

# I Was Never An American: Rejection and Disaffiliation in Twenty-First Century Immigration Narratives

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Boston College

The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Department of English

***I WAS NEVER AN AMERICAN:*  
REJECTION AND DISAFFILIATION IN  
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY IMMIGRATION NARRATIVES**

a dissertation

By

MARY CATHERINE DAILY-BRUCKNER

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## Abstract

Title: I Was Never An American: Rejection and Disaffiliation in Twenty-First Century Immigration Narratives

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This dissertation explores traditional patterns of immigration narratives and reads them alongside not only their contemporary, divergent counterparts but also historical moments that contribute to the narrative transformations. By way of this examination, literary changes over time become readable, highlighting the speed at which the rhetoric and aims of many immigration narratives became patently anti-America in the twenty-first century, significantly departing from the traditions established in the twentieth century, which, at their core still held pro-America aims.

The first chapter, “The Solution is the Problem: Immigrant Narratives of Internment and Detention,” considers nonfiction narratives regarding immigration detention within the borders of the United States. I read Monica Sone’s *Nisei Daughter* and Edwidge Danticat’s *Brother I’m Dying* as narratives that explore detention as central immigrant experience, exposing a chronicle of national suffering after attacks on American soil. When paired with Sone’s work, Danticat’s *Brother I’m Dying* reveals a shift in traditional narratives, exposing links to criminality and a move away from affiliation.

In my second chapter, “The Helpless Helper: Illegality, Borders and Family Reunification,” I study Thomas McCarthy’s *The Visitor*, Courtney Hunt’s *Frozen River*, and Wayne Kramer’s *Crossing Over*. In these films, the suffering of immigrant families designated as somehow “illegal” are often displaced onto a white, parental “helper” figure in order to scrutinize their processing and treatment. These three independent films

probe the ways in which economic, judicial, and political interests negatively affect family reunification policies. Additionally, *The Visitor*, *Frozen River*, and *Crossing Over* rely on an alternative point of view – that of American citizens rather than immigrants – as a way to further fragment traditional immigrant narrative structures, which instead favored immigrant-as-narrator constructs.

In chapter three, “Considering Conditions of Possibility: Canonical Modes with Modern Concerns,” I transition back to the immigrant’s point of view and turn to traditional “high” literature. The narratives studied in this chapter retell canonical American novels before placing an important twist on the story: the decision to leave America rather than assimilate and aspire to the American Dream. Saher Alam’s *The Groom to Have Been* and Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* both make use of the narrative mode of the novel of manners while H.M. Naqvi’s *Home Boy* and Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* draw upon the ethnic bildungsroman tradition. By treating immigrant experiences as literary through adaptations of canonical novels rooted in American success and integration, these four authors make the choice of writing their protagonists out of America all the more resonant.

The final chapter of this project, “The End Product of Our Deep Moral Exhaustion: Alternative Genres and Immigration Narratives,” pulls upon Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* and Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* to ground a discussion of the role of alternate history in contemporary immigration narratives. From there, the chapter pushes out to include Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story* as an example of speculative fiction. In each novel, a commentary on America’s global social position is revealed by means of the degree to which the

protagonists and their families do or do not become assimilated Americans, placing these novels in an intermediary position on the continuum of post-9/11 immigration narratives.

Via my close readings, I aim to demonstrate the ways in which patterns of departure from traditional narratives became both enhanced and more rapidly altered at the start of the twenty-first century. The comparative work of this dissertation project allows access to a unique vision of twenty-first century America that is only available through the lens of immigration narratives, critiquing the modern nation's strengths, shortcomings, political climate, and social realities all while attending to conscious and significant modifications to traditional immigrant narratives.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
INTRODUCTION: OPPORTUNITIES FOR REDEFINITION.....	1
CHAPTER 1: CONSIDERING CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY.....	35
CHAPTER 2: THE SOLUTION IS THE PROBLEM.....	80
CHAPTER 3: THE HELPLESS HELPER.....	127
CHAPTER 4: THE END PRODUCT OF OUR DEEP MORAL EXHAUSTION.....	190

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**INTRODUCTION:**  
***OPPORTUNITIES FOR REDEFINITION***

It was my sense in the fall of 2001 that the United States was missing an opportunity to redefine itself as part of a global community when, instead, it heightened nationalist discourse, extended surveillance mechanisms, suspended constitutional rights, and developed forms of explicit and implicit censorship.

- Judith Butler

## I.

Any of us, myself included, who stood in lower Manhattan on September 11, 2001, felt a literal seismic change as immense towers collapsed profoundly into dust. After the seismic activity came the ripples: first the eerie ripples of human silence, followed by the ripples of first responder sirens, and finally, after what seemed like an eternity, ripples of speech. Early utterances, barely comprehensible, released primal emotions before giving way to more coherent calls to organization and action. We are still in the midst of these ripples, but the space between them grows larger as we move further away from 2001. Narratives intervene in the interstitial space between the concrete events situated on each ripple, helping to make sense of the events of the day, the aftermath, and the way that a series of events occurring over just a few hours (it was 102 minutes from the time the first plane hit the WTC until both towers had collapsed, with the Pentagon and Pennsylvania events in-between) led to the alteration of national immigration policy and, consequentially, American immigration narratives.

In the months and years immediately following the events of 9/11, novelists, poets, musicians, and visual artists took to their mediums to work through the day itself and its cultural aftereffects. As such, 9/11 became a single event that set in motion a series of changes to immigration in America; modifications that include policy decisions, border patrol practices, and social shifts felt on both individual and collective levels. In 2010, Edwidge Danticat explained some of these aftereffects on her identity:

One of the advantages of being an immigrant is that two very different countries are forced to merge within you. The language you were born speaking and the one you will probably die speaking have no choice but to find a common place in your

brain and regularly mere there. So too with catastrophes and disaster, which inevitably force you to rethink facile allegiances. (112)

Danticat goes on to describe the ways in which she felt many immigrants became more solidly American in the wake of September 11, in part responding to an upwelling of patriotic writing (and TV, film, music, etc.) by rethinking their once-facile allegiances to America and choosing to strengthen those bonds through the experience they shared with other citizens. She describes immigrants hoisting American flags and visiting Ground Zero as a way to show their commitment to their American identities. However, her personal experience, as we will see in the discussion of her immigration detention memoir, is deeply conflicted. And, of course, there were other writers, indeed some of them immigrants, who chose instead to rethink facile national allegiances and write away from rather than into America given the way that the country responded and changed in the early twenty-first century.

As creative authors set about their work, so too did journalists, pundits, and politicians. While novelists methodically wrote their way through the beginning of the new century, puzzling through immigration challenges, popular periodicals and programs were oftentimes more dramatic, leveraging a sense of fear, as is seen in this profile from *New York Magazine*:

The nineteen arrived in the U.S. at various times, several of them more than a year before the day... throughout their time in this country they moved about freely in a number of states—Florida, Arizona, California, Virginia, New Jersey—and on the morning of September 11, each passed through airport security and onto their planes undisturbed. (Lee)

This article goes on to describe that the nineteen men who have come to be known as the “9/11 hijackers” all arrived in the United States on valid immigration visas. Some were visiting. Some were students. All of them came to America legally and subsequently forged lasting problematic ties between immigration and terrorism.

Another man, originally from Pakistan, [Faisal] Shahzad, “pledged allegiance to the Stars and Stripes in April [2009] during a citizenship ceremony in Hartford, Connecticut, having passed all the criminal and security checks needed to get a US passport” (Clark). Shahzad has since been convicted of plotting and subsequently failing to detonate a homemade bomb in New York City’s Times Square. He remains an American citizen who will spend life in an American prison without the possibility of parole, and his profile ties his naturalization together with his attempted acts of terror.

And then there is Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. As *The New York Times* described him in 2013, “Mr. Tsarnaev was a smart, athletic 19-year-old with a barbed wit and a laid-back demeanor, fond of soccer and parties, all too fond of marijuana... He gained American citizenship on Sept. 11, 2012, ‘and he was pretty excited about it,’ said his first-year dorm mate, Mr. Rowe” (Wines and Lovett). Dzhokhar and his brother, Tamerlan, went on to detonate two homemade pressure cooker bombs near the finish line of the Boston Marathon on April 15, 2013, killing three people and injuring over 260 others. As of the winter of 2015, this immigrant citizen is on trial for his life in Boston, having admitted to building and detonating the bombs at the finish line that caused such a wide range of physical and emotional casualties.

These three profiles, all from popular periodicals, highlight the proliferation of a connection between terrorism and immigration in the twenty-first century United States.

The story is told over and over with different names: Mr. X came to the United States legally. Perhaps Mr. X even took an *oath* to become a naturalized citizen. Mr. X subsequently infused the United States with fear using terrorist tactics. Terrorists, whether suspected, convicted, or self-confessed, are public enemies poised to disseminate fear. They are endlessly profiled in periodicals and subjected to analysis on television and radio talk shows, perpetuating the glorification (and sometimes glamorization) of individual terrorists while simultaneously linking terrorism and immigration. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the most recent example, has been featured on the covers of *Rolling Stone*, *People*, and other mainstream, highly circulated publications.<sup>1, 2</sup> Will the hook used to explain complicated cases such as Tsarnaev's ultimately center on terrorism, immigration, or something else entirely? Unfortunately, individuals like Tsarnaev with statuses as both immigrants and accused terrorists have driven policy discussions in the twenty-first century, with politicians using national anxiety as grist for the mill of immigration reform and allowing propaganda to dominate policy. On April 19, 2013, Republican senator Charles Grassley said that the Boston Marathon bombings underlined the need to ensure that "those who would do us harm do not receive benefits under the immigration laws," (M.S.) echoing out as just one voice reflective of an American body politic yearning for a better alarm system on the house of America, one set to shut out terror, terrorists, and terrorism. Unfortunately, this revised system of security folds immigration into the fray while making its sweeping changes aimed at terror, terrorists, and terrorism.

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<sup>1</sup> See Jill Smolowe et al. "A Tale of Two Brothers." *People*. 6 May 2013.

<sup>2</sup> See Janet Reitman's "The Bomber: How a Popular, Promising Student was Failed by His Family, Fell Into Radical Islam, and Became a Monster." *Rolling Stone*. 1 Aug. 2013.

Grassley is not alone in his conflation of terrorism, immigration, and national security. In 2002, the White House released its “Action Plan for Creating a Secure and Smart Border,” which in part read that America “requires a border management system that keeps pace with expanding trade while protecting the United States and its territories from the threats of terrorist attack, illegal immigration, illegal drugs and other contraband” (Alden 139). The rhetoric disseminated by the White House during the first decade of the twenty-first century continued along these lines, creating unfortunate pairings that placed terrorism and drug smuggling alongside immigration when, in reality, these challenges are categorically different.

This coupling of immigration and terrorism invites an examination of how contemporary immigration is narrated in the popular imagination. Specifically, how have literary critics and authors conceived of this narration over the past fourteen years? This dissertation explores the ways in which authors reexamine discourse and the traditions of immigration narratives, thereby rupturing the censorship that Judith Butler rightly attributes to post-9/11 policies and practices. For example, my first chapter studies the targeting and silencing of particular immigrant groups via the PATRIOT ACT and the social realities of profiling that it (at least linguistically) aims to mitigate. In chapter two, I explore the silencing of immigrants who have been placed in detainment, looking at how the imprecision of detention practices comes to bear on particular (in this case Japanese and Haitian) families in the wake of particular national tragedies. My third chapter views family reunification policies—lauded as the cornerstone of contemporary immigration—through the lens of independent cinema as a way to grapple with the complicated and failing nature of family reunification practices from both the

prosecutorial and defense sides of deportation. Finally, my fourth chapter pushes back at not only the censorship that Butler identifies, but the extreme endings presented by works studied in previous chapters—offering a mediated possibility of immigrant existence in America that no longer requires complete assimilation.

Transformations in immigrant narratives are, of course, to be expected in a new century. As Gilbert H. Muller explained in 2000, “Our world today is much more complicated than it was 100 years ago. We are far more mobile. We have more choices. We slip in and out of various characters. Still, in one way or another, the promise of America is validated by many [contemporary immigrant] writers because their characters either discover themselves or persist in the attempt” (Sachs 21). However, the aftershocks of 9/11—as Judith Butler has said, an ever-stronger nationalist discourse, the extensions of surveillance, the suspension of constitutional rights, and the development of new forms of explicit and implicit censorship—has meant that “promise of America” had now been violated, made even more precarious for immigrants at the start of the twenty-first century. And so this dissertation asks: is there a discernable, emerging pattern of waning allegiance to America within twenty-first century American immigrant narratives?

## II.

As with any question of change over time, one must understand what came before—and of course “immigrant narrative” is a capacious term. Critics such as William Boelhower and Alfred Hornung have explored the ways in which twentieth-century American multiculturalism can, perhaps, be replicated in other parts of the world, most particularly Europe, as a way to extend transnationalism and expand immigrant narratives

to become more global in the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup> However, I myself will not include much attention to transnationalism, but rather focus on immigrant narratives in America. The writers and filmmakers that I study, while certainly globally situated, are more concerned with a rejection of and disaffiliation from America than an acceptance of globalization, transnational, or multicultural narrative traditions; therefore, my focus remains on the development of immigrant narrative genres concerned with an acceptance or rejection of the United States in the twenty-first century.

In terms of immigrant writing in America, critics tend to identify four major subcategories that have dominated the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and reflect the changing patterns of America's cultural, legal, and political climate regarding immigration. As explained by Tim Prchal, these classic and well-defined modes of American immigrant narratives are the immigrant tragedy, novels of anti-immigration, immigrant adjustment novels, and novels of cultural pluralism or multiculturalism ("New Americans" 426-436). Prchal explains that these four categories "continue to appear in pleas for instituting greater immigration restriction, for making English the nation's official language, for revising American history textbooks to better represent the contributions from neglected camps, even for holding ethnic festivals" ("American of the Future" 205), making them ripe for adaptations outside the realm of fiction. Therefore, I apply Prchal's taxonomy to the broader scope of narrative that not only includes fiction, but also autobiography and film.

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<sup>3</sup> Werner Sollors, as a founder in the study of immigrant narratives, defines an "American ideology [that] has steered between descent and consent" (5), creating an ambiguity around ethnic interaction. Following Sollors, William Boelhower's *Through A Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in America* considers and questions the ways in which ethnic writing (especially that of immigrants) is inherently American writing. I argue that Prchal incorporates this early work on defining immigrant narratives (which is ultimately rooted in the multiculturalism of the 1980s) in order to neatly carve out the wider range of categories that I consider in this dissertation.



