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Versions of America: Reading American Literature for Identity and Difference

Raj G. Chetty

Brigham Young University - Provo

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VERSIONS OF AMERICA: READING AMERICAN LITERATURE
FOR IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

by
Raj Chetty

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Raj Chetty

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

Date

Trenton L. Hickman, Chair

Date

Edward Smith Cutler, Reader

Date

Aaron Christopher Eastley, Reader

Date

Phillip A. Snyder, Graduate Advisor

Date

Nicholas Mason, Associate Chair for
Graduate Studies

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Raj Chetty in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

Date

Trenton L. Hickman
Chair, Graduate Committee

Accepted for the Department

Phillip A. Snyder
Graduate Advisor

Accepted for the College

John R. Rosenberg
Dean, College of Humanities

ABSTRACT

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Raj Chetty

Department of English

Master of Arts

My paper examines how American authors of the South Asian Diaspora (Indian-American or South Asian American) can be read 1) as simply American and 2) without regard to ethnicity. I develop this argument using American authors Jhumpa Lahiri, a first generation American of Bengali-Indian descent, and Bharati Mukherjee, an American of Bengali-Indian origin. I borrow from Deepika Bahri's materialist aesthetics in postcolonialism (in turn borrowed from members of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory) and include theoretical insights from Rey Chow, Graham Huggan, and R. Radhakrishnan regarding multiculturalism, identity politics, and diaspora studies. Huggan and Radhakrishnan's insights are especially useful because their work deals with the South Asian diaspora, in England and the United States, respectively.

After setting up a theoretical framework, I critique reviews and essays that privilege hyphenated, "Indian," or "South Asian" identity, and the resultant reading

paradigm that fixes these authors into an ethnic minority category. I then trace aesthetic and thematic content of short stories from both Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies and Mukherjee's The Middleman and Other Stories to demonstrate how these stories resist this ethno-cultural pigeonholing.

My analysis exposes how ethnic and multicultural identity politics supplant aesthetic criticism and transform ethno-cultural identity into an aesthetic object, even if done as a celebration of hybridity or liminality as a putatively liberating space (hyphenated identity as embodying that space). Though my purpose is not to undermine the meaningful artwork and criticism instantiated in or about the “in-between” spaces of American culture, I demonstrate that an over-emphasis on ethnicity and culture (culture “other” than the majority culture in the U.S.) in fact stifles the opening of the American literary canon. Ethnicity and culture become ways of limiting the hermeneutics available to literary criticism because they become the only ways of reading, instead of one lens through which American literature is read.

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A New Racial Mountain: Ethnicity, Culture, and Race in Contemporary American
Literature

Langston Hughes opens his seminal 1926 essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” with a critique of a young Black poet of the time: “One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, ‘I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet,’ meaning, I believe, ‘I want to write like a white poet’; meaning subconsciously, ‘I would like to be a white poet’, meaning behind that, ‘I would like to be white’” (27). Hughes continues, evoking and explaining the image of his title, “this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible” (27). The power of Hughes’ invective is unmistakable: to be American in 1926 is to be white, and to ignore one’s “Negro” identity in favor of an assimilated American one is to ignore oneself.

However, Hughes’ poet colleague arguably asserts something other than a black/white dialectic: his desire to be read simply as a poet, instead of being forced to create poetry defined and circumscribed by his race. This is not to say that Hughes’ point is invalid. Hughes speaks in 1926, when it was difficult to dissociate one’s racial identity from one’s artistic identity, because of how both artist and artwork were received. In other words, to be a poet who was “Negro” in the United States in 1926 was to be a “Negro poet” in critics’ and readers’ eyes, whether or not the poet him or herself wished to self-identify based on race.

The issue of racial, ethnic, and cultural assertion is again at the forefront of much of contemporary literary American studies. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt preface

their collection, Postcolonial Theory and the United States, with an eye to explaining this shift in the United States:

The rise of global capitalism and neocolonialism, plus more than a century of immigrant life in the U.S.—coupled with other migrations around the world throughout the twentieth century—have kept in constant flux our understandings of assimilation and resistance, assent and dissent, descent and consent. The growing recognition in the last two decades of hybrid cultures around the globe calls into question, more sharply than ever before, the validity of old binaries such as West and East, North and South, white and non-white, developed vs. developing nations, First and Third Worlds. (vii)

As Singh and Schmidt point out, the shift in the last two decades to an increasingly transnational or global perspective has affected the ways in which American literary studies both has interacted in that global discussion and has begun to address the increasingly complex issues of race, ethnicity, nation, and culture within itself.¹

The tide has shifted to a more receptive cultural understanding that has opened up the canon and encouraged cross-cultural dialogue. Edward Said's work in Culture and Imperialism, as an example, undermines the cultural transcendence of works by canonical writers like Austen and Conrad by contextualizing their cultural nuances, but does not undermine their literary quality. Thus, whereas before critics and readers privileged

¹ Singh and Schmidt's preface to the collection describes the further shift in twentieth century American literary studies, highlighting the not-so-recent move away from a white, male canon to a contemporary emphasis on both international ("transnational") studies and cross-cultural studies within the United States ("the *borders* of English within the U.S."). They posit, however, that this shift is not a just contemporary phenomenon but one that is indebted to the transnational and cross-cultural work by nineteenth and turn-of-the-century thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Frederick Jackson Turner, José Martí, and Charles Chesnutt.

literature from a Eurocentric canon for the perceived universality of its themes, now greater attention to the contextualized, historicized nature of literature expands literary study to the transnational, global focus Singh and Schmidt note.²

But is all of this as positive as proponents of so-called “multiculturalism” would have it be?³ James Clifford asserts that “making *cultural* room” (Routes 258) for different ethnicities, races, and nationalities is necessary but not sufficient to erase or solve other socioeconomic disadvantages outright. Analogously, making “*cultural* room” at the literary table—in the canon—is necessary but not sufficient to equalize these “cultural representatives” in literature with the culture-transcending dominant literature that can be read for aesthetics, politics, and culture. If authors and works previously marginalized by the field are now at its center, to what degree does this represent genuine, as opposed to token, inclusion?

Rita Dove, a contemporary American poet, represents in her art and identity politics a contemporary complication of Hughes’ assertions above. In a Time article published shortly after Dove’s appointment as US Poet Laureate in 1993, she states, “There are times when I am a black woman who happens to be a poet, and times when I

² There is, nonetheless, still a backlash against the decentering of the Western canon and a concomitant expansion of the canon, as Chow notes:

In spite—and because—of the current clamor for ‘minority discourses,’ there is no lack of voices supporting the opposite viewpoint. The debates in the U.S. on the issue of canonicity, for instance, are driven by the urge to perpetuate what has been established as the ‘universals’ of cultural literacy.’ In fact, the more frequently ‘minor’ voices are heard, the greater is the need expressed by the likes of Allan Bloom and E.D. Hirsch, Jr. for maintaining a canon, so that a Western notion of humanity can remain the norm....The rhetoric of universals, in other words, is what ensures the ghettoized existence of the other, be it in the form of a different culture, religion, race, or sex. (101)

³ Clifford suggests in Routes, “When borders gain a paradoxical centrality, margins, edges, and lines of communication emerge as complex maps and histories” (7). Though his point is well taken, perhaps it should be added that they *should* emerge as complex maps and histories. Clifford acknowledges this later in his prologue: “there is no reason to assume that crossover practices are always liberatory...In most situations, what matters politically is who deploys nationality or transnationality, authenticity or hybridity, against whom, with what relative power and ability to sustain a hegemony” (10).

am a poet who happens to be black” (qtd. in White 88). In a significantly different historical context, Dove’s stance about her identity and her poetics echoes the “Negro poet” Hughes critiques seventy years earlier:

One of the big stumbling blocks I have had to get over was coming to terms with what blackness meant to me as an artist. Is that my central concern? Or is that one concern among many?...I don’t really care to think about any of these “themes,” these “concepts” when I’m writing. I am in the moment; I’m filtering the moment through language and through my *self*, through my artistic heart, which may be 60 percent black, 40 percent female one day, but 10 percent black, 50 percent female, 40 percent dancer—whatever!—the next.

Frankly, I just want to write poems....

I’ve had the luxury of coming of age as a writer at a time when I could make these choices. So many generations of black writers before me could not afford to attend artistically to their full human selves because the critical reception would not permit it. They had to “be black” or nothing.
(1036)

At the same time that Dove acknowledges a certain artistic debt to those “generations of black writers” who preceded her—like Hughes and his colleague—who had to “be black or nothing,”⁴ she asserts her ability now to make new choices regarding her identity. One of the pitfalls of current trends toward multiculturalism is a certain cultural epistemology that asks ethnic American minority artists to produce cultural knowledge for the majority

⁴ Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s introduction to his edited volume “Race,” *Writing and Difference* and Anthony Appiah’s “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race” in the same collection both address the issue of those generations of black writers Dove invokes in her quote here.

American reader⁵ and critic about what it means to inhabit the peripheral space of ethnic minority. Instead of capitulating to this cultural interpellation, Dove redefines, and circles back to, the dilemma of articulating identity within America.

The trajectory I've chosen to outline here—from Hughes' diatribe against avoiding the “Negro” in one's artistic identity to Dove's assertion that she can negotiate her artistic identity as she sees fit—underscores the way in which many “ethnicized” or “hybridized” American authors struggle against the way in which their identities are dictated for them by an American audience eager to define, behold, understand, consume the “ethnic” other. This struggle does not suggest that some “ethnic” authors do not embrace the essentializing tropes of race, ethnicity, and culture, nor that their projects are inherently inferior, but instead allows a space for that struggle against identity politics alongside the struggle to assert ethnicity, race, and culture in artwork.⁶

The crisis in contemporary American identity, of course, is not limited to Black Americans. American authors Amy Tan and Bharati Mukherjee have elsewhere articulated their aversion to being typecast as ethnic representatives. Tan states that she is “alarmed when reviewers and educators assume that my very personal, specific, and fictional stories are meant to be representative down to the nth detail not just of Chinese-

⁵ A term like “the majority American reader” is itself open to the same critique of essentialism that this paper suggests is a problem when dealing with “ethnic minority” literatures, and I lay no claim here to the sort of “strategic essentialism” Spivak rightly states is sometimes necessary. Instead, I will present in the first part of the body of this thesis an analysis of those American readers, often literary critics whose reviews are highly influential, who rely on problematic assertions, essentialisms, and exoticisms in their analyses of *Interpreter of Maladies*. These readers, and their influence, are the objects of my otherwise problematic phrase above.

⁶ Gates' introductory essay to *“Race,” Writing, and Difference* highlights both the liberation and the “trap” of writing about race and difference, specifically for blacks. On the one hand, “the inscription of the black voice in Western literatures has preserved...cultural differences to be repeated, imitated, and revised in a separate Western literary tradition, a tradition of black difference” (12). On the other, “when [blacks] attempt to appropriate, by inversion, ‘race’ as a term for an essence...we yield too much: the basis of a shared humanity” (13). Gates refuses to cede to an uncomplicated depiction of either strategy, a useful ambivalence in determining how authors “should” write about ethnicity, race, and difference today.

Americans but, sometimes, of all Asian culture” (11).⁷ Mukherjee has been particularly explicit about her denunciation of a hyphenated identity: “I’d say I’m an American writer of Bengali-Indian origin” (“Holders” 6). Though her self-definition includes India’s Bengal, she intentionally foregrounds and privileges her American identity in this construction. At other times, Mukherjee makes this point even more emphatically: “I choose to describe myself on my own terms, that is, as an American without hyphens...rather than as an Asian-American. Why is it that hyphenation is imposed only on nonwhite Americans? And why is it that only non-white citizens are ‘problematized’ if they choose to describe themselves on their own terms?” (“Beyond Multiculturalism” 33).

In each of these cases, American artists’ ability to define themselves, and to do so variously at different times, is paramount.⁸ Yet, this issue of self-definition is itself fraught with difficulty, and many authors, including those mentioned above, struggle with their own self-definitions.⁹ All authors must struggle to some degree with how their artwork and identity are received by both critical and popular audiences. However, the struggle facing writers from minority backgrounds is more complicated than that facing mainstream or “majority” writers. Rey Chow points up the difficulty when she states,

⁷ See Susan Koshy’s “The Fiction of Asian-American Literature” for a compelling critique of the tendency by both conservative and liberal scholars to assert pan-Asian ethnic identity.

⁸ Clifford’s “Traveling Cultures” (conference remarks with subsequent discussion that are reprinted in *Routes*), addresses this question in response to Keya Ganguly’s probing question: “When you extend the metaphor of bifocality to call for a comparative study of, for example Haitians in Haiti and Haitians in Brooklyn, New York, don’t you make the kind of reifying move that Appadurai critiques, as the othering of others? By locating them as Haitians in a continuous space between Haiti and New York, are you reinscribing an ideology of cultural difference?” Clifford’s response is twofold. On the one hand, he “hope[s] that he does not reinscribe an ideology of *absolute* cultural difference” (*Routes* 45, italics added). On the other, he recognizes “the whole question of identity as a politics rather than an inheritance—the tense interaction between these two sources...Questions like these do not lend themselves to systemic or definitive answers; they are what cultural politics is all about” (46).

⁹ The Chicago Cultural Studies group defines identity politics in a more useful way: “This is how identity politics may be fruitfully understood now: as sites of struggle, rather than as sites of ‘identity’” (548).

“Part of the goal of ‘writing diaspora’ is ... to unlearn that submission to one’s ethnicity such as ‘Chineseness’ as the ultimate signified even as one continues to support movements for democracy and human rights in China” (25). Chow carefully nuances her comment and gives the writer power: on the one hand, a writer can engage in projects connected to diasporic identity, and on the other, a writer can define his or her identities—not an identity that foregrounds race, ethnicity, or culture as “the ultimate signified”—on his or her own terms. Perhaps in an attempt to explain some minority writers’ tendency to foreground their minority position, R. Radhakrishnan un.masks disturbing trends in the current American literary milieu:

For too long, oppressed groups have been forced to constantly militarize their sense of identity, (1) as though their identities had no truth or significance beyond the expediency of polemics or strategy...and (2) as though the meaning of their lives has to be perennially played out in the context of dominant identities who supposedly have transcended the strategic and the political in the name of their successful and “natural” history. (xxvi)¹⁰

Thus, as Chow points out, authors writing from a minority subject position must unlearn submission to the demands of authentic, ethnic representation. At the same time, however, these same authors must “constantly militarize” their identities in the face of the dominant culture, which has “transcended” identity politics and strategies. In other

¹⁰ Michael M. J. Fischer’s discussion of Asian-American ethnic autobiography highlights the productive moves writers can derive from identity politics: “for personal self-definition, and also to overcome those publishers and critics who consistently reject any writings contradicting popular racist views of Asian-Americans as either totally exotic, as no different from anyone else (denial of culture), or, finally, as model minorities” (211). Fischer’s “doubly important” focus on both “personal self-definition” and public political assertions regarding identity is often lost in today’s official forms of multiculturalism that ask for fixed, often hybridized, identity.

words, whereas writers from dominant ethnicities can struggle with self-definition in a way that transcends the identity politics of a multicultural society, writers from minority positions always already must articulate their identity politics in response to orientalizing readers who tend to, like the ethnographer of old, “confer on the other a discrete identity” (Clifford, “Introduction” 12).¹¹ This expectation complicates minority writers’ ability to negotiate Chow’s unlearning submission to ethnicity with Radhakrishnan’s forced articulation of ethnicity.

The most challenging aspect of writing “ethnic” or “cultural” identity into literary texts is what Radhakrishnan calls “literally a ‘pre-post’-erous space where [the ethnic] has to actualize, enfranchise, and empower its own ‘identity’ and coextensively engage in the deconstruction of the very logic of ‘identity’ and its binary and exclusionary politics” (62). Thus, the marginalized author must confront his or her marginalized identity at the same time that he or she must move away from a focus on such confrontation.

Radhakrishnan underscores the importance of the project by revealing the consequence of its failure: “Failure to achieve this doubleness can only result in the formation of ethnicity as yet another ‘identical’ and hegemonic structure” (62). In other words, so long as “ethnic” authors focus on, privilege, or engage exclusively in writing about internally and externally constructed “ethnic” identity, these authors will perpetuate a paradigm that asks them to continue to capitulate to a literary market appetite hungry for the “other”

¹¹ This sociological/anthropological approach to “viewing” Commonwealth writers prompts Huggan to state, “the ‘Commonwealth writer’ required to play the dual role of cultural ambassador and native informant, is submitted to a controlling metropolitan gaze that joins inquisitive—suspiciously colonialist—amateur-anthropological sensibilities to the philanthropically expressed desire for international *détente*” (234). Huggan’s critique here of Commonwealth readers who have an “amateur-anthropological” hermeneutics is valid in the case of American readers with an equally “inquisitive” regard for their “ethnic/minority” other. It also evokes the double-edged nature of cross-disciplinary study: on the one hand it is productive in opening up critical strategies, but on the other, when writers who write from the cultural or ethnic “margins” of American society are read in cross-disciplinary ways, it can mask a desire to read the “margin” in only one way—in disciplines “other” than English or literature, like the social sciences.

within the United States. It seems, however, that Radhakrishnan speaks within an America that has already begun to realize its failure.

This failure in contemporary American literary studies to both confront marginal identity and de-privilege the focus on it stems not from authors' inability to "achieve," as Radhakrishnan posits it, but from a failure in readers. Critical reception, which typically influences popular reception, fails to recognize the doubleness of ethnic identity. Instead, identity as a theme is seen as the only possibility arising from ethnic literature as a genre; because of such readings, ethnic identity becomes discursive necessity. But Chow suggests that ethnic authors, like those mentioned above, in fact "resist...with stubborn opacity" the desire of the "dominant discourse" to provide a "hasty supply of original 'contexts' and 'specificities'" that cement hegemonic thought "precisely by its capacity to convert, recode, make transparent, and thus represent" the ethnic other within America (38).¹² Chow's articulation of the desires of the dominant discourse explains the prevailing notion that authors from previously marginalized backgrounds now included in the mainstream should foreground that which kept them in their peripheral position in the past—in the spirit of cultural pluralism's liberating mantra, mockingly represented by Chow, "Always contextualize! Never essentialize!" (6)—even when the authors themselves resist such a foregrounding.

Contemporary theoretical frameworks that argue for the reading of identity within a historical or cultural context (i.e. New Historicism, Multiculturalism, Postcolonialism) do well to attempt to avoid the essentializing gaze of the so-called "First World" by

¹² Huggan supplements what Chow states when he cites Canadian editors of ethnic minority descent who are careful to delineate the authors in their anthologies of multicultural writings not as cultural representatives but as Canadians, and the texts not as sociological or anthropological cases but as contributions to literature (134-35).

encouraging historically or culturally nuanced readings. However, these projects run the risk of ignoring aesthetic considerations in favor of sociocultural or political ones. So Chow's question becomes crucial: "How do we prevent what begin as tactics...from turning into a solidly fenced-off field, in the military no less than the academic sense?" (17). Herein is a major danger of official multiculturalism¹³: readers often view authors, whose personal connections to "third world" culture range from intimate to tenuous, as representative of those cultures, even if these authors do not wish to represent these cultures or do not know them. The dominant discourse forces these "ethnic" authors into the "fenced-off field" of cultural or ethnic literature.

Graham Huggan prefaces his work The Postcolonial Exotic with the very problem delineated above:

When creative writers like Salman Rushdie are seen, despite their cosmopolitan background, as representatives of Third World countries; when literary works like Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) are gleaned, despite their fictional status, for the anthropological information they provide; when academic concepts like postcolonialism are turned, despite their historicist pretensions, into watchwords for the fashionable study of cultural otherness—all of these are instances of the *postcolonial exotic*, of the global commodification of cultural difference... (vii)

¹³ Chow provides a good definition of "official multiculturalism," even if she does not deploy the term itself: "Current trends in contemporary cultural studies, while being always supportive of categories of difference, also tend to reinscribe those categories in the form of fixed identities....these categories of difference are often used in such a way as to stabilize, rather than challenge, a preestablished method of examining 'cultural diversity,' whereby 'difference' becomes a sheer matter of adding new names in an ever-expanding pluralistic horizon" (23). Her biting phrase "adding new names" represents the underlying practice often accompanying the token inclusion of minority writers in a purported celebration of cultural difference. Singh and Schmidt add, linking official multiculturalism with colonial discourse, "In colonial discourse of the Other—as in official multiculturalism—each national (or racial/ethnic) group is viewed as pure and homogenous, representing an authentic and unified culture" (23).

Huggan critiques the privileging of the study of cultural otherness, because this study often is nothing more than “fashionable.” Even more, his comments underscore the way in which certain authors are corralled into the very “fenced-off field” Chow warns against. Though Huggan’s quote focuses more on global and postcolonial instances of the “commodification of cultural difference,” his work delves into the more local problems of multiculturalism, ethnicity, and marginality, issues that are part of but not exclusive to postcolonialism. His question is similar to mine, though modified slightly: are ethnic, marginal, or minority writers forced “to represent their respective cultures, and to translate those cultures for an unfamiliar metropolitan readership?” (Huggan 26).

Although Huggan presents a British reaction to literature from Britain or its former colonies, the contemporary American literary scene is equally fraught with problematic relationships with its ethnic minority writers. Radhakrishnan denounces forced identity in his Diasporic Mediations: “In the diasporan context in the United States, ethnicity is often *forced* to take on the discourse of authenticity just to protect and maintain its space and history” (210; italics added). Authors writing from the margins of American society, according to Radhakrishnan, are expected to continuously perform the authenticity of their marginality, an expectation created and maintained by American consumers’ literary tastes. But this exigency arises not only from American “pop” readers; critics, too, are guilty, as Chow notes:

In the name of investigating ‘cultural difference,’ ethnic markers...easily become a method of differentiation that precisely blocks criticism from its critical task by reinscribing potentially radical notions such as ‘the other’ in the security of fastidiously documented archival detail. A scholarly

nativism that functions squarely within the Orientalist dynamic and that continues to imprison ‘other cultures’ within entirely conventional disciplinary boundaries thus remains intact. (6)

Chow’s reference to Said’s seminal work, Orientalism, is apropos, since so-called literary multiculturalism’s focus on race, culture, and ethnicity reveals a latent desire to orientalize the “Orient” within America. Ironically enough, it is in an attempt to “avoid the pitfalls of earlier Orientalism” that such readings “particulariz[e] their inquiries as meticulously as possible by way of class, gender, race, nation, and geographical locale” (Chow 6). For this reason, the “rhetoric of authenticity tends to degenerate into essentialism” (Radhakrishnan 211). The ethnic other has become epistemologically delicious to American literary consumers.

