

Washington University in St. Louis

Washington University Open Scholarship

All Theses and Dissertations (ETDs)

January 2011

And Others: Pursuit of Individuality in Minority Creative Expression 1984 - Present

Michelle Thomas

Washington University in St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Thomas, Michelle, "And Others: Pursuit of Individuality in Minority Creative Expression 1984 - Present" (2011). *All Theses and Dissertations (ETDs)*. 490.

<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/etd/490>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses and Dissertations (ETDs) by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.



WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

University College

Liberal Arts

AND OTHERS

PURSUIT OF INDIVIDUALITY IN MINORITY CREATIVE EXPRESSION

1984 — PRESENT

by

Michelle Sindha Thomas

A thesis presented to the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
degree of Master of Liberal Arts

May 2011

Saint Louis, Missouri

Copyright by
Michelle Sindha Thomas
2011

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to Professor Lutz Koepnick, my thesis director, an incredibly intuitive, kind, and gentle man and the most intelligent mentor I have ever known. Thank you to my thesis defense committee members, Professor Marvin Marcus and Professor Henry Schvey, for taking notice of my work, even during a terrible period in my life, and urging me to aim high.

Thanks to my students, especially the A231 gang.

Thank you, librarians Patty Swalley and Jennifer Darnell.

Thanks to the Hanley & Wydown Starbucks in Clayton managed by Aaron Thomas; specifically Steve Wolfe, Kathleen McClellan, Aladrian Ward, Rebecca Chin, and Rebecca Chaffin for keeping me entertained, encouraged, and nourished with dipped madeleines, green tea, oatmeal with all the toppings, and chai to remind me of my spicy roots.

For all the conversations, thank you tea buddies, Codi Mouser, Ahad Hosseini, Carlos Ruiz-Avila, Onyoo Kim, and especially Luke “Amos” for making me explain myself. Thank you for listening: Barbara Rumph, Felicia Finley, Hank Halpin, Dr. Pam Nickels, Dr. Shrinivas Chilakammari, Janice Jaeger, Karen and Tom Quinn.

Thanks to Baby for her chops and Sosa for her charm. Thank you, Papa, for your sense of justice, and Witty Thangam for your badam and pista brains.

Thanks always to Little Darling—oh, how she cares.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgements..... | i |
| List of Illustrations..... | iii |
| And Others: Pursuit of Individuality in Minority Creative Expression..... | 1 |
| <i>Self Representation: The Artist’s Purpose</i> | 4 |
| <i>Self-Portraiture: The Künstlerroman</i> | 6 |
| <i>Self-Assembly: The Nature of Artistic Awareness</i> | 9 |
| <i>Self-Styling: Modes of Expression</i> | 10 |
| <i>The Media Blitz</i> | 19 |
| <i>On the “Native Informer”: A Consideration of Audience</i> | 24 |
| <i>American History and Other Stories</i> | 27 |
| La Poética of Space: <i>The House on Mango Street</i> by Sandra Cisneros..... | 31 |
| <i>Wrestling la Madonna: Individuation of the Protagonist</i> | 38 |
| <i>ZeZe the X: The Great American Tomboy</i> <i>Cisneros’s Contribution to the Western Canon</i> | 42 |
| And Other Stories: Jhumpa Lahiri beyond the “Immigrant Experience”..... | 49 |
| <i>Jhumpa Lahiri: An Interpreter of Maladies</i> | 55 |
| <i>Migration + Displacement = Cosmopolitanism:</i> <i>The Next-Generation Great American Novel</i> | 63 |
| <i>Hema & Kaushik: Jhumpa Lahiri’s Pensive Wanderers</i> | 72 |
| Un GhettoNerd in New Jersey: The Ethnographer’s Quandary..... | 80 |
| <i>Case Study: Junot Díaz</i> | 85 |
| <i>“The Beauty! The Beauty!” The Transformation of the Great American</i> <i>‘Ethnic Fall Guy’ to Wondrously Tragic Hero</i> | 90 |
| Conclusion: “In the American Society”..... | 109 |
| <i>Prejudice is Natural! Gasp!</i> | 109 |
| <i>Towards Cosmopolitanism: The Big House</i> | 111 |
| Works Cited | 118 |

List of Illustrations

- 1 Colson Whitehead
Roy, Norman Jean. 2011. *Vogue* Mar. 2011: 240. Print.
 - 2 *Sag Harbor* book jacket
Morford, Tracy (photographer) and Rodrigo Corral (designer). 2009. *Sag Harbor: A Novel* by Colson Whitehead. New York: Doubleday, 2009. Print.
 - 3 Gish Jen
The Harvard Crimson. *Thecrimson.com*. 4 June 2002. Web. 30 Mar. 2011.
 - 4 Jenny Lumet
Leibovitz, Annie. 2009. *Vogue* Aug. 2010: 146. Print.
 - 5 Sandra Oh with Isaiah Washington
Desmond, Michael. 2006. Screenshot. "Tell Me Sweet Little Lies." *Gray's Anatomy* 22 Jan. 2006. ABC Television Network. *Abc.com*. Web. 9 Apr. 2011.
 - 6 Maya Arulpragasam (M.I.A.)
van Lamsweerde, Inez and Vinoodh Matadin. 2009. *Vogue* Jan. 2010: 120. Print.
 - 7 Sandra Cisneros
Guzmán, Rubén. *Caramelo or Puro Cuento: A Novel* by Sandra Cisneros. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. Print.
 - 8 Jhumpa Lahri.
May 2008. Books to the Ceiling. *Robertarood.files.wordpress.com*. Web. 9 Apr. 2011.
 - 9 *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* book jacket
Corral, Rodrigo. 2007. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao: A Novel* by Junot Díaz. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. Print.
 - 10 Amy Tan
Boyd, Pat. 2008. *7x7 San Francisco* Sep. 2008: 168. Print.
 - 11 Teeth
Thomas, Nirmala Thangam. 1991.
- Cover: Self
Thomas, Michelle Sindha. 2005. Silkscreen and watercolor, 5 x 3 in.

Table

- 1 2010 U.S. Census Report of Racial Distribution in Most Populous States
U.S. Census Bureau. *Census.gov*. 25 Mar. 2011. Web. 9 Apr. 2011.

Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin. I am proud of my humanity when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own. Let me feel with unalloyed gladness that all the great glories of man are mine.

Rabindranath Tagore

It was a place deep down south. The place is not even in the U.S. It is in a country called Haiti. Haiti is where my whole family is from, but not me.

My mom and dad are from Haiti. That is where they were born and raised. They did not know each other until they moved to the U.S.A. Then they met and got married. They are still together. Then they made my brother in 1993. Two years later, they made me, 1995. They've been living here for about thirty years now. We are not the only family that was born here. There are a lot from around the world. My dad's name is Albert Bayard, that is where I got the Al in my name. My mom's name is Maslay. People in my family say I look just like her.

There are a lot of times that people come and ask us about our family. Like where did we come from. It is a really nice way to start up a conversation. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad.

I think that is all there is to know about our family history.

Al-Kenny Bayard, age 14, "Haiti Family"

And Others
Pursuit of Individuality in Minority Creative Expression

I come from a long line of spoiled brats, sweet Indian princesses soaked in unconditional love and regard. I might have carried on this legacy of distinction and grace.

No. When my parents chose to raise me in America, the spell was broken. I am the Other. I do not take one step without a furtive glance around for approval.

All the while, I am writing.

“This is the ‘Other,’” writes Eleanor Heartney in her Tate Gallery text, *Postmodernism*, “A word that seems simple but is in fact heavily weighed down with conceptual and linguistic complexities. Like postmodernism itself, the Other is a thing that only exists in relation to something else. It has no independent essence.” Most importantly, most excitingly, she details its vocation—“The Other must operate as a saboteur, continually undermining the effort to install any group or philosophy as the privileged purveyor of truth and reality” (51).

Special interest in the “Other story” was sparked in 1984 by an exhibition at MoMA New York. Calling the show *‘Primitivism’ in the 20th Century*, curators intended to demonstrate how traditional African art influenced early modernism. They maintained the long-established perspective of the non-Western artist that Heartney describes: “To be Other is to be considered less than the male and less than the individual of white European heritage. The Other is viewed as marginal, a sideshow in the grand narrative of world history” (65). Critics took issue with the hierarchy implied by pairing anonymous, even unlabelled artifacts against carefully documented paintings by artists of Western

heritage. They denounced MoMA for retaining colonialist, Eurocentric values in the 20th century, for upholding Joseph Conrad's notion that by conquering the dark, savage heart of the African, civilized man may confront his own primal urges and go on to reinvent Western artistic expression! Heartney records artists and critics calling for a different approach to art outside the Western tradition as they began to advocate the ideal of multiculturalism.

That same year, Sandra Cisneros published *The House on Mango Street*, a "greatly admired novel," its book jacket proclaims, "of a young girl growing up in the Latino section of Chicago." As if Chicago has only one Latino section and Cisneros decided to take its pulse.

While improved from the schema in which Other histories were customarily noted only at the intersection where they met Western history, Heartney marks failings in the interpretations of multicultural art, some of which persist even today. She writes:

Underlying the fascination with multiculturalism was the tendency to equate the modern with the Western and to deliberately avoid expressions associated with either. As artists came to be categorized by race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, an unspoken demand arose that they must speak for their group and for a certain vision of anti-modernism. But as critics of multiculturalism were quick to point out, these expectations merely reinforced the differences that modernism had asserted to justify the West's dominant position. Like the essentialist position that embraced women's designation as representative of nature, emotion and body, multiculturalism appeared to accept non-Western cultures as purveyors of spirituality, instinct and the irrational (68).

Back to square one. The demand for "authenticity" also overlooks the influence of transplantation, immigration, and increasing populations of first, second, and third generation American artists who are detached from ethnic roots yet expected to perform anthems of foreign allegiance. Ivo Duchacek writes of the extended dangers of categorization based on nationality which emphasizes difference and encourages conflict: "Nationalism divides humanity into mutually intolerant units. As a result people think as Americans, Russians, Chinese, Egyptians, or Peruvians first, and as human beings

second—if at all” (qtd. in “Prejudice and Discrimination” 5). The assignment to depict a cultural history pigeonholes artists, requiring them to adopt a defensive tone and participate in the war of “us” versus “them.” In her debut novel, *When the Emperor Was Divine*, Julie Otsuka details the horrors of Japanese internment and concludes with the direct address of a forced confession:

Who am I? You know who I am. Or you think you do. I’m your florist. I’m your grocer. I’m your porter. I’m your waiter. I’m the owner of the dry-goods store on the corner of Elm. I’m the shoeshine boy. I’m the judo teacher. I’m the Buddhist priest. I’m the Shinto priest. I’m the Right Reverend Yoshimoto. *So please to meet you.* I’m the general manager at Mitsubishi. I’m the dishwasher at the Golden Pagoda. I’m the janitor at the Claremont Hotel. I’m the laundryman. I’m the nurseryman. I’m the fisherman. I’m the ranch hand. I’m the farm hand. I’m the peach picker. I’m the pear picker. I’m the lettuce packer. I’m the oyster planter. I’m the cannery worker. I’m the chicken sexer. *And I know a healthy young rooster when I see one!* I’m the grinning fat man in the straw hat selling strawberries by the side of the road. I’m the president of the Cherry Blossom Society. I’m the secretary of the Haiku Association. I’m a card-carrying member of the Bonsai Club. *Such a delightful little people! Everything so small and pretty!* I’m the one you call Jap. I’m the one you call Nip. I’m the one you call Slits. I’m the one you call Slopes. I’m the one you call Yellowbelly. I’m the one you call Gook. I’m the one you don’t see at all—we all look alike (142-143).

The speaker directs his burst of rage at an assumed white reader with a long held dominant position in American society. Any other sort of reader becomes a mere observer of this exchange, once again sidelined, the Other.

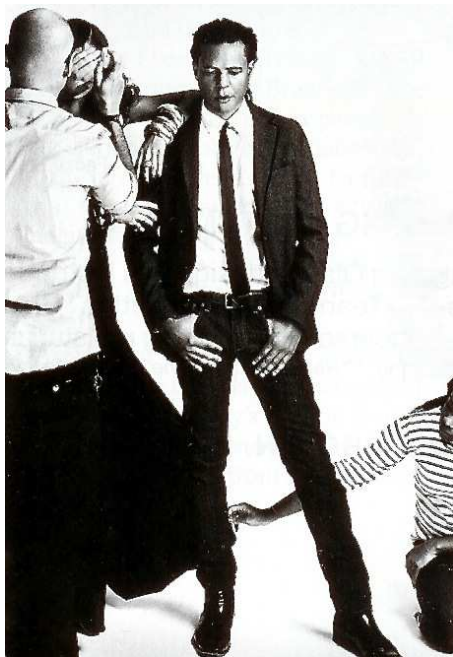


Figure 1 Colson Whitehead

Despite a presence in the United States that predates the very institution, individuals of Native American and African heritage are especially expected to smile, shine shoes, catch dreams, and play the adorable Other. Colson Whitehead treats the situation with humor in his semi-autobiographical novel, *Sag Harbor*:

There has been far too little research done in the area of what drives white people to touch black hair. What are the origins of the strange compulsion that forces them to reach out to smooth, squeeze, pet, pat, bounce their fingers in the soft, resilient exuberance of an Afro, a natural, a just-doin’-its-

own-thing jumble of black hair? It's only hair—but try telling that to that specimen eyeing a seductive bonbon of black locks, as the sweat beads on their forehead and they tremble with the intensity of restraint, their fingers locked in a fist in their pocket: I cannot touch it, but I must. A black-hair fondler has a few favorite questions that they like to ask when they fondle. 'How do you comb it?' 'How do you make it do that?' 'How do you wash it?' (94-95).

While Whitehead regards the matter lightheartedly in the passage above, his protagonist laments the weight of representation, speaking for himself and his friends when he says, “We were made to think of ourselves as odd birds, right? According to the world, we were the definition of paradox: black boys with beach houses. A paradox to the outside, but it never occurred to us that there was anything strange about it. It was simply who we were” (57). He continues, almost bitterly, “We were on display [. . .] We were people, not performance artists, all appearances to the contrary” (88).

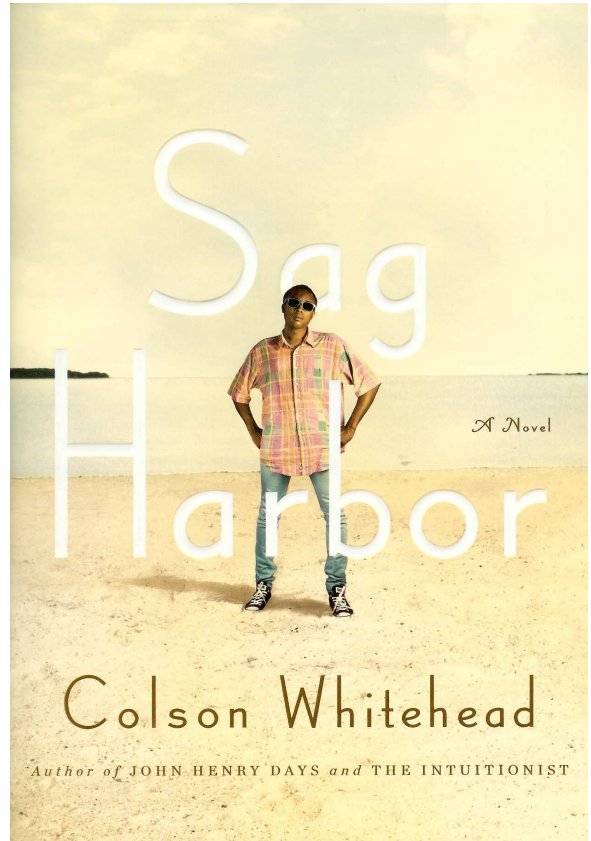


Figure 2 *Sag Harbor* book jacket

Self Representation The Artist's Purpose

Postmodern discussion of identity politics places immense burden on artists from minority backgrounds, expecting them to serve as representatives or advocates for entire marginal groups. Multiculturalist analysis, with its stress on performative declarations of ethnicity, often suggests that the artist has no purpose apart from his role as ethnic

specimen—an implication severely limiting the artist’s expressive individuality. Amy

Tan addresses this tendency, writing:

I am alarmed when reviewers and educators assume that my very personal, specific, and fictional stories are meant to be representative, down to the smallest detail, of not just Chinese-Americans but sometimes all Asian culture. Is Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* supposed to be representative of all American culture? Do all American daughters serve their tyrannical fathers the same breakfast every morning? Do all sisters betray each other? [. . .] Why do readers and reviewers assume that a book with Chinese-American characters can encompass all the demographics and personal histories of Chinese America? (305).

Creative production by minorities must be analyzed by revised critical frameworks so that artists are valued for more than general service as purveyors of cultural experience, but for individual perspectives, insights, and contributions. While racial categorization serves valid function—an artist’s culture speaks through his work—a consideration of ‘ethnic art’ beyond this essentialist designation allows it to unfold as more than a guide to the exotic. It elicits personal engagement, bringing the peripheral figure to the center of what it means to communicate as an artist.

Ellen Dissayanake defines art making as a psychological survival strategy that enables humans to express and publish personal values and to communicate the nuances of physical and social realities (Anderson 143). An artist’s ability to interpret diverse influences lends originality to his work, as Tom Anderson writes, “Creativity is fostered by cross-cultural, intercultural, cross-generational, multi-faceted material. The more viewpoints one has, the more creative one can be” (66). The practicable, innovative individualism that evolves from these handpicked choices may be interpreted as ethnic standard or cultural dilution—labels devastating for the artist seeking recognition for original voice and vision. Contextualization that prioritizes political effectiveness over creative authenticity must not continue as a primary critical classification if aesthetic statements by marginalized artists are to receive due merit.

The following paper addresses the specific production of the American educated outside the historical continuum of ethnic heritage and reared on media communications potentially damaging to a sense of cultural self. An interdisciplinary collection of products by minorities are surveyed with an original strategy of psychological criticism with emphasis on growth and development. A description of each artifact precedes analysis of artistic choices, interpretation of thematic content, and evaluation of the artist's particular contribution to an understanding of universal themes of emotional striving.

The works addressed include *The House on Mango Street*, *Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz. The artists selected for study earn critical acclaim, receive the attention of mass audiences, and have begun entering mainstream educational canons—their far-reaching influence setting them apart from similarly talented peers. Their writing also directly contains a negotiation of identity with an aim toward fulfillment of psychological needs. These are not cultural artifacts, the production of artisans who replicate traditional forms with the purpose of preserving a cultural stamp, but rather the expressions of contemporary authors who assert their individuality in masterworks of artistic originality.

Self-Portraiture
The Künstlerroman

The fiction writing considered here follows the form of the *künstlerroman*, literally translated from German to English as the “artist novel.” The *künstlerroman* follows the development of an individual from their first visionary inclinations and throbbings of rebellion to full artistic voice. The form originated during the eighteenth century Romantic Movement in Germany, when writers inspired by Goethe turned away

from the rationalism of the Enlightenment and sought freedom of expression in art.

Goethe advocated writing as a means of personal reflection with the purpose of exploring the emotional landscape rather than delivering concrete, final-word declarations. Goethe wrote *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, the prototypical *künstlerroman*: Disillusioned by the soul-sapping options life offers him, Wilhelm nixes it all by living according to his own standards and eventually becoming a playwright. Over the next century, the tenets of Romanticism and with them the *künstlerroman* form appeared in the English language, influencing Alfred Lord Tennyson, Kate Chopin, and James Joyce. Where the hero of a traditional *bildungsroman* (novel of development) tempers his big dreams and finds a respectable place for himself in adult society, as he ascends the *künstlerroman* protagonist generally rejects the society which stifled him, carving a specialized place for himself in the liberal art world. If that effort meets failure, as in the case of Chopin's *Edna Pontellier*, the artist often prefers suicide to a return to mediocrity.

The *künstlerroman* maintains a life beyond the Romantic Period, and a writer today may utilize the form early in his career to share his concerns about establishing himself as an artist and maintaining authentic voice despite external pressure. Doubly marginalized by birth culture and unconventional life choices, Junot Díaz relates his personal struggle to succeed through an aspiring writer named Yunior, the narrator of both of his major works. The inner turmoil of the artist offers him one of two choices: he may isolate himself in an ivory tower dedicated to his work or, associating art with experience, he may spend his life deeply engaged in making waves, changing the course of history, and aiding others toward self-fulfillment. Gish Jen, for example, explains her motivation for leading a writing workshop at Harvard, where she often felt unsupported

as a student. She tells *The Harvard Crimson*, “Basically, I’m offering the sort of class I wish I had taken when I was here” (Ganguli, “Literary Voice”).



Figure 3 Gish Jen

The “artist novel” mirrors the “immigrant novel” genre in its

description of the outsider’s struggle to understand and define himself, yet its very specificity makes it far more useful for purposes of literary criticism. The “immigrant novel” suggests narrative based on the movement of peoples and the standard human reaction to a new environment. The *künstlerroman* does not aim to illustrate the experience of multitudes, but rather narrows focus to a single archetype, the artist, a sensitive being who feels impelled to name every subtlety of feeling and to create.

The authors examined here have each written works in *künstlerroman* form, each defining his individual vision of what it means to be human and how we are to live in the world. They may also be grouped for creating extremely confused, conflicted characters that face not only the *künstlerroman* protagonist’s situation of social alienation, but also the contradictory restrictions and standards imposed on them by two or more cultural influences. In *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri an aspiring architect of Indian American heritage attempts to draw the Taj Mahal, but “The building’s grace eludes him and he throws his attempt away. Instead he immerses himself in the guidebook” (85). Incapable of grasping the ancestral homeland with his limited cultural experience, he must rely on the guidebook to lead him. Characters make sense of external traffic while addressing

deeply important, philosophical and personal questions which are, universally, the raw materials of great art. Concern with these great questions characterize the literary fiction included here as artist novels rather than broad cultural studies. Julian Olivares warns against an easy tendency, “that of viewing minority literatures as sociology or anthropology instead of reading them as literature.” He says, “A book such as *The House on Mango Street* is fundamentally a work of art. It is not ‘art for art’s sake,’ however, but an aesthetic expression of the writer’s personal and social concerns” (“Entering”). In her memoir, *The Opposite of Fate*, Amy Tan says:

The truth is, I write for [. . .] self-serving reasons—that is, I write for myself. I write because I enjoy stories and make-believe. I write because if I didn’t, I’d probably go crazy. Thus I write about questions that disturb me, images that mystify me, or memories that cause me anguish and pain. I write about secrets, lies, and contradictions, because within them are many kinds of truth. In other words, I write stories about life as I have misunderstood it. To be sure, it’s a Chinese-American life, but that’s the only one I’ve had so far (304-305).

Self-Assembly
The Nature of Artistic Awareness

Marshall McLuhan once described artists as people “of integral awareness” using modern terms, Sam Tanenhaus explains in a *New York Times* contribution, “to update the ancient belief that works of the imagination might actually require a talent for invention but for attunement” (“Violence”). Colson Whitehead conveys the young artist’s hyper-aware sensitivity to his surroundings in *Sag Harbor* as he describes himself “Keeping my eyes open, gathering data, more and more facts, because if I had enough information I might know how to be. Listening and watching, taking notes for something that might one day be a diagram for an invention, a working self with moving parts” (68). An increasing number of psychological studies prove that “artistic” thinking and reasoning patterns are significantly different from normal brain activity, further emphasizing the

need to approach works of creative expression as individual products rather than representatives of cultural convention.

An artist may often experience alienation from his home culture because of his behavior and thinking patterns. Dianne Klein identifies an element in the writing of Sandra Cisneros which shows “the struggle of Chicano/a people to find identities that are true to themselves as individuals and artists but that do not betray their culture and their people” (“Coming”). This occurs not only in the choice of content but in the most basic family interactions—even as an adult, Cisneros describes her parents’ typical frustration with her independence:

It’s overwhelming to me to go back to the house where to be alone or to seek privacy is evil or anti-social, anti-family. A high school teacher recently told me her Latino students couldn’t understand why Esperanza wanted to go off by herself, why she wanted to be alone. According to their perspective, to be alone, to be exiled from the family is so anti-Mexican. My family still finds my behavior rather strange (qtd. in Satz, “Returning”).

The act of writing may itself constitute an attack against an artist’s family. In a story titled “The Writer in the Family” by E.L. Doctorow, a young writer who desires to portray his father’s world with accuracy finds himself accused of betraying family secrets. Jennifer Gillan writes, “In the New York Jewish community out of which he writes kin groups are valued over self, and family secrecy above all.” She emphasizes the struggle of both authors and their protagonists who face “alienation as writers, usually compounded by the outsider status bestowed upon them by their ethnicity” (xii). In her article “Coming of Age in Novels,” Dianne Klein writes of the outsider lifestyle which may begin in a writer’s childhood, saying, “These experiences nurtured their creation of protagonists who, like themselves, had no models—but were possessed by destiny, by inclination, and by courage to be artists [. . .].”

Kay Redfield Jamison, professor of psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, published a study of creativity entitled *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. Citing research beginning with Andreasen's "Study of Writers" in 1987, she reports:

Increased rates of suicide, depression and manic-depression among artists have been established by many separate studies. These investigations show that artists experience up to 18 times the rate of suicide seen in the general population, eight to 10 times the rate of depression and 10 to 20 times the rate of manic-depression and its milder form, cyclothymia (93).

While she clearly states that mood disorders do not breed genius, she suggests that these diseases can heighten sensitivity and enhance creativity, writing:

Where depression questions, ruminates and hesitates, mania answers with vigor and certainty. The constant transitions in and out of constricted and then expansive thoughts, subdued and then violent responses, grim and then ebullient moods, withdrawn and then outgoing stances, cold and then fiery states—and the rapidity and fluidity of moves through such contrasting experiences—can be painful and confusing. Ideally, though, such chaos in those able to transcend it or shape it to their will can provide familiarity with transitions that is probably useful in artistic endeavors. This vantage readily accepts ambiguities and the counteracting forces in nature [. . .] Ultimately, these fluxes and yokings may reflect truth in humanity and nature more accurately than could a more fixed viewpoint (95).

Behavioral neurologist Dr. Vilayanur S. Ramachandran studies neurological phenomena in an effort to understand normal brain functioning, including, he says, "very enigmatic aspects of the brain that few people have dared to approach, like what is a metaphor? How do you construct a body image? Things of that nature." During research on synesthesia, a condition of intermingled senses most famously described in Nabokov's *Invitation of a Small Evening*, Ramachandran discovered established artists are eight times more likely to have synesthesia than non-artists. In a *New Yorker* profile, John Colapinto explains that in correlation with the most common synesthesia, number-color, Ramachandran noticed the part of the brain where number shapes are processed, the fusiform gyrus, lies next to the area where colors are processed. Ramachandran

hypothesized that a cross-wiring in the brain, similar to that in phantom-limb patients, was responsible:

Brain scans confirmed his hunch: in synesthetes, there are excess neural connections between the two brain centers. This suggested to Ramachandran that the syndrome arises from a defect in the gene responsible for pruning away the neural fibres that connect the various centers of the brain as it develops early in life. ‘What do artists, poets, and novelists have in common?’ Ramachandran asked me. ‘The propensity to link seemingly unrelated things. It’s called metaphor. So what I’m arguing is, if the same gene, instead of being expressed only in fusiform gyrus, is expressed diffusely through the brain, you’ve got a greater propensity to link seemingly unrelated brain areas in concepts and ideas. So it’s a very phrenological view of creativity’ (85).

To understand the imperative demands of creative pursuit, one might consider the example of Junot Díaz as he describes the 11-year process of producing his first novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. He continued to write and rewrite through a series of woes and difficulties, and although he had previously published to great acclaim, he does not call this period simply “The Making of *Oscar Wao*” but rather, “The Tale of How I Became a Writer.” In an inspiring contribution to *O the Oprah Magazine*, he says:

In truth, I didn’t become a writer the first time I put my pen to paper or when I finished my first book (easy) or my second one (hard). You see, in my view a writer is a writer not because she writes well and easily, because she has amazing talent, because everything she does is golden. In my view a writer is a writer because even when there is no hope, even when nothing you do shows any sign of promise, you keep writing anyway. Wasn’t until [then] that I realized, really realized, what it was exactly that I am (191).

*Self-Styling
Modes of Expression*

In her article “Culture as Transition: Becoming a Woman in Bi-Ethnic Space,”

Maria Szadziuk writes:

If culture at the communal level involves the constant interaction of diverse elements, the same holds true of the microscopic mindscape. An individual in a multicultural society is also a site in which various cultures are rooted and transformed [. . .] a human psyche can also be a site of cultural conflict, as well as the place where individual mental ‘space’ is invaded by incompatible cultural models and contradictory value systems [. . .] for the person writing about such experiences there is also frequently the problem of choosing amongst various discursive modes, plus of course, the decision concerning the language in which to express oneself.

When an artist from a minority background chooses an alternative literary format to convey already atypical subject matter, his first readers may deem his work downright incomprehensible. Like the Modernist e.e. cummings, Sandra Cisneros chose to eschew traditional punctuation and form in *The House on Mango Street*, variably described today as a novella or collection of vignettes. When she first published, however, critics were perplexed: Was she writing poetry? Did she purport to write a children's book? But what of the adult themes? Ganz reports, "A controversy continues about her writing among the critics over the issue of genre-crossing" ("Border Crossing"). One such critic, Barbara Kingsolver, wrote a review of *Woman Hollering Creek* called "Poetic Fiction with a Tex-Mex Tilt," the title itself containing an essentialist designation: Would any conscientious writer call Kingsolver's *Poisonwood Bible* "Fiction with a Caucasian Tilt"? In the review she states:

Sandra Cisneros has added length and dialogue and a hint of plot to her poems and published them in a stunning collection called *Woman Hollering Creek* [. . .] It's a practical thing for poets in the United States to turn to fiction. Elsewhere, poets have the cultural status of our rock stars and the income of our romance novelists. Here a poet is something your mother probably didn't want you to grow up to be [. . .] When you read this book, don't be fooled. It's poetry. Just don't tell your mother (3-4).

Kingsolver seems to miss the most important purpose of her writing: Cisneros says, "The reason I write is not to publish but to get the thorn out of the soul of my heart" (qtd. in Satz, "Returning"). Kingsolver negates the form Cisneros has chosen for her work because it blurs or perhaps transcends the boundaries of genre. But cannot the artist create new formats? As Madmoiselle Reisz of *The Awakening* declares, must not the artist "possess the courageous soul which dares and defies"? (116).

Maria Szadziuk goes on to describe the conundrum second and third generation American artists face: Cherríe Moraga, of Anglo-Chicana heritage, expresses a desire to

claim her ethnic roots as a method of self-definition, but such a “reconnection” seems to suggest a forced authenticity as these roots have nearly dissolved in the proverbial melting pot. Fiction writing, however, does not require intense research and cultural reclamation, as Amy Tan writes:

Contrary to what some students, professors, reporters, and fund-raising organizations assume, I am not an expert on China, Chinese culture, mah jong, the psychology of mothers and daughters, generation gaps, immigration, illegal aliens, assimilation, acculturation, racial tension, Tiananmen Square [. . .] the purported one million missing baby girls of China, the future of Hong Kong after 1997, or, I am sorry to say, Chinese cooking. Certainly I have personal opinions on so many of these topics, especially food, but by no means do my sentiments or my world of make-believe make me an expert (305).

Joan Didion stated the purpose of creative fiction when she said, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means.” Such exploration becomes essential to the process of identity building, helping the writer to process difficult and confusing experiences. Richard Rodriguez illustrates one process of organizing these thoughts in his autobiography, *Hunger for Memory*:

The youthful writer addresses a stranger [. . .] with ‘Dear Diary’ and tries to give public expression to what is intensely, privately felt. In so doing, he attempts to evade the guilt of repression. And the embarrassment of solitary feeling. For by rendering feelings in words that a stranger can understand –words that belong to the public [. . .] –the young diarist no longer need feel all alone or eccentric. His feelings are capable of public intelligibility. In turn, the act of revelation helps the writer better understand his own feelings. Such is the benefit of language: By finding public words to describe one’s feelings, one can describe oneself to oneself. One names what was previously only darkly felt (187).

Gillam cites Martin Luther King Jr.’s philosophy of bringing hidden tension to the surface, “out into the open where it can be seen and dealt with,” as a way that writers may achieve catharsis and with their art aid readers towards similar enlightenment. Bruno Bettelheim writes:

After watching [a tragic drama] a viewer may wonder why he is so deeply moved; and in responding to what he observes as his emotional reaction, rumination about the mythical events and what these mean to him, a person may come to clarify his thoughts and feelings. With this, certain inner tensions which are the consequence of events long past may be relieved; previously unconscious material can then enter one’s awareness and become accessible for conscious working through (38).

Through the creative process, artists make their perceptions concrete, tangible, publicly understood, and thus valid. Anupama Chowdhury writes of how a first-generation American writer may use his particular set of circumstances as an asset to creativity, saying, “The cultural dislocation, alienation, and loss of identity related to Diaspora open up multiple perspectives for writers who wish to portray these experiences in their writings.” She quotes Manju Sampat who calls a multicultural perspective a blessing, as it “enables them to write from a wider and more exciting angle” (12). Sandra Cisneros told Robin Ganz that she feels grateful to have “twice as many words to pick from. . .two ways of looking at the world” (“Border Crossings”). While authors who hail from ethnic communities may reflect characteristics of multiple cultures, they remain individuals, each with a unique artistic vision. Jhumpa Lahiri adamantly resists labeling her characters “hybrids,” saying:

I get frustrated by this tendency to flatten whole segments of the population, like the Indian immigrant or the Jewish immigrant. I know these are just words and phrases, but I think people tend to see these other groups as a people. They are ‘other,’ and it’s harder to see the nuances and the variations because they’re just a group of people. I have been sensitive to it my whole life, and annoyed by it. As a writer, I didn’t set out to represent a certain group of people, but I acknowledge that I write about Indians and Indian Americans. And I hope at least in writing about these characters, you can prevent those generalizations (Bolonick, “Migration, Assimilation, Inebriation”).

Lahiri claims to represent herself alone, using characters from her experience—who happen to be part of a specific Indian community living in a specific part of the United States at a specific time—to illustrate her distinctive observations of universal human desires and aspirations. In an essay entitled “Identities and Decisions,” Harvard professor and Nobel Prize recipient Amartya Sen proposes a method of representing the self and others that satirizes essentialist designations of race or nationality while prioritizing context:

Each of us invokes identities of various kinds in disparate contexts. The same person can be of Indian origin, a Parsee, a French citizen, a US resident, a woman, a poet, a vegetarian, and anthropologist, a university professor, a Christian, a bird watcher, and an avid believer in extraterrestrial life and of the propensity of alien creatures to ride around the cosmos in multicoloured UFOs. Each of these collectivities, to all of which this person belongs, gives him or her a particular identity. They can all have relevance, depending on the context. There is no conflict here, even though the priorities over these identities must be relative to the issue at hand (for example, the vegetarian identity may be more important when going to a dinner rather than to a Consulate, whereas the French citizenship may be more telling when going to a Consulate rather than attending a dinner (350).

While one may chose to put forward one or a combination of characteristics of our personalities to identify himself, Sen concedes, “the constraints may be particularly strict when considering the extent to which we can persuade others to take us to be different from what they take us to be.” Unless, or until Sen’s method of self-identification becomes a global standard, the fact remains: “Our freedom in choosing our identity, in terms of the way others see us, can sometimes be extraordinarily limited [. . .] Whether we are considering our identities as we ourselves see them, or as others see us, we choose within particular constraints” (351).

In rapid everyday exchanges it comes naturally to quickly sum up character based on the “extraordinarily limited constraints” of physical appearance and other quick signifiers. When analyzing a creative composition by a minority American, therefore, a reader might consciously put aside the assumptions associated with these constraints, approaching the text as a blank slate. After all, the artist considered here works to create a niche for himself because none previously existed. Alfred Kazin writes, “One writes to make a home for oneself, on paper, in time and in others minds” (qtd. in Chandler 2). His sentiments are similar to those of Esperanza, heroine of *The House on Mango Street* who desires:

A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody’s garbage to pick up after.
Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem (108).

The development of the *künstlerroman* follows Erik Erikson's stages of identity development in which an individual adopts strategies and behaviors in an effort to adapt to his social environment. From the initial stages of confusion or apathy, an emotionally healthy person ultimately establishes clear personal values and uses his skills to benefit himself and his community. According to James Marcia, who builds on Erikson's research, the balance between identity and uncertainty depends on whether an individual can make a commitment to an identity. This presents a special problem for American minorities who may grow up in uncharted territory. Their parents or ancestors arrive in the host country with a sense of identity acquired in their homeland, taking for granted a developmental task that may not be so easily accomplished by children growing up in a new world that often feeds messages which are damaging to self-image. In *Asian American Dreams*, Helen Zia describes the effect of media portrayals of Asians:

Asian American viewers absorbed the steady diet of demeaning caricatures with embarrassment and shame. Many wished, as youngsters, to be another race, to be anything but the images that dominated them. The media portrayals were reminders of the ridicule they encountered from childhood, of closed minds of people who saw Asians in narrow, proscribed ways—the outsider, the foreigner, the gook (115).

Ironically, minority actors who were able to break into Hollywood possessed star quality often because they grew up outside the United States. Sidney Poitier, for instance, raised in the Bahamas, ascended to such great success because he refused to sing and dance and carried himself with a confidence no American-raised black actor was able to muster in the 1950s. Whitehead illustrates his incredible influence on the narrator of *Sag Harbor* when pressured to steal a candy bar as he says, "Before I could even think about it, I heard Sidney Poitier's voice in my head and in that crisp, familiar, so-dignified tone, he declared, "They think we steal, and because they think we steal, we must not steal"

(101). The self-possessed celebrity figure has the capacity to provide youngsters struggling to achieve healthy identity status with a model upon which to build their lives. Screenwriter Jenny Lumet credits “Hollywood’s first black glamour symbol,” her grandmother Lena Horne with paving the way for her own positive sense of identity, saying, “There was quite literally no road for Lena—she made the road by walking. I can trace my life and successes to her actions [. . .] And I feel in my being an obligation: to

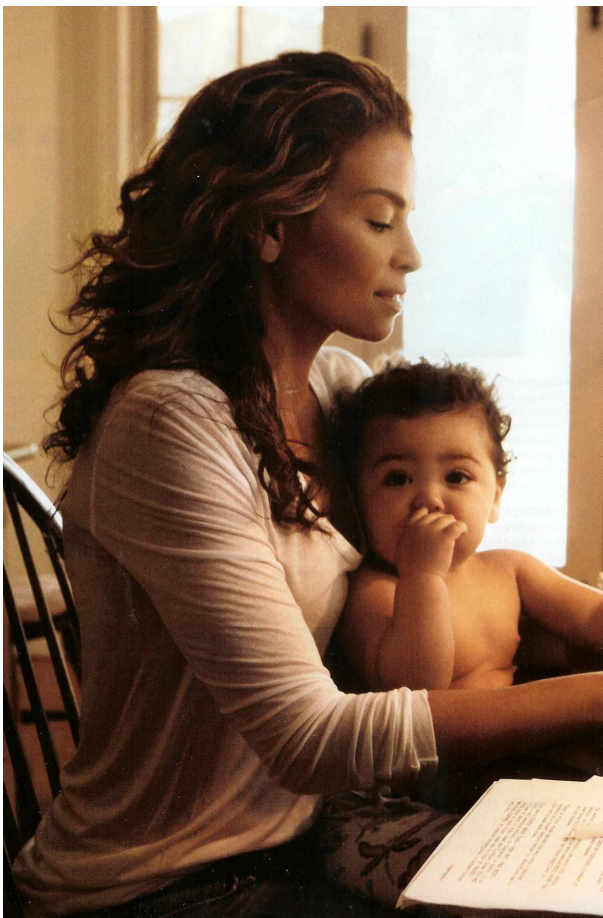


Figure 4 Jenny Lumet

raise decent children and do good work—to somewhere, somehow, open a door for somebody else” (qtd. in Wood 148-149). Marcia distinguishes four different markers of identity status, each finding a representative in the paradigmatic texts mentioned here:

Esperanza of The House on Mango Street and Oscar Wao represent *identity achievement*, which occurs when an individual has gone through an exploration of different roles and made a commitment to one.

Callie, the young narrator of

Gish Jen’s “In the American Society,” characterizes *moratorium*, the status of one actively involved with exploring different identities and yet to make a commitment.

Mr. and Mrs. Das of “The Interpreter of Maladies” are so preoccupied with material signifiers of rank that even as adults they achieve only *foreclosure status*, making a commitment to their American home apparently without attempting identity exploration. In India, Mr. Das refuses to associate himself with his surroundings, and Lahiri highlights the depth of his delusion as he shakes off an opportunity to make a connection with his host: ““Oh, Mina and I were both born in America,” Mr. Das announced with an air of sudden confidence. ‘Born and raised’” (45). For Mr. Das, American citizenship serves as a badge of honor that subsumes centuries of cultural history.

Kaushik, the main lead of “Once in a Lifetime” absently floats through life, epitomizing *identity diffusion*—he at once belongs everywhere and nowhere, making a career out of observing the world as a photographer and leaving behind nothing when he dies.

Marcia underscores the eventual necessity of identity achievement, as those who make a strong commitment to an identity—even a self-created one—report higher levels of health and satisfaction. Failure to achieve positive identity results in emotional effects from social isolation to depression, and physical symptoms including hypertension and early death (McManus 41).

The Media Blitz

Kera Bolonick says, “When more than two writers of a similar cultural background publish a work of fiction, the American media and publishing industry announce a zeitgeist” (“Migration, Assimilation, Inebriation”). Amy Tan observes how reviews often reinforce the idea that writers who share ethnic culture also share genre:

Gus Lee's *China Boy* is compared with Gish Jen's *Typical American*, David Wong Louie's *Pangs of Love* with Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, and so forth [. . .] Some reviewers tend to reduce books to the most obvious and general abstractions: the themes of immigration and assimilation. They overlook the specifics of narrative detail, language, and imagery that make the story and the characters unlike any that have been written before (312).

As her interview shows, Jhumpa Lahiri can be said to embody the “Indian experience” only so far as the rapper Eminem or horror specialist Stephen King represent a standard white American male “experience.” Each embodies only a dimension, an individual version of a collective cultural experience. Noelle Brada-Williams notes the tension inherent in the way different types of readers approach literature, saying, “The unique vision of an individual artist and the unique representation he or she provides of a community are often challenged by readers from both within and outside the community being represented as various readers lobby for the value of one representation over another” (“Short Story Cycle”). Brada-Williams looks for a reason behind the naïve misconceptions certain audiences maintain, writing:

I use the term ‘naïve’ to describe a variety of readers, including students who may be new to reading ethnic literature as well as individuals of any age or level of education who may be ignorant of the communities depicted in ethnic literature. This lack of knowledge, willful or not, may stem from the varied regional demographics of the US or from the still segregated nature of American society [. . .] We see the logic of representation at work in the naïve reader who naturally bases his or her understanding of a particular demographic unit on the few representations he or she has come across, as well as the experienced lit. professor who attempts to create a syllabus that is ‘representative’ of diverse populations through what can be read in a single term [. . .] a common dilemma of obscuring part and whole due to the inevitably finite nature of both available representations and one’s own reading (“Short Story Cycle”).

The approach to “ethnic” literature Brada-Williams describes resembles the colonialist response to the cultural artifacts of colonized lands, what Sen terms “exoticist, magisterial, and curatorial” approaches (141). In a study of the reaction to Lahiri’s work, Brada-Williams indicts the “logic of representation”:

Claims on writers include the demand for more sanitized, more stereotype-affirming, or simply more diverse representations. Examples range from controversies over the use of dialect in early twentieth-century African American literature to the depictions of sexuality and gender roles in virtually all ethnic American literatures up to the present time, including, most recently, Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s depiction of a Filipino American sexual predator in *Blu’s Hanging*. Although most

rational readers are aware of the diversity and individuality of any given ethnic group (especially the vast population Lahiri engages of South Asia and its diaspora), the logic of representation implies, especially with regards to groups underrepresented within a national literature, that a work depicting a part of a community ‘represents’ the whole (“Short Story Cycle”).

Blame for the prevalence of the “logic of representation” might be assigned to the design of mainstream media which historically demeans characters of color. Negative media images contribute to internalized racism and the difficult task of individuation in a society with few models. Whitehead’s protagonist, Benji, recalls African American millionaires “hungering for validation after all they’d accomplished” writing:

The Cosby Show cornered us, forcing us to reconsider our position. That was some version of ourselves on the screen there. After so long. My mother told us that when she was growing up, whenever a black face appeared on television, you ran through the house to tell everyone, and they dropped what they were doing and gathered around the RCA. If you had time, you hit the phone to spread the word. You could plan your day around it—*Jet* kept a list of upcoming appearances of black people on television, no matter how small. Nat King Cole, Diahann Carroll in *Julia*. Make some room on the couch to verify that you actually existed. My generation had *Good Times* (six seasons) and *Baby, I’m Back* (one-fourth of a season), shows that honestly depicted how the black community lived in this country. Like, what to do when the heat goes off in the projects in the middle of winter. How to sort things out when your deadbeat husband returns after seven years with a jaunty “Baby, I’m back!” Hence the title. The practical matters of the black day-to-day, don’cha know. Me and Reggie and Elena tuned in, making room on the couch to verify that we didn’t exist, while my father restrained himself from kicking in the set: “That’s not how we live.” (187).

Richard Rodriguez depicts a similar situation in *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father*:

Most boys my age in Sacramento are wearing coonskin caps when my father tells how America stole the Southwest from Mexico, how Americans died at the Alamo to make Texas a slave state.

The United States has a different version.

On Sunday nights, we gather around the TV to watch *The Ballad of Davy Crockett*. My father is interested at first. The Mexicans surrounding Walt Disney’s Alamo are buffoons with white suspenders crossed over their bellies. My father returns to his newspaper” (222).

The developing artist’s goal to establish identity and voice, delineate an existence which resists contextualization, might be drowned by a media and thus a society which overlooks the uncategorizable—imagine why Ralph Ellison named his magnum opus *The Invisible Man*. Difference from the norm helps artists to succeed however, for Salman

Rushdie tells *The New Yorker*, “A writer's injuries are his strengths, and from his wounds will flow his sweetest, most startling dreams” (28). In *The Enchantress of Florence*, Rushdie describes the child Akbar learning survival and humility as an Indian exiled in Kandahar: [He was taught] the best defenses of those who are less against those who are more: inwardness, forethought, cunning, humility, and good peripheral vision. The many lessons of lessness. The lessening from which growing could begin” (37).

Sandra Cisneros says that the effect of growing up without models of Latino characters in literature or mass media left her feeling culturally impoverished:

As a poor person growing up in a society where the class norm was superimposed on a TV screen, I couldn't understand why our home wasn't all green lawn and white wood [. . .] I rejected what was at hand and emulated the voices of the poets [. . .] big, male voices [. . .] all wrong for me [. . .] it seems crazy, but [. . .] I had never felt my home, family, and neighborhood unique or worthy of writing about (“Ghosts and Voices” 72).

Klein regards Cisneros's eventual success, despite antipathy from the educational system, of all places, writing, “This is no mean feat, considering that Anglos did not teach [Mexican Americans] to value their cultural heritage and experiences, that they were shown no Chicano/a role models, that, in fact they were often discouraged from writing” (“Coming of Age”). Building out of disadvantage including external and internalized racism, a young artist must establish a niche, a specialization, an identity structure constructed in the absence of lifestyle model and in response to stereotype.

These obstacles face artists in every creative field, as Dana Stevens of *Slate* writes: “Asian women in American movies and television [. . .] can be ‘sexy,’ in the inscrutable-dragon-lady fashion [. . .] but they rarely, if ever, appear as funny, frank and openly aggressive beings.” Helen Zia writes:

For Asian American actors, internalized shame [adds] another layer to the trauma of having to act as a caricature of themselves. As a young actor, Ming-Na Wen, the voice of Disney's *Mulan*, tried to deny her Asianness. ‘Acting was a way for me to get out of my own skin and be somebody else. Because for a while, my biggest obstacle was getting over the fact that I was Chinese. I kept

denying it,' she said to *A. Magazine* in 1998. Wen became proud of her ancestry only after she played the role of the daughter, June, in the movie version of *The Joy Luck Club*" (115).

The funny, frank, and openly aggressive actress Sandra Oh was born in Ontario in 1971 and began acting at the age of ten, much to the chagrin of her conservative Korean parents. Oh faced a dearth of work after her breakthrough role as "sexy, smart, wine-loving biker" in the award-winning 2004 film *Sideways*. In a *New York Times* interview entitled "All That Korean Rage, Unbottled," she told Hilary deVries:

I understand myself more as an actor in Hollywood now and I know that I don't get jobs in films by auditioning. I'm not blonde. You can't place me in movies the way you can with certain actors. It's very difficult for my agents. They say to me, 'I have a hard time getting you in' and all I want is a shot [. . .] After [*Sideways*] came out I couldn't get an [expletive] audition. The only other role I got was another best friend and they said to me, 'Well, you've already played a best friend so we're not going to cast you.' [. . .] It was enraging. It's not like they're ever going to say to Danny Glover, 'Oh, you can't play another buddy because you've already played one.' Or say to Jeremy Piven, 'You can't play John Cusack's best friend again.'

Oh finally landed a long-standing part on the television series *Grey's Anatomy* which she credits the show's creator for tailoring to suit her: "Shonda Rhimes is a black woman, which



Figure 5 Sandra Oh with Isaiah Washington

makes a big [expletive] difference. What I like about my character [Christina Yang] is that she's ambitious, she's not apologetic. She's a complete female character that doesn't have to be bitchy or conniving." Although she has earned Emmies, Genies, Golden Globes, and Screen Actor's Guild awards for her work, Oh says, "Sometimes I don't think [people] know who I am. [They] ask me what I'm writing. They think I'm Sandra

Tsing Loh. Or they ask about stand up. ‘No, that’s Margaret Cho.’ I really think there is this kind of glomming, that they think we are all somehow the same person” (qtd. in deVries).

Gillam points out the benefits of this situation despite the evident frustration, as it affords its bearers “a special kind of vision”:

From the vantage point of the outsider, it may be easier to see beyond limited cultural assumptions and analyze American culture more critically. This ability to travel between two worlds affords one the kind of perspective that is necessary for both personal growth and empathy for others [. . .] learning to see others from their points of view is necessary to foster understanding across and among cultures and generations (xvi).

While certainly a noble calling, this sort of responsibility remains a heavy, almost messianic load; while artist of minority backgrounds are in a good position to be cultural ambassadors, they must not be constantly expected to perform this function. “Art must discover and reveal the beauty which prejudice and caricature have overlaid,” wrote Alain Locke in 1925 (198). The artist has a desire for individuation from both minority and majority community. The very nature of creativity includes divergent thinking and a resistance to the modus operandi, as Sokari Douglas Camp says, “I see myself as an artist, being an African artist or being a Western artist has got nothing to do with it. I think that being an artist overrides all that.”

*On the “Native Informer”
A Consideration of Audience*

Unless he has declared himself a tour guide, the fiction writer writes primarily for himself and his loved ones. Although his work depicts his experience of growing up as a Caribbean American, Junot Díaz shuns the role of the “native informer,” whose behavior aligns with that of the archetypal traitor, familiar in every culture as la Malinche or the Judas who betrays his people to a foreign conqueror. Díaz describes this figure as a sell-

out who writes about his own culture “for the consumption of primarily white outsider audiences, an act which by its very nature requires that the writer commit heavy-duty discursive violence on [his] cultural/identity site—simplifying, limiting, deforming it in the most brutal and familiar ways imaginable” (qtd. in Marsters, “Radical Alchemy”).

Díaz has his narrator compose a family record for his best friend’s daughter, and likewise Colson Whitehead directs his text to an intimate, often saying, “Take my word, friend” (36). In *The House on Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros’s storytelling depends on the presence of a familiar, sympathetic listener to whom she delivers her narrative. As Esperanza gains confidence in her writing ability she projects herself into the future and looks back on her present state, telling readers, “I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn’t want to belong” (109). Beth Brunk notes:

She directly addresses her audience—whether it be the mujeres, the women, to whom the book is dedicated, those who symbolically live on Mango Street, or anyone who has cared to read this account of Esperanza and her experience on Mango Street—who realized that the story Esperanza believes she is about to tell is the one she has already told. This ‘you’ gives the story direction, a recipient [. . .] This story has been (or will be) told with the intention of someone hearing it (“Multiple Voices”).

Reuben Sanchez furthers this observation in an article called “Remembering Always to Come Back: The Child’s Wished-for Escape and the Adult’s Self-Empowered Return in Sandra Cisneros’s *House on Mango Street*.” He writes that Cisneros’s address of a primary audience, the very women who inspired her to write, serves as a structural device: “Dedicating her book ‘A las Mujeres/To the Women,’ Cisneros has come back ‘for the ones who cannot out.’ The book’s dedication and the very last line of the book form a circle symbolic of [the book’s theme] remembering always to come back.”

Cisneros writes to her younger self, crafting herself as the mentor she never had. She writes to herself to clarify her artistic identity, a primary purpose which does not involve news reporting or even social justice.

Cisneros's text has a sense of depth and self-revelation lacking in novels such as Andre Dubus' *The House of Sand and Fog* or *Little Bee* by Chris Cleave, popular fiction narratives by mainstream writers that feature minority characters. In *Little Bee*, an adolescent Nigerian narrator—who seems very much like a middle-aged, male British journalist in disguise—addresses her predictable tale of woe to the “sophisticated people” of England:

Imagine how tired I would become telling my story to the girls from back home. This is the real reason why no one tells us Africans anything. It is not because anyone wants to keep my continent in ignorance. It is because nobody has the time to sit down and explain the first world from first principles [. . .] This is a story for sophisticated people, like you (128).

After two years in a British detention camp peopled exclusively with foreign refugees, Cleave has *Little Bee* inexplicably absorb British values and play the “native informer,” dismissing Nigerians as too simpleminded to understand her newly acquired erudition. Cleave reveals a sense of identification with his audience rather than his protagonist in the Author Q & A which follows his story:

In sci-fi an ordinary protagonist discovers an extraordinary world, and the genre is exciting because of the emotional dissonance. But my thing is contemporary realism, so I'm always showing the ordinary world to what is effectively an extraterrestrial protagonist. It's fun to do.

Cleave plainly calls *Little Bee* an “alien narrator” who “sees us as we can no longer see ourselves.” In the 21st century, an internationally successful author continues to pit “us” versus “them.” He cannot help himself— it makes big bucks and plus, “It's fun to do.”

*American History
And Other Stories*

On the Coeur d'Alene Indian reservation in Washington, Sherman Alexie grew up evaluating himself according to the standards of 1960s television, adjusting his life so completely that he declared himself a "Brady Bunch Indian." Sandra Cisneros felt haunted by the Barbie doll, Gary Soto by the Cleaver family dinners which made his meals of burritos, rice, and beans seem so odd. After years of seeing her work designated as ethnic studies, Asian American studies, and Asian feminist literature, Amy Tan writes:

What about American literature? [. . .] I have this attitude that American literature, if such a classification exists, should be more democratic than the color of your skin or whether rice or potatoes are served at your fictional dinner table. And so I ask myself and sometimes others: Who decides what is American fiction? Why is it that works of fiction by minority writers are read mainly for the study of class, gender, and race? Why is it so hard to break out of this literary ghetto? (306)

Jennifer Gillam discusses how a sense of difference eventually helped these artists to establish a firm sense of individuality, bolstering their "determination to write stories that challenge those images so that the next generation of children can grow up secure in the knowledge that there are many shades and shapes of American faces, many ways to be American" (ix). While clearly beyond the scope of an individual artist, Gillam notes that together they produce this remarkable byproduct. By recognizing the artist's voice as opposed to a distant, indistinct marginal yell, audiences may appreciate their contribution to a clearer, more accurate picture of what it means to be alive in present day: Or, more specifically, what it means to be alive in a place once upon a time inhabited by "Indians" and "discovered" by an Italian sailor for a Spanish queen; a place far from England in which the national language has long been established as English, a continent named after one Amerigo Vespucci.

In an article called “The Case for Contamination” Kwame Anthony Appiah refutes the melting pot theory, praising the increasing occurrence of cultural exchange as he writes, “Whatever loss of difference there has been, there are constantly inventing new forms of difference: new hairstyles, new slang, even, from time to time, new religions.” Natalie Friedman considers his article and writes that changes “have less to do with people’s cultural or national identity (or loss thereof) but rather with individual demands for a better moral and physical lifestyle [and] changes that are progressive” (“From Hybrids to Tourists”). Since culture remains dynamic and ever-changing, the “logic of representation” necessarily fails. Friedman writes of cultural evolution in *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri:

Children in Lahiri’s novel are not only observers and translators of two worlds that encounter each other on American soil but are also conduits of change, importing American culture into their Indian homes and creating a kind of metissage that does not threaten their ethnic or cultural identity, but that enriches their experience (“From Hybrids to Tourists”).

Maria Szadziuk notices that the writing of first, second, and third generation immigrants to the West respectively evidences an increasing movement toward non-conformity and protest:

The tendency to take a radical stand against the mainstream culture becomes more pronounced with progressive abstraction from the individual’s ethnic roots [. . .] increasing distance from mainstream literature is also accompanied by increasing freedom of form, and is reflected in the degree of fragmentation in the various texts as well as in the greater variety of means of expression (“Culture as Transition”).

In a *Vogue* article aptly titled “Miss Chief,” Sally Singer heralds a new internationalism in her profile of Maya Arulpragasam, a.k.a. M.I.A. (Missing in Acton). Born in London, raised in Sri Lanka, India, and the London suburbs (hence Acton), Arulpragasam studied film at Central Saint Martin’s and moved to Brooklyn upon graduation. In *Bed-Stuy*, writes Singer, she started cranking out:

The most hybrid, transgressive hip-hop out there, sampling *The Clash* and gunshots, making revolutionary statements in a singsong voice, and generally embracing a strongly political, transcendent vision of artistic endeavor: ‘It should be raceless, classless, faceless, and sometimes tasteless’ (121).

M.I.A. released *Arular* in 2005, inspired in turns by her father—a member of the Tamil Tigers—and her cosmopolitan upbringing and dynamic new surroundings. Although she has received minimal musical training, her releases are acclaimed for conceptual originality—the single “Paper Planes” and her soundtrack collaboration with A.R.



Figure 6 Maya Arulpragasam (M.I.A.)

Rahman have been worldwide sensations. “She has succeeded in shaking up hip-hop, fashion, and ready-made notions of identity,” says Singer. M.I.A. boldly publishes issues of immigration and alienation—*We do it cheap, hide our money in a heap / Send it home and make ‘em study, fixing teeth*—yet she feeds them to audiences in the very current, appealing medium of electro pop. She defies all norms in efforts both to liberate herself and encourage others to revel in expressive joyousness. “I don’t feel bound by the medium I choose to express myself in,” she says. “My

fans are 3D. They need music, content, currency. You need to arm them with currency. It's what you stand for" (qtd. in Singer 138).

An artist creates with the goal of discovering something remarkable about himself. He reflects on his society, maybe providing answers but more often not, and offers these ruminations to an audience. When author and reader unearth the same truths from a text, Amy Tan writes, "that's the mystery and the wonder of both life and fiction—the connection between two unique individuals who discover in the end that they are more the same than they are different" (323). In a proposal for artistic direction in our transitional era, ethnographer James Clifford suggests that the idea of authenticity be reinterpreted as an ongoing creative activity in which elements of 'traditional' and 'modern' cultures collide, meld and restructure themselves into something new. He advocates "optimistic hybridity," the idea of cultures and individual identities continually refashioned through their contact with one another (Heartney 73) Contemporary artists keep a 'laugh so you don't cry' eye to the future—assembling useful expressions from many sources in an unaffected sharing of pleasure, a straightforward survivalist celebration of liberality, sensuous beauty, and individualism.

A final note: In anticipation of things to come, apart from those italicized in quotes, foreign words will not be italicized in this paper. In its present state, the English language exists as a great big agglomeration including Bushisms, Palinisms, and chewed up foreign words—a few more can only add more color, depth, and charm.

La Poética of Space
The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros

The places in which we have experienced daydreaming reconstitute themselves in a new daydream, and it is because our memories of former dwelling places are relived as daydreams that these dwelling places of the past remain in us for all time.

—Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

She didn't always live on Mango Street. When she grew up, Sandra Cisneros, twenty-two years old, sat in a seminar called "Memory and the Imagination" at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her classmates passionately debated *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard, discussing "the attics and stairways and cellars of childhood." Cisneros felt overwhelmed, alienated from the



Figure 7 Sandra Cisneros

other writers: "Everyone was writing about the sun shining and beautiful gardens," she recalls, "but those things weren't in my life." Cisneros was born to parents of Mexican heritage and raised in Humboldt Park, a poor Puerto Rican neighborhood on the North Side of Chicago. Her father taught the family Spanish and took them on yearly trips to Mexico which left Cisneros with the sense of diaspora; she could have had another life in another place. She grew up with six brothers in what she describes as "an ugly little house, bright red as if holding its breath." Her familiarity with the "dwelling places" Bachelard describes consisted of a wistful childhood longing for the perfect abode of *The*

Little House, by Virginia Lee Burton. While her classmates deliberated over Bachelard's spacio-temporal perspectives, Cisneros felt disconnected and unaware of some collective consciousness, thinking, "What do I know? What could I know? My classmates were from the best schools in the country. They had been raised as hot-house flowers. I was a yellow weed among the city's cracks" (qtd. in Ganz, "Border Crossings"). Cisneros had attended Chicago public schools, graduated from Loyola University, and entered Iowa's program on a professor's recommendation without realizing what a prestigious institution she was attending. She realized that coming from a working-class background, Latino culture, and an urban community, she had a different set of references from the others. "It wasn't as if I didn't know who I was," she said in an interview with Pilar Aranda ten years later:

I knew I was a Mexican woman. But I didn't think it had anything to do with why I felt so much imbalance in my life, whereas it had everything to do with it! My race, my gender, and my class! That's when I decided I would write about something my classmates couldn't write about. It wasn't until I realized and accepted that fact that I came upon the subjects I wanted to write about.

She learned that she would have to legitimize her own experience because she had first-hand knowledge the others would never be able to articulate with her depth of understanding. When she turned her attention back to *The Poetics of Space*, she hit upon the metaphor of a house, upending Bachelard's sentimental, socially elite idyll for one which resembled her reality:

What did I know except third-third floor flats? Surely my classmates knew nothing about that. That's precisely what I chose to write about: third-floor flats, and fear of rats, and drunk husbands sending rocks through windows [. . .] And this is when I discovered the voice I'd been suppressing all along ("Ghosts and Voices" 72-3).

Looking back, Cisneros says, "I think it was important for me to have the cultural shock I experienced at Iowa, for me to experience my otherness, in order for me to choose my

subject intentionally. I'm grateful for Iowa. If anything, it stirred me up, and that's good" (qtd. in Satz, "Returning to One's House).

Cisneros's breakthrough resulted in *The House on Mango Street*, an experimental collection of vignettes, a *künstlerroman* recording the passage from childhood to adolescence of a budding writer named Esperanza. This central protagonist witnesses psychic, sexual, and economic crises in the lives of those around her, yet consciously cultivates self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-esteem which build her confidence in the future. The text concludes with Esperanza's artistic withdrawal from the limits of her community, though it includes a noble promise: "I have gone away to come back for the ones I have left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (110). The girl who did not want to belong to the social circumstances represented by her house in the *barrio* realizes that she belongs to herself, to others, and not to a situation. Esperanza's name means 'hope' in English. Gifting her marginalized young heroine with a powerful voice and a powerful name, Cisneros expresses optimism that the painful social reality she depicts can change.

In the introduction to *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros writes, "I was searching for the 'ugliest' subjects I could find, the most un-poetic story [. . .] trying the best I could to write the kind of book I had never seen in a library or in a school, the kind of book not even professors could write" (xv). The simple, lyrical language of each story flows from English to Spanish both to convey dialogue in a realistic fashion and to evoke the sensory detail in the environment. Cisneros empowers herself and the sensitive little girl she once was by chronicling her reflections and illustrating female space in the *barrio*—a setting until then ignored in American literary fiction. Cisneros spotlights writing as the key to Esperanza's positive self-definition. "You must keep writing," a

mentor tells her, “It will keep you free” (56). The act of naming, defining and capturing the implications behind the interactions she observes helps Esperanza make sense of prejudice and misogyny, comfort and love. Andrea O’Reilly Herrera writes, “For Esperanza, the act of writing and recollecting enables her to synthesize, critique, and recuperate her own personal history and, by correlation, the history of her culture” (“Chambers of Consciousness”).

The House on Mango Street expresses three main wishes of its young narrator: a desire to move away from her impoverished neighborhood, her goal to become a writer, and most importantly, her yearning to establish an individual identity. Esperanza views her house as a literal representation of her identity. She recalls how a nun reacted to her living space on Loomis Street: “You live *there*?” Esperanza cringes, “There. I had to look to where she pointed—the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn’t fall out. You live *there*? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. *There*. I lived *there*. I nodded” (5). Julian Olivares notes that by pointing to this dilapidated third-floor apartment, Esperanza “points to herself, revealing her own poverty and shame. Consequently, she wants to point to another house and to point to another self” (“Entering”). Mary Esselman writes that Esperanza’s desire for ‘a real house’ “reflects her need to be considered a ‘real’ person in mainstream society, to be treated with dignity, and to live freely and creatively” (“Overview”). Esperanza’s next words confirm these analyses: “I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn’t it. The house on Mango Street isn’t it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go”

(5). Herrera suggests a further reason for Esperanza's initial loathing for the family's new house by citing precedents in American literature:

For Edith Wharton (*The House of Mirth*) houses symbolize the materialistic, patriarchal ideology that entraps both men and women and prescribes limited and repressive behavioral patterns to females, offering them few options outside the context of marriage [. . .] For Sandra Cisneros, the house on Mango Street simultaneously represents all of the systems that oppose or challenge her as a woman, a minority, and a writer (“Chambers of Consciousness”).

As Esperanza matures, she learns that while she has the intelligence and strength to transcend her situation and build a world of her own—perhaps an intellectual space of books and learning—the little red house on Mango Street and all it represents remains an essential element of herself she must accept.

A Venn diagram of Esperanza's identity, or, more accurately, Cisneros's identity, would include several commingling circles—their intersection represents the reality *The House on Mango Street* portrays. The novel does more than simply illustrate the condition of women, or feminists, Chicanas, Chicanos, Latinos in Chicago, or academics from poor backgrounds with old-world legacies and Messianic notions. Cisneros reflects all of these demographics, but more importantly, she conveys her individual experience as a writer coming of age.

When she first emerged on the literary scene, Sandra Cisneros famously described herself in biography pages as “nobody's wife and nobody's mother,” a declaration intent on separating herself from the stereotype of the Latina woman as pacific, eternal Madonna. While she has often come to be read as a voice of opposition to majority-culture practices, over the years, Cisneros's writing primarily charts her journey from tough Chicago street child to cultivated, educated and cosmopolitan aesthete (Ganz, “Border Crossings”). In an ironic twist, Felicia Cruz brings out that *The House on Mango Street*, the singular gem Cisneros sourced from personal depths, has acquired

“elite status as a ‘representative’ work of multicultural literatures in the curricula of high-schools and colleges.” Stanford University adopted it into their multicultural core curriculum immediately, setting the model for other schools to follow and influencing the sale of over two million books.

After the publication of *The House on Mango Street* in 1984, Cisneros went on to win a Columbus American Book Award and gain the notice of major New York publishers. Her next major work, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*, a collection of verse released in 1997, brought her positive critical reviews. In these poems, the “bad girl” of *Mango Street* ripens into the seductress, the “evil woman”—an unmarried, transgressive cultural wanderer. She resembles Esperanza’s projected adult persona; “beautiful,” “cruel,” and untamed (88). The narrators of each section fulfill certain cultural expectations while maintaining autonomy and even a prideful sense of defiance. Cisneros explores the archetypal femme fatale of Mexican lore, La Malinche, the indigenous mistress of Hernan Cortes, a traitor who betrayed her people to the conquistador. Cisneros describes this specific interest in an interview, saying:

It’s true for many writers and women like myself who have grown up in a patriarchal culture, like the Mexican culture—I felt great guilt betraying that culture. Your culture tells you that if you step out of line, if you break these norms, you are becoming anglicized, you’re becoming the malinche—influenced and contaminated by these foreign influences and ideas [. . .] many of my stories come from with straddling two cultures” (qtd. in Satz, “Returning to One’s House”).

After mastering the voice of a blossomed Esperanza, she experimented with what she describes as “a deluge of voices, voices that weren’t mine at all,” in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, published in 1991. Characters range from the spirit of Inés Zapata, wife of the Mexican revolutionary, to Chaq Uxmal Paloquin, son of an ancient line of Mayan kings who “lives behind Esparza & Sons Auto Repair in a little room that used to be a closet” (29).

In 1995, Cisneros was granted the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, which provided her with the time and resources necessary to write a multigenerational novel based on her own family stories. Published in 2002, she dedicates *Caramelo* to her father who passed away shortly afterwards. The novel begins with the epigram, “Tell me a story, even if it’s a lie,” and continues with this disclaimer:

The truth, these stories are nothing but story, bits of string, odds and ends found here and there, embroidered together to make something new. I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies. If, in the course of my inventing, I have inadvertently stumbled on the truth, *perdónenme*. To write is to ask questions. It doesn’t matter if the answers are true or *puro cuento*. After all and everything only the story is remembered, and the truth fades away like the pale blue ink on a cheap embroidery pattern: *Eres Mi Vida, Sueño Contigo Mi Amor, Suspiro Por Ti, Sólo Tú* (vii).

Caramelo tells the story of the Esperanza-esque Lala Reyes. It begins with a tale of a great-grandfather like Cisneros’s own, whose family “boasted railroads and wealth” yet who lost his fortune to gambling. It largely centers on the middle generation of a father tellingly named Inocencio. His personality resembles that of Cisneros’s father who, after failing his college classes, ran off to wander the United States instead of facing his family’s anger and eventually settled in Chicago for the love of a woman. The book traces Lala’s maternal lineage as well, which, of course, resembles Cisneros’s: Her grandfather, a humble yet admirable Indian man took his wife and fled the Revolution for backbreaking railroad work in Chicago, and there her mother was born (Ganz, “Border Crossings”). They sent for cruel relatives, like Lala’s. Inocencio learns upholstery and comes home each day exhausted, a “papa who wakes up tired in the dark,” like Esperanza’s. The fictional characters Sandra Cisneros creates blend with the real people in her life now and those in her memory, and with those of her previous writings; they take flight and come home again.

The House on Mango Street ends with a sense of open dénouement—will Esperanza find her ideal house, one all to herself, with room for her books and space for her work? Margaret Higonet writes, “The most interesting type of fragment may be that which deliberately propels the reader into responsibility for the unwritten narrative conclusion” (49). Readers must decide whether the conclusion occurs simply as pause before the hot storm brews anew or whether Esperanza achieves lasting success and goes on to live the adult life she dreams up for herself as a child. One may be swayed, though, by the information provided in the author biography immediately following: Sandra Cisneros, nobody’s wife and nobody’s mother, helps former high school dropouts in Chicago, teaches writing at universities across the country, delivers countless readings, and in her writing returns to the barrio just like the young Esperanza promised she would.

*Wrestling la Madonna
Individuation of the Protagonist*

In *The House of Mango Street*, Sandra Cisneros individuates her protagonist, Esperanza, both from negative images of herself in mainstream media and limiting expectations of her cultural background. Esperanza thus becomes free to assert herself as an individual, and furthermore, as an artist.

Esperanza feels out of place in the physically hostile environment of Mango Street. Cisneros does not present Esperanza as the face of Chicanas trapped by a patriarchal system. These stereotypical long-suffering mother figures do exist in the narrative, yet their plight highlights Esperanza’s choice to defy the prescribed routine. The women of Mango Street include Marin, “under the streetlight, dancing by herself,” Ruthie, “the lady with one blue sock and one green because she forgot,” the old woman who had “so many children she didn’t know what to do,” Mamacita, crying “¿Cuándo,

cuándo, cuándo?” and Rafaela, “who drinks coconut and papaya juice on Tuesdays and wishes there were sweeter drinks, not bitter like an empty room (27, 67, 29,79, 80).

Esperanza rejects the work which subjugates them and refuses their place in society. She says: “I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain [. . .] I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate” (88-89). Esperanza’s mother encourages such independence: In the chapter called “A Smart Cookie,” she stops cooking, points a wooden spoon at her daughter and says: “I could’ve been somebody, you know? Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard [. . .] Got to take care all your own” (90-91). Esperanza’s experience echoes Cisneros’s own upbringing: she recalls:

Because of my mother, I spent my childhood afternoons in my room reading instead of in the kitchen [. . .] I never had to change my little brothers’ diapers, I never had to cook a meal alone, nor was I ever sent to do the laundry. Certainly, I had my share of housework to do, as we all did, but I don’t recall it interfering with my homework or my reading habits (qtd. in Ganz, “Border Crossings”).

“A Smart Cookie” reads as a tribute from Cisneros to her mother, a “feisty, strong, independent” woman. “I’m here,” Cisneros explained to an audience of young writers, “because my mother let me stay in my room reading and studying, perhaps because she didn’t want me to inherit her sadness and her rolling pin” (“Notes” 75).

Esperanza writes out of respect for those who sacrificed for her benefit. She writes to reveal the unfulfilled wishes of her mother and her comadres. Elizabeth Doyle writes, “Esperanza, who often speaks as ‘we,’ [. . .] achieves a collective as well as an individual voice [. . .] She survives to release the stories of those around her but also to reach for her own freedom” (“More Room of Her Own”).

Feisty, independent, creative Esperanza takes nothing for granted—she considers even the implications of her name and ponders the possibility of changing it in an effort at self-labeling: “My great-grandmother [. . .] I have inherited her name, but I don’t want to inherit her place by the window [. . .] I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or ZeZe the X. Yes. Something like ZeZe the X will do” (11). At baptism, the Catholic child receives the name of a patron saint in addition to his other names. Therefore, Esperanza’s stance does not deny her grandmother or her culture. She attempts to define her personality and interests rather than passively accept the foreign status bestowed upon her by her foreign name—which means ‘hope,’ but also ‘sadness’ and ‘waiting.’ Esperanza prefers to identify herself rather than be identified by others. And so she deems ZeZe the X her patron saint. Cisneros said in an interview, “ZeZe the X came from my own love affair with *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. I loved the X in Malcolm X and the idea of his choosing that as a name [. . .] There’s zest to it. It sounds exotic and wild” (qtd. in Satz, “Returning to One’s House”).

Cisneros critiques the tendency of Latino society to regard unorthodox thinking and behavior as undesirable, or, as Esperanza puts it, “wicked.” Cisneros gives Esperanza the support of exceptional parents who support her pursuits and give her a sense of validation. For this reason, when Esperanza encounters opposition to her choices outside the home she shrugs it off and over time begins to embrace danger and the wicked, redefining the term as a mark of courage and daring. Juan Daniel Busch notes:

Esperanza begins to actively self-label and explore her 'badness' [. . .] she is unwilling to assimilate to other 'worlds' definitions" ("Self-Baptizing"). She takes a cue from the femme fatale, saying, "In the movies there is always one with red red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away" (89).

From watching older girls Esperanza realizes that even in a male-dominated society, women have a certain influence: the power of seduction (Sugiyama, "Of Woman Bondage"). When she and her friends make their first tee-tottering experiment in "magic high heels" Esperanza realizes men cannot take their eyes off her. While she aspires for dangerous, "wicked" sensuality, she decides at the end of the day, "We are tired of being beautiful," unsettled by the implications of the charade (42). Herrera writes, "Esperanza finds that she can be beautiful, she can attract attention wearing 'ordinary' shoes as well" ("Chambers of Consciousness"). As she moves across the dance floor with her Uncle Nacho, she says:

My mother watches, and my little cousins watch, and the boy who is my cousin by first communion watches, and everyone says, wow, who are those two who dance like in the movies, until I forget that I am wearing only ordinary shoes, brown and white, the kind my mother buys each year for school. And all I hear is the clapping when the music stops [. . .] All night the boy who is a man watches me dance. He watched me dance (47-48).

Esperanza proves herself more mature and sensitive than her peers. This leads her to cultivate different goals and desires from the others. Girls like Sally are prisoners in their fathers' houses and attempt escape through marriage in the hopes that they might find salvation and love in a home of their own. Sally marries young and sits isolated in her husband's house: "She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake" (102). In absolute contrast, Esperanza takes a job downtown even before she can legally work, wishes for the "red red lips" of sexual empowerment, and dreams of a house all her own with "pretty

purple petunias,” a house full of books and stories, “quiet as snow, clean as paper before the poem” (108).

While Esperanza has artistic insight and uncommon ability, her mentors remind her that the search for self involves more than personal happiness—she has a responsibility to Mango Street. Dianne Klein writes of how Esperanza’s mentors “nurture her writing talent, show her ways to escape the bonds of patriarchy, and remind her of her cultural and communal responsibility” (“Coming of Age in Novels”). Alicia balances university studies with responsibilities in the home and tells her, “Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you’ll come back too.” Esperanza disagrees and says she will not return until someone makes it better. “Who’s going to do it?” Alicia asks, “The mayor?” At this thought Esperanza laughs out loud and realizes Alicia’s point. No, “not the mayor” (107). Like three wise women indicated to her earlier, when she moves on—and all acknowledge that as one set apart from the rest she will one day rise and depart—she must come back for the ones who cannot leave as easily.

ZeZe the X: The Great American Tomboy
Cisneros’s Contribution to the Western Canon

Thanks to the enduring popularity of *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros offers generations of readers an accessible new language to express the grand themes of literary fiction. Eduardo Elías describes Sandra Cisneros as an artist, “a painter with words, who relies on sounds, plural meanings, and resonances to produce rich and varied images in each reader’s mind” (“Overview”). She creates a poetic hybrid dialect which incorporates English, the many Spanishes spoken in the Latin world, and Spanglish in a move to translate the autobiographies of Americans borne of diaspora. Cisneros reflects the multilingual invention of diasporic peoples by defining the gray spaces of reality in-

between long established cultures. “The Eskimos got thirty different names for snow,” Esperanza declares to her friends in a chapter which lists the names of all the children on their street: “Rita, Margie, Ernie. . .” (35-38). Just as Eskimos have thirty names for snow, recognizing the variety and difference in its quality, Cisneros gives character and individuality to a mass of barrio kids. Andrea O’Reilly Herrera writes of the state of Mexican Americans, “discriminated against and marginalized by both Anglo-American and Mexican culture [. . .] In Gloria Anzaldúa’s words, Chicanos live ‘on the border,’ the ‘fault line,’ the ‘wound’ between two cultures: although they share aspects of each, ultimately they are dispossessed from both” (“Chambers of Consciousness”). Cisneros’s characters do not “choose sides,” abandoning Mexican culture for the Anglo or vice versa: She invites readers to recognize and validate fusion culture. She demonstrates the value of having two languages, two cultures from which to pick and choose in efforts at self-definition.

“I’m trying to write the stories that haven’t been written,” Cisneros said in a 1991 interview, “I feel like a cartographer; I’m determined to fill a literary void” (qtd. in Ganz, “Border Crossings”). In *A Room of One’s Own*, written in 1929, Virginia Woolf anticipated just such a break in “the expected order” of literary tradition. She foresaw women of the future developing forms “adapted to the body,” expressing everyday lives in prose works that were “shorter, more concentrated than those of men” (85, 95, 81). Cisneros fulfills this prophecy with *The House on Mango Street*, creating a new storytelling format. Her episodic vignettes are not characteristic of an umbrella “Latino lit” but rather represent a young narrator’s quest for authenticity and construction of worldview. Maria Elena de Valdés writes, “The structure of this text, therefore, begins as

a frame for self-invention and as the writing progresses so does the subject. She is, in the most direct sense of the word, making herself and in a space of her own” (“In Search of Identity”). In service to the *künstlerroman*, Cisneros proposes a new aesthetic which includes lyrical phasing, imagistic language, and circumlocutions which at once convey Esperanza’s youth and myriad connotations. In an article titled “Do You Know Me? I Wrote *The House on Mango Street*,” Cisneros recalls:

I wanted to write stories that were a cross between poetry and fiction [. . .] I wanted to write a collection which could be read at any random point without having any knowledge of what came before or after. Or, that could be read in a series to tell one big story. I wanted stories like poems, compact and lyrical and ending with a reverberation.

Even aside from the content of her work, Cisneros’s choice of form has great impact on fiction writing today. Mary Esselman writes, “Cisneros’s experiments with language and content serve as models to young readers who may not see their experience reflected in ‘traditional’ culture stories, and to young writers who wish to express their own experience in ‘alternative’ narrative forms” (“Overview”). The inclusion of *The House on Mango Street* to an ever-increasing number of school reading lists testifies to her influence on the American canon and a growing acceptance of her distinctive writing form.

Teachers of Sandra Cisneros’s work realize that her style and form underscore the theme of individual exploration. In a trend that spans the past twenty years, students from kindergarten to college are routinely assigned to write Cisneros-inspired contemplations on aspects of their own lives with the goal of defining personal values and priorities. A high school student named Cherie responds to the vignette “Those Who Don’t” by writing on her own upbringing as one of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Where Cisneros writes, “Those who don’t know any better come into our neighborhood scared.

They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives," Cherie writes, "Those who don't know any better are scared when we go into their neighborhoods. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with big shiny Bibles." As students read Cisneros, they realize that although tackling the topics of spiritual belief and cultural heritage may be difficult, the defining and eventual claiming of these remain vital and inherently empowering. Eckerd College professor Nancy Corson Carter writes, "As an academician, I choose these texts for my teaching and writing as part of my own effort in canon re-vision, in engaging in the 'difficult dialogues.'" Writing in 2010, she describes choosing literature from past and present which "explicitly speaks to, with and from a specific communal matrix, [yet] has the potential to expand and enrich our sense of the larger matrix for all our stories [. . . helping us] to write a larger, more compassionate, and more diversely appreciative human biography" ("Claiming the Bittersweet Matrix"). She makes reference to the matrices conceived by Johnella Butler, who urges instructors to consider a "non-hierarchical methodology [that] would refuse primacy to either race, class, gender, or ethnicity," demanding instead a recognition of their place of interaction (16).

In *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros alters, stretches, and subverts the archetypal themes and images present at this place of interaction for her own purposes. Herrera writes, "The self which Cisneros defines is, in effect, defined both in relation and resistance to conventional plot formulas. Cisneros refashions archetypal paradigms, such as the Fall, the Peter Pan syndrome, and the Cinderella cycle" ("Chambers of Consciousness"). Ultimately her artistic genius resides in her capacity to take the raw materials of the past—words, concepts, ideologies—and reinterpret, reappraise, revise,

and recontextualize them for the future. Esperanza and her friends improvise upon traditional jump rope ditties and in so doing, writes Elizabeth Doyle, they “‘write beyond the ending’ of the cultural scripts confining the women around them” (“More Room of Her Own”). She reconfigures the tree that grows in Brooklyn as “four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows [. . .] hairy toes [. . .] and “violent teeth [. . .] whose only reason is to be and be” (74-75). She deromanticizes Venus, the morning star of hope and love to dreamers everywhere, calling it the “tortilla star” of subjugation and drudgery (31). As the setting of a painful sexual awakening, “The Monkey Garden” of Mango Street has Biblical overtones of Eden, yet Cisneros evokes also the symbolism of America as the new Eden. She writes:

There were sunflowers big as flowers on Mars and thick cockscombs bleeding the deep red fringe of theater curtains. There were dizzy bees and bow-tied fruit flies turning somersaults and humming in the air. Sweet sweet peach trees. Thorn roses and thistle and pears. Weeds like so many squinty-eyed starts and brush that made your ankles itch and itch until you washed with soap and water. There were big green apples hard as knees. And everywhere the sleepy smell of rotting wood, damp earth and dusty hollyhocks thick and perfume-like the blue-blond hair of the dead [. . .] This, I suppose, was the reason why we went there. Far away from where our mothers could find us [. . .] Somebody started the lie that the monkey garden had been there before anything. We liked to think the garden could hide things for a thousand years. There beneath the roots of soggy flowers were the bones of murdered pirates and dinosaurs, the eye of a unicorn turned to coal (94-96).

She dashes the expectation and promise held in each of the archetypal images by describing them with the connotations of death and decay. In this garden, Esperanza closes her eyes and longs for death.

As a writer educated in the Western tradition, Cisneros weaves allusions to Greek mythological characters into her work, yet, interestingly, creates a sort of warp and weft which binds multiple mythological traditions. The three sisters who mysteriously appear to guide Esperanza near the end of her story resemble the Fates, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. They single out Esperanza, assuring her that she will go far while telling her

what seems like a riddle: “When you leave you must remember always to come back.”

Arriving “with the wind,” they are apparently from Mexico and seem to be “related to the moon” (105). Cisneros references more than the Fates, as Maria Elena de Valdés reveals: “In pre-Hispanic Mexico, the lunar goddesses, such as Tlazolteotl and Xochiquetzal, were the intermediaries for all women” (“In Search of Identity”). Cisneros pulls together goddesses and oracles from various contexts to create fairy godmothers that “smell like Kleenex or the inside of a satin handbag” and send Esperanza on her mighty way (106).

Esperanza’s odyssey to liberate herself from the obstacles blocking her success topples the paradigm of the traditional tragic female coming-of-age story. Where the activities of a typical proud literary heroine result in disillusionment (*When the Emperor Was Divine* by Julie Otsuka) or death (*Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, *Little Bee* by Chris Cleave), Esperanza refuses her expected place in society and implicitly succeeds. Cisneros produces a derivation of the male bildungsroman, in which a female empowers herself through her writing, realizes a purpose beyond marriage and motherhood, and manifests her empowerment through her actions. Notions of women’s behavior, both American and Mexican, are challenged: A woman does not have to “play coy” or “come on hearty,” as the girl of Margaret Piercy’s “Barbie Doll” was advised. Cisneros opens up more options for women’s behavior, and for minority behavior. Notions of minority expectations for integration with mainstream society are challenged by the text. Esperanza tires of looking at houses with gardens “like the hungry.” She believes she will succeed, and on her own terms: “One day I’ll own my own house,” Esperanza says, “but I won’t forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I’ll offer them the attic, ask them to stay,

because I know how it is to be without a house” (86-87). Esperanza envisions her house as a meeting place, and unlike the houses on the hill, approachable and inviting to both dinner guests and those in need. The fictions Esperanza concocts are at once an act of defiance—in their deviation from the fairy tale— and, in Adrienne Rich’s words, “an act of survival” (35).

Cisneros adds dimension to the archetypal American tough girl, allowing her to be beautiful and serious and sentimental, granting her a full range of expression. Cisneros continues the line of Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, and Toni Morrison, and she clears the way for the graceful sass of Sandra Oh, Maya Arulpragasam, and Marjane Satrapi. Esperanza’s liberation through writing draws from the *künstlerroman*’s goal of self-creation. Self-knowledge and self-invention are the goal of the artist-protagonists, many of whom sidestep limiting labels—feminist, Latino, Mexican, American, working-class—to proclaim, like Henrik Ibsen, “My only cause is freedom.” Viewed in such a context, the place Esperanza describes in the chapter “A House of My Own” represents even more than female space or an escape from the barrio. Esperanza describes the personal space of her identity:

Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody’s garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem (108).

Through writing Esperanza creates a space for her thoughts, desires, and convictions. She investigates the constructs of her world, carves a comfortable place in it, and begins a journey toward freedom, fulfillment, and a modest contentment. In an answer to continuing racial inequality, oppressive cultural expectation, economic and personal crises, what does Cisneros offer? Esperanza. Hope.

And Other Stories
Jhumpa Lahiri beyond the “Immigrant Experience”

Once made public, both my book and myself were immediately and copiously categorized. Take, for instance, the various ways I am described: as an American author, as an Indian-American author, as a British-born author, as an Anglo-Indian author, as an NRI¹ author, as an ABCD² author. According to Indian academics, I've written something known as 'Diaspora fiction': in the U.S., it's 'immigrant fiction.' [. . .] *The fact that I am described in two ways or twenty is of no consequence: as it turns out, each of those labels is accurate.*

—Jhumpa Lahiri, “To Heaven without Dying”



Figure 8 Jhumpa Lahiri

Pulitzer Prize winner. PEN/Hemingway Award winner. *The New Yorker* Debut of the Year. American Academy of Arts and Letters Award winner. Addison Metcalf Award winner. One of the ten sexiest women in the world, according to *The Daily Beast*'s list “for the thinking man.”

Internationally best-selling author. The best

efforts of scholars and critics to label Lahiri beyond these external designations yield generally phrased, clichéd results: Her novel's book jacket calls her an “illuminator of the immigrant experience.” The very qualities which led to Lahiri's breakthrough success make her impossible to categorize without limiting the accomplishment of her art.

In an interview called “Migration, Assimilation, and Inebriation,” Kara Bolonick asks Lahiri, “At what point do you think a writer can escape the labels and just be a

¹ Non-Resident Indian

² American Born Confused “Desi”—“desi” meaning Indian—an acronym coined by Indian nationals to describe culturally challenged second-generation Indians raised in the U.S.

writer?” She answers with characteristically graceful forbearance, saying, “A writer always wants to feel that she’s just a writer.”

Stephen Metcalf traces this attitude in the “melancholy poise” of Lahiri’s writing, which delineates the quiet, modest private lives of everyday people. In his review for the *New York Times*, Metcalf compares her choices to those of others who have grown up as ethnic minorities, writing, “With a background similar in outline to that of Zadie Smith, she nonetheless arrived at an entirely different imaginative enterprise. She renounced the writerly flourish, never once played the exotic and—perhaps most astonishing—scaled her characters to actual human existence” (“Out of the Overcoat”). Mandira Sen concurs, saying Lahiri’s writing “is as different as it can be from the outpourings of Indian immigrants writing in English for whom the home country provides a canvas for their magical interpretations” (“Names and Nicknames”). The protagonists Lahiri offers include shy housewives, professors of physics, and an interpreter of maladies—a literal Gujarati language interpreter; the character himself a revolt against Salman Rushdie’s clairvoyants, against mystics and mistresses of spices. Lahiri writes about ordinary humans and their need for belonging. She refuses to feature ethnicity in the manner of Khaled Hosseini, David Davidar, or Gurinder Chadha all of whom play into stereotype instead of expressing personal concerns, profitably offering mainstream audiences a tour of the bizarre, complaisantly telling jokes at their own expense. They continue the dirty work of Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad, catering to an appetite for the exotic, telling stories to tickle a Western consciousness, and emphasizing the idea that non-European cultures rank low in some universally accepted hierarchy and need saving. Jhumpa

Lahiri evades the entire post-colonial debacle and writes simply of the human desire to make a life for oneself on one's own terms.

While she claims to examine universal needs rather than ethnic issues, most of Lahiri's characters just happen to have Indian heritage. This can be attributed, however, to the fact that Lahiri writes only about what she knows thoroughly and deeply. To tell her universal story, therefore, Lahiri draws specifically from the palette of her background, saying of her material:

Some bits and pieces are taken from my own parents and other parents that I knew growing up [. . .] It was a tight world, but I knew a lot of people and was privy to a whole spectrum of types and personalities and characters. To me they don't represent immigrants or anyone specific. They just represent the human condition (qtd. in Bolonick, "Migration").

Such a complete denial of "the immigrant experience" despite her choice to deal almost exclusively with first and second-generation immigrant characters may reflect an inner conflict Lahiri continues to battle into middle age. In interviews she regularly states that her parents taught her to respect Indian culture and to be as "Indian" as possible, yet when asked in 2003 whether she feels more American than Indian she expressed real uncertainty. This could not have been the first time she encountered such a question, considering that she ascended to great success years before, yet even when given time she did not recover with a witty remark like Sandra Cisneros or Amy Tan might. When she thinks of herself, she said, "I don't think of a nationality. I don't think of anything." When asked in school to declare her ethnicity, she checked the box marked "Other" (qtd. in Langer, "A Daughter's Journey").

Lahiri revisited her uncertainty that same year, using personal experience to explain the dilemma of self-classification for the children of immigrants in general:

I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants—those with strong ties to their country of origin—is that they feel neither one thing nor the other (“Interview”).

Lahiri expertly articulates the mind state of first-generation Indian Americans who, like herself, are often married to non-Indians and attempting to establish their own families. She describes her subjects as those who have “come of age in two cultures, America and the more insular if still vast world of their parents and friends, whose expectations and experiences are in stark contrast to their own.” She continues, revealing her purpose to evoke the multitude of dichotomies which pummel characters so like herself, feeling “displacement, guilt, and fear as they try to find a balance between the solace and suffocation of tradition and the terror and excitement of the future into which they’re being thrust” (qtd. in Bolonick, “Migration”). Lahiri maintains this aim in all of her published fiction, using complex combinations of literary technique to bind her stories and novels, each of which center around the individual’s need for connection and communication despite the difficulty of putting words to our most pressing and vital yet divergent thoughts. She presents situations and asks questions without moralizing or offering solutions. How can a couple get past the resentment they feel for each other since the death of their child? How can a widower convey to his son the necessity of his remarriage? How can a young man explain to a lover all the abstractions he has come to associate with his name? Lahiri’s stories often conclude with open denouement.

In an essay titled “From Hybrids to Tourists: Children of Immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*,” Natalie Friedman observes that assimilation and the American Dream are no longer at the heart of stories by contemporary writers from minority backgrounds. She writes that the central figure of these stories “is more concerned with

his or her dual identity as it manifests itself in America and in the shrinking global community.” She lauds Lahiri for challenging the conventional image of the disenfranchised foreigner, writing:

Lahiri’s depictions of the elite class of Western-educated Indians and their children’s relationship to both India and America dismantle the stereotype of brown-skinned immigrant families that are always outsiders to American culture and recasts them as cosmopolites, members of a shifting network or global travelers whose national loyalties are flexible.

The 21st century American hero does not have to fight for his right to life, liberty and the pursuit. In fact, he does not literally have to fight for anything at all. Lahiri’s thoroughly postmodern protagonist battles neither poverty nor political restriction; no, his battles are far more refined. He grapples with too many choices. He resists labels and insinuation. He fights the past. He feels trapped by the future. He battles his name.

Jhumpa Lahiri feels ambivalence for her own name. She admits to her own “massive name anxiety,” saying, “When I entered the American world as a child, I endlessly had to explain to people how to say my name and how to spell it and what it meant [. . .] I really felt like my name was causing people pain on some level [. . .] it was painfully bastardized and it just sounded so silly to me.” She recalls being called “Jump-Jump” by classmates and even concedes, in an interview with Adam Langer, that she remains still not so much fond of her name as “resigned to it.” Tia Lahiri did not anticipate such a consequence when she chose to name her daughter Jhumpa, explaining simply, “I just liked the name [. . .] It sounds like a raindrop or the sound anklets make when people dance.” In his article, “A Daughter’s Journey,” Langer studies the characters and events of Jhumpa Lahiri’s childhood to gain insight into her quasi-autobiographical writing. He describes her manner, saying:

What has occasionally been described as standoffishness seems more like timidity and discomfort with the attention lavished upon her, the natural reaction of a woman who spent a lifetime in libraries and was transformed almost overnight into a sex symbol and literary superstar [. . .] she speaks with genuine self effacement.

His investigation reveals that Lahiri's ongoing struggle to make peace with her name and to shake off negative associations from the past reflects the ongoing struggle of her characters to be recognized as Americans despite their old world cultural heritage.

Tia Lahiri and her husband Amar left India in 1964, first moving to London, where Jhumpa was born in 1967. Shortly afterward, they immigrated to the United States and settled in Rhode Island. Jhumpa and her younger sister, born in America, grew up in a household full of books. Their father worked as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island and their mother, who earned Masters degrees in Bengali drama and literature, instilled a love of learning in her children by example. She says:

We read a lot in our house [. . .] everybody was reading something all the time, and whenever I read something, I like other people to know about it. So every time I read a good novel or a good short story, I would read it aloud and Jhumpa always showed lots of interest.

Langer continues to report on Lahiri's quiet, studious, serious nature as he interviews English teachers and librarians, one of whom points out Lahiri's entry in the South Kingstown High School yearbook: *Men are cruel, but Man is kind—Rabindranath Tagore*, she begins profoundly, before gushing over Sting, Bono, and Agatha Christie mysteries. Lahiri worked part time at a library and co-edited her school newspaper, choices to which Langer attaches great significance. He notes:

Though her status as the daughter of immigrants often made her feel like an outsider [. . .] she found refuge in writing, inspired by the books she loved [. . .] She says one of her moments of greatest childhood excitement came when she won a writing contest and her story was bound with fluorescent orange yarn and shelved in the library, with an actual pocket and card in the back of it.

Lahiri quit creative writing in her teen years, citing self-consciousness and a lack of confidence. She remembers writing bland articles for the school paper, contributing no fiction at all: "I was too mortified," she says.

Lahiri made plans to pursue a career in academia, earning a BA in English from Barnard, Masters degrees in English literature, comparative literature and creative writing, followed by a PhD in Renaissance studies from Boston University. After writing a dissertation which concerned the social commentary of British playwrights, Lahiri describes how she felt a sudden, urgent need to change course. “I didn’t want to go on the job market,” she tells Langer, “I didn’t want to teach *Women Beware Women*. I just didn’t want to do it.”

Lahiri became more vigorously involved with creative writing once she graduated, crafting stories of her own while publishing anonymous copy as an intern at *Boston* magazine. During a fellowship at the Fine Arts Works Center in Provincetown, she created the short story cycle which would become *Interpreter of Maladies*. Lahiri’s very first collection quickly garnered praise and the ultimate honor of the Pulitzer Prize.

Jhumpa Lahiri: An Interpreter of Maladies

“Trust me,” Lahiri’s father likes to say, “I’ve survived on three continents; I know how to survive.” Many of the characters in *Interpreter of Maladies* are based on Lahiri’s family members. She pays homage to the courage of her father in a story titled, of course, “The Third and Final Continent.” Her mother’s comments reflect the impact of Lahiri’s most basic choice to record life through the lens of a previously invisible demographic: “We had to go through a lot when we came here, being immigrants and speaking with different accents and wearing different sorts of clothing, we had to go through a lot of criticism and humiliation.” As she remembers the day Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize, she says, “That moment, nothing mattered, because look where we are

now, where our daughter has brought us. She put us on some pedestal or something and people started to look at us in a different way” (qtd. in Langer, “A Daughter’s Journey”).

The stories of *Interpreter of Maladies* are unified by themes of exclusion, loneliness and the search for fulfillment which characterize not only an immigrant situation but contemporary middle-class existence in general. In her study of the short story cycle genre, Susan Garland Mann notes that “because cycles consist of discrete, self-sufficient stories, they are especially well suited to handling certain subjects, including the sense of isolation or fragmentation or indeterminacy that many [modern-day] characters experience” (11). In every story of *Interpreter of Maladies*, characters face the very same “maladies” Mann mentions. Most of their lives are defined by lonesomeness and a craving for an elusive emotional something which might help them achieve self-actualization. Anupama Chowdhury suggests, in her review for the *Journal of Indian Writing in English*, “Perhaps Lahiri is an interpreter herself who correctly translates these maladies without offering any specific remedy” (16). The title, *Interpreter of Maladies*, which stands without the adjunct “and Other Stories,” indicates that the text should be read as an episodic narrative on one set of themes.

In an interview with Vibhuti Patel, Lahiri says, “The characters I am drawn to all face some barrier of communication,” which she links to growing up in two countries (80). She describes the influence of Calcutta to Radhika S. Shankar in an early interview:

These trips to a vast, unruly, fascinating city so different from the small New England town where I was raised shaped my perceptions of the world and of people from a very early age. I learned there was another side, a very different version to everything [. . .] I went to Calcutta neither as a tourist nor a former resident—a valuable position, I think for a writer. I learned to observe things as an outsider, and yet I knew that as different Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way, in the ways I didn’t seem to belong in the United States (“A Writer Free to Write All Day”).

In her first collection, Jhumpa Lahiri keeps her settings very close to her own first-hand experience. Two stories take place in Calcutta and she sets the remaining in New England. Her work to date continues to center around upper middle-class suburbs, college towns, and fashionable neighborhoods in Boston and New York City. Characters are not only Indian, but more specifically from the state of Bengal; The Library of Congress most recently catalogs her writing as 1. BENGALI AMERICANS—FICTION. 2. BENGALI (SOUTH ASIAN PEOPLE)—UNITED STATES—FICTION. Bengal, home to such legendary intellectuals as Satyajit Ray and the illustrious Tagore family, has long been considered a major center of learning and erudition, with Calcutta as its axis. Bengalis take pride in their high-culture reputation, but many college graduates must leave their home state in order to acquire suitable employment. Mandira Sen examines cultural trends of the diaspora as she writes, “Their middle-class status sets the Bengalis apart from many American immigrant communities, though the experience of cleaving to the ethnic community remains the same” (“Names and Nicknames”). Lahiri’s characters are distinguished by their unique Indian subculture, and their lives often revolve around academia as well, reflecting the environment of her childhood. Her second-generation characters reflect the company she has chosen for herself as an adult, as she says:

[. . .] the way I made friends and connections was motivated by very different criteria than my parents. My parents befriended people simply for the fact that they were like them on the surface, they were Bengali, and that made their circle incredibly vast. There is this de facto assumption that they’re going to get along, and often that cultural glue holds them, but there were also these vast differences. My own circle of friends is much more homogenous, because most of my friends went to college—Ivy League or some other fine institution—and vote a certain way (qtd. in Bolonick, “Migration”).

Lahiri’s surprising view that her parents’ connections within an exclusively Bengali-American community are heterogeneous makes the criteria for inclusion to her circle of friends—described as “much more homogenous”—seem downright elitist. This may

explain the rather troubling absence of African Americans or any other ethnic minorities in her work. Lahiri has always lived and worked in the diverse northeastern part of the United States, so the exclusion of any non-Indian central characters of color and the absence of any American character at all who might originate from below the middle class stands at odds with her claim of expressing universal sentiment. A possible explanation for her decision to work solely with Bengali and mainstream white American characters could be that she writes variations of her own story over and over again. She understands the depths of her conflict in relation to the white majority and so does not dare to touch the complexities of the tensions other minority Americans face. Since she does not know the situation intimately and personally, she does not explore it. One comes away from her oeuvre with the sense that the very similar activities and choices of her various protagonists—all of them soulful and injured and devoid of a sense of humor to carry them through—reflect Lahiri's own journeys. She ventures no further.

In her best efforts to push past the boundary, the results are not successful, best seen in the case of two stories which center solely on Indian nationals. The individual thoughts of Boori-Ma and Bibi Haldar are unknown and rendered irrelevant—to the extent that they come across as generic caricatures: “In fact, the only thing that appeared three-dimensional about Boori-Ma was her voice: brittle with sorrows, as tart as curds, and shrill enough to grate meat from a coconut” (70). When questioned by an Indian journalist as to why she spotlights the life of servants and marginal figures in her two Calcutta stories, Lahiri admitted, “The reason I portrayed these characters out of the fray was because I felt that I could imagine it more easily than assuming the role of a more ‘ordinary’ adjusted Indian character” (qtd. in Chowdhury 19). Lahiri abstains from

designing characters like these in the following twelve years. She does not know them well enough—their tales are bombastic imaginings, a place for experiments with the Faulknerian collective narrator or large-scale social commentary, and the story she writes best stays small and quiet and close to home.

The internal crises Lahiri's characters face are quite apparently also her own, as Chowdhury writes:

The failure of most characters to make a balance between their American and Indian identities brings in an 'identity crisis' in their lives. This results in cultural isolation that leads to personal isolation as well. The stories establish convincingly the elements of diasporic obsession with the longing for a home, where the diasporans can feel at home (23).

On initial reading, *Interpreter of Maladies* comes across as a disaffected presentation of various case studies in which the author refuses to exalt or condemn her characters, refraining from comment almost completely. Lahiri camouflages her stance on these delicate affairs, however, with layers of sensory detail and a deliberate choice of names sourced from Shakespeare, Sanskrit, Modernist literature, and pop culture.

Shoba and Shukumar of “A Temporary Matter” grieve separately and differently for the death of their baby. Shoba, whose name means “light,” busies herself with work and activity, resenting Shukumar who was at a conference when she went into premature labor. Shukumar has since taken a leave of absence from university, presumably to focus on a dissertation he cannot bring himself to begin. His name connotes the easygoing contentment which seems to characterize his behavior—most days since the death “he would lie in their bed until he grew bored, gazing at his side of the closet which Shoba always left partly open, at the row of the tweed jackets and corduroy trousers he would not have to choose from to teach his classes that semester” (4). They are on the brink of separation—ninety-five percent of people who lose a child eventually divorce—yet over

a succession of power outages they talk in the dark, express identical concerns, and finally weep together, “for the things they now knew” (21).

The next story, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” recounts the awakening of a young narrator’s empathy. As Lilia watches her parents and a visitor from East Pakistan follow the details of a bloody war for the liberation of Bangladesh, she realizes, “Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what already happened there [. . .]” Lilia takes on the anxiety of her parents and especially Mr. Pirzada, stranded during a study semester abroad, far from his wife and daughters when war broke out, saying:

I could no longer eat. I could only steal glances at Mr. Pirzada, sitting beside me in his olive green jacket, calmly creating a well in his rice to make room for a second helping of lentils. He was not my notion of a man burdened by such grave concerns. I wondered if the reason he was always so smartly dressed was in preparation to endure with dignity whatever news assailed him [. . .] (31).

Lilia’s fascination with the gracious Mr. Pirzada stimulates her interest in her Indian heritage, and at school she sneaks a look at books on Asia while her classmates research early American history. Readers sense an early font of inner conflict for a child with multiple cultural influences as Lilia’s teacher scolds her, telling her to focus on more relevant matters, while later in the day her parents and Mr. Pirzada watch the eleven o’clock news, “anticipating the birth of a nation on the other side of the world” (34).

Lahiri tells the story of “Mrs. Sen’s” from the perspective of another young narrator, this time a white American named Eliot who spends his afternoons with a babysitter from Bengal. He has the poetic, observant nature of his namesake, T.S. Eliot, who indeed made the choice to leave his life of privilege in the United States and take citizenship abroad. Natalie Friedman notes that Eliot’s comparison of his pragmatic mother to the warm Mrs. Sen both “defamiliarize” the two cultures and create “a mode of heightened awareness” (“From Hybrids to Tourists”). Eliot becomes Mrs. Sen’s

confidant and witness to the turmoil in her heart, which culminates in a Gatsby-esque explosion:

She flung open the drawers of the bureau and the door of the closet, filled with saris of every imaginable texture and shade, brocaded with gold and silver threads. Some were transparent, tissue thin, others as thick as drapes, with tassels knotted along the edges. In the closet they were on hangers; in the drawers they were folded flat, or wound tightly like thick scrolls. She sifted through the drawers, letting saris spill over the edges. ‘When have I ever worn this one? And this? And this?’ She tossed the saris one by one from the drawers, then pried several from their hangers. They landed like a pile of tangled sheets on the bed (125).

Eliot forges a bond with Mrs. Sen that he can never attain with his mother. When Mrs. Sen asks him, “‘Do you miss you mother, Eliot, these afternoons with me?’” he reveals that “the thought had never occurred to him” (122). His own mother soon appears to him odd and alien: “It gave him a little shock to see his mother all of a sudden, in the transparent stockings and shoulder-padded suits she wore to her job, peering into the corners of Mrs. Sen’s apartment” (118). Anupama Chowdhury cites Eliot’s youth as the key to this relationship, writing:

Eliot is free from the ‘exoticist’ gaze and this makes the cross-cultural interaction possible. Eliot’s response to his mother’s arrivals each day to pick him up expresses the comfort level he feels within Mrs. Sen’s apartment, even though he recognizes that her customs are rooted in India [. . .] The readers get the message that meaningful communication can be possible only if there is genuine understanding, love, and sympathy (18).

When events separate them, Eliot finds himself in the same situation as Mrs. Sen, without companionship, looking out at “gray waves receding from the shore” (135).

“Sexy” follows another white American, Miranda, recently arrived in Boston from the netherworld of the American Midwest. Like Duke Prospero’s daughter, Miranda departs a sheltered childhood yet naïve, spending her days in the big city working in a cubicle, searching for bargains at Filene’s Basement, eating dinner in front of her television. She enters into a relationship with Dev, a married Bengali man, which inspires her to invent a new persona: she gathers the stereotypical accoutrements of a sophisticate, a kept woman, and gobbles up the foreign culture that makes her feel

worldly and adventurous. Dev, by the way, means “god”, and Miranda makes him the object of her adoration. Anupama Chowdhury notes, “To Miranda, India is always a land of ethnicity, the ‘other’” (21). Lovemaking feeds Miranda’s fantasy: “Miranda closed her eyes and saw deserts and elephants, and marble pavilions floating on lakes beneath a full moon” (96). In her emotional innocence she thrills when Dev calls her sexy, yet experiences an epiphany when a little boy tells her “sexy” means “loving someone you don’t know” (107). Chowdhury writes that this scene “forms the climax of the story and Miranda realizes the reciprocal colonization between her and Dev: he is with her for her white skin and long legs, both of which are unfamiliar or ‘other’ to his experience, and she is with him for his Indianness and his difference” (21). Miranda gains strength, allows her infatuation to fizzle and pushes Dev away, her actions reflecting the words of another late-blooming Miranda before her:

When thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
With words that made them known [. . .] (*The Tempest* I.ii.354–359).

Lahiri’s title story, “The Interpreter of Maladies” also involves the dashing of an innocent’s fantasies. The scholarly and ambitious Mr. Kapasi was destined for greatness, but misfortune has left him scraping at multiple jobs, among them guiding foreigners on sightseeing tours. As he drives the Indian American Das family through the Bengali countryside, Mr. Kapasi dreams about a correspondence with the diva-licious Mrs. Das. When she absently asks for his address, he writes it neatly on a scrap of paper, imagining:

She would write to him, asking about his days interpreting at the doctor's office, and he would respond eloquently, choosing only the most entertaining anecdotes, ones that would make her laugh out loud as she read them in her house in New Jersey. In time she would reveal the disappointment of her marriage, and he his. In this way their friendship would grow, and flourish. He would possess a picture of the two of them, eating fried onions under a magenta umbrella, which he would keep, he decided, safely tucked between the pages of his Russian grammar (55).

Bengali language speakers would realize Lahiri has doomed Mr. Kapasi from the start, effectively naming him "Mr. Neuter" or "Mr. Impotent." As the tour progresses, he reflects on his life, which has unfolded as a series of disappointments: the sickness of his son, his ensuing work as an interpreter for a country doctor rather than a foreign embassy. As he contrasts his decorum to the behavior of the Americans, however, he realizes that he has lived his life with a sense of integrity and honor. He reaches a certain peace, an almost audible sigh of relief as he watches his address escape Mrs. Das's purse and flutter away in the wind. He has tired of the petty, ridiculous nature of the presumptuous tourists who offend his human dignity and so he lets the paper fly away, "carried higher and higher by the breeze, into the trees where the monkeys now sat, solemnly observing the scene below." Lahiri writes, "Mr. Kapasi observed it too, knowing that this was the picture of the Das family he would preserve forever in his mind" (69). The concluding line of *Interpreter of Maladies* sums up its overall contribution to an understanding of the miracle of communication: "As ordinary as it all appears," there are times when it surpasses the imagination (198).

Migration + Displacement = Cosmopolitanism
The Next-Generation Great American Novel

Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake*, covers the same emotional and physical territory as her short stories. In a review titled "From Calcutta to Suburbia: A Family's Perplexing Journey," Michiko Kakutani summarizes *The Namesake* as a narrative "about exile and its discontents, a novel that is as affecting in its Chekovian exploration of

fathers and sons, parents and children, as it is resonant in its exploration of what is acquired and lost by immigrants and their children in pursuit of the American Dream” (E1). Natalie Friedman disputes this interpretation as a hasty generalization, writing that although *The Namesake* revisits the themes of immigration and acculturation introduced in *Interpreter of Maladies*, it cannot be simply labeled an immigrant narrative. Friedman critiques Kakutani, saying, “She oversimplifies the idea that the book is an immigrant narrative about the pursuit of the ‘American Dream’—a cliché of immigration on par with that of ‘the melting pot.’” She urges readers to delve past cursory categorization as she proposes a next-generation literary concern:

I claim that Lahiri, as part of [a] growing Asian American author group, is less interested in the pursuit of the American Dream as it was traditionally rendered in older immigrant narratives than she is in focusing on what happens once that dream (in its variety of incarnations) is achieved, not only by the generation of immigrants but also by its children (“From Hybrids to Tourists”).

In her essay, “Names and Nicknames,” Mandira Sen describes Lahiri’s demographic in great detail, introducing the “Bengali upper caste (Hindus of high ritual status), middle-class, well-educated immigrants who came to the U.S. in the late 1960s to work in the medical and engineering professions or to teach in universities.” These are not the “huddled masses [. . .] yearning to breathe free” commemorated at the Statue of Liberty (Lazarus 203). This relatively recent wave of immigrants does not wash up on America’s shores with visions of the “fresh green breast” of the New World, or of rugged individualism on the Western frontier, of streets paved with gold. As Friedman writes:

The idea of a fixed, poor, disenfranchised Indian who comes to America to better his life through the discovery of some ineffable ‘dream’ does not apply to Lahiri’s characters [. . . Her] story is really one of Appiah-style cosmopolitanism [a healthy ‘cross-contamination’ of cultures], in which Indian and American cultures bleed into one another when they encounter each other on American soil (“From Hybrids to Tourists”).

It may be easy for critics to read *The Namesake* as another account of an immigrant’s child struggling to “find himself,” as Judith Caesar notes, “[. . .] as if identity

were nothing more than cultural identification [. . .] a confusion which itself has become a bit of a cliché” (“Gogol’s Namesake”). Jhumpa Lahiri goes beyond such categorization, though, utilizing literary devices such as flashback, metaphor, and motif of significance only in context of the story and themes which emphasize personal development rather than grand-scale social change in order to convey a thoroughly individual struggle. She writes the entire story in the present tense, perhaps to depict the perspective of characters who are detached from their pasts because of physical separation, as in the case of the Indian national in America, or by the first-generation’s psychological distance from a heritage which can be intuited but never completely grasped. The narrative takes on a dispassionate style in which readers have surface knowledge of events’ significance, yet sense deeper implications. Lahiri goes beyond illustrating generic first-generation angst, elucidating specific sources and consequences of developmental crises. Her examination reveals a problem with the way people on the whole view identity in the modern day. In terms of Erik Erikson, Americans tend to build a public persona on markers of “social identity”—one’s taste in music, food, and clothing, one’s home and car and neighborhood, one’s lovers and friends, apt to be transitory in the twenty-first century. The distinctly American emphasis on maintenance of one’s public image leaves little time for the inner, essential self that strives for meaning, continuity, and purpose. This philosophical challenge plagues *The Namesake*’s protagonist, a young man named Gogol Ganguli.

The story begins in 1968 with Gogol in his mother’s womb as she looks through her kitchen cupboards for ingredients to create an approximation of Hot Mix. In his commentary on this opening scene, David Lynn writes:

The universal cravings of pregnancy are imprinted as well with issues of identity—our tastes, our yearnings, define us. Ashima is satisfying her longing for India with this strange hybrid of American cereal and chilies. Ashima and Ashoke will spend the rest of their lives making these kinds of accommodations (“Virtues of Ambition”).

Gogol’s father, Ashoke was rescued from a train accident in India because he held a page from book by Nikolai Gogol in his trembling, outstretched hand. He spends his convalescence pondering the words of a fellow passenger, now deceased, a businessman who told him, “You are still young. Free [. . .] Do yourself a favor. Before it’s too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it. One day it will be too late” (16). Upon recovery, Ashoke decides to flee a prosaic destiny in Calcutta and travels to America to study engineering at MIT. He returns briefly to his hometown for an arranged marriage to Ashima Bhaduri, and together they build a family in the United States.

With the birth of his first child, Ashoke feels the impact of his new lease on life, and as thoughts of his near-death experience pass through his mind, Lahiri writes, “For the first time he thinks of that moment not with terror, but with gratitude. ‘Hello Gogol,’” he whispers to the baby (28). The pet name sticks and as Lynn writes, “So Gogol Ganguli appears to the world, his name a concoction about as odd as Rice Krispies and chili” (“Virtues of Ambition”).

Gogol grows up oblivious to the significance of his name or his namesake until high school, archetypical site of the great American coming-of-age story. Of Gogol’s quandary Stephen Metcalf writes:

‘Gogol’ only fills the young American Ganguli with feelings of dissonance and shame [. . .] Upon learning that his namesake was a severe depressive – a ‘queer and sickly creature,’ as Turgenev once described him—who slowly starved himself to death, Gogol feels freshly betrayed by his parents (“Out of the Overcoat”).

Gogol's misery may not come from issues related to culture—he has friends at school and faces no explicit racism—but he spends little time trying to understand himself and the many unique facets which contribute to his existence. Judith Caesar addresses Lahiri's skill in probing past the most obvious conflicts, writing:

Both nationality and ethnicity affect one's sense of identity, because they are part of the material self, and yet they are not all of what one is, and there are ways in which multiple and seemingly conflicting material selves may increase the difficulties of self-knowledge [. . .] Yet there is a self beyond and within this that can never be articulated, only sensed and evoked—as are the meanings of this novel. As in Nikolai Gogol's 'The Overcoat,' the form, the language, and the subject matter of the novel work together to help us to find the space in which to discover our own meanings and contemplate the ineffable ("Gogol's Namesake").

As Gogol becomes older, women define his personality. They are additions to his social self and he attaches his shifting identity to theirs again and again. Metcalf writes that as "Gogol moves into young adulthood, he becomes that classic case: the charmingly spazzy, high-achieving mild depressive who doesn't yet comprehend how alluring he is to women. Women [. . .] take him by the lapels, shake him awake to life's charms and inject the chronology of his life with some zest." From the purely physical pleasures of Kim and Ruth, to the material excesses of Maxine the art scholar and mousy Bengali cum French cosmopolitan Moushumi, Metcalf writes of lifestyles which "induce in the reader, and in Gogol himself, a pleasant trance, through which aversion heroically fights its way to the surface" ("Out of the Overcoat"). Gogol must evaluate the norms he acquires from his parents and associates and take on the difficult work of defining a moral identity of his own.

He makes the first step on a trip to India, ironically, when he decides to become an architect, breaking free from the typical immigrant parents' insistence on safe, established professions—yes, medicine, engineering. He makes experiments in culture which are reflected both in his choice of lovers and his acceptance and rejection of two

names: Gogol, his pet name, and Nikhil, a given name which means “he who is entire, encompassing all.” As Nikhil, he masquerades, an alluring poseur accepting outer identities imposed on him by others. As Nikhil, and sometimes Nick, he first attempts to disappear into mainstream American culture, and when that fails, in a burst of nostalgia triggered by his father’s death, he tries on traditional Bengali identity and marries the young woman recommended by his mother. Regarding his choice of Moushumi, Judith Caesar writes:

It seems to have been part of an unconscious attempt to concretize another identity, an adult identity that would connect him to his childhood world and to his family [. . .] Although there are habits and traits he loves about her, a factor in both his love for her and hers for him is not just the person him/herself, but the image of the self reflected back through the other (“Gogol’s Namesake”).

Once a glum, unattractive girl, Moushumi escaped the pressures of both American society and her Bengali parents to pursue French literature, and she revels in the persona she concocted while living in Paris: epicurean, intellectual, sexually adventurous, mysterious, and exotic. Lahiri writes that in her marriage to Gogol and the establishment of their household in New York, Moushumi “can’t help but associate him, at times with the very life she had resisted, had struggled so mightily to leave behind” (250). One night, in an attempt to entertain her pretentious friends, Moushumi reveals her husband’s unusual pet name. He bristles, as “Gogol” represents the continuing ambiguity and ambivalence of his essential self. Their relationship deteriorates and Moushumi moves back to Europe, still in narcissistic love with her invented self. Gogol must find a personal identity which transcends culture.

One of the seminal images of *The Namesake* occurs on an ordinary day in Gogol’s youth, when his father, like another father created by Virginia Woolf, takes him in search of a lighthouse on Cape Cod. The little boy follows his father’s footsteps as they pick

their way along the rocky outcrop, and when they reach the farthest point of land, Ashoke asks his son, “Will you remember this day, Gogol?” When Gogol asks how long he must remember, Ashoke says, “Try to remember it always [. . .] Remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go” (187). Ashoke guides his son in this gentle way, demonstrating to him the value of exploration. He also indicates that the adventure of exploration, the journey itself, can be part of how one defines himself. Caesar writes:

[Ashoke] made conscious decisions to change his life, as he did in coming to America. He seemed to have inner resources his son lacks, including an acceptance of the irrational and of the fluidity of his own identity. Perhaps by understanding more about his father and what a writer like Nikolai Gogol meant to his father, Gogol could understand something of his own passivity as well and the inadequacy of the ways in which he had sought to define himself (“Gogol’s Namesake”).

On a dangerous train ride many years before, Ashoke read the stories of Nikolai Gogol which influenced him, as Lahiri writes, by “shedding light on all that was irrational, that was inevitable about the world” (14). In her novel, Lahiri seems to contrast Ashoke’s strength with the reflexive indolence of his son before he grows to maturity. She sheds light on an extraordinary act which millions of ordinary people undertake each year, to make a new life for oneself and one’s family in a new country. Friedman writes:

Lahiri consigns this child of immigrants to the bin of triviality, because he sees himself as a ‘bland’ American, whereas she elevates the immigrant as a person who deserves respect and admiration not only for making the voyage to America but also for struggling to maintain cultural ties to a faraway homeland (“From Hybrids to Tourists”).

Gogol desperately needs the qualities that enabled his father to succeed in a foreign country so that he can process the contradictions of his own life and actively create his identity in a healthy, balanced way.

Gogol’s epiphany takes place on a quiet, ordinary night, when he picks up the book of Nikolai Gogol’s short stories given to him by his father at a time when he neglected to appreciate the gift. By the end of Lahiri’s novel, Caesar writes:

[Gogol] seems changed, more complex, more aware of the contradictions of his life and more accepting of them [. . . He] begins to understand that he is not defined by one relationship, but by all the things that have happened to him and by the ways in which he has tried to understand these experiences. And he comes to some understanding as well for the irrationality and unpredictability of the life that has defined him (“Gogol’s Namesake”).

Gogol opens the book, as David Lynn describes him, “an isolated individual who, through his experience of the world and some suffering, has achieved a moral identity. Gogol—educated, scarred, tested—is now ready to read” (“Virtues of Ambition”).

Mira Nair read *The Namesake* on a flight and was so moved that she immediately put aside her other projects to work on a film adaptation. In an article for *Society* magazine, published in India, she tells Kakoli Poddar, “*The Namesake*, in a deeply humane way, encompasses the tale of millions of us who have left one home for another, who have known what it means to combine the old ways with the new world and who have left the shadow of our parents to find ourselves for the first time” (117). She has great familiarity with the settings and situations Jhumpa Lahiri describes and recalls her own story in a contribution to *Time* magazine:

In 1976, when I’d trekked across Radcliffe Yard to the Charles River to meet the person who would become my lifelong collaborator, screenwriter Sooni Taraporevala, we were among only a handful of Indian undergraduates at Harvard. As an Indian filmmaker in New York City in the 1980s I would ride Greyhound with my documentaries, showing my films to anyone who’d have me. I tolerated audiences who would ask whether there was tap water in India and how come I spoke such good English.

Nair, who immigrated to the U.S. for her film studies, sees Lahiri’s current popularity as a succession to her own groundbreaking work, saying:

Today Bollywood is on as many screens in midtown Manhattan as in an Indian neighborhood in Queens. The literary world has learned to pronounce Vikram and Amitav and Jhumpa, and an Amrita Sher-Gil can fetch as much as a Warhol at auction [. . .] When I was invited back to Harvard for a South Asian night in 2001, I was ushered into a hall brimming with 1,500 heads of shiny black hair (49).

When Mira Nair contacted Jhumpa Lahiri for the film rights to *The Namesake*, she responded “in ecstasy.” Lahiri says, “I felt really grateful because I had an instinctive

trust and connection and respect and admiration for the director because I knew her work, and I knew her a little bit: She was a familiar stranger, and we became friends through the process of the film.” Nair asked Lahiri and her family to become involved with the filmmaking process, incorporating cameos and heirlooms which lent intimacy to her interpretation. Lahiri continues, “Mira seemed to have really absorbed the book, and that was really powerful, and humbling to think that there is someone connected to my work and who cares so deeply that she is going to make something out of it” (qtd. in Bolonick, “Migration”).

After reading *The Namesake*, actor Kal Penn sought the movie rights, only to learn that they were already acquired by Mira Nair. She had first offered the crucial role of Gogol Ganguli to Bollywood prince Abhishek Bachchan, which he refused due to the nudity and physicality the part required, so she decided to cast an Indian American. She recalls receiving a passionate letter from Penn, which she quotes as saying:

‘I am an actor because I saw *Mississippi Masala* when I was eight years old, I buy *The Namesake* for everyone I love, and my show name when I check into hotels is Gogol Ganguli; therefore I must fly in and see you.’ And I wrote back to say the role had been cast but come anyway if you like—And he came and he blew me away (*The Anatomy of The Namesake*).

Having played in *American Desi* and *Where’s the Party, Yaar?* and eager to move past identity films driven solely by ethnicity, Penn dove enthusiastically into his dramatic role.

In a 2007 interview with Brian Hu he says:

I think once Asian American filmmakers focus on personality and the actual driving force of human beings and *human* interactions and move away from Asian American identity issue oriented films then their products are going to be a lot more interesting [. . .] *The Namesake* is a very American story, it’s a universal story, it deals with issues of family and hope and love and loss and things that apply to everybody [. . .] What attracted me to it was kind of this intangible thing that attracted me to *The Catcher in the Rye* [. . .] Holden Caulfield was this character that I could relate to. It was the same thing with Gogol; I mean, we share a similar family history and background, but it wasn’t what ultimately attracted me to the character. I still can’t figure out exactly what it was, maybe part of it may have been his cynicism, part of it may have been his career choice, he’s non-traditional, I don’t know what it is still, but it really was immediately my favorite book and I really wanted to play the character (“Gogol Versus the Idiots”).

The film takes on grander scope than the original novel in that it reflects the diverse experiences, talents, and personalities of all those involved with the collaboration. Kal Penn, who typically plays in comedies, lends warmth and charisma to Lahiri's somber Gogol. Irrfan Khan and Tabu bring an effortless physical chemistry acclaimed in another film, *Maqbool*, to their depictions of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli. In correlation with the interaction between Ashoke and Gogol, Mira Nair injects *The Namesake* film with a joie de vivre Lahiri's writing lacks. In a concluding scene which translates almost as an alternate ending to the novel, Gogol appears transformed, taking control of his own future as he reads the last page of his father's favorite book. He sits on a fast moving train, watching the landscape of New York state give way to palm trees and open fields. Nair's decision to show Gogol's metamorphosis complete manifests her own sense of hope and optimism. In her article for *Time* she celebrates the success of both Bollywood extravaganzas and independent films, refusing to make distinctions, she says, "Because we come from a place whose heart is as big as the ocean" (49). In Nair's film, Gogol emerges from his rootless wafting and moves, finally, with a sense of purpose. He hears the words which inspired his father, now addressed to him: "Pack a pillow and blanket. Go, see the world. You will never regret it, Gogol."

Hema & Kaushik
Jhumpa Lahiri's Pensive Wanderers

The stories of *Unaccustomed Earth*, published in 2008, follow the same delicate vein of *Interpreter of Maladies*. The contents of Part One are flavored by life-changing events in Lahiri's life, such as the birth and development of two children, the ripening of her marriage, and the deaths of her husband's parents. Mandira Sen writes:

There is a shock of insight: the particular has been honed to reveal the universal. Lahiri depicts uncertainty, betrayal, cruelty—and the looming presence of death in a culture that shies away from it. The puzzle is that this teasing out of what it is to be human comes from someone so young. Does [. . .] ‘a life sentence to being foreign,’ as the parents sense in Lahiri’s short story ‘Only Goodness’—lend itself to this? Does being torn asunder between two worlds, the one left behind, the one sought, heighten a consciousness of loss and death, as the fragments of existence do not quite come together? (“Names and Nicknames”).

Unaccustomed Earth follows characters that could easily have peopled the world of *The Namesake* as they resolve identity crises, enter middle-age, and negotiate adult life.

The book, dedicated to her son and daughter, opens with an epigram by Nathaniel

Hawthorne:

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 birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth (“The Custom-House”).

Lahiri maintains the elegiac tone of her earlier work while incorporating a new motif which highlights the value of perpetual motion, constant planting, uprooting, and replanting. Natalie Friedman references both Ashima of *The Namesake* and the characters of *Unaccustomed Earth* as she writes:

The disillusioned or disappointed ethnic Americans in Lahiri’s novel and the novels of her multicultural contemporaries can and do leave America—some return to their countries of origin, while others divide their time between countries [. . .]the immigrant or child of immigrants does not become disillusioned with America because America is not the endpoint of his or her travel. America becomes a stop on the voyage to discover a better life, a more fulfilling career, or a more interesting lover; and this voyage is no longer unidirectional or even bidirectional, but is continuous and global (“From Hybrids to Tourists”).

In Part Two Lahiri addresses cosmopolitanism, neo-nomadism, and wandering both literal and metaphorical as a lifestyle choice for first-generation Americans and well-educated modern people in general. Lahiri employs a graphic motif as well—the ginkgo leaf that appears on the book spine references the tree’s capability for living in disturbed environments, even though it paradoxically happens to be an endangered species now regarded as a living fossil. *Hema and Kaushik*, a novella in three parts, takes flight in a

different direction from Lahiri's past writing as it renders the first seeds sown in unaccustomed earth a highly unusual breed which lacks the sense of grounding of both the generation before and the generation after. Where the Indian-born Mira Nair can say, "It is because my roots are so strong that I can fly," Jhumpa Lahiri describes her relationship with the past by saying:

Some of the culture goes by the wayside, or the link is never made. I was aware of that myself when I had my kids. I really felt a sense that I was the end of a line, and that it was a very short line [. . .] I knew my parents had parents and so on, but to me, the universe was my parents and they were the far end and I was the near end (qtd. in Bolonik "Migration").

Where many American minorities seek opportunities to study their heritage in college, neither Lahiri nor her characters make this choice, generally pursuing a specialization in Western Classics and preferring travel to Europe over India. Building from a foundation of internalized racism, Lahiri's characters absorb themselves in a construction of personal identity in the absence of lifestyle models: They are ashamed of the way their parents raised them and show unconcealed fascination for the confidence and style of their cultured white American and European friends. The roots of Jhumpa Lahiri's characters are not strong, and they fly in a concerted effort to evade those roots prized by Mira Nair. A constant maintenance of self-image must be wearisome work, yet they fly in an act of avoidance, unable to nestle and put down roots as adults, unable to find anything that simultaneously satisfies their urbanity yet resembles the childhood home. Friedman writes:

[. . .] the return must be to their parental home in America, a place where India is re-created, albeit in a diluted form. These children do not see India as their country of origin or as a putative homeland, and they can only define home as the place where their two cultures merge—the literal and metaphysical location is in their parents house ("From Hybrids to Tourists").

"Once in a Lifetime," the first story in the *Hema and Kaushik* series, centers on two characters like Angelica of *The Leopard*, groomed by their parents to become

something quite unlike them. The adolescent narrator, Hema, becomes fascinated by the Choudhuris, elegant and sophisticated houseguests newly returned from Bombay, and especially their son, Kaushik, to whom she addresses her narrative. As she overhears her parents' envious criticism of the Choudhuris' indulgence—nightcaps, smoking, lounging—Hema gains an awareness of class distinction. Kaushik's father kindles her interest in ancient Rome by sharing photos of their travels, and Hema becomes embarrassed of her own mother's shortcomings in comparison to Kaushik's beautiful mother, "her slippery dark hair cut to her shoulders, wearing slacks and a tunic, a silk scarf knotted at her neck [. . .] her collarbones glamorously protruding" (232). She mourns when the ordinarily non-communicative Kaushik shares the secret that his mother has cancer. She keeps this secret even while realizing that their parents' friendship was also dying. Lahiri discusses the creation of *Hema and Kaushik* in an interview, saying:

Hema and Kaushik have been with me for a decade—I started thinking about them before I even began *The Namesake* [. . .] I wrote 'Once in a Lifetime,' then I felt a curiosity for the first time about what might happen after the ending of that story and what happened to the families, to Kaushik. So I just followed him for the second story [and a third . . .] There's one story that took more or less a summer—the second story in that trilogy. I think it's because I'd written 'Once in a Lifetime,' and it had taken a lifetime [. . .] Suddenly, I knew what was going to happen in that second story. I just saw the whole thing in my head, which is rare (qtd. in Bolonick, "Migration").

Kaushik narrates "Year's End," speaking to Hema in a confessional manner. He remembers his mother with great affection, yet acknowledges that he and his father have been unable to grieve for her: "Being with her through her illness day after day had denied us that privilege," he says (253). While away at Swarthmore, Kaushik receives news that his father has entered into an arranged marriage to Chitra, a young widow with children. Kaushik abhors the idea of his father's remarriage, especially to a simple, traditional woman. When Kaushik visits, he recoils at Chitra's ingratiating manner, her awkward daughters, Rupa and Piu, and the *gaucherie* obscuring the Modernist

furnishings his mother collected with avid connoisseurship. Kaushik and his father communicate evasively and Kaushik conveys his irritation with his father's decision to move on saying, "We were stating facts and at the same time arguing, and argument whose depths only he and I could fully comprehend" (280). Lahiri often considers the consequences of what remains unsaid, and Kaushik recalls, "I wanted to ask my father what on earth had possessed him to marry an old-fashioned girl half his age" (264). Of course, he misses his opportunity and the large climax occurs with Kaushik taking out his rage on Chitra's children instead of his father. Kaushik continues the pattern of avoidance that began when his mother died and which comes to characterize the rest of his life. Mandira Sen writes, "Lahiri hints that things could have been different. The little stepsisters too have lost a parent, and they understand Kaushik's loss. He could have seen the second marriage as a way for him and his father to move forward" ("Names and Nicknames"). At one point, he tries to reach out to his stepsisters, saying, "I sensed that they needed me to guard them, as I needed them, from the growing, incontrovertible fact that Chitra and my father now formed a couple. My presence was proof that my mother had once existed, just as they represented their physical legacy of their dead father" (282). Kaushik tells Hema of the guilt he has even as an adult, for leaving the girls frightened and alone at night as he disappears with a box of his mother's photographs. Nobody knows where he has gone, and as he travels up the coast to the uncharted edge of the continent, afraid and ashamed, he imagines the experience of death—"My escape," he says, "allowing me to taste that tremendous power my mother possessed forever" (290). In a sense, he travels with his mother to that place where "there was nowhere left to go"; though his journey has a different significance than the

one Gogol takes (*The Namesake* 187). Kaushik's movement functions as a modern-day quest for enlightenment as he gives up company and pleasure and succeeds in unburying items of meaning—including a memory of Hema. He gains a sense of closure as he buries the box of photos in a beautiful wilderness. When they meet again, his father tells him, "We are both moving forward, Kaushik [. . .] New roads to explore" (293).

Twenty years later, Hema and Kaushik meet in Italy. In "Going Ashore," an omniscient narrator peers into the thoughts of Hema, now a Wellesley professor specializing in the Etruscans, the ancient people introduced to her by Kaushik's father so long ago. Hema's parents have facilitated her success and are proud of her accomplishments, but they do not understand her apparently solitary, scholarly life, "at once impressive and irrelevant" (294). Like the Indian celebrity Hema Malini, for years she pines away in a relationship with a completely unworthy married man, but when she realizes that he will never leave his wife, she resignedly agrees to an arranged marriage with a fellow Indian American (from, again, Lahiri's nether-region designee, Michigan). Hema tries one sort of relationship and then another, not finding her own groove. The narration shifts at intervals to the adult Kaushik, who makes a career of running as an international photojournalist. His name, in fact, means "friend of the universe." Years ago, watching waves against the rocks in Maine, he noticed the "eternally restless motion having an inversely calming effect" on him (292). He chases conflict in every corner of the world while strategically avoiding America and India, the sites of his own struggle. Hema and Kaushik meet by coincidence at a dinner party and begin a physically and emotionally passionate affair—a reader discerns that the intimate revelations of the previous two stories suggest pillow talk. In the end however, Sen writes, "they can

neither free themselves from the past nor construct a common future” (“Names and Nicknames”). Hema returns to her life and Kaushik travels to Thailand, where he drowns in a tsunami, leaving nothing behind. One senses that Jhumpa Lahiri writes in order to create a like-minded community for herself, especially as she says:

The more time I spent with these characters, the more they became a part of me, and I had a hard time emotionally letting go of them. I felt very sad with this book, more than I’d felt with the previous two books. I knew that the stories were done—I felt they were done. But it’s taken me until now, and I’m finally beginning to imagine what will come next someday in the future (qtd. in Bolonick, “Migration”).

Mandira Sen examines the implications of Jhumpa Lahiri’s painfully realistic fictional world, writing, “A new society provides much promise, but too often it remains unfulfilled. Relationships are troubled and intractable in the new world as anywhere else; in fact, they are perhaps even more painful when there is a greater measure of freedom” (“Names and Nicknames”). Lahiri’s characters are ordinary individuals thrust into the role of the exotic by virtue of their parents’ choices and their neighbors’ perceptions. They create life models anew, original templates which are untested and difficult to maintain, and doubly excruciating for the average person who lacks the artistic compulsion to revel in diversity and to rebel against the mainstream like Esperanza of *The House on Mango Street* or even Holden Caulfield. Lahiri’s characters feel guilt for their emotional and spiritual dissatisfaction: As Americans in comfortable material circumstances with all the privilege that class, relative wealth, and education bring, they believe they should be happy, but they continually feel disturbance from something implacable and intangible. Lahiri seeks to illustrate and quantify this pervasive unrest. The tendency to wander renders Shoba and Shukumar, Gogol and Hema and Kaushik cosmopolitan, but they wander not out of choice but out of need, trying to recreate the mishmash of the home culture of their youth which no longer exists for them as adults.

This lost generation would do well to communicate with the older gang—long since removed to Calcutta or a new suburb away from the childhood home—as they could be nudged into action instead of continuing on in dismal complacency. In her film adaptation, Mira Nair whispers encouragement to Gogol, indicating that he will achieve breakthrough and successfully forge ahead without feeling limited by the artificial boundaries of nationality and ethnicity. The world becomes his oyster, just as it was to his parents before him; place exists for him to shape rather than for him to suffer under the effect of its shaping.

Un GhettoNerd en New Jersey
The Ethnographer's Quandary

Un Caribeno tells me:
we are spoiled here
we eat burgers, fries
arroz y habichuelas negras, platanos
for two dollars and ninety-nine cents
others starve, looking for a few bits—
We forget hunger. . .
I love America
but I dream of mangoes
Café Santo Domingo, merengue,
salsa, bachata, son
I can't forget the sun on my back
in my eyes
but this is Nueva York in winter
and I can't see the beautiful brown legs
of *las mulatas*
can't see their curves as they move
in the streets of Brooklyn, Bronx,
in the Upper West
Washington Heights. . .
Now I eat at Lenny's Bagels and Gray's Papaya
I look at the Hudson
instead of the Caribbean waters, *los malecones*.
Proud of Gloria, Shakira, Marc, JLo
Juan Luis Guerra, Celia Cruz . . .
I dream of *la tierra*
where we were born,
I walk Central Park
with our islands in my pockets
and my gloves on.

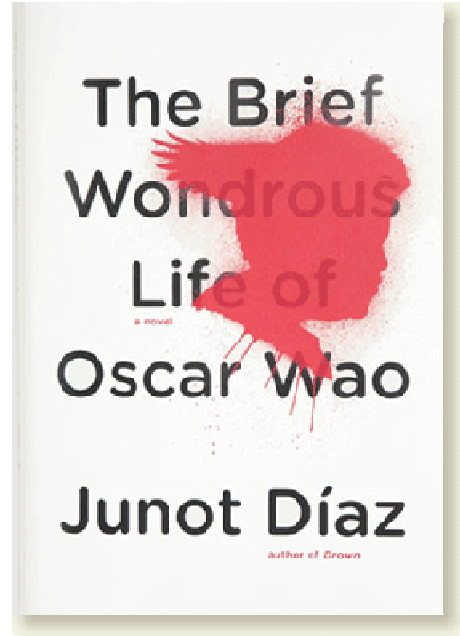


Figure 9 *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* book jacket

—Nathalie Handal, “Caribe en Nueva York” 2005

“If my thoughts and questions irritate you, this is exactly my intention,” said Alejandro Anreus at the 2008 *Latino Art Now!* conference. This statement prefaced a simple, common-sense message which defies current trends in identity politics: “Por favor remember: the generic Latino artist does not exist and never will” (263-264).

The ethnographer's quandary: An examination of Latinidad. How shall he describe it? Does it refer to ethnicity, to nationality, to Dominicans and Mexicans, Chicanos, Columbians, Peruvians, Chileans, los Índios, Puerto Ricans...Spaniards?

Well, then limit it to the Americas, Spanish-speaking cultures— a consideration of writers, artists, musicians who are Cubans, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans...

Maybe he can more easily define U.S. Latin identity: Caribes en Nueva York, Los Angelenos, los Chicanos de Chicago, Jenny from the Block with her golden hair and sister booty, reaching to the blacks, reaching to the whites.

Could it be termed hybridization, or, not-so-nicely, a dilution of what it means to be an American as suggested by Samuel Huntington in his 2007 essay “The Hispanic Challenge”— to live on the margins of the dominant American experience and erode it slowly, slowly?

But Arizona and New Mexico could not even become states until 1912 for the very reason of Spanish-speaking majority populations, a fact that becomes especially ironic in light of current politics (Noriega 7). Can the ethnographer even name a prevailing, authoritative American culture? As Jorge Capetillo-Ponce writes in *The Journal of Intergroup Relations*, “Today’s U.S. population bears little or no resemblance to the Puritans. Is Boston, with its dominant Catholic Irish and Italian populations, an Anglo-Protestant city? And what about the Jews, Chinese, and African Americans of New York City?” (16). Some of the difficulties immigrants to the United States experience are the result of rejection by the very parties that demand assimilation. The element of physical difference renders members of some cultural groups incapable of assimilation and thus inherently alien to conservative sociopolitical analysts like Huntington. In his autobiography, Richard Rodriguez devotes an entire chapter to the topic “Complexion,” writing:

Throughout adolescence, I felt mysteriously marked. Nothing else about my appearance would concern me so much as the fact that my complexion was dark. My mother would say how sorry she was that there was not money enough to get braces to straighten my teeth. But I never bothered about my teeth. In three-way mirrors at department stores, I’d see my profile dramatically defined by a long nose, but it was really only the color of my skin that caught my attention (125).

Exclusion based on physiognomy subject them to what Blauner calls “internal colonization,” assigning an entire cultural group a monolithic, essential character based on foreign cultural characteristics cited as marks of degeneracy (8).

So then—might the ethnographer record the collective experience of racial oppression? Yes, perhaps, partly. Only 44 percent of Latino students graduate from high school, seven percent earn a bachelor’s degree, and less than one percent graduate with a doctoral degree. “Many of these students are not dropouts but rather ‘pushouts,’” contends Anita Revilla, “pushed out of school by ineffective schooling structures and practices” (309). These include racial segregation, language and accent discrimination, academic tracking, overcrowding, lack of preparation for a successful college experience and low expectations from counselors who do not emphasize transfer to four year schools, instead promoting technical education or a military career. It includes a dichotomy of resentful or even racist teachers and, by contrast, messianic “sympathizers,” many of whom advise assimilation. Of the students who do enroll in community colleges, only one percent transfer to four-year colleges (310-311). During secondary education, students combat “micro-aggressions,” subtle, pervasive, and persistent forms of under-the-radar discrimination from peers and instructors. Revilla says that while these struggles often build resistance and resilience, they also produce “racial battle fatigue.” She writes, “Students become psychologically, spiritually, and physically exhausted from resisting and confronting racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subtle and overt oppression. Indeed, students are engaged in battles to resist what critical race theorist Patricia Williams calls ‘spirit murder’” (312).

The collective experience of racism and oppression appears as an obstacle to success in the biographies of Sandra Cisneros, Richard Rodriguez, Felix Gonzales-Torres, and Junot Díaz— but the category remains too broad. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz relates his protagonist’s observations as a teacher: “Every day 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 feminino, the gay—and in every one of these clashes he saw himself” (264). Experiences of racial oppression are also shared by Sherman Alexie, Colson Whitehead, Gish Jen, Jay-Z.

Then, could Latinidad be about place? Yes. Proust writes, “Even from the simplest, the most realistic point of view, the countries for which we long occupy, at any given moment, a far larger place in our true life than the country in which we may happen to be” (410).

And shared style? Spattering Spanish words here and there like Viramontes and Hijelos? No. Take the example of Nathalie Handal. Ask a group of American high-school students to guess at the authorship of “Caribe en Nueva York,” cited above, and they will inevitably respond, “Some homesick Mexican dude.” What if Handal, a poet of mixed racial heritage born in Palestine, composed her work in New York City, recording the dialogue and empathizing with the sentiments of her Dominican neighbors that reflect her own feelings of dislocation, longing, and displacement? Handal makes clear that style can be adopted by the diligent observer to create a poem so representative of Latinidad that it just might be chosen to introduce an analysis of writers who claim Spanish language heritage.

U.S. Latino artists must be allowed to define themselves by declaring a relationship with a Latin-American country, despite the possibility of physical and generational distance. Anreus says that while Latin American artists benefit from the art infrastructures in their native countries, U.S. based Latino artists have the struggle of cultural identification which proves peculiarly restrictive as they seek publication and access to gallery space. He states that they have had to “practically invent and develop a new culture, which oftentimes has been rejected by the United States as well as by the country of origin of the artist or his/her parents” (368). He recounts a discussion which illustrates the difficulties of showing work that transcends the limiting fiction of authenticity:

Example: A number of years ago a curator at the Whitney told me she was not interested in the work of Juan Sánchez because ‘he is a Puerto Rican artist’; at the same time a leading Puerto Rican painter was assuring me that ‘Sánchez is not a Puerto Rican artist, but a New York hybrid.’ What is so wrong with being both? [. . .] Where do they come from? From everywhere! What are they? Whatever they want to be! Where are they going? To Mars or the Bronx, or East L.A. or Rome, Miami or Johannesburg [. . .] Latino artists should not allow anyone, not even themselves, to be defined in such a narrow, boxlike way that forces a one-dimensional, essentialist type of identity. I remember Tomás Ybarra-Frausto stating, ‘The identity of the Latino artist must be well rooted as well as fluid and multilayered. Why can’t a Latino artist be both Mexican and from East L.A., a citizen of the United States and a Latin American, a rigorous formalist and a teller of stories?’ Why not? (269).

Anreus presents *Latinidad* as a fluid, changeable, customizable commodity. In short, it must be considered in the light of each individual artist’s stated relationship with a specific geography and its associated culture. He proposes that curators shift the focus of their exhibitions from anthropological display to the presentation of works that share content with similar thematic or formal elements:

The complex, rich, and multilayered exhibition of these groups of Latino artists awaits. I sincerely hope it will not be the usual generic production consisting of chronology and styles. Identities in relation to issues such as border, colonialism, exile from both right-wing and left-wing regimes, and a dense variety of spiritualities must be explored in all their complexities. And those two issues that give some people the shivers, RACE and CLASS, must be front and center in this analysis (266).

If U.S. Latinidad has to do with the American individual's relationship to Latin American place, then it also has to do with the mind's ability to support code-switching—for the American Latino identified artist may feel at home in two or more cultures—and it has to do with heart—the ability to sustain a potentially complicated affection for multiple places. “Place was never something I took for granted,” says Junot Díaz, “Not when I had two geographies in my heart.”

Case Study: Junot Díaz

Junot Díaz was born on December 31, 1968, in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, the third child in a family of five. He lived with his mother and grandparents, and they were visited occasionally by his father who worked in the United States. Often publicized as a Latino author, Díaz's childhood actually lent him a frame of reference with far greater complexity. He says, “Where I was born and raised in Santo Domingo in the Caribbean is sort of a collision, a confluence of all these cultures, English-speaking, Spanish-speaking, French-speaking, Dutch-speaking [. . .] Everything. Every race. I mean, the joke of the Caribbean is that, if it can float, it will wash up eventually on our shores” (qtd. in Brown, “Cultures and Languages”). In 1974, his mother decided to join his father in America and the family transmigrated to New Jersey despite the prospect of menial work and limited resources (Jaggi, “All-American”). In an interview, Díaz describes the encounter with his new home:

My family didn't tell me why we came. In those times, adults were just like one morning, they woke you up, and they're like, 'We're going to the United States.' And there wasn't even the attempt at a cliché narrative, like, 'We're leaving because of jobs,' or, 'Because we want freedom.' Our parents didn't tell us anything (qtd. in Brown, “Cultures and Languages”).

Díaz turned to reading to help him reconcile the divergent, conflicting, confusing array of influences on his life. He says:

I think part of my desire and love of books wasn't just this kind of random encounter with them. It was an attempt for a kid who, in some ways, miraculously teleported out of one world and appeared in another that's so radically different. It was an attempt of me to understand where I came from, where I was, how I got there. I mean, there were maps; they were just maps. And I needed them, man, because it's real confusing to jump from the third world to the first world in the '70s, especially from Santo Domingo to New Jersey (qtd. in Brown, "Cultures and Languages").

Young Junot became absorbed with fantasy and science fiction, legendarily walking four miles through tough streets in order to visit the nearest public library. Maya Jaggi of *The Independent* writes, "Junot Díaz found refuge from the memory of tyranny and the shock of migration in fantasy adventures [. . .] Wrested from the Dominican Republic aged six, and brought with his family to New Jersey, he found that only such fiction captured his experience." Díaz tells Jaggi:

There are historical extremes in the Americas that are difficult for the mind to grasp [. . .] Migration is like having your house burn down with everything in it, and only whispers left of what went before. Yet in genres I found descriptions of these very extremes: endless genetic breeding; time travel; leaving one world and being teleported to another ("All-American").

Díaz grew up relatively poor in a black and Latino neighborhood, factors to which he credits his success in communicating an alternative American identity. Díaz believes he became cultivated by the general cultural diversity of New Jersey, saying, "I always felt that, in my life, what I knew more was the sort of the mixtures, sort of the hustle of many cultures, rather than the myth of one unified culture. I never saw that, never saw that" (qtd. in Brown, "Cultures and Languages"). Like other writers from minority backgrounds, Díaz resists labels, yet on separate grounds: "African diasporic, migrant, Caribbean, Dominican, Jersey boy," he says, "These are my building blocks. It's more an interlocking chain than any one point" (Jaggi, "All American").

Díaz's adolescence was marked with trauma. His father, once a military policeman under the notorious dictator Rafael Trujillo, treated his family abusively and abandoned them while the children were still young. Díaz seeks to comprehend

aggressive machismo in his fiction and cites Trujillo as the paradigm for the way men in his sphere interact with women. Jaggi explains, “Trujillo’s regime is not just a kleptocracy but a ‘culocracy,’ built on the despot’s nationwide droit de seigneur. Absolute power filters down into ‘Little League dictators’ (as Díaz has described his father), and their notions of manhood [. . .].” Identifying the source of the scourge enabled Díaz to resist his father’s influence, as he says, “The greatest Dominican was a demon. You have to wrestle with that patrimony on a level of identity for boys: either come to terms with it, or avoid and ignore it” (“All-American”). Soon after his father left, Díaz’s oldest brother was diagnosed with leukemia and the single-parent family sunk deeper into poverty. Díaz, already an avid reader, became obsessed with apocalyptic books and films: the writing of John Christopher, *The Planet of the Apes*, and *Edge of Darkness*.

Díaz attended Rutgers and graduated in 1992 with a degree in English. He became exposed to writers such as Toni Morrison and Sandra Cisneros at college, and their work inspired him to become a writer himself. Three years later, Díaz earned his MFA from Cornell University, where he began writing a collection of stories that would become the critically-acclaimed national bestseller *Drown*, published in 1996.

Drown follows the episodic narrative of a soft-hearted tough guy named Yunior. A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* praises Díaz for the “sexy, diamond-sharp” collection and his “impressive high-low dexterity, flashing his geek credentials, his street wisdom and his literary learning with equal panache” (“Dreaming in Spanglish”). Settings shift between the Dominican Republic and industrial New Jersey, language moves fluidly from English to Spanish to Spanglish, and the stories are transparently autobiographical:

The children of *Drown* are first overwhelmed by a controlling father, and they grow up with a sense of inferiority and self-loathing made apparent in “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie.” From a sociological aspect, the stringent guidelines Yunió puts forth are influenced by the dictates of a dominant cultural power. Capetillo-Ponce states that victims of internal colonization will eventually “have the experience of being managed and manipulated by outsiders who look down on them” (12). Although his characters portray his experiences growing up as a Dominican American male, Díaz shuns the role of the “native informer,” which he defines:

That historically familiar figure who writes about his/her own cultural/identity location for the consumption of primarily white outsider audiences, an act which by its very nature requires that the writer commit heavy-duty discursive violence on his/her cultural/identity site—simplifying, limiting, deforming it in the most brutal and familiar ways imaginable (qtd. in Marsters, “Radical Alchemy”).

Díaz, an older, wiser Yunió, exposes the institutions and implicit cultural hierarchies that bequeath such a destructive legacy on minority communities, one being the editorial world which he says “only [imagines] Latino literature through magic-realism,” forever seeking echoes of Allende and Lorca. On this standpoint, Sophie Maríñez writes:

Díaz’s ethical position regarding the ways in which the experience of a minority community is represented is part of his critical stance against the conservative, white supremacist structures in American mainstream literature and publishing [. . .] Díaz has committed himself to transgressing and subverting stereotypes that come from both mainstream and minority literary traditions (“Biography”).

Mirasol Riojas of UCLA validates the aims of Junot Díaz, writing, “Latina/os inhabit bodies that are marked by race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality [. . .] their images are fetishized, commodified, and consumed as an essential part of ‘multicultural’ American society [while] they remain ‘othered’ and excluded in various ways” (303). As Díaz takes the interpretation of his identity into his own hands, he follows the incitation

of David Joselit who denounced mainstream media messages and said in 2007, “Let’s stand against interpretation and in favor of action, use the resources of the art world, but don’t remain there, learn the system and counter it, everyone knows that the corporative mindset is everywhere, so seize the world as a ready-made and break open its circuits” (171).

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao followed *Drown* after 11-year gap in which Díaz describes himself as “cocooned in depression,” beginning and abandoning a thriller, losing a fiancée, considering alternate careers, yet always writing, he says, “like it’s an organ I’m pulling out of myself” (qtd. in Jaggi, “All-American”). In an essay titled “Write On!” he describes not a rags-to-royalties story, but the excruciating process of producing his first novel, an account of his artistic determination to write, to purge himself, and to create despite emotional difficulty:

It wasn’t that I couldn’t write. I wrote every day. I actually worked really hard at writing. At my desk by seven AM, would work a full eight and more. Scribbled at the dinner table, in bed, on the toilet, on the No. 6 train, at Shea Stadium. I did everything I could. But none of it worked. My novel, which I had started with such hope shortly after publishing my first book of stories, wouldn’t budge past the 75-page mark [. . .] Want to talk about stubborn? I kept at it for five straight years [. . .] Five years of my life and the dream that I had of myself, all down the tubes because I couldn’t pull off something other people seemed to pull off with relative ease: a novel. By then I wasn’t even interested in a Great American Novel. I would have been elated with the eminently forgettable NJ novel [. . .] There were no sudden miracles. It took two more years of being utterly, dismayingly lost before the novel I had dreamed about for all those years finally started revealing itself. And another three years after that before I could look up from my desk and say the word I’d wanted to say for more than a decade: done (190-191).

Díaz’s brave, individualistic work has become a torch for, among others, artists of Latino heritage, as evinced by the concluding remarks Alejandro Anreus chose for his speech at the *Latino Art Now!* conference: “Latino art, like its originating communities, has been born of blood and fire,” he said, “Tragic beginnings, with possibly redemptive continuations—there are no endings here. Let’s read Junot Díaz’s *Brief Wondrous Life of*

Oscar Wao,” he told listeners, quoting the foreboding curse which dooms Oscar de León and his ancestors:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles (1).

Anreus then emphasized the sense of promise implicit in the novel’s final words:

So this is what everybody’s always talking about! Diablo! If only I’d known. The beauty! The beauty! (335) (274).

A tragic beginning with a redemptive continuation: Since the publication of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in 2007 Díaz has earned national recognition and an endless stream of awards including the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. He teaches at prestigious institutions, including MIT, while dedicating himself to the advancement of disadvantaged communities and rising to become a powerful member of the Dominican community in New York City. He founded and continues to lead the Voices of Writing Workshop, a summer program for writers of color at the University of San Francisco. And today, Díaz has a seat on the current Pulitzer selection panel.

“The Beauty! The Beauty!”

The Transformation of the Great American ‘Ethnic Fall Guy’ to Wondrously Tragic Hero

In *The Heart of Darkness*, the great anti-hero Mr. Kurtz peers into the primal inclination of man, only to utter that famous line, “The horror! The horror!” Junot Díaz subverts the profound archetypical tragic heroic epiphany in several ways. First, he snatches the epiphany and puts it into the mouth of a generally cast-off character in the class of the slapsticky black sidekick, the dispensable exotic lover, the fatty, the Tonto, the Danny Glover, the stereotypical man of loyalty and principle whom Stephanie Kirk of Washington University terms “The Ethnic Fall Guy.” From the start, Díaz makes clear

that his woebegone leading man has all odds against him—he cannot even claim that celebrated Latino suavemente. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* begins:

Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about – he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock [. . .] You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest" (11, 22).

In a PBS interview, Díaz emphasizes Oscar's 'out-is-in' status, saying, “[. . .] He's like really nerd major. I mean, it's the kind of guy who can't but talk in *Star Trek* languages. If someone is going to speak Klingon in a room, it's going to be poor Oscar, you know?” (qtd. in Brown, “Cultures and Languages”). Díaz takes pains to make his hero a real stereotype buster, and his narrator reports, “To say I'd never in my life met a Dominican like him would be to put it mildly” (171).

Utilizing the conceit of the family curse, the novel moves from Oscar's present-day trouble to his mother's struggle with cancer and back to her childhood in the Dominican. Named by her doctor father after an ancient Greek female mathematician, Hypatia Belícia Cabral has suffered incredibly, losing not only her privileged lifestyle, but her father, mother, and two sisters to the attacks of Rafael Trujillo. Finally, after she experiences torture in the darkness outside Baní, she escapes to the relative security of inner-city Paterson, New Jersey. Of her early life in the Dominican, Beli does not speak, as if “that entire chapter of her life got slopped into those containers in which governments store nuclear waste, triple-sealed by industrial lasers and deposited in the dark, uncharted trenches of her soul” (258).

Díaz plays his tale before real historical events. Alejandro Anreus cites Trujillo's brutality as the motivation for large-scale transmigration to the United States as he writes, “The Dominicanos started arriving after the brutal dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo took

over the country in 1930. They've continued to come since May 30, 1961, when Trujillo was assassinated. This steady migration speaks of the continuation of the Trujillato beyond the physical existence of the dictator [. . .]" (265). Díaz depicts Beli with collage technique, paying homage to both Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Luba, a "large-breasted woman with a challenging past" of the Brothers Hernandez comics. He describes Beli as "Empress of Diaspora," now fierce and tough, protecting her son and daughter from her past. They have yet to realize:

Before there was an American Story, before Paterson spread before Oscar and Lola like a dream, or the trumpets from the Island of our eviction had even sounded, there was their mother, Hypatía Belicia Cabral:

a girl so tall your leg bones ached just looking at her
so dark it was as if the Creatrix had, in her making, blinked
who, like her yet-to-be-born daughter, would come to exhibit a particularly Jersey
malaise—the inextinguishable longing for elsewhere (77).

Díaz sensitively contrasts the external oppression of Beli's generation to the inner battles her children face, suggesting that while the horrors vary greatly in intensity, they inflict equal damage on their victims. "What did you know" the narrator asks Beli, "[of] children whose self-hate short-circuited their minds?" (160).

In a beautiful review quoted on the book jacket, the *Los Angeles Times* calls *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* "panoramic and yet achingly personal. It's impossible to categorize, which is a good thing. Díaz's novel is a hell of a book. It doesn't care about categories." The article acknowledges both the singularity and the universality of Díaz's work without attempting to box it up and conquer it. In similarly admirable fashion, A.O. Scott describes the novel from every single facet: "a young-adult melodrama draped over a multigenerational immigrant family chronicle that dapples in tropical magic realism, punk-rock feminism, hip-hop machismo, post-postmodern pyrotechnics and enough polymorphous multiculturalism to fill up an

Introduction to Cultural Studies syllabus” (“Dreaming in Spanglish”). Díaz will not compromise and simplify his world in order to become the “native informer” and sell a “believable” representative of Dominican American experience. In a section called “A Note From Your Author” Díaz addresses the reader reactions he anticipates:

Look, he’s writing Suburban Tropical now. A puta and she’s not an underage snort addicted mess? Not believable. Should I go down to the Feria and pick me up a more representative model? [. . .] Would this be better? Yes? But then I’d be lying. I know I’ve thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix but this is supposed to be a *true* account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (284-285).

Since he writes literary fiction and not social studies textbooks, Díaz spends considerable attention disentangling his protagonist from stereotype; yet he does so playfully, acknowledging popular images of the Dominican male while separating Oscar from these:

Sophomore year Oscar found himself weighing in at a whopping 245 (260 when he was depressed, which was often) and it had become clear to everybody, especially his family, that he’d become the neighborhood parigüayo. Had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male, couldn’t have pulled a girl if his life depended on it. Couldn’t play sports for shit, or dominoes, was beyond uncoordinated, threw a ball like a girl. Had no knack for music or business or dance, no hustle, no rap, no G. And most damning of all: no looks [. . .] Dude wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber or a Lensman her lens. Couldn’t have passed for Normal if he’d wanted to (19-21).

The Ghettonerd! Díaz compels readers to consider a brand new character, unique, yet attachable to a variety of recognizable “types.” Oscar de León does not represent the model caribe en Nueva York. Oscar is strange in any context. A dreamer in life and a romantic in death, Oscar adamantly refuses to give up his ideals. He neither assimilates to majority Dominican culture nor mainstream white New Jersey culture, negating the conclusions of A.O. Scott when he writes, “This is almost in spite of itself, a novel of assimilation, a fractured chronicle of the ambivalent, inexorable movement of the children of immigrants toward the American middle class, where the terrible, incredible stories of what parents and grandparents endured in the old country have become a genre

in their own right” (“Dreaming in Spanglish”). Oscar’s very particular obsessions—his sci-fi fantasies, his gentle unreciprocated love, his attempts to answer philosophical questions by writing— form a life defined by the longing for “A Stronger Loving World”; also, so it happens, a heading in his favorite *Watchmen* comic book.

Oscar finds support from no one but his sister, Lola. They are both uncommonly intelligent, sharing an interest in science-fiction, and in their childhood she brings him books from the library at her school. “All my favorite books from that period were about runaways,” she says, “*Watership Down, The Incredible Journey, My Side of the Mountain*, and when Bon Jovi’s “Runaway” came out I imagined it was me they were singing about. No one had any idea.” She describes herself almost as a she-Oscar saying with mortification, “I was the tallest, dorkiest girl in the school, the one who dressed up as Wonder Woman every Halloween, the one who never said a word” (57). And so begin the troubles of Lola—proper name Dolores, meaning “sorrows.” While Oscar forever remains “the brown blob,” Lola transforms in puberty to a “long, slender-necked ibis of a girl” with green eyes, long hair which makes her look “more Hindu than Dominican” and “a behind that the boys haven’t been able to stop talking about since the fifth grade and whose appeal [she does] not yet understand” (52). She behaves as the perfect daughter until she reaches adolescence and the restrictions of her mother become unbearable as she attempts to assert her individuality. She takes on a Goth persona, shaving her head for full effect:

A punk chick. That’s what I became. A Siouxi and the Banshees-loving punk chick. The puertorican kids on the block couldn’t stop laughing when they say my hair, they called me Blacula, and the morenos, they didn’t know what to say: they just called me devil-bitch (54).

When the iron-fisted Beli becomes weak with cancer, Lola leaves high school and follows her runaway fantasies. Apart from her teenage rebellion, Díaz gives Lola the

motivations which fund the classic American Dream: to become free of family, free of a past, “a radically new personality, the hero of a new adventure, an individual emancipated from history [. . .] standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling,” as R.W.B. Lewis describes the archetypal American hero (5). After a wearying series of misadventures, however, Lola calls Oscar:

By then I had a plan. I was going to convince my brother to run away with me. My plan was that we would go to Dublin. I had met a bunch of Irish guys on the boardwalk and they had sold me on their country. I would become a backup singer for U2, and both Bono and the drummer would fall in love with me, and Oscar could become the Dominican James Joyce. I really believed it would happen too. That’s how deluded I was by then (68).

Of course, Oscar tells his mami and they fetch Lola home together. Beli sends Lola to La Inca, her grandmother in the Dominican so that she can mend her ways. “If you think it was tough being a goth in Paterson, try being a Dominican York in one of those private schools back in DR,” Lola says, “You will never meet bitchier girls in your whole life. They whisper about me to death” (72). The influence of La Inca reforms her to a certain extent—she even joins the school track team!—but she learns the power of sex and uses mind and body to blackmail a politician in an attempt to materialize fantastical plans: “Two thousand dollars in those days could have taken you anywhere, and of course I was thinking about Japan or Goa, which one of the girls at school had told me about. Another island but very beautiful, she assured us. Nothing like Santo Domingo” (207). Díaz intimates the ambiance of Sandra Cisneros’s loose women poems to paint punk-feminist Lola, using the iconic imagery of her early work including *las brujas*—witches—and menstruation as metaphor. As Lola senses La Inca wants to share information about her mother which may affect their future relationship, she says:

It's about that crazy feeling that started this whole mess, the bruja feeling that comes singing out of my bones, that takes hold of me the way blood seizes cotton [. . .] And that's when it hit with the force of a hurricane. The feeling. I stood straight up, the way my mother always wanted me to stand up. My abuela was sitting there, forlorn, trying to cobble together the right words and I could not move or breathe. I felt like I always did at the last seconds of a race, when I was sure that I was going to explode. She was about to say something and I was waiting for whatever she was going to tell me. I was waiting to begin (75).

Lola learns of Beli's suffering in youth which led to a perpetually defensive manner, "suspicious, angry, scowling, uncommunicative, a wounded hungering campesina, but with an expression and posture that shouted in bold, gothic letters: DEFIANT" (258).

From La Inca, Lola realizes that her mother recognized and understood her behavior all along. When Beli arrives to take her home, Lola realizes how she has hurt her mother.

She says:

It was only when I got on the plane that I started crying [. . .] I know I didn't stop atoning. The other passengers must have thought I was crazy. I kept expecting my mother to hit me, to call me an idiota, a bruta, a fea, a malcriada, to change seats, but she didn't. She put her hand on mine and left it there. When the woman in front turned around and said: Tell that girl of yours to be quiet, she said. Tell that culo of yours to stop stinking (210).

Lola also realizes the weight of all she has experienced during her time in the Dominican, so far away from her everyday life in New Jersey. Her mother knows this and sits uncharacteristically silent while the old man next to her says, "It's OK, muchacha [. . .] Santo Domingo will always be there. It was there in the beginning and it will be there at the end" (210). Later, in a richly intertextual, confessional narrative in the style of Lahiri's Hema and Kaushik trilogy and reflecting the childhood sentiments of Cisneros's Esperanza (a.k.a. ZeZe the X) she says:

I would have lived far away. I would have been happy, I'm sure of it, and I would never have had any children. I would let myself grow dark in the sun, no more hiding from it, let my hair indulge in all its kinks, and [my mother] would have passed me on the street and never recognized me. That was the dream I had. But if these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in. And that's what I guess these stories are all about (209).

Lola speaks to the narrator, a college boyfriend nicknamed Yunior who receives her rare moments of vulnerability with respect and understanding. "It was only when I

got on the plane that I started crying,” she tells him. “I know this sounds ridiculous but I don’t think I really stopped until I met you” (210). Yunion grasps the complexity of Lola’s experience which so closely resembles his own, yet this keeps him forever in awe of her and unable to possess her completely. Unlike anyone he has ever met, she consistently makes the difficult, noble, moral decision; she consistently takes the high road. At Rutgers she blossoms into a minor celebrity, a “Big Woman on Campus [who] knew just about everybody with any pigment, had her hand on every protest and every march [. . .]” (49). Tara Yosso relates how students cope with discrimination and subordination, describing the “model of community cultural wealth,” which regards language, family, and community as valuable resources that help them develop “resistant capital” and “navigational capital” in making their way up through the educational system. Lola turns her sorrows and her cultural perspective into a badge of certification, becoming what Yunion describes as “one of those overachiever chicks who run all the organizations in college and wear suits to meetings. Was the president of her sorority, the head of S.A.L.S.A. and co-chair of Take Back the Night. Spoke perfect stuck-up Spanish” (49). She refutes Vincent Tinto’s “stages of passage” model which suggests that students of color must separate from their precollege community in order to assimilate and ease transition into a successful college experience. Utterly secular, she eschews Oscar’s search for a reason behind the family’s misfortune. “The curse, some of you will say,” she says. “Life, is what I say. Life” (210).

Yunion, yes, almost certainly Yunion of *Drown*, fails to keep Lola’s tough love, but in a last ditch effort offers to room with her little brother, the depressed and now suicidal Oscar who has joined them at Rutgers. Yunion becomes increasingly involved

with the Oscar saga, eventually memorializing his small life, writing, “That should have been the end of it, right? Just a memory of some nerd I once knew who tried to kill himself, nothing more, nothing more. But the de Leóns, it turned out, weren’t a clan you could just shake off” (194). In a bold move to subvert one stereotype with yet another, Díaz has the hotshot telling the geek’s story.

Although he spends the bulk of his time muscling up, partying, and bedding women, Yunior continues to adore Lola and care for Oscar, revealing a softer core to his hedonistic, macho image. His personal life has many parallels to that of Díaz — when he loses his brother to leukemia he gives up all faith in the “system,” and he supports himself by delivering pool tables as he studies creative writing. He begins to regard Oscar as a brother and even picks up Oscar-isms which betray his own enthusiasm for sci-fi: When he finds himself strangely jealous of Oscar’s companionship with a “fly boricua goth” he says, “I always thought of myself as the Kaneda of our dyad, but here I was playing Tetsuo” (184). In his article “Dreaming in Spangish,” A.O. Scott emphasizes the significance of Yunior’s character to the novel, writing, “Not all Dominican men are macho peacocks.” A Proust quoting, foul-mouthed homeboy, Yunior almost fits the stereotype, but as a literature major with the social finesse to inhabit public and private worlds, he serves as a translator of experience. Yunior and Oscar are both writers, each acknowledging the merit in the other’s work. Yunior says, “[. . .] even I could tell [Oscar] had the chops. Could write dialogue, crack snappy exposition, keep the narrative moving. Showed him some of my fiction too, all robberies [. . .] and BLAU! BLAU! BLAU! He gave me four pages of comments for an eight-page story” (173). In turn, Yunior serves as Oscar’s Marlow, slowly taking on his best qualities just as

Marlow becomes “enlightened” like Kurtz. Yunior describes the effect of Oscar’s dedication, discipline, feedback, and big dreaming, writing:

That winter I even managed to sit in my dorm room long enough to write a story that wasn’t too bad, about the woman who used to live in the patio behind my house in the DR, a woman everybody said was a prostitute but who used to watch me and my brother while my mom and my abuelo were at work. My professor couldn’t believe it. I’m impressed. Not a single shooting or stabbing in the whole story. Not that it helped any. I didn’t win any of the creative-writing prizes that year. I kinda had been hoping (196).

The novel serves at once as Oscar’s quasi-tragic bildungsroman and Yunior’s kuntslerroman. While Oscar receives only rejection letters from publishers, never attaining a single literary opportunity in his short life, Yunior changes, matures, and lives on, not only to tell Oscar’s story, but to share the art of writing with his own students.

The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao functions on one level as a case for the arts and the therapeutic power of creative expression. Yunior describes the pattern of Oscar’s love and loss: “A week of mooning and then back to the writing. The thing that carried him [. . .] I knew something was wrong when he stopped writing—Oscar never stopped writing [. . .]” (186). Yunior watches Oscar’s behavior closely, especially after his second suicide attempt, and realizes Oscar’s creative productivity reveals his state of mind. He observes, “[Oscar] claimed he was ‘regenerated.’ No more suicide attempts for him. He was writing a lot, which was always a good sign. I’m going to be the Dominican Tolkien, he said” (192).

Oscar identifies himself as a Dominican, in part, because the island exerts a certain influence over his creative faculty. Dominican lore fuels the writing which keeps him bobbing along, and he seeks the keys to the universe in his cultural history. Like countless writers before him, Díaz grants personification to the motherland which wields an almost god-like power in the lives of his characters. Beli, Yunior, Lola, and Oscar

each exhibit an individually defined, complicated relationship with the Dominican Republic revealing varying combinations of affection, frustration, disgust, and longing, yet never ambivalence. When his plane lands in Santo Domingo, fellow passengers let out an applause, and Oscar experiences a wash of memory: “The beat-you-down heat was the same, and so was the fecund tropical smell that he had never forgotten, that to him was more evocative than any madeleine [. . .]” (273). The DR demands their attention, its dictates command their lives, and imposes a real, undeniable will upon them. Yet it offers something also—when Oscar suffers from an especially numbing depression, his sister tells him, “You need some time in the patria.” Yuniors grasps her reasoning and says, “It felt like the right thing to do. Help clear his head and heart of the gloom that had filled him these months” (278). Like the dark heart of Africa which corrupts Conrad’s protagonists, Díaz’s Dominican at once performs the role of a cruel father with the face of Trujillo and the nurturing, spiritually nourishing matriarch, represented by La Inca. To describe Santo Domingo, Díaz adopts the free-wheeling, madcap fever of Salman Rushdie’s *Bombay*, London, and New York City, even borrowing Rushdie’s trademark descriptor, “funtoosh,” and succumbing to a few moments of magic realism:

[. . .] Santo Domingo summers. . .well, Santo Domingo summers have their own particular allure, even for one nerdy as Oscar [. . .] Every summer Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine into reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children as it can; airports choke with the overdressed; necks and luggage carousels groan under the accumulated weight of that year’s cadenas, and paquetes, and pilots fear for their planes—overburdened beyond belief—and for themselves; restaurants, bars, clubs, theaters, malecones, beaches, resorts, hotels, motels, extra rooms, barrios, colonias, campos, ingenios swarm with quisqueyanos from the world over. 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 (271-272).

Díaz refuses to placate critics and indulge in fantasy, however, immediately qualifying his single concession (involving a mongoose) as an acknowledgement of some tropical

coping mechanism, writing, “But no matter what the truth, remember: Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena. How else could we have survived?” (143, 149). Towards the very end of the novel he extends this jab at reader expectation, offering a short, intentionally ridiculous pastiche entitled “The Gangster We’re All Looking For.”

Each of the characters of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* establishes a different standing relationship with the DR. Although Yuniors establishes himself in New Jersey, he makes his island childhood the stuff of his writing. Oscar benefits artistically from his first extended visit to the Dominican, as La Inca perceives something of his grandfather in him and defends his habits as intellectual behavior. Díaz writes:

The trip turned out to be something of a turning point for him. Instead of discouraging his writing, chasing him out of the house like his mother used to, his abuela, Nena Inca, let him be. Allowed him to sit in the back of the house as long as he wanted, didn’t insist that he should be ‘out in the world’ [. . .] In the afternoons, when he couldn’t write another word, he’d sit out in front of the house with his abuela and watch the street scene, listen to the raucous exchanges between the neighbors (31).

Lola finds less solace in the Dominican and creates a lifestyle for herself similar to Jhumpa Lahiri’s restless cosmopolitans. In college she spends time in Spain and Japan: “Japan?” Yuniors laughs, “What the hell is a Dominican going out to Japan for?” “You’re right,” Lola responds sarcastically, “Why would *anyone* want to go *anywhere* when they have *New Jersey*?” (197). After school she moves to Miami and marries “Cuban Reuben,” an patient Oscar-ly sweetness implicit in his name, and they travel everywhere together, making brief stops at their New York home base. Lola retains a sense of agitation that manifests itself as something more than youthful impatience. She says, “I wanted the life that I used to see when I watched *Big Blue Marble* as a kid, the life that drove me to make pen pals and to take atlases home from school. The life that existed beyond Paterson, beyond my family, beyond Spanish” (55). This statement

elucidates the difference between Oscar and Lola—She gets involved with the people around her and makes a place for herself in the world while he waits for acceptance. In the Dominican, where he receives more respectful acknowledgement than he does as a sore brown thumb in New Jersey, Oscar involves himself with the place, sightseeing and socializing with his cousins and their friends. Yuniór acknowledges Oscar’s increased activity and social ease as he views his photos, and as an aside he says, “He’s also, you might notice, not wearing his fatguy coat [. . .] He refused to succumb to that whisper that all long-term immigrants carry inside themselves, the whisper that says You do not belong” (275, 276). Oscar meets the love of his life, Ybón, and courts her with a new sense of confidence and optimism based on real-world engagement. Since he cannot possibly communicate with her in his usual sci-fi jargon, he develops flair, charm, and polish, even responding to her protestations with elegance: “Go home,” she says. “But beautiful girl, above all beautiful girls,” he responds, “This is my home”:

“Your real home, mi amor.

A person can’t have two?” asks Oscar. Asks Yuniór. Asks Junot Díaz.

When Oscar finally attains that thing for which he has been searching all his life, he does not express the tragic hero’s disillusionment. Díaz actually gives Oscar a moment of happiness! When he becomes the man he always wished to be, when he becomes the champion of a lovable woman and discovers “the cure to what ails us,” Oscar writes a letter to his sister that finishes the novel itself: “So this is what everybody’s always talking about! Diablo! If only I’d known. The beauty! The beauty!” (335).

Oscar's quiet and mild spirit lingers, maybe not with Ybón, but in the lives of Lola and Yuniór. Lola begins to use her given name, Dolores, and names her daughter Isis after the ancient Egyptian protector of the dead. Yuniór settles down with a wife and academic life in Perth Amboy. Like the enlightened Marlow looking back at the heart of darkness, he says, "These days I write a lot. From can't see in the morning to can't see at night. Learned that from Oscar. I'm a new man, you see, a new man, a new man" (326). Yuniór anticipates the day Isis will visit him wanting to know more, wanting to piece together her history:

If she's her family's daughter—as I suspect she is—one day she will stop being afraid and she will come looking for answers [. . .] I'll take her down to my basement and open the four refrigerators where I store her tio's books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers—refrigerators the best proof against fire, against earthquake, against almost anything [. . .] and maybe, just maybe, if she's as smart and as brave as I'm expecting she'll be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it. That is what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream (330-331).

In his PBS interview, Jeffrey Brown converses with Díaz and notes, "There are so many references to other books, and authors, and "Star Trek," and everything. But in a way, it is kind of a book about books, isn't it, as well as about contemporary life?" Díaz says, "Sure [. . .] I will not ever hide that I'm like such an incredible book lover. I mean, the title sort of gives it away. The title of the book itself refers to [. . .] 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,' the Hemingway story, and to Oscar Wilde simultaneously."

Díaz makes myriad literary, art historical and general "high culture" references: from *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass to Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* to "You ever seen that Sargent portrait Madame X? Of course you have" (181). In the aforementioned Ernest Hemingway story, the anxious Macomber has a precious few moments of happiness as he tackles a wild buffalo, finally achieving the masculine identity he most desires—only to meet a brief, wondrous death. Díaz's genius, however, resides in the

subversion of classic plot structure, theme, and character types while making conscious reference to them. Díaz's allusions are not for the sake of ironic, stylish posturing or clever conscious-rap freestyle. Díaz does not borrow from history, but rather engages in Reconstructionism, acknowledging the canon, referencing it quite apparently, and making comment as he transgresses, chops up, and alters the established conventions. Consider the way Oscar de León acquires his nickname, "Wao":

Halloween he made the mistake of dressing up as Doctor Who, was real proud of his outfit too. When I saw him on Easton, with two other writing-section clowns, I couldn't believe how much he looked like [. . .] Oscar Wilde, and I told him so. You look just like him, which was bad news for Oscar, because Melvin said, Oscar Wao, quién es Oscar Wao, and that was it, all of us started calling him that: Hey, Wao, what are you doing? Wao, you want to get your feet off my chair? (180).

All of history and various literary canons are available to Díaz. He will take them all, allow them to influence him, and make them his own. Sophie Maríñez writes, "Díaz's works reflect his Latino, Afro-American, and global literary experiences, and although critics have perceived various influences in his writing, many of them concede that his success resides in his crafting of a new voice in the American literary landscape" ("Biography"). Silvio Torres-Saillant, to whom Díaz gives thanks in his acknowledgements, describes the author's sentence crafting as a studio art process and the novel as a work of art that transcends the limits of literature: "Díaz causes words—and most notably the verbs—to show meaning plastically. Here is a fiction writer who draws on the robust lexical fund at his disposal to sculpt, to paint, to physically imprint the reality of his characters so as to make them seen" (892).

Díaz writes using language which best suits his purpose to depict a New Jersey family with various cultural influences, and no, not Spanglish. Populations of Dominicans have lived in New York for years; in recording their syntax Díaz validates a

previously silent American subgroup, and coupling this with Oscar's nerdspeak ("she's orchidaceous!"), Díaz creates a new language. He explains but does not translate strings of Spanish, or for that matter, Elvish, for readers. Spanish words are not italicized or marked off in any way and the text abounds with colloquial usage not found in an English-Spanish pocket translator. In footnote 5, he teasingly nods to the fact that some readers have already scoured their dictionaries with frustration: "If you looked in the Dictionary of Dominican Things, the entry for *parigüayo* would include a wood carving of Oscar" (20). Díaz directs the main text to readers who are aware of the long history of violent political conflict in the Caribbean, while he adds footnotes for a mainstream audience, "those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history" (2 footnote 1). In writing a text that references foreign politics, Díaz comes up against an obstacle once faced by Maxine Hong Kingston—how might a writer convey all the nuance of a narrative when readers lack any knowledge of context? In her second novel, Kingston decided to teach her readers what they needed to know, choosing a bit of didacticism over a career relegated to obscurity. Díaz makes a similar choice, yet the separation of storyline from history lesson helps to maintain the impression that an adult Yuniór writes the story of his Jungian shadow, Oscar, for his own cathartic release and for the edification of Isis—not for the entertainment of the masses. Yuniór acts as Oscar's advocate but he also makes bold political comment, using the footnotes to make low blows to the mainstream gut and get away with murder in general: "(You didn't know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when you have kids they won't know the U.S. occupied Iraq either.)" (19 footnote 5). Yuniór/Díaz almost seems resentful of the need for footnotes, and the constant digs come across as a

way of retaining power, socking it to “the man” while at the same time informing “him,” maintaining Oscar’s hope for a stronger, loving world. Díaz writes in English about New Jersey, an American story for a primarily American audience, yet he tells Mariñez that he sees Spanish as no different from English in terms of the quantity of people who speak it around the world and its prevalence and growing presence in the United States. “Why ‘other’ it? Why denormalize it?” he asks. He views culture as dynamic and ever-changing rather than static, “pure,” and in need of preservation, a concept Edward Said defends in his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*:

If the old and habitual ideas of the main group were not flexible or generous enough to admit new groups, then these ideas need changing, a far better thing to do than rejecting emerging groups [. . .] Being loyal to America for Latinos doesn’t necessarily mean discarding their own cultural heritage. They [should] feel they can plunge right into the American mainstream without the fear of watching their ancestral identity get swept away in the process [. . .] (xxvi).

Flouting all convention, Díaz fearlessly plunges into the mainstream, saying, “By keeping the Spanish as normative in a predominantly English text, I wanted to remind readers of the fluidity of languages, the mutability of languages. And to mark how steadily English is transforming Spanish and Spanish is transforming English” (qtd. in Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 904). Gloria Anzaldúa maintains that cultures can successfully transform each other without the outcome being assimilation to dominant culture and the extermination of minority cultures, but Díaz reveals dark personal motives beyond the aspect of social instrumentalism, saying, “When I learned English in the States, this was a violent enterprise. And by forcing Spanish back onto English, forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I’ve tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page. Call it my revenge on English” (qtd. in Céspedes and Torres-Saillant 904). While the British publishers of *Drown* included a glossary, Díaz refused to attach one to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. “They knew I wasn’t playing,” he

says, “The opaqueness of some of the language is the point; confusion is part of the game” (qtd. in Jaggi, “All-American”).

Díaz succeeds on his own terms while garnering an unprecedented number of positive reviews such as this one by Michiko Kakutani: “It is Mr. Díaz’s achievement in this galvanic novel that he’s fashioned both a big picture window that opens out on the sorrows of Dominican history, and a small, intimate window that reveals one family’s life and loves” (“Travails of an Outcast”). When Brown asked if Díaz wrote with an awareness of the universal family tale within the particular de León history, he said:

The universal springs from the particular [. . .] It’s like you look at a book like “Moby Dick,” a book that we considered a foundational text in American letters, and that book is so incredibly particular that it’s almost astonishing. I mean, it’s about whaling. And that’s the great American text? Well, because it’s the particularity of it, the specificity of it, is in some ways what lends its power. So, yes, I mean, I wanted to write a book that was, of course, in some ways accessible, about families, about a nerd kid wanting to get a girl [. . .] But I also knew that, by not eliminating the weird particularities of this Dominican family in central New Jersey, with a kid who loves ‘Dungeons and Dragons’ and loves Jack Kirby comic books, that was the way into the universal soul (Brown, “Cultures and Languages”).

For this very particular story came the ultimate recognition of its universal appeal and significance. Reflecting upon the Pulitzer Prize, Díaz notes that his personal achievement means even more for future writers. In a 2008 interview he says:

[. . .] there’s something really cool about, you know, a Dominican kid, a writer of color, a writer of African descent, immigrant kid from a nowhere place in New Jersey, spent 11 years writing a book, and that anybody who wanted to read it, and that anybody wanted to give it an award, it’s – I’m like, a, that’s great personally, but it’s also kind of hopeful for other people. I mean there’s a lot of young writers and artists of color and a lot of young writers, period, from the sort of backgrounds that people don’t expect much from. And I’m like, ‘Let me tell you something: If I can do this, they certainly can do it’ (qtd. in Brown, “Cultures and Languages”).

Oscar, a Dominican kid, an immigrant kid from a nowhere place in New Jersey who spends his life waiting to become a writer like Díaz, dies alone. Like Kaushik of *Unaccustomed Earth*, his death nearly goes unaccounted, the funeral attended only by his mother, sister, grandmother, and Yuniur. Thus the modern world’s response to someone unconventional, to the artist.

“How in the world can anyone form an authentic self when there are so many damn rules about how one should act in the world?” asks Díaz, conveying the anger of Yuniors, the metaphysical dilemma plaguing Oscar. He goes on describing the obligation of artists to ease that struggle and apply meaning to the developmental task of individuation: “Us writers, we’re just throwing words up into the wind, hoping that they will carry, and someone, somewhere, sometime, will have a use for them” (qtd. in Cornell Council for the Arts “Biography”).

Conclusion: “In the American Society”

The greatest fiction of all: America as Eden.

Sixteen-year-old Onyoo lived in Korea and Poland before she moved to the United States in 2009. Since her arrival, she says, “People at school are always trying to tell me that I moved here for freedom. But that’s not true. We only move here for jobs.” The Puritan idiom of America as dream, as New Jerusalem the beacon on a hill, has little relevance to the secular, contemporary autobiography. Cynthia Sau-ling Wong discusses how current literature by minorities exhibits a “matter-fact-attitude toward the idea of going to America” devoid of New World rhetoric (135). Mrs. Chang of Gish Jen’s short story “In the American Society” tells her children, “Your father doesn’t believe in joining American society [. . .] He wants to have his own society” (*Who’s Irish* 116). Mr. Chang leaves China to pursue business opportunity in the United States, but with nostalgia he tells his daughters about his grandfather, the village he governed, and the generosity of his family, the stuff of great fiction roughly comparable to “that Godfather in the movie” (114). In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz relates the fears of La Inca as she contemplates her adopted daughter’s relocation—even though the girl must escape for her life:

Exile to the North! To Nueva York, a city so foreign she herself had never had the ovaries to visit [. . .] Who knows what might happen to the girl among the yanquis? In her mind the U.S. was nothing more and nothing less than a país overrun by gangsters, putas, and no-accounts. Its cities swarmed with machines and industry, as thick with sinvergüencería as Santo Domingo was with heat, a cuco shod in iron, exhaling fumes, with the glittering promise of coin deep in the cold lightless shaft of its eyes (158).

Prejudice is Natural. Gasp!

In *The Opposite of Fate: Memories of a Writing Life*, Amy Tan describes an interchange with a well-intentioned official from the California State Department of



Figure 10 Amy Tan

Education who approached her to say her work was approved for the multicultural recommended reading list for high schools, passing inspection by a “gauntlet of educators who must agree that it will provide a positive and meaningful portrayal of the culture it represents” (307). Appalled to find a growing number of educated readers who “choose fiction like cans of soup on a grocery shelf

seeking specific nutritive ingredients, she relates a conversation with an agent who asked, “Don’t you think you have a responsibility as a minority writer to teach the world about Chinese culture?” Provoked, she writes:

Her comment reminded me that if you are a minority, you may not be read in the same way that, say, Anne Tyler, John Updike, or Sue Grafton is read. In other words, your stories may not be read as literary fiction, or as American fiction, or as entertainment; they will be read more likely as sociology, politics, ideology, cultural lesson plans in a narrative form. Your fiction will probably not be allowed to reside in the larger world of imagination; it will be assigned to a territory of multicultural subject matter. I know this is happening because I have seen the student papers marked with A for “excellent analysis of the differences between Chinese and American cultures (308).

Humans automatically make implicit associations between one event or object and a second, resulting in built-in evaluations which generally serve us well. However, because programming instilled by language acquisition happens naturally, while most people state they believe in racial equality, social psychologists easily demonstrate that the brain has subconscious programming that labels some ethnic groups and bad. A.G. Greenwald states in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* that when an individual observes something that contradicts this bias, he must consciously, actively avoid acting in a way that is consistent with the bias and resist the natural tendency for

race based categorization (1464-80). Greenwald, Mahzarin Banaji, and Brian Nosek head *Project Implicit* at Harvard University where they conduct many variations of The Racial Implicit Test to study implicit association in Americans. Their findings consistently prove programming of racial stereotypes intertwined with language acquisition—therefore as basic as learning to speak English in the United States. Citing Greenwald’s Racial Implicit Test and other prejudice studies, Scott Plous makes three conclusions in *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination*:

Perhaps the most important conclusions to emerge from prejudice research are these:

- (1) no one capable of human thought and speech is immune from harboring prejudice,
- (2) it often takes deliberate effort and awareness to reduce prejudice, and
- (3) with sufficient motivation, it can be done (iv).

Readers must contrive intellectual tools and critical frameworks designed to combat the process of implicit association when engaging with literature. Julian Olivares notes:

A factor that may impede accessibility to the text is one’s unfamiliarity with the experiences related by minority writers. That is, the degree of one’s response and sensitivity to these texts can be related to one’s class, upbringing, education, exposure to other groups and ways of life, and so on. Consequently, the acquisition of such a sensitivity depends on one’s own initiative in overcoming the limitations of ethnocentricity and the willingness to benefit from a liberal education and a curriculum with a multicultural component (“Teaching”).

While racial profiling, hasty generalization, and discrimination are everyday evils of the “real” world, the serious reader will approach works of artists from minority backgrounds with conscientiousness. As a specific recommendation for action, one could regard the advice of Amy Tan: “Be open to all possibilities, never generalities” (qtd. in Labong 168).

Towards Cosmopolitanism: The Big House

In *The Namesake*, Kal Penn looks through a train window as his character follows his father’s advice to see the world. The sceneries of old and new worlds blend together before his eyes. The children of immigrants today might be taught to view the world as

one big house created for their enjoyment, demoting or removing altogether the decision of national allegiance. Global citizenry, in its truest sense, has become a possibility. Zygmunt Bauman writes that immigrants and their children have ceased to be “locally tied” and entered what Appadurai calls the world of “global flows” (89, 30). Kwame Anthony Appiah of Princeton University advocates the “cosmopolitan” mindset, a term he propels beyond martinis and stilettos: Despite the apparently clashing values in society, Appiah argues that there are more binding similarities in a united world that transcend the artificial boundaries humans are inclined to promote. He redefines the cosmopolitan temperament as a quality found in people of every society regardless of socioeconomic status, characterized simply by a willingness to welcome difference and change. In the introduction to *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, he states his goal to revise readers’ view of the world as “divided between West and Rest; between locals and moderns; between the bloodless ethics of profit and the bloody ethic of identity; between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (xxi). He advocates the “ennobling, universal, and integrative” philosophy of cosmopolitanism in an effort to establish universality and shared values as a common denominator, stressing that people in diverse locale all “have gods, food, language, dance, music, carvings, medicines, family lives, rituals, jokes and children’s tales. They smiled, slept, had sex and children, wept, and in the end, died” (14). This worldview seems especially convenient and suitable for an individual who experiences the influence of several cultures from childhood onwards; one who must learn to love his elbows and knees that become gray when they are dry and the sound of his mother’s Bombay Scottish accent and the smell of tamarind chutney and turmeric in the kitchen.

The cosmopolitan can build a lifestyle to suit his needs and preferences. In a specific analysis describing children of immigrants, Friedman cites Tim Brennan who calls them “exempt from national belonging,” perennial migrants “valorized by a rhetoric of wandering.” She writes:

[They] move fluidly between the private sphere of their [. . .] home life and the public sphere of their American experience [. . .] Children of immigrants have gained a certain kind of power. Their power comes from economic and class ease, not from a sense of ethnic identity that is part of some mythic melting pot (“From Hybrids to Tourists”).

Maria Szadziuk writes, “Culture can no longer be regarded as a static entity but must be viewed instead as something dynamic” (“Culture as Transition”). She reframes culture using James Clifford’s term, “travelling cultures.” Clifford, Professor in the History of Consciousness at UC-Santa Cruz, writes, “There is no such thing as a singular culture equating a singular language. This equation, implicit in nationalist culture ideas, has been thoroughly unraveled by Bakhtin for whom a language is a diverging, contesting, dialoguing set of discourses that no ‘native’—let alone visitor—can ever learn.” He eschews the concept of a “field” of study, which fails to take account of “cosmopolitan intermediaries,” the “wider global world of intercultural import-export in which the ethnographic encounter is always already enmeshed.” Clifford describes culture in terms of travel, as “constructed and disputed historicities, sites of displacement, interference, and interaction,” in which an observer, scholar, or personal memory may participate (17).

Clifford unravels the notion of fixed culture and posits that humans must constantly adapt to ever-changing circumstances. While such conjecture may shake the foundations of the most popular identity structures, it also encourages individuals to select “best method practices” rather than relying on convention and traditional methods of organizing their lives.

In consideration of statistics from the latest U.S. Census, the cultural dynamic of the American population promises fresh and interesting turns. The trajectory of Gish Jen’s oeuvre charts the discussion of multiculturalism from the 1980s to the present day. In *Typical American* published in 1987, she defines “Americanness” as a preoccupation

| Self Identification: | California | Texas | New York |
|----------------------|------------|-------|----------|
| White: | 57.6% | 70.4 | 65.7 |
| Black: | 6.2% | 11.8 | 15.9 |
| American Indian: | 1.0% | .7 | .6 |
| Asian: | 13.0% | 3.8 | 7.3 |
| Pacific Islander: | .4% | .1 | — |
| Other: | 17.0% | 10.5 | 7.4 |
| Two or more: | 4.9% | 2.7 | 3.0 |
| Latino: | 37.6% | 37.6 | 17.6 |

with identity available to anyone who occupies space on the continent: “As soon as you ask yourself the question, ‘What does it mean to be Irish American, Iranian American, Greek American, you are American.’” The novel quickly won critical acclaim and national attention at a time, Jen says, “when

Table 1 2010 U.S. Census Report of most populous states

multiculturalism became a popular theme in literature” (qtd. in Ganguli, “Literary Voice”). Jen next regards the “invention of ethnicity” in her novel, *Mona in the Promised Land*, where she portrays the typical American family, complete with the teenage Chinese American Jewish convert. She shakes up cultural code with increased vigor in *Love Wife* which centers on “The New American Family”—interracial parents with both biological and adopted children—and challenges any attempt at categorization. As Jen asks “What is a family,” she asks a broader, bolder parallel question: “What is a nation?” In her most recent novel, *World and Town*, Jen depicts a fragile, terror-era America challenged by globalization and immigration. Jen asks that infamous question put forward by Yeats and then Achebe: Can the center hold?

Historical cycles show that every so often the margins enact great coups against the governing center. The center does not hold—in every generation things fall apart as society builds itself anew. In with the “out” and out with the “in” and so on.

Maria Szadziuk makes every member of modern society an Other when she suggests that multicultural environments—which most Americans today inhabit—are the scene of both internal and external conflict as individuals test personal concerns against an increasing variety of ideologies (“Culture as Transition”).

If the center cannot hold, the margins are a safe place for us all. In effect, if we are all Others, then we are none of us Others. We become individuals.



Figure 11 *Teeth*

To Meneka who crawls into bed dressed like a Nepali. Half because she is cold and half because she feels it is a very rock star way to fall into bed and half because her lungs are still full of Bombay-Cochin smog and cold airplane germs. One foot in the East but facing west, missing but relieved and wanting the press of a crowd but hot and bothered and pushing it away and still feeling most at home in airports.

Works Cited

- Aguiar, Arun. "Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri." *Pifmagazine.com*. *Pif Magazine* 28 July 1999. 3 May 2003. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lutte, 1987. Print.
- The Anatomy of The Namesake: A Class at Columbia University's Graduate Film School*. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2007. DVD.
- Anderson, Tom, and Melody Milbrandt. *Art for Life: Authentic Instruction in Art*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005. Print.
- Anreus, Alejandro. "Contra-notas: Irreverent Thoughts and Questions on Latino and Latin American Art." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 34.1 (2009): 263-275. Print.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "The Case for Contamination." *New York Times Magazine*. New York Times, 1 Jan. 2006. Web. 25 Jan. 2011.
- . *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: Norton, 2006. Print.
- Aranda, Pilar E. Rodriguez. "On the Solitary Fate of Being Mexican, Female, Wicked and Thirty-Three: An Interview with Writer Sandra Cisneros." *The Americas Review* 18 (1990): 64-80. Print.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. New York: Orion Books, 1964. Print.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. Print.
- Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977. Print.
- Blauner, Robert. *Racial Oppression in America*. New York: Harper and Row, 1972. Print.
- Bolonick, Kera. "Migration, Assimilation, and Inebriation: Jhumpa Lahiri Talks with *Bookforum*." *Bookforum Contemporary Literary Criticism* 282 (2008). *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Brada-Williams, Noelle. "Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* as a Short Story Cycle." *MELUS* 29.3 & 4 (2004): 451-464. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.

- Brown, Jeffrey. "Novelist Junot Díaz Weaves Cultures and Languages." *Pbs.org*. PBS Newshour, 29 Apr. 2008. Web. 17 Feb. 2011.
- Brunk, Beth. "En Otras Voces: Multiple Voices in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*." *Hispanofila* 133 (2001): 137-150. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Busch, Juan Daniel. "Self-Baptizing the Wicked Esperanza: Chicana Feminism and Cultural Contact in *The House on Mango Street*." *Mester* 22-23.1-2 (1993): 123-134. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Butler, Johnella. "Difficult Dialogues." *Women's Review of Books* 6.5 (1989): 16. Print.
- Caesar, Judith. "Gogol's Namesake: Identity and Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*." *Atenea* 27.1 (2007): 103-119. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Capetillo-Ponce, Jorge. "Latinos as a Threat to Anglo Protestant Culture: A Critical Analysis of the Theoretical Bases of Samuel Huntington's 'The Hispanic Challenge.'" *The Journal of Intergroup Relations* 33.1 (2007): 3-24. Print.
- Carter, Nancy Corson. "Claiming the Bittersweet Matrix: Alice Walker, Sandra Cisneros, and Adrienne Rich." *Critique* 35.4 (1994): 195-204. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Chandler, Marilyn R. *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. Print.
- Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening* (1899). New York: Dover Publications, 1993. Print.
- Chowdhury, Anupama. "Interpreter of Maladies: A Saga of Diaspora and Multiculturalism." *The Journal of Indian Writing in English* 37.1 (2009): 12-23. Print.
- Cisneros, Sandra. *Caramelo or Puro Cuento: A Novel*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. Print.
- . "Do You Know Me? I Wrote *The House on Mango Street*." *The Americas Review* 15.1 (1987): 69-79. Print.
- . "From a Writer's Notebook." *The Americas Review* 15 (1987): 69-79. Print.
- . "Ghosts and Voices: Writing from Obsession." *The Americas Review* 15.1 (1986): 193-212. Print.
- . *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage, 1991. Print.

- . “Notes to a Young(er) Writer.” *The Americas Review* 15 (1987): 74-76. Print.
- . *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. New York: Vintage, 1991. Print.
- Cleave, Chris. *Little Bee: A Novel*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008. Print.
- Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988. Print.
- . “Traveling Cultures.” *Cultural Studies*. Ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichner. New York: Routledge, 1992. 96-116. Print.
- Colapinto, John. “Brain Games: The Marco Polo of Neuroscience.” *The New Yorker* 11 May 2009: 76-87. Print.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness* (1902). New York: The Modern Library, 1999. Print.
- Cruz, Felicia. “On the ‘Simplicity’ of Sandra Cisneros’s *House on Mango Street*.” *Modern Fiction Studies* 47.4 (2001): 910-946. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- DeVries, Hilary. “All That Korean Rage, Unbottled.” *New York Times*. New York Times, 17 Oct. 2004. Web. 21 June 2010.
- Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao: A Novel*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. Print.
- . “Write On!” *O: The Oprah Magazine* Nov. 2009: 190-191. Print.
- Doyle, Jacqueline. “More Room of Her Own: Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*.” *MELUS* 19.4 (1994): 5-35. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Elena de Valdés, Maria. “In Search of Identity in Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*.” *The Canadian Review of American Studies* 23.1 (1992): 55-72. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Erikson, Erik. *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968). New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994. Print.
- Esselman, Mary. “Sandra Cisneros: Overview.” *Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers*. Ed. Laura Standley Berger. Detroit: St. James Press, 1994. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.

- Friedman, Natalie. "From Hybrids to Tourists: Children of Immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's: *The Namesake*." *CRITIQUE: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 50.1 (2008): 111. Literature Resource Center. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Ganguli, Ishani. "Novelist Gish Jen Finds Literary Voice Outside Harvard Identity." *The Harvard Crimson*. 4 June 2002. Web. 30 Mar. 2011.
- Ganz, Robin. "Sandra Cisneros: Border Crossings and Beyond." *MELUS* 19.1 (1994): 19-29. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Gillan, Maria Mazziotti, and Jennifer Gillan, eds. *Growing up Ethnic in America: Contemporary Fiction About Learning to Be American*. New York: Penguin, 1999. Print.
- Greenwald, A.G., D.E. McGhee, and J.L. Schwartz. 1998. "Measuring individual differences in implicit cognition: The implicit association test." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74 (6): 1464-80. Print.
- Greenwald, A.G., Mahzarin Banaji, Brian Nosek. *Project Implicit*. Harvard University. *implicit.harvard.edu*. Web. 27 May 2010.
- Handal, Nathalie. "Caribe en Nueva York." *Literature and Composition*. Ed. Carol Jago, Renee Shea, Lawrence Scanlon, and Robin Dissin Aufses. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. 523. Print.
- Heartney, Eleanor. *Postmodernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Print.
- Herrera, Andrea O'Reilly. "'Chambers of Consciousness': Sandra Cisneros and the Development of the Self in the *BIG House on Mango Street*." *Bucknell Review* 39.1 (1995): 191-204. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Hu, Brian. *Gogol Versus the Idiots: An Interview with Kal Penn*. *Asiaarts.ucla.edu*. Asia Pacific Arts—UCLA Asia Institute, 10 Feb. 2007. Web. 5 Feb. 2011.
- Jaggi, Maya. "Junot Díaz: a truly all-American writer." *The Independent*. The Independent of London, 29 Feb. 2008. Web. 17 Feb. 2011.
- Jamison, Kay Redfield. "Manic-Depressive Illness and Creativity." *Mysteries of the Mind* Feb. 1995: 90-95. Print.
- Jen, Gish. *Mona in the Promised Land: A Novel*. New York: Vintage, 1997. Print.
- . *Who's Irish? Stories*. New York: Vintage, 2000. Print.

- Joselit, David. *Feedback: Television against Democracy*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007. Print.
- “Junot Díaz, Cornell MFA/Fiction, 1995, Biography and Selected Bibliography.” Cornell Council for the Arts, Cornell University. *Cca.cornell.edu*. 2008. Web. 9 Apr. 2011.
- Kakutani, Michiko. “From Calcutta to Suburbia: A Family’s Perplexing Journey.” *The New York Times* 2 Sep. 2003: E1+. Print.
- . “Travails of an Outcast.” Rev. of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, by Junot Díaz. *New York Times*. *New York Times* 4 Sep. 2007. Web. 4 Jan. 2010.
- Kingsolver, Barbara. “Poetic Fiction with a Tex-Mex Tilt.” Rev. of *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, by Sandra Cisneros. *Los Angeles Times*, 28 Apr. 1991. Print.
- Klein, Dianne. “Coming of Age in Novels.” *English Journal* 81.5 (1992): 21-26. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Labong, Leilani. “The Ghost Whisperer: Local Author Amy Tan Gets Spirited Away.” *7x7 San Francisco* Sep. 2008: 168. Print.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. New York: Mariner, 1999. Print.
- . Interview. *Readersread.com*. Readers Read, Nov. 2003. Web. 25 Jan. 2011.
- . “Maladies of Belonging.” Interview by Vibhuti Patel. *Newsweek International* 20 Sep. 1990: 80. Print.
- . *The Namesake: A Novel*. New York: Mariner, 2004. Print.
- . “To Heaven without Dying.” *Sawf.org*. South Asian Women’s Forum 9 Apr. 2000. Web. 1 Feb. 2011.
- . *Unaccustomed Earth*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. Print.
- Langer, Adam. “A Daughter’s Journey.” *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 282 (2003): 52-55. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Lazarus, Emma. “The New Colossus.” *The Poems of Emma Lazarus*. Boston: Houghton, 1889. Print.
- Lewis, R.W.B. *The American Adam*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955. Print.

- Locke, Alain. "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts" 1925. *Primitivism and Twentieth Century Art: A Documentary History*. Ed. Jack D. Flam. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. Print.
- Lynn, David. "Virtues of Ambition." *The Kenyon Review* 26.3 (2004): 160. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Mann, Susan Garland. *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide*. New York: Greenwood, 1989. Print.
- Marcia, James. *Ego Identity: A Handbook for Psychosocial Research*. New York: Springer, 1993. Print.
- Maríñez, Sophie. "Junot Diaz Biography." *Jrank.org*. 2011. Web. 17 Feb. 2011.
- Marsters, Sarge. "Radical Alchemy: Junot Díaz on the Voices, Languages, and Structures behind His Fiction." *Emerson College Newsletter* (Fall 2004). *Jrank.org*. Web. 17 Feb. 2011.
- McManus, Cecil, and Shawn Lewis. "Communicating Cultural Control: John Henryism, Personality and Social Isolation in African Americans." *The Journal of Intergroup Relations* 33.1 (2007): 25-44. Print.
- Metcalf, Stephen. "Out of the Overcoat." Review of *The Namesake*, by Jhumpa Lahiri. *The New York Times Book Review* 28 Sep. 2003: 11. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Nair, Mira. "Hooray for Bollywood." *Time* 26 June 2006: 49. Print.
- The Namesake*. Dir. Mira Nair. Perf. Kal Penn. Fox Searchlight Pictures and Mirabai Films, 2007. Film.
- Noriega, Chon. "The Western's 'Forgotten People'." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 34.1 (2009): 1-9. Print.
- Olivares, Julian. "Entering *The House on Mango Street*." *Teaching American Ethnic Literatures: Nineteen Essays*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- . "Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, and the Poetics of Space." *Americas Review* 15.3-4 (1987): 160-170. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Otsuka, Julie. *When The Emperor Was Divine: A Novel*. New York: Anchor, 2003. Print.

- Piercy, Marge. "Barbie Doll." 1971. Marge Piercy Online. *Margepiercy.com*. Web. 12 Jan. 2011.
- Plous, Scott ed. *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination*. Chicago: McGraw Hill, 2002. Print.
- "Prejudice and Discrimination: Why? How Can You Cope?" *Awake* August 2009: 3-9. Print.
- Poddar, Kakoli. "Salaam Kolkata." *Society* July 2005: 116-119. Print.
- Proust, Marcel. *Swann's Way* (1913). Trans. C.K. Scott Montcreiff (1922). New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005.
- Revilla, Anita Tijerina. "Yosso's Critical Race Counterstories." Rev. of *Critical Race Counterstories Along the Chicana/Chicano Educational Pipeline*, by Tara J. Yosso. *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 34.1 (2009): 309-312. Print.
- Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision." *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences*. New York: Norton, 1975. Print.
- Riojas, Mirasol. "Mendible's From Bananas to Buttocks." Rev. of *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture*, ed. by Myra Mendible. *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 34.1 (2009): 303-307. Print.
- Rodriguez, Richard. *Days of Obligation: An Argument With My Mexican Father*. New York: Penguin, 1993. Print.
- . *Hunger for Memory—The Education of Richard Rodriguez: An Autobiography*. New York: Bantam, 1982. Print.
- Rushdie, Salman. *The Enchantress of Florence*. New York: Random House, 2008. Print.
- . "My Unfunny Valentine." *The New Yorker* 15 Feb. 1999: 28. Web.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994. Print.
- Sanchez, Reuben. "Remembering Always to Come Back: The Child's Wished-for Escape and the Adult's Self-Empowered Return in Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*." *Children's Literature* 23 (1995): 221-241. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Satz, Martha. "Returning to One's House: An Interview with Sandra Cisneros." *Southwest Review* 82.2 (1997): 166-185. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.

- Scott, A.O. "Dreaming in Spanglish." Rev. of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, by Junot Díaz. *New York Times*. New York Times, 30 Sep. 2007. Web. 4 Jan. 2010.
- Sen, Amartya. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian Culture, History and Identity*. New York: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- Sen, Mandira. "Names and Nicknames." Rev. of *The Namesake*, by Jhumpa Lahiri. *The Women's review of Books* 21.6 (2004): 9. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- . "The Immigrant Generations." *Women's Review of Books* 25.6 (2008): 29. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Ed. Horace Howard Furness. New York: Dover, 1964. Print.
- Shankar, Radhika R. "A Writer Free to Write All Day." *Rediff.com*. Rediff India Abroad 23 Aug. 1999. Web. 3 Feb. 2011.
- Singer, Sally. "Miss Chief." *Vogue* Jan. 2010: 120-121, 138. Print.
- Stevens, Dana. "Oh, Doctor?" *Slate*. Washington Post. Newsweek Interactive, 28 March 2005. Web. 21 June 2010.
- Sugiyama, Michelle Scalise. "Of Woman Bondage: The Eroticism of Feet in *The House on Mango Street*." *Midwest Quarterly* 41.1 (1999): 9-20. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Szadziuk, Maria. "Culture as Transition: Becoming a Woman in Bi-Ethnic Space." *Mosaic* 32.3 (1999): 109-129. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.
- Tan, Amy. *The Opposite of Fate: Memories of a Writing Life*. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- Tanenhaus, Sam. "Violence That Art Didn't See Coming." *New York Times*. New York Times, 28 Feb. 2010. Web. 30 Feb. 2010.
- Torres-Saillant, Céspedes, Diógenes, and Silvio. "Fiction Is the Poor Man's Cinema: An Interview with Junot Díaz." *Callaloo* 23.3 (2000): 892-907. Print.
- Whitehead, Colson. *Sag Harbor: A Novel*. New York: Doubleday, 2009. Print.
- Wong, Cynthia Sau-ling. "Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definition and Approach." *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect*. Ed. Paul John Eakin. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991. Print.

Wood, Gaby. "A Storyteller is Born." *Vogue* Aug. 2009: 146-149. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. 1929. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957. Print.

Zia, Helen. *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000. Print.