Prchal's first two subcategories of the immigrant novel, which blend together thematically, correspond with an increasingly hostile political reaction to in the late nineteenth to early-to-mid-twentieth century. The Page Act of 1875, for instance, was the first restrictive immigration reform passed in the United States, and it limited the admittance of persons deemed "undesirable," most of who were Asian and/or convicts in their home countries (Abrams). The idea that persons could be deemed categorically "undesirable" is reflected in the immigrant tragedy, which oftentimes follows the demise (sometimes literally to the gutter) of questionable persons who have immigrated to the United States. Or, in the 1920s, the National Origins Formula (a broader category that includes the 1921 Emergency Quota Act, the Immigration Act of 1924, and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952) came into effect and remained so from 1921-1965, limiting immigration based on proportions of specific immigrant groups (low quotas were given to Eastern and Southern Europe) with the aim of maintaining a desired ethnic composition in America (Lemay and Barkin).

This at best selective acceptance of particular ethnic groups became the premise behind both immigrant tragedies and, from the opposite end of the cultural spectrum, anti-immigrant narratives in which immigrants attempt to shed their ethnicities and assimilate to life in America, whitewashing away their roots in order to blend seamlessly into a nation favoring cultural homogeneity over diversity. In other words, in either narrative form, immigrants endeavored to become American so as to escape anti-immigrant sentiments by no longer identifying as a non-citizen, but the attempt usually ends in failure. The immigrant tragedy subcategory, Prchal argues, is rooted in a novel not generally thought of as immigrant literature at all, Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in*

*the Iron Mills* (1861), which tells the tale of an “immigrant unable to adjust to life in a new land” (“New Americans” 428). This generally-early phase also includes Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl* (1896) and Michael Gold’s *Jews Without Money* (1930). The novels within this phase of the immigrant narrative are infused with “terrible disillusionment after arriving” that follows a “downward path” to individual ruin at the hands of America (“New Americans” 429). Owing to its dark particulars, the immigrant tragedy both leads to and overlaps with Prchal’s second mode, anti-immigration novels. This second group of works encompasses narratives that are “hostile toward immigrants, reveal[ing] the general climate in which novelists interested in capturing the experience of individual newcomers operated” (“New Americans” 429). This collection portrays immigrants as dangerous to America’s cultural fiber, depicting foreigners as outsiders poised to dilute an otherwise robust of nation of culturally analogous individuals. Examples of anti-immigration novels include H.G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and Katharine Metcalf Roof’s *The Stranger at the Hearth* (1916) (Prchal “New Americans” 429-430).

In a third quadrant, Prchal’s third mode, the immigrant adjustment novel, positions itself against this hostile climate, and “features characters who manage to take root in America, thereby affirming the ideal of the land of opportunity” (“New Americans” 431), and grows out of assimilative desires displayed in the immigrant tragedy and anti-immigrant modes. Even though the characters in the immigrant adjustment model successfully integrate into America, “the dangers, struggles, and sacrifices” of that integration remain central to the narratives (ibid), unable to completely leave behind the hazards and problems of earlier phases. Prchal cites Henry Roth’s *Call It*

*Sleep* (1934) and Gish Jen's *Typical American* (1991) as seminal works operating within the adjustment mode of imagination.

And then, especially with an improvement in the political climate, the final category in Prchal's account of immigrant narratives, novels of cultural pluralism or multiculturalism, builds on immigrant adjustment novels to include a focus on narratives that maintain "the preservation of diversity enhances the quality of life for all" ("New Americans" 432) while simultaneously permitting integration into America. In Prchal's view, this immigrant narrative mode is actually present throughout the twentieth century: early works in this category focus on assimilation and include Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) and Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925). In both novels, complications following assimilation are explored, with Cahan and Yezierska illuminating the "double-edge" of assimilative practices in the United States (Prchal "New Americans" 433). Attention is also paid to cultural pluralism, which is often "embraced under the banner of 'multiculturalism'" (ibid) and is best understood through Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918). This narrative "valorizes cultural pluralism" ("New Americans" 434) through the character of Anna, who shows that "even though assimilation and blending are a part of immigrant experience, cultural preservation ultimately creates vital American families" (ibid). As David Cowart likewise explains, traditionally the story told is one in which the original homeland becomes unlivable for immigrants, thereby leaving individuals no choice but to culturally conform and remain in America. In these narratives, the immigrant "must deal with prejudice and homesickness but eventually becomes empowered by a new American identity" (Cowart 7).

Narratives in Prchal's multicultural subcategory, however, proliferated especially following the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Celler Act,<sup>4</sup> which abolished the origins quota system that had been in place for over forty years. (Equally important, in Prchal's view, was Isaac B. Berkson's "Federation of Nationalities" theory of ethnic adjustment [1920], which came to be known as cultural pluralism and, subsequently, multiculturalism [ibid]). America's demographics drastically altered following this immigration reform owing to an unprecedented increase of immigrants from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. The number of first-generation immigrants following the passage of the Hart-Celler Act quadrupled, from roughly 9.5 million in 1970 to roughly 38 million in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Segal, Elliott, and Mayadas 32). Such demographic shifts find expression in a new kind of aesthetic that places emphasis on America's multicultural reality in immigration narratives. As Bharati Mukherjee observes, many non-European immigrant American authors in the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first century are "articulating their break with the narrative traditions of American immigrant fiction as it was practiced in the 1950s and 1960s... announcing their transnational aesthetics" (683) Mukherjee goes on to argue that traditional templates "are inappropriate for a literature that centers on the nuanced process of *rehousement* after the trauma of forced or voluntary *unhousement*" (ibid) because older models do not allow for the inclusion of multinational personalities that are a reality in the twenty-first century. Instead, a new "grid and grammar" must be created in order to "explore American works that are not quite 'American' in a canonical sense" (Mukerhjee 695). This reflection of

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<sup>4</sup> For full text of the Hart-Cellar Act, see <http://library.uwb.edu/guides/usimmigration/79%20stat%20911.pdf>.

multiculturalism's advancement and the incorporation of transnational aesthetics (as well as the often tenuous nature of assimilation) is observable in novels such as E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1994) and *A Gesture Life* (1999).

Prchal's subcategories certainly provide a usefully concise and well-defined history of the immigrant narrative that can be traced alongside alterations to immigration policy in the United States. However, my contention is that his taxonomy does not begin to explore a newer, more rejectionist turn that is becoming evident in a variety of twenty-first century immigrant narratives. This new phase is what I refer to as "narratives of rejection and disaffiliation," which favor a departure from America and are not limited to literary narratives, widening genre alterations to include novels, memoirs, and film. What is at stake in these contemporary narratives, I will argue here, is a processing of immigration that concludes not with tragedy, assimilation, or multicultural membership, but often with a decision to walk away from rather than align with America on the heels of 9/11 and its resulting anti-immigrant climate. Take, for example, the protagonist in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, who occupies a privileged space in New York as a fully assimilated European immigrant, but who actively chooses to leave America after experiencing the realities of ethnic judgement and segregation following 9/11. Likewise, in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*, Korean Americans deemed successful in the economically-driven universe of the novel decide to relocate back to Korea after America fails to redefine itself in global terms within twenty-first century economic realities.

In making this argument, I follow David Cowart in suggesting that many of my contemporary narratives both participate in, and yet invert, traditions within immigrant genres, most specifically acculturation and assimilation. In some cases, this means addressing “subvarieties” of these classic genres. In my first chapter, drawing upon Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* becomes a vehicle for examining the relationship between sexuality and national affiliation. In other cases, writers such as Saher Alam and Joseph O’Neill (also chapter one), choose to filter immigrant experience through F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Another example is found within my film chapter, where the Hollywood tradition of the immigrant “helper” figure, which is a variation on the assimilationist template, becomes disrupted by failure rather than success on the part of the helper to assimilate their immigrant counterparts. Like Cowart, therefore, I also want to widen my analysis to “new immigrant” narratives, that is to say, to include not only fictional depictions the new perils of immigration in the post-9/11, twenty-first century climate, but memoir, film, and fantasy forms. I want to suggest that even when they do not engage with traditional templates of immigrant stories, the ethos of disaffiliation from and rejection of America is still broadly felt.

However, this widening and mode of disaffiliation and rejection does not mean that past templates are abandoned wholesale. Some of the most recognizable and repeated traditional conventions of the immigrant narrative, which go on to become both incorporated and altered in the twenty-first century include:

1. “Views of what makes the homeland unlivable” (Cowart 7), which becomes inverted to examine the possibility that that America is the unlivable nation.

2. “Travail in school, especially in connection with learning English” (ibid), which is revised in contemporary creative works when protagonists are forced to navigate not basic language, but the confusing linguistic and political realities of immigration law.
3. “Cultural contrasts often represented as generational conflict (older immigrants at odds with their more easily Americanized children)” (ibid), which is leveraged as a generational conflict wherein the older generation is more invested in assimilative behaviors than their younger counterparts.

By employing some of these recognizable features of traditional (pre-twenty-first century) immigrant literatures, narratives of rejection and disaffiliation demonstrate an understanding of literary history that is then revised to suit contemporary cultural climates.

Of course, as Cowart reminds us, a tradition of reversing the current of assimilative tendencies exists pre-2000. Examples of immigrant novels in the past wherein central characters have actively selected departure from America include Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and Chang Rae-Lee’s *Native Speaker*. These novels demonstrate that the tide for turning away from America began churning as multiculturalism fell out of favor at the end of the twentieth century when the “perception of ethnicity” changed “from a quality needing to be burned away in some refiner’s fire of cultural homogenization” to something with “distinction, cachet, and a quite literal marketability” (Cowart 2006). However, Alvarez and Lee’s novels do not focus on national disaffiliation, still remaining with traditional assimilative tendencies for

many of their characters. Pre-2001 narratives explain immigrant departure from America as a circumstance driven by disgrace and/or forced exile (one need only think of the way John Kwang exits America in *Native Speaker*). I argue that this focus on departure as negative becomes altered in the twenty-first century. Instead of imagining separation from the United States as a circumstance to which immigrant protagonists are subjected, authors and filmmakers actively select an exit from America with agency placed on these characters. Twenty-first century narratives, that is, use a rejection of America as a statement of individual identity and removal from traditional literary expectation. By expressing individual ethnicity rather than melting into multicultural America, contemporary immigrant narratives reject assimilation, instead placing active departure in focus. Cowart does not give significant weight to this newly-perceptible pattern of rejecting America in favor of individual ethnic identity. This elision is where I seek to pick up the conversation. The decision to exit America on the heels of September 11, 2001 is, of course, tied up with complex issues including government surveillance, racial prejudices, and a general displeasure with America's political and cultural climate.

### III.

Early scholarship on post-9/11 literature labored to make immediate sense of the event itself, but understandably lacked critical distance, remaining focused primarily on America and on narratives of trauma that suggested a national retreat into domestic self-examination.<sup>5</sup> Understandably, the question central to most post-9/11 scholarship has been whether, and to what degree, the nation has been traumatized, and whether that

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<sup>5</sup> For early discussions of post-9/11 literature, see Greenberg's *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*, Willis's *Portents of the Real: A Primer for Post-9/11 America*, and Faludi's *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11*.



traumatizing has limited the kinds of political and cultural critiques emanating from its fiction.<sup>6</sup> As Bimbisar Irom explains, “the responses to the 9/11 attacks, originating from both the state apparatus and the ethical-aesthetic sphere” were “attempts to appropriate the event into comprehensible modes of narration” (517),<sup>7</sup> but the narratives in contemporary literary scholarship took several years to emerge. It was arguably not until 2008 that a marked shift in the tone and analysis within post-9/11 criticism came to pass via a special issue of *American Literary History*. Led by a dialogue between Richard Gray and Michael Rothberg, this new movement analyzed the literary and critical shortcomings of what it cast as “the post-9/11 novel.” The debate focused not only on the literature itself but the cultural climate that gave rise to post-9/11 works ranging from Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* to Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, which both tell stories of American parenting in a post-9/11 world from very different perspectives. But both Gray and Rothberg also remarked upon the tendency of post-9/11 scholarship to move in a less regressive direction, and to see transnational borders as increasingly permeable in both positive and negative ways, interrogating the nation from a more global perspective.

Gray’s “Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose Writing at a Time of Crisis” certainly recognized the early appearance of fear (128) and trauma in post-9/11 fiction, both of which he contended were being worked through by novels written in the immediate aftermath of the event (130). Gray argued for the many ways in which a

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<sup>6</sup> In addition to the aforementioned scholars, see also *Literature After 9/11*, *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture*, and *Out of the Blue: September 11th and the Novel* for additional examples of post-9/11 scholarship that focuses on literary contributions. See also Richard Gray’s *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* for a more in-depth exploration of his work, which directly grew out of the *ALH* special issue.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida refers to 9/11 as “the event” and breaks it into two parts: “the thing itself” and “the impression that is given, left, or made by the thing” (Borradori 89). Irom follows this logic to further analyze the subgenre of the American 9/11 novel.

multicultural, multiethnic America must move past this fear and initial trauma, insisting that contemporary writers need to “insert themselves into the space between conflicting interests and practices and then dramatize the contradictions that conflict engenders. Through their work, by means of a mixture of voices and free play of languages and even genres, [contemporary authors] can represent the reality of their culture as multiple, complex, and internally antagonistic” (147). To Gray, the novel that came the closest thus far was Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* because of its engagement with the unspeakable aspects of trauma (140); however, Gray does not view *The Road* as a post-9/11 *immigrant* narrative, preferring instead to categorize it as post-apocalyptic fiction.

In his response to Gray, meanwhile, Michael Rothberg argued that “in addition to Gray’s model of critical multiculturalism, we need a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship,” work that charts “the outward movement of American power” (153) as it is represented and interrogated in the post-9/11 form. Intriguingly, however, this charge to “imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state” (158) may keep an outdated emphasis on what it means to be American in place, even an exceptionalist one. Though Rothberg highlights the importance of novelists moving beyond national boundaries, he stops short of charting the reverse migration that would come to be thematically prominent in so many contemporary immigration narratives.

Julián Jiménez Heffernan and Paula Martín Salván identify a common trauma paradigm in post-9/11 literature which “subscribes to the following notion: the WTC attacks made visible the pervasiveness of a trans-national terror accountable only within the historical logics of globalization” (145). They then go on to dissemble this paradigm

by pivoting away from this “reductionist” notion in favor of an interpretation that privileges the “key notion of *community*” (147) over trauma. Their work regarding post-9/11 fiction helps move the discussion toward the immigration narratives that I select for this study:

When confronted with the 9/11 event, the novelist does not ask “Is that real?” “Does that have a meaning?” “Can I describe that?” or “Can I compete with that?” He raises rather the very simple question, “who am I with?” more technically rephrased as “which is my true community?” and further elaborated into “which of the various communities I belong to provides me with the best means of inter-personal communication?” And, more decisively, the novelist tries to answer this question by resorting to a textual practice, the realistic novel, originally designed to provide fresh communitarian allocation to individuals stricken by the multifaceted violence of History, be it microphysical or cataclysmic. (147)

The question of, “which is my true community?” is at the center of my analysis. Specifically for immigrant narratives, I ask, “how has ‘my true community’ changed in the first decades of the twenty-first century?”