Thus, whereas the previous and legitimate critiques of formalist, aesthetic-centered literary studies, like Said’s mentioned above or Achebe’s critique of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, revealed ethnocentrism at best and exploitative racism at worst, the tide has shifted so far toward studies of race, ethnicity, class, and gender in multiculturalism that aesthetic concerns seem on the surface to be ignored. Though there is merit to the inclusion of previously marginalized literatures, the terms of inclusion reveal similar tendencies (epistemological relationship with an “other” culture, exotic beauty of the marginalized) that often fly under the banner of multiculturalism.

Deepika Bahri has devoted a book-length study to this process—by which the aesthetic is ignored in favor of the political in literature—as it manifests itself in postcolonial literary studies. She employs the Marxist dialectics espoused by the Frankfurt School to warn that because of contemporary trends in capitalism and the fact

that “artistic expression is increasingly regulated by technological expansion and market considerations, the value of the aesthetic sphere as a distinctive activity threatens to dissolve” (Native 1). Bahri’s lament does not suggest a nostalgia for aesthetic formalism or criticism, because she recognizes its attendant problems; instead, she suggests that it is “no less important to refuse to cede [the postcolonial] text either to reactionary, nonmaterialist, apolitical aesthetics, or to an ineffectually diluted metropolitan political correctness, or indeed to an unimaginatively constrained conception of political value” (Native 3). Here, Bahri critiques the tendency to read postcolonial literatures as in an either/or bind: *either* they are read for aesthetic value, irrespective of political insight; *or* they are gleaned exclusively for their political commentaries, at the expense of a discussion of their aesthetics. This either/or approach to reading effectively limits critical approaches to postcolonial texts. Unfortunately, the claim is equally applicable to the way contemporary American readers and critics privilege “hybrid,” “marginal,” and “ethnic” literatures, myopically emphasizing political value (read: social, cultural, racial).

I would argue that notions of race, ethnicity, culture, and nationality have in fact become re-read as aesthetic quality, instead of being ignored. The aestheticization of racial, ethnic, and sociocultural concerns in contemporary multicultural literature by literary criticism is antithetical to the rebellion against the formalist aesthetic approach to criticism. In other words, the literary revolt against the privileging of aesthetics has itself been aestheticized: race, ethnicity, culture, and nationality have become aesthetic art—“beautiful” and produce-able, package-able, marketable. Huggan recognizes the potential power of multiculturalism, but then warns that it “continues to operate as a form of wilfully aestheticising exoticist discourse—a discourse which inadvertently serves to

disguise persistent racial tensions within the nation; and one which, in affecting a respect for the other as a reified object of cultural difference, deflects attention away from social issues...that are far from being resolved” (126). Thus, cultural identity politics supplants aesthetic criticism and transforms cultural identity into an aesthetic object.

However, just as Bahri argues about postcolonial literature, minority literatures in the United States should be read not solely as culturally informative, but also as containing “truth-content”¹⁴ that can reveal more “fully human” (Dove 1036) themes through the particularities of different experiences. This is not to suggest that cultural considerations should only focus on identity; instead, authors writing in the U.S., irrespective of their ethnic, cultural, or racial background, should be read for their particular contributions to the fabric of American culture and to the fabric of human understanding. Because this reading paradigm opens up criticism to include cultural, political, and aesthetic concerns, Bahri’s discussion of aesthetics and politics and postcolonial literatures is fitting:

Literature’s truth-content is unlikely to be released without a commitment to an interpretative stance that approaches it as an artifact at once sociopolitical and aesthetic, in fact as always simultaneously so, with each element inextricably bound up with the other. The second and considerably more challenging charge of this book, therefore, is a reanimation of the aesthetic dimension as a crucial category in the assessment of the social context of postcolonial literature. (Native 6)

¹⁴ The term is taken from Walter Benjamin’s fragment “False Criticism,” unpublished during his lifetime, in which he declares, “To see inside the work means giving a more precise account of the ways in which the work’s truth-content and material content interpenetrate” (408). Thus, Benjamin, in the early 1930s, advocated the dialectical task of criticism: to study the inextricable relationships between the material and “truth” content of literature.

Bahri's project in postcolonial literary studies is applicable to contemporary American literary studies because, as she puts it, it would "liberate the energy of this dynamic by attending more carefully to the processes of aesthetic mediation alongside literature's other mediations" (8). What Bahri calls for in postcolonial studies and I call for in contemporary American literary studies is a critical and readerly sense of accountability for what we do with what are typically read as culturally or natively informative texts, because these readings bear on the people whose culture is putatively represented and representative. It is an echo of Said's call at the close of Culture and Imperialism: "Much of the passionate controversy about 'cultural literacy' in the United States and Europe was about what *should* be read—the twenty or thirty essential texts—not about *how* they should be read" (328).

In Culture and Imperialism Said's focus on the problems of the "right-thinking response" to previously marginalized texts and authors is interesting because it ignores the equally problematic, pluralistic "left-thinking" response that demands and reads ethnic identity-driven performance as aesthetically valuable. But his closing paragraph illuminates the problem of identity-based cultural readings: "No one today is purely *one* thing," he argues (336). Appropriating his comments to contemporary dilemmas in American literary and cultural studies, one sees the problems of "labels like [Indian-American, or Chinese-American, or African-American]" because cultural imperialism's "worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively" defined by those hybridized, hyphenated labels (336).¹⁵

¹⁵ Fischer presents a further complication, one that productively destabilizes the essentializing notion that people are defined by their hyphenated, ethnic labels: "ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual and...is often something quite puzzling to the individual, something over which he or she lacks control. Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to

As such, even if authors foreground their particular ethnic, cultural, or racial identities in their work, this foregrounding should be read as contributing to an ever-increasing sense of what it means to be American, or human. Such a reading recognizes that writing by ethnic minority authors is aesthetically, politically, and critically equivalent to writing by ethnic majority writers, not simply cultural additions to an expanding museum-like canon.¹⁶ Hence Radhakrishnan's question: "Will there be a reciprocity of influence whereby American identity itself will be seen as a form of openness to the many ingredients that constitute it, or will 'Americanness' function merely as a category of marketplace pluralism?" (211).¹⁷ This reciprocity is only possible when American authors writing from ethnic, racial, or cultural minority spaces are read both for issues of identity and for issues of what redefines "Americanness" itself.

An author's identity can be American at one reading and Black-American, Chinese-American, or Indian-American at another, and a good reader must recognize the possibility and viability of both. But this limits a reader's response to the same binary

generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided" (195). Thus, he continues, "to be Chinese-American is not the same thing as being Chinese in America. In this sense, there is no role model for becoming Chinese-American. It is a matter of finding a voice or style that does not violate one's several components of identity" (196). Fischer's anthropological insights about identity construction merge nicely with Said's literary theory and applications.

¹⁶ Benjamin notes a similar trend to creating a "museum" in his fragment "Literary History and the Study of Literature." In it, he criticizes the "use of literary history for the creation of 'representative examples,'" noting that "Such achievements have long since ceased to have anything in common with scholarship; their function is limited to giving certain social strata the illusion that they are participating in the cultural and literary heritage" (462). He suggests a remedy to the problem immediately after, claiming, "Only a discipline that abandons its museum characteristics can replace illusion with reality" (462). Benjamin's comments about literary history in 1931 presage the current "museuming" of literature characteristic of official multiculturalism.

¹⁷ Anthony Appiah traces W.E.B. Du Bois' lifelong study of the concept of race in America and reveals that Radhakrishnan's question regarding "reciprocity of influence" dates back at least to Du Bois' life, even if Appiah admits to "adumbrating the argument Du Bois never managed to complete" (35). Appiah faults Du Bois for not being able to "ask if there is not in American culture—which undoubtedly *is* his—an African residue to take hold of and rejoice in, a subtle connection mediated not by genetics but by intentions, by meaning" (34). Thus, Appiah's deployment of Du Bois's struggle represents a retroactive positioning that asks America to recognize the "Americanness" of Africa and the "Africanness" of America, or, in other words, the reciprocal, mutual influence exerted by imported African culture and dominant American culture.

logic that allows “centered” American literature to deal with issues outside of identity while disallowing “marginalized” American literature to deal with anything but the politics of American cultural identity. As such, like Bahri, I aim to “instantiat[e] a variety of possible readings that arise from [the] hermeneutic matrix” (Native 8), a matrix that comes out of “a dialectical rationale” that “mobilizes the artwork’s truth content...against its more transparent social content” (17). In other words, my goal is to open up the critical possibilities such that aesthetic considerations—such as formal techniques, narrative movement, use of language, point of view—are not excluded in favor of the fashionably ethnic, racial, cultural, social ones.

It is in this light that recent and semi-recent literary contributions by two American authors of Indian descent and origin, Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee, reveal the limited and limiting nature of American literary criticism’s view regarding its own “ethnic other.” These authors may not be outside the swath of market-driven collusion: “the market’s very need for novelty, however, enables the production of ‘newness’ and innovation” (Bahri, Native 27). Nonetheless, both Lahiri’s and Mukherjee’s highly prized collections of short stories aesthetically represent an elusive politics, one that does not encourage monothetic readings revolving around essentialized ethnic and cultural identity, but instead opens up space for varied readings along the “dialectical rationale” proposed by the Frankfurt School and reapplied by Bahri.

Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies, a debut collection of short stories published in 1999, garnered the Pulitzer but has received scant attention by literary scholars. The literary reviews that do exist, however, indicate a certain tendency to note the Indian or Indian-inflected aspects of her stories at the expense of developed consideration either

about the particularly American aspects of her stories or their aesthetic quality outside of identity politics. Though some criticism to that end exists, it is sparse. This is not to suggest that the “Indianness” of Lahiri’s work should be excluded; however, both the lack of scholarly critical attention and the tendency in reviews to privilege identity politics, leaning even towards privileging the exotic in the stories, smacks of latent, home-grown Orientalism. Furthermore, as a recent Newsweek article indicates, American reception of Lahiri’s work is predominantly tied to its sensibilities about the hybridized, hyphenated other. The danger herein is to ignore those voices that clamor from marginal spaces but who don’t have the ability or desire to foreground their hybridity or hyphenated identity.

Mukherjee is one such author. Her self-proclaimed disavowal of “assimilated” and hyphenated identity is notoriously contested by American, Indian, and Indian-American readers. On one hand, she is read and identified in ways opposite to her pronounced aversion to hyphenated identity. On another, she is lambasted for being a cultural “assimilationist” because of her desire to foreground her American identity. Her 1988 collection, The Middleman and Other Stories, also a highly acclaimed and awarded work (National Book Critics’ Circle Award for fiction in 1988), works like Interpreter. The stories in Middleman shift aesthetically and thematically enough to prevent readers and critics alike from positioning Mukherjee as either representative of or “native informant” about the Indian-American or immigrant-American experience.

In both cases, literary and critical reception moves one-dimensionally, underscoring and privileging issues of culture and identity at the expense of how the aesthetics of these two collections of stories undermines such a practice. Uncovering and

illuminating this practice will be particularly relevant in trying to flesh out the way cycloptic readings engaging American ethnicity and difference become representations of those ethnicities and differences, and retroactively posit those readings as the only or best critical options. Thus, whereas once the insurmountability of Hughes' "racial mountain" was attributable to the prevailing notion that minority races, ethnicities, and cultures are inferior to the dominant, today's "racial mountain" is often insurmountable because American consumer-readers privilege a certain version of minority racial, ethnic, and cultural identity and expect minority authors to deliver.

A Passage to India (in the United States): Exoticisms and Essentialisms in Critical
Reception of Interpreter of Maladies

The March 6, 2006, Newsweek features as its lead story “The New India”—all about India’s current “moment in the sun” and what that “means for America—and the world” (3). The article focuses on India’s rapidly growing economy and its relationship with the United States. Perhaps in an effort to appeal to its American audience, Newsweek links the economic development in India with the role of India “inside” the United States: the feature article is accompanied by a brief introduction to young Indian-Americans in the United States, a discussion of outsourcing to India, and a piece by Jhumpa Lahiri discussing the negotiation between her identity as an Indian-American.

Though Lahiri’s autobiographical sketch is not itself grounds for critique since she speaks from a highly subjective position, the way in which Newsweek deploys her struggle with and resolution of her own hybrid identity as representative of the “Indian-American” experience in the United States is. Hers is the only voice Newsweek includes to represent her generation, the generation that is the offspring of Indian immigrants to the United States.¹⁸ In doing so, Newsweek privileges the position she claims, namely one that has noted a “difference from [her] early life, when there was no such way to describe me, when the most I could do was clumsily and ineffectually explain” what her identity is: Indian-American (“My Two” 43). In fact, the difference now is that Lahiri can “use the term [Indian-American] myself, pleasantly surprised that I do not have to explain further” (43). She contrasts this with “growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s” when she felt “neither Indian nor American” but instead “[feeling] intense pressure to be two

¹⁸ Lahiri is, in fact, an immigrant to the United States. When she was two, her family emigrated from London, where she was born. She was raised in Rhode Island. Her parents were born in Calcutta.

things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen” (43).

Lahiri’s is one, and perhaps not an atypical, experience within the inherently variable process of cultural negotiation that accompanies immigrant or cross-cultural experience. But even within the highly specified category of those American-born or American-raised offspring of Indian immigrants, Lahiri’s case is not exclusive.

Newsweek’s presentation of Lahiri as a case, however, becomes American readers’ understanding of *the* case.

The danger in such a representation by the popular media and reading by popular readers is the elision of alternative voices arising out of a similar space, whether the specific space of Americans of Indian descent or origin or the more general case of Americans with recent immigrant ancestry. Furthermore, in the current milieu of identity politics and official multiculturalism, hyphenated identities such as Black- or African-American, Asian-American, or Chicano (Mexican-American) often are privileged in a sort of liberal humanism focusing on, as Bhabha puts it, cultural diversity instead of cultural difference.¹⁹ Diversity becomes the unqualified and uninterrogated catchword for including a multiplicity of voices, obscuring the fact that this inclusion often reveals

¹⁹ Bhabha suggests that “cultural diversity is an epistemological object—culture as an object of empirical knowledge—whereas cultural difference is the process of the *enunciation* of culture as ‘knowledgeable,’ authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification” (50). In his formulation, cultural difference interrogates cultural authority on the basis of the ambivalent, ambiguous, unstable moment of enunciation. The concept of cultural difference inaugurates Bhabha’s now famous “Third Space of enunciation,” the space that destabilizes the fixity of cultural representations in the dominant discourse. On the other hand, Bhabha demystifies cultural diversity as “the recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs” that “gives rise to liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange, or the culture of humanity” (50). The concept of cultural difference, for Bhabha, represents a more fruitful methodology than its vulgar cousin cultural diversity.

latent exoticisms and “othering” within the United States. This obscuring prompts

Huggan to state:

it is the singular ambiguity of the term ‘multiculturalism’ that has allowed its proponents to implement it—often simultaneously—as a corrective liberal-pluralist programme of minority recognition/social integration and as a closet-conservative ideology of separate development that patronises even as it promotes respect, ghettoises even as it fosters inclusion. (153)

The “exotic” or “other” status of writers—often coded as “multicultural,” “ethnic,” or “minority”—thus becomes a way of removing them perpetually to a marginal state, always “locked in opposition to the ‘hegemonic’ in a permanent bind” such that “support for the ‘minor,’ however sincere, always becomes support for the center” (Chow 104)

In interviews Lahiri focuses on always being between identities, never fully American nor fully Indian, belonging neither to the United States nor India.²⁰ She has stated, “I have never felt a very strong affiliation with any nation or ethnic group. I always felt between the cracks of two cultures” (qtd. in Roy-Chowdhury, par. 34) and “I don’t feel rooted in any place, and it hasn’t been a goal for me” (qtd. in Nair, par. 21). But she has also stated, regarding writing, “I would like to see myself as an American writer” (qtd. in Rothstein E5), and, “At this point I cannot imagine not writing about India....Somehow, something about India has to be in the background” (qtd. in Thayil, par. 9).

²⁰ About being Indian, she has stated, “I don’t feel fully Indian...I don’t really know what a distinct ‘South Asian identity’ is” (qtd. in Tsering, par. 5). Elsewhere, regarding her identity as an American, she says, “But on the top of it I don’t feel it. I don’t feel it inside. I don’t feel it would be honest to say I am American” (qtd. in Pais, par. 10).

It seems clear that Lahiri has settled comfortably into the hyphenated, in-between “Indian-American” when describing herself and even her work. This decision may be critiqued as complicit with the culture knowledge machine that keeps India, hybridity, displacement, rootlessness, liminality, and Lahiri herself marketable,²¹ but it may also be, simply put, her personal preference. In fact, in an interview with Hema Nair,²² Lahiri states, “It’s always a bad thing to try to answer people’s expectations. There hasn’t been a lot of writing from the perspective of Indian American writers and some people will look to my writing to answer some of those questions. But I never think of self-consciously trying to answer questions of identity” (par. 24).

Lahiri acknowledges her inability to be representative insofar as she distances herself from “self-consciously trying” to represent or answer definitively questions about “the Indian-American experience”; however, she also recognizes the potential for some readers to see her identity and fiction as representative of Indian-Americans in general. Some readers do show a tendency to interpret this isolated assertion of personal identity as a generalizable assertion of the Indian-American experience, a problem of cultural essentialism if ever one existed. Thus, the danger lies in the extent to which readers take highly personalized statements, like the ones above, to be more generally representative. Readers who do will expect that most or all children of Indian immigrants struggle in the same way as Lahiri, extending her personal experience to others in a way that erases the differences of personal experiences, even if they arise from similar circumstances.

²¹ Meenakshi Mukherjee has observed, “Experience of rootlessness and displacement are...privileged in the cosmopolitan discourse” (180).

²² Unlike most other interviewers, Nair chooses questions that do not pigeonhole Lahiri into ethnic or cultural informant. She allows Lahiri to discuss the question of identity instead of forcing her to answer questions about her own identity.

Part of the problem stems from critics and interviewers alike who conflate fiction and ethnography when interviewing Lahiri. These interviews treat Lahiri as what James Clifford calls a native informant,²³ dealing in cultural capital that she knows by personal experience or her family members' experiences, or, ironically, by research and study. The irony here is that Lahiri's "knowledge" about India is through research and study, a fact that makes her foreign, or outside, or even a tourist to the India of which she is putatively representative. In this sense, Lahiri is conflated as insider/outsider, informant/ethnographer, apparently allowing her to study India unproblematically because of her ethnicity. She becomes, similar to Chow's "'third world' intellectual," one of many cultural others within the United States who "are not only 'natives' but spokespersons for 'natives' in the 'third world' ...serving as providers of knowledge about their nations and cultures...inseparable from their status cultural workers/brokers in diaspora" (99).

In one exemplary interview, Arun Aguiar asks Lahiri how she got "to know the Bibi Haldar's [a character in one of Lahiri's short stories] of India so well," to which she replies, "From going to India, and observing people" (par. 11). Later she says she

[has] also written stories set in places and/or times of which I had no idea, and had no access to, and I've had to rely on a little bit of research, and questions, and get some details that way. It's easy to set a story anywhere if you get a good guidebook and get some basic street names, and some

²³ About this "problematic figure, the 'informant,'" Clifford states, "A great many of these interlocutors, complex individuals routinely made to speak for 'cultural knowledge,' turn out to have their own 'ethnographic' proclivities and interesting histories of travel. Insider-outsiders, good translators and explicators, they've been around" (*Routes* 19). Clifford problematizes even the position of ethnographer's informant. Lahiri's, then, is a doubly problematic situation: it is a problem to see her as informant to an ethnographer (the reader?), and even if she were informant, that position itself is fraught with complexity.

descriptions, but, for me, yes, I am indebted to my travels to India for several of the stories. (qtd. in Aguiar, par. 17)

For Clifford, however, “‘Travel’ has an inextinguishable taint of location by class, gender, race, and a certain literariness” (Routes 39) because travel is available only to a select few. To imagine Lahiri as representative, then, is to ignore significant socioeconomic disparities between her and the India and many of the Indians she purportedly represents. Nonetheless, according to many of these interviewers, precisely her ability to travel combined with the “fact” of her ethnicity and race endow Lahiri with a certain native “Indianness.” This ability to travel is not interrogated in the way Clifford suggests it should be; therefore, it allows Lahiri to become the native ethnographer-informant.

Similarly, Vibhuti Patel, in a Newsweek interview, peppers Lahiri with questions about her status as a second-generation immigrant, her relationship with India generally and Calcutta specifically, and the personal or autobiographical relationship with her characters. The final question is authenticated and established by Lahiri’s responses to all the previous ones: “Do you see yourself as the interpreter of maladies of belonging?” (par. 11).²⁴ In this move, Patel (and Newsweek) position Lahiri as the interpreter of identitarian struggles, privileging a reading of Lahiri that sees her as authentic, native informant about the “Indian” in America. Lahiri responds, in the often misapplied mantra of Bhabha’s hybridity or “third space,”²⁵ “Growing up in two countries, I see things in a

²⁴ Elizabeth Farnsworth poses this exact question in a PBS Online NewsHour Interview, but in the form of a statement: “It occurred to me that you’re kind of an interpreter of maladies yourself in these stories” (Lahiri, Interview, par. 5).

²⁵ Bhabha’s theoretical insights regarding the potential of those who occupy the productive space of in-betweenness, liminality, transgression, ambivalence, difference have led many to erroneously assume that hybrid identities are necessarily productive spaces, thereby privileging cultural products by those who putatively write from ethnic, cultural, or national margins. Bhabha’s work, however, suggests that the

way that not everyone around me can” (par. 11). This prompts Mervyn Rothstein to write, “It is that kind of knowledge, she said, that propels her stories of Indians in what for them is a strange land” (E5).

The most problematic aspect of these and other interviews²⁶ is the status Lahiri is given both as representative and representer of India, Indians, and Indian-Americans, this despite being born in England and raised in the United States. Nonetheless, Lahiri’s cultural representations are unproblematically privileged because of her presumed cultural “authenticity,” what Charles Bernheimer calls “the ‘reflectionist’ view of literature’s relation to the cultural site of its production” (8).²⁷

So is Lahiri an interpreter, a translator with a privileged point of view? Does she authentically represent—in fictional short stories, no less—the Indian-American ethno-cultural experience? Though her stories suggest otherwise, interviews like these position Lahiri as native informant/ethnographer, charting the foreign experience within the

“difference of other cultures is other than the excess of signification or the trajectory of desire. These are theoretical strategies that are necessary to combat ‘ethnocentrism’ but they cannot, of themselves, unreconstructed, represent that otherness. There can be no inevitable sliding from the semiotic activity to the unproblematic reading of other cultural and discursive systems” (100). Perhaps anticipating the appropriation of “theoretical strategies” in ways that reify cultural objectification instead of displacing it, Bhabha here warns against uninterrogated ethno-cultural readings that appear to celebrate cultural diversity.

²⁶ National Public Radio (NPR) has also interviewed Lahiri on a few separate occasions (August 22, 1999 on “Weekend Edition”; August 29, 2003 on “All Things Considered”; and September 4, 2003 on “Fresh Air”). Each interviewer invariably presses her to reveal the personally inflected nature and sources (herself, her family members) of many of her stories. In addition, these interviews ask for Lahiri’s cultural knowledge to help explain the more “Indian” and “Bengali” parts of her stories.

²⁷ Charles Bernheimer discusses this “reflectionist” view in relation to comparative literature and multiculturalism. To him, this view sees multicultural artwork’s “value” as “residing primarily in the authenticity of the image it conveys of the culture it is taken to represent, politically and mimetically” (8). But, as he notes, it is a problematic approach:

For instance, how is authenticity to be judged?...These works...may well be representative only of the dominant traditions in cultures that are themselves hegemonic in their geopolitical contexts. And isn’t the entire multiculturalist model flawed by its tendency to essentialize those cultures, attributing to them far more unity, regularity, and stability than they actually have? And isn’t the model of reflection, for all its good intentions, also flawed? A literary work can never authentically mirror a culture not only because that culture is not at one with itself but also because the work is a *literary* representation and hence not a transparent medium but a formal structure. (8)

United States for an American consuming public eager to learn from a *real* Indian(-American).²⁸ Hence Tom Wilhelmus's assertion: "Lahiri takes seriously *her responsibility* as an interpreter of maladies, of translating the pain of a whole group of Bengalis and Bengali-Americans into stories that all readers can understand" (137, italics added). Wilhelmus's comment becomes a poignant illustration of the quick transition from calling a writer an authentic supplier of ethno-cultural knowledge and the demand that the writer then supply it. In assigning Lahiri the role of native ethnographer-informant, interviewers and critics alike allow themselves to praise Lahiri for living up to her responsibility to translate or interpret between what they see as two incommensurable and monolithic cultures, India and America, or criticize her for failing in that responsibility.

This ethno-cultural focus shows up in the critical response to Interpreter, response that mainly comes in the form of reviews, from newspapers to literary journals. Though these reviews typically have a less scholarly or academic purview, they are useful in diagnosing the problem of reception of Lahiri's work (and there simply isn't very much scholarly work extant).²⁹ A careful study of these reviews reveals the exoticist, orientalist approach to writers who are seen as ethnic representatives or native informants, in this

²⁸ Spivak suggests that "an 'Indian' commentator is not necessarily helpful" as a cultural informant or ethnographer, and "To think the contrary is to fetishize national [or ethnic] origin and deny the historical production of the colonial [or ethnic] subject" (257). This fetishizing results in what Bahri calls a "foreclosure on the text's otherness as aesthetic object" (Native 107). When cultural identity via native informant becomes aesthetic object, cultures are objectified and reified, as I explain in my opening section.

²⁹ U.S. scholarship on "Interpreter of Maladies" is limited to Michael Cox's "Interpreters of Cultural Difference: The Use of Children in Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Fiction" (South Asian Review), Noelle Brada-Williams' "Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies as a Short Story Cycle" (MELUS), Judith Caesar's "Beyond Cultural Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dinner'" (The North Dakota Quarterly), and Gita Rajan's "Ethical Responsibility in Intersubjective Spaces: Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Interpreter of Maladies' and 'A Temporary Matter'" (in the edited collection Transnational American Literature: Sites and Transits). Ashutosh Dubey and Basudeb and Angana Chakrabarti also have written scholarly pieces, but their work appears in The Journal of Indian Writing in English, published in India. Also, Suman Bala has edited a collection of criticism of Interpreter, titled Jhumpa Lahiri, the Master Storyteller: A Critical Response to Interpreter of Maladies, published in Delhi.

case Lahiri as representative of “the” Indian-American population, the second generation or “desis,”³⁰ and as native informant about India, Indians, and their cultural niceties—all of which are problematic essentialisms because of their misleadingly totalizing connotation. It would be nearly impossible to define or essentialize India, its people, and its culture as it is a nation that includes different major religions, different major languages, and grossly different socioeconomic levels and classes. Nonetheless, many reviews do present an image of India that is totalizing, and read Lahiri as representative. Some reviews are explicitly exoticist, playing into hegemonic desire to consume the ethnic other, while others evince more subtle exoticisms. Other scholars make overtures to debunk exoticist readings but still capitulate to such readings. Very few reviews read Interpreter for the multiplicity of cultural meanings available in the stories, and even fewer acknowledge the viability of readings that address aesthetic issues along with carefully nuanced racial, cultural (as in a “foreign” culture), ethnic, or identitarian ones.³¹

The explicitly exoticist reviews and interviews that exist typically arise from popular magazines like People, a venue that one might expect would demonstrate a lack of nuance in cultural identity issues. Nonetheless, these reviews manifest the “popular” reception of Lahiri’s works. For example, Entertainment Weekly reports on Lahiri’s winning the Pulitzer as follows: “When she heard, Jhumpa Lahiri wasn’t doing anything appropriately exotic. She was, in fact, heating soup, peeling an orange, and screening her phone calls” (Flynn 1). According to this review, the “appropriate” behavior by a cultural

³⁰ “Desi” in its more general connotation, refers to members of the South Asian diaspora. South Asia according to Shilpa et al, “refers to seven countries—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka” (69). At times it is deployed more specifically to refer to those from or with ties to India only.

³¹ One review that does address aesthetic and cultural issues in an even-handed way is Jennifer Bess’ analysis in Explicator.

informant like Lahiri would be something exotically Indian, even if Lahiri is American by citizenship, British by birth, and Indian only by heritage. Publishers Weekly adds their own twist of exoticist evaluation: “The rituals of traditional Indian domesticity—curry-making, hair-vermillioning—both buttress the characters of Lahiri’s elegant first collection and mark the measure of these fragile people’s dissolution.” The focus (subject) of that opening sentence is the exoticism of India, providing it as the reason for the “elegance” of Interpreter.

Unfortunately, some of these more blatantly exoticist readings arise not only from popular culture repositories but also from popular³² literary reviews. Vanessa Jones in The Boston Globe describes Lahiri as having “the doe eyes and striking looks that have inspired editors around the nation to slap her photograph next to reviews” (par. 2). Even though the next sentence attributes her literary success to literary quality, the link made between her “exotic” look and her success capitalizes on the connections the review expects its readers will make or already have made. Katherine Guckenberger, writing for The Boston Phoenix, is unashamedly explicit about her exoticist review of Lahiri’s stories: “These are heady days for Indian writing, and they’re only getting headier. *It’s fortunate for American readers, then, that the bulk of Indian literature is written in English*” (par. 1, italics added). In this statement, Lahiri is lumped together with “Indian writing,” and “Indian writing” itself is defined by its ability to be consumed by an anxiously awaiting American reader. Though the reviewer does admit that Lahiri “is as American as I am,” this gesture is lost when at the close of the same paragraph she states, “For an American reader, these stories are at once subtle and informative, filling cultural

³² “Popular” here refers to readership, calling more generally accessible publications like newspapers or magazines (The New York Times, USA Today, Newsweek) popular, as opposed to scholarly publications (World Literature Today, MELUS, or South Asian Review) with smaller readerships.

gaps with the invisible ease granted only to writers of foreign heritage and exceptional skill” (par. 3).³³

The us-them binarism in these reviews bridges the gap between the American reader (defined as one who is unfamiliar about the culture) and the cultural other living within the United States, the cultural other from whom “we [a monolithic, Western, white, uninformed we] learn bits and pieces about Indian life and culture and begin to understand how those bits and pieces fit into Indian lives in America” (Guckenberger, par. 5). James Clifford’s work, which emphasizes “the *narrative* character of cultural representations” in ethnography and anthropology (“On Ethnographic Allegory” 100), tried to preempt exoticist reviews like these from surfacing from beneath the critical wasteland that is American ethno-cultural consumerism when it was written over twenty years ago. Lahiri’s work is even more “narrative” in the sense that it is explicitly fictional, but readers fail when they attribute to it an anthropological or ethnographic value. It is ironic that Clifford’s twenty-year old work in anthropology critiqued the objective, reportorial stance of yesterday’s anthropologist by underscoring the subjective, narrativizing voice of the anthropologist, but Lahiri’s subjective, fictional, narratives are being read today, in spite of such work, for their contributions to the understanding of an “other” culture.

Equally disturbing are the literary reviews that avoid the essentializing, exoticizing gaze so explicit above but still dabble in the sort of cultural othering that encourages limited and limiting readings. Because these exoticisms lurk beneath otherwise “standard” reviews, they reveal a subsumed desire to “orientalize” Lahiri’s

³³ Here is a more popular instance of the misappropriations of Bhabha’s theoretical insights regarding hybridity.

work. Both the Boston Globe and USA Today reviews speak of Lahiri's collection in terms of performance: "dazzling feat" (Jones, par. 26); "dazzling writing" (Donahue, par. 1). The reviewers' use of "dazzling" to describe Interpreter unmasks their voyeuristic evaluation of the performing Oriental, in this case Lahiri as writer. Analogously, some reviewers play into the stereotypical, orientalizing trope of ethnic Indian food to describe Lahiri and her stories, thereby revealing these reviewers' desire to consume—almost too literally—the India and Indian characters she, the American-born but always Indian chef, has concocted: "the emotional resonances of her stories possess a rare delicacy" (R. Taylor, par. 8); "Food in these stories is a talisman, a reassuring bit of the homeland to cling to. Spices and flavors waft through like themes in a piece of music" (C. Taylor, par. 4); "Their aroma drifts from the pages of her first collection of short fiction" (Noor 356). Here, Indian food is ethnic representative and becomes the measuring rod for critical evaluation; Lahiri's stories are good insofar as they are what Indian food is for Orientalist Americans: a delicacy, a talisman, a wafting aroma.

Equally orientalizing are the reviews that linguistically ascribe to Lahiri the erotic exoticisms of the Indian stereotype. Publishers Weekly gives us, "Lahiri's *touch* in these nine tales is *delicate*" (italics added); Gillian Flynn of Entertainment Weekly offers, "[The stories] read like *lucid daydreams*" (par. 3, italics added); and The New York Times' Caleb Crain states, "[Lahiri] breathes unpredictable life into the page, and the reader finishes each story *reseduced...*" (BR12, italics added). These reviewers play into stereotypes of exotic, soft Indian or Eastern femininity that seduces while it soothes, leaving the Western tourist with a sense of sublime satisfaction. What appears to be most appealing for these reviewers is they don't have to leave the West to receive the dazzling

performances or pampered pleasures of the East; Lahiri has provided the Western consumer longing for Eastern experiences with all the Eastern culture that's fit to know, and in America's very own backyard.

At other times, reviewers essentialize India, Indians, Indian-Americans, and their experience (singular): "Lahiri writes about the Indian American experience from all angles" (Kipen, par. 4); "In varying degrees, Lahiri explores 'Indianness' in all her stories, wherever they are set" (Quinn 1514); "she's justified the praise for her tales of dislocated Indian immigrants" (Jones, par. 2). In her New York Times review titled "Liking America, but Longing for India"—itself already an inaccurate essentialism of the "Indians" in Lahiri's stories—, Michiko Kakutani states, "Many of Ms. Lahiri's people are Indian immigrants trying to adjust to a new life in the United States" (E48). Kakutani's influential review exclusively addresses the position represented by the "many," thereby ignoring the stories and characters that are not "trying to adjust" their different lives to a "new" United States. Similarly, Éva Tettenborn states that Lahiri "largely focuses on the intersections of culture and romance as seen through the eyes of Indians and Indian Americans" (11), omitting, despite her qualifying "largely," the stories seen through the eyes of those who have no tie to India whatsoever.³⁴ Each reviewer above pigeonholes Lahiri's stories as essentially or primarily dealing with *the* Indian or Indian-American experience—"the anxiety of Indianness"³⁵—, a generalization that at

³⁴ See the next section of the body of this thesis for an analysis of Lahiri's stories—such as "This Blessed House" and "Mrs. Sen's"—that resist easy identification with "Indianness."

³⁵ Meenakshi Mukherjee outlines the development of this "anxiety": "If the anxiety of Indianness in Raja Rao, Anand and Narayan came out of their own desire to be rooted, the anxiety of the new generation who can thrive on easy international accessibility may be attributed to the pressures of the global marketplace" (181). Earlier in her essay, she notes that "when it comes to English fiction originating in [India]"—and I would argue, American fiction by authors like Lahiri who are tied to India—"not only does the issue of Indianness become a favourite essentializing obsession in academic writings and the book-review circuit, the writers themselves do not seem affected by it" (168).

once says nothing about the particularities of each of these experiences and under-represents the way in which the stories also deal with un-hyphenated (non-Indian) American issues, from American perspectives.

Other essentialisms come in the form of stereotypical perceptions about India. Crain's review subtly evokes the stereotype of arranged marriage—"Fate, in the form of friends, relatives or lust, arranges a match" (BR11)—by presenting it in "acceptable" cultural language to Americans while still maintaining the essentialized image of Indian marriages. Publishers Weekly is more explicit, announcing in its review the "arranged marriage of 'This Blessed House'"—a comment that reveals more about the desire to orientalize these stories because Sanjeev and Twinkle's marriage in "This Blessed House" is not in fact arranged, at least in the stereotypical Indian sense. Instead, what is arranged is their initial meeting, an arrangement equivalent to a "blind date" or a "set-up," a practice as American as it is Indian. The erroneous reference to arranged marriage could be read as simply misreading or misinformation; however, even this generous evaluation of the review reveals a deeper, latent desire by the reviewer to reify the cultural otherness of "Indians" in America. This reification perpetuates essentialisms.

There is also a tendency in some reviews to read Lahiri's work and characters as always foreign or "other" to America. The Boston Globe review mentioned above contributes to a sense of Indian or Indian-American non-belonging by locating Lahiri's characters as "dislocated Indian immigrants." In a similar vein, Charles Taylor writes, "many of [the characters] have come to America for a job or for school...or because of political crisis" (par. 3), casually eliding the many characters in Lahiri's stories who have not "come to America" for material or political reasons, but belong in America by

citizenship via birth or choice. Caleb Crain notes, “most of Lahiri’s characters move between the Indian subcontinent and the United States...Lahiri’s Indian Americans struggle for dignity out of their element” (BR11). Not-belonging is underscored in each of these reviews, with language that marks its foreignness: “dislocated,” “come to America,” “out of their element.” The resulting image of Indian immigrants these reviewers see in Lahiri’s fiction is a displaced, uncomfortable immigrant, even if many of Lahiri’s characters are comfortably located in America as Americans.

On the other hand, reviewers also describe Lahiri’s characters in terms that suggest a teleology prescribing assimilation as the way to American-ness. Mary Ellen Quinn writes for the ALA’s Booklist, “[Other stories] deal with immigrants at different stages on the road to assimilation” (1514). Charles Taylor adds in his Salon.com review, “As you might expect, the way people assimilate is a major theme” (par. 3).³⁶ Taylor and Quinn posit assimilation both as the end of the process of becoming an American and as the expected and major theme dealt with in a collection presumably about Indian immigrants “in varying degrees.”

These reviews are disturbing because they endorse a polarized vision of what constitutes an allowable Indian immigrant experience: either one assimilates into America, denying all vestiges of Indian culture, or one remains always already Indian, always foreign, providing an “ethnic spectacle” (Huggan 67) within America, ready to be incorporated into the American cultural museum that is official multiculturalism or

³⁶ Taylor’s aside to the reader represents an interpellation to the reader as always already assuming that first, writing by putative immigrants is always about assimilation, and second, that immigrants are always assimilating.

liberal humanism.³⁷ Both of these visions fail, as Susan Koshy notes, because they inaccurately “[set] ethnicization in opposition to assimilation” (335). Furthermore, official multiculturalism turns a blind eye to the realities of continued racisms, prejudices, and inequalities, all of which remain unaddressed, and under its rubric what it means to be American remains unchanged.

However, essentializing reviews are not the only force behind both Lahiri’s success³⁸ and the myopic readings that posit her as ethnic informant on all things Indian and Indian-American. Interpreter won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, an accomplishment that is even more astonishing since it is Lahiri’s first book. Wendy Lesser, editor of Threepenny Review and one of the Pulitzer judges who chose Interpreter as a finalist for the prize, defended awarding Lahiri the honor by stating, “She wrote the best fictional prose and the best short stories of anybody that was eligible [in 1999].” This, in of itself, seems uncomplicated; however, Lesser continues, “It was not a political choice. It was not a choice in favor of a young person or a foreign person. It was a literary choice” (qtd. in Jones, par. 31). The qualifications Lesser provides her beg the questions: Who, if anyone, asked if it was a political choice, or a choice in favor of a young person? Or a choice in favor of a “foreign” person? Though it isn’t clear that Lesser, in denying an exoticizing or political element to the selection process, was actually admitting it to a degree by her defensive posture, it is clear that she is aware of

³⁷ Huggan’s comments about the “consuming of India” in contemporary British society nicely summarize the aforementioned reviews: “Such liberalism...risks collapsing cultural politics into a kind of ‘ethnic’ spectacle, reclaiming culture as a site not of conflict but of pleasurable diversion. And for another, it places emphasis on the mutual *consumption* of the other, literalised in the themed performance, the touristic circuit, the ‘ethnic’ meal” (67).

³⁸ Basuroy, Chatterjee, and Ravid’s study in the Journal of Marketing, “How Critical are Critical Reviews? The Box Office Effects of Film Critics, Star Power, and Budgets,” refers to Lahiri’s success after favorable reviews as a way to introduce their essay: “Readers often defer to literary reviews before deciding on a book to buy...for example, rave reviews of Interpreter of Maladies, a short-story collection by then relatively unknown Jhumpa Lahiri, made the book a New York Times best-seller” (103).

such complications in the current “taste” for foreignness, or specifically India, in American literary sensibilities. As George Huggan observes, “[literary] prizes reflect as much upon their donors as their recipients” (118).

Huggan, in The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins, examines this trend of consuming ethnicity (and specifically India) as it has developed in England. In fact, in a section dealing with Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things (published in England in 1997, dangerously close to Interpreter), Huggan comments, “Roy, incorrigibly photogenic, has clearly worked hard on her image, her marketably exotic looks” (77). This and his earlier description of the novel—“most remarkable for the publicity it generated, both as the arrestingly good first novel of a young, little-known and unusually attractive writer and as an example of the star-making industry, the media-driven process by which a writer can be catapulted to a quasi-mythical celebrity status” (76)—are uncannily similar to descriptions of Lahiri and her work. Though Huggan does recognize the nuanced complexity of The God of Small Things and its literary quality, he rails against “the common view that Indian literature is a composite entity,” a view that “is largely a fiction of the Western press...[corresponding] to the metropolitan myth of a fetishized body of ‘Indian writers’, the decontextualisation of whose work merely serves to enhance its commercial appeal” (59-60).

The “mobile capital good” (Huggan 67) that is India in the West prompts Huggan to question the media and subsequent popular reception in England of works by Indian and other ethnic minorities. Of the Booker Prize, Huggan states, “As the stakes get even higher, the Prize exerts a major influence over the cultural perceptions, as well as the reading habits, of its consumer public” (108), an observation easily transferable to the

Pulitzer. The (British) Booker is not strictly equivalent either historically or in purpose to the (American) Pulitzer,³⁹ but Huggan's critique of the Booker's privileging of "multicultural" texts is useful in examining the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize to Lahiri, and the ensuing critical celebration and star-power Lahiri now enjoys. Like Huggan, I am hesitant to blame literary prizes like the Pulitzer or the Booker for establishing the material conditions for hegemonic ethno-cultural consumption; however, I do feel, as he does, that these prizes help to encourage, even normalize such conditions (Huggan 115). This is because "prizes like the Booker [and the Pulitzer] might work to *contain* cultural (self)-critique by endorsing the commodification of a glamorized cultural difference" (110).

The Pulitzer has endorsed the cultural glamorization of both Lahiri and the version of India in America she is supposed to represent. Hence the feel the reviews and interviews give: there is a closed set of interpretive possibilities surrounding Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies. The stories are about Indian culture, because the characters are Indians, Indians in America, or Indian-Americans, never Americans or never about Americans. This critical myopia reveals the limits of "official multiculturalism"—a practice that celebrates diversity at the same time that it reifies minority or ethnic writers and their art into always hyphenated, always cultural, always identitarian representatives served up for mainstream America's consumption. Fortunately, Lahiri's reviewers are not accurate in their myopia; the stories in Interpreter of Maladies, when read against the grain of liberalism's identity politics, both destabilize the celebration of hyphenated American identity, producing vividly American stories (un-hyphenated but not

³⁹ See the opening sections of "Prizing Otherness" in Huggan's The Postcolonial Exotic for a more in-depth "history of, and histories *behind*" (106) the Booker, and its more recent shortlist finalists and prizewinners.

necessarily assimilated), and present an America that is constantly shifting and redefining itself as a result of its immigrant population.

Unfixing the Gaze: The Destabilization of Ethnic Identity in Lahiri's Short Stories

Interpreter of Maladies received the Pulitzer Prize in 2000, catapulting Lahiri from lesser-known writer (many of the stories in Interpreter first appeared in The New Yorker) to globally published and acclaimed writer. Most of the reception surrounding Lahiri's success and craft, from reviews to feature articles, interviews to essays, circle back to discussing her biography and identity. Lahiri herself has responded repeatedly to questions about how she imagines her own identity and how this sensibility inflects her stories, as demonstrated in the previous section.

However, the biographical approach to understanding Lahiri's stories neither encompasses nor accurately reflects the cultural shifts and nuances in her stories that destabilize the focus on culturally "other," hybrid, or hyphenated American identity, enacting metaphorically what Radhakrishnan calls the "doubleness" of ethnic identity (62). In other words, Lahiri's stories complicate identity assertion, specifically Indian identity, and in doing so draw attention both to identity and to what Jennifer Bess calls "universal themes of alienation, connection, and loss" (125). David Kipen of The San Francisco Chronicle easily but short-sightedly imagines "a new generation of Americans, born of Indian immigrant parents, greeting the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri with...astonished greediness...Someone understands! Someone finally gets all the tiny bargains that assimilation asks of us! Someone knows how awful my mother's kitchen smells" (par. 1). However, Lahiri's stories do not offer that easy identification to a narrowly defined, marginally imagined group of Americans. In fact her stories resist such an identification.

In her analysis of postcolonial works by Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, and Arundhati Roy, Deepika Bahri claims, "it is possible to recuperate some of the features of

[postcolonial artwork's] resistance to instrumental rationality from the excessively administered world in which they exist, even if the ideally autonomous art that 'has renounced consumption' is no longer possible" (Native 103). Though Interpreter is not a postcolonial work, its global and American commodity value as ethnic minority literature functions similarly to those works more appropriately dubbed postcolonial⁴⁰ that Bahri examines, and a study of Interpreter's resistance as artwork is useful. Even if some accuse Lahiri of being complicit with the ethno-culture industry, based on her self-avowed hyphenated identity and celebrations of being "between two cultures," criticism is important and valuable, even in opposition to Lahiri, because, as Adorno states, "the content of a work of art begins precisely where the author's intention stops; the intention is extinguished in the content" (qtd. in Bahri, Native 112).⁴¹ Whether Lahiri intended it or not, her stories do resist the cultural pigeonholing characteristic of too many evaluators of her work.

In "Sexy," Lahiri includes Indian and Indian-American characters; however, the protagonist of the story, Miranda, for whom the word "sexy" becomes the crux of her development throughout the story, is neither:

She had silver eyes and skin as pale as paper, and the contrast with her hair, as dark and glossy as an espresso bean, caused people to describe her as striking, if not pretty. She had a narrow, egg-shaped head that rose to a

⁴⁰ Huggan's The Postcolonial Exotic is useful here, too, because though his analysis covers postcolonial works the same issues he discusses manifest themselves in the popular and critical reception of Lahiri and her work; he critiques the "mediated events...characteristic of the current appeal of India, and more specifically of Indian literature in English" calling them "a literalised *consumer* item" (59). As he puts it, "India is very much in fashion" (59).

⁴¹ Roland Barthes famously announces the "Death of the Author," including with it the death of the authority of the Critic. He claims, "Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (147). This closing of writing by foreclosing on meaning is precisely the sort of move critics attempt when they ask for cultural meaning directly from Lahiri.

prominent point. Her features, too, were narrow, with nostrils so slim that they appeared to have been pinched with a clothespin. Now her face glowed, rosy at the cheeks, smoky below the brow. (Interpreter 87, hereafter referred to as IM)

Though Lahiri doesn't give any indication about her cultural background, it is clear by this description that Miranda is probably white, though definitively not Indian or Indian-American. The story revolves around her, not through first-person narration but through an omniscient third person voice that sees, hears, and feels what Miranda does. Even though all the characters with whom Miranda interacts are tied to India either by birth or by heritage, to call this a story about Indian-Americans is a gross error.

In fact, the story refuses such an easy categorization. The omniscient third-person narrator, looking through Miranda at her Indian and Indian-American acquaintances, could be ungenerously described as ethnic voyeur; however, her development through the story from uninformed ethnic consumer to an awareness of her own objectifying gaze problematizes this argument. In addition, the story reveals not only her own gaze at an ethnic other, but also the diverse ways in which this gaze is returned, thereby destabilizing the easy fixity of cultural consumption that this story works to undermine.

When Miranda first sees her adulterous lover Dev, she is conspicuously exoticist in her gaze: "Miranda noticed a man standing at one of the counters. He held a slip of paper covered in a precise, feminine hand....The man was tanned, with black hair that was visible on his knuckles" (IM 85-86). A few minutes later she "wonder[s] where he was from. She thought he might be Spanish, or Lebanese" (87). Éva Tettenborn observes that their "relationship is tainted from the very beginning as Miranda perceives Dev only

within the realm of a colonial fantasy and frames his identity in terms of racist stereotypes....seeing these identities [Spanish and Lebanese] as different from her own supposedly ethnically unmarked American identity” (11).

This superficial, essentializing judgment represents Miranda’s first response to Dev, made more ironic and fitting because she is at the cosmetics department, where her complexion is also being “assessed” by the saleswoman at the counter, who then recommends a cream that, she states, “Gives you some color” (IM 86). A residue of this exoticism is apparent later when, well into their affair, Miranda watches Dev as he sleeps, recalling his complaint about the hair on his hands. At this moment of observation, the narrator allows the reader to peer into Miranda’s internal response: “but Miranda thought him perfect, and refused to imagine him any other way” (94). Here, Miranda’s gazing fixes Dev in two senses of the word “imagine”: she refuses to see any other “image” of him and she does not allow for any other side to him in her own “imagination.”

In fact, Miranda’s fixed “image” of Dev manifests itself even more strongly when she compares this “Indian” with “the only Indians whom [she] had known” (95). Miranda recalls the Dixits, the only Indian family living in her neighborhood when she was growing up. She remembers now the jokes hurled at the Dixit children by the neighborhood children, and her own fear of the family. Then she reflects, in a moment of apparent compassion and penitence, “It shamed her now” (96). Her shame now over her childish racism stems from the realization that there is nothing to fear in difference, nothing to make fun of, as her close interaction with “Indian” cultural difference as an adult demonstrates.

However, this change of attitude is partly superficial, as evinced by the line immediately following, linking her superficial shame by the repetition of the word “now”: “It shamed her now. Now, when she and Dev made love, Miranda closed her eyes and saw deserts and elephants, and marble pavilions floating on lakes beneath a full moon” (96). Though Miranda has moved beyond her childhood fear of the difference embodied in her neighbors, the Dixit family, she has supplanted this fear with an equally problematic exotic essentialism of one of the few other “Indians” she had known. She imagines India when she is with Dev, closing her eyes literally and figuratively against her continued ethnic stereotypes and essentialisms. Even though she does not close-mindedly fear that which she does not know or does not understand, she has now moved from a conservative fear of ethno-cultural other to a liberal celebration of difference that still locks the cultural “other,” embodied here in her “Indian” lover, as always other. Both conservative fear and liberal celebration keep her cultural others fixed in her imagination.

The initial meeting is a flashback in the story to explain how Miranda had begun her affair with Dev. But, at the start of the story, which is chronologically after this meeting, Miranda observes “Indians” for what they contribute to her understanding of what it means to be “Indian.” Thus, not unlike the American consumer that desires its ethnic other,⁴² Miranda adds to her voyeuristic desire an epistemological desire. Her relationship with Dev reveals this cultural epistemological consumption most poignantly: “Dev was Bengali, too. At first Miranda thought it was a religion. But then he pointed it out to her, a place in India called Bengal, in a map printed in an issue of The Economist” (84). Dev had brought the magazine to Miranda’s apartment, always the site of their

⁴² Graham Huggan identifies the “mechanisms...through which multiculturalism functions in mainstream society as a powerful *discourse of desire*” (154).

rendezvous, to resolve her confusion about Bengal, and then throws it away on his way out. However, once she sees that he leaves, Miranda fishes the magazine out, “hoping for a photograph of the city where Dev was born” but disappointed because “all she found were graphs and grids” (85). It is fitting, and reveals Lahiri’s attention to ironic detail, that The Economist be the magazine Miranda consults for information regarding Dev’s Indian heritage. The irony is double here. First, the magazine is published in Britain, providing a filtered version of India through British consciousness, instead of an Indian one. Second, as a symbol of capitalism and consumption, the magazine “sees” India for its economic value in the global capitalist system. This detail highlights the commercial undercurrent—an undercurrent Huggan suggests is the “[product] of the globalization of Western-capitalist consumer culture, in which ‘India’ functions not just as a polyvalent cultural sign but as a highly mobile capital good” (67)—underlying Miranda’s desire to consume what is for her a beckoning, exotic India.

Continuing in her quest to discover more about India, a quest initiated only because of her relationship with Dev, Miranda “walked all the way to Central Square, to an Indian restaurant, and ordered a plate of tandoori chicken. As she ate she tried to memorize phrases printed at the bottom of the menu, for things like ‘delicious’ and ‘water’ and ‘check, please’” (IM 96). She also studies the Bengali alphabet at the foreign language section of a nearby bookstore, even going “so far as to try to transcribe the Indian part of her name, ‘Mira,’ into her Filofax” (97). These voyages “into India” seem innocent and charming enough; however, they reveal a superficial engagement with India typical of the Westerner fashionably interested in sampling “India”: ethnic sampling

through food, language sampling both through a few meaningless phrases and through self-absorbed learning of Bengali characters.

Unfortunately for Miranda, her own superficial engagement with India through Dev masks her real desire for Dev's love. As a result, she is unable to see, at first, the detached objectification Dev enacts on her, without any concomitant desire for a true relationship. Her blinded gaze at Dev's exotic Indianness blinds her against seeing his consumption of her. Thus, a story that might appear to be about wholly unmasking the exoticist tendencies of an American ethno-cultural consumer instead is a story that complicates such a reading because it is not just about "the Western gaze," nor an easy critique of it. Instead, Miranda's desire, though coded in exoticist tropes, also suggests a real desire for love. When she sees in Laxmi's cubicle the photo of Laxmi and her husband at the Taj Mahal, she asks her, "What's the Taj Mahal like?" (92). Laxmi's response embodies Miranda's desire for love and a meaningful relationship different from the casual, adulterous affair with Dev: "The most romantic spot on earth....An everlasting monument to love" (92). Miranda does not see the Taj Mahal as exotic Indian architecture, one of the "eight wonders of the world," instead seeing it, through Laxmi, as a monument to love. At this point, she is beginning to realize her love affair with Dev will never measure up to the love immortalized in the Taj Mahal. She is abandoning her objectifying, exoticist consumption of Dev, but he continues his of her.

Miranda's question about the Taj Mahal could be read as simply another one of Miranda's exotic, romanticized imaginings of India, but her reason for visiting shortly thereafter an Indian grocery store that rents Indian movies reveals her deeper desire for love. She goes to the store not to "learn" about India the fashionable way—through the

Bollywood movie scene—but instead to see what Dev’s wife looks like. When Miranda had asked about her, Dev had compared her to Madhuri Dixit, an actress in Bombay. Though she is unable to find Madhuri Dixit herself, Miranda sees images of the beautiful Indian actresses gracing the video covers on the shelves. At this point Miranda realizes “that Madhuri Dixit was beautiful, too,” a realization that extends to her estimation of Dev’s wife. The tone here is somber, because Miranda realizes that she is, simply, Dev’s “mistress,” a status she enjoyed at first (IM 92) but now is a source of pain for her because she can never receive the love she desires from him.

The realization above de-stabilizes a too-easy reading of Miranda as colonialist lover, and also introduces the way in which, as Tettenborn puts it, “Dev also incorporates colonial aspects in his desire for Miranda” (11). Dev objectifies Miranda throughout, a detail the careful reader picks up in the Miranda-inflected narrative descriptions of his interactions with her, even if Miranda doesn’t recognize it. At one point, the narrator notes, “Dev said he liked that her legs were longer than her torso, something he’d observed the first time she walked across a room naked,” and Dev adds that she is the “first woman I’ve known with legs this long” (IM 89). Later, he “[complains] that she was depriving him of the *sight* of her long legs” (93, italics added). Like Miranda’s admiration for him, Dev’s attraction for her is based on what is observably different about her from what he is familiar with, an attraction that reveals the same sort of exoticism Miranda is guilty of. Dev’s exoticism is damaging here because he objectifies Miranda absolutely, desiring her only for her difference and for her sex, whereas Miranda’s exoticism is also partially a desire for a true relationship.

The scene that most vividly captures this complex mutual objectification takes place in the Mapparium. Dev tells Miranda to stand at the opposite end of the bridge from him, promising that “though they were thirty feet apart,” because of the acoustics “they’d be able to hear each other” (91). Though in the room they will be figuratively continents apart, like India and the United States, they will be able to understand each other across the bridge of their differences. However, the bridge that supposedly unites their putatively different cultural origins instead carries words that do not bridge in any sort of meaningful way, either inter-culturally or inter-personally: “You’re sexy,” Dev whispers across the bridge (91). Underscored here is their mutual, what Tettenborn calls colonial, objectification. Thus, though Miranda’s exoticist gaze is blended with affection, in both cases exoticism reduces the other to object, thereby allowing mutual, self-centered consumption without regard for the other’s well-being.

Miranda and Dev are both marginalized here, at opposite ends of the bridge. Though Tettenborn astutely notes the way in which Miranda “is in fact relegated to the very margins of Dev’s existence” (11), she does not explicitly connect Dev’s marginalization of Miranda with her marginalization of him, revealed in the way she imagines him as colonial exotic for her consumption. For this reason, what Tettenborn calls “a reversal of colonial history” (11)—Indian, brown man colonizing American, white woman—is more properly the collision of two colonial enterprises: a brown, “third world” man desires and objectifies a white, “first world” woman for selfish reasons, but she also objectifies him, albeit less selfishly.

However, Tettenborn does accurately note the cause of Miranda’s realization that “both she and Dev are attracted to their fantasies, not each other” (12), namely Rohin,

Laxmi's cousin's seven-year-old boy, whom Miranda baby-sits and from whom Miranda learns about herself and the exoticist of her affair. Rohin's mother is dealing with the loss of her husband, who left his wife and son because he met an English girl on a flight home and stayed with her in England instead of catching the last leg of the flight home. The story, told to Miranda by Laxmi, pricks Miranda at times because of her own affair with a married Indian man; however, it isn't until she agrees to baby-sit Rohin that she comprehends the problems in her affair, because through her interactions with this precocious seven-year-old Miranda sees her own and Dev's exotic, objectifying consumption.

The reader does get a picture of Rohin, who is of Indian descent, seen through Miranda's point of view, but it is not the sort of exoticist, stereotypical gaze she had fixed on Dev. This represents the first difference in her relationship with another "Indian," but a significant one, as it allows her to have a much more meaningful relationship with Rohin, a child, than she ever has with Dev. Rohin, too, wants to preserve an image of Miranda, but his is not Dev's objectifying gaze. Instead, he asks Miranda to draw a picture of the living room, so he can, he says, "memorize...Our day together...Because we're never going to see each other, ever again" (IM 104). Miranda twinges, "feeling slightly depressed" (104), possibly recognizing the futility of her relationship with Dev. But she notices that Rohin isn't affected in the same way. He even asks her to draw him, something she is reluctant to do, since she realizes it won't look like him. This recognition, that she cannot accurately represent Rohin—she can't fix him literally in art, but also not figuratively in representation either—echoes but reverses her previous attempts to fix Dev in her imagination.

Miranda does not, herself, note the striking similarities between her relationship with Dev and her babysitting “relationship” with Rohin, until Rohin eerily echoes Dev’s whisper across the bridge. After acquiescing to Rohin’s demand that she put on a slinky dress she had bought to wear for Dev but never does, Miranda stands before him. Rohin’s “eyes opened wide at the sight of her” and he declares, “You’re sexy” (106-107).

Miranda is shocked and asks him what the word means. Rohin, shyly and innocently and distinct from Dev, reveals his understanding of the term: “It means loving someone you don’t know” (107). Miranda realizes that this understanding must have come from conversations Rohin overheard between his mother and father, discussing his leaving her. She also realizes that Dev’s estimation of her is superficial, having nothing to do with any knowledge he has of her, nor any real desire to get to know her. She, however, is only slightly less guilty than he. Michael Cox notes, “She is able to realize, in part, that the fact that she is of a different culture is largely the reason for Dev’s being attracted to her, just as her attraction to him has more to do with his group identity than with any individual merits” (128). Miranda realizes the mutual colonization between her and Dev: he is with her for her white skin and long legs, both of which are foreign or other to his experience, and she is with him for what is enticingly foreign and other to her, his Indianness and his difference.

If it takes a child’s innocence to awaken Miranda to the mutual exoticist fantasies underlying her and Dev’s mutual attraction, then “Sexy” as a story undercuts any reading that attempts to narrowly define this either as an exposure of white colonialist cultural fantasy or as a story about Indians and their interactions with Americans. Instead, the shifting, multiple gazes—between Miranda and Dev *and* between Miranda and Rohin—

uncover the complexity of the gaze, both as desire to objectify, coded as damaging colonial objectification, and as desire to establish memory and community, coded as enriching interpersonal exchange.

Emphasizing the child-like quality mentioned above, Cox's essay "Interpreters of Cultural Difference: The Use of Children in Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Fiction" underscores the way "Lahiri uses children in a number of her stories to provide her readers with a more probing insight, perhaps, than her adult characters might allow into cultural difference and cultural accommodation, and in particular, into the not uncommon impulse to exaggerate or exoticize distinctions" (120). For the purposes of this essay, however, the characteristics typically associated with children's perspectives—such as a desire uncomplicated by the prospect of material, sexual, or social gain, or a willingness to establish community in spite of difference—, rather than a child's perspective itself, are useful in examining how Lahiri's stories destabilize exoticism and undermine the criticism that, unlike Cox's, engages in the very exoticism found in the reviews and scholarly essays analyzed in the first section of the body of this thesis.

The child protagonist Eliot in "Mrs. Sen's" serves, like Miranda, as a foil to those readers who would describe Lahiri's collection as about Indians and Indian-Americans, or the world as seen through their perspective. Although the title of the story suggests that it is about Mrs. Sen, an Indian woman who immigrates to the United States with her Indian husband, a mathematics professor, the reader "watches" the story through "the filter of the third-person narrative," eleven-year-old Eliot (Brada-Williams 458). Eliot represents a perspective that isn't tainted by exoticist desire. In choosing this perspective, Lahiri reinforces the idea she establishes with Rohin of the possibility of a gaze untainted

by the othering of Orientalism or exoticism, a possibility that is necessary if there is to be any wholly positive outcome to cross-cultural interaction. It seems, however, that at least in “Sexy” and “Mrs. Sen’s” children embody the type of gaze or observation untainted or least tainted by selfish, economic, or exoticist desire. In the larger scope of her collection, characters, both mature adults and innocent children, who possess these characteristics become the vehicle through which a disinterested gaze is possible.

This sense of non-exoticist gazing is established at the outset of the story. Eliot accompanies his mother to Mrs. Sen’s house, where Eliot’s mother, who remains anonymous, interviews Mrs. Sen for the job of watching Eliot while she is at work. During the interview, the third-person omniscient narrator describes both Eliot’s mother and Mrs. Sen through Eliot’s eyes, though with narrative additions probably not attributable to Eliot. The narrator describes Mrs. Sen in what is typically read as a foreign, exotic, or different appearance:

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Sen wore shoes...She had a small gap between her teeth and faded pockmarks on her chin, yet her eyes were beautiful, with thick, flaring brows and liquid flourishes that extended beyond the natural width of the lids. She wore a shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisleys, more suitable for an evening affair than for that quiet, faintly drizzling August afternoon. Her lips were coated in a complementary coral gloss, and a bit of the color had strayed beyond the borders. (IM 112)

I quote extensively to reveal the breadth of detail Eliot sees in Mrs. Sen; he does not focus on nor privilege those “unfamiliar” or “foreign” elements of Mrs. Sen’s appearance. Instead, he takes the whole appearance in: he observes her sari and her thick

eyebrows, both of which are foreign and could be exotic, but he also notes other details that are neither necessarily foreign nor exotic, such as the gap in her teeth and her slightly strayed lip gloss. Furthermore, even those parts of the above description that readers might find alien, or might assume that Eliot finds alien, are unsettled by the narrative voice that reveals Eliot's inner thoughts: "Yet it was his mother, Eliot had thought, in her cuffed, beige shorts and her rope-soled shoes, who looked odd" (112). Here, as Cox points out, "in the presence of recent immigrants, it is Eliot's mother, ironically—with whom he of course has had long association—who seems the least familiar of all, in part because she should be, readers might think, a familiar and reassuring presence" (122). The related, but muted in Cox's formulation, reader response is that Mrs. Sen should be a presence both alienating and disturbing to Eliot, a response that is also undermined in this moment. Unlike Eliot's own mother, Mrs. Sen is not "odd" to Eliot, revealing Eliot's mature and open attitude to "the presence of recent immigrants," an openness not typical of conservative adult mindsets that are resistant to change, difference, and the resultant requirement for cultural adaptation.

The narrator's description of Eliot's response to his mother's arrivals each day to pick him up also demonstrates an unsettling of readerly expectations: "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" (IM 118). Eliot's shock is attributable to a sense of comfort with Mrs. Sen and within her home, even though he recognizes her customs are rooted in India—chopping food, waiting for correspondence from family in India, removing shoes at the door. Furthermore, his comfort is almost instantaneous, a fact that transforms his gaze—"He especially enjoyed

watching Mrs. Sen as she chopped things” (114)—into something positive and unproblematic because his observing is not accompanied by objectifying desire. Instead, he watches her and becomes accustomed to her, such that his mother literally and figuratively occupies a marginalized space as she shocks him from outside the window to the Sens’ apartment.

However, Eliot’s relationship with Mrs. Sen is not always depicted in terms of familiarity, a depiction that would be romantic at best and unrealistic at worst. There are moments when Mrs. Sen is unfamiliar to Eliot. His mother’s driving, he thinks, “seemed so simple when he sat beside his mother, gliding in the evenings back to the beach house. Then the road was just a road” (121). But when he watches Mrs. Sen drive, “that same stream of cars made her knuckles pale, her wrists tremble, and her English falter” (121). Her anxiety confuses him here, as it does when Mrs. Sen is awaiting a letter from India: he finds her “anxiety incomprehensible” (121). These moments are unfamiliar for Eliot, though not in a negative sense, as details reveal that his unfamiliarity does not create distance between him and Mrs. Sen. In fact, even after finding her anxiety incomprehensible, he hears Mrs. Sen speak with her husband “in her own language, rapid and riotous to [his] ears” (121-22). Here, Eliot’s incomprehension is compounded by a foreign language; however, he never allows that lack of comprehension to prevent the community/communion the two of them enjoy. Immediately after the incomprehensible, to him, conversation on the phone between Mrs. Sen and her husband, Eliot listens to her explanation of the contents of the letter: her sister in India had given birth to a baby girl.

Where Eliot could have focused on the numerous instances of incomprehension in this vignette, he instead remembers Mrs. Sen’s conversation with her husband for what it

represents for Mrs. Sen: one of the “Two things [that] made Mrs. Sen happy” (121). In fact, Eliot himself may be a third thing that makes Mrs. Sen happy, because as Noelle Brada-Williams points out, “Mrs. Sen is homesick for the kind of community she had in India, a community defined by a responsibility to participate in the lives of others rather than a responsibility not to interfere or be in any way intrusive in the lives of others” (459). Eliot, with a wisdom beyond his years noted by Mrs. Sen herself (IM 123), does participate in Mrs. Sen’s life, even when he cannot fully understand her at times. Thus, even though incomprehension at first destabilizes a romanticized image of perfect communication, community is established along lines that allow differences to exist without being either foreign or foregrounded.

With the establishment of community between Eliot and Mrs. Sen in mind, then, Geetha Ganapathy-Doré’s assertion that Lahiri “rounds the story off with a coda by shifting the focus from the misery of the immigrant woman to the sense of triumph of the American youngster who graduates into a latchkey kid, a normal rite of passage for him” (61) misses the mark in its analysis of the story’s ending. The break of community/communion, so central to the relationship between Eliot and Mrs. Sen, ends on a somber note: “The first day, just as he was taking off his coat, the phone rang. It was his mother calling from her office. ‘You’re a big boy now, Eliot,’ she told him. ‘You okay?’ Eliot looked out the kitchen window, at gray waves receding from the shore, and said that he was fine” (IM 135). To call this first day alone a moment of triumph, or to celebrate it as a graduation to latchkey status, misses the overtly somber feeling, a feeling that is compounded by the reader’s sense throughout the story that Eliot and Mrs. Sen share an understanding because of and despite cultural differences. This understanding is

severed by the so-called “normal rite of passage” to “latchkey kid.” By feeling with Eliot a sense of loss or a sense of the break-up of community in this closing scene, the reader understands the possibility of meaningful communication across cultures within the same nation, a two-way bridging that requires both cultures to adapt and flex, seeking understanding and community with patience and openness. There is a real loss, a somber feeling, when that community is disrupted.

If understanding and community are established through children in “Sexy” and “Mrs. Sen,” it is fitting that Twinkle, the female protagonist in “This Blessed House,” be the sympathetic character of that story that opposes her unsympathetic husband Sanjeev, the male protagonist. Twinkle takes a “spontaneous and playful approach to life,” what Brada-Williams calls “carelessness” that is “ultimately connected with creativity and *joie de vivre* as much as it is with selfishness” (462). Here, Twinkle is described in terms not unlike those associated with children. And Sanjeev recognizes this in her physical appearance, her name, and her personality: “He looked at her face, which, it occurred to him, had not grown out of its girlhood, the eyes untroubled, the pleasing features unfirm, as if they still had to settle into some sort of permanent expression. Nicknamed after a nursery rhyme, she had yet to shed a childhood endearment” (IM 142).

Her connection to children thus established, it is no surprise, based on the abilities of the children in the collection to establish community,⁴³ that Lahiri would present her message of community through Twinkle. Despite her child-like characteristics, however, Twinkle is neither immature nor naïve, possessing neither child-like innocence nor endearing ignorance. From their home in Connecticut, she is finishing her Master’s thesis at Stanford, on an Irish poet. Furthermore, the narrative reveals that she is capable of

⁴³ See Cox’s article for a more complete analysis of Lahiri’s use of children in her stories.

noting and creating irony even while she is endearingly child-like. Twinkle, then, becomes Lahiri's example of an adult who is able to negotiate cultural intermingling, both in her own body/identity and in her interactions with others, in a way that isn't "othering." In fact, it is Twinkle who most positively negotiates her identity as an American of Indian descent, in contrast to her husband Sanjeev, who struggles with this negotiation. When the reader glimpses into Twinkle's personality, her Indianness is muted but not absent, present but not foregrounded as artificial, exotic, privileged, celebrated. Twinkle doesn't let it be. On the other hand, Sanjeev's Indianness is foregrounded but undermined, privileged but superficial and problematic, present but uncomfortable and irrational, because he lets it be.

The opening scene, featuring Twinkle's initial and jubilant discovery of a Christ statue in their new house, underscores Twinkle's comfort at negotiating her two worlds. Sanjeev responds to what he dubs "that idiotic statue" with his no-nonsense attitude, "We're not Christian" (136). Twinkle responds characteristically: "She shrugged. 'No, we're not Christian. We're good little Hindus.' She planted a kiss on top of Christ's head" (137). Twinkle's characteristically adult but playful sarcasm—"We're good little Hindus"—is immediately followed by kissing the statue's head. The playful assertion and action embody her ability to deal in both religions without mutual antagonism or personal conflict. Unlike Sanjeev, for whom religious observance is strictly practical, without any cultural or religious cross-over or mixing, Twinkle allows herself to kiss a Christ statue while still being a "good little Hindu," without demeaning either religion. In fact, the tone of the scene above does not suggest that Twinkle takes either her own religion, Hinduism, or the religion of the previous owners of the home, Christianity, irreverently, even if her

attitude toward both in this moment is playful. Later, this reverence is revealed both by Twinkle's own admission and Sanjeev's observation. Twinkle states, "I would feel terrible throwing them away. Obviously they were important to the people who used to live here. It would feel, I don't know, sacrilegious or something" (138). Giving us Sanjeev's perspective, the omniscient narrator states, "He was further puzzled that Twinkle, who normally displayed good taste, was so charmed. These objects meant something to Twinkle, but they meant nothing to him. They irritated him" (138).

Twinkle's gleeful collecting resonates with Western ethnographic collectors who strive to collect, catalog, and mediate typically Eastern cultural artifacts and then display them for cultural consumption. The great irony, of course, is that in the United States, or the "West," Twinkle is scavenging for the iconography of a putatively Western religious tradition, namely Christianity. This reverses satirically but humorously the "Western" ethnographer or anthropologist residing in the "East" who collects, describes, and displays the iconography of those "Eastern" religions, including but not limited to Hinduism. At the same time, Lahiri ironically reverses the tendency by fashionable Westerners to accumulate "interesting" cultural artifacts from "other" (quaint, interesting, spiritual) cultures and religions. The irony is cemented when all the party's guests willingly scavenge the rest of the house for more Christian paraphernalia, ironic because these "Westerners" are seeking out the culturally quaint within their own "West."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ The irony sounds almost like a playful depiction of Achebe's response to the New York students at the start of his 1975 critique of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "The young fellow from Yonkers... is obviously unaware that the life of his own tribesmen in Yonkers, New York, is full of odd customs and superstitions and, like everybody in his culture, imagines that he needs a trip to Africa to encounter those things" (782). It is as though Lahiri is exposing those "odd customs and superstitions" in the United States' own backyard, albeit in a much softer, humorous satire than Achebe.

However, unlike the Western ethnographer's or the fashionable Western collector's purpose, Twinkle's purpose, as she states, is more about preserving something that was important to the people to whom these artifacts belonged. Also, the juxtaposition of Sanjeev's attitude with Twinkle's—she finds meaning, he is irritated—reveals an important contrast between husband and wife: Twinkle desires to preserve and understand something that is foreign to her but nonetheless important because of its importance to real people, but Sanjeev completely lacks concern for the culture of another people. This difference between the two explains Twinkle's ability to negotiate her own identity and Sanjeev's confusion regarding his; her personal negotiation of her cultural identity is strong enough to allow her to engage with different cultures and traditions, like Christianity. This opposes Sanjeev's narrow-minded sense of what is proper for Hindus in America: they should not mix with what is not “them,” a feeling figured in his desire to maintain a strict separation between their Hindu-ness and the former occupants' Christian-ness.

Lahiri's grammatical structures also reveal the way in which India is a present absence for Twinkle, something part of her but always in the background. Lahiri describes their unpacking, “But as they unpacked their boxes and hung up their winter clothes and the silk paintings of elephant processions bought on their honeymoon in Jaipur, Twinkle, much to her dismay, could not find a thing” (139). Later, India is similarly a muted presence in Twinkle's description: “She rolled up the poster slowly, securing it with one of the elastic bands she always wore around her wrist for tying back her thick, unruly hair, streaked here and there with henna” (139). In both sentences, the “Indian” aspects of Twinkle's identity are subordinated grammatically. In the first

instance, Indian silk paintings are mentioned in a prepositional phrase that also includes unpacking and hanging up winter clothes, and the main clause of the sentence deals with her search for more Christian items. In the second, the mentioning of henna only hints at India and is also buried in a modifier for her hair, itself part of a modifier for the main clause of the sentence, which again deals with a newly found Christian poster. The effect of this grammatical subordination is to both normalize and decentralize her “Indianness”: it is neither absent nor exotically foregrounded.

Nonetheless, even if “Indian food, she complained, was a bother” (144), this is not to say that Twinkle is either ashamed of or wishes to hide her Indian heritage. In fact, when one party guest comments about her nickname, “What an unusual name,” Twinkle responds, matter-of-factly and without offense or pretensions, “Not really. There’s an actress in Bombay named Dimple Kapadia. She even has a sister named Simple” (151). This casual revelation to an uninformed American combines with her and Sanjeev’s willingness to be married in India, “at the urging of their matchmakers” (143), to prove that Twinkle is neither ashamed of her Indian background nor willing to display it like a badge of ethnicity. In fact, she knows the names Dimple and Simple and even Twinkle might sound ridiculous in an American context and thus willingly pokes fun at them without making them the “other” or “exotic” that her guest’s “unusual” suggests.

The most conspicuous misreading of Twinkle is as arranged bride in an arranged marriage with Sanjeev, because it reveals the cultural essentialisms/exoticisms that expects an “Indian” marriage to be arranged, even when it is not, as in this case.⁴⁵ But the

⁴⁵ Ganapathy-Doré calls Sanjeev and Twinkle’s meeting an “Indian-style arranged encounter” (62), while *Publisher’s Weekly* identifies their marriage “an arranged marriage.” The most grievous error, however, comes from Patricia Goldblatt, writing in *MultiCultural Review*, a magazine that purports to be “dedicated to a better understanding of ethnic, racial, and religious diversity” (from its website, www.mcreview.com).

real image Lahiri presents is of an American whose parents live in California, and these parents maintain ties with the Indian community, including Sanjeev's parents in Calcutta. So though their initial meeting is "arranged" (142), it is as arranged as any meeting between two individuals that parents want to see wed. There is nothing particularly "Indian" about this arrangement beyond the names of their parents and their Indian community connections. Lahiri's use of the term "arranged," though, satirizes readers' expectations and stereotypes by presenting an arrangement that for all intensive purposes could be characteristic of any culture or ethnicity. Though Lahiri may know what readers will do with her description, it is their essentialized reading that is at fault, not her depiction. In fact, by setting Sanjeev's forced "Indianness" against Twinkle's comfortable identity negotiation, Lahiri upends expectations that the Indian-American should maintain his or her "cultural identity," an expectation that usually entails representing "Indianness."

Sanjeev, despite publicly maintaining "his" culture, is not entirely comfortable with his identity. The omniscient third-person narrator reveals this by taking the reader into Sanjeev's internal thoughts at various points in the story. Sanjeev's "Indianness" is not authentic, stereotypically or essentially, insofar as his cultural connections at times seem forced or undermined by a certain distance from the Indian culture he purportedly represents or is inherently a part of. While unpacking, he reminisces "with fondness, when he would walk each evening across the Mass. Avenue bridge to order Mughlai

Goldblatt states, "'This Blessed House' ... features Twinkle *from Calcutta*, who unlike Mrs. Sen is ready to embrace the contradictions she finds in America. *Although betrothed at age 16 in India*, she has been educated at Stanford, even writing her master's thesis on an obscure Irish poet" (52, italics added). This is a gross misreading, given that Twinkle's is from California, where her parents live, not Calcutta, which is where Sanjeev's parents live. Furthermore, they are set up ("arranged") to meet at "a sixteenth birthday party for a daughter in their [parents'] circle" (IM 142). See the previous section for a discussion of this desire to essentialize Indians, even those who are American or Indian-American.

chicken with spinach from his favorite Indian restaurant” (138). He must order “his” culture’s food from a restaurant, a fact that at once removes him from being a representative “Indian.”

Sanjeev’s purported irritation at Twinkle’s collecting and displaying Christian paraphernalia because they are “not Christians” is complicated by the circumstances of their wedding. He and Twinkle agree at the behest of their parents to be married in India, “under a red and orange tent strung with Christmas tree lights on Mandeville Road” (143). The insignificant detail about the Christmas lights is made significant by its casual, unproblematic inclusion, a stark contrast with Sanjeev’s repeated revulsion at the Christian elements adorning their mantel, house, and yard. What this reveals is that Sanjeev’s desire to rid their house of those Christian icons is less about being a good Hindu than about keeping up appearances with his American neighbors, friends, and co-workers: “Twinkle, I can’t have the people I work with see this statue on my lawn” (147).

Another way in which Lahiri depicts Sanjeev’s superficial “Indianness” is through his attitude towards his marriage with Twinkle. His displeasure with Twinkle’s quirks, especially her penchant for hoarding the Christian artifacts left over in their new house, causes him to wonder if he had truly fallen in love, and why, if he had done everything properly “Indian,” things are not working out. Recalling his mother’s advice that he needed a wife “to look after and love,” he thinks to himself, “Now he had one, a pretty one, from a suitably high caste, who would soon have a master’s degree. What was there not to love?” (148). This demonstrates Sanjeev’s desire to mingle his superficially “Indian” understanding of love and marriage with his “American” identity, and he fails miserably to recognize that he is unable to weld these two identities in the way the

Twinkle can. He even thinks “with a flicker of regret of the snapshots his mother used to send him from Calcutta, of prospective brides who could sing and sew and season lentils without consulting a cookbook. Sanjeev had considered these women, had even ranked them in order of preference, but then he had met Twinkle” (146-47). It is clear that Sanjeev has both a superficial understanding of marriage and love, and of his own cultural heritage, flirting with the idea that his disagreement with Twinkle would have magically disappeared had he married one of the Calcutta prospective brides. If Twinkle embodies the way to avoid the problems of cultural essentialisms in cross-cultural interaction, then Sanjeev is her opposite here, too, as a representative figure for those same problems.

Sanjeev’s false sense of “acceptable Indianness” is also manifest in his own confusion regarding it. All the guests at their housewarming party are his friends, since Twinkle is from California and they are in Connecticut, and they comprise both co-workers and some Indian couples. But even though he invites these Indian couples, “many of whom he barely knew,” Sanjeev “often wondered why they included him in their circle. He had little in common with any of them” (144-45). The one thing that at least would be a common denominator between him and these guests, their common ethnic heritage, is nonexistent since Sanjeev’s “Indianness” is both superficial and uncomfortable.

Though both Sanjeev and Twinkle are fully developed characters in the story, it is Twinkle’s personality and development that are endearing to the reader, an unsettling comment to readers who would expect to find Sanjeev, the Indian-American who strives so hard to “represent” his Indianness, the more interesting and compelling character. But

because of Lahiri's prose, at the end the reader follows Twinkle with Sanjeev as he follows her out. In this moment, though he does not resolve his own identity problem, he seems at least to recognize Twinkle's vitality, confirmed by his guests falling in love with her during the party. This vitality stems from Twinkle's unassuming and comfortable personality, a personality that is American without ever discarding—or privileging—her Indianness. Such a negotiation is possible in the United States, and "This Blessed House" suggests through Twinkle's obvious Americanness and muted Indianness that Americanness continues to be redefined by the "foreign" cultures coming into contact with it. This redefinition is in contrast to "the idea of an Americanness that precedes (and subsists in spite of) the hyphens that contribute to it and to maintain a distinction between tribal Americans (the black, the brown, the yellow) and other Americans" (Appadurai 171). Americanness, then, is an always shifting, always re-negotiated term.

Despite all of Lahiri's nuanced treatments of identity, there is still a refusal on the part of many readers to acknowledge this shifting definition of what it means to be American. This is no more evident than through critics' handling of the title story of Lahiri's collection. These misreadings stem less from the story, however, than from a desire to continually make alien the cultural "other" in the United States.

The story's protagonist is Mr. Kapasi, who lives in Orissa, India and works as a medical interpreter for a doctor who has patients who speak Gujarati, a language not spoken by the majority in the area but spoken by Mr. Kapasi because of his father. The story, however, told from his perspective but again in third person, revolves around one day in Mr. Kapasi's other job, that of tour guide around the area's cultural and historical sites.

Mr. Kapasi's convoy this time is the Das family, from New Jersey, and distinct from Mr. Kapasi's typical guests, because "The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors" (IM 44). Even though "Mr. Kapasi was accustomed to foreign tourists" because his ability to speak English garnered him English-speaking tourists, "the tanned, youthful faces of Mr. and Mrs. Das were all the more striking" (44). However, this, the second page of the story, is the last place Mr. Kapasi and the reader see any similarity between the Das family and India or Mr. Kapasi. However, neither is the rest of the story, as Simon Lewis unreflectively calls it, a "postcolonial rewrite" of Forster's A Passage to India. Lewis forces a diasporic unity that does not exist, imagining in Lahiri's story "a contemporary postcolonial nation more concerned with dialogue with its own diaspora than with its former colonizers" (219). In fact, all of Mr. Kapasi's observations subsequent to his initial (mis)recognition expose the differences between India and the American Das family.

However, like Lewis, too many critics refuse to recognize the way Lahiri abandons in "Interpreter of Maladies" a pan-Indian, diasporic unity of characters. Instead these readers force unity by the way in which they "read" the Das family. Guckenberger calls them "a family of Indians from New Jersey...every bit 'ugly Americans'" (3). Guckenberger writes for a less academic newspaper, but Ganapathy-Doré, writing in an academic French publication entitled The Global and the Particular in the English Speaking World, similarly states, "The Indian family whom he is escorting in Konarak is from New Jersey and so has to check facts about India in the guide book" (60). Robert Morace's entry on the collection of short stories for Magill's 2000 echoes this description

of the Dases, calling them an “Indian couple” (432). In each of these cases, the Das family is read as essentially and primarily Indian, with a nod in the first two to the fact that they are from New Jersey. Ganapathy-Doré even recognizes that the family is wholly unfamiliar with India, but still insists on labeling them an “Indian family.” This overlooks the lack of textual evidence—either the Das family referring to themselves as Indians or Mr. Kapasi seeing them as Indians—to make the assertion that the family is inherently Indian. In fact, the text suggests quite an opposite reading.

Other critics and scholars are more even-handed, but still force Indian identity into their readings of the Das family. Judith Caesar calls the Das family “Indian-American characters” but also recognizes in their travel to India, the family “[does] not discover a new cultural identity” (91). Here, the imposition of a hyphenated identity—not just American, but also Indian—is based solely on the “fact” of their name, heritage, and skin color, again, not any evidence in the text. If Caesar recognizes that the family doesn’t get a “new cultural identity” in India, presumably meaning that they do not develop a deeper connection with India, then what justifies the a priori assignment of the “Indian” on the left side of the hyphen? What suggests the need for the hyphen?

Finally, numerous critics keep the Das family perpetually foreign, perpetually not belonging completely to the United States as Americans. Robert Taylor of The Boston Globe writes, “The interpreter takes an Americanized family to see a temple” (par. 2). Morace’s description cited above is actually more amplified in the Magill’s entry: “a young, superficially Americanized Indian couple” (432). Both reviews keep the family’s Americanness eternally deferred, locking them as eternally “other,” never fully American, always “Americanized.” Equally deferring, but more subtly so, are the reviews

that do not presume an essentially, automatic Indian identity but still suggest something short of American. Ronny Noor writes in World Literature Today, “The title story, ‘Interpreter of Maladies,’ is about a young couple named Mr. and Mrs. Das, by birth American” (356). Michiko Kakutani, in her influential New York Times review, comments, “In the title story, a tour guide who is showing an American-born couple around India” (par. 8). In identifying the Das family as “American-born,” both Noor and Kakutani again imply, like the hyphenations, a sense of non-belonging, that though the Dases were born in America, the fact of their birth masks some deeper, more fundamental identity. Those “fundamental” parts of one’s identity, such as race, ethnicity, and other markers of biological heritage, though, are themselves no less imagined than nation or community, as Arjun Appadurai suggests: “In many of these theories of the nation as imagined, there is always a suggestion that blood, kinship, race, and soil are somehow less imagined and more natural than the imagination of collective identities” (161). When “blood, kinship, and race” are read as less imagined and more natural categories of difference and identity, then it is easy to read racial and ethnic difference in America as always less belonging to and in America than the racial and ethnic “identity” of the hegemony.

These reviews combine to create a false impression of who the Das family is, not simply because of the lack of evidence “proving” their Indianness, but more because Lahiri, through the third person filtered perspective of Mr. Kapasi, depicts the family as quintessentially American. Their language is not Indian English, but American, full of “Cools” (IM 57) and “Neats” (59). Those Americanisms come not from the Das children but from the parents. In fact, Mr. Das asserts “with an air of confidence” in response to

Mr. Kapasi's question about their origins that both he and his wife were "born and raised" in America (45). However, it isn't just what they say that is typically American, but even how they say it: "Their accents sounded just like the ones Mr. Kapasi heard on American television programs" (49).

If the members of the Das family show all linguistic indication that they are incontrovertibly American, they also show no indication of a linguistic capability that would qualify them as Indians. They do not understand any of the Indian languages of the area, where their parents now live. This ignorance manifests itself through the English language Bombay film magazine Mrs. Das uses to fan herself (47) and the English language tour book on India that "looked as if it had been published abroad" (44), the book Mr. Das uses during the family's stay in India. Also, when Mr. Kapasi hears "one of the shirtless men sing a phrase from a popular Hindi love song" in Mrs. Das' direction, he notices that "she did not appear to understand the words of the song, for she did not express irritation, or embarrassment, or react in any other way to the man's declarations" (46). Mr. and Mrs. Das, then, are removed from their purported Indian identity because they do not appear to speak or at least understand the Indian languages of the region where their parents live, and most likely do not understand or speak any Indian languages, other than English.

But language is not the only thing that both marks them as Americans and not Indians; the Das family fits the cultural stereotype regarding Americans, what Guckenberger calls "ugly" and Morace calls "superficial." Even though they are typecast in a way that does not represent all Americans, the image Lahiri depicts is one that no one

would deny as associated with perceptions of what it stereotypically means to be an American, especially for those outside the United States.

It is through Mr. Kapasi's eyes and thoughts that the reader sees really how different the Dases are to both him and India, different in the sort of way that Americans are. The first differences he notes are Mrs. Das's "shaved, largely bare legs"; the Das boys', Robby and Bobby, "teeth covered in a network of flashing silver wires"; and how the family "dressed as foreigners did" (43-44). All of these differences are alienating to Mr. Kapasi because to him "the family looked Indian" (43). After these early observations, however, to Mr. Kapasi the Das family is quintessentially American, and foreigners in and to India.

Should one think the above descriptions are not enough to establish the cultural distance between the Das family and India, Lahiri continues to present narrative detail and Mr. Kapasi's perspective to emphasize the point. Mr. Kapasi attempts to greet in the culturally Indian manner, "but Mr. Das squeezed hands like an American so that Mr. Kapasi felt it in his elbow" (44). Here the connection to Americanness is explicit; however, Mr. Kapasi's observations about other, more subtle details reveal more implicitly American cultural stereotypes. For example, Mr. Das encourages his wife to accompany them to take more scenic pictures, suggesting that they "could use one of these pictures for our Christmas card this year" (61). The tradition of sending out Christmas cards does not necessarily make the Dases Christian, nor does it negate the possibility of their Indianness. Nonetheless, if it is not absolutely or exclusively an American tradition, neither is it stereotypically Indian.

In terms of their parenting strategies, Mr. Kapasi “found it strange that Mr. Das should refer to his wife by her first name” in front of their young daughter (45). Also, after seeing the lack of discipline and attention Mrs. Das affords her children, Mr. Kapasi notes, “They were all like siblings, Mr. Kapasi thought as they passed a row of date trees. Mr. and Mrs. Das behaved like an older brother and sister, not parents” (49). These images, though not by any means representative of all Americans, are easily identifiable stereotypes of “progressive” American parenting techniques, techniques that both value being a friend to one’s children instead of disciplining them and erase the distinctions between parent and child.

Perhaps Mr. Kapasi’s internal comments about Mrs. Das reveal the most about the family’s Americanness. Mrs. Das pays attention to neither her kids nor her husband, self-absorbedly consuming an Indian snack without thinking to share (47), vainly polishing her nails (48), and “ignoring her husband’s requests that she pose for another picture” (58). In fact, it is this negligence—“She was lost behind her sunglasses” (58)—that causes Mr. Kapasi to lament her, and by extension the stereotypical American housewife’s, existence: “He looked at her, in her red plaid skirt and strawberry T-shirt, a woman not yet thirty, who loved neither her husband nor her children, who had already fallen out of love with life” (66). Though the story does not depict a romanticized version of a pure, contentedly dutiful Indian womanhood or motherhood⁴⁶ unsoiled by Western norms, it is clear that the image here of Mrs. Das is not celebrated a liberal, emancipated

⁴⁶ In fact, one of the other major threads of the story is Mr. Kapasi’s “failings” at home and at work, failures that have put distance between him and his wife, who has never been able to get over the death of their son. Mrs. Kapasi, we learn through Mr. Kapasi, is not the dutiful Indian housewife eager to cook, clean, and care for her husband that is often romanticized in depictions of Indian femininity.

Western woman. Instead, she is the self-absorbed American woman and mother. Even though it is a stereotypical depiction, it is a stereotype associated with America, not India.

Again, the establishment of the Das family as characteristically American is bolstered by the repeated emphasis of their foreign status in India. Lahiri accomplishes this emphasis by continually depicting the family as tourists, as seen primarily through Mr. Kapasi's perspective. In addition to his tour book, Mr. Das "had a sapphire blue visor, and was dressed in shorts, sneakers, and a T-shirt. The camera slung around his neck, with an impressive telephoto lens and numerous buttons and markings, was the only complicated thing he wore" (44). His camera figures later in a moment of blatant exoticist tourism. He asks Mr. Kapasi, "Hey do you mind stopping the car. I just want to get a shot of this guy," a "guy" described as "a barefoot man, his head wrapped in a dirty turban, seated on top of a cart of grain sacks pulled by a pair of bullocks. Both the man and the bullocks were emaciated" (49). Here, Mr. Das can be described in no other terms than as a tourist-voyeur, desirous to capture (to "fix") the romantically impoverished, quaintly "Third World" Indian—and this desire locks Mr. Kapasi into a "First World," American sensibility.

Mrs. Das is equally American in her attitude toward India. She asks Mr. Kapasi to give details about his job as a medical interpreter, a request that excites him. To her, Mr. Kapasi's job sounds "so romantic" (50), but she doesn't know why, she tells her husband. A minor detail, though, uncovers her tourist attitude: "I want to picture what happens" (51). This "picture" recorded mentally resonates with Mr. Das's literal pictures recorded with his camera, linking her with the tourist gaze. Her depiction here as tourist in India maintains her as alien in India; she does not belong to India because she can only engage

with India as a tourist, and her “tour” of the country will provide for her later when she returns to New Jersey not identification with India but the tourist “pictures”—fixed and essentialized—in her memory.

Mr. Kapasi even indirectly calls the Das family tourists on two occasions. At the Sun Temple in Konarak, he notices that “they admired the exterior, as did all the tourists Mr. Kapasi brought there” (57). Later, “Mr. Kapasi watched as they crossed paths with a Japanese man and woman, the only other tourists there” (61). Clearly, Mr. Kapasi’s initial reception of them as “looking like Indians” has been replaced by an understanding that this family does not belong in or to India. He even recognizes that his relationship with them is, as he calls it in his mind, “an interpreter between nations” (59). In fact, at the Konarak Temple, Mr. Kapasi is “interpreting” a cultural artifact, the Temple. But the feeling isn’t the problematic cultural gloss designed by Lahiri to inform the culturally ignorant reader about India. Instead, Mr. Kapasi is telling the Das family, linking them with the culturally uninformed reader. Thus, to call the Das family Indian is as preposterous as assigning all uninformed American readers the same identity. The Das family is as much a tourist here, and clearly depicted as such, as the typical reader is.

If the Dases sound American, act American, and are American by birth and citizenship, should they not be read as American? And if their connection to India is by heritage only—not by language, nor knowledge of Indian customs and traditions, nor cultural practice—then why do too many readers insist on artificially appending India to America in assigning them identity? Why can they not be read simply as Americans, especially when Lahiri appears to take pains to describe them in such a way as to sever

all but biological ties with India?⁴⁷ Perhaps the desire to identify the Das family as Indian, or Indian-American, is a form of latent Orientalism/exoticism, a desire to continually imagine the Das family, and racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities, as always minor, always marginal, always other. This Orientalism might derive from the hegemony, because of its “tendency to assimilate ‘marginal’ cultural products, rejuvenating, but also protecting, the beleaguered mainstream culture” (Huggan 117), or it might stem from liberal pluralist practices in the academy, practices whose official celebration of difference and multiculturalism and resultant “compensatory policies,” paradoxically, “might well be seen as further marginalising the very communities they set out to assist” (Huggan 128). In both cases—conservative desire to protect the center and liberal desire to celebrate diversity—ethnic, racial, or cultural minorities and literatures are objects of desire, fixed and appropriated by seemingly antagonistic discourses. This objectification and fixity curb the potential for meaningful dialogue between America’s cultures and for dialogue about who belongs—both in American literature and in America itself.

From the four stories discussed, it is apparent that Lahiri’s stories are not exclusively “about” India, Indians, or Indian-Americans, nor do they present a unified concept of “Indianness” as it putatively manifests itself through some of the characters. Instead, Lahiri as an artist is “merely a detached observer of the daily events in the lives of her characters” (Chakrabarti and Chakrabarti 28-29), not a representative but a

⁴⁷ Clifford asks in *Routes*, “How long does it take to become ‘indigenous’? Lines too strictly drawn between ‘original’ inhabitants (who often themselves replaced prior populations) and subsequent immigrants risk ahistoricism” (252). His question seems fitting here, since the tendency to hyphenate cultural others, or the “recent immigrants,” even when they have been born and raised in America, reveals a desire to maintain a strict split between “original” Americans who need no hyphenated identity and immigrant Americans (and more ironic is that even the “more original” inhabitants of this continent are also Native—hyphenated—Americans) who must constantly deploy a hyphenated, “unoriginal” identity. This isn’t to suggest that a personally motivated assertion of hyphenated identity is itself problematic for the above reason, but that it is when it imposed by another.

representer. As such, her fiction cannot but be an imagined and elusive, meaning not fixable, representation of cultural truth.⁴⁸ However, as Bahri states, “What is represented in the literary text is meaningful within its immanent logic, even if it offers analogies to the complexities and challenges of the real world” (*Native* 29). It is precisely this complex and challenging quality of Lahiri’s stories that makes them more accurate representations of reality—not fixed or fixable except in the imagination—and allows for meditation on the nature of cultural (not ethno-cultural) production.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Brada-Williams reads Lahiri’s collection as a short-story cycle, and her reason for such a reading is that it “reveals Lahiri’s careful balancing of a range of representations and her intricate use of pattern and motif” (463). In fact, Brada-Williams asserts that the short-story cycle is a “genre [that] can, as we see in *Interpreter of Maladies*, work towards solving the problem of representing an entire community within the necessarily limited confines of a single work by balancing a variety of representations rather than offering the single representation provided by the novel or the individual short story” (453). Despite these astute observations, Brada-Williams still concludes a bit narrowly: “readers not only receive the additional layers of meaning produced by the dialogue between stories but a more diverse and nuanced interpretation of members of the South Asian diaspora” (463). Though she acknowledges the diversity of representations, she still capitulates to a focus on ethno-cultural issues in identifying the collection as part of an “interpretation of members of the South Asian diaspora.”

⁴⁹ Another example of this aesthetic complexity arises from a text by a social scientist. Anthropologist James Clifford’s *Routes* is a self-proclaimed collage whose stated purpose “is not to blur, but rather to juxtapose, distinct forms of evocation and analysis. The method of collage asserts a relationship among heterogeneous elements in a meaningful ensemble. It brings its parts together while sustaining a tension among them” (12). Even a text outside the “more” fictive genre of Lahiri’s short stories, engaging in issues of writing about culture, *Routes* self-consciously represents distinction by juxtaposition, meaningful ensemble by heterogeneity, togetherness with tension.

Differing Visions of America: A Comparison of Mukherjee's Middleman and Lahiri's
Interpreter

In another instance of cultural pigeonholing, critics often link Lahiri with other cultural (typically Indian or South Asian) representatives. The ALA-published Booklist avers, "Readers who enjoy these stories should also appreciate the work of Bharati Mukherjee and G.S. Shandra Chandra's collection Sari of the Gods" (Quinn 1514), while Robert Morace states that Lahiri's collection of short stories "fulfill[s] the promise of Bharati Mukherjee's early stories and do for Indian Americans what Philip Roth's fiction did for young Americanized Jews in the 1950's and 1960's" (434). Mervyn Rothstein's article is a full-blown examination of what he dubs in the title of his article, "India's Post-Rushdie Generation," linking under the sweeping banners "India" and "Rushdie" all the fiction coming from the "Indian diaspora." And Rothstein knows why these new "Indian" writers are enjoying popularity in Britain and United States: "The phenomenon, publishers and writers say, is also a product of renewed interest in things Indian that began in 1997 with the mammoth publicity for the 50th anniversary of the country's independence" (E1).⁵⁰ However, the easy "national," "ethnic," or "diasporic" connections between Lahiri and her putative compatriots elides the significant differences between them. Thus, the desire to unify all these writers under India reveals the desire to essentialize and ease understanding, making different authors more familiar by virtue of a pan-Indianness that is easier to understand than a diverse and complex Indian diaspora.

⁵⁰ Rothstein recognizes that these "voices are being heard much more loudly in the West than in India" (E1). See Graham Huggan's "Consuming India" in his book The Postcolonial Exotic for a sustained critique of this Western celebration of Indianness as what he calls "an infinitely rechargeable, universally applicable marketing tool" (66).

As the reviews above indicate, American author Bharati Mukherjee could be easily seen as Lahiri's foremother. Mukherjee is from Calcutta originally, and thus a Bengali, and her literary career started in similar fashion to Lahiri's. Though not her first work, Mukherjee published in the middle of her career a critically acclaimed set of short stories, The Middleman and Other Stories, which garnered the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1988.⁵¹ She followed this up with a highly anticipated and also critically acclaimed novel (though it won no national literary prizes) dealing with an experience of immigration, Jasmine, for which she is most well-known. Lahiri's The Namesake, published in 2003, also was a highly anticipated follow-up to her Pulitzer Prize winning collection of short stories, and acclaimed Indian director Mira Nair has made it into a feature film to be released in November 2006.

So it would appear to make sense that the press or literary critics link Mukherjee and Lahiri. However, this essay, though making comparisons between them, chooses to highlight the ways in which Mukherjee's Middleman differs from Lahiri's Interpreter aesthetically, even if it identifies thematically with Lahiri's collection of short stories, resisting the easy, fixable identifications about members of the so-called South Asian or Indian diaspora, instead offering an ever-changing, elusive image of what constitutes the United States.

The approach Mukherjee takes in delineating the America that is both constantly remade by its immigrants and constantly remaking them is markedly different from Lahiri's because each of Lahiri's stories has at least one character who has ties to India, though the previous section has demonstrated that not all of the stories are about or from

⁵¹ Ganapathy-Doré explicitly links the titles of these two collections, asking in a footnote, "What is an interpreter if not a middle man?" (59).

the perspective of those “Indian” characters. In Middleman, however, Mukherjee writes stories featuring both immigrants from various locations and Americans, typically but not only white, who have called the United States home their entire lives and stake an original claim to the country. Unmasking the critical oversight that imagines Mukherjee as writing simply about non-white, immigrant Americans, Jennifer Drake states, “critics and readers seem to focus on Mukherjee’s immigrant Americans, Americans in the making, to the exclusion of the stories that represent ‘white’ Americans as *also* Americans in the making, immigrants to a new and multicultural land” (71).⁵² Drake goes on to claim that Mukherjee’s collection of stories “represents white Americans as willing and not-so-willing immigrants to the New World” (71). The tendency to focus on the ethnic or racial minority, the marginalized actor on the American stage, is refuted by Gurleen Grewal: “Evident in Mukherjee’s self-definition is a refusal to be marginalized as a writer of alien material, an insistence that her themes are central—not marginal—to contemporary American society. Middleman and Other Stories (1988) and her latest novel Jasmine (1989) support her claim” (181). The pigeonholing that has located and fixed Mukherjee as a marginal or minority writer finds its contemporary echo, twenty-odd years later, in critics who similarly read quite narrowly Lahiri and her characters.

Though Mukherjee’s broad brushstroke has been accused of “homogeniz[ing] her ethnic minority immigrant subjects, instead of calling attention to the actual heterogeneity

⁵² One example of this critical oversight comes from Liew-Geok Leong’s entry on Bharati Mukherjee in International Literature in English: Essays on the Major Writers. Leong states that Middleman “has a wider circle of participants. Besides South Indians, she uses Middle Eastern, Vietnamese, Filipino, Italian, and Afghan characters” (496). But this reading forces non-white, non-American ethnic identity too much into the equation, ignoring the “white” and “American” characters who figure prominently in the stories. Later, Leong suggests, “In the challenges posed by America to her expatriates and immigrants, Mukherjee shows that, inevitably, it is America that is affecting them in varied ways; so far only in a few stories is immigration handled from the mainstream culture’s point of view” (498). This reading glosses over the story “Loose Ends” and misidentifies the family in “Orbiting” as Italians (see below for a discussion of both these stories).

of ethnic minority immigrant subjects in the United States” (Knippling 144), it seems that Mukherjee could be presenting, in the heterogeneous subjects that share something in their common denominator as immigrants to the United States, the “basis of a shared humanity” that Gates suggests is lost in over-emphasizing difference.⁵³ Isn’t the very fact of her characters’ ethnic, national, and racial heterogeneity enough to highlight the differences they have? Also, Mukherjee’s stories do not present an overwhelming unity to these characters, one that erases their real differences. Instead, she presents multiple, different stories about America and its immigrants, each unified only by the fact that all the characters in her stories—born Americans, immigrant Americans, naturalized Americans, whites, blacks, browns—deal with the constantly changing face of America. Furthermore, they deal with this change very differently.

Jeb Marshall, a Vietnam veteran turned hired hitman, is the narrator of “Loose Ends,” set in culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse Florida. Through Jeb’s first-person narrative, Mukherjee reveals the racist ideology that pits white, “belonging” America against the dark, alien, “other” immigrant in America. Throughout the story Jeb sees all racially and culturally different others as immigrants and, in the same essentializing move, links all immigrants linguistically and imaginarily with his Vietnam War military experience: they are invading and infesting the image of America he wishes to preserve, an image that “sounds like the Constitution of the United States. We have freedom and no strings attached. We have no debts. We come and go as we like”

⁵³ Gates’ comment more specifically addresses “the challenge of the black tradition,” a tradition that he suggests “attempt[s] to appropriate... ‘race’ as a term for an essence” and in doing so, “yield[s] too much: the basis of a shared humanity” (13). Despite that specificity, it is still useful here in discussing the deployment of Indianness specifically, or race/ethnicity/difference generally.

(Mukherjee, Middleman 45, hereafter referred to as MO). Jeb's American Dream, a dream that allows for freedom without consequence, is threatened by immigrants.

Jeb's interior thoughts reveal his paranoid racist imaginings regarding the immigrants he hates. He wonders, "Where did America go? I want to know...Back when me and my buddies were barricading the front door, who left the back door open?" (MO 48). He provides himself part of an answer later when he encounters a motel owned and operated by the Patel family: "While we were nailing up that big front door, these guys were sneaking in around back. They got their money, their family networks, and their secretive languages" (53). The "them" of this tirade is consistently described by him as "alien" when he first encounters them (52). Jeb's racist rhetoric isn't limited to the South Asians in the story, however. In his confrontation with the men who sideswipe him off the highway and tell him they know that he stole the car from Mindy Robles, he notes, "Turns out they didn't like Mindy Robles, didn't appreciate the pressure her old man tried to put on the police department. They look at our names—Robles and Marshall—and I can read their minds. We're in some of these things together" (51). Jeb sees the link between himself and these "small time" crooks because they, like him, are Vietnam vets who have an aversion, he tells us, to people with "un-American" names, names like Robles and Patel. To Jeb, names that sound ethnic or different do not belong in America in the same way that his does, even if those names have been in America for generations. As such, Jeb represents an example, albeit extreme and racist, of the desire to imagine America's immigrant populations as always other, always foreign, always not belonging.

Contrary to his hatred for the immigrant population in Florida, Jeb states he likes Miami, but not because it is the "good Florida" of his youth, a Florida long ago to which

“only the pioneers came down” and in which he “knew your pappy and grammie. I mowed their lawn, trimmed their hedges, washed their cars. I toted their golf bags. Nice people” (50). He shares this nostalgic Florida with his audience, about whom Drake writes:

As Jeb tells his story, it is clear that he assumes that his reader or listener is white, assimilated, and the grandson or granddaughter of the old American working class (who were probably immigrants, or first generation, but Jeb forgets this part of the narrative). Jeb confirms his imagined reader’s suspicions: that there *was* a “good Florida” and that your grandparents worked hard for it, and that your grandparents got their just deserts, which are now being denied you. (74)

This assumed audience that Jeb imagines—white and “American”—shares his anti-immigrant, racist ideology and represents, in his mind, the true America. This imagined audience, however, bears no similarity to the story’s literal audience, which is racially and ethnically diverse and still American. Jeb’s over-the-top racism and myopic imagining of a similarly minded audience cause Mukherjee’s real readers to distance themselves from such a point of view and, simultaneously, to allow what could otherwise be critiqued as a stereotypical depiction of “white America.”

The Miami and Florida Jeb enjoys are now “run by locusts and behind them are sharks and even pythons and they’ve pretty well chewed up your mom and pop and all the other lawn bowlers and blue-haired ladies” (MO 50). This Florida is run by “them,” Jeb’s racial, cultural, and ethnic other linked derogatorily here with pythons, sharks, and locusts, and Jeb assumes such a description to be familiar to his white audience. The

irony of Jeb's racism, something he appears to recognize in the story, is that he is the locust and the python,⁵⁴ an identity he developed while in Vietnam and that he believes must continue because the fight in Miami, on American soil, is no different to him than the fight on foreign soil, in Vietnam.

Jeb's racism turns on him when the Patel girl who is showing him his room, and whom he had described earlier as "one luscious jailbait in jeans" (52), doubly unsettles his expectations. First, after he asks if she was born in Bombay, she states matter-of-factly, "New Jersey" (54). This unsettles his ability to imagine her as not American, born elsewhere, having snuck in the back door. Second, he notices her gazing at him, reversing and destabilizing the white, American, subjective gaze only he enjoys throughout his first-person narrative: "That's when I catch the look on her face. Disgust, isn't that what it is? Distaste for the likes of me" (54). These two actions disrupt Jeb's vision of both America and the "alien" and turn his gaze back at him, and his reaction to this disruption of his imagination is violent. He jumps her and "take[s] America with her" (54).

Though Jeb's racism and life represent an extreme example of racism in the United States, Mukherjee's story through him uncovers the slippage from the discursive and psychic violence enacted by Jeb on culturally and racially different (from him) Americans, through his racist rhetoric and beliefs, and the physical violence he eventually enacts on the adolescent Patel. Jeb imagines a racist solidarity with others—uniting himself with the Vietnam veterans who he believes are distrustful of immigrant-sounding names and addressing an audience he imagines as identical to himself in appearance and

⁵⁴ Jeb identifies himself as a locust, imaginarily addressing the judge who sentenced a Vietnam vet convicted of "sinking his teeth into sweet, succulent coed flesh": "The whirring of our locust jaws is what keeps you awake" (45). At the conclusion of the story, he links himself with the python image he earlier observes, "This is what I've become. I want to squeeze this state dry and swallow it whole" (54).

sensibilities. However, even if this racist solidarity is imagined, it still is linked in effect with the exoticizing, othering tendency in literary criticism. Thus, the discursive othering of minority or ethnically different authors and works, as in the literary criticism of Mukherjee or Lahiri, finds its potentially violent ends embodied in Jeb's racism. This isn't to suggest that the latent exoticism and othering in literary criticism produces or upholds racist violence; instead, such othering reifies a system of thought that allows American ethnic minorities to inhabit a space "outside" mainstream America, a system that also provides a space for anti-immigrant, racist discourse and violence.

It is interesting that Mukherjee should leave that physical instance of violence muted and almost unstated—the entire violent episode comprises one entire paragraph, with no clear indication of what exactly happens⁵⁵—because this redirects the focus away from the literal physical violence, which gets enough airplay in news media, and instead towards all the psychic violence in Jeb's mind that makes this physical violence an obvious, un-surprising climax to Jeb's story. If Jeb's violence is not a surprising climax, it is because the conditions leading up to this violence—his pronounced racist anti-immigrant ideology—serve to make the violence make sense. When narratives of racist violence privilege the description of the violent act without also producing the material conditions that create an atmosphere for such action, such violence becomes shocking or incomprehensible, instead of being logical results of the a priori racist discourse and ideology. Though Mukherjee might go too far in eliding the real, physically violent

⁵⁵ Geraldine Stoneham reads the episode as rape and murder (86), both of which are possible, even likely; however, the text isn't as explicit as Stoneham makes it seem. It is clear that some sort of violence takes place, and it is probably rape, since Jeb lets us know that the girl struggles, "but it's no use and once she knows it, [she] submits" (*MO* 54). Nonetheless, the power of the scene lies in its ambiguity because it forces readers to confront the real power of discursive violence as it prefigures the physical violence that is here omitted.

consequences of Jeb's thinking, perhaps her choice reveals a desire to underscore the conditions prior to the act that permitted such violence to take place.

Jeb Marshall's story, "Loose Ends," told from his perspective, is not a story about immigration or about immigrants; it is however about what it means to be or become American, from the perspective of one who wishes to keep the definition narrowly fixed. Mukherjee's fictional foray into the mind of racist American ideology that insistently and consistently views racial, cultural, and ethnic others as "aliens" in America manifests the mental and discursive violence inherent in such an ideology, one that realizes itself in physical violence.⁵⁶ Though Kristin Carter-Sanborn notes Mukherjee's failures, she does recognize that the value in her artwork is tied to this understanding of discursive and physical violence: "it is imperative that we understand violence in its discursive articulation if we *are* to detail the real effects of material violence beyond the physical" (584). Violence in its discursive articulation might not directly produce physical violence, but it creates an atmosphere that makes it viable for unstable, racist individuals or groups. Furthermore, even if no physical violence occurs, as Carter-Sanborn points out, there still are "real effects"—socially, psychologically, emotionally, economically—on those who are consistently read as others, as minor, as not fully belonging in America.

Thus, when critics and readers position Mukherjee and her characters as always "other"—insisting on the foreign, insisting on a hyphenated identity—they enact

⁵⁶ Mukherjee's decision to choose a racist Vietnam vet to mediate these debates might appear to undercut the force of her comment on American racism, because readers could see Jeb as a wholly exceptional case, one whose racism stems not from the United States, but from his war experience in Vietnam. However, the story indicates that Jeb's racist ideology happens prior to going to Vietnam, even if his tour of duty in Vietnam may have exacerbated it. He admits, "I liked the green spaces of Nam, too. In spite of the consequences. I was the Pit Bull—even the Marines backed off. I was Jesse James hunched tight in the gunship, trolling the jungle for hidden wonders" (45). Jeb brings his racist sensibilities, already formed in the America that celebrates the Jesse James figure who patrols the "Wild West," to Vietnam, instead of learning racism and hatred of the racial and cultural Other in Vietnam and importing it into the United States upon his return.

critically Jeb's discursive and psychic violence. Though such criticism stops short of literal physical violence, there is still validity to Mukherjee's self-stated project that seeks to undo the discursive violence that imagines immigrants and putative foreigners as outside of America, never fully belonging. She states, "As a writer, my literary agenda begins by acknowledging that America has transformed me. It does not end until I show that I (and the hundreds of thousands of recent immigrants like me) are, minute-by-minute, transforming America" ("Beyond Multiculturalism" 34). Mukherjee sees part of her project as transforming America because she sees value in maintaining her belongingness, her contributions to America, in opposition to those discourses that see her as not-belonging, as acted upon by America but never acting upon America.

Two of Mukherjee's stories in Middleman, "A Wife's Story" and "The Tenant," demonstrate different negotiations with the question of connections with the "home country"—in both cases India—and adaptation to the new land, the difference between what are typically read as polar opposites, nostalgia and assimilation. However, neither story seems to settle comfortably at either end of that polemic, instead offering more complex and nuanced images of two different struggles with the adaptations and dialogues resulting from cultural collision. These are two of the stories dealing with immigrant experience that prompt Sherry Morton-Mello to note Mukherjee's exploration of "the ambiguity and alienation entailed in the particular acculturation of the immigrant in America. These tightly woven tales of 'process' may be viewed as concise parables about the nature of cultural change and the overwhelming violence to self it can entail for the individual member or 'soul' of a particular culture" (37).

In “A Wife’s Story,” Panna Bhatt, the female protagonist-narrator, lives in the United States, studying for her Ph.D. in special education, while her husband remains at his job in India, visiting her in the latter half of the story. She has become American in many ways, but she has not let go of her Indian heritage. She attends a play with her Hungarian friend Imre, at which play Mukherjee places them in the margins: “we’re sitting in the front row, but at the edge, and we see things we shouldn’t be seeing” (MO 25). It is as though their position in the theater is representative of the immigrant experience: up front and seeing everything American despite (or perhaps because of) being relegated to the margin. The play itself emphasizes the contradiction and ambiguity of such a position by including Panna’s negative response to being cast as both part of and marginalized in America. Panna is utterly offended by the play’s depiction of Indians, noting in her head, “In my red silk sari I’m conspicuous. Plump, gold paisleys sparkle on my chest” (25). Her outrage isn’t completely personal, and her desire to write David Mamet, the playwright, stems not from hatred:

I don’t hate Mamet. It’s the tyranny of the American dream that scares me. First, you don’t exist. Then you’re invisible. Then you’re funny. Then you’re disgusting. Insult, my American friends will tell me, is a kind of acceptance. No instant dignity here....I long, at times, for clear-cut answers. Offer me instant dignity, today, and I’ll take it. (26)

Panna is outraged here by the lie of the American dream, recognizing that it at once beckons and pushes away, allowing the immigrant to sit close in the theater of America but marginalizing the immigrant in the drama enacted in that same theater. Despite its many costumes—non-existence, invisibility, butt of jokes, putative acceptance—

marginalization continues to withhold dignity from the American immigrant. In a satiric comment to the man hoarding the armrest he shares with her, Panna sees through the jokes at her and her culture/ethnicity's expense: "You're exploiting my space" (27). Here, the double-entendre is biting but fitting: literally he is taking up her space on the armrest, but figuratively he is "exploiting her space" by laughing at the ethnic stereotype on stage, with no regard for Panna, conspicuously dressed as she is, or her feelings.

This feeling of constant alienation imposed from outside, even when coded by her American friends as acceptance, runs in opposition to the Americanness she feels when her husband visits from India. As he marvels at the size of chicken breasts in America, tries American fast food, runs through grocery stores to purchase hair and bath products, she realizes to herself, "There's so much I already take for granted" (34). Though it is not clear how long it has taken her to adapt herself to America, when she notices her husband's change since having arrived, she suggests how quickly adaptation takes place: "In the ten days he has been here he has learned American rites: deodorants, fragrances" (40).

Despite these quick adaptations, it is clear that Panna's husband's changes are not the more permanent and embracing ones hers are. While on a tour of New York City, which she will not later admit to her friends because she is "too proud to admit [she] went on a guided tour" (37), she responds to the tour guide's over-the-top antics emphatically, in contrast to her husband's disapproval of the tour guide's theatricality, noting afterwards, "I've been trained to adapt; what else can I say?" (36). Her response to the tour guide is based on her understanding of what Americans do in such situations, and

she situates herself with the “American” response she has made her own and against the “Indian” response represented by her husband.

Here, adaptation or acculturation is not assimilation; based on her clothing choices and her thoughts about her husband before he arrives to visit her, it is clear she has not abandoned India or her husband, even if she might not return at all to either nation or husband, or at least not the same as when she left. Mukherjee, then, does not depict adaptation as a totalizing process that requires one to leave all of one’s prior self or selves behind in order to refashion a completely new identity. Instead, as Carole Stone notes, “[Mukherjee] shows her belief in the New World by using the present tense to suggest the desire of her characters to eradicate past lives and adopt new ones. Like Mukherjee herself, they are in a hurry to become Americanized, although the weight of their histories remain [sic] in their consciousness” (217).⁵⁷

In fact, cultural adaptation becomes normalized, even ancient, when Panna reminisces about the white Muslims Imre told her about. She thinks, “In Mostar white Muslims sing the call to prayer. I would like to see that before I die: white Muslims. Whole peoples have moved before me; they’ve adapted” (MO 39). The older cultural adaptation by “whole peoples” provides for Panna, and the reader, evidence of cultural change that shares something with today’s immigrant to America, among whose numbers Panna seems to count herself. Nonetheless, Panna’s Americanness surprises even herself. In a poignant mirror-image at the end of the story, as Panna is unclothed and waiting for

⁵⁷ This resonates with Clifford’s assertions in Routes about identities neither fixed nor forgotten: ““I do not accept that anyone is permanently fixed by his or her ‘identity’; but neither can one shed specific structures of race and culture, class and caste, gender and sexuality, environment and history. I understand these...not as homelands, chosen or forced, but as sites of worldly travel: difficult encounters and occasions for dialogue” (12). The difficulty of cross-cultural encounters that Clifford highlights here is emblematic of Mukherjee’s stories, which neither fix identity nor present it as easily re-made. Her stories, then, are useful as moments of dialogue about what happens when cultures intersect, overlap, and adapt.

her husband to return to her from the bathroom, she thinks she “want[s] to pretend with him that nothing has changed” (40). But when she sees herself in the mirror, she re-imagines herself, “I watch my naked body turn, the breasts, the thighs glow. The body’s beauty amazes me. I stand here shameless, in ways he has never seen me. I am free, afloat, watching somebody else” (40). The story closes, leaving the reader gazing *with Panna* at her own mirror image, highlighting the separate identities—Indian and American—that have adapted, molded, refashioned each other inside her, such that she is unrecognizable even to herself.

“The Tenant” also has a female protagonist, Maya Sanyal, but in this story the point of view is third person, omniscient. The effect of this perspectival difference is to highlight the lack of a sense of self-definition for Maya, as compared with Panna’s more self-assured negotiation of her Indian and American selves. As C. Sengupta points out, “‘The Tenant’ adumbrates the second theme that shines through Bharati Mukherjee’s shorter fiction: that rootlessness is basically a psychic problem. If a person suffers from self-alienation, he/she will not be able to take root in any culture, Indian or foreign” (154).

In “The Tenant,” Maya has been in the United States for ten years, since age nineteen, has just moved to Iowa, and has been hired to teach a course in World Literature (she has a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature). Her conflicted self arises from a split in her selves, American and Indian, that she can’t seem to escape or successfully negotiate. On the one hand, when her new and only friend in Iowa, Fran, comes over, Maya “realizes Indian women are supposed to be inventive with food, whip up exotic delights to tickle an American’s palate,” having unsuccessfully sought out “exotic spice

stores” around town, even looking up Indian and Bengali names in the phone book to make “culinary intimacies” (MO 98).

This early insight into her Indian self is quickly overshadowed by her break with it. “Maya’s taken some big risks,” the narrator tells us, “made a break with her parents’ ways. She’s done things a woman from Ballygunge Park doesn’t do, even in fantasies....She’s told [Fran] nothing of men she picks up, the reputation she’d gained, before Cedar Falls, for ‘indiscretions.’...She is an American citizen. But” (100). Later, after describing her grandmother’s betrothal at age five and her great aunt’s having “been burned to death over a dowry problem,” and her own training to be a proper, demure, soft Indian woman, she recognizes, “She has broken with the past. But” (102). In fact, to underscore this apparent break with her Indian past, she claims to hate Dr. Chatterji, a Bengali Brahmin she contacts through her phone book hunt and Physics professor at the same college where she teaches. When she visits his house, she notices both his and his wife’s disapproval of their nephew’s desire to marry the “Negro Muslim”—a fellow student at the college—with whom he has fallen in love. After Maya listens to Dr. Chatterji’s response, the narrator gives the reader a glimpse into her thoughts, “He is pompous; he is reactionary; he wants to live and work in America but give back nothing except taxes. The confused world of the immigrant—the lostness Maya and Poltoo feel—that’s what Dr. Chatterji wants to avoid. She hates him. But” (106).

Each of the evidences of her break with India above represents, on the surface, a comfort with her new self in America; however, at each point, the passages above are punctuated with a “But” that destabilizes the apparent comfort of her decision to leave India behind to embrace America. These hedges develop later, echoing the already

mentioned sense of Indianness that shrouds her at the start of the story. She escapes to the periodicals room at her college library, where “There are newspapers from everywhere,” because “She thinks of the periodicals room as an asylum for homesick aliens. There are two aliens already in the room both Orientals, both absorbed in the politics and gossip of their far-off homes” (108). The reason for her search through Indian newspapers is both to read news stories from India and to search through “matrimonial columns,” even stealing an issue of India Abroad, because she knows “Indian men want Indian brides” (109).

Thus, unlike Panna in “A Wife’s Story,” Maya in “The Tenant” is running away from an India she won’t let go and towards an America she doesn’t fully want. She is stuck between two worlds in an instance not of celebrated hybridity but of confused liminality, and she recognizes it when she sees the “Hindu god touching down in Illinois,” Ashoke Mehta, the man whom she had sought out based on his personal ad in the India Abroad she stole:

She can’t move. She feels ugly and unworthy. Her adult life no longer seems miraculously rebellious; it is grim, it is perverse. She has accomplished nothing. She has changed her citizenship but she hasn’t broken through into the light, the vigor, the *bustle* of the New Worlds. She is stuck in dead space. (110)

This recognition stems from her inability to settle comfortably with her multiple identities, instead being pulled psychically one way in moments, to America, but to India in others, while trying to “rebel” against the other, but never feeling at home in any formulation of her self. Sengupta recognizes that “since her alienation is in her psyche,

she is incapable of establishing a permanent relationship; once a tenant, always a tenant” (156). Sengupta’s revelation regarding the deeper meaning of the story’s title translates nicely into a metaphor for immigrants who cannot negotiate their place in the new society to which they have arrived. Maya is always moving out or moving in: at the start of the story, to Iowa; in the middle, because her landlord has remarried; at the end, when Ashoke Mehta calls her to him. Like a perpetual tenant, always moving from place to place, unable to put down her own roots in any home for very long, Maya is a perpetual foreigner, despite her American citizenship, because of her own psychic alienation and confusion. This seems an important metaphoric comment about always being a foreigner, whether self-imposed, as in Maya’s case, or imposed by an outside discourse: the always-already “foreign” immigrant is temporarily inhabiting a space in the nation, incapable of putting down roots or connecting meaningfully with others.

In Maya’s and Panna’s stories, immigration is always a negotiation of past selves with current ones, and Mukherjee’s message seems to be neither about assimilation nor about cultural nostalgia, the two ends of the cultural change continuum. Instead, through Panna’s success and Maya’s failure, Mukherjee seems to suggest that cultural adaptation is necessary but does not require the abandonment of all cultural heritages. Though Brinda Bose’s claim that “belonging is all-important, even if it means the discarding of nostalgia in order to wholly embrace the New World” (52) may be too absolute an assertion regarding the themes of Mukherjee’s works, it does highlight what Mukherjee sees as the immigrant’s need to find a way to belong, negotiating between absolute assimilation and absolute cultural nostalgia. Immigrants must negotiate both their new and old societies.

This idea of negotiation between new and old selves also appears to be Mukherjee's comment on the fashioning of America itself, built on old and new—or perhaps new and newer—immigrant populations. In her analysis of Mukherjee's novel Jasmine, Deepika Bahri notes the power of what Sharmani Patricia Gabriel calls Mukherjee's "immigrant" aesthetics⁵⁸ and politics: "The propulsion of identity into a condition of always becoming is a powerful call to reimagine it as a site for negotiation, both for the immigrant self and for the country she is becoming a part of" ("Always Becoming" 154). The story that best captures this idea is "Orbiting," told from Renata "Rindy" DeMarco's first-person perspective, set during Thanksgiving. Rindy is a third- or fourth-generation American⁵⁹ and is hosting her family's Thanksgiving dinner at her apartment. Victoria Carchidi suggests, "Such a story, one might think, offers mainstream America for our examination. One might even be disappointed; from an Asian writer, we encounter a family of Americans" (91). However, precisely the way new and old immigrants interact in this story reveals Mukherjee's vision of an America that is constantly shifting, constantly redefining its immigrants and being redefined by them.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Gabriel's essay sets out to establish Mukherjee's poetics as "immigrant" rather than "postcolonial," developing her argument out of a close reading of Mukherjee's novel The Tiger's Daughter. She states, "Lying at the heart of Mukherjee's cultural politics is her espousal of the 'immigrant' aesthetic, integral to which is a rejection of fixed conceptions of national-cultural identity" (85). Her essay goes on to define and nuance this "immigrant" aesthetic as it manifests itself in Mukherjee's work.

⁵⁹ This is through her father's side. Rindy's mother is an Italian immigrant, a "born and raised... Calabrian peasant" (MO 58). Rindy's paternal grandfather was born in America, "a fifteen-week-old fetus when his mother planted her feet on Ellis Island" (58), making Rindy's great-grandmother the first generation American, her grandfather second generation, and her father the third generation. Some might call her grandfather the first generation, because he was the first born on American soil, and this would make Rindy third-generation. All that, however, is simply a question of definitions. Needless to say, as Victoria Carchidi points out, "Renata is not an immigrant, nor is her father" (91), nor, even, is her paternal grandfather.

⁶⁰ Carchidi underscores the way in which the American family at the center of the story, with Italian origins present but never foregrounded, creates the image of America Mukherjee envisions: "In this perspective, we—whoever we may be—are not outside the multitude of cultures in the United States, but are part of the fabric that is being woven. An example of constantly changing, vibrant, and dynamic elements that come together is offered us" (91). Drake echoes this sentiment in her analysis of Mukherjee's work, "we're all immigrants, strangers in a strange land" (60).

The plot revolves around a typically American Thanksgiving dinner—made more typical, Mukherjee seems to be suggesting, by the way it is adapted to include both “American” and “Italian” elements: Rindy’s mother brings crostolis to go with the turkey, and Rindy relates to the reader the “story” about her paternal grandmother’s Thanksgiving traditions, “every Thanksgiving she served two full dinners, one American with the roast turkey, candied yams, pumpkin pie, the works, and another with Grandpa’s favorite pastas” (MO 67). The tone of the passage, as with Rindy’s current Thanksgiving adaptation—“Ok so traditions change. This year’s dinner’s potluck” (61)—, is one not of foreignness or even Italianness, but instead one of cultural blending and adaptation. These “Italian-Americans” are American without giving up those parts of Italy that they wish to hold on to. Drake notes:

As this supposedly assimilated family gathers for Thanksgiving dinner, they bring together many incarnations, many cultures and histories and names. The details that Mukherjee chooses to describe Rindy’s family show that, in America, past selves and their stories don’t disappear; they just emerge in the corners of rooms, or kaleidoscope into talk’s subtext, creating new stories that...revel in detail and juxtaposition. (80)

The American DeMarcos have become American not because they have left Italy behind completely, but precisely because they have been able to incorporate elements of their Italian heritage, perhaps unconsciously, into their American identity. Mukherjee’s description of them coupled with Drake’s analysis reveal the way that America is made and re-made by its immigrants, against initial anti-immigrant suspicion and against the rhetoric of the necessity of assimilation that often accompanies or follows it. In fact,

Rindy says of her father, “Dad’s very American, so Italy’s a safe source of pride for him” (MO 58). The implied inverse of the statement suggests that if Dad were not “very American,” it would be more “dangerous” for him to take pride in his Italian heritage.

By setting the cultural stage this way, Mukherjee has made cultural adaptation and change a given and has depicted this family as fundamentally American. However, the introduction of the foreign/alien to this image of American traditionalism, a foreignness embodied in Rindy’s new boyfriend, the Afghani immigrant Roashan (“Ro”), destabilizes the comfort felt during the first part of the story. However, by the end of the story, Ro has changed the DeMarco’s as much, if not more, than the changes that they and America will effect upon him. He transforms their American Thanksgiving dinner and forces them to reevaluate their own scars and struggles because they seem trivial in comparison with the ones he shares from his experience. They listen to his stories, his experiences, and they are shocked out of the complacency of an “easy” and “safe” Americanness because his journey to the United States has been anything but safe and easy. His new immigrant Americanness collides with the Americans who are descended from less recent immigrants to the United States, productively desettling their vision of what it takes to come to America and come to be American.

Carole Stone states, “In ‘Orbiting,’ set in suburban New Jersey, Mukherjee uses Thanksgiving, the quintessential American holiday, to portray culture clash” (223). Stone’s use of “culture clash” to describe this scene deromanticizes the mythic tradition that suggests a clean and easy cultural mingling at that first Thanksgiving occasion. Violent terms like “collision” or “clash,” however, also suggest the way both cultures are

forced to intermingle, because a collision or clash demands attention and evaluation, thereby liberating the potential for cultural dialogue, mutual adaptation, and redefinition.

Just before dinner with the DeMarcos, and after the initial awkwardness of his entry and introduction, Ro tells his story:

he's holding forth on the Soviet menace in Kabul....He's talking of being arrested for handing out pro-American pamphlets on his campus....He talks of this 'so-called leader,' this 'criminal' named Babrak Marmal....He goes on about how—*inshallah*—his father, once a rich landlord, had stashed away enough to bribe a guard, sneak him out of this cell and hide him for four months in a tunnel dug under a servant's adobe hut until a forged American visa could be bought. (MO 72-73)

Even though Rindy knows her dad only hears “Jail, bribes, forged” (73), she recognizes her new lover's scars as more significant than her own and her family's: “I am seeing Ro's naked body as though for the first time, his nicked, scarred, burned body....I am seeing Brent and Dad for the first time, too. They have their little scars, things they're proud of, football injuries and bowling elbows they brag about. Our scars are so innocent” (74).

However, Ro's narrative, filtered through Rindy's mind, is not something he celebrates. Carchidi points out, “he is embarrassed to speak of it because he does not treasure the scars of difference. He has come to America, to a land that celebrates Thanksgiving, but he will not lose his core as he integrates himself into his new land; instead he will invest its rituals with new meaning; he brings a new dimension to the family meal” (100). This is key because the “real” or original meaning of Thanksgiving is

told here—not with a “new meaning” the way Carchidi suggests, but in fact in an echo of the original myth of Thanksgiving—, and it is told, fittingly, by Ro, a pilgrim to the United States who is escaping oppression and seeking freedom. Ro thus more appropriately links with the Pilgrims from Europe who were the “new arrivals” at these shores, escaping from hardship and oppression and seeking, amongst other things, religious freedoms. Ro is thus equated here with quintessentially American mythology, the Pilgrims and their myth of hopeful but difficult adaptation to this country. Ro’s connection with the first Thanksgiving prompts Carchidi to state, “Ro’s incorporation changes the DeMarcos, as he revitalizes what had become simply a ritual of food” (100). The fact that Ro, the immigrant to America, changes the DeMarcos, Americans for multiple generations, is both ironic and poignant, because they must reevaluate their own Americanness in the face of an immigrant, an “other,” who destabilizes their complacent sense of belonging. This forced reevaluation as a result of contact with America’s immigrant population reveals Mukherjee’s assertion that American’s immigrants possess the potential to reinvigorate America and its sensibilities. Furthermore, reevaluation occurs despite, or perhaps because of, Rindy’s astute mental assertion that “The meaning of Thanksgiving should not be so explicit” (MO 73). Ro makes Thanksgiving more explicit because he embodies the explicit struggles and cross-cultural collision involved when America was “discovered” and “settled” by its first wave of immigrants. It is fitting, then, that Rindy sets the turkey before Ro so that he may carve it.

The title of the story, “Orbiting,” itself suggests the sort of mutual pull between the American DeMarcos and the immigrant Ro. Sherry Morton-Mello unpacks the power

of this metaphor to describe what happens in cultural exchange in America. She points out

the reciprocal transforming process that Mukherjee envisions as resolution for the disorienting, alienating paths of cultural collisions. Watching her own culture and its premises confront and collide with another culture, [Rindy] is, through the process of love, able to view both cultures as fluid; acting one upon the other, pulling each other into their mutual spheres.

(37)

Some critics read this and other stories by Mukherjee as either a celebration of assimilation and one-way Americanization (American changes the immigrant), or a problematic representation of America's cultural other.⁶¹ Though these stories contain representations that run the risk of being read as representative, Mukherjee's refusal to fix identity, manifested clearly in "Orbiting," itself suggests that cultural exchange in the United States is a two-way street. Carchidi states, "Ro is already changing this family through the discomfort he gives Mr. DeMarco in having to learn his religious

⁶¹ Shilpa Davé's evaluation of "Orbiting" seems agenda-driven, intent on berating the hegemony of the "West" and America and depicting Mukherjee as consenting and complicit Americanized or assimilated other. She misreads Rindy as second generation, her father (not her grandfather) as the fetus that came to America in his mother's womb, and based on this misreading, identifies Rindy and her father as outside the dominant culture rather than inside it, selling out their immigrant identity to become Americans. She reads Rindy and her sister Cindy's changing their name from Renata and Carla as emblematic of the desire to assimilate, casting off their "Italianness" in favor of "Americanness." What Davé misses here is first, Rindy is not an immigrant, and second, in changing their names, they reveal a desire "to shape oneself rather than simply to be shaped. Renata and her sister feel the desire to establish their own identities early on" (Carchidi 96). In another instance of agenda-driven misreading, Knippling forces the issue of subalternity, accusing Mukherjee of attempting in *Middleman* "to represent the Other as the *wholly other* in her writing," (146) and suggesting that "Most of Mukherjee's characters seem to be subaltern in that they are both heterogeneous and socially marginalized in one way or another" (149). But Mukherjee is not attempting to present subalterns who need a voice; she is presenting voices from the margins of the United States, margins from which immigrants have viable, potent voices that often go ignored or unheeded. As Carter-Sanborn puts it, speaking about *Jasmine* but even more applicable to *Middleman*, "Does the text in fact asked to read as speaking the 'subaltern' voice through Jasmine's first-person narrative? Or is such an assumption merely a function of the misguided expectations of what Spivak calls 'card-carrying listeners'?" (576).

prohibitions, in the interest he affords Franny, and most centrally in the opportunity to grow that he offers Renata” (98). Though Drake rightly critiques Carchidi’s optimistic reading of Rindy’s response to Ro,⁶² she does agree with Carchidi that “Ro’s ‘foreignness’ disrupts the deMarco family’s comfort zone, exposing their dependence on a narrow band of ‘American’ narratives to make things make sense despite, or because of, the complex histories they themselves carry and forget” (80). As both Carchidi and Drake’s analyses of “Orbiting” make clear, Ro is changing the DeMarcos, even forcing them to recognize the createdness of their own Americanness and thus reevaluate it, “undermin[ing] any sense of a congealed and static American identity” (Bahri, “Always Becoming” 152). Mukherjee’s vision of America is compelling because it is always re-making itself, a vision in opposition to those who would imagine America “congealed” or “static,” unchangeable and unchanged by influences “other” than its own.

If critics and readers want to read Mukherjee as an immigrant, minority, ethnic, or even specifically Indian-American writer who writes stories about and from those positions, they not only neglect her adamant avowals regarding her own identity, but they also ignore the way in which her stories, with their shifting realities, unfixable characters, and conflicting images, resist such a pigeonholing.⁶³ The desire to locate Mukherjee and

⁶² Unlike Carchidi, Drake reads Rindy unfavorably: “She writes Ro’s difference as requiring assimilative change, and she plots her own heroic story by giving herself a mission: if she heals ‘her’ man, she heals the world” (82). The reading seems viable, even if unfavorable, because Rindy seems to “(m)otheringly” want to remake Ro as American. As such, Rindy misses the way in which he already is adapting to America and the way in which he is transforming and will transform her and her family’s “Americanness.” Also, it is possible to read her desire to “heal” two ways, the one above that is unfavorable to Rindy, and the other favorable, which sees Rindy as recognizing Ro’s incorporation into America as “healing” America because of his stories, experiences, and personality. She permits this latter reading because she admits to the reader that she will “give him citizenship if he asks” (MO 74).

⁶³ Anthony Alessandrini makes the case that too many critics do not perform “the actual act of *reading* Mukherjee’s fiction” and thus miss “all its complexity” (270). Instead, as he points out, there is a reactionary tendency in Mukherjee criticism that, though valid, is more properly directed at “the disciplinary and institutional practices that have, by their very design, unproblematically celebrated

her work as fundamentally other—always immigrant, always foreign, always hyphenated—reveals the sort of marginalization Mukherjee’s artwork fights against. Her stories are about Americans—“old” ones and “new” ones—and America in transit; as Bahri puts it, they are “always becoming,” never fixed.

Furthermore, the tendency to link Mukherjee with Lahiri misses the way in which their aesthetics diverge. Though Mukherjee does include Americans of Indian origin in her stories, she does not do so exclusively, and as this essay has demonstrated, her stories sometimes do not include anyone of Indian origin. This is because Mukherjee, as artist, has no problem representing “other nationalities and backgrounds because they are her natural subject as an American writer, and these many colored strands of people’s lives are the quintessentially American experience. We are not Indian, Italian, Jewish, fighting to retain our identity against a monolithically other American; America is made up of all our strands” (Carchidi 94). Furthermore, her “immigrant aesthetic” (Gabriel) differs from Lahiri’s aesthetic, attributable perhaps to Lahiri’s personal experience as a child of immigrants as different from Mukherjee’s personal experience as an immigrant. This isn’t to suggest biographical determination in their artwork; however, it is to suggest that the differences in their works stem from differences in their thematic concerns, arising out of personal observations and experiences. Lahiri is not an updated Mukherjee, nor should she be read as the next phase of representative Indianness, the phase arising from the growing and growing up second-generation of “Indians” in America.

Mukherjee’s work as giving voice to a new, multicultural America, rather than at Mukherjee’s texts themselves (269).

Dialogue and Difference: Keeping America from Settling Itself

It may seem contradictory to compare Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri, two American women writers with Bengali-Indian origins, in an effort to undermine the criticism and readings that seek to pigeonhole authors by their minority, ethnic, or cultural identity. It would seem, in fact, to reinforce those very readings' tendency to locate similarities or to make comparison because of the "fact" of ethno-cultural commonality. However, precisely those differences between Mukherjee and Lahiri, their personal identity assertions, and their works highlight the incommensurability of assigning to their art together or each individually an absolute unity. Criticism that attempts this unity, even when celebrating the unity of their diversity, corrals both authors into ethno-cultural representative, a practice that maintains the binary oppositions between us and them, American and foreigner, center and periphery. To argue for readings that posit either Lahiri's or Mukherjee's work as quintessentially American even as they are hyphenated, as this essay has sought to do, is to argue for the viability of a "hermeneutic matrix" (Bahri, Native 8) for interpreting artwork created by Americans putatively inhabiting or writing from a marginal space. This is because mainstream American literature has been allowed to be read for both aesthetic and political contributions, whereas "non-Western [or ethnic minority] literatures tend to be read in ways that privilege sociological over literary approaches," as Anthony Alessandrini points out with regard to postcolonial literatures (265). If "global fiction like Mukherjee's"—or what is now called "transnational" literature—were considered truly equivalent to canonical literature or the literature of the dominant discourse, then it would "[produce] a set of critical practices for reading post-colonial literature equal to the ones

developed for reading colonial texts” (Alessandrini 266), or, to translate this to American literary criticism, it would produce critical practices for reading “ethnic” or “minority” literature equal to the ones developed for reading “non-ethnic” or “majority” literature.

In fact, criticism does seem to recognize, at least implicitly, some aesthetic and political differences between Lahiri’s fiction and Mukherjee’s. These differences, however, reveal more about the desire to read Lahiri as the representative model minority, as opposed to Mukherjee’s less “quiet” presence. Robert Morace calls Lahiri’s work, “*quietly* stunning” (434, italics added) and the title for Vanessa Jones’ article is “A *Quietly* Powerful ‘Interpreter’” (italics added). Charles Taylor’s review for Salon.com adds, “If I haven’t said anything about Lahiri’s style, that’s because the identification she establishes between her readers and her characters requires the kind of simple, direct prose whose refinement is invisible” (par. 7). Jones’ article expands on the title’s privileging of a “quiet” power: “These nine stories are striking instances of an art that never tries to raise its voice in order to remain in the mind” (par. 8). Tom Wilhelmus describes her prose as follows: “as a storyteller she’s neither shrill nor tendentious but rather calm, efficient and focused primarily on situations where the dramas of cultural interaction are played out quietly in personal and domestic settings” (136-37). These critics align Lahiri’s style with the sort of aesthetics and art that do not confront the reader directly with unsettling and uncomfortable images, ideas, or themes. In privileging this kind of reading, the critics reveal the sort of safe, non-confrontational aesthetics they would like to see from American artists writing from the position of ethnic minority.

The enthusiasm attending these critics’ evaluation of Lahiri’s style and aesthetics echoes the enthusiastic praise of and for the model minority in America: quietly

successful, never raising its voice, simple, direct, invisible, and calm, rather than shrill or tendentious. The muted interpellation is to all other ethnic minorities: if only all of you could be as quiet, as simple, as invisible—instead of raising your voice, shrilly and tendentiously—, then you could be recognized and prized as was Lahiri and her artwork.

This call seems to respond to Mukherjee, whose fictional and non-fictional prose style does not resound softly in a reader's mind. Instead, Mukherjee plays up the violence and terror associated with cultural contact, and the ensuing personal and national re-formations, re-negotiations. Bose calls the response by Mukherjee's immigrants to mainstream America as fighting "battles" (47) and trying to avoid the "terror of marginalization" (48). Drake mentions the way Mukherjee "represents the real pleasures and violences of cultural exchange" (61). Geraldine Stoneham's comment that Rindy, the American narrator of "Orbiting," is "apparently unaware of [Ro, her immigrant boyfriend's,] potential ruthlessly to transform such myths and with them her perception of America" (86) also underscores the violence inherent in cultural contact between older and newer immigrants to America. Mukherjee's images of the violent side of America's cultural collisions, what Stoneham calls "the clamour of the diasporic" (82), and the ensuing critical reception prompt Alpana Sharma Knippling to state, "It would be no exaggeration to say that Bharati Mukherjee is primarily recognized in United States academic circles for her challenge to mainstream American literary-cultural productions" (143). Clearly, she isn't the model minority Lahiri has been made out to be by her reviewers.

Unfortunately, in privileging Lahiri's version, criticism imagines a cleaner, more palatable version that, if viable, also elides the messier, harder-to-swallow experiences of

transethnic or transnational interaction in America. It is not as simple as Ronny Noor's assertion in his review of "The Third and Final Continent," the last story in Lahiri's collection: "Thus, with sympathy, understanding, and a smile, one can narrow the gap not only between spouses but also between continents" (366). Instead, as Mukherjee reveals, there is struggle, violence, rape, and murder, both literally and figuratively. The violence in many of Mukherjee's stories illuminates the violence she sees in America's own imaginations about its identity. Speaking in the 1990s, she states:

in this blood-splattered decade, questions such as who is an American and what is American culture are being posed with belligerence and being answered with violence. We are witnessing an increase in physical, too often fatal, assaults on Asian Americans. An increase in systematic 'dot-busting' of Indo-Americans in New Jersey, xenophobic immigrant-baiting in California, minority-on-minority violence during the south central L.A. revolution. ("Beyond Multiculturalism" 31)⁶⁴

This opposes Gita Rajan's image—articulated in her essay on Interpreter—of what constituted the clean, safe, acceptable incorporation of South Asian immigrants into the United States. Rajan claims that Lahiri "tackles the immigrant experience from the safe distance of an acceptable stereotype formulated around the 1960s when South Asians struggled and melted into America...unmarked except as stereotypically quiet academics and professionals" (127). Rajan notes that the image above is stereotypical, and thus

⁶⁴ Sunaina Maira's study of South Asian cultural production in the United States refers to violence against South Asians in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including a brief description of the "Dotbusters" gang (358-59). The Harvard Law Review also adds in its 1993 article, "Racial Violence against Asian Americans," a footnote about the "Dotbusters" in New Jersey (1927) and an excerpt from a letter published by the gang (1928-29). An earlier and slightly different version of Appadurai's essay "Patriotism and its Futures," reprinted in Callaloo and titled "The Heart of Whiteness," gives his personal experience and reflection regarding the racism associated with New Jersey "dotbusting" (801-802).

imagined and not representative. Perhaps Lahiri's "excavation" of the stereotypically perceived model minority, Indians or South Asians or Asians in general, is itself to blame for the way critics privilege such an integration into American society. Whether or not this is the case, her safe Americanness is clearly the preferred version for mainstream critics and readers, even if it forgets the racist violence directed against Indians and Indian-Americans in New Jersey in the late 1980s.

If this preference for "quiet" or "model" narratives were mitigated by the recognition that such a version of American identity formation is not representative of all American identity negotiations but just one version, there would be no need for critique. However, it appears that critical reception of Lahiri's work imagines that her personal assertions of hyphenated Americanness, being an Indian-American, not only realize themselves in her stories but also are representative of the ethnic minority experience, specifically for those who, like her, are children of South Asian or Indian immigrants, but also more generally for second- or third-generation Americans of immigrant descent. Instead of re-imagining what constitutes the nation itself, these critics seek to perpetually hold at bay the possibility of "full" Americanness by appending cultural, racial, or national qualifications. Hence the prevalence of describing ethnic minorities in hyphenated terms: African-American, Chinese-American, Indian-American, Mexican-American, even Native-American. However, always assumed hyphenation, too, is discursively "violent" insofar as it erects barriers against changing the definitions of Americanness and compartmentalizes American ethnic minorities into ethnic camps. This is not to suggest that self-imposed hyphenated formulations, like Lahiri's and unlike Mukherjee's, are inherently or necessarily problematic; instead, it refers to hyphenation

imposed from without, as practiced by the official form of multiculturalism that “pluralizes the notion of an American identity by insisting on attention to African-Americans, Native-Americans, and the like, but...leaves in place a unified concept of identity” (Scott 13). As Joan Scott notes, this oft-celebrated concept of identity masks “one of the complicated and contradictory effects” of the dangerous ideology that seems to surround the implementation of the minority gender, minority area, minority sexuality, minority race, and minority ethnic studies, namely, “to totalize the identity that is the object of study, reiterating its binary opposition as minority (or subaltern) in relation to whatever is taken as majority or dominant” (19).

This contradiction finds its example in the way Mukherjee has been replaced in American literary criticism by the newly celebrated Lahiri and her “quiet power.” Her incorporation into American literary and popular consciousness, however, also reveals a desire to maintain ethnic minorities just outside what constitutes America as a nation. It is the discursive form of what Clifford calls the “constant, often violent, maintenance” required for “the imagined communities called ‘nations’” (Routes 9). Clifford’s invocation of Benedict Anderson’s landmark Imagined Communities brings into sharp focus how the imagined quality of nations is both positive and negative. Anderson’s analysis of the effects of “print-capitalism” suggests that fiction like Lahiri’s collection of short stories, functioning today as did the novel and newspaper in eighteenth century Europe (Anderson 25), has the potential to re-present America’s imagined community, to re-configure, re-imagine. But as this fiction is relegated to the realm of in-between-ness—Interpreter or Middleman as always Indian-American, always immigrant-American, always hyphenated—it loses its ability to expand what constitutes a

community or a nation. Hence the negative side: “official nationalism” can be “an anticipatory strategy adopted by dominant groups which are threatened with marginalization or exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community” (Anderson 101). Though dominant discourse in the U.S. today may not be as concerned about its own marginalization or exclusion, its desire to imagine its cultural minorities as always-already “other” and never fully belonging at least reveals a move to counter its displacement from the center, from the position of dominance.

Thus, the re-imagining of America, a process that finds its microcosmic representation in American literary criticism’s canon and culture wars, allows for both the progressive re-imagining that seeks to articulate an Americanness recognizing the changes made to it by its new immigrant populations, or conversely, a reactionary re-imagining of Americanness that attempts to envision both Americanness as unchangeable or unchanging and immigrants as perpetually not-belonging. The latter tactic, whether embodied in conservative literary criticism or celebratory official multiculturalism, is dismissed as a “formula of hyphenation (as in Italian-Americans, Asian-Americans, and African-Americans)” that is “reaching the point of saturation, and the right-hand side of the hyphen can barely contain the unruliness of the left-hand side.... No existing conception of Americanness can contain this large variety of transnations” (Appadurai 172). Thus, at the very least, Americanness is not containable because, as Bahri notes in her analysis of Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, America is presented both “as a geographic and temporal state/space that is always in the process of becoming a new nation” (“Always Becoming” 143) and “as a corporeal body undergoing constant change” (144). To this, Appadurai adds a provocative suggestion for re-configuring hyphenation, “perhaps the

sides of the hyphen will have to be reversed, and we can become a federation of diasporas: American-Italians, American-Haitians, American-Irish, American-Africans” (173). This new federation of diasporas mirrors Mukherjee’s assertion mentioned at the start of this thesis—“I am an American of Bengali-Indian origin”— and would underscore the national unity of America, formulated now as the left—and first—side of the hyphen, a unity that is attributable to, not fighting against, what is now the right side of the hyphen, namely the ethnic, national, or cultural origins of each individual American.

Even if the community Appadurai imagines above is idealistic, its idealism mirrors the democratic principles espoused by the United States. These principles abound in the aesthetics of both Lahiri’s and Mukherjee’s works, because their stories refuse to cede to an easily identifiable identity politics; neither author’s short stories fit cleanly either into a typical immigrant or Indian experience or into a typical American experience. Herein, then, is their power: by refusing aesthetically to accept predetermined or imposed cultural stereotypes, Lahiri’s and Mukherjee’s fiction unsettles the imagined monolithic permanence of Americanness, reminding the nation that its history has always been one of re-negotiation and re-definition.

The onus of responsibility for such interpretative strategies then, is on the scholars, critics, and teachers who heavily influence the way the more general populace reads literature from the putative margins. Unfortunately, this influence must undo the “othering” that some critical work has already done. For example, Patricia Goldblatt, writing in a magazine intended to help elementary and secondary teachers address multicultural issues in the classroom, encourages her students to read works like Lahiri’s

Interpreter of Maladies and others as books that “introduce diverse cultures” because “they invite curiosity and entrance into new worlds. They permit safe observation platforms, secure placement for comparisons and queries” (52). Though this classroom activity sounds harmless enough, one cannot help but wonder what happens to the immigrant students in her class who come from those diverse backgrounds, who become the object being looked at from the other, culturally dominant students’ “safe observation platforms.” Furthermore, Goldblatt’s misreadings of Lahiri’s non-immigrant Americans of Indian descent as Indian immigrants would cause even the students who were born in the United States but who come from “diverse backgrounds” to be the objects of that same gaze by “mainstream” American students. Students need to learn about difference, it is true, but not by objectifying, reifying, and perpetually othering the literatures, cultures, and students who appear to embody those differences. Also, as has been demonstrated in the earlier analysis Interpreter’s critical reviews, too many critics tend to interpret Lahiri, other ethnic minority writers, and their works in terms of their ethnicity or race. Not all scholars are outside this critique, either, because, as Bahri points out, American literary critical practice has tended to the following: “The criteria of exotic appeal or multicultural representativeness threaten to shape a restrictive context of reception in which the complex interplay of aesthetic formalism, utopian thinking, and the problem of justice feature but poorly, if at all” (Native 99). Thus, if scholars continue to privilege the form of multiculturalism that significantly overlooks aesthetic techniques and universal themes, they will join the teachers and critics who misread and misappropriate multiculturalism in such a way that diverse and minority populations are

essentialized and marginalized *because* their ethnicities, cultures, or races are being held up as primary.

When ethno-cultural identity and representativeness become the trope of interpretive and critical practice, critical practice itself undermines art's potential to reflect back at life in order to transform life. Thus, the "new" literature in America joins with the "old"—perhaps more appropriately the "less new"—literature to constantly interrogate Americanness itself, never settling, never fixing, always in dialogue. Especially in light of Lahiri's star power, garnered so early—a Pulitzer and other major prizes for her first major work; a current spot as one of the Vice Presidents on PEN American Center's Board of Trustees; a feature film for her second work, a first novel—it is important to avoid the critical impulse to praise Lahiri as representative of *the* Indian-American experience, *the* model minority, or even *the* exemplar ethnic in the United States. To do so would fix reader response in a way that would silence other voices, other visions of and for America and its ethno-cultural or racial minorities. Instead, criticism must strive to keep alive the remembrance that Lahiri's is one voice, Mukherjee's another, and there are a million more clamoring from the margins, from the centers, from the Americas.

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