dominicans? Is he mocking the community in which he was raised by pointing out the overt sexism that existed historically and persists today? The answers to such questions permeate most of Díaz academic scholarship and combine to form a first wave of critical reaction to his work. Díaz himself is not blind to the criticism or the issue at hand. In fact, he admits that as a male writer, “sexism is a given. There’s no question of my masculine privilege, no matter how foreign or how much of African descent I am” (qtd. in Miranda 36).

As Díaz appears to recognize, gender, sexuality and sexual identity are often linked to issues of immigration. For example, his male characters acknowledge that their Americanness makes them “less than” when they return to the Dominican Republic. Sexual prowess and aptitude are portrayed as Dominican qualities, sometimes tempered by a split identity. For example, throughout his narrative, Oscar is often called “un-Dominican” because he has no game with the ladies (as Díaz would put it). He defends himself time and again, asserting his belonging

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<sup>12</sup> In reviewing *This Is How You Lose Her*, *The Atlantic*’s Joe Fassler entitled his article “How Junot Díaz Wrote a Sexist Character, but Not a Sexist Book.”

in the Dominican male community. Toward the end of the book, when he finally develops a relationship with a prostitute in Santo Domingo, his uncle “seems thrilled that he no longer had a pájaro for a nephew. I can’t believe it, he said proudly. The palomo is finally a man” (287). The underlying theme of homosexuality in Díaz’s texts has been addressed by scholars such as Dorothy Stringer and Elena Machado Saez. Saez, for one, argues that Yuniór’s desire for Oscar drives *Oscar Wao*, particularly when it comes to the final letter, in which Oscar is “devirginized” and thrust into “full-fledged heterosexuality” (Saez 524). Only then can Yuniór’s ghosts begin to dissipate.

### Commuting

Because the path that commuters take is more predictable and recurrent, opposed to the patterns displayed by McCann’s wanderers, masking becomes an important tool of agency, subjectivity, and self-awareness. The journey itself, or the unique migratory motif that Díaz highlights, provides the space for such self-reflexivity. Given the historical realities of Dominican immigration to the United States, the characters in Díaz’s works enjoy the freedom to move between New Jersey and the Dominican Republic rather fluidly. Many see themselves as belonging to both places as the commute shrinks the distance between the two cultures. Thus, masking and commuting function in coordination: because Díaz’s characters commute, they learn to utilize various masks that allow them to adjust their identities. Establishing “home” in two locations is in itself an act of resistance to immigrant identity, or at least how it manifested in the past. Living at “the interstice of two geographies and cultures can be seen as a rebellious declaration” that pushes back against the hegemony of their home-countries or the bigotry of

their host-countries, “and hence all systems of power” (Elboubekri 263). Commuting characters, therefore, are inherently empowered by their migratory circumstances.

Oscar is one such character: near the end of *Oscar Wao*, he has absconded to the Dominican Republic to pursue Ybón, the prostitute who has captured his heart. They write back and forth in an attempt to dodge her jealous policeman-boyfriend. She begs him,

Please, Oscar, I haven't slept in a week. I don't want you to end up hurt or dead. Go home.

But beautiful girl, above all beautiful girls, he wrote back. This is my home.

Your real home, mi amor.

A person can't have two? (318)

Although he resists visiting his family on the island in his youth, by the end of his brief life, he acknowledges the relationship he has developed not with the home of his birth but with the home of his heritage (30). The commute has solidified their dual significance. Yuniór's last name, “de Las Casas,” also underscores duality. “Casa” in Spanish is translated as both “house” and “home,” although a privileging of the latter, as in the case of the ubiquitous Google translator, is especially intriguing. With a name like “of the houses/homes,” our guide and narrator is identified as unbound by one homeplace.

Even in flashbacks, Díaz accentuates his characters' desire to return. The story “Negocios” in the collection *Drown* follows Yuniór's father during his first years in the United States. Almost all of the other immigrants whom Ramon encounters, those from Puerto Rico or Russia or other Dominicans, are in the midst of migrating or saving money to return. When he

expresses his discouragement at not being able to save money quickly enough to visit home, his new girlfriend tells him that she goes back annually, although it took years to save up for that first trip. “It will happen,” she says, “believe me” (182). The return trip, even a temporary one, is assumed to be inevitable; the promise it holds eases the psychological burden of the new immigrant.

Once established, the annual journey home functions as a renewal or ritual. Near the end of the novel, Yuniór recounts what it means for scattered Dominicans to return:

Every summer Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine into reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children as it can...Like someone had sounded a general reverse evacuation order: Back home, everybody! Back home! From Washington Heights to Roma, from Perth Amboy to Tokyo, from Brijeporr to Amsterdam, from Lawrence to San Juan. (272)

In this case the commute may only happen each summer, but it is unswerving. Dominicans the world over have a chance to reconnect with their own culture, a renewal unavailable to many immigrants of generations past. The renewal can be personal or local as well. In the opening story of *This Is How You Lose Her*, entitled “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars,” Yuniór brings his girlfriend back to the island with him in the hopes of salvaging their relationship. He returns every year to the country of his birth and has reached the age at which he can admit, “I love Santo Domingo. I love coming home...Love the plane landing, everybody clapping when the wheels kiss the runway” (9). Previous manifestations of Yuniór sometimes complain about making the pilgrimage, but young adult Yuniór has faith that the atmosphere of Santo Domingo

will mend his broken relationship. Like the young Ramon and his fellow immigrants, Yuniór knows a return trip has the ability to heal a manner of ailments, both psychological and emotional. The same applies even to the American-born Dominicanos. Although the siblings in *Oscar Wao* were born in the United States, Oscar and Lola are sent “back” to Santo Domingo frequently; Lola even lives there for nearly two years as a troubled teenager. She retains the friends she makes and reconnects with them every time she visits. Likewise, Oscar’s final summer on the island heals him emotionally, providing him with love and confidence for the first time in his life.

Commuting serves two particular purposes when it comes to the post-immigrant: first, it allows the reader to discern the relationship between American-born characters and immigrant characters. That is, in *Oscar Wao*, the relationship between Yuniór and Oscar is complicated by the fact that Oscar is New Jersey-born and -bred. He returns to visit Santo Domingo not as a birthplace but as the home country of his mother and grandmother. Yuniór, on the other hand, moves to the United States as a child, thereby retaining a split identity as an immigrant, albeit one who has lived the majority of his life away from “home.” Elena Machado Saez argues that Oscar must be “domesticated” by Dominican-born Yuniór over the course of the narrative in order to adhere to a “code of national belonging” by the end (526). Yuniór has to become an immigrant to serve as the “gatekeeper of cultural authenticity” for Oscar (530). Yuniór and Oscar, linked by national belonging but distinct in their relationship to the homeland, represent the arc of the post-immigrant narrative.

Second, the commute diffuses overwhelming themes of nostalgia, the romanticized homeland, or the grand homecoming, which were ubiquitous in previous generations of immigrant literature. With such frequent visits back and forth, the home country/homecoming of

the immigrant is meaningful, though by no means exceptional. As one gentleman says to a sobbing Lola as their plane departs the Santo Domingo airport, “It’s OK, muchacha...Santo Domingo will always be there. It was there in the beginning and it will be there at the end” (*Oscar Wao* 210). As Ramon is reminded early on, the return is not only possible but inevitable; with the commitment of migrants, advances in technology, the fall of Trujillo and rise of democratic freedoms, it will “always” be upon those who have left to return once again.

Additionally, characters’ reaction to home upon their return reflects their initial discomfort or disconnectedness. In particular, the sudden re-exposure to the mind-boggling poverty of the Dominican Republic is overwhelming. Upon returning home for the first time after emigrating, Ramon in “Negocios” sees his home town as “stifling” (198). He is caught off-guard by the volume of Spanish spoken around him, by the suffocating heat and dirty children (198). Oscar, too, notes the raucous and colorful neighborhoods containing so many hungry children and wrapped in pollution (273). Their descriptions oppose the sentimental, romanticized homecoming of prior literary generations<sup>13</sup>. For both Ramon and Oscar, seemingly accustomed to Dominican life, the return is nevertheless startling and requires some adjustment. The commute normalizes Santo Domingo, grounding it in reality rather than the fantasy of the home country.

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<sup>13</sup> From Mary Anne Sadlier’s 1861 novel *Bessy Conway; or, the Irish Girl in America*: “A bright fire burned on the hearth, the table was spread for a feast, and the place was redolent with the grateful smell of frying beef. The kitchen was full of friends and neighbors, all looking as gay as could be in anticipation of the good cheer...hope and joy were beaming in the eyes but late so dull and heavy. There was a twinkle of sly humor, too, that brought old times vividly back...A moment more and Bessy was in the arms of the brothers so long unseen, so fondly remembered, and the tears that years of suffering and privation could not squeeze from their hearts, now gushed from their manly eyes and rolled unheeded down their cheeks. Their emotion was shared by all present. If ever there was a moment of unclouded happiness that was one.” (277).

## Masking

The symbolism of masking is well-worn territory in the field of postcolonialism (see Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*). The colonial subject becomes adept at living two lives, one as himself/herself, one as a colonial subject. Extending to American literature, the mask is frequently cited in the literature written about institutionalized racism, from minstrel performance to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and to Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*. The subject learns how to cultivate dual identities to survive or advance. W.E.B. DuBois famously translated masking as "double consciousness," an awareness that "one ever feels his twoness." However, with examples from the canon of postcolonialism and Jim Crow, the mask carries problematic connotations. Masking implies coercion, or even a loss of free will. In the case of post-immigrant texts, I argue that masking suggests the *intentional adaptation* of the commuting immigrant character. He/she continues to ever feel his/her twoness, but the mask becomes a powerful tool, not necessarily a defense, that helps him/her make his/her way in both worlds.

Díaz opens up his first published text, *Drown*, with a story about a boy who is forced to wear a mask over his disfigured face. The same boy, Ysrael, reappears near the end of the collection, as the audience accompanies him through his day to witness the abuse he combats. His masking invites two responses: from his own perspective, the mask is a weapon of strength. In the short story "No Face," the narrative from Ysrael's point of view, he appears to associate the mask with faux superhuman powers. He assumes the mask first thing in the morning and then becomes a force of empowerment: he exercises in his backyard while his family still sleeps, scurries up trees, runs through town, and knows where to find loose change on the ground (154).

His internal superhero monologue includes words written in all caps: “He runs past the water home and the pasture, and then he says FLIGHT and jumps up...He has the power of INVISIBIILTY and no one can touch him...He says STRENGTH and the [attacking] fat boy flies off him and he’s running down the street and the others are following” (153, 155, 156). Even as the people of the town yell at him, calling him “no face,” he ignores them, smiling under his mask and accomplishing more (“fighting evil”) under his mask than those living without one. His mask provides him with the strength to ignore his mother’s shame in his condition and the abuse he suffers from the townspeople. Ysrael’s mask not only emancipates him but also symbolizes the larger theme of superheroes and supernatural power; the marginalized provide evidence that “freaks” can be heroes (Hanna 515).

The second response to the mask is a need for discovery. That is, the people who meet Ysrael, notably his male peers, want to forcibly expose what has been covered. In the story “Ysrael,” the other boys are cruel to Ysrael because of his difference, but they are also desperate to see what is under the mask. Even Yuniór, aware of this cruelty, participates to some degree. He recounts,

The summer before, I pegged Ysrael with a rock and the way it bounced off his back I knew I’d clocked a shoulder blade.

You did it! You fucking did it! The other boys yelled.

He’d been running from us and he arched in pain...We laughed and went back to our baseball games and forgot him until he came to town again and then we dropped what we were doing and chased him. Show us your face, we cried! Let’s see it just once. (“Ysrael” 14-15)

The passage ends with no further mention of what exactly the boys wanted to see. The same is true of Yuniór's brother Rafa at the end of the story: he rips the mask off of Ysrael's face and slowly turns Ysrael's head from side to side, simply surveying the damage. Both of these episodes speak to adolescent boys' fascination with the grotesque but also to the larger act of unmasking. If Rafa and Yuniór as young boys are so desperate to unveil the true Ysrael, even abusing and assaulting him, then perhaps they are testing the limits of what unmasking will do for themselves. Marisol Moreno writes that Yuniór's focus on the masking/unmasking of one's identity, "illustrates that Dominicanness is being redefined as a result of migration" (115). As Anne Connor has argued, the boy's name, Ysrael, is reflective of an entire nation or group of people. If Ysrael uses a mask, he is synecdochic of the nation he represents (Connor 153). The story is much more of an allegory for the fate of a people struggling with ethnic identity and deciding when and where to shed/adapt the mask. It symbolizes a reconciliation with exposure, of making the invisible immigrant visible in post-immigrant literature.

Just as the mask can cover or define reality, Díaz explores metaphorical masking as a means to fill in of *silences*, that is, talking or writing about something painful as a way to move beyond it. As he has stated in an interview, "All societies are organized by the silences that they need to maintain. I think the role of art is to try to delineate, break, and introduce language into some of these silences" (qtd. in Moreno 539). In the case of the three texts examined here, the unspoken represents the pain of Dominican history, a loss of identity, or even the regret over a relationship. If it is summoned into being and acknowledged properly, then that is a step toward healing.

While Díaz's first short story collection delves into the symbolism of a masked character, his novel sheds the mask for blankness as a reflection of these silences. That is, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* emphasizes a motif of the "blank page," or *página en blanco*, as well as faceless hallucinations. But what does this unmasking signify? The blank page concept is initially introduced as a metaphor for the Trujillo years in the Dominican Republic. The nation's history is essentially erased (Yunior points out that Trujillo and his minions did not share their German counterparts' love of paperwork) and part of the task of this story is to speak of the unspoken. However, the *página en blanco* also corresponds to the image of the faceless figure who appears multiple times in the narrative, all when major characters are about to experience some type of trauma: a pregnant Beli, Oscar's grandmother, first sees him as she is driven back home after being threatened by the wife of her lover. She describes him as "a man sitting in a rocking chair in front of one the hovels [with] *no face* and he waved as her as she passed" (135). She refuses to break contact with her "Gangster" or have an abortion and is driven to the canefields to be beaten within an inch of her life. After getting out of the car, "she looked up [and] saw that there was one more cop sitting in the car, and when he turned toward her she saw that he *didn't have a face*" (141).

However, while the blank faces signal a terror about to happen, a moment of hallucination before one meets one's fate, the image is also paired with the literal *página en blanco* as a means of suggesting the antidote<sup>14</sup>. Near the climax of the novel, after Oscar has been badly beaten by Ybón's boyfriend, he has a dream in which he sees an old man, wearing a mask and holding a blank book (302). He repeats aloud, "the book is blank" as he emerges from unconsciousness. The dream of a masked figure and a blank book inspires him in his writing and

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<sup>14</sup> Yunior would call this *zafa*, or the antidote against the Dominican curse, *fukú*, that has chased Oscar's ancestors into their current circumstances. *Zafa* takes many forms, including Yunior's narrative, meant to be an attempt to purge his own ghosts.

in his final pursuit of love; he returns to the island permanently to fulfill both goals. Similarly, after Oscar's death, Yuniór has a reoccurring dream in which Oscar is the masked figure, smiling behind the mask as Yuniór realizes the pages are blank (324). Yuniór reveals this to the reader at the end of the novel, as a means of explaining why he felt the need to fill his own pages with this story. Whereas the faceless figure is a warning of impending danger, the masked man in the dream is an invitation to fill the blank page, a call to complete a task or fulfill a goal.

The metaphor can also be extended to deeper, national roots: facelessness and blank pages, rather than performing a silencing, represent the silenced. In her article on metropolitan immigrants in Latin American texts, Stacy Balkan argues that facelessness in *Oscar Wao* is linked to the peripheral or marginalized figures. That is, she states that those who are deemed "faceless" by the other characters are natives or locals who are forced to perform the dirty work of an authority figure. This includes the cop who beats Beli, Trujillo's spies who cart Oscar's grandfather to prison, and Trujillo's many henchmen, all who are devoid of individual personalities (Balkan 8). Balkan's argument is not necessarily that facelessness speaks to the lack of a defined identity in the larger sense of nationality or ethnicity, but that it applies specifically to the exploited "urban subaltern" who is cloaked in invisibility (8). All of the faceless figures identified in the novel suffer from an "erase[d] national or cultural distinction" (8). If the mask symbolizes the post-immigrant ability to adapt to multiple identities, as I argue here, then the blank page/face represents the lack of identity. That is, when the page is blank or the faceless figure appears, the character/culture is in danger. The page must be written, the mask must be adopted, or the narrative and characters suffer.

Apart from the physical and figurative specters of masking in his books, the many masks of Díaz's linguistic style quite literally fill the page. His narrative voice has enraptured critics and has been likened to "Mario Vargas Llosa meets 'Star Trek' meets David Foster Wallace meets Kayne West" (Kakutani E1). One strategy in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* that has set Díaz's readership awl is his use of footnotes. He is by no means the first fiction writer to play with footnotes, but they create a unique rhythm and tempo that complement Yunió's narration. Additionally, he is often praised for his ability to integrate intertextual references to both "low" and "high" literature, his "switch from the vernacular to the academic," or as I would put it, his ability to assume various masks the same way his characters do (Sepulveda 16). In a single sentence, he can include references to Foucault, Marvel Comics characters, and 1990's New Jersey street slang. Indeed, the hybridity of his texts, from form to style to dialogue, represents the diversity of his characters (Hanna 499).

Additionally, some scholars have called attention to the "Spanglish" spoken/written by Yunió and other characters. Translations of Díaz's work take varying approaches: in many foreign-language editions, the Spanish remains intact and a glossary of all Spanish terms is included in the back. Even more interesting is how the French edition describes the translation of *Drown*: not as having been "translated from English" but as "translated from American." The unique vernacular is perceived as an American creation, possible only in a country built by immigrants of all languages (Torres-Saillant 134).

However, as "Spanglish" is a problematic term and a decisively vague one (given the variation in world Spanishes), I prefer to argue for Díaz's use of Spanish and English as deliberate code-switching. Code-switching is typically defined as a move between language(s) in one conversation or text. Scholars and educators link code-switching particularly to African

American students and their conscious/unconscious movement between African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and “standardized” English, currently designated as Standard Written English (SWE) or simply Standard English (SE). In their pedagogical work, educators emphasize that the movement is not always deliberate and that code-switching adjusts according to the differences in place, audience, and purpose (Devereaux and Wheeler 96). When applied to literature, a character’s dialogue or narrative style reveals the circumstances of his/her setting or purpose.

According to this definition, Yuniór is quite the talented narrator. Susan Balee points out that his switching is not constrained to English and Spanish, but also appears in Yuniór’s narratives that move “between the lexicons of homeboys and those of literature professors” (Balee 34). Code-switching reveals more than simply Yuniór’s command of multiple rhetorics. Rather, it also signals how African American slang “intertwines with an Afro-Latino immigrant language,” thereby pointing to a possible “black-brown alliance in the aesthetic realm” (Carpio 265). Additionally, Díaz leaves his Spanish untranslated because he wants his readers to (momentarily) feel like immigrants, even if the combination produces a potentially “volatile” relationship between reader and text (Balee 348, Gonzalez 11). One might say that this transforms his reader into a literary commuter of sorts.

The Spanish within the text is sometimes decipherable, given context clues, even to a non-Spanish-literate reader. However, the narrator often throws in regional vernacular<sup>15</sup>. Sepulveda likens the narrator’s use of Spanish as analogous to the usage of Black English in literature (17). In defense of the fact that the characters’ Spanish is not translated, Sepulveda quotes James Baldwin in stating that the use of a specific form of language can be used “to

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<sup>15</sup> In *Oscar Wao*, as Yuniór drives through Santo Domingo with a friend and comments on the political campaign posters around the city, his friend snorts, “Ese ladrón no va’pa’ningún la’o” (112).

describe and thus control their circumstances...in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate” (17). Similarly, Díaz has stressed that Spanish is not the minority language in this hemisphere, arguing that othering Spanish negates the fluidity of language and the impact it has on English and vice versa (Gonzalez 10). In any case, characters do not adhere to one linguistic identity but rather jump between forms effortlessly. Ironically, Díaz is highly praised for this technique in his writing, as critics and scholars appear to find it refreshing, unique, and contemporary. And yet, code-switching is frequently met with resistance elsewhere in American culture (Kunsa 212). Is this because non-Spanish speakers see it as a potential threat? That those who can easily switch between modes of communication are able to mask their identities so well?

For Díaz’s characters, the presence of Spanish becomes a powerful tool. As referenced above, upon his return to the Dominican Republic for his first visit, Ramon in “Negocios” is most startled not only by the Spanish being spoken, but the *volume* at which it is spoken. He recalls, “he was unprepared for it. The air whooshed out of his lungs. For nearly four years he’s not spoken his Spanish loudly in front of the Northamericans and now he was hearing it bellowed and flung from every mouth” (197-8). The narrator’s word choice implies Ramon’s protection of “his” Spanish, that he has concealed it for fear of detection while he was away. Only when he returns to the land of his birth is he is suddenly aware of the power of a language and how it functions to transform his hometown. In other words, language makes him recognize that the Santo Domingo he left will never be the same for him. He has officially reached the point of negotiating his place between two cultures and two languages. The title of the story, “Negocios,” refers to a small business. And yet, this passage in which Ramon’s eyes (and ears)

are opened implies a powerful awareness of both Ramon the Immigrant and Ramon the Dominican and how he negotiates between the two identities.

Díaz's books and Yunió's voice not only present language in a new way for an English-only audience but also delve into how the immigrant commuter is racialized according to location. While Díaz's characters are most often identified as Latino/a given their language preferences and national identity, he emphasizes the legacy of Africa in the Dominican Republic to shed light on characters' performativity or control of racialization. Díaz is more eager to address the African heritage of his Dominican characters than his predecessors (Kunsa 212). He even states that his Dominican friends who live in the U.S. are much more willing to engage in conversations about racial identity and acknowledge the presence of colorism in Dominican culture (Miranda 30). He, like Yunió, deliberately refuses to ignore his African heritage for the sake of the colorist hierarchy he grew up within.

Díaz's texts thereby echo a reclaiming of African identity for Latino characters in general. Africa haunts these pages from the very first line, for example, in the symbolism of the mongoose: while it plays a mystical role in *Oscar Wao*, it also embodies the characters' underlying relationship to Africa. It appears several times in the pages of *Oscar Wao*, visiting both Beli and Oscar near death. In a footnote, Díaz mentions that "The Mongoose" is one of the universe's "greatest travelers," having "accompanied humanity out of Africa...[and then] jumped ship to the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean" (*Oscar Wao* 151). The mongoose is not only supernatural but quick and powerful. It's taken as a compliment when someone calls Ysrael "faster than a mongoose" (*Drown* 15).

Africa is not only represented in mystical creatures and notable narrative moments but also character identification. As Christopher Gonzalez and Ashley Kunsu have explored at length, African identity becomes a mask for characters to adopt if they so choose. In the Dominican Republic, characters are often paralyzed when it comes to acknowledging their African heritage; dark skin and afros are shameful. However, once in America, they are freer to explore their African identity. They use the n-word with each other and embrace hip-hop language. They refer to themselves as people of color and imply kinship with other minority populations. In other words, Díaz “takes something considered to be verboten within a culture and re-appropriates it to suit his fiction” (Gonzalez 76). Writing the story of Afro-Latinos, as told by another Afro-Latino, demonstrates how Díaz inscribes the African *página en blanco* onto their Latino identities (58).

A hyper-awareness of self is established from the first story in Díaz’s first published text. As a young boy growing up in the Dominican Republic, Yuniór is trapped by the colorist hierarchy of his surroundings. The opening of “Ysraél” centers on Yuniór and Rafa as they are shipped off to the country when their mother struggles to make ends meet in the city. Even within his internal monologue, Yuniór refers to home as “the Capital,” placing it squarely at the center of the culture with the campo setting as a satellite, a potential paralleling of the relationship between the Metropole and colonies in postcolonialism. In other words, they are sent to the margin, to the periphery. Once there, they have more opportunities to encounter the marginalized, including the masked Ysraél.

While they become closer and more bonded as they share time outside the Capital, Rafa has nothing but cutting and insensitive remarks to make toward Yuniór at home. Instead of the usual name-calling tactics that commonly exist between siblings, Rafa’s comments not only

wound Yuniór but racially-ostracize him as well: “Most of [his comments] had to do with my complexion, my hair, the size of my lips. It’s the Haitian, he’d say to his buddies. Hey, Señor Haitian, Mami found you on the border and only took you in because she felt sorry for *you*” (5). With “Haitian” the cruelest comment he can muster, Rafa reveals to what degree race and nation are localized. Likewise, the italicized “you” in the quote above exposes the tension that exists along the border between the two countries; Rafa is saying that Yuniór’s appearance is a source of pity, just as Haitians are “pitied” by their Dominican neighbors (in Rafa’s estimation). As Peggy Levitt points out, modern Dominican culture emerged from an “anti-Haitian” one, meaning that the relationship between the two nations sharing one island was so historically volatile, that Dominicans wanted to be considered the anti-Haitian, lighter-skinned than their neighbors<sup>16</sup>. Yuniór’s blackness, like that of Beli and Lola in *Oscar Wao*, is often taken as a pitfall or evil omen in a culture obsessed with whiteness.

Although their intentions for racial masking are different than Yuniór’s in the example below, Lola and Beli both deliberately discard a marker of their racial identification. In her article on the imagery of hair in Díaz’s texts, Ashley Kunsá asserts that Lola cuts off her long, straight hair, a revered rarity amongst Dominican women, as an act of rebellion. She undermines her Dominican identity and willingly alters others’ perception of her. Without her hair, she is often mistaken for African American and begins sentences with “We colored folk...” (35) In the flashback portion of the novel, the reader witnesses the same situation with a teenaged Beli as she perms her straight hair, shedding her one “link to whiteness” (Kunsá 220). In rejecting what is perceived as “white” hair in their culture, both women embrace the blackness of their heritage.

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<sup>16</sup> The origin of Dominican discrimination toward Haitians has deep roots, although many trace it to the bloody “purge” of Haitians ordered by Trujillo in the 1930s. It cemented Haitians as inferior and subservient in Dominican culture. The discrimination continues today, as Haitians (or anyone who looks/sounds Haitian) are routinely rounded up in the Dominican Republic and sent across the border (Phillip). Thus, referring to a fellow Dominican as “Haitian” is one of the most historically-entrenched and degrading slurs that young Rafa can conjure.

Like Lola, Yuniór is also more free to explore performative racialization once the narrative moves stateside, as displayed in the short story, “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie” from the collection *Drown*. Narrated in second person, it reads as a “how-to” guide if the reader is interested in navigating the complicated dating waters of a multiethnic New Jersey community. In reality Yuniór is addressing Yuniór, reminding himself how to make the most of his dating prospects. As the narrative continues, it becomes clear how much Yuniór is aware of his racial identity and how he adjusts it accordingly to get what he wants. His success with each type of girl depends on his performance. For example, if his date is from somewhere other than his neighborhood, he reminds himself to “hide the pictures of yourself with an Afro,” acknowledging later on that even as he runs a hand through his hair “like the whiteboys do,” he knows that “the only thing that runs easily through your hair is Africa” (143, 145). However, he understands that he needs to act more sensitively toward the topic of race if the date is black; he coordinates it down to, “put down your hamburger and say, It must have been hard” when she references her biracial upbringing (147). He then pivots toward Latino identity, revealing that he would take a girl to El Cibao for dinner if she wasn’t from his neighborhood. As he orders in his “busted-up Spanish,” he will let the girl correct him if she is Latina and “amaze her if she is black” (145). If she’s white, he acknowledges that it is his otherness which might attract her. If she seems willing to have sex and says, “I like Spanish guys,” he reminds himself to swallow the fact that he’s never been to Spain and that she is incorrectly generalizing (148). While the story is entertaining, it also asks the reader: are his manipulative dating techniques more harmful than his date’s assumptions? Aren’t they all just performing to get what they want?

## Conclusion

As some critics have identified, Yuniors is an appropriate narrator to guide us through stories abounding with masking symbolism because he has a difficult time ditching his own mask throughout all three books (Gates 2). For example, Christopher Gonzalez states that in the story “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie,” among other narratives, Yuniors allows others’ expectations to dictate “who he is and be who he wants to be. Instead, he much fake an identity” (42). Gonzalez’s analysis raises a provoking question: does the reader ever actually hear from the “real” Yuniors? Or is he so adept at narrating stories of shifting identity that his own remains permanently shrouded? He performs for other characters, so it would follow that he performs for his reader as well. Discerning all layers of concealment in Díaz’s texts could provide future scholars and critics with copious material.

Imagery and themes of masking/unmasking within Díaz’s books expose the performativity of identity but also emphasize how the post-immigrant figure has become more adept as adopting multiple selves. Post-immigrant writing ensures that these multiple selves do not need to be ranked in a particular order or significance but can instead exist concurrently; as mentioned in the introduction, the process of identity formation for immigrants is not an erasing but a doubling. More significantly, masking translates into power, as a way for characters- and Díaz- to call attention to the limited but burgeoning agency of the marginalized. Oscar, for one, finds strength in identifying with a “diaspora of marginal outcasts” (Saez 548). As a new teacher at his old high school, “he watched the ‘cool’ kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminine, the gay—and in every one of these clashes he saw himself”

(264). Oscar is painted as an outcast throughout the narrative, for being un-Dominican, for being a geek, for being obese or a person of color. And as Christopher Gonzalez points out, the subjects of Yuniór's narration are almost always marginalized figures: Ysrael, Aurora, Oscar, Miss Lora, and Nilda, etc. (15). Oscar even admits that he "couldn't have passed for Normal if he's wanted to" (21). As someone who identifies with the marginalized, Oscar considers Normal as a group identity unto itself. The means by which a character shifts from marginalized to center, from immigrant to resident, or from Dominican to American is through the performativity of masking. The mask functions not only as a way for the characters to adapt to a new culture, race, and language but also as a means of moving *to* rather than *away* from where they feel they belong. The mask is a tool of survival, a superhero weapon of strength, a feminist rebellion, a *zafa* against the cursed, and a potent political statement about the growing influence of immigrant narratives in American culture.

### Chapter Three: The Dislocation of Jhumpa Lahiri

Dissecting my linguistic metamorphosis, I realize that I'm trying to get away from something, to free myself...I feel that I've been transformed almost reborn...Why am I fleeing? What is pursuing me? Who wants to restrain me?  
~"Teach Yourself Italian" by Jhumpa Lahiri,

Several years ago, Jhumpa Lahiri made the decision to become fluent in Italian. For years, she threw herself into extensive study and even moved her family to Rome in 2008. The product of her labors is the 2015 book entitled *In Other Words*. Lahiri wrote the book in Italian, and it was translated into English by Ann Goldstein. The decision to undertake intensive immersion and then write a book in a new language surprised, if not baffled, Lahiri's fans and critics. She encountered reactions that ran the gamut from, "don't do it," to people telling her that writing a book in Italian would be "disastrous." Lahiri even admits that her "yearning" for Italian "seems foolish"<sup>17</sup> ("Teach"). And yet, without conquering a new linguistic feat, she felt "tortured" and "incomplete," oddly disconnected and rootless. She needed to satisfy the bond she had cultivated with Italy. Her decision to publish in Italian sprang from her upbringing: she has spent her entire life observing her parents and how they engaged with their home culture while living halfway across the world. They preserved a lasting connection to Bengal, creating a "home" outside of home. Despite the fact that Italian was not her home culture, nor Italy her homeland, Lahiri struggled for it regardless, creating a linguistic residence within unfamiliar

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<sup>17</sup> The essay in which she defends her decision, published in *The New Yorker* in 2015, was written in Italian and translated into English for her readers.

territory. Throughout her writing, she appears to share a belief that “we belong to the place where we want to stay” (de Souza). Her new existence is one of intentional dislocation, a condition about which she writes extensively.

Lahiri’s physical and linguistic relocation to Italy reflects the post-immigrant state of alterity, or a new way of moving beyond past easily-definable definitions of the immigrant experience. Ultimately, her work is less about immigration and more about extensive dislocation. She has never appeared to settle, nor do many of her characters. By analyzing Lahiri’s two short story collections, *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, I argue here that Lahiri relies upon physical and symbolic structures to interrogate the meaning of “home” for the immigrant, as well as themes of rootlessness or unhomeliness, particularly for those who resettle in new locations for extended periods of time. Her characters grapple with how to build something, figurative or literal, around themselves that will maintain a link to their original homes yet allow them to develop their new American identities, however that may look to each individual or family.

More specifically, if the term “immigrant literature” should be challenged, then the same could be applied to the term “home.” It has been too deeply tied to nostalgia and spatiality in past immigrant literature and needs to be revisited or revised. Therefore, I use the idea of dislocation to identify how the post-immigrant character locates himself or herself in the midst of movement. Dislocation as discussed in the following pages is not used pejoratively. Instead, we can read dislocation as a postmodern condition, especially as it disconnects itself from distress; it is no longer a tragic state but rather one to be celebrated (Krishnaswamy 137-8). Dislocation is not equated with homelessness or exile. Rather, it empowers the self by providing alternative homes or locations, allowing a character to decide upon his/her chosen home(s) by becoming

homeless first (139). The dislocated character is thereby de-territorialized in both physical home and consciousness, resulting in a “comforting unhomeliness” (Elboubekri 253). As for McCann’s wanderers, dislocation rejects totality and instead seeks the partial and the plural (Krishnaswamy 138). While this sounds good in theory, Lahiri’s texts invite the question: *how* can dislocation be liberating? To answer the question, I will look at how “home” is constructed, how a lack of home results in dislocation, and how Lahiri uses contrasting symbolism of permanence and impermanence to highlight themes of fluidity and settlement.

### Background

Born in London in 1967 to Bengali parents, Nilanjada Sudeshna “Jhumpa” Lahiri arrived in the United States when she was two. She grew up in Rhode Island, attended college at Barnard University and then proceeded to earn four additional degrees at Boston University. She broke into the literary world in 1999, with the publication of *Interpreter of Maladies*. The short story collection went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000, making her the first South Asian writer to receive the award. She followed up with the novel *The Namesake* (2003), another short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), and the novel *The Lowland* (2013), which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award. After accepting various fellowships over the years, Lahiri currently teaches creative writing at Princeton University.

Lahiri is perhaps the most recognizable author analyzed in this dissertation. Her short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, and novel, *The Namesake*, have undoubtedly been

selected for many small book clubs in America. Additionally, unlike the other authors here<sup>18</sup>, her first novel was developed into a successful feature-length film in 2006. Compared to McCann, Díaz, and Adichie, Lahiri's entire body of work is most concerned with the immigrant experience, to the point that scholars seem to collectively view her as a "documentalist of the immigrant experience" (Friedman 111). As the child of immigrant parents, she has been very open about how her upbringing and cultural identification have influenced her writing, although she resists being categorized as a author of "immigrant writing" alone.

Lahiri's subjects are almost exclusively part of the upper-middle class circle of first- or second-generation Bengali<sup>19</sup> immigrants living on the eastern coast of the United States. More specifically, they leave India or Bengal for intellectual pursuits, often attaining doctorates and faculty positions at prestigious institutions, such as Harvard and MIT. Like Lahiri's own parents, they belong to the post-1965 generation<sup>20</sup>, those with enough family wealth and connections to make immigration a rather easy decision and process. Her families of characters are not beset by impoverishment, racism, discrimination, persecution, or a lifelong pursuit of economic success (Friedman 112). Rather, any struggles are more emotional or intergenerational. Her narratives often center on female protagonists, the wives and daughters of men who immigrate to America to pursue educational or job opportunities. They capture the loneliness and isolation many of these women feel, while other stories celebrate the communities they cultivate in their new

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<sup>18</sup> Colum McCann's short story "Everything in This Country Must" was adapted into a short film of the same name in 2005. It was subsequently nominated for an Academy Award for Best Short Film. As of mid-2017, audiences are waiting for a film adaptation of *Let the Great World Spin*, whose film rights were purchased by J.J. Abrams in 2009.

<sup>19</sup> The relationship between Bengal and the larger Indian peninsula is alluded to in several stories. Lahiri's immigrant characters are most often identified as Bengali. When the stories identify a character as such, I use the term "Bengali." If it is not specified, I use "Indian."

<sup>20</sup> The 1965 immigration act, known as the Hart-Celler Immigration Bill, shifted American immigration policy from one of national quotas to one of skills and education. In other words, it largely altered the allocation of national quotas so that it privileged immigrants with desirable intellectual or family backgrounds. It greatly benefited immigrants from Asia in particular. According to the Center for Immigrant Studies, the long-term effects include higher rates of illegal immigration and reduced rates of return migration today. The structure of this bill is still in place, although given the current climate of the country, it could be repealed at some point in the near future.

homes. As mentioned in earlier chapters, I hesitate to use the word “diaspora” since it has a tendency to homogenize the migratory experience. The diasporic experience of Lahiri’s immigrant characters is nothing like that of Bengalis or Indians emigrating with little education and no connections, outside of the twentieth century. Yet, Lahiri seems to view the immigrant experience as partially equalizing. As Hema points out in “Once in a Lifetime,” her mother and Kaushik’s mother belong to different social classes, stating, “In Calcutta they would have had little occasion to meet...Those differences were irrelevant in Cambridge, where they were both equally alone” (225).

Her collections may not feature conspicuous connecting threads typical in a short story cycle (like a Yunion), but her common themes provide enough rhetorical and thematic glue to hold them together. Noelle Brada-Williams makes a compelling argument that *Interpreter of Maladies* should be considered a short story cycle for its attention to “balance,” especially the balancing theme of “extreme care and neglect;” other connections include “ritual,” “marriage,” “the delicate balancing of representations” and the ever-popular choice of “displacement” (456, 455, 453). While previous scholarship highlights the isolation and loss endemic to migration, some new critical voices have begun to point toward the promise, opportunity, or new beginnings that emanate from her work. Sima Farshid and Somayeh Taleie, for example, examine the ways in which her characters initiate change, advocate for themselves, or embrace new challenges, as opposed to depicting them as succumbing to inevitable loss or cultural deterioration. Sally Dalton-Brown also argues that “for Lahiri, exile from one’s birth or traditional culture results ontologically in a state of inbetweenness, or limbo, that is not necessarily a negative condition, but can be one of *potential freedom*” (333) (italics mine).

More specifically, Dalton-Brown pinpoints how one scene, taken to suggest a pending severance of national and familiar belonging, can be interpreted in more expectant, post-immigrant terms: in the story “The Third and Final Continent,” the newly-married narrator lies next to his weeping bride, who is devastated by the fact that she is about to move to America with a practical stranger. Only one room away is the space in which the narrator’s mother died, crazy and infantilized. The narrator, aware of the atmosphere of sadness and loss around him, continues to read his tourist guide to America in preparation for his move. Dalton-Brown sees this as, what I would term, a post-immigrant moment in the text. The sadness of immigration is tempered by a character’s resilience and preparation for new life, his desire to “leap into a free, new space” (338).

Yet, the majority of mainstream criticism, including several chapters of the critical text *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri* (2012), attempts to explain away her success by categorizing her work as stories of universalism. That is, although she gives voice to individuals from the Bengali immigrant community, the recurring experiences are universal: loss of parents, difficulties in marriage, generational conflict, etc. In her chapter on *Interpreter of Maladies*, Susan Muchshima Moynihan opens with a summary of reviews of Lahiri’s work and their compulsive explanations of her mainstream appeal: these reviews include phrases and statements such as Lahiri’s “emotional wisdom” (Lenora Todaro), her “intimate knowledge of [characters’] conflicted hearts” (Michiko Kakutani), and her “ardor of empathy” (Charles Taylor) (Moynihan 97). Rajini Srikanth even opens his scholarly article on Lahiri by stating that reading Lahiri “reinforces one’s belief in a universal humanism where the difference among peoples is not so vast as to be unbridgeable” (51). In other words, her empathetic connection to her subjects and readers and her artistry in translating that to the page obscures her approach to contemporary immigration.

Such an observation over-simplifies what Lahiri is trying to do in her representation of difference. I see this explanation as potentially harmful when used to explain her popularity, by implying that the casual reader can only identify or enjoy “immigrant authors” if they can extend beyond immigrant themes. Indeed, as Moynihan and others argue, she is often painted as the “safe” choice of multicultural writing. They praise her for making ethnic literature more “palatable” for the mainstream audience. Either positively or negatively, some (such as Purvi Shah and Rajini Srikanth) view her work as “lack[ing] overtly direct threats of difference” (Moynihan 99). My focus here is not to choose sides in a battle between whether Lahiri’s literature is about immigration or about universal emotion; this creates yet another binary that does a disservice to literary studies in general. Her works, like those previously discussed in chapters one and two, cannot and should not be reduced to the ways in which they fit into a traditional molds of past literature.

### Defining Home

In approaching the multifaceted issue of “home” in immigrant literature, one should first attempt a definition of what that means. More specifically, how has the definition changed within post-immigrant literature and how does it apply to dislocation? As we see in all four chapters of this dissertation, characters perceive home in a wide variety of ways; perceptions differ even between characters who leave the same place at the same time. If we consider home symbolically, it can never be “reclaimed” or even revisited in the same way because it never existed as “something that is ever already there” (Elboubekri 261).

In his critically-acclaimed ethnographic book *Evicted*, Matthew Desmond opens his epilogue by juxtaposing the historic roots of the word “home” against the lasting and damaging impact of homelessness as a result of eviction. He notes:

In languages spoken all over the world, the word for “home” encompasses not just shelter but warmth, safety, family- the womb. The ancient Egyptian hieroglyph for “home” was often used in place of “mother.” The Chinese word *jia* can mean both family and home. “Shelter” comes from two Old English words: *sciold* (shield) and *truma* (troop), together forming the image of a family gathering itself within a protective shell. The home remains the primary basis of life. It is where meals are shared, quiet habits formed, dreams confessed, traditions created. (294)

Historically-speaking, home represents psychological safety and care of the individual. However, it is also based upon the physical structure of the house, which is permanent and all-encompassing. One of the few Lahiri scholars to recognize the inherent power of the house in these stories is Judith Caesar, who argues that Lahiri’s houses upend the traditional “meaning” of a dwelling place in the American literary tradition. For example, she emphasizes how prior American writers privilege the outdoors over interior spaces; Sherwood Anderson, Thomas Wolfe, Carson McCullers, Mark Twain, Edger Allan Poe, etc. all write about the life-giving freedom of the outdoors while the symbol of the house decays, is destroyed, or suffocates characters’ ambitions or possibilities. Lahiri, on the other hand, uses the house as a way to rethink or re-imagine the American spirit indoors. Houses represent the emotional spaces of the characters while also allowing for personal connections between them (Caesar 52). As Ann

Marie Alfonso-Forero explains, for immigrant women in particular the house becomes the place “in which one carries out the traditions and practices that make up one’s identity” (858). And as Natalie Friedman reminds us, the American-born children in *The Namesake* return home after their father’s unexpected death: not to India, their mother’s home, but to their childhood house, the “literal and metaphysical location...where India is re-created, albeit in a diluted form” (115).

Perhaps more importantly, the house stands as a symbol of immigrant identity formation. The two terms “house” and “home” are commonly linked and substituted for one another without critical regard. But their conflation can simplify the meaning behind the physical or metaphorical building of the physical house as well as the emotional, national, or psychological attachment (or lack thereof) to an abstract conception of “home.” In her article reviewing the multi-disciplinary literature of “home,” Shelley Mallen carefully parses apart the distinctions between the two words, citing social scientists, anthropologists, psychologists, geographers, and philosophers. Some of her literature review determines that “house” is often considered merely a dimension of the more-encompassing concept of “home.” Or, put a similar way, “home is a ‘socio-spatial system’ that represents the fusion of the physical unit or house and the social unit of the household” (68). In other words, we might say that the house is the physical manifestation of the lives within. Because age, ethnicity, and gender are determining factors in how one perceives “home,” it is important to therefore examine the “house” as a symbol of the multitude of perceptions that exist within (68).

As Mallen explains, “house” and “home” became associated in English law in the sixteenth century; from this point onward, a person’s “house [became] his castle” (65). Owning property signified a belonging to a home. Therefore, the development of the middle class, or

one's movement into the middle class, has resulted in a conflation of house, home, and family. In Lahiri's texts, when the immigrant figure builds or buys his or her own house, it becomes a source of personal identity, as well as a "source of personal and familial security" (Mallen 66). Mallen critiques the easy conflation of "house" and "home," but the house *creates* a multidimensional homeplace for the immigration family unit. After all, we see few kinship networks in Lahiri's fiction, which would exist in India and alter the individual family household unit. Therefore, the American immigrant family becomes the new self-enclosed, multi-generational location of identity formation. The house is where this occurs.

Many of Lahiri's characters live in apartments upon arrival, often close to campuses and separate from the larger Indian or Bengali community. The purchase of the house and the move to the suburbs results in more gatherings for friends and family. It signifies their ability to provide an American upbringing for their children as well as space to accommodate others within their circle. The building of the house (or the settling over the years) can have "a synecdochical relationship with countries in [a] novel, reconfirming the parallel between the family and the nation" (Ghosh 2). In other words, the establishment of a household reaffirms immigrant characters' American identities. Lahiri veers from examining the chase for the American Dream and instead portrays what happens after it is achieved (Friedman 112).

The house-as-home is also a site of cultural education. It stands as an important setting for both horizontal and vertical cultural transmission. Lahiri addresses the ways in which cultural education is present in the home through narrative perspective. Several stories are told through the eyes of a child, growing up under the watchful eyes of their immigrant parents. For example, in "Once in a Lifetime," a young Hema begins to question Kaushik about his life in India. Her sense of Bengali culture is confined to meals her mother makes or clothes she is sent from relatives in Calcutta. She learns about India only from experiences with visitors in her house.

“Bombay is nothing like Calcutta,” [Kaushik] added, as if reading my mind.

“Is it close to the Taj Mahal?”

“No.” He looked at me carefully, as if fully registering my presence for the first time.

“Haven’t you ever looked at a map?” (241).

Certain narrative moments between immigrant characters or their children can challenge the reader to gain a more specific knowledge of India’s various regions rather than lump them all together. In other words, it calls attention to the reader’s own dislocation. Non-Bengali or non-Indian readers can both empathize with their confusion while also acknowledging that they/we, too, are visitors to unfamiliar territory.

In “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” from *Interpreter of Maladies*, the adult narrator recalls a brief episode in her young life that profoundly impacted her perspective on her culture and history. Lilia meets Mr. Pirzada, seemingly just another Bengali friend of her parents, in the fall of 1971. He not only dines with them nightly but also watches the evening news; his wife and daughters are trapped in the middle of the civil war in Pakistan. Like Hema, Lilia’s experience with Bengali culture is rather localized. It exists only with her parents and their social circle. However, Mr. Pirzada’s visits to her house allow for her to develop her cultural education. When she refers to him as an Indian man, her father corrects her:

“Mr. Pirzada is no longer considered Indian,” my father announced, brushing salt from the cashews out of his trim black beard. “Not since Partition. Our country was divided. 1947.” When I said I thought that was the date of India’s independence from Britain, my

father said, “That too. One moment we were free and then we were sliced up, “he explained, drawing an X with his finger on the countertop, “like a pie. Hindus here, Muslims there. Dacca no longer belongs to us.” (27)

In the same conversation, her father admits that he is surprised she does not learn this kind of thing in school. When her mother defends her education, saying she learns American subjects, her father retorts, “But what does she learn about the world?...What is she learning?” (27). Her temporary encounters with Mr. Pirzada educate her in a way she cannot experience in school. He is “different” than her parents due to the location of his hometown and his religion, and yet Lilia learns to see him as a man like her father. The lived experience within the home counters the book-learning outside. She understands more about her culture through Mr. Pirzada than what she can read about.

The adult narrator of “Hell-Heaven” from *Unaccustomed Earth* recounts a meeting between her family and a lonely Bengali graduate student when she was a child. The graduate student, Pranab, begins visiting the narrator, Usha, and her mother, Aparna. He stops by most days, often staying through dinner or taking them on trips around Boston in his car. As the story progresses, he falls in love with an American girl, marries her, and they lose touch with him until years later. In reflecting back on the past, the narrative perspective accomplishes two things: first, the narrator as a child did not recognize her mother’s feelings. Pranab’s presence in her home was about her mother caring for another in the community. Usha admits that she did not realize her mother’s love for Pranab until years later, an admission she does not share until halfway through the story. Second, the home becomes the centerpiece of their relationship. Usha recalls her parents’ apartment during her childhood years and states that in her memories,

“Pranab Kaku is always there” (61). After all, they first get to know him inside: Aparna invites him to her home, makes him tea and feeds him two dinners at the kitchen table. From that point on, he treats their home like his own. His temporary apartment, in the attic of a divorcee with two children, is unwelcoming. For Pranab, his first American home is Aparna’s. And for Aparna, her first meaningful relationship is with Pranab. The home provides them both with what they need at that point in their lives.

The selection of the child narrator may simply be an authorial choice to alter perspective or comment upon the lasting impact of specific childhood moments or memories. Additionally, it could contribute to a sense of the unhomely; the shifts in time, from an adult’s memories of childhood, can make the reader feel disoriented. However, I would argue that the tension between the adult narrator and child protagonist (or witness) is not only indicative of a sense of temporal dislocation within the narrative but also speaks to the relationship between immigrant generations. Delphine Munos sees the (physical) return of the second generation characters, the children of immigrants in Lahiri’s work, to signify an “advent of new beginnings,” a formation of a new immigrant generation that must combine understanding of the past with connection to the future (140). However, we could extend this from the “physical return” to the “narrative return.” That is, in recounting a significant childhood moment revolving around the immigrant experience, the adult narrator dislocates to signify a connection between immigrant generations within the spatial dimensions of the house-as-home.

We can interpret the search for a house and the subsequent creation and execution of cultural transmission that occurs as a literal search for belonging: the immigrant family unit, captured in these stories as they transition from temporary apartment living to more permanent conditions in a (most-often) suburban house likewise transition from dislocated immigrant to

Bengali or Indian American. They build not only their homes but communities of other migrants to “locate” themselves. As Ashima ponders in *The Namesake* once she decides to split her life between India and America following the unexpected death of her husband, “though she still does not feel fully at home within these walls on Pemberton Road, she knows that this is home nevertheless- the world for which she is responsible, which she has created, which is everywhere around her” (279-80). Not only is she comfortable with the house/home she has created but acknowledges that she is *responsible* for that which she has made.

The house-as-home in Lahiri’s work becomes a site of both cultural dislocation and fusion. Bengali identity cannot be transported wholesale but can instead become replicated. In these instances, a focus on cultural dislocation allows Lahiri to “reflect on the constructedness of reality” (Krishnaswamy 135). Her characters engage in cultural practices severed from their homeland, calling further attention to the role of “home” in culture. In creating cultural moments far from their origin, Lahiri’s post-immigrant characters are once again emphasizing their “comforting unhomeliness.” While the house is a fixed thing, home is a social construction, a dynamic place for activities that give value and meaning to identities and serve as the site for new relationships.

### Dislocation and Unhomeliness

Given Lahiri’s subject matter, from displacement to family relationships, marriage, or death, we should interpret her texts as works of dislocation, rather than strictly immigration. Dislocation as a theme is pervasive in her two short story collections. For instance, several characters are dislocated within their marriages, from the couple in “A Temporary Matter” in the

months following the stillbirth of their only child, to newlywed Sanjeev in “This Blessed House,” who comes to acknowledge that he does not know his new wife at all, to both Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das in “Interpreter of Maladies” who both married young to spouses with whom they no longer feel a connection, and Aparna in “Hell-Heaven,” who falls in love with a man who is not her husband. Dislocation in marriage leaves these characters in an inbetween state, neither happy with their current arrangement nor completely willing to sever all ties.

Likewise, Lahiri often creates characters who have lost a parent, essentially dislocating them from having a sense of complete family life as Bengali Americans. With a deceased parent, especially a mother, second-generation characters are left without a connection to the nation of their heritage. And yet, this can result in the potential for possibility. For example, Ruma in “Unaccustomed Earth” mourns the unexpected loss of her mother not too long after she becomes a mother herself. However, the death of her mother results in a bond between father and daughter that was nonexistent before; she is left behind like the motherland, allowing Ruma and her father to make a connection at last (Farshid and Taleie 3). Kaushik, discussed in depth below, is set on a completely different life path (including the country he lives in) because of his mother’s illness and death. However, Dalton-Brown suggests there is “power” in the specter of the dead mother: before Kaushik is swept away in the tsunami, “it is suggested that this is the final acceptance of life as inevitable accident; entering the water ‘to show his mother he is not afraid,’ Kaushik ‘lets go’ and sinks into the warm sea” (341). Finally, the narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” feels more liberated to leave home and move abroad following the slow, agonizing death of his mother who cannot thrive after her husband’s death. He recalls watching her die in their family home, “playing with her excrement in her final days” (182). Leaping into the unknown on two other continents is emancipatory following such grief.

Given the above framework of “home,” the process of defining “unhome” is even more vexing. Homi Bhabha famously addresses this in his 1992 text “The World and the Home,” in which he pre-dates Krishnaswamy in stating that to be unhomely does not mean to be homeless (141). Rather, the unhomed come to recognize that home and world are not oppositional, or that the home represents the domestic space and the world its social counterpart. Instead, “unhomely” is recognition of the “home-in-the-world” (141). In other words, to be unhomed is to understand that the home can be outside the domestic space; Bhabha also recognizes the opposite, that the world can “invade” the home. He considers the unhomely to be a sense of physically living in a home but not feeling at home. But as Bhabha states, “in the stirrings of the unhomely, another world becomes visible” (141). In this regard, the term carries with it more possibility or potential than implications of tragedy, loss, or isolation. Unhomeliness as it applies to immigrants does not mean that home is impossible or unachievable, nor is it necessarily akin to a childhood home or nation of birth. For several of Lahiri’s characters, the new, visible world takes shape far away from where they begin their lives.

Several of the houses in these stories are old, given their location in colonial regions of America, yet they house transient characters. The movement of the characters stands in direct juxtaposition to the timelessness of the structures, similar to the symbolic tension of land and water, explored below (Caesar 68). The most powerful example occurs in the short story “The Third and Final Continent,” a story that has received much critical attention because Lahiri has indicated that she drew details from her parents’ past. In this story, the unnamed narrator rents a room for himself in a house close to MIT while he awaits the arrival of his wife from India. The ornate, nineteenth century house is owned by an elderly woman, Mrs. Croft, whom he later

learns is 103-years-old. The narrator is recently married and adjusting to America after life in India and school in London. He is unhomed following the death of both parents, yet he sees a new life in America as a fresh beginning. Writing from the present, he recalls his short stay in Mrs. Croft's home as a significant chapter in his life because it provides him space to form connections.

Despite their differences in age, occupation, gender, and national origin, the narrator feels a bond with Mrs. Croft, just as she refers to him as a "gentleman" to her daughter. Perhaps this is because both the unnamed narrator and Mrs. Croft are dislocated, one in space and one in time. Mrs. Croft, born in 1866, appears to the narrator as someone who stepped out of a time machine. She is dressed in clothing reminiscent of the Victorian era; when her daughter asks what she would do if she saw someone wearing contemporary fashion like a miniskirt, Mrs. Croft replies, "I'd have her arrested" (186). The exuberance she expresses upon the Apollo 11 moon landing, her repeated exclamation that it is "splendid!" is not included in the story to highlight her faulty, aged memory but instead reinforces her temporal dislocation. Like Mrs. Croft, the house represents the stability of home as the world around changes, standing as a constant in the midst of spatial and temporal dislocation for these two characters. While the first-person narration restricts readers' access to Mrs. Croft's perspective, one might expect them to mirror the thoughts of an elderly lifelong resident of Palo Alto in the 2017 book *Exit West*. Having seen the value of her home and the surrounding area skyrocket in her lifetime as the neighborhood changed, she meditates on the oddity of change in one's life, "all sorts of strange people were around, people who looked more at home than she was...more at home maybe because they were younger, and when she went out it seemed to her that she too had migrated, that everyone

migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives, because we can't help it. We are all migrants through time" (209).

He not only bonds with Mrs. Croft within the house's walls but also his new wife. After Mala arrives from India, practically a stranger to him, he takes her to meet Mrs. Croft. After observing Mala, taking in her modest sari and her respectful silence, Mrs. Croft declares, "She is a perfect lady!" The narrator laughs, and he and Mala share a glance and a smile. This marks the moment in which "the thick ice" between them is broken and their marriage truly begins (Farshid and Taleie 3). The setting of the old house, although a temporary home to the narrator, becomes a house-as-home in this moment. His summer-long tenure in the house represents his first moment of "settling down" in his new homeland. The confines of the house allow him to "make an imaginative connection with America," as he can begin to envision a new space where he can belong (Caesar 53).

The above example demonstrates how a lack of house-as-home, a version of unhomeliness, can create a sense of dislocation. And yet, many immigrant characters shed the houses of their families or upbringings willingly. For those between houses, the home is not one location to escape but a place in which to potentially re-imagine and re-develop oneself. Home is not viewed through the lens of nostalgia, but it also does not guarantee comfort and cultural revitalization. The best example Lahiri provides is the bookending of home and homeland issues within *Unaccustomed Earth*. By opening and closing the collection with the ongoing problematic of home and homeland, Lahiri stresses that "home" is unsettled and not part of a nostalgic narrative.

In particular, dislocation produced by unhomeliness is most eloquently captured in the novella *Hema and Kaushik*. This three-story arc in the second half of the collection

*Unaccustomed Earth* follows both characters from childhood to adulthood. In the first story, “Once in a Lifetime,” the reader meets them as children. Hema narrates in second-person, as if addressing the story directly to Kaushik. She recalls the history between their families and the circumstances of their reintroduction as teenagers once Kaushik’s parents return to the United States from Bombay. Upon their return, they stay with Hema’s family until they find a house of their own. Only late in the story does Hema discover that they moved back because Kaushik’s mother is dying of cancer and wishes to do so away from the gaze of relatives back home. They are purposefully dislocated, fleeing India in order to escape the stifling attentions of family and friends. In fact, in escaping from the problems they encounter in their homeland, Kaushik’s parents “renounce the old definitions of home as a place where you feel safe, serene and at ease” (Farshid and Taleie 4). Their search for a new house is not only an attempt to reconfigure home once again as immigrants, but also to provide Kaushik’s mother with a final resting place. Once she is gone, Kaushik acknowledges the complexity of his relationship to the new house; he associates it with her dying and death, and yet, “the space still retained her presence” (263).

The second story, “Year’s End,” is a snapshot Kaushik’s early adulthood, when his father has remarried a Bengali woman with two young daughters. Although he feels like a stranger within this new family, he tolerates them the best he can before finding the young girls looking at pictures of his deceased mother. He immediately leaves the house and abruptly severs any serious ties with them. Finally, “Going Ashore” sees Hema and Kaushik meeting again as adults in Italy. Although they quickly commence a romantic and sexual relationship, Hema ultimately decides to return to her arranged engagement. Kaushik takes a break from his job as a photojournalist to vacation in Thailand in 2004, where he becomes a victim of the deadly Boxing Day tsunami.

More than perhaps any other Lahiri character, Kaushik represents dislocation; the love story between Kaushik and Hema even ends because Hema doesn't want to someday be accused of "pinning him down" (322). From the moment the reader first encounters him, he is disconnected from the place where he is living. As the novella opens, Hema recalls Kaushik as a fellow American child of Bengali immigrants. At nine, his parents return to Bombay, only to once again move stateside when he is sixteen. He misses India even though he enjoyed a very "American" upbringing while he was there. Hema, too, senses his dislocation and her own disconnection from him as a fellow Bengali American teenager. She recalls,

I did not know what to make of you. Because you'd lived in India, I associated you more with my parents than with me. And yet you were unlike my cousins in Calcutta, who seemed so innocent and obedient when I visited them, asking questions about my life in America as if it were the moon, astonished by every detail. You were not curious about me in the least. (240)

Hema's implication that he is insubordinate and rude does not paint Kaushik in a flattering light. And yet, Hema maturely sees this as a result of his displacement. Indeed, her world view is so firmly bisected that she does not know what to do with someone who falls outside the American/Bengali binary.

Although the traumatic return to America was the product of his parents' wishes, the rest of Kaushik's adult life is spent avoiding a permanent home or residing in a single location. He becomes a photojournalist, always globe-trotting on assignment, which "allowed him to permanently avoid the United States" (305). When Hema and Kaushik reconnect in Italy, she is

on a scholarly vacation from her regular life as a classics professor, whereas he is momentarily pausing at the only place he stores his belongings before accepting a more settled job assignment. Although it goes against his lifelong detachment from the material world and any sense of “home,” he had accepted a position as a photography editor for an international news magazine in Hong Kong. The fact that he is lost in the tsunami, swept away in the sea, before he has a chance to begin his new desk job in some ways grants him an ending fitting to his life.

Kaushik is notably dislocated because he is literally unhomed, without a house to call his own. The same can be said for a character in the title story of *Unaccustomed Earth*. The story revolves around Ruma, a recent transplant to the Pacific Northwest, and her father’s week-long stay at her new home. Following her mother’s death, both Ruma and her father have had to adapt to new lives. Ruma has left Brooklyn and her job at a law firm to become a full-time mother. She expects her father to accept her offer to live with her, assuming that he is still mourning her mother’s death and unable to live alone and care for himself. However, Ruma’s father, like Kaushik, is at home in his new dislocation. While never one to travel while his wife was alive, he quickly becomes comfortable in her “sudden wanderlust” after she is gone (19). After selling the family home following his wife’s death, he is resistant to settling down again and living with his only child. He wants to create a figurative home abroad, as he travels to foreign countries with his girlfriend, a woman he only sees during arranged group travel vacations. In fact, when the narrative perspective shifts from Ruma to her father, his first thought is, “How freeing it was, these days, to travel alone, with only a single suitcase to check” (7). A severing of ties from his old life is not a tragedy but a liberating new chapter of his life. “Unaccustomed Earth” demonstrates how expectations of dislocation can contribute to a false narrative: Ruma expects

her father to be a lost widower, when in reality he is enjoying “comforting unhomeliness” for the first time in his life. He is in control of when and where his home is.

### Permanence and Impermanence

As examined above, Lahiri’s texts can be considered post-immigrant works of dislocation because of the inclusion or creation of many characters who purposefully displace themselves. However, we can also understand these texts as ones of dislocation through symbolism, particularly within the tension between the permanent and the impermanent. For example, one of Lahiri’s most pervasive juxtapositions is land-water. Through Kaushik’s narrative, Lahiri draws attention to fluidity and a resistance to settlement, contrasting the permanence of the land and the instability or rootlessness of the sea. In fact, tension between land and sea bookend the novella. In “Once in a Lifetime,” Kaushik’s dying mother requests a final home by the sea complete with a swimming pool. She desires to be in or near water as her life drains away. Kaushik admits to Hema that looking at gravestones makes him “wish we weren’t Hindu, so that my mother could be buried somewhere. But she’s made us promise we’ll scatter her ashes into the Atlantic” (249). As promised, once she has passed, Kaushik shares that “her ashes were tossed from a boat off the Gloucester coast” (257). In the second story, once Kaushik flees his father’s house after discovering his new stepsisters looking at his mother’s photos, he pursues a rambling, directionless journey up the New England coastline. He stays in maritime-themed motels and eats in restaurants with fishermen, stopping occasionally to watch the unrelenting expanse of the sea. In the end, he cannot give his mother’s pictures to the water, as they did her ashes, but instead decides to bury them in the ground. While he cannot keep them himself, he settles for a

more permanent resting place for them. Coming full circle, at the end of “Going Ashore,” Kaushik is swept up in the tsunami, and the reader is never informed whether or not his body is found. In death, he becomes as impermanent as the sea.

Kaushik’s profession as a photographer is resonant of the collision between the permanent and impermanent. His job is to capture the temporary moment and make it eternal. On the other hand, Hema is a classics professor, dedicated to studying the past. She is enraptured by what remains of the past, from buildings to pottery to inscriptions of language. She studies the tangible objects left behind from an impermanent culture. The intersection of permanent and impermanent does not appear only in Hema and Kaushik’s story but throughout both short story collections. They ask the reader, how do physical objects tether us to location? What part do they play in dislocation? Most significantly, what the reader often encounters here is the symbolism of the physical as impermanent or fleeting. For example: the address on a slip of paper that Mrs. Das gives to Mr. Kapasi in “Interpreter of Maladies,” the antique keepsake box the child narrator uses to store her candy in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” Boori Ma’s skeleton keys to the apartment home she manages in “A Real Durwan,” or the ancient household items encased in Italian museums that Hema visits in “Going Ashore.” And yet, most of these examples point to the temporary nature of a situation, if not a given existence: the slip of paper is lost in the wind, Mr. Pirzada’s visits come to an end, the skeleton keys are stolen, and household items remind visitors of their owners’ fleeting, anonymous lives. They call to mind *what could be* but quickly remind us of what is.

One story that particularly captures the power of physical objects is “This Blessed House” from *Interpreter of Maladies*. Sanjeev and Twinkle are newlyweds, both Bengali Americans who allowed their parents to arrange their introduction. As the story opens, they have

moved into their new house and stumble upon Christian items left behind by the previous owners: a large statue of the Virgin Mary, a smaller one of Jesus, a 3-D postcard of St. Francis, a framed picture of the three wise men, a tile trivet depicting Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and a small plastic Nativity scene. Despite the fact that they are not Christian, Twinkle is enamored with her findings and proudly displays them around the house to Sanjeev's mounting dismay. Her joy at each new discovery begins to nettle him more and more; when she finds a statue of the Virgin Mary, he thinks back with regret to other potential brides his mother had found for him. At the end of the story, as Twinkle discovers a large, silver bust of Christ, he admits that,

He did hate it. He hated its immensity, and its flawless, polished surface, and its undeniable value. He hated that it was in his house, and that he owned it. Unlike the other things they'd found, this contained dignity, solemnity, beauty even. But to his surprise these qualities made him hate it all the more. Most of all he hated it because he knew that Twinkle loved it. (156-7)

Twinkle's fascination with the objects becomes a psychological wedge in Sanjeev's view of marriage. He realizes how little he knows about her and how difficult it has been to adapt to living with another person. Yet, Twinkle's joy upon discovering each item and her insistence on displaying them reflect her overall flexibility of character in contrast to Sanjeev's rigidity (Farshid and Taleie 3). She is not dismissive of objects that reflect views other than her own, as Sanjeev is. Along with her cooking style and personal affability revealed throughout the story, her quest for more artifacts demonstrates her creativity and refusal to abide by traditional rules or roles (4). The reader's final glimpse of Sanjeev is one of resignation: Sanjeev watches as his new

wife charms his colleagues and friends at their housewarming party, leading the entire group in a hunt for more religious relics. In the case of this story, the objects left behind by the previous homeowners, themselves permanent residents of the house, threaten impermanence in Sanjeev's marriage. They successfully introduce an overwhelming sense of marital dislocation and emphasize the powerful tension that can be created between characters and objects.

### Conclusion

The common thematic link between *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* is one of movement within families and adjustment to dislocation. However, there exists a poetic bridge between them as well: *Interpreter of Maladies* ends with "The Third and Final Continent," more specifically, a moment in which the narrator reflects on his choice to move far away from his home. He states:

While the astronauts, heroes forever, spend mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (242)

The quiet heroism of migration is juxtaposed against the backdrop of Apollo 11's moon landing, speaking to the bravery of exploration in any form. As the final lines in the collection, the above

passage invites readers to recognize the extraordinary feat of relocating one's life to the unfamiliar. *Unaccustomed Earth* takes its title from a passage by Nathaniel Hawthorne, which also serves as the epigraph:

Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birth-places, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots in unaccustomed earth. ("The Custom House")

The Hawthorne passage, on the heels of "The Third and Final Continent," declares that the exploration into new lands via immigration is not only a possibility, is not simply brave, but is inherently necessary for the survival and endurance of all humans. Movement and migration allow for a creation of "self beyond culture," producing space for identity formation independent of homeland (Dalton-Brown 336).

These texts are not about "here" versus "there," nor can the characters be simplistically reduced to caricatured immigrants lamenting about a romanticized home or resisting all assimilation. Just as other post-immigrant writers disrupt established binaries such as black/white or nationalist/assimilationist, Lahiri's works complicate a binary of home/away. In doing so, she calls particular attention to the possibility of rootlessness and the many ways in which immigrant characters can feel at home in a place, culture, language, or relationship. Her texts leave the specificity of "immigration" behind and move toward dislocation and relocation that speaks to the movements of all people, and not just immigrants. Lahiri posits that the identity condition of

the twenty-first century for all of us is migratory, whatever our ethnic history. As Bhabha would put it, the novel (or short story) becomes the house where the unhomely can live (142).

## Chapter Four: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Immigrant Gaze

It was there I learned I was not a person from my country, not from my families. I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song- all of it cooked together in the color of my skin.

~*A Mercy* by Toni Morrison

In an essay addressing the nature of “authenticity” in contemporary African literature, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie delves into how or why a writer is identified by certain modifiers. For example, is a given artist a Nigerian, a poet, a man, or an Igbo first? How is he to be classified? Adichie goes on to say that she “finds it reductive that the different identity labels we carry must somehow be arranged in some sort of ascending or descending order” (“African ‘Authenticity’” 48). As I have argued throughout the previous chapters, classification or categorization especially for immigrant writers, is problematic if not often arbitrary, both in the life of the writer and the lives of the characters. Adichie’s work is exceptionally productive in this regard, as it approaches the intersection of contemporary immigration and entrenched racial hierarchies as well as the relationships between peoples of different black diasporas. More specifically, she interrogates the shift that occurs when a Nigerian character is primarily identified as “black” once he or she arrives in the United States. In other words, how does one’s blackness shape, challenge, or distort the perception of immigrant-ness? In the post-immigrant literary setting of America, Adichie calls our attention to the socio-political implications of being both black *and* foreign.

In doing so, we can see how Adichie's work is post-immigrant: first, the characters exist as observers and storytellers, rather than representative, stock figures of immigrants from foreign lands. They resist full assimilation not out of nostalgia for their homeland but because they have the freedom and ability to decide how they want to integrate their new identities into their existing ones. As observers of American and Nigerian cultures for both American and Nigerian audiences, amongst others, they alternate between the role of storyteller of the local and that of the "native informant" (Guarracino 6). That is, they both convey what they perceive and report or translate what they know. Second, Adichie reinterprets more traditional narratives of racial belonging in America as well as the "heart of darkness" perception of Africa. In positioning Nigerian characters within an American context, she is able to challenge the assumption that African immigrants are somehow disadvantaged compared to their American counterparts. Instead, Adichie creates characters who drift to America and England not only out of necessity but because of opportunity. They are students, teachers, businessmen and –women, more worldly than a vast amount of Americans they meet. In fact, in her article on *Americanah*, Katherine Hellemeier contends that the Nigerian characters are the agents of sympathy, not the recipients (232). Adichie exemplifies a new generation of Nigerian writers who "insist upon conceiving of African agents who shape, respond to, and have purchase in global economic flows and pressures, as opposed to African subjects who passively provide the backdrop for transnational capitalist exploits" (233). Compared to the short-sighted, insular and limited worlds of the American characters, Nigerians are the ones with the promising futures while the Americans are to be pitied, an upending of the traditional immigrant tale altogether.

## Background

Adichie's acute sensitivity to individual representation comes from own her self-awareness as an immigrant. As a child who grew up reading British literature, heavily influenced by images of blond children in the English countryside, she has been vocal about the power that storytelling can have on one's self-image. As she puts it, it is a power exerted by others that attempts to essentialize the immigrant story, or "the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person" (5). In her famous TEDTalk "The danger of a single story," she explains to her audience/reader that one of her roles as an African writer living in America is to mediate the psychic distance between the two cultures. Even more so, she is purposeful in pointing out that African literature or culture is not "a single story." She talks about how a single perception, whether what "female" is or what "poor" is or what "African" is, can be harmful to both the subject and object of the assumption. Adichie has often found herself the inaccurate "single story" of Africa to Americans around her, due in part to the image of Africa in much of Western literature.

In her own life, Adichie has shared that she sometimes focuses too much on the relationship of immigrant to native and hinders the one between immigrant and immigrant. As a new American, she admits to stereotyping "the immigrant" herself: when she visited Guadalajara, she was quickly ashamed to discover that she has perceived Mexicans a certain way because of how the election-year media has portrayed them. She states, "immigration became synonymous with Mexicans. There were endless stories of Mexicans as people who were fleecing the healthcare system, sneaking across the border, being arrested at the border, that kind of thing." Her first day walking through Guadalajara, she immediately feels ashamed for

inadvertently buying into the media coverage about Mexico. She admits to allowing Mexicans to become “the abject immigrant” in her own mind (“single story” 4). Those with the power, in this case the media that Adichie consumed, were successful in shaping an inaccurate narrative. If the single story is ultimately all about power, then a “balance of stories” has the ability to empower and humanize the subjects as well as the reader.

The “balance” of the post-immigrant text allows an author or a character to live across borders and separates the strands of a misperceived single story. As a writer of the post-immigrant generation, Adichie presents individual voices that distance themselves from broad categorization, simplification, and/or stereotype and reclaim the power of their own storytelling. Part of her observational abilities undoubtedly extend from her academic background. Born and raised in the university town of Enugu, Nigeria, Adichie attended college at Drexel in Philadelphia and Eastern Connecticut State, followed by graduate work at Johns Hopkins and Yale. By 2008, she had earned two M.A. degrees in addition to a MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Fellowship. Even though she has spent most of her young adult life learning and working in the United States, Adichie, similar to Junot Díaz, divides her time between her two home nations. She continues to teach writing courses and seminars in both countries and identifies as both Nigerian and American.

In the last fourteen years, she has published one short story collection, *The Thing around Your Neck* (2009), as well as three novels, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and *Americanah* (2013). While her first three works have garnered plenty of praise from critics, scholars, and readers, *Americanah* has made her a household name. Besides developing a reputation as a skilled novelist, Adichie has also become a contemporary feminist icon<sup>21</sup>,

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<sup>21</sup> Many of the awards she has recently won or been nominated for are literary awards. However, some of them also highlight the extent to which she is becoming famous for her leadership talents, her global perspective, and her

publishing the essay “We Should All Be Feminists” to wide acclaim. The essay emerged from a TEDTalk she delivered in 2013. The prominence of the presentation/essay and her candor on the topic of gender and contemporary African identity have transformed her into a bit of a celebrity. Additionally, the modest fame she has achieved as an outspoken feminist has only driven interest in her literary works. There is reason to believe that, in a move she finds reductive as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Adichie may come to be identified as a feminist writer first and a Nigerian writer second.

Adichie may be enjoying an unusual amount of success for someone her age because, like Junot Díaz, she has quickly come to represent a new voice in a sparse landscape. Her fellow Nigerian writers, such as Chigozie Obioma, Chinelo Okparanta, or Nnedi Okorafor, have not been as successful in America as they have been in Nigeria. Also partially responsible for her success is the increase in Nigerian literary production and the advent of “digital pulp,” that is, the quick (and often quality-lacking) generic literature produced online to feed the massive hunger for new literature in some African countries (Santana). The Nigerian literary scene, similar to its film industry nicknamed Nollywood, is presently trying to keep up with demand. Adichie has come along at just the right time.

Yet, Adichie’s work is not merely representative of the new Nigerian voice but is instead building upon the complex foundational work of generations past. Daria Tunca and Benedicte Ledent go a step further in arguing for a sharp division between the “old” diaspora texts, namely those that emerged from the transatlantic slave trade, and the “new” diaspora texts, which have come from more contemporary African immigrants’ experience (3). The two are not necessarily separate entities. The connection and communication between them is identifiable but

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advocacy. She was included in the 2013 *Foreign Policy* magazine’s “Top Global Thinkers of 2013,” the 2013 *New African's* “100 Most Influential Africans 2013” and *Time*’s “The 100 Most Influential People of 2015.”

complicated, similar to the ways in which the genealogy of immigrant literature is referenced in previous chapters. Tunca and Ledent go on to argue that for the heirs of the former, some of which identify as belonging to the latter, Africa has become a “distant, intangible entity, yet for many it also remained a pivotal constituent in their search for identity (2). In fact, there are brief glimpses of the “old” in Adichie’s work, despite the fact that she is one of the most famous “new diaspora” writers, a connection that stems from her characters’ experiences in a racialized America (Mami 10). In their fascination with and exploration of one major issue- race- in the context of contemporary America, Adichie’s African characters could be considered products of the new diaspora as defined by Tunca and Ledent. As is the case with her most notable protagonist, Ifemelu, Adichie’s characters define a new journey altogether while encountering and living under the legacy of the old one.

Adichie and her cohort are also receiving attention, both positive and negative, for writing “outside Africa.” That is, they have produced, and continue to produce, “extroverted” African novels that focus on Africans living elsewhere or their experiences beyond the metaphorical borders of African culture. While previous generations have found success with the “introverted” novel (including predecessors of McCann and Díaz, as discussed previously) Adichie does not hesitate to explore her global orientation (Pahl 75). Her readership reflects the same: after hundreds of years of Western colonialism in Africa, including occupation and illegal trade and seizure, African immigrants are now emigrating to America and Europe at record rates. Additionally, children of these immigrants are more likely to be college-educated than any other immigrant or American-born ethnic group, including white Americans (Valentine).

However, her work has not circumvented criticism from other Nigerian writers. As Ehijele Eromosele points out, older generations of Nigerian writers are critical of younger rising

stars like Adichie, or those belonging to what is commonly known as the “Third Generation.”<sup>22</sup> The Third Generation is more concerned with movement, displacement, and the global journey more than the political and anti-colonial struggles of the previous literary generations (Guarracino 3). Writers such as Charles Nnolim have stated that Adichie and her contemporaries are too concerned with writing literature “of the flesh” (99). Throughout her essay “We Should All Be Feminists,” Adichie also references several occasions in which her ideas about gender equality have been met with consternation, misunderstanding, or direct criticism from other Nigerians. She even opens by recalling a memory in which a male childhood friend used an unfamiliar word to describe her: feminist; it was not meant as a compliment (2). Adichie’s work does not shy away from discussing gender, sex, and sexuality, even the daily grittiness of human existence. She is adept at swiftly moving between the scope of global existence and the quotidian grind of life.

The two texts I will analyze in this chapter are a short story collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and her most recent novel, *Americanah*, both of which attempt to shatter immigrant stereotypes of the past, particularly images of the African immigrant as the backwards cog in the imperial system rather than a voluntary migrant of the twenty-first century. Her two earlier novels, *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, center on religion and family and the Biafran War<sup>23</sup> in Nigeria, respectively, whereas the texts I analyze below engage with the international community, both readers and critics, to a greater degree.

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<sup>22</sup> The first two generations closely resemble Krishnaswamy’s model, as outlined in chapter one: the first generation writers published in the aftermath of de-colonialization, while the second generation emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. The latter were heavily influenced by the events of the Biafran War.

<sup>23</sup> The war in the region of Biafra, Africa took occurred between 1967-1970. While it is often referred to as the Nigerian Civil War, Adichie consistently uses “Biafran,” so I will do likewise throughout this chapter.

*The Thing Around Your Neck* is a collection of twelve stories, mostly told from the perspective of women living in Nigeria or the United States. Unlike her two previous novels, *The Thing Around Your Neck* allows Adichie to turn her gaze to emigration. As one review of the book points out, she has explored the themes of university life, romantic relationships, family dynamics, racial and ethnic division, gender identity, and imprisonment all before, but adding the motif of migration to her writing transforms her perspective on themes of movement and identity (Dawson 61). Although there are plenty of moments that speak directly to Western readers and their dangerous misperceptions of Africa and African characters, the stories are linked by a self-awareness of what it means to be Nigerian in America or how immigration has impacted the Nigerian perspective of national identity.

As a holistic work, the collection includes several intangible themes that can inform readers about Adichie's perspective of the post-immigrant experience, namely departure, individuality, and authenticity. First of all, several stories end with the title character abruptly leaving a location or walking away from a discussion in progress. The most powerful example is protagonist in the heartbreaking story, "The American Embassy." After her dissident husband is smuggled across the border to Benin to escape government agents and her young son is shot by men looking for him, she attempts to gain asylum status at the American Embassy in Lagos. While being questioned by a visa interviewer, she realizes that she cannot disclose more details about her son's death in order to claim asylum status. He is not something to be exploited, and so she abruptly leaves the embassy in the middle of her interview. Her departure, though potentially detrimental to her own safety, momentarily grants her agency in the midst of personal and national tragedy.

In the story entitled “Jumping Monkey Hill,” we meet Ujunwa, a young Nigerian fiction writer who is selected to participate in a week-long writers’ retreat with others from around the continent. She encounters not only a variety of African perspectives but also the condescension and arrogance of a white, English host named Edward who believes himself to be the expert on all things African. In the course of the story, both Ujunwa and a character she creates (admittedly based on herself) abruptly leave three times: one morning a few days in, Ujunwa quickly stands up and leaves the group breakfast when Edward argues that “homosexual stories of this sort weren’t reflective of Africa,” despite the fact that the story in question is written by a homosexual African author (108). Similarly, when Edward reads her own story and states that, “the whole thing is implausible...it isn’t a real story of real people,” she briefly shares the fact that it’s based on her own experience (114). Like her character who briskly walks out on a potential job after being sexually propositioned, Ujunwa finds movement to be more effective than argument:

There were other things Ujunwa wanted to say, but she did not say them. There were tears crowding up in her eyes but she did not let them out. She was looking forward to calling her mother, and as she walked back to cabin, she wondered whether this ending, in a story, would be considered plausible. (114)

The meta-fictional moment, as well as the repetition of abrupt departure in “Jumping Monkey Hill,” clarify how movement is used as an effective tool, even at a local level. Yet, these two stories use abrupt departure as a means to call attention to the difference between personal convenience and political persecution: one woman leaves because she feels unappreciated by her

English host, while another risks death at the hands of government agents because she refuses to share details of her young son's death. The gulf between their rationales reflects a further resistance to the single story of the female African experience, yet both characters would rather walk away than compromise their beliefs.

Second, in addition to departure, others speak to the significance of the individual, or the human beings caught in the midst of large-scale conflict. For example, the third story in the collection, "A Private Experience," is about a meeting between two women in the middle of a riot in Kano. The women escape the violence by ducking into an abandoned store. One is Igbo and Christian while the other is Hausa Muslim. Very quickly, the reader learns that the riot outside is the result of Muslims slaughtering Christians in revenge for one man's desecration of the Quran. The women's interaction breaks down the barriers of ethnicity, religion, language, and class, in stark contrast to the faceless violence and death occurring outside the window. The attempt to portray them as diametrical at times feels heavy-handed:

She unties her green wrapper and spreads it on the dusty floor...Chika looks at the threadbare wrapper on the floor; it is probably one of the two the woman owns. She looks down at her own denim skirt and red t-shirt embossed with a picture of the Statue of Liberty, both of which she bought when she and [her sister] spent a few summer weeks with relatives in New York. (46)

A simple description of their clothing implies they are separated by a gulf of class and religion, and yet they are united not only in their gender but also in loss: both end up losing close family members that day.

Finally, several stories speak to authenticity, or one's sole identification as "African" or "black," a topic that comes up again in *Americanah*. In the title work, written entirely in second-person narration, the speaker recounts her journey from Nigeria to America. Her African identity reconfigures throughout the short narrative, as she gains a foothold in America and begins to voice her objection to standing in as a representative of the entire African population. In the early days of her American life, she "smiles tightly" when curious strangers ask her questions about her hair, an intrusion of "ignorance and arrogance" that she endures with politeness (116). However, the latter half of the story addresses her first boyfriend in America, a white man who seems overly-interested in African and Asian countries, who prides himself on his "knowledge" of foreign territories and their inhabitants. The narrator implies that he does not necessarily seek her out as a partner because of her personality but because of what she represents. She refuses to let him visit Nigeria with her, reminding herself that, "you did not want him...to add it to the list of countries where he went to gawk at the lives of poor people who could never gawk back at *his* life" (124-5).

"Authentic representation" and its tenuous connection to objectification reappear in the story "Imitation." The title refers to both the folk and art pieces scattered around the protagonist's American house as well as her feelings about her marriage and life as a Nigerian American. While she spends most of her time with her children in their American home, her husband spends less and less time with them and more in Lagos, where he apparently has installed his new girlfriend in their home. The story raises the specter of African presence in America; her husband is a "Big Man" in Nigeria, a title supported by the fact that his children are growing up as Americans. And yet, he is passionate about the African artwork in his house, either imitation or authentic. He resents the British theft of African work, that he must rely on

knock-offs to represent his pride in his African past and heritage. The juxtaposition of historic African art in the same house as his newly-Americanized family sheds light on the complicated relationship between Adichie's post-immigrant characters.

While the short stories cover a lot of ground in terms of the aforementioned themes, Adichie's most recent novel provides her with the room to develop them accordingly. While her previous works may have been critically acclaimed, *Americanah* is what many writers aspire to: a well-written and thoughtful novel that has been selected for book clubs across the country, as well as for major literary awards. From the title, a reader can ascertain that the novel tackles issues of immigration: "Americanah" is the Nigerian slang term that refers to people who have gone to the United States<sup>24</sup> and returned to Nigeria "with American affectations...it's often used in the context of a kind of gentle mockery" ("Americanah' Author"). The novel cuts between time, location, and character perspective to tell the story of two young Nigerians, Ifemelu and Obinze. They spend their teenage years in Nigeria romantically involved, but when Ifemelu gets a student visa to America, she leaves Obinze behind.

Ifemelu's narrative begins in the present, as she gets her hair braided in anticipation of her return to Nigeria after a dozen years in America. In a series of flashbacks, the reader learns about her young love story with Obinze and the depression she suffers when she first moves to the U.S. She cuts him out of her life and rejects all contact because she does not know how to process the isolation and anxiety she faces. After earning her degree, and in the midst of a serious relationship with a white American named Curt, she begins writing a blog that examines racial identity. It grows in popularity throughout her relationships with Curt and an African

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<sup>24</sup> In her new novel *Behold the Dreamers*, Imbolo Mbue shares that a similar "gentle mockery" is employed by Cameroonians when a loved one or neighbor emigrates and becomes an "American Wonder."

American man named Blaine. She eventually decides to break up with Blaine, sell her house, and move back to Lagos, where she briefly holds a job in publishing and establishes another blog about contemporary life and identity in Lagos.

In between Ifemelu's chapters, we encounter Obinze, frustrated with the disconnection from Ifemelu and unable to get a visa to join her after 9/11. He visits London with his mother and decides to outstay his visa. After struggling there to find work using someone else's identification card, he is eventually deported. He returns to Nigeria disillusioned but rather quickly makes the right connections to a "Big Man" that allow him to prosper in property development. He marries a woman he feels he is supposed to, a woman trained to be a good wife and who gives him a daughter. Nevertheless, he never quite falls out of love with Ifemelu. They reconnect online, and when she returns to Nigeria, they resume their love affair. The novel ends with Obinze leaving his wife for Ifemelu.

Taken together, *Americanah* and *The Thing Around Your Neck* challenge the traditional narrative of both American immigration and American blackness. The African character is no longer the object of capital imperialism but, like other immigrant characters explored earlier, possesses the agency to resist past expectations of assimilation. Moreover, the adopted country is often objectified, rather than the reverse. As Yogita Goyal explains, Adichie's work, "placed within a tradition of postcolonial writing revers[es] the heart of darkness narrative, where rather than Europeans or Americans going to Africa to find themselves, an African character travels to the heart of the West, only to find darkness there" (xii). As self-conscious observers of their new surroundings, Adichie's immigrants are able to convey not only the challenges of migration for the migrant but also the problems within the systems they find already in place.

I would like to begin an analysis of Adichie's work by examining the origin of her characters' agency. As I have stated, her immigrant characters, mainly women, maintain a certain position of power as witnesses that is unusual to see in past immigrant texts. Many critics have addressed Adichie's feminist "agenda" throughout her works, but I would more specifically like to consider her texts through the lens of bell hooks's oppositional gaze of "black female spectatorship." In her 1992 article, hooks speaks in particular to cinema and black viewership in responding to Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," but her framework can be applied to the potentially-political written word of black immigrant women decades later. In her essay, hooks recounts the ways in which the "gaze" holds enormous power in a racially-divided country. As objects of the white gaze for centuries, black women understand, perhaps more than anyone, that "there is power in looking" (270). The "looking" not only entails bearing witness to history or critical observation but ultimately holds the observed accountable for their role in shaping contemporary conditions. Adichie, I argue, reverses the gaze of whiteness, Americanness, and maleness in creating observational female characters who enjoy the privileges of technology, mass media, and education. In "looking," they note and share what is and what needs to be. They do not adhere to conventional, historical racial roles ascribed to black people in the United States, nor do they accept the subservient role of African subjects within a European colonial/imperialist cultural hegemony. They extend beyond established binaries to carve out their own position in post-immigrant environments. In reconfiguring perceptions of the African immigrant, in emphasizing the dangers of ethnic and cultural essentialism, in nakedly recounting the painful journey of negotiating race in America, and by reflecting the stirrings of Afropolitanism, Adichie's post-immigrant figure transforms the apolitical, isolated, or assimilationist stance so long associated with the stranger in a strange land.

## Technology

As I argue above, the role of the observer in these texts is not a passive one. As bell hooks has written, in the position of subordination, the subjected turn a critical gaze toward those in power (hooks 271). Their observations about the hierarchy and expectations in America, conveyed either in conversations with friends or through a third-person omniscient narrator, are powerful in their intent and empowering for the observer. For example, in *Americanah*, Ifemelu becomes a financial success in America because of her observational blog, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. In turning her gaze toward others, she also engages in “critical spectatorship” of her surrounding culture and race. Through payments from interested readers, advertising, and speaking engagements, she is not only able to quit her day job but also become a homeowner. She has “made it” in America after thirteen years, yet she decides to leave it behind and return to Nigeria on the heels of her financial blogging success despite everyone’s (even her own) doubts. For her, America is not the Promised Land; she ultimately decides to leave not for any one reason but because “layer after layer of discontent had settled in her, and formed a mass that now propelled her [home]” (8). In becoming dual citizens, her characters have earned options.

Similar to her rejection of the traditional one-way immigrant journey, Adichie challenges the idea that the immigrant’s home country is “less than” the country to which they move, as Ifemelu’s return home testifies. However, Ifemelu becomes an internet success yet again once she has returned to Lagos. Her new blog, *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*, focuses on the “new Nigerian” way of life: people like herself returned from Western nations, the quickly-growing upper-middle class, and rampant corruption, but also the realities of poverty and lack of

opportunity in areas outside the main cities. Just as her American blog investigates racial tensions through observation, her Nigerian blog attempts an understanding of the newly-technological and -globalized direction of her country.

The objectives of the blogs are complementary. Her American blog aims to explain what it means to be black in America to those readers who grew up elsewhere. For example, she opens a post on American tribalism by sharing that, “In America, tribalism<sup>25</sup> is alive and well. There are four kinds- class, ideology, region, and race” (227). Obviously, non-black readers would also be interested in learning how a “non-American black,” as Ifemelu calls herself, approaches a new life of increased racialization. As she says, race or racial tension is not a problem in her home country. The American blog is educational for non-black readers, a helpful guide for non-American black readers, and an attempted connection to all readers, given her posts on relationships and colorism. Ifemelu starts the Nigerian blog after the magazine she works for refuses to publish the articles on subjects she finds appealing, such as healthcare, religion, and corruption in Lagos. She feels that her bosses are playing it too safe and redirects her attention to the online community. Like the American blog, she is observing a new (to her) community and trying to translate it to unfamiliar readers.

Both blogs act as conduits of the post-immigrant: first, they introduce non-Western ideas to the Western reader. Africa becomes more familiar through technology. It is no longer represented by “Third World” famished children in commercials but in the funny, edgy, honest posts of a young woman observing the nouveau riche of Lagos. Second, the two blogs as immigrant texts merge entertainment with education. For example, the American blog often asks

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<sup>25</sup> Her use of “tribalism,” a term formerly used to discriminate against the “uncivilized,” designates the imperialists, a reversal of the gaze in the postcolonial sense in addition to black female spectatorship.

pointed questions and requires serious responses, such as “What Do WASPs Aspire To?” a post that emphasizes the “oppression Olympics” of America and suspects that everyone seems to aspire to upper-class whiteness (253). The post is written to invite honest feedback, collectively educating readers of all races. Similar posts question the reader about black identity, interracial relationships, and politics. On the other hand, Ifemelu inserts moments of entertainment or humor, such as the entry entitled, “Not All Dreadlocked White American Guys Are Down” (5). From her standpoint as an outsider, Ifemelu is able to shift focus to her subjects and point to the cracks and contradictions in the racial hierarchy in America. After all, as bell hooks reminds us, black women traditionally are relegated to the margins of spectatorship, as they “refuse to identify with white womanhood [and] who [do] not take on the phallogentric gaze of desire and possession” (275). Ifemelu’s position as a black female immigrant transforms something as seemingly benign as her popular blog into an actual conduit of resistance.

The blog also becomes a channel for character agency. Of course, it allows Ifemelu to make enough money to become independent and eventually live wherever she desires, but the proliferation of her immigrant voice through this medium is even more significant. As noted in the introduction, publication venues for the immigrant narrative have expanded exponentially with the emergence of the worldwide web. Ifemelu’s blogs are representative of the manner in which the lone immigrant voice can be proliferated outside of the traditional setting of the large-scale publication house. It empowers her not only as an immigrant writer but also as a woman of color in America.

Finally, Adichie’s texts examine how internet access has transformed immigrants’ relationships and how they relate to their dual lives. Contemporary technology further complicates the relationship of the immigrant to his or her home, creating a virtual connection

that has the potential to hinder more than help. For example, when Ifemelu's Aunty Uju moves to America with her young son, she meets her new husband, Bartholomew, through the website *Nigerian Village*. As a news outlet, community board, and dating site, it connects Nigerian immigrants to one another across the vast span of America. Ifemelu comments on Bartholomew's "sour-toned and strident" posts on *Nigerian Village*, theorizing that he and others like him need the community of the online groups so that they could "fight on the Internet over their mythologies of home, because home was now a blurred place between here and there" (143-144). Her tone here is critical of those who cling to a prior life by forming a group of like-minded, resentful compatriots. They are unable to move into a new if they are continuously linked to home. Therefore, rather than easing the lonely state of the contemporary immigrant, sites like *Nigerian Village* have the potential to make it more constrictive and isolating. Bartholomew's reliance upon community in the form of online chat rooms speaks to a destructive form of resistance that continues to romanticize the origin country, thereby preventing any new identity formation. Additionally, it implies that in addition to the Nigeria left behind and the Nigeria one returns to, there is also a Nigeria that exists solely in cyberspace.

As much as we can interpret how Ifemelu and others use the internet to communicate their ideas to others, technology in this novel democratizes the immigrant experience as well. After all, with her American blog, Ifemelu allows readers to comment on her posts, both in agreement or disagreement. At a later point, detailing her "transition" from relaxed hair to natural hair, she asks, "Any AB (American Black) or NAB (Non-American Black) naturals out there who want to share their regimen?" (369). She not only allows for interaction between herself and her readers, she seeks it out for the betterment of her new community. That is, if she posts an observation of American culture (admittedly, as an outsider), the return comment may

be an agreement from a fellow immigrant or a soft rebuttal from an American-born reader. The shared culture of the blog shrinks the distance between American and non-American, thereby erasing the metaphorical lines of race and nationhood<sup>26</sup>.

### Race and Spectatorship

In addition to their integration of digital technology, Adichie's texts are sites of resistance and critical spectatorship because of their frank attention to race in the United States. They tackle racial difference in immigrants, or more specifically, what happens when an immigrant character "looks" like an American but is not apprised of the country's historical racial context. Some immigrants write of experiencing an increased visibility upon arriving in America. They witness how their foreignness makes them more visible to the rest of the American population. Adichie's characters, on the other hand, experience an increased invisibility upon their arrival. Without speaking of their circumstances or home country, they are immediately identified as black. Assumptions about their origins, based solely on skin color, mark them as doubly-othered from the start. However, the post-immigrant text provides space for them to erase both their prior invisibility in Western culture and their contemporary invisibility in twenty-first century America.

As noted earlier, preoccupation with race or blackness is nonexistent in Nigeria. However, because they resemble Black Americans, Nigerian immigrants are forced into a situation of discovering their blackness. Adichie herself has spoken about how she has had to "learn" what race means in the United States. When Ifemelu first moves to Philadelphia, she

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<sup>26</sup> As Miriam Pahl points out, Adichie adopts both blogs to real life outside the novel. However, Pahl notes that Adichie's version of the Nigerian blog does not allow for comments, thereby "curtail[ing] the possibility of creating meanings collectively" (78).

immerses herself in American literature, hoping that reading will help her to better understand her new country. After Obinze recommends James Baldwin, she begins exploring for herself:

In those weeks she discovered the rows and rows of books with their leathery smell and their promise of pleasures unknown...she finally understood. She read the books on Obinze's list but also, randomly, pulled out book after book, reading a chapter before deciding which she would speed-read in the library and which she would check out. And as she read, America's mythologies began to take on meaning. America's tribalism- race, ideology, and region- became clear. And she was consoled by her new knowledge. (167)

The passage invites the American reader to consider these "mythologies" that guide contemporary culture and reveals the degree to which Ifemelu must educate herself in order to thrive in America. She begins to absorb the complexity of race, to challenge it, and to write about it herself, thereby opening a space to push against it. However, she also must experience it first-hand for the theoretical writing to become reality: she learns that she is supposed to be offended when people assume she likes watermelon and fried chicken (which she does). She learns that the term "half-caste" in America is offensive and she must say "biracial" instead. Even her failed relationships with Curt (white) and Blaine (African American) can be read as her attempt to understand "the question of race" in the United States (Hallemeier 240). As the novel opens, she is reading Jean Toomer's *Cane* while getting her hair, an indication that she considers her African American education to be unending.

African characters' racial education is broadened by the White Americans who often walk a tightrope between condescension and benevolent curiosity when they learn a given

character is African. They assume she comes from a primitive, disease-infested, impoverished home, that she does not speak English, that she has adopted Western dress recently, or that she will somehow be interested and consoled by the fact that the White American wants to visit Africa someday. The examples are endless, occurring numerous times in both the short stories and in *Americanah*. The title story of *The Thing Around Your Neck* is one of the best examples. Working as a waitress in a Connecticut restaurant, the narrator states that most patrons think she is Jamaican, “because they thought that every black person with a foreign accent was Jamaican” (119). When she corrects them, they tell her that “they loved elephants,” that they “wanted to go on a safari,” or that “they donated money to fight AIDS in Botswana” (119). She points out that “white people who liked Africa too much and those who liked Africa too little were the same—condescending” (120).

However, Adichie’s white characters, while often rude or offensive, are typically harmless. They “don’t get it,” but that does not waylay her protagonists’ journeys too often. Perhaps surprisingly, they are most often forgiven for their ignorance<sup>27</sup>. Adichie is careful to draw a distinction throughout her texts between characters who are perceived as “black” by peripheral white figures and those who are perceived as African or as immigrants. In other words, we see plenty of moments in which foreignness trumps blackness<sup>28</sup>. That is, despite the blog post in which Ifemelu begins, “Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to

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<sup>27</sup> In contrast, one of Adichie’s fellow contemporary Nigerian writers, Teju Cole, a self-identified Afro-pessimist, has produced much more searing indictments of white interest in African affairs. In a 2012 article published in *The Atlantic* entitled “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” he compiles a series of his own tweets in which he writes: “From Sachs to Kristof to Invisible Children to TED, the fastest growth industry in the US is the White Savior Industrial Complex. The white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening. The banality of evil transmutes into the banality of sentimentality. The world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm...Feverish worry over that awful African warlord. But close to 1.5 million Iraqis died from an American war of choice. Worry about that.”

<sup>28</sup> In their study of African and Afro-Caribbean university faculty, Josephine Beoku-Betts and Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi found that immigrant women of color were often preferred (by fellow faculty and students) over their African American counterparts because they were considered “less threatening...[they] preferred to deal with our ‘foreignness’ rather than our racialization in the United States” (118-119).

come to America, you become black. Stop arguing,” plenty of other characters relate how they are treated differently once a White American realizes they are not American-born (273). In the short story “Imitation,” Nkem recalls how her new white neighbors all stop over at some point to see if she needs help with anything, as “her accent, her foreignness, made her seem helpless to them” (24).

However, Adichie’s African characters also undertake the contentious relationship between Black Americans and Black non-Americans. African characters are disparaged for their lack of understanding of Black American culture, yet they also note how many American-born black people attempt a connection to Africa, or at least buy into a Pan-Africanist perspective. In one of her first college courses, Ifemelu quickly recognizes the racial gap between herself and the American-born black students. In her honors history seminar, her professor shows clips from the 1977 miniseries *Roots* to spark a discussion about historical representation in film. It quickly raises the issue of using the n-word in class. Another African student argues that it shouldn’t be removed from the film. After all, it is a word “that exists” and is used frequently in harmful ways. Ignoring or erasing the word in a text denies the pain it has caused many people for generations (169). Ifemelu adds that it’s “[not] always hurtful. I think it depends on the intent and also who is using it” (169). The African American students in the class emphatically disagree, calling Ifemelu’s perspective “nonsense,” stating that it is never permissible (169). The argument escalates until an African American student turns to the African student to say, “if you all hadn’t sold us, we wouldn’t be talking about any of this” (170).

Yet, Adichie’s characters also encounter Black Americans who enthusiastically explore their African roots. In “The Arrangers of Marriage,” Chinaza is forced to use her Anglicized name, Agnes, when her husband brings her to America. She meets an African American

neighbor who has changed her name to Nia, a Swahili name. Nia immediately identifies “Chinaza” as an Igbo name and shares that she spent “three fucking amazing years” in Tanzania, an experience that necessitated her own name change (180). The irony of the situation, that she must adopt an Anglicized, Christian name upon her arrival to America while her American-born neighbor adopts an African name after a recreational visit to Africa, is not lost on Chinaza. It also very quickly introduces her to the complicated relationship between African Americans and Africa, the pain felt on account of lost heritage and the (potentially) misguided ways that African American characters attempt a connection.

Similarly, several of Ifemelu’s classmates in *Americanah* identify as African despite being several generations removed; these students, Ifemelu is told, “are the ones who write poetry about Mother Africa and think every African is a Nubian queen,” and quick to say, “I am *originally* from Kenya” if you inquire about their origins (172). The unpredictability in regards to how Black Americans will respond to characters’ African identities establishes a consistent tension throughout Adichie’s works. Despite any similarities between them and assumptions from non-Black Americans, no Pan-Africanist bond can be formed between the wide spectrums of black characters in these texts because of the centuries of separation between them.

Because of the endlessly-complex racial minefield in America, the African characters sometimes seek solace in each other. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu joins the African Students Association, where she meets:

Nigerians, Ugandans, Kenyans, Ghanaians, South Africans, Tanzanians, Zimbabweans, one Congolese, and one Guinean...their different accents formed meshes of solacing sounds. They mimicked what Americans told them...And they themselves mocked

Africa, trading stories of absurdity, of stupidity...it was a mockery born of longing, and of the heartbroken desire to see a place made whole again. Here, Ifemelu felt a gentle swaying sense of renewal. Here, she did not have to explain herself. (170-1)

The passage echoes a reoccurring theme in the book: Ifemelu or her fellow immigrants do not necessarily find comfort only with their fellow countrymen and –women. In fact, Ifemelu is often harder on other Nigerians<sup>29</sup> and feels more relaxed around international students from other nations. But it is the shared experience of being different in America, of being from a vast and diverse continent that links the African students together. Ifemelu spends so much time in America explaining what it means to be African or what it means to be Black non-American, that she is comforted simply by the absence of explanation. Ifemelu’s relationship to other Africans in America as well as her disconnection from African Americans “captures the ‘messiness’ of black transnational identities in a world shaped by histories of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and globalization” (Blain 3).

Likewise, the solace of shared experience follows Ifemelu back to Nigeria in the form of her fellow returnees. Once resettled in Lagos, she is introduced to the Nigerpolitan Club, a group of Nigerians who have spent time abroad, mostly in America and England, and since returned. They enjoy the freedom to complain about small things in Lagos, reminisce about food in other countries, and simply talk with others who feel a bit unwelcome since their return. Ifemelu tells them she most misses, “low-fat soy milk, NPR [and] fast internet” while another says “good customer service” makes her want to return to America (502). Ifemelu comments on the “righteousness in her voice, in all their voices. They were the sanctified, the returnees, back

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<sup>29</sup> As Adichie cuttingly says near the beginning of “We Should All Be Feminists,” “Nigerians, as you might know, are very quick to give unsolicited *advice*” (9) (italics Adichie).

home with an extra gleaming layer” (502). And yet, they are unabashed in their “difference” while meeting together, as they do not need to explain anything or defend how they may have changed while they were away.

### Afropolitanism

One product or legacy of critical black female spectatorship is a resistance to the status quo, or the potential to move beyond finite theoretical borders. The oppositional gaze on a large scale allows the subject- and by extension, a people- to resist previous models of representation. We can see a resistance coming to fruition in recent critical attention to Afropolitanism, a localized and individualized offshoot of cosmopolitanism. The term “Afropolitanism” was first coined in Taiye Selasi’s 2005 article, “Bye Bye Babar” and was expanded upon by Achille Mbembe in a 2007 essay published in *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*. From there, the concept spread rapidly online, cementing its status as a digital-age product. At the most basic level, Afropolitans see themselves as global citizens, not necessarily tied to one region of Africa, similar to the ways in which cosmopolitans reject “loyalty” to one nation or culture. As Selasi states, the question “where are you from?” to an Afropolitan will elicit no single answer: “Home for them is many things: where their parents are from, where they go on vacation, where they went to school, where they see old friends, where they live (or live this year).” Likewise, Afropolitans embrace the possibility of movement, have abandoned victimhood as part of their self-perception, undermine national boundaries, and acknowledge migration as a “natural human phenomenon” (Pahl 76).

Some see Afropolitanism as a beneficial antidote to Afro-pessimism and insularity. Perhaps most importantly for my purposes here, adherents of Afropolitanism argue that it can be politically transformative, that it “does not merely praise the possibilities of globalization but more importantly examines persisting power differentials and injustices” (Pahl 74). Chielozona Eze argues that the term is the most inclusive of contemporary, globalized Africans, going on to state that it is a helpful new development since the traditional image of and language about Africans are anachronistic and historically incorrect (3).

Not all contemporary Africans see Afropolitanism through such rosy lenses. Critics consider Afropolitanism to be a product of upper-middle class privilege, a trend based on consumerism and commodification that is ultimately harmful to Africa as a whole. As Emma Dabiri states, “the danger of Afropolitanism becoming the voice of Africa can be likened to the criticisms leveled against second wave feminists who failed to identify their privilege as white and middle class while claiming to speak for all women. Because while we may all be Africans, there is a huge gap between my African experience and my father’s houseboys” (“Why I’m Not an Afropolitan”). Dabiri’s logic is easy to trace: the online Afropolitan Shop (tagline: “Love Africa”) sells everything from Africa-shaped earrings to purses called “Kente Slouch bags.” Likewise, *Afropolitan Magazine* boasts a description that oversimplifies the original intent of Afropolitanism in using the term to cover “all things African” or conflating it to simply stand in for Pan-Africanism:

The *Afropolitan* is a new multicultural and multidimensional magazine highlighting the heritage of African culture. The core audience target is the African diaspora and/or those of African origin...Our goal is to synchronize the multidimensional influences and

expressions of modern African culture...It is intended as a mirror and a link between Africa, Europe and the Americas.

Even more detrimental is the argument that Afropolitanism is the new “single story.” In other words, it has replaced Western colonial perceptions as the way in which Africa is painted in broad strokes (Dabiri). Critics like Emma Dabiri, Binyavanga Wainaina, and even Chimamanda Adichie have been vocal in an attempt to deny Afropolitanism the chance to become the main identifier of African culture. Adichie even argues that she is not Afropolitan, calling herself “African, happily so,” as if the two terms were strictly exclusive.

In reality, the attempt to accurately define Afropolitanism is problematic. In short, Afropolitanism has risen out of globalization, the internet, and a younger, postcolonial African generation. Like some of the characteristics of post-immigrant work, it too resists both classifications of the past and easy binaries. While Afropolitanism is an early twenty-first century production and is not guaranteed to have a lasting influence, its popularity reflects the disruption of previous codified modes of cultural translation. There is a hunger to redefine boundaries within contemporary literature and culture and a post-immigration framework is one way to harness that need.

Given this context, and the temporal intersection of Afropolitanism and the Third Generation of Nigerian writers, it's impossible to avoid examining Adichie's work through the lens of Afropolitanism. Do her characters, particularly Ifemelu and Obinze, fit the description above? Is *Americanah* a product of Afropolitanism despite Adichie's protest that she does not adhere to its philosophies? Obinze exudes Afropolitanism from the start of the narrative, especially prior to his deportation from England, although Ifemelu becomes more Afropolitan in

the end. As a younger man, Obinze is obsessed with American culture, reading only American literature “because America is the future” (84). He imagines himself, “walking the streets of Harlem, discussing the merits of Mark Twain with his American friends, gazing at Mount Rushmore” (288). He views a move to the U.S. as the ultimate sign of progress, whereas Ifemelu leaves strictly for her college education. Rather than the initial passion that Obinze shows on her behalf, her new surroundings “subdue” her (135). Obinze’s failure to obtain a legal visa and his subsequent rude awakening in England leave him jaded with the process, if not more conscious of his African identity. He develops an appreciation for Nigerian culture grounded in reality, not in fantasy.

Ifemelu becomes Afropolitan in that she slowly cultivates her African identity as she develops her American one. While she comes to appreciate conveniences of America and find friends and community, she bristles at small things that chip away at her Africanness, such as when someone on the phone tells her, “You sound totally American,” and she replies, “Thank you” (215). Her blog, after all, is based upon astute observations of the ways in which identity is perceived and how it translates across various borders. She ultimately returns to Lagos not because she has to but because she desires a reconnection with her culture, family, and city. However uncomfortable, she attempts to blend her Nigerian American lives in ways very similar to the philosophies espoused by Afropolitanism: she is of Africa but does not solely define herself as African. “Home” for her becomes complicated.

While their narratives embrace certain aspects of Afropolitanism, Ifemelu and Obinze reflect the class-based criticism of the movement as well. After all, if Ifemelu and Obinze are Afropolitans, in words and/or deeds, it may be because they both enjoy certain upper-class privileges. Ifemelu makes the trip to America as a college student, while Obinze is raised by

proto-Afropolitan parents who are educated abroad and expose him to international tastes. They are privileged just enough to become fully cognizant of their national identities and their understanding of how Africanness is developed outside of the continent. Just as one character in the short story “On Monday of Last Week” posits that American parents’ anxieties about their children come from a place of privilege (“it all came from having too much food: a sated belly gave Americans time to worry”), Ifemelu and Obinze develop a recognition of their “place” on account of their privilege (82).

This is not to imply that their Afropolitanism is particularly “bad.” Indeed, one of the dangers of debating terms and trends like Afropolitanism or cosmopolitanism is that they inadvertently introduce new binaries in an attempt to circumvent old ones. Adherents and opponents of Afropolitanism argue: Is it helpful or harmful to our national identity? Do we want to be identified as such? Does it paint me positively or negatively? What we can gain from the above exploration identifying Ifemelu and Obinze as Afropolitans is that labels or classification are merely one more manifestation of the multifaceted post-immigrant identity. Contemporary immigrant literature and its characters are becoming less definable according to existing modes of identification; the possibilities for new identities and new definitions are expanding.

## Conclusion

The opening quote in this chapter, “[i]t was there I learned I was not a person from my country, not from my families. I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song- all of it cooked together in the color of my skin,” suggests that erasing individuality leads to dehumanization. The quote comes near the end of Toni Morrison’s neo-

slave narrative *A Mercy* (2009), from an enslaved African woman recounting the experience of her first days in America. While I am not equating the experience of immigration with that of American slavery, the erasure of culture and nationality due to skin color echoes throughout Adichie's work. Post-immigrant literature calls for a reconstruction of homogenizing labels. Adichie's work in particular asks for a reconsideration of what we mean when we use the term "black" (Blain 2). As bell hooks states, spectatorship "emerges as a site of resistance only when *individual* black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking" (279) (italics mine). I argue here that post-immigrant literature has the task of separating the strands of the single story: each traveler, wanderer, commuter, or migrant has a particular path for what he/she hopes to achieve. They are able to shed their national belonging- should they choose to- because they develop the agency to self-fashion new identities as they see fit. Adichie's characters resist assimilation or an expectation of conforming to certain standards of American racial behavior through observation. In other words, (re)turning the gaze has reshaped the lens of the immigrant narrative; the characters present "the expectations of the observer and the experience of the witness" (Row).

In addressing the topics of race, nationality, gender and home in her novels, short stories and essays, Adichie reverses the immigrant's position: rather than learning to play the foreigner in new nations, her characters learn how Americans create otherness as a matter of course. At the same time, these characters call attention to the otherness of Americans in the global community. Adichie's work does not so much speak *to* America about present-day African life but instead speaks *of* America to "better articulate a desirable Nigerian future" (Hallemeier 235). In a post-immigrant reality, America becomes objectified in place of the immigrant. The fluidity of movement and the (potential) impermanence of residency provide the critical space for

immigrant characters to both challenge conceptions about the nation's attitude toward foreignness but also to fashion their own identities as profound, even subversive.

## Conclusion: The Future of Post-Immigrant Literature

### Article 15

1. Everyone has the right to a nationality.
2. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

~Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1947

This dissertation set out to analyze what the genre of immigrant literature looks like in twenty-first century America and how that differs from the entirety of its genealogy. More significantly, it attempts to address *why* we should recognize these works as a potentially-connected subgenre. In surveying the recent work of four authors, all of whom are immigrants to the United States and write about the immigrant experience, I have argued that we are experiencing a wave of post-immigrant literature, and previous rules do not have to apply. After all, official definitions of “immigrant” make reference to settlement and permanent residency<sup>30</sup>; if that alone has changed, then “immigrant literature” is no longer a useful classification (OED). Similarly, I include the quote at the beginning of this conclusion for two reasons: it reminds us that the definition of “nationality” has transformed since 1947, but it also signifies what is at stake in my discussion here. Immigrant literature, and the actual people(s) it represents, celebrates the basic human rights of mobility and transformation. The characters in these texts

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<sup>30</sup> Earliest reference: “a going to dwell” in 1658. Presenting, it is defined as “entrance into a country for the purpose of settling there.”

shed, adopt, reject, or amass national identities at will. The post-immigrant text provides them the freedom to do so.

Post-immigrant literature departs from preceding generations by offering options to its characters, empowering the subject, making the invisible visible, creating space for more voices, and disrupting traditional binaries, expectations or assumptions. In these four chapters, I have mentioned several concepts that, while very diverse in their parameters, seem to agree upon a new generation of immigrant or national writing: transmigration, Nigerian “Third Generation” writing, post-Celtic Tiger literature, the neo-immigrant, cosmopolitanism, Afropolitanism, etc. They are far-reaching in their respective scopes but identify the late twentieth/early twenty-first century era as a turning point in how we view migratory writing and identity. And yet, I want to clarify that migration in post-immigrant texts is not uninhibited altogether; migrants are not free-wheeling and unencumbered, destined for utopia. As we’ve seen, they experience anxiety and feelings of severance and hardship. However, despite the doubt or hesitance or challenges in their journeys, there is *possibility*. As Sally Dalton-Brown states, in their “courageous acceptance of chance and disconnection lies the freedom of the inbetween” (342).

In making a case for post-immigrant literary characteristics, I acknowledge that my list is incomplete and that more research from diverse voices of scholarship will need to come forward over the next several years to fill some gaps. But as I have explained above, literary scholars, social scientists, and others agree that new language should address contemporary patterns and challenges of immigration. For example, I recently came across an interview of Australian novelist Christos Tsoilkas in which the interviewer asked him “what he thinks of the fight raging in the British press over whether the people flooding out of Syria are more properly termed ‘migrants’ or ‘refugee.’” Tsoilkas simply replies, “Let’s just call it a movement of people

desiring home. That's what it is" (Scutts). A very public discussion of what to "call" people in movement in the twenty-first century is part of what drives my research. However, I would conclude by stating that the terminology is secondary to a further examination of why a shift has occurred in the past couple of decades. The "break" in tradition can be traced, as I argue here, but it is not a hard line. It's complex, gradual and evolving.

Future research in the field of contemporary or twenty-first century immigrant literature must accomplish several things: first, it should attempt to harness the influx of literature that could be considered post-immigrant. Presently, publishers frequently churn out migration narratives, both fiction and non-fiction. Since the time I began writing this dissertation, I have lamented the fact that I could not include new novels like Jade Chang's *The Wangs vs. The World*, Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*, or Lara Vapnyar's *Still Here*. In particular, all three of these examples also intersect with the burgeoning genre of Great Recession literature. The immigrant narrative in America in the last decade is becoming explicitly connected to the economic circumstances that characters encounter or must survive. Second, new scholarship should interrogate how the production of new cultural material requires/will require new frameworks. As noted here, previous frameworks for understanding immigrant literature are antiquated. Even more recent concepts such as cosmopolitanism do not sufficiently meet current needs.

The form of the narrative itself is also in flux. The field of post-immigrant literature is embracing other territories like magical realism. For example, the usage of portal doors in the 2017 novel *Exit West* to symbolize refugee passage (without a lot of further commentary beyond their existence), is quite imaginative. The novel more aggressively identifies the constructedness

of home and location for new immigrants. Additionally, it raises the question of the general nature of movement. Books like *Exit West*, which play with space and time, allow us to expand upon the meaning of migration. One might even compare what *Exit West* is doing to what *Kindred* did for the genre of the neo-slave narrative. I look forward to the near future of post-immigrant writing, which I anticipate will continue to reconstruct narrative techniques and themes that address the unique nature of the subject material.

Additionally, future scholarship should be careful to not neglect a thorough dialogue about authorial representation. While I did not participate in the debate regarding cultural appropriation in the preceding chapters and only analyzed authors writing about their own nations and people of origin, a larger interrogation of authorship is necessary to flesh out the ideas of post-immigrant literature. The question will become: who is writing post-immigrant literature? How do we distinguish parameters for inclusion? Finally, there is danger in reducing literary characters to one dimension, particularly when immigration narratives are either non-fictional or are drawn from life experiences. One particular danger lies in reducing the migrant experience to metaphor: Krishnaswamy writes about “migrancy” as a metaphorical tool that “de-materializes the migrant into an abstract idea” (132). I’ve seen this manifested through my research as a mounting tension between theorizing changes in the portrayal of immigration and the human experience itself.

In *The Wangs vs. The World*, the immigrant patriarch, Charles Wang, meditates on his immigrant past after returning to China for the first time in years:

...he remembered a discussion he’s had with Nash once, soon after his friend had taken on a senior seminar populated mostly by second-generation Chinese immigrants. Nash

had explained his students' complicated relationship to the country their parents had left behind, finally convincing Charles that not everyone saw the world as simply and clearly as he did. For Nash's students, there were many Chinas. There was the China that was against the world, the China that was the Communist government. The China that existed briefly in Taiwan...And as many Chinas as there were, there were as many Charleses as well. Every immigrant is the person he might have been and the person he is, and his homeland is at once the place it would have been to him from the inside and the place it must be to him from the outside. All of that was academic bullshit. (298)

As this passage demonstrates, post-immigrant writers, like Jade Chang, are becoming more vocal in calling out academic discourse. A book like *Exit West* is a gratifying read, entertaining and well-written...but reading a book about migration set in an unnamed Middle-Eastern country during the (real-life) largest historical migration on human record leaves a different mark. Immigrant literature, in other words, should never exist in a vacuum. I wrote in the Introduction that turn-of-the-twentieth century literature had specific purposes (according to Charles Fanning). But I staunchly believe that every bit of immigrant literature serves a purpose.

With a list of limitations, I must also include my own. Having spent a great deal of time on this research, I hope the previous chapters capture the complexity of contemporary immigrant literature. And yet, despite my research, I am cognizant of the fact that I write this from a position outside of immigration. I am economically-comfortable and well-educated, brought up in a suburban environment by white parents descendent from early twentieth-century European immigrants. As new and terrible immigration restrictions and deportations have suddenly increased, I have watched and read the news sadly, all the while recognizing that it would not

directly affect my own situation. My position of observation, while safe, is difficult to reconcile. Likewise, the scholarship I researched and integrated into these pages has been published in English, my primary language.

In concluding here, at the risk of sounding a bit idealistic, I would like to take a moment to return to Kwame Anthony Appiah's conceptualization of cosmopolitanism. In his book he remarks at one point that fine art does not necessarily belong solely to the place in which it is produced. In other words, we have no way to isolate art or the artist; if so, the art produced would in no way resemble what we currently enjoy because the artist would not fall under the many influences he or she naturally encounters during the creation process. As Appiah explains, "much of the greatest art is flamboyantly international; much ignores nationality altogether" (126). While I have examined texts in my four chapters that exist as an expression of their authors' global movement, I hope my analyses extend beyond four authors and ten books. A more nuanced understanding of the place of immigrant literature and the ways in which it reflects international artistry is and will continue to be a significant facet of English studies, not only in terms of exposing readers, critics, and scholars to new voices but also in providing space for the immigrant voice to be heard by all.

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## Curriculum Vitae

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#### EDUCATION

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Ph.D. in English	2012-2017
University of Louisville M.A. in English Honors: Graduated summa cum laude	2006-2008
University of Dayton B.A. in American Studies Honors: Graduated magna cum laude, John W. Berry Scholar	2002-06

#### AWARDS/GRANTS

UWM First Year Student Success Award	2013
UWM First Year Student Success Award	2012
Best-of-section winner, KPA conference	2007
Learn, Lead, and Serve Award, University of Dayton	2005
Patricia Labadie Writing Award, University of Dayton	2005

#### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Instructor- College Research Writing	2012-present
Instructor- English Composition	2012-present
Instructor- Intro to English Studies	2013-2014
Instructor- Irish American Literature	2015
Newberry Library, Chicago Instructor- Neo-Slave Narrative Seminar	2016
Instructor- Irish Diaspora Seminar	2013
University of Louisville Instructor- English Composition 101 and 102	2007-08
Consultant- University Writing Center	2006-07
University of Dayton Teaching Assistant- Introduction to the University	2004-2005

## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Educational Testing Service AP English Language Exam Scorer	2014-present
Chicago Jesuit Academy College Persistence Volunteer Assist in summer programs to help graduating seniors prepare for college	2013-present
Erie Neighborhood House Volunteer ESL Tutor	2013-2015
Irish American Heritage Center Cultural Program Manager/Volunteer Planned and developed cultural programming, provided logistical support for major events and cultural activities.	2009-2011/2011-2015

## SUBMITTED PUBLICATIONS

- “Scoring Fairly in Advanced Placement Writing: Addressing Students Who Fall Through the Cracks”  
Submitted to *The Journal of Writing Assessment*
- “How to Practice Irishness: Hyphenated Identity at Irish American Cultural Centers”  
Submitted to *Quarterly Horse, A Journal of American Studies*

## CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- “*The Border State of Junot Diaz*”  
Paper presented at the annual Midwest MLA conference 2016
- “*Colum McCann and the Irish Wanderers*”  
Paper presented at the annual American Conference for Irish Studies 2016
- “*Passing, Crossing, Twinning in Puddn’head Wilson*”  
Paper presented at the annual Midwest MLA conference 2014
- “*Pound for Pound: The New Negro and Economic Agency*”  
Paper presented at the annual Midwest MLA conference 2013
- “*Living Irish: The Identity Crisis of Irish American Cultural Centers*”  
Paper presented at the annual American Conference for Irish Studies 2013
- “*‘Make [him] black and bid him sing’: Othello’s African Americanization*”

Paper presented at the annual Midwest MLA conference	2010
<i>“Mass Weapons of Destruction: The Riot in Black America and Northern Ireland”</i> Paper presented at the annual AEGIS conference	2008
<i>“The Heartbroken Island”</i> : <i>Seventeenth Century Ireland’s Dreams of Violent Utopia</i> Paper presented at the annual Kentucky Philological Association conference	2007

**PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

Irish American Heritage Center	2008-present
American Conference for Irish Studies	2008-present
Midwest Modern Language Association	2010-present
NAACP	2010-present
Modern Language Association	2013-present