Meanwhile, I myself mean to further expand the critical discussion of post-9/11 literature by bringing together Gray’s cry for a blending of voices, languages, and genres (147) with Rothberg’s notion of continuing to move beyond native ground (157). As Lisa Lowe argues in *Immigrant Acts*, this approach “considers the novel as a cultural institution that regulates formations of citizenship and the nation” and “determines possible contours and terrains for the narration of ‘history’” (98), a widening that helps to

move the novel beyond 9/11 and into a discussion that encompasses twenty-first century immigrant writing that engages with and aims to disrupt as well as reform definitions of citizenship and history. From there, I emphasize twenty-first century immigration narratives that do not centralize 9/11, broadening the canon of novels beyond those studied by early critics. The narratives I study often glance sideways at 9/11, calibrating September 11, 2001 as a series of events (the downing of the World Trade Towers, the attack on the Pentagon, and the crash of United Airlines flight 93), and focusing instead on the aftershocks; specifically, alterations to immigration policies, practices, and homeland security.

#### IV.

As Edward Alden explains, “homeland security... faced a fundamental dilemma. Completely protecting the country from another terrorist attack would require security measures that were so vast and so expensive that they would destroy the very things they were designed to protect. Lives would be saved, but at huge costs to liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (123). The deployment of resources in the name of national security has indeed affected liberty, and specifically the liberty of American immigrants.

Six weeks after the 9/11 attacks, the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001 was passed. Better known as the USA PATRIOT ACT, it widened the use of surveillance while simultaneously expanding the already murky definition of “domestic terrorism” (Hafetz 13). The PATRIOT ACT contains ten Titles: enhancing domestic security against terrorism, surveillance procedures, anti-money-laundering to prevent terrorism, border

security, removing obstacles to investigating terrorism, victims and families of victims of terrorism, increased information sharing for critical infrastructure protection, terrorism criminal law, improved intelligence, and miscellaneous.<sup>8</sup> While plagued with issues since its inception, certain provisions within the PATRIOT ACT remain in place today, signed into extension by President Barack Obama. These are particular to foreigners (oftentimes immigrants), and include the “roving wiretap,” which allows for listening in on foreign suspects regardless of their location, the “library provision,” which authorizes government access to personal records of anyone suspected of terror-related activities, and the “lone wolf” provision, which gives the government the ability to investigate foreigners with no known ties to established terrorist groups (Mascaro). The PATRIOT ACT (inclusive of its titles and provisions) is an Act of Congress that serves as an example of the pervasive alterations to immigration policies that were written and signed into law following 9/11. The practice of these legal changes is traceable within works such as Saher Alam’s *The Groom to Have Been* and H.M. Naqvi’s *Home Boy*, both of which incorporate ethnic prejudices against South Asian immigrants following 9/11, a problem so persistent that the PATRIOT ACT specifically denounces it (even though this denunciation is nothing more than linguistic symbolism that is rarely enforceable in actual practice). This lack of accountability is picked up by Joseph O’Neill in *Netherland*, which critiques a diseased nationalism that infiltrates the lives of immigrants to American in the twenty-first century. Also present in the PATRIOT ACT is the widespread use of detainment, which is condemned by Danticat in her memoir *Brother I’m Dying* as well as imaginatively in Tom McCarthy’s film *The Visitor*, both of which denounce detention

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<sup>8</sup> For full text of the USA PATRIOT ACT, see <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-107hr3162enr/pdf/BILLS-107hr3162enr.pdf>.

practices and the treatment of immigrants in U.S. custody. Of course, written law has not been the sole catalyst for modifying the American immigration climate in the twenty-first century.

In 2003, The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was founded “to secure the nation from the many threats we face... [Its] duties are wide-ranging, but [its] goal is clear - keeping America safe” (“About DHS”). Within DHS, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) “has more than 20,000 employees in offices in all 50 states and 47 foreign countries” (ibid). One need not be a gifted close-reader to understand the message of the DHS and ICE: they are extremely large government organizations with the goal of keeping America “safe,” without clearly defining what “safe” means, further diluting the lines between legal and illegal, between threatening and nonthreatening individuals, and between immigration and the treatment of suspected terrorists.<sup>9</sup> Just as the National Origins formula and the Hart-Celler Act influenced immigrant narratives in the twentieth century, so too do the PATRIOT ACT and DHS/ICE in the twenty-first.

The PATRIOT ACT and DHS/ICE, while not always obvious, are constantly present in the background of twenty-first century narratives that are invested in exploring immigration. Within each of this dissertation’s chapters, I will highlight when and how particular facets of the PATRIOT ACT or DHS/ICE influence particular narrative explorations.

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<sup>9</sup> See also “8 USC § 1226 - Apprehension and detention of aliens” for complete text of United States Code relating to the apprehension and detention of immigrants: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/8/1226>.

## V.

In what follows, I argue that contemporary immigrant narratives place equal concentration on what it means to exist both within and beyond America's borders. These narratives are therefore not solely American, *per se*, but instead recalibrate national affiliations, sometimes looking beyond assimilationist politics to reclaim ethnic histories and identities, often owing to prejudices resulting from new laws, departments, and other government influences. For that reason, my analysis moves beyond simply defining a nascent post-9/11 literary canon to examining a component *within* such as canon, what I refer to as twenty-first century, or contemporary, *immigrant* narratives of rejection and disaffiliation.<sup>10</sup> This analysis therefore participates in what Bharati Mukherjee calls the needs for “a new literary theory that provides a more complete, more insightful entry into the ‘literature of immigrant experience’” (683) in this moment. Like Mukherjee, I observe that there is, indeed, a sufficient body of contemporary literature that can be distinguished from “traditional—canonical—US immigrant literature” (683).

However, I am less interested in what Mukherjee calls “Literature of New Arrival” which “embraces broken narratives of disrupted lives, proliferating plots, outsize characters and overcrowded casts, the fierce urgency of obscure history, the language fusion [Spanglish, Chinglish, Hinglish, Banglish], the challenging shapelessness, and complexities of alien social structures” in the service of politically adjusting “to our new demography” in America (683-684). Rather, I aim to look at those authors who feature

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<sup>10</sup> Jumpa Lahiri dismisses “immigrant fiction,” as do others involved in recent critical debates surrounding the usefulness of the term (see also Caplan-Bricker and EUNIC). However, the narratives in this project make clear the importance of *immigration* as a factor in the development of contemporary narratives; therefore, immigrant narratives (as well as “immigrant fiction” and “immigrant literature”) will be carefully considered and analyzed not with an eye toward the author's relation to immigrant experience, but the way immigrant narratives are constructed within the works themselves.

not fusions and adjustments to but *removals* from America. This removal leaves behind both American exceptionalism as well as more familiar multicultural way of thinking about one's identity in favor of a new possibility: choosing to positively identify as something other than American and, quite often, in a place other than America. Not, as Mukherjee suggests, to "immerse oneself in this history of the homeland the immigrant author has left" (691), but to instead alter the course of individual history by returning to that homeland, wherever it may be, rather than remaining in America.

Therefore, the authors that I study take to their work not only to explore assimilation (or lack thereof) for immigrants, but also occasionally to decouple immigration from the specific issue of terrorism. As immigration reform continues to be debated, pervasive problems concretize: the targeting of immigrant groups, detention and deportation practices, and the helplessness of those who aim to assist immigrants. Meanwhile, I perceive that the creative ripples emanating forth from the events of September 11, 2001 and leading to narratives of rejection and disaffiliation progress from canonical "literary" texts to nonfiction to film, and even to speculative fantasy. At each juncture, writers and filmmakers take stock of the past fifteen years and wonder aloud how America ended up stunting its own growth potential following an unexpected attack.

Specific to immigrant narratives, my guiding observation expands what Chang-rae Lee explained at the turn of the twenty-first century, "The old immigrant would say, 'I'm becoming an American.' The new person is now starting out saying, 'I am American'" (Sachs 23). But what are the consequences when, after the first few years of the twenty-first century, immigrant literature transitions to "I was never an American?" What does it mean that immigrant authors are creating strong and talented protagonists



and pointedly writing them out of America? How does the problem of lengthy and unexplained immigration detention influence a story's tone? In what way does a sense of helplessness on the part of Americans find expression through the medium of film? And what does it look like when well-established American immigrant authors critique America from an unflattering and comical perspective?

My project explores the growing involvement of immigrant narratives in political and social debates in the contemporary United States; however, the narratives in this project are merely indicative of this involvement rather than exhaustive. My aim is not to represent all possible new directions for immigrant texts; instead, I have selected works that speak to and inspire my thinking in particular ways. My hope is that my readings will encourage other scholars to revisit and read texts with fresh eyes while reexamining previously established assumptions regarding American immigration narratives.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, "Considering Conditions of Possibility: Canonical Modes with Modern Concerns," I investigate novels that explore the effects of targeting particular immigrant groups, which is a central concern of Title I in the PATRIOT ACT. The narratives studied in this chapter pull from established literary traditions, using a template of traditions similar to what Cowart explains in his analysis of contemporary immigrant narratives; however, the novels that I study retell canonical American novels before placing an important twist on the story: the decision to leave America rather than assimilate and aspire to the American Dream. It is in this thematic twist that rejection and disaffiliation are located. Saher Alam's *The Groom to Have Been* and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* both make use of the narrative mode of the novel of manners (retelling Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*,

respectively) while H.M. Naqvi's *Home Boy* and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* draw upon the ethnic bildungsroman tradition (both using Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*). By choosing to treat immigrant experiences as literary through adaptations of canonical novels that at their heart have stories of American success and integration, these four authors make the choice of writing their protagonists out of America all the more resonant. After all, "nothing has been more important to American competitiveness than its ability to attract talented immigrants and put their talents to the fullest use" (Alden 191), and the disintegration of immigrant retention is at the heart of the novels in this chapter. All four retellings are written by immigrants who previously lived in America, writing from a place of personal experience and critiquing what Fitzgerald referred to as the "foul dust" of America, in this case viewing it from outside the country's borders.

In my second chapter, "The Solution is the Problem: Narratives of Internment and Detention," I consider two memoirs about detention in two moments of political crisis. The criminalization of immigrants via detention has long been part of United States history, but detention in the twenty-first century is more dangerous, more secretive, and more destructive for individuals and their families owing to links to terrorism that are both spoken and implicit. I read Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter* and Edwidge Danticat's *Brother I'm Dying* as narratives that explore detention as central to multiple generations of immigrant experience. The detainment of immigrants on American soil is a component of certain narratives of immigrant adjustment, and Sone's *Nisei Daughter* is a standout example of that tradition, exploring the aftereffects of Executive Order 9066 (Roosevelt), which authorized both the deportation and incarceration of people of Japanese ancestry.

When paired with Sone's work, Danticat's *Brother I'm Dying* suggests a shift in those narratives, exposing a move away from immigrant adjustment, instead criticizing and rejecting America on the basis of its treatment of immigrants. Danticat's memoir reflects the realities of twentieth-century immigration policies aimed at late twentieth-century Haitian Boat Arrivals, such as Executive Order 12807 and its resulting interdiction program (Bush), as well as Title IV of the PATRIOT ACT (subtitle B, section 412), in which the lawful use of mandatory (and possibly indefinite) detention is justified as a means to prevent attacks on national security.

In chapter three, "The Helpless Helper: Illegality, Borders, and Family Reunification" I study Thomas McCarthy's *The Visitor*, Courtney Hunt's *Frozen River*, and Wayne Kramer's *Crossing Over*. American protagonists, or helper figures, are traditionally associated with aiding immigrants in assimilating; however, this desire to assimilate becomes disrupted in the twenty-first century, leading to a functional collapse of the helper protagonist in the films that I study. This collapse corresponds with the breakdown of the adjustment narrative as well as borrowing from anti-immigration narratives, which view immigrants as dangerous masses to be contained and deported. As such, family reunification policies (officially laid out under US Code Title 8) are scrutinized from multiple points of view through the helper figure, including individuals ranging from college professors to destitute mothers to ICE officers. In these films, the suffering of immigrant families designated as somehow "illegal" are often displaced onto this (always) white, parental "helper" figure in order to scrutinize their processing and treatment. These three independent films probe the ways in which economic, judicial, and political interests negatively affect family reunification policies. Additionally, *The*

*Visitor*, *Frozen River*, and *Crossing Over* rely on an alternative point of view – that of American citizens rather than immigrants – as a way to further fragment traditional immigrant narrative structures, which instead favored immigrant-as-narrator constructs.

The final chapter of this project, “The End Product of Our Deep Moral Exhaustion: Speculative Fiction and Immigration Narratives,” examines Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* and Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* to ground a discussion of the role of alternate history in immigration narratives. Roth and Chabon employ the modes of the immigrant adjustment narrative as well as novels of multiculturalism to ground their critiques of the contemporary immigration climate, offering revised histories of twentieth century American immigration. From there, the chapter pushes out to speculative fiction by interrogating Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story*. Shteyngart’s novel takes direct aim at narratives of affiliation as well as surveillance procedures that are laid out in Title II of the PATRIOT ACT. The writers studied here have high literary reputations; however, they turn to genre fiction in order to create twenty-first century/post-911 immigrant narratives. I argue that they make this choice in order to acknowledge a narrative trend that writes immigrants as turning away from America while simultaneously utilizing their well-established literary reputations to suggest that this turn-away might also have hints of salvageable pro-America outcomes. In other words, Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart delve into the template of the immigrant narrative of adjustment and rework it into genre fiction in order to incorporate a rejection of America with the possibility that there could still be an American outcome layered into that rejection.

Throughout this dissertation, I explore traditional patterns of immigration narratives and read them alongside not only their contemporary, divergent counterparts but also the politics that contribute to the narrative transformations. By way of this examination, literary changes over time become readable, highlighting the speed at which the rhetoric and tendencies of many immigration narratives became patently anti-America in the twenty-first century, significantly departing from the traditions established in the twentieth century, which, at their core still held various degrees of assimilationist aims. The comparative work of this dissertation project allows access to a unique vision of twenty-first century America that is only available through the lens of immigration narratives, critiquing the modern nation's strengths, shortcomings, political climate, and social realities. Specific to narrative analysis, I examine how assimilation and multiculturalism, the traditionally dominant aims of immigrant narratives are no longer viable; instead, immigrants are rejecting and disaffiliating from the contemporary American nation owing to shifts taking place following September 11, 2001. This dissertation serves as a jumping off point for future discussions regarding the role of literary narratives in both responding to and shaping immigration in the contemporary United States.

As Jeff Chang has said, "These conversations [regarding race, culture, and immigration] are difficult. People don't know how to have them. People don't know how to start them. We need safe spaces to converse together" in order to bring about change, and change itself "is not an event, but a process. Cultural change always precedes political change." This dissertation aims to suggest that narratives regarding immigration and America's global position are the perfect place to initiate not only the difficult conversations, but that literature and films reflect our developing history and are indeed

the cultural locations in which to plant the seeds of political change. My hope is that these conversations and the questions born from them will continue to resound in the developing scholarship on contemporary immigrant narratives.

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1.

***CONSIDERING CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY:***  
**CANONICAL MODES WITH MODERN CONCERNS**

We were trying, as I irreverently analysed it, to avoid what might be termed a historic mistake. We were trying to understand, that is, whether we were in a pre-apocalyptic situation, like the European Jews in the thirties or the last citizens of Pompeii, or whether our situation was merely near-apocalyptic, like that of the Cold War inhabitants of New York, London, Washington and, for that matter, Moscow.

- Joseph O'Neill, *Netherland*

## I.

In recent years, an important group of contemporary American authors has written novels that self-consciously re-adapt either classically canonical fiction or traditional immigrant narratives. These authors therefore don't simply write "contemporary" fiction: rather, they craft "revisionary" narratives that look back at America's recent and distant past, attempting to revisit both "literary" and political history simultaneously. To do that, these writers—here, Saher Alam, Joseph O'Neill, H.M. Naqvi, and Mohsin Hamid—have also returned to traditions of social realist fiction previously downgraded in a supposedly "postmodern" age. That is, they seek to illuminate the ways in which young immigrants have navigated the mundane realities of everyday life-- marriage, naturalization, sexuality, and ethnicity—in an America reshaped by the aftershocks of September 11, 2001.<sup>1</sup> In these ways, the classic themes of canonical social fiction-- group affiliation, family cohesion, sexual identity and the treatment of newcomers—are used to explore the inhospitable moral and political climate of a post-911 world. Paradoxically, the formal templates of a "national" tradition are readapted to compose contemporary immigrant narratives that ultimately reject and disaffiliate from America.

In recent years, critics such as William Boelhower and Alfred Hornung have explored the ways in which twentieth-century American multiculturalism can, perhaps, be replicated in other parts of the world. And I myself, as I say in my Introduction, follow the lead of thinkers like Heffernan and Salvan, who suggest that the central question of community membership is particularly suited to the "textual practice" of the "realist

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<sup>1</sup> Following an observation by Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, the authors in this chapter imagine 9/11 with a "focus almost exclusively on the events in New York City. The destruction of the Pentagon and the crash in Shanksville, PA, while suggestive for film makers, have not proven as interesting to writers" (1).

novel” in this moment. But what is this turn to canonical (read: white) antecedents about? At its core, I will argue, it’s about a rejection of America as a supposed “nation of immigrants”: characters both undergo transformations that suggest a rejection of the multicultural template that Prchal has identified and instead embrace a more productive multicultural identity elsewhere. It may seem an odd, even counterintuitive choice to turn to older forms to frame post 9/11 narratives; however, rewriting the outdated is precisely what resides at the core of these novels. No longer is incorporation into America the assumed endgame, as it was as well with Prchal’s novels of immigrant adjustment; instead, these novels defy conforming to American social mores and feature characters who actively depart from America’s political borders.

In this chapter, I will examine this adaptation of two different classical templates. Alam and O’Neill write novels of manners, reworking Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* (1920) and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), respectively. H.M. Naqvi’s *Home Boy* and Moshin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* instead turn to the ethnic bildungsroman tradition, specifically *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), in order to narrate stories of ethnic identity formation. Whether they use stories that explore community cohesion or romance, all four novelists diagnose a diseased moral foundation at the heart of twenty-first century American culture. All four novels in this chapter, as I will show, also implicitly acknowledge the impact of 9/11, specifically by focusing on both profiling of immigrants and the “diseased nationalism” that became so evident following September 11.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Naqvi and Hamid, these effects were even felt in as intimate realms as that of sexual identity and, again, ethnic affiliation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As of the writing of this dissertation, there have been no scholarly articles published analyzing *The Groom To Have Been*. Unlike Alam’s novel, *Netherland* has started to receive critical attention. Specific to

These prejudicial practices against immigrants and young persons of color were so widespread at the start of the twenty-first century that they were even originally denounced in the PATRIOT ACT itself. Specifically, Section 102 explains that “Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and Americans from South Asia play a vital role in our Nation and are entitled to nothing less than the full rights of every American.” It goes on to state that “the civil rights and civil liberties of all Americans, including Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and Americans from South Asia, must be protected,” segregating Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and Americans from South Asia out of the general public, calling attention to ethnicities that are somehow different from the rest of the American demographic constitution.

The protection of specific immigrant groups as required by the PATRIOT ACT was negated entirely by the Special Registration Program (the National Security Entry-Exit Registration Program, or NSEERS) administered through the Department of Homeland Security. This program required citizens of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Eritrea, Lebanon, Morocco, North Korea, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, and Kuwait to register with Immigration and Customs Enforcement so that DHS was aware of their location and any travel arrangements. This combination of written protection in the PATRIOT ACT and practical exclusionary

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this project, Sarah Wasserman’s “Looking Away from 9/11” uses visual paradigms to argue for an ambivalence with regard to nationality and notions of home, resisting assimilative tendencies of traditional immigrant literature on the heels of 9/11.

<sup>3</sup> Asma Mansoor analyzes *Home Boy* and identity in “Post 9/11 Identity Crisis,” defining notions of “Self” within a post-9/11 climate that labels individuals (especially Pakistanis) as terrorists based on ethnic and religious affiliation. Anna Hartnell’s “Moving through America” tackles both multiculturalism and American exceptionalism after 9/11 through an analysis of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, concluding that contemporary America could transcend racial differences. For a reading of ethnic affiliation in both *Home Boy* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, see Chandra Bidhan Roy’s “The Tragic Mulatto Revisited,” which explores the political limits of discourses surrounding South Asian diasporic identity following 9/11.

practices via NSEERS contributed to a climate of disarray and discrimination at the start of the twenty-first century. Given the widespread effects of the PATRIOT ACT and NSEERS, in what ways are the resulting legal conflict between policy and practice explored through contemporary immigrant narratives?

The four authors analyzed in this chapter call out the disruption of hypothetical tolerance and the celebratory mode of late-twentieth-century multiculturalism by revisiting forms that existed long before the turn to cultural pluralism, allowing their novels to examine issues regarding contemporary America and immigration with a more globally situated and critical point of view. In other words, Alam, O'Neill, Naqvi, and Hamid embrace rejection and disaffiliation in the face of disordered and prejudicial practices against immigrants in contemporary America.

By using classic tropes and forms, the novels in this chapter not only offer critiques of contemporary America, but also construct literary outcomes that operate as declarations of new immigrant options rather than those traditionally bound by American norms. The most critical alteration to the form is the ability of middle- and upper-class immigrants to selectively leave America after encountering the realities of the post-9/11 nation. Alam, O'Neill, Naqvi, and Hamid use traditional American literary genres to update immigrant narratives, commenting on the possibility of completely undoing national allegiances, “facile” and otherwise. This revised immigrant narrative permits the privileging of a single, non-American culture rather than working to acculturate to America via adjustment narratives or straddle ethnic fences akin to multicultural practices. For the novels in this chapter, America that becomes unlivable, and individual

immigrant empowerment comes through turning absorption inside-out, making the choice to reject an anti-immigrant social climate and disaffiliate from the American nation.

By creating ties to classic novels of the early-to-mid twentieth century, Alam, O’Neill, Naqvi, and Hamid not only utilize traditional literary devices, but also harken back to eras in which America felt invincible but was, in fact, teetering on the brink of cataclysmic cultural changes (such as The Great Depression, WWII, Vietnam, and The Cold War), much like the start of the new millennium. The characters in these four novels are fully integrated into America pre-2001, “adjusted” as Prchal would say, and yet see the nation with new eyes as the century progresses. What I aim to demonstrate is that pre-twenty-first century vision is ruptured by the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, thereby altering narrative possibilities and opening the way to construct immigrant literary narratives in new ways. I take the novel of manners as my starting point to explain the ways in which speech acts and social belonging are narrated for contemporary immigrants before turning to the ethnic bildungsroman to further narrow my argument to hone in on not only social behaviors, but how immigrant ethnicity becomes redefined against the backdrop of contemporary America. Caren Irr argues that contemporary novels strive to become “global novels,” leaving behind the Great American novel of earlier generations (660).<sup>4</sup> I agree with this assessment and believe that Alam, O’Neill, Naqvi, and Hamid are further emphasizing the move away from the Great American novel by utilizing some of its most canonical versions before writing their own, alternate, globalized endings, allowing the Great American novel to, in fact, participate in non-American work. This allows immigrants to return home not “in a casket or as ashes in an urn” (Mukherjee

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<sup>4</sup> See also Rita Barnard’s “Fictions of the Global,” which contends that contemporary novels alter points of view and language in order to operate as global literature.



695), but very much alive and well, turning the tide against outdated declarations of what it means for immigrants to leave America.

The four novels in this chapter shuttle between moments of history and literary mechanics, allowing the technology of genre to unearth critiques of America not available outside the novel, thereby adding depth and dimension to the definition of what it means to live in the contemporary United States. By working with genre fiction, these authors write novels that “change shape and push past their earlier limits [as they] strain to accommodate new content” (Irr 661). For these novels, the new content is 9/11 and its effects on immigration, the revised endings are the result of incorporating that content into traditional forms. As Irr explains, “these observable generic mutations suggest that fiction grappling with the pragmatics of global mobility and inequality has begun to display array of effects whose significance we can now begin to measure” (678). Let us begin with measuring the significance of repurposing the novel of manners and its genre-based focus on social customs and community behaviors to understand how this traditional genre can be rewritten to provide a contemporary critique of American immigration.

## II.

One might ask, “why the novel of manners?” in working through twenty-first century issues. The answer comes from the novel of manners’ form and focus on communities of people brought together by a specific moment at a specific time, and the way in which these communities are narrated through social and cultural mores. Lionel

Trilling, in his classic work on the novel of manners, gives us a lasting definition that remains central to the genre:

What I understand by manners, then, is a culture's hum and buzz of implication. I mean the whole evanescent context in which its explicit statements are made. It is that part of a culture which is made up of half-uttered or unutterable expressions of value. They are hinted at by small actions, sometimes by the arts of dress or decoration, sometimes by the tone, gesture, emphasis, or rhythm, sometimes by the words that are used with a special frequency or a special meaning. They are the things that separate them from the people of another culture. They make the part of a culture which is not art, or religion, or morals, or politics, and yet it relates to all these highly formulated departments of culture. It is modified by them; it modifies them; it is generated by them; it generates them. In this part of culture assumption rules, which is often so much stronger than reason. (Trilling 200-201)

The novel of manners is concerned with the specifics of a particular group of people in a particular time and place.

James W. Tuttleton furthers Trilling's work, explaining that "more often the portrait of manners is put to the service of an ideological argument. The center of the novel of manners, that is, may be an idea or an issue – for example the idea of social mobility, of class conflict, or professional ambition, of matchmaking, of divorce" (10). When working to update the novel of manners tradition in the late twentieth century, Jerome Klinkowitz declared, "From the language of manners, which is both a linguistic and semiotic affair, the novel can be reinvented at need" (169). He goes on to explain that

events and social structures that would be “beyond articulation” become “eminently sayable when the novelist [responds] to the particular system at hand” (ibid). For Alam and O’Neill, the articulation of 9/11 and its aftereffects become speakable through the novel of manners owing to the form’s malleability and timelessness. So, the question is not why we should analyze the novels in this way, but rather how Alam and O’Neill utilize the mechanics of the novel of manners to tell their tales.<sup>5</sup>

The novel of manners, as a realistic novel form,<sup>6</sup> is revived because fits cleanly into the needs of the contemporary immigrant novel and its work telling the stories of specific communities (for Alam and O’Neill, immigrant communities) at a particular historical moment through the form of a realistic novel. As for why it is revived now, the answer lies in the complex issues of communities and allegiances brought forth by the events and resulting aftershocks of September 11. By pairing their works with canonical American narratives, Alam and O’Neill place central focus on the novel of manners and its ability to tell stories that specifically concern themselves with America. The canonical American narratives to which I refer are Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. These novels take up ideologies of speech acts and belonging to weave their American immigrant tales.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the novel of manners has also been called upon in analyses of twenty and twenty-first century women’s literature (see both Klinkowitz [1986] and Harzewski [2006]), marking it as a form that is ripe with possibility for contemporary cultural analysis.

<sup>6</sup> According to Christine Alfano of Stanford University, “The Novel of manners is a realistic novel that focuses on the customs, values, and mindset of a particular class or group of people who are situated in a specific historical context. The context tends to be one in which behavior has been codified and language itself has become formulaic, resulting in a suppressing or regulating of individual expression. Often, this type of novel details a conflict between the individual’s desires and the ethical, moral, economic, or interpersonal mandates of society.” See <http://www.stanford.edu/~steener/su02/english132/Novel%20of%20manners.htm> for additional information.

<sup>7</sup> See Gordon Milne’s *The Sense of Society: A History of the American Novel of manners* for a chronological study of the American novel of manners from its inception to the late 1970s. See also Bege

### III.

In *The Age of Innocence*, Wharton examines the mores of upper-class domestic traditions, specifically the drawing room, social etiquette, and marriage, to contrast the traditions of an older generation against the aims and ambitions of a new generation. Because of the novel's attention to generational difference, manners in this case are more historical than purely social (Lindberg 101). This focus on generations and their roots in traditions is central to *The Age of Innocence*'s contemporary counterpart, Saher Alam's *The Groom to Have Been*, which not only scrutinizes generational difference, but does so in the shadow of twenty-first century historical developments and social change, pinning old world immigrants against their cosmopolitan children. Alam therefore uses the novel of manners to focus the way in which the newest generation of immigrants to America feels freer than their older counterparts to question the lived experience of post-9/11 America and decide whether or not they find it acceptable.

*The Groom to Have Been* has been linked to *The Age of Innocence* by its author. Alam describes the relationship between the two, explaining that “the story is set in the fall and winter of 2001, when the attacks of September 11th came to signal that we (here the larger we, of Americans and Muslims) had entered another sort of age—had shed an innocence that had previously defined our actions” (Alam “First Person”). Alam's shedding of innocence creates an opening of both consciousness and physical borders, immediately allowing her characters more freedom than Wharton's and designating a narrative space in which they will operate in new ways; however, on deeper inspection,

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K. Bowers and Barbara Brothers's *Reading and Writing Women's Lives: A Study of the Novel of manners* for a volume that enhances the work of Tuttleton and Milne in defining the genre.

the connection between the two novels goes far beyond innocence into a critique of speech acts, class, and belonging.

As highlighted by her quotation, Alam is interested in both Americans and Muslims, bringing together two diverse groups, which is necessary for the novel of manners. “What is important to this genre is that there be for analysis groups with recognizable and differential manners and conventions... for the novel of manners it is necessary only that there be groups large enough to have developed a set of differing conventions which express their values and permanent enough for the writer’s notation of their manners” (Tuttleton 13). For Alam, the groups are Muslims, and specifically South Asian Muslims compared to Americans. The South Asian characters are steeped in culture and traditions, even going so far as to engage with the rituals surrounding arranged marriage.

Alam’s novel opens with a direct link between the tradition of arranged marriage and the events of 9/11, placing traditional culture in direct contact with a contemporary, violent attack: “The engagement had been announced before the terrible thing happened” (7). Nasr Siddiqui and Farah Ansari are the well-bred South Asian counterparts of Wharton’s white, upper class Newland Archer and May Welland, but instead of Manhattan in the 1920s, we are in the twenty-first century Northeast. Instead of moving between the Hudson River Valley and the city, we shuttle between New York and Canada, highlighting the novel’s concern with and freedom regarding the ability to cross national borders. And, of course, there must be the third peak in the Wharton-esque love triangle. Yesterday’s Countess Ellen Olenska is today’s Jameela Farooqi, the thirty-year-old distant Siddiqui cousin at the center of the family’s talk of scandal and rumor. Like

the Countess, Jameela, through the novel of manners form, exposes a cultural problem, specifically “the double standard in sexual education and behavior” separating men and women (Tuttleton 130). It is through her education, political activism, and departure from marriage traditions that Jameela demonstrates that Muslim women can be seen and heard, unlike stereotypical depictions of them as silent figures shrouded in burkas. Where Alam departs in her character system is the addition of Javaid, Jameela’s eventual husband and Nasr’s foil. Where Nasr often remains sequestered in the suppression of direct speech so common to the novel of manners form, Javaid speaks freely and against accepted cultural practices.

Alam scrutinizes cultural etiquettes, social standing, and marriage (all traditional elements of the novel of manners) as a way to demonstrate how established customs can be revised, particularly when looking at those customs through the lens of immigration. In her exploration of the conventions linked to arranged marriages,<sup>8</sup> Alam writes:

Nasr would drive a rental car an hour or two out of his way to her parents’ home in the suburbs. He would be welcomed at the door as if he were a long-lost relative instead of a stranger who’d gained entry on the good word of a distant mutual acquaintance. Her father, gray-haired and froggy-eyed, with a professional but slightly apologetic handshake, would lead him to their living room. [He] would be served tea by her mother. He would be fed a biscuit, a stale sweet dish, or pretzels. He would accept seconds of whatever he was offered, though it would taste like nothing in his mouth. Her mother, before retreating shyly to the kitchen, would smile at him shyly but kindly, almost as if she felt sorry for him. An older

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<sup>8</sup> Although lengthy, this quotation is central to establishing the level of detail present in Alam’s work, and its similarity to the particulars that Wharton took great pains to explore in her novels of manners.

brother or younger (if he wasn't too young), would emerge and also shake Nasr's hand and sit down to chat with him and the father... No one would say anything that alluded to the reason Nasr was there, but he would sense that everything he said was being noted appreciatively, especially the references to his family... At some point, the mother would reappear, a hush would descend, after which another figure would appear. Slimmer, sometimes taller, almost always a shade fairer, she would stand beside her mother in a plain or ornate shalwar suit. She might have a rupatta draped over her head. Nasr always felt he could instantly ascertain the situation... all from one look, from how she stood there, from how she came into the room, smiling, and sat down quietly between her brother and father. (27-29)

The above package is about no particular woman, certainly not Nasr's eventual bride, and serves to emphasize the predictable and repetitive social scene that unfolds in these families' living rooms as Nasr meets potential brides. Here we again see the suppression of direct speech, a formal element of the novel of manners, as culturally accepted between Nasr and his marriage prospects – only the men, and mostly the elders, are engaging freely in speech acts. This reflects a silence expected on the part of immigrants subjected to American customs in the twenty-first century – there is an unfortunate expectation of cooperation between the American nation and its immigrants, one that Alam uses this formal aspect of the novel of manners to emphasize.

Not only are the social speech behaviors essential, but so too is the fact that these marriage narratives play out in living rooms throughout the novel, paralleling the drawing rooms in which Wharton's social codes are explored as well as the closed doors in which

negotiations regarding immigration reform takes place in the twenty-first century. By bringing a traditional genre in bear on a contemporary narrative, *The Groom to Have Been* frees generic conventions to take on increased social relevance.

In addition to its more couched critiques, *The Groom to Have Been* explicitly explores what it means to be an immigrant Muslim after September 11, putting focus on the friction created by discordant laws and practices. While engaged in “old world” arranged marriage rituals, Nasr still is still written as “new world” man living and working in New York City. As he explains to a co-worker, “at a time like this, we didn’t all just become Americans – we became white Americans” (127). Here, Alam puzzles through national identity affiliation on the basis of ethnic characteristics. In the wake of 9/11, there was an oftentimes accepted (and expected) sense of solidarity with the victims and their families, and Alam demonstrates her awareness of historical specifics through the way she composes Nasr’s racial awareness. Specifically, from the World Trade Center attack, there were 2,977 victims, 2,605 of whom were Americans (the remaining 372 were foreign nationals). According to the Centers for Disease Control’s official information, of the total number of victims, over 75% were White, non-Hispanic men and women (CDC MMWR). So, in reality, most of the 9/11 victims were in fact white Americans. Alam’s characters are working through this information and questioning the ways in which they choose to affiliate in the shadow of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Are they really Americans? Are they, as we are reminded throughout the novel, actually Canadians? Are they New Yorkers? Are they dark-skinned or light-skinned? And, most important of all, what’s the difference and does it really matter? The answer to the final query is, clearly and substantially, yes. It matters how these characters not only identify themselves, but



how they are identified by those around them because that combined identification mirrors the omnipresent practice of label individual ethnicities (in the name of homeland security) at the start of the twenty-first century.

Alam has Nasr grapple with these issues throughout the novel, especially considering that he is fully acculturated into his life as a businessman in New York but still agrees to an arranged marriage. Nasr, like Wharton's Archer, submits to the traditions of his culture and the older generation, allowing his elders to construct his marital relationship. This desire to return to a deep-rooted cultural tradition, the arranged marriage, comments on the failings of contemporary America as a place for Nasr to find his bride on his own. In order for him to "satisfy [his] deep-seeded human need" for tradition (Tuttleton 133), Nasr must participate in this enduring cultural institution that is patently *not* American. His self-selected encounters with women are merely "sowing his oats Western style" (Alam 14), and he needs to exit America (for Canada) in order to find his traditional bride and complete the familial structure that he so craves. This flailing romantic mission parallels Nasr's rootlessness in New York. It is not until his traditional Indian family finds him a traditional Indian bride that his character begins to move forward after experiencing 9/11 firsthand. He longs for the security of cultural traditions in order to set his roots back in New York, a city within an otherwise culturally drifting nation.

Alam constructs Nasr's heavily staged engagement, which was "written and recited by Hamid Uncle, who was a close friend of Nasr's family" (8), the "Siddiquis's living room furniture was pushed to the walls, white sheets laid over the carpet, and heavy, long-shaped cushions were strewn about. A low sofa was put out in the center of

the room, where the bride and groom accepted blessings and were subjected to all manner of related by unsolicited attention” (7) before Nasr eventually slipped an austere engagement band on Farah’s finger (9). In this case, “The social arbiters militate[d] against the individual, forcing him to give him his happiness for the duty that they dictate, causing him to yield his ideas, which they regard as impractical in the social order” (Milne 124). In contrast, Javaid and Jameela, the initially most westernized of Alam’s characters and those brought together through a love marriage rather than a traditional arrangement, fuse together old and new to strike out successfully on their own rather than creating lives in the shadow of their families; they are the pair that ultimately acts as a foil for tradition, marking the locatable place wherein Alam chooses to disaffiliate from the novel of manners and creating a new option for the immigrants in her narrative.

Jameela and Javaid are initially ingrained in their western life: she is trendy, drinks alcohol, and is unconcerned with eating Halal. He is a Harvard Business School grad well-rooted in his Manhattan life. Alam writes them as coming together via a western “love marriage” (169), which is considered a radical alternative rather than a customary unification produced by their families. As they come together as a couple, they begin to turn away from their acculturated immigrant lives, Alam choosing to allow the marriage – usually the endgame in the novel of manners – to act instead as the catalyst for profound change. Soon after their engagement, Jameela’s makeup fades, she dons a conventional Islamic headscarf (even tries a full-coverage burka), and her previously argumentative and rebellious nature aligns with her future husband’s, becoming a “born-again Muslim” (157), Alam making extremely clear that this change is social, cultural,

and religious in nature. Similar to what Tuttleton highlights in reference to Wharton, Alam reminds us that we are suspended in web of cultural inheritances that help us define what is “good” or right (140), and that those cultural inheritances are malleable in nature. Alam attends to cultural moments and social shifts in contemporary America, especially those leading to the erasure of Muslim traditions, choosing then to exhume and inspect these traditions and write them back into the novel, even if they are ultimately unable to exist in America.

In a key scene, Alam writes that, in light of immigration policies resulting from 9/11, there is nothing for the contemporary immigrants to do but “go.” “Go where, beta? Hamid Uncle now inquired... ‘Back?’ Javaid replied. ‘Back?’ Adil Ansari echoed. ‘Back home, to Pakistan. To India for you all. It’s the only way” (152). The character of a young scholar and New Yorker sits before family elders and voices a once unthinkable concept: we can *choose* to go home again. “Nasr kept expecting [Jameela] to set him straight—tell him ... one person’s return wasn’t going to change the state of affairs of any country. But she didn’t” (162), suggesting that an exodus of immigrants can have a very real impact on America. Alam’s modernized Pakistanis understand this and their departure from the traditions of their families (in both marriage and geography) allows these two characters to operate as metaphorical stand-ins for any contemporary immigrants who no longer acquiesce to assimilation and tradition, and who find themselves unsatisfied by the offerings of contemporary America. Javaid and Jameela reject the contemporary social climate of America and disaffiliate in order to embrace lives wherein they can fully express their ethnic identities.

As with *The Age of Innocence*, “we are constantly reminded of the way things have always been done” through a “screen of custom” in *The Groom to Have Been*. This “rigidity of customs... thus encourages disproportionate responses” (Lindberg 102) in the novel of manners form. Characters do not simply voice their concerns; they act on them with strength and conviction. Contemporary immigrants can choose to exit the borders that confine them and return to a culture that instead defines America as foreign. No longer are immigrants scrutinized (as many young Muslims were in post-9/11 America), but they are the scrutinizers, turning a critical eye onto America and its cultural failings. Javaid and Jameela culturally emigrate back to Islam together before physically relocating to Karachi. Alam’s modern, westernized pair actively chooses Islam and Pakistan over Wall Street and America, offering a cautionary tale that successful, productive, intelligent immigrants from South Asia may actively choose to take their talents and intellect back to their home countries rather than remaining as valuable contributors in contemporary America. This implodes American exceptionalism, stressing that there are more relevant and sophisticated “promised lands” in other parts of the world.

Alam’s use of Wharton to tell this story exploits a fundamental truism of the novel of manners: “[Manners] are the things that for good or bad draw people of a culture together and that separate them from the people of another culture” (Trilling 201).<sup>9</sup> Alam uses Wharton to draw us into American literary culture, to demonstrate its “hum and buzz of implication” (Trilling 200). But this implication traditionally assumes a desire to conform to or assimilate into American manners, and that is where Alam turns the form

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<sup>9</sup> See also Gary H. Lindberg’s *Edith Wharton and the Novel of Manners* for an additional explanation of the formal elements central to Wharton’s genre conventions that Alam seeks to both utilize and alter in *The Groom to Have Been*.

on its head, making it not about Americans – but about immigrants. And, even more critically, Alam’s narrative is not about their immigration, but their subsequent choice to leave, their choice to culturally and physically separate from the contemporary American nation.

Alam’s New York, like Wharton’s in *The Age of Innocence*, is scrutinized in order to see that contemporary American “values are wrong or arbitrarily narrow, at least they are intelligibly so; and the coherence of [the novel’s] habits and its means of interpreting them provides a stable configuration of values against which an individual’s divergence and growth can be estimated” (Lindberg 108). In order to maintain a controlled sense of identity, Alam’s immigrants break from tradition, instead turning their backs to America in order to declare allegiance to their homelands. Alam thus uses the formulaic nature of the novel of manners to reveal and subsequently reject twenty-first century American hostilities toward immigrants.

#### IV.

Similar to Alam’s novel, Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* presents a plot that is rooted in an American classic with an emphasis on immigration and a twist on the conclusion. O’Neill takes as his foundation a clearly recognizable novel of manners narrative: *The Great Gatsby*. Though not always recognized as such, *The Great Gatsby* “has its interest as a record of contemporary manners, but this might only have served to date it, did not Fitzgerald take the given moment of history as something more than a mere circumstance, did he not... size the given moment as a moral fact” (Trilling 244), making it readable as a novel of manners because of its thematic interests and genre

traditions. Like *Gatsby*, *Netherland* examines the moral life of America, not only societal patterns but also the principals and moral behavior that arise from those patterns. Additionally, as with a traditional novel of manners, *Netherland* is concerned with the ways in which social conditions exert themselves on character (Tuttleton 12) as a way to elucidate meaning. O'Neill is concerned with the need to capture a particular era, the post-9/11 moment, and its dark and decaying particulars as they bear down on an immigrant and his family.

O'Neill's central narrator, Hans van den Broek initially comes to New York for a few years, remains for far longer, and bears witness to the 9/11 attacks. He is O'Neill's twenty-first century Nick Caraway, coming from London instead of the Midwest and joining his Gatsby, Chuck Ramkisson, who claims to be from the US, but is in fact from Trinidad (O'Neill 17). Chuck, like Jay Gatsby, is a dreamer. He aims to build a large cricket complex on the decaying Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn. O'Neill's geographical choice ties Chuck to America's gilded past since Floyd Bennett Field was an important Northeast American airport and is named after the first man to fly over the North Pole – a dreamer who realized his dreams.<sup>10</sup> Grounded by their questionable morals and con-man personalities, both Chuck and Gatsby represent the American Dream gone bad, acting as “mirror[s] to the moral nature of America” (Tuttleton 171) in their respective time periods. O'Neill makes this degradation of morals contagious: the closer Hans gets with Chuck, the more America's diseased dream and faulty moral nature begins to infect him and his family.

O'Neill's Hans and his wife Rachel live a self-described “smug” (O'Neill 92) existence, not unlike Fitzgerald's Jazz Age characters: “Our jobs were working out

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<sup>10</sup> For a complete history of Floyd Bennett Field, visit <http://www.nyharborparks.org/visit/flbe.html>.

well—much better than expected, in my case—and we'd settled happily into our loft on Watts Street. This had a suitably gritty view of a parking lot and was huge enough to contain, in a corner of our white-bricked bedroom, a mechanical clothes rack with a swooping rail... you pressed a button and Rachel's jackets and skirts and shirts clattered down from the ceiling like entering revelers" (92-93). The physical space of their home, complete with the mention of luxurious details regarding clothing, parallels Gatsby's Long Island mansion. O'Neill's upper class is above the fray of New York's chaos following the 9/11 attacks, as metaphorically illustrated through their pristine domestic space, but the novel soon demonstrates that nobody is above the moral complications that come to contaminate and define contemporary America.

O'Neill pens America as "an 'ideologically diseased' country... a 'mentally ill, sick, unreal' country whose masses and leaders suffered from extraordinary and self-righteous delusions about the United States, [and] the world... a great power [that] had 'drifted into wrongdoing,' [and] her conscious permitted no other conclusion" (95-96) but to condemn the US under the tutelage of President Bush. Chuck Ramkissoo represents this "diseased ideology" while keeping pressure on questions of immigration and assimilation. Chuck is aligned with American national identity and ideals, shunning his Trinidadian roots entirely; therefore representing the choice of an immigrant to assimilate along traditional narrative lines. Interestingly, Chuck's "diseased ideology" parallels the "foul dust" of Fitzgerald's narrative,<sup>11</sup> a dark and noxious sediment that settles over the characters in the novel and ultimately poisons American immigrant existence. Through

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<sup>11</sup> On the second page of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick states, "Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it was what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men." See Tunc for a more complete reading of *Gatsby*'s motif of decay.

Chuck, O'Neill condemns traditional assimilation narratives as deleterious in the twenty-first century.

With cricket as a guiding metaphor, O'Neill explores Hans's identity and allegiances to American nationalism. The character swings his cricket bat traditionally rather than in American form, and for him this is source of pride, the piece of the assimilation narrative to which the character clings: "Coming to America, I'd eagerly taken on new customs and mannerisms at the expense of old ones... But self-transformation had its limits..." (49) until one fateful match. "I'd hit the ball in the air like an American cricketer; and I'd done so without injury to my sense of myself. On the contrary, I felt great... everything is suddenly clear, and I am at last naturalized" (176), but this alignment and naturalization never adheres. Not unlike Nick Caraway, Hans is morally superior to this new existence and his newfound American identity ultimately slides off the Teflon of his European roots. When later reflecting back on this moment, Hans explains, "then and there, among the blushing shots, I underwent a swerve in orientation. I decided to move back to London" (219). In the very moment that Hans completes his transformation to recognizably American, O'Neill writes him out of America. He and his family return to London, which is significantly and decisively *not* in the middle of America (like Nick Caraway's Midwest), but outside its borders entirely.

In *Gatsby*,

Nick's return to the Midwest is a return to the origins of his existence, to the wisdom of his father, to those middle-class 'fundamental decencies' marked by the inner check, by the family continuously rooted through the generations in the same place, by social stability. The disintegration of society in the Jazz Age,



Fitzgerald suggests, is curable by a return to the moral foundations, to the simple middle-class virtues. (Tuttleton 179)

Likewise, O'Neill selects for his protagonist not to be contained and contaminated by twenty-first century America, so he moves them back to Europe in an attempt to regain stable moral footing. Hans's departure, his "swerve in orientation" (O'Neill 219), is the powerful shift of his allegiance that removes power from the United States as that power now travels with immigrants who reject and disaffiliate from America, complicating and deepening the contemporary immigrant narrative.

In O'Neill's version of the *Gatsby* story, Chuck (who claims himself as a solid American) ends up dead, fished out of the Gowanus Canal "by the Home Depot building" after two years of residing there "among crabs and car tires and shopping carts, until a so-called urban diver made a 'macabre discovery' while filming a school of striped bass" (6). O'Neill stages his *Gatsby* in the shadow of a corporation whose name is reminiscent of Levittown prefabrication and mass identity while an oddly-placed recreational diver follows a bunch of fish that unquestioningly follow the tides of their group, commenting on what exactly it is about America that lands Chuck in the canal with his hands tied behind his back. O'Neill not only breaks Hans's allegiance to America, but he demonstrates through Chuck that a current day *Gatsby* will not die in his posh Long Island pool, but instead spend years in a polluted urban canal before pathetically becoming front page news. O'Neill's novel, through his imagining of Hans and Chuck, illustrates that contemporary America and its damaged moral structure has little left to offer immigrants.

In O'Neill's American nation, the "diseased ideology" (95) of the Bush era infiltrates every corner of the nation. The way in which New York, cricket, and post-9/11 social changes are represented in *Netherland* demonstrates how the novel of manners can emphasize collective history, the ways in which "the manners, social customs, folkways, conventions, traditions, and more of a given social group at a given time and place play a dominant role in the lives of fictional characters, exert control over their thought and behavior, and constitute a determinant upon the actions in which they are engaged" (Tuttleton 10).

By establishing their stories in recognized American narratives, Alam and O'Neill are better able to bring acculturation and its aftereffects to the foreground, highlighting that contemporary immigrant narratives require a separation from traditional immigrant tales, leaving behind the melting pot and assimilation in favor of multifaceted immigrant stories that require analysis with fresh, non-multicultural frameworks and ideas. In these contemporary works, unencumbered speech and national belonging are global values no longer limited to, and in many ways even permitted by, America; therefore, these revised narratives focus instead on rejecting and disaffiliating from the limiting traditions and expectations of America and its literary history.

The work that Alam and O'Neill begin is carried forward by Naqvi and Hamid. This second pair of authors likewise focuses on repurposing classic narrative structures to tell their tales of leaving America. In addition to teasing out speech and belonging, *Home Boy* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* further narrow their concentration to hone in on the impossibility of individual identity formation for young Muslim men given the atmosphere generated via the PATRIOT ACT and NSEERS.

## V.

Naqvi and Hamid pull not from the novel of manners, but from the ethnic bildungsroman, which weaves narratives of “disenfranchised Americans... [by] assert[ing] an identity defined by the outsiders themselves or by their own cultures, not by the patriarchal Anglo-American power structure; it evinces a revaluation, a transvaluation, of traditional *Bildung* by new standards and perspectives” (Braendlin 75). Braendlin’s tidy working definition of the ethnic bildungsroman<sup>12</sup> puts emphasis on the immigrant, the outsider, rather than traditionally white, masculine American characters. In addition, ethnic bildungsroman move away from “the more exclusively personality-oriented plot of the traditional Bildungsroman and towards a more political and social vision” (Japtok 27). What the ethnic bildungsroman allows, in the context of contemporary immigrant literature, is an examination of the “new standards and perspectives” that were set in motion by September 11<sup>th</sup>.

The “ethnic” of “ethnic bildungsroman” is especially critical in this discussion because it privileges one way of viewing difference (ethnicity) over another (race).<sup>13</sup> What we have in contemporary immigrant literature is not primarily a racial issue, but one more clearly determined and defined by ethnic identity markers, and that difference is critical since *Home Boy* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* ultimately raise questions about Muslim identity more than being South Asian. As Martin Japtok explains in his work on the ethnic bildungsroman, “ethnicity, usually culturally defined, differs from

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<sup>12</sup> For additional information on the ethnic bildungsroman genre, see also Naomi B. Sokoloff’s *Imagining the Child in Modern Jewish Fiction*, Geta Le Seur’s *Ten is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman*, and Susan Ashley Gohlman, *Starting Over: The Task of the Protagonist in the Contemporary Bildungsroman*.

<sup>13</sup> See Omi and Winant seminal work, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* for more on the differences between race and ethnicity that inform this chapter.

race in that the latter tends to be defined by physical traits, color the foremost among them” (12), and it is cultural definition, not skin color, that is at the heart of twenty-first century immigrant bildungsroman stories.<sup>14</sup>

What we get, then, is ethnicity combined with an accepted, familiar genre (the bildungsroman) as a way to deviate from traditional immigration narratives. Ethnic bildungsroman are coming-of-age stories that illustrate a “protagonist’s growing awareness of his/her ethnicity and its social significance, as reflected in the text, [and] can reveal much about both the shape and importance a work gives ethnicity and its impact on the protagonist” (Japtok 21). The ethnic bildungsroman genre is particularly befitting of a contemporary immigrant project because it “focuses on the relations of the protagonist with the wider environment,” (ibid) and that wider environment is exactly the point. Vast changes to American national ideals and how those alterations are enacted upon individuals after September 11, 2001 is precisely what H.M. Naqvi and Mohsin Hamid comment on in their respective ethnic bildungsroman, *Home Boy* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

Both novels end with a disruption of American social order in favor of placement within identities bound physically to Pakistan. This geographical disruption itself is not novel to the Bildungsroman form as some do focus on heroes not being able to integrate into their given societies.<sup>15</sup> What is new is that Naqvi and Hamid emphasize their alternate endings by linking not only into formal aspects of the genre, but also to

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<sup>14</sup> There is tremendous work being done on race and contemporary literature, especially with regard to Asian writers, with Min Song’s *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American* as a standout example.

<sup>15</sup> As Manfred Engel explains, “Ideally, the *Bildungsroman* will end with the hero’s integration into society; [however], there are also numerous examples of a *Bildungsroman ex negativo*, in which the process of formation fails, either because of the hero’s own faults, or because of deficits in the society of time” (267).

canonical ethnic literature of *America*. They utilize Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* to critique American social ideology, choosing a text obsessed with the sexual dynamic between men and women to critique the ways in which America's waning power is not only pervasive, but destructive to immigrant identities. Choosing this particular text fits well with Susan Faludi's observation of American responses to 9/11: "The last remaining superpower, a nation attacked precisely *because* of its imperial preeminence, responded by fixating on its weakness and ineffectuality. Even more peculiar was our displacement of that fixation into the domestic realm, into a sexualized struggle between depleted masculinity and overbearing womanhood" (9). By pulling from *Portnoy*, Naqvi and Hamid express an awareness of this displaced fixation as well as the need to utilize American stories in order to make meaning of the contemporary power struggle taking place both within and outside of the country's borders.

At the heart of *Portnoy* are two narrative themes: sexuality and ethnicity. For Portnoy, the struggle is whether he is Jewish, American, or Jewish-American, and the differences and placement of "American" most certainly matters in racial and ethnic narratives. As Min Song explains, "each marker of difference must be given lesser or greater weight so that the ways in which one is an American and an individual first must never get obscured" (107). In other words, identity categories explored alongside being an American are traditionally subsumed in immigrant narratives in favor of American-ness coming out on top. In addition, this path of exploration "binds America to individuality, and from there to whiteness, upper-middle-class professionalism, heteronormativity, manliness, and able-bodied-ness (Yoshino qtd. in Song 108). Each of these binds is critical, and it is whether novelists choose to have their protagonists align

with or turn from these categories that ultimately comments on their commitment to America. While Roth's Portnoy does return to and decide to find his way in America, the central characters in *Home Boy* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* select ethnicity over American-ness on the journey to becoming an individual.

Before turning to specific readings of *Home Boy* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, it must be noted that I choose to interpret these novels along a continuum, as working in conversation with one another. Where *Home Boy* ends, with a decision to leave America, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* begins, narrating its story of American experience from a city square in Pakistan. By viewing *Home Boy* as a narrative precursor to *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the novel's more adolescent sexuality as a gentler commentary on American ideology becomes clearer and more effective. It is as if Shehzad (Naqvi's protagonist) is a slightly younger version of Changez (Hamid's central character), and coupling the novels allows for a wider and more comprehensive view of what it means to come of age as a young Muslim under the constraints of contemporary America, especially since the critique of losing one's ethnic identity for the sake of American acceptance grows more rejectionist from one novel to the next.

## VI.

We begin in Naqvi's world of young Pakistani men. "We'd become Japs, Jews, Niggers. We weren't before. We fancied ourselves boulevardiers, raconteurs, renaissance men, AC, Jimbo, and me" (5). The "before" of Naqvi's narrative universe is 9/11. Three main characters orbit in Naqvi's novel. Ali Chaudry (AC) is a green card holder, Jamshed Khan (Jimbo) is a "bonafide American" (7) who was born and raised in New Jersey, and

Shehzad (Chuck) comes from Karachi to attend college in New York on a student visa. A successful young man, Chuck finishes college early and secures a job “at a big bank that had just become bigger” (32), echoing the untouchable success and invincibility of pre-9/11 America – a place where an immigrant could graduate early, secure a top job, eventually bring his mother from Karachi, and “live happily ever after like a happy, all-American family” (ibid). Unfortunately, in the summer of 2001, as the economy begins to stall, Chuck loses his job, and his world starts to literally crumble as Naqvi explains that that he used to work “on the forty-first floor of 7 WTC, the third building that went down” on 9/11 (10). This crumbling of three buildings serves as foreshadowing of the downfall of Naqvi’s three young men.

After months of moping and depression, Chuck finds himself at a Pakistani restaurant late at night, dining in the company of taxi drivers, declaring “I want to become a cab driver” (38), eschewing his formerly privileged status, which Naqvi utilized to pass his protagonist into white America via a job in finance and American college experience. In mere pages within the novel, Chuck transitions from climbing Wall Street’s corporate ladder to memorizing its intersections and one-way impasses, illustrating that Naqvi’s story is told not only through the geography of the city, but the people on the island: specifically Muslim versus non-Muslim characters. This ethnic comparison echoes Roth’s project in *Portnoy’s Complaint*, but Naqvi goes one step further, tying *Home Boy* to *Portnoy* through a specific semantic decision: the use of depersonalizing nicknames for women.

In *Portnoy’s Complaint*, sexualized women are referred to most often by their nicknames, which represent something about them and their standing in America. There

is the Pumpkin (Kay Campbell, Davenport Iowa): a full-bodied, flat-chested Middle Westerner, representing the abundance of middle America (171); The Pilgrim (Sarah Abbott Maulsby, New Canaan, Connecticut), who is “one hundred and fourteen pounds of Republican refinement, and the pertest pair of nipples in all New England” (174); and the Monkey (Mary Jane Reed), who is one part confidence and two parts humiliation, entirely broken and contaminated (160). It is not until Portnoy meets the final woman in the novel, the Jewish Pumpkin, that he becomes fully awakened to the damage he has caused to his ethnic identity through his childish sexual conquests. He believes her to be his “salvation” (193), but after failing to perform sexually for her (or for anyone within Israel’s borders), Portnoy is told to back to America, to “go home” (199), painting the United States as a country that someone as morally and sexually perverse as Portnoy can comfortably call home owing to the nation’s own questionable ethics.

This pattern of nicknames picks up in *Home Boy* as a way for Naqvi’s central immigrant to explore his bodily ties to America. Early in the novel, Chuck lusts after the “girl from Ipanema” (16) while also admiring “Blonde and Blonder” (9) during his time at the bars, one representing his pre-9/11 sexual prowess and ability to operate within heteronormative constructions, and the others representing a pair of Barbies, the ultimate American sexual fantasy and ideal. These women provide no more than fodder for the sexual grist mill, demonstrating a previously privileged status enjoyed by ethnically diverse immigrants that becomes subsumed at the start of the twenty-first century. These women, like those in Portnoy’s story, are ultimately nothing more than American signposts on the way to maturation, each revealing in the protagonist a facet of his ethnic identity that he loses and must fight to regain. For Chuck, the sexual freedom he was



permitted as a young man of Wall Street is crushed in the rubble of 7 WTC and what remains is the reality that he chooses to become a Pakistani cab driver. This is especially clear since the last three-quarters of the novel are notably devoid of sexual encounters for Chuck. However, Naqvi takes great care to create a three-dimensional woman at the heart of this narrative, a woman who represents old money and upper class America, beginning his departure from the formal resonances of traditional narratives.

The Duck (Dora), “live[s] in a swank corner apartment overlooking West Broadway, her parents’ pied-a-terre in the city... Her father’s people had reportedly landed on Plymouth Rock and drifted down the coast to New Canaan, Connecticut” (21), authenticating this young woman as patently American. Rarely referred to by her name, The Duck is akin to the women in Portnoy’s world, filling needs (she gives the young men a place to gather at her home, is intimate with Jimbo, and gets all three central male characters into “insider” events in New York) and standing in for America rather than operating as an autonomous individual separate from her citizenship. As a mouthpiece for America, The Duck informs Chuck that he absolutely must “decide what [he’s] about” (75), while standing in the doorway of her doorman building, using her status as an upper-class, educated, white American woman to finally shatter what remained of the façade of Chuck’s “Metrostani” (15) life. Not unlike Naomi confronting Portnoy on his bad behavior, ethnic and otherwise, Naqvi uses this nicknamed woman as the voice that moves Chuck to action.

Although opportunities for American success are present (via interviews at investment firms), Chuck declares that he “figured out [his] jihad” (60). The use here of the word “jihad” immediately summons ideas regarding religious devotion, strengthening

Naqvi's conviction for this character to identify as Muslim *rather* than American. However, this is not a typical jihad. In his version, Chuck travels with AC and Jimbo to Connecticut in order to locate Mohammed Shah, described "as a drifter, a grafter, an American success story, a Pakistani Gatsby" (26). After being arrested on trespassing charges for breaking into Shah's estate, Chuck muses from prison, "I finally got it. I understood that just like three black men were gangbangers, and three Jews a conspiracy, three Muslims had become a sleeper cell" (121). Here, Naqvi's trifecta of friends not only misunderstood the American Dream via their summoning of *The Great Gatsby*, but that same brand of social misinterpretation becomes redirected at them by means of law enforcement. The young men are transported to the Metropolitan Detention Center and held on suspicion of terrorism charges. AC, Jimbo, and Chuck are ultimately processed through the system not as terrorist, but in a much more American way: one by spilling his guts in exchange for freedom, the next by being booked on illegal substance rather than terrorism charges, and the third by having a political favor called in by an old college friend of the governor's. If this system represents America, Naqvi's protagonist is most certainly not on board.

In a pivotal scene of Chuck's despair with and fear regarding the American justice system, Naqvi summons yet another canonical novel, and by far the most famous bildungsroman of the American canon, *The Catcher in the Rye*. After his release, Chuck asks after his friends, but is told by an officer of the Metropolitan Detention Center (who he has nicknamed Grizzly), to "Go home, boy!" (119). And so he does, before sprinting

out into the street wearing his “pajamas, cowboy boots, and hunting hat” (188),<sup>16</sup> stumbling through Central Park and ultimately wandering aimlessly through his panic. He describes drifting “south, in the general direction of the Pond. It wasn’t to ponder the age-old question: where do the ducks fly in the winter? It wasn’t even winter yet, through the leaves were changing color. In another couple of months, everything would be black and white” (ibid).<sup>17</sup> In contemporary America, very little is black and white and so Chuck must therefore be speaking of another place, a different reality that has nothing to do with the shadows and confusing grey contours of contemporary America. Poetically, by drawing on *Catcher*, Naqvi emphasizes the American whiteness of Salinger’s story to illustrate just how far-removed Chuck has become from his ethnic identity during his coming-of-age journey. It is in this moment that Chuck reaches his own, personal, very black-and-white decision to cut ties with America and return home to Pakistan in order to reclaim his ethnicity.

As *Home Boy* draws to a close, Naqvi switches briefly from the first-person monologue device of the Bildungsroman to a second-person, detached, observational perspective, signaling another linguistic deviation from the genre’s formal elements and illustrating that a large-scale alteration has occurred within the protagonist. As Chuck packs for his return to Pakistan, he waxes poetic about being “unsentimental about the bricolage that contributed to the infrastructure of [his] formative years” (203) before “considering the possibility, the conditions of possibility” under which he could stay in

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<sup>16</sup> See *The Catcher in the Rye* for instances of Holden Caulfeld’s red hunting hat. Specifically, in chapter seven (52), he fixes the hat to his head before leaving Pencey for his adventures in New York City, utilizing it as a protective device much like Chuck clings to his hunting hat in *Home Boy*.

<sup>17</sup> See chapter eight of *Catcher*, “You know those ducks in that lagoon right near Central Park South? That little lake? By any chance, do you happen to know where they go, the ducks, when it gets all frozen over?” (60).

America. “At the end of the day, it was a vision” he “could not quite commit to” (206-208) and Naqvi’s hero therefore departs. Like the characters from Alam’s novel, Naqvi’s protagonist requires a more radical change in order to reclaim his full identity; he therefore chooses, even when offered a good life in America, to return home to Pakistan.

Naqvi blends the traditions of the ethnic bildungsroman with a recapturing of ethnic identity only available outside of the confines of America. In the novel’s closing pages, Chuck (now referred to by his proper name, Shehzad) “spread the [prayer] rug” from his suitcase, “positioned [himself] generally east, toward Mecca, recited the call to prayer” and then “when it was time to go, left” (209). *Home Boy* leaves readers with an ending that equally signals a new beginning, a reclaiming that had been suppressed by contemporary America. Naqvi could have just as easily ended his novel with the Roth’s, “Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?” (204) since a simultaneous ending and opening transpire on the page. Where Naqvi ends his tale of coming-of-age and imagining life in Pakistan for a young man transitioning out of America, Mohsin Hamid begins. So, with *Reluctant Fundamentalist* vee may perhaps to begin... in Pakistan.

## VII.

Whereas Naqvi pulled from sexual identity exploration, nicknames, and fleeting mentions of other canonical novels, the formula for Hamid’s connection to and break from American literature is explored exclusively through sexuality, and specifically, the way in which sexual identity metaphorically parallels the mounting weaknesses of America. Hamid explores this sexuality through a fantasy encounter in order to highlight

the negative consequences of subsuming one's ethnicity for the sake of belonging in America.

Throughout *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid's protagonist (Changez) recounts the story of Erica, his lost love and emotional muse. A classmate at Princeton, Changez and Erica first met on a trip to Greece, where he describes her as a member "of the university's most prestigious eating club... and [traveling to Greece] courtesy of... trust funds," (14) placing her in the upper-class echelon of white American society. "She belonged more to the camp of Paltrow than to that of Spears" (17). Changez is immediately drawn to Erica; unfortunately, in the same moment that his attraction to Erica becomes clear, his most formidable opponent for her affection, Chris, also greets the reader. Erica lost her love, Chris, to cancer just a year before and his hold on her is palpable. He was "a good-looking boy with what [Erica] described as an *Old World* appeal," but a white American nonetheless (20). A man that Erica claims is her "home" (21).

It is through sexuality and Changez's connection to Erica that Hamid associates *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* with *Portnoy's Complaint*. Throughout Roth's novel, Portnoy is driven by sexuality and need. Granted, Portnoy is extremely crass and his conquests are unabashedly illustrated by the novel's boorish prose. Changez, on the other hand, is quiet and well-intended in his desire and Hamid's writing oozes manners and tact, but an animalistic passion drives Changez nonetheless. Changez, like Portnoy, is unable to come of age without the narration of how sexuality is shaping and being shaped by ethnicity. For Portnoy, Jewish parental guilt mingled with insatiable individual passion to create a protagonist who is nothing if not neurotic and confused, but always

firmly Jewish. For Changez, surrendering ethnicity for the sake of a sexual encounter gives birth to a protagonist ultimately committed to regaining his Muslim identity and leaving behind the fantasy-based ideologies of post-9/11 America.

In the pinnacle scene on which *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* arguably turns, Changez and Erica finally have their long-awaited sexual encounter.

In my bed she asked me to put my arms around her, and I did so, speaking quietly in her ear. I knew she enjoyed my stories of Pakistan, so I rambled on about my family and Lahore. When I tried to kiss her, she did not move her lips or shut her eyes. So I shut them for her and asked, ‘Are you missing Chris?’ She nodded, and I saw tears begin to force themselves between her lashes. ‘Then pretend,’ I said, ‘pretend I am him.’ I do not know why I said it; I felt overcome and it seemed, suddenly, a possible way forward. ‘What?’ she said, but she did not open her eyes. ‘Pretend I am him,’ I said again. And slowly, in the darkness and silence, we did. (69)

It is here that Hamid weaves an extended metaphor into his ethnic bildungsroman, expanding into a register that further enhances the emotional life of the novel. In this moment, Changez so desperately hopes for a way to physically and emotionally become part of (Am)Erica that he degrades himself and his ethnicity to take on the role of Chris(t) in hopes of pulling them both back from the darkness of contemporary America. However, this encounter awakens both characters to true versions of themselves. Continuing to read Erica as a metaphorical nation figure, her subsequent withdrawal into a deep depression, institutionalization, and apparent suicide<sup>18</sup> all comment on the health

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<sup>18</sup> “‘They haven’t recovered any remains,’ the nurse said, ‘and she didn’t leave a note. Technically, she’s a missing person. But she’d been saying goodbye to everyone’” (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* 105).

of the twenty-first century American nation: a place of deep economic and social strife that may be unsavable, and is certainly unlivable (her Chris[t] is already dead). Concurrently, Changez begins to grow his traditional Muslim beard, ultimately decides to leave his very successful financial job at Underwood Sampson (note that the initials are U.S.), and returns to Pakistan to be a college professor. Hamid ultimately writes both Changez and Erica out of America.

Hamid writes Changez's post-Erica transformation as initially physical before becoming geographical, represented through the development of his traditionally Muslim facial hair. When Changez first arrived in New York, he had "not yet kept" (38) his beard. It is on a trip home for the holidays that he begins to grow it out, which becomes problematic when returning from Pakistan to America. "I do not recall why I had not shaved by two-week-old beard. It was, perhaps, a form of protest on my part, a symbol of my identity, or perhaps I sought to remind myself of the reality I had just left behind... I know that I did not wish to blend in with the army of clean-shaven youngsters..." (84). Hamid positions the growth of Changez's beard parallel to Erica's withdrawal. As his identity returns, we learn that Erica is "at a sort of clinic... an institution where people can recover themselves" (85). The choice of putting these events alongside one another as well as employing the word "recover," with its double-meaning of getting back to one's self and also Changez's literal work of re-covering his face with a traditional beard, further emphasizes the way in which Hamid narrates the ability of his narrator to regain control of his ethnic identity while (Am)Erica falls apart, especially since her stay at the clinic results in her disappearance and suicide.

Once (Am)Erica is gone, the real America became visible to Changez, a country “unwilling to reflect upon the shared pain that united [it] with those who attacked [it]” (107-108), leaving the protagonist as “an incoherent and emotional madman, flying off into rages and sinking into depressions... asking the same questions about why and where Erica had gone; sometimes I would find myself walking the streets, flaunting my beard as a provocation...” (107). And so, before leaving from JFK (the ultimate site of post-9/11 immigrant movement), Changez decides to leave his jacket on the curb of the airport arrivals area as “a wish of warmth for Erica” which ultimately “cause[s] a security alert” because it is abandoned clothing at an international airport (108). In his final gesture on American soil, Hamid’s character metaphorically hopes to warm (Am)Erica, but is met not with outstretched arms or a reciprocated show of affection, but instead the coldness of procedure that surely follows any perceived threat to national security.

As *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* draws to a close, readers are left not with a “sense of arrival and closure that signals the end of a story” (Song 1), so familiar to immigrant tales. No, Hamid’s audience is instead faced with a lack of resolution, an open ending that is open for multiple interpretations. This is another place at which Hamid, like Naqvi, connects to *Portnoy’s Complaint*. The final lines of Roth’s novel are delivered as a punch line, leaving readers pondering whether they are, in fact, just party to a lengthy joke about Jewish ethnicity. Hamid likewise implicates his readers, leaving the final lines meaningless without an external infusion of meaning: “But why are you reaching into your jacket, sir? I detect a glint of metal. Given that you and I are now bound by a certain shared intimacy, I trust it is from the holder of your business cards”



(117). Perhaps a violent chain of events is about to unfold.<sup>19</sup> Or, perhaps change has occurred and the American audience is indeed now bonded to Changez, suggesting an opening for peace. In either scenario, Hamid, like Roth, leaves us without action, suspended in a moment at the end of the protagonist's tale where the man at the center of the narrative has explained how he grew into the person he is now, and the reader must do the rest. However, Roth's Portnoy returns "home" to America while Changez's "home" is Lahore, making clear that America's borders are simultaneously permeable and pervasive, and that identity comes through an embracing rather than denial of one's true ethnicity.

In both *Home Boy* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the main characters are integrated into America pre-9/11 before rejecting the nation for the sake of a more positive and complete ethnic identity as the narratives advance. Through the exploration of sexual identity, both Chuck and Changez are able to see that they have lost significant portions of their ethnicity to contemporary America; however, it is clear that these contemporary immigrants can reclaim their full identities through a physical removal from America. Like *Portnoy's Complaint*, Naqvi and Hamid's novels end with possibility and uncertainty, but they depart from the expected through an animosity towards the ideologically flawed good vs. evil dichotomy pervasive to American culture in the twenty-first century. A country obsessed with labeling and eradicating evildoers leaves no room for the exploration of a full, ethnically established identity outside of standing as a proud American. Naqvi and Hamid critique this flawed way of thinking as outdated exceptionalism, allowing departures from the traditional elements of ethnic

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<sup>19</sup> This interpretation is, no doubt, bolstered by the 2012 film adaptation of the novel, directed by Mira Nair, which ends not only with violence and a CIA operation, but with Changez reiterating (out of context) that he is a "lover of America" and has offered to work for the CIA.

bildungsroman narratives speak to the ways in which America is moving dangerously toward global obsolescence unless it can find a way to better accept and honor the full ethnic identities of its immigrants.

### VIII.

Through their deployment of recognizable forms and narratives, Alam, O'Neill, Naqvi, and Hamid spotlight their alternate, non-American endings, critiquing contemporary America and emphasizing the country's inability to adapt to modern immigrants and their complex ethnic identities. By combining multiple literary forms, these four authors move past traditional immigrant narratives as well as early 9/11 literature, taking on the particulars of form and canonical novels in order to create literature that is surprisingly divergent owing to its emphasis on rejection and disaffiliation of both American literary history and the nation itself. These contemporary immigrant retellings reject American national allegiance as a way to explore and explain new immigrant choices and freedoms, demonstrating a new view of America open only to those who represent a wider worldview that comprehends the full extent of the damage done to America not only by the events of 9/11 but by the political and social response.

Because of this awakened view, contemporary immigrant narratives no longer need to demonstrate a desire for an empowered American identity, but rather can highlight a renewed sense of connection to non-American roots outside of America's borders through the choice to exit America for positive, identity-driven reasons. The immigrant novel has been transformed in order to tell a story that is otherwise too large for traditional narrative conventions, and authors such as Alam, O'Neill, Naqvi, and

Hamid buttress their work by pulling from the novel of manners and ethnic bildungsroman genres in order to mark their narratives as something simultaneously traditional and innovative. What ultimately emerges is a choice to abstain from America not, as many might suggest, an “urge to reclaim” or a creation of “imaginary homelands” a la Rushdie. These are not stories of failed immigrant projects, but commentaries on shunning America as both a physical nation and Promised Land after seeing it as a less desirable option to someplace else, with that someplace often represented as one’s homeland. These narratives not only demonstrate new components of immigrant literature, but also claim that contemporary America may, in fact, be less desirable than bombed-out Pakistan, traditional India, or even a place as culturally similar to the U.S. as Europe. These novels help contextualize and comment on the fact that America’s global identity is undergoing a massive historical shift, so much so that even widely accepted canonical forms must be viewed with new eyes. What is at stake here is a processing of immigration narratives that concludes not with tragedy or assimilation under the umbrella of multiculturalism, but a decision to rethink, as Danticat puts it, “facile allegiances” to America and reject those bonds in order to become one’s most complete self once clear of American’s borders.

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***THE SOLUTION IS THE PROBLEM:***  
**NARRATIVES OF INTERNMENT AND DETENTION**

**Detainee:** Please tell the Judge that I have all my letters to the Embassy are being held at the detention center. I haven't gotten any response.

**Judge:** I can't do anything about that, sir. Okay. The only thing I can suggest to you is this. I know you have some family around. You need to tell them that you're probably going back to Poland pretty soon, so if they can help you out getting set up in Poland you need to start working on that, sir. Okay. Sir.

**Detainee:** No, it's not okay. I am okay. But no, it's not okay this country.

**Judge:** Okay, sir. I understand your frustration.

**Detainee:** They broke my life.

**Judge:** Okay. Sir, good luck to you.

- Official Immigration Hearing Transcript, *The United States v. Miszczuk*



## I.

Internment and detention have always been part of America's immigration history. From its beginnings at Ellis Island, to Angel Island, to World War II internment camps, and the over 350 detention sites currently in use, the confinement of immigrants has been both a widespread practice and a significant feature of narratives by and about American immigrants. Even so, the phenomenon remains woefully under-examined in literary studies. Human rights and legal groups investigate detainment violations<sup>1</sup> while sociologists and psychologists scrutinize data related to immigrant detention experiences;<sup>2</sup> however, literary scholarship remains largely at the fringe.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I examine a pair of detention narratives—each the first personal memoir to respond to mass detention in its respective era—that assess how the national hysteria following attacks on American soil can have the debilitating effect of imposing punishment not merely on the innocent, but on those immigrants who have, ironically, traditionally aspired to American assimilation. Indeed, the two narratives I examine here-- Monica

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<sup>1</sup> Groups such as Human Rights Watch, the American Civil Liberties Union, and Amnesty International have all chronicled and fought against human rights and legal violations taking place in United States immigration detention centers. Particular issues of concern include indefinite detention, mandatory detainment without individual legal hearings, and instances of the torture and death of inmates.

<sup>2</sup> Studies on the impact of detainment practices on individuals include Robjant, Hassan, and Katona's "Mental Health Implications of Detaining Asylum Seekers," which conducted a systemic review of psychological studies and summarized the negative psychological impacts of sustained detention for asylum seekers who did not commit immigration violations. Another important study, "The Meaning and Mental Health Consequences of Long-Term Detention" likewise explores the impact of detainment on individual mental health with the conclusion that profoundly detrimental consequences result from detention experiences.

<sup>3</sup> Literary scholarship on detainment and immigration violations has recently focused, like the Associated Press, on the rhetorical application of "illegal" to define a person rather than an action. In the summer of 2011, this discussion was heightened by Jose Antonio Vargas's admission that he is an undocumented alien in the United States. As a Pulitzer Prize winning author, Vargas's identification as "undocumented" rather than "illegal" shed light on the importance of rhetorical choices and strategies when discussing contemporary immigration in the United States. The AP joined Vargas in banning "illegal" to refer to human beings, instead using the term only to describe the violation of immigration laws rather than the people allegedly committing those violations. Critic Judith Butler likewise calls the term into question, claiming that it makes it impossible to "perceive the suffering, persecution, and legitimate flight" of immigrants (Davies 160).

Sone's *Nisei Daughter* (1953), written in the aftermath of Japanese internment, and Edwidge Danticat's *Brother I'm Dying* (2007), a memoir about a Haitian uncle detained in 2004 --each speak across generations, exploring how the cause of national security sends off shock waves *within* immigrant families and some of the traditional means they have used to affiliate with (or at least attempt to survive) the nation.

Of course, many fictional treatments including John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1956), Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine* (2002), Susan Choi's *American Woman* (2003), and Teju Coles' *Open City* (2011), take up the internment and detention of immigrants in their respective eras. And detention is, in itself, a longstanding component of Japanese narratives that address anti-immigrant sentiment: *Nisei Daughter* is often placed alongside other Japanese American internment memoirs such as *Farewell to Manzanar* (1979),<sup>4</sup> *Desert Exile* (1984),<sup>5</sup> *Only What We Could Carry* (2000),<sup>6</sup> and *Looking Like the Enemy* (2005).<sup>7</sup> *Brother I'm Dying* might well be compared to other works of long-form narrative journalism such as *The New York Times*' chronicling of

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<sup>4</sup> Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, like Sone, is a Nisei. Her family's story of internment is told through *Farewell to Manzanar*, which is perhaps the most famous Japanese internment memoir studied by scholars. Like *Nisei Daughter*, it traces themes such as the deterioration of family and the difficulty of reconciling a split (American/Nisei) identity. For Houston, reconciliation comes in the form of declaring herself a Japanese American rather than Japanese or American, embracing cultural pluralism (which was the dominant mode when her memoir was written in the 1970s) rather than assimilation.

<sup>5</sup> In 1982, Yoshiko Uchida penned *Desert Exile*, chronicling her Nisei experiences and internment at both the Tanforan and Topaz camps. Uchida left Topaz for Smith College in 1943 and first wrote about her experiences in the novel *Journey to Topaz* (1971). It was not until eleven years later that she published her memoir, which also tackles the issues of personal and cultural identities. Like Houston, Uchida embraces a both/and outlook on her identity, claiming to be a "human being" rather than a Nisei, Asian, or American.

<sup>6</sup> Unlike memoirs that follow the full arc of a family's experience in interment, *Only What We Could Carry* is an anthology of Japanese interment experience, including written accounts, artistic expressions, and oral histories. Published in 2000, it coincided with the end of the reparations program that began in 1988 and awarded monetary reparations to individuals interned during WWII, signaling a focus on morality and national restitution.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Matsuda Gruenewald's *Looking Like The Enemy* is the most recent instillation into the canon of Japanese internment narratives. Also a Nisei, Gruenewald chooses to write her memoir late in life – age 80 – incorporating anti-immigration sentiments, cultural pluralism, a turn to moral atonement, and her success as a nurse in America. This particular memoir places emphasis on Gruenewald's Asian American identity.

Boubacar Bah's death in detention (2008),<sup>8</sup> Sacchetti and Valencia's *Boston Globe* multipart series on detention and deportation (2012),<sup>9</sup> as well as twenty-first century nonfiction books such as *My Guantanamo Diary* (2008),<sup>10</sup> *Between the Fences* (2010),<sup>11</sup> and *Detained and Deported* (2015).<sup>12</sup> But I want to restrict my analysis to these two "template" memoirs for three main reasons. First, again following the lead of Heffernan and Salvan, I want to turn our eye away from a generalized "trauma" post-9/11, and focus particularly on disruptions in *communities*—in this case, communities marked by specific ethnic or immigrant traditions. As Shirley Geok-lin Lim has argued, the rich history of detention memoirs helps to understand the experience of Japanese Americans in World

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<sup>8</sup> Nina Bernstein of *The New York Times* chronicled the experiences of Boubacar Bah, a 52-year-old man from Guinea who, like Joseph Dantica, died while incarcerated at a United States detention center. His death, along with the deaths of 66 other immigrant inmates (between 2004-2007) is written into Bernstein's long-form journalism in order to give his death meaning while calling attention to the mistreatment of immigrants in US detention. Bah's fate and the silence surrounding the incident is eerily similar to what Dantica experienced, making traceable a trend of information blackouts on behalf of families who have loved ones within the contemporary immigration detention system.

<sup>9</sup> Maria Sacchetti and Martin Valencia, like Bernstein and Danticat, trace the issues of immigrants languishing in detention centers. Again, themes such as communication gaps and the violation of constitutional rights weigh heavily on this series of investigative reports, which were published in *The Boston Globe* in 2012. Unfortunately, medical mistreatment and inmate death are also prevalent in this three-part series, underscoring this particular deadly problem, which is drawn out through contemporary nonfiction.

<sup>10</sup> An interesting addition to contemporary entries on detainment, Mahvish Khan's *My Guantanamo Diary: The Detainees and The Stories They Told Me*, focuses exclusively on the stories of individuals detained at the Guantanamo prison. Unlike Danticat, Bernstein, Sacchetti, and Valencia, Khan focuses on the detainment of suspected terrorists off American soil, but still under American control. However, Khan's narrative highlights indefinite detention, which is a byproduct of information blackouts as well as constitutional violations. In addition, the individuals in Khan's book, like those in the journalistic and memoir treatments of detention, maintain innocence and an absent link between their actions and provable criminality.

<sup>11</sup> Tony Hefner's *Between The Fences* relays a firsthand experience from a different vantage point. Hefner spent six years as a guard at the Port Isabel Processing Center in Texas, one of the largest immigration detention centers in the United States. His memoir focuses on the forced silences and lack of human rights that were accepted and expected ways of prison management, leading to abuses by guards and the mistreatment of immigrant inmates.

<sup>12</sup> The most recent entry into general detainment nonfiction, Margaret Regan's *Detained and Deported*, like Khan's anthology, chronicles the experience of multiple detainees. Reporting from within the Eloy Detention Center, which is a for-profit prison in Arizona, Regan brings the privatization of detention centers into the discussion of government silences and human rights violations surrounding contemporary immigration detention. Like her other journalism and nonfiction counterparts, Regan takes dead aim at corrupt political structures and explores the ways in which assimilation and immigrant adjustment are no longer viable options.

War II America since “these life stories repeat a common plot of race difference and conflict... represent[ing] some other, both more communal and more abstract than [one] particular life” (Lim 292). Second, I want to pair these two texts to demonstrate some of the very specific ways that internment practices post 9/11 both *continue* past policies towards immigrants but also represent important and disturbing alterations. And thirdly, I want to change the focus of recent discussions on internment away from the isolated category of “illegality” towards a richer understanding of how these narratives participate in, and rewrite, the immigrant-narrative traditions in which they participate.

This last point bears emphasis. When studying detention narratives, that is, most scholars place focus on the “illegal” statuses of the detained, often by suggesting the debts of these stories to slave narratives. Marta Carminero-Santangelo, for example, explores the role of nonfiction in narrating “illegal” border crossings in her work on detention. Her argument explores illegality as it is applied to human movement across borders, and the resulting detainment that happens upon capture. Drawing upon the work of Giorgio Agamben and Judith Butler, reading them alongside cases such as *Boumediene v. Bush*,<sup>13</sup> Nicole Waller similarly applies the concept of “*terra incognita*” to detention, asking whether the political neither/norness of detention centers can be better counteracted by legal or literary discourses. While I do not disagree with these readings, I believe this focus overlooks a simpler truth. First and foremost, the families in these memoirs are not criminals, but are treated as such. Exploring the ways that harsh treatments come to bear on them not just because of a general “illegality,” but because of specific acts, orders, and laws, clarifies how particular government practices are causing

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<sup>13</sup> *Boumediene v. Bush* is a Supreme Court Ruling of June 12, 2008 that grants “Guantanamo detainees the right to the writ of habeas corpus in US courts” (Waller 363).

physical and emotional harm to immigrant families.<sup>14</sup> This legally justified detention is being misused to detain immigrants who, like the Itoi family and Joseph Dantica, had no nefarious aims regarding national security. Once we separate out criminality (which is not really relevant to these memoirs) and instead emphasize immigrant status (which is central to both), we can see how Sone and Danticat write memoirs that, in both implicit and explicit ways, explore the patterns of justification that the United States uses to validate internment and detention as “solutions.”<sup>15</sup>

Naturally, *Nisei Daughter* and *Brother I'm Dying* cannot stand for the larger body of texts that have responded to this crisis; in some ways, the manner in which each responds is unique. By using Tim Prchal's categories of immigrant narratives, what I mean to show is that we can look more deeply into Sone and Danticat's narratives to better understand how they tailor their responses to internment around familiar immigrant concerns about national affiliation, adjustment, and how one best responds to anti-immigrant hysteria. Both narratives are written by second-generation daughters, and as such explore the particular problems faced by immigrant children, most especially the acceptance or rejection of the dominant culture and exploring one's personal identity outside of a native homeland. Sone's *Nisei Daughter*, which begins as what Prchal would call an anti-immigration narrative morphs into what he would call an adjustment

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<sup>14</sup> As I will show, Sone's narrative explores the aftereffects of Executive Order 9066, which authorized both the incarceration and deportation of people of Japanese ancestry. Danticat's memoir reflects the realities of contemporary detention policies that are patently anti-immigrant, specifically the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), which were signed into law in the late 1990s, as well as the PATRIOT ACT (subtitle B, section 412), which justifies the lawful use of mandatory (and possibly indefinite) detention and was passed in 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, *Nisei Daughter* was re-released in April, 2014, marking the memoir's third edition, which comes as a turbulent time for detention in the United States, signaling the importance of this work and its contemporary resonance.

narrative. Danticat's *Brother I'm Dying*, however, finds "adjustment" more than it can stomach.

In order to fully comprehend the scope of detention as part of United States history and resulting immigrant narratives; however, we must examine its origins and the policies that permit the perpetuation of detention as an accepted instrument in the name of national security. I will begin with the history leading up to Japanese internment.

## II.

After Pearl Harbor, internment was employed to criminalize and punish Japanese immigrants who, in fact, had no ties to subterfuge or the attack on America. But the history of detention is, of course, much longer than this. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, the United States processed over 1,000,000 new immigrants, mostly through New York Harbor. This predominantly free flow of new Americans continued for decades, until rapid declines began in the 1930s. In 1933, only 23,068 individuals decided to immigrate to the United States, the smallest number since 1831 (Cannato 349). Ellis Island was losing its luster as the port of call for the land of the free; instead, "deportation [became] the big business at Ellis Island" (ibid) in the early twentieth century, keeping the center and its employees working hard, but this time on detention, the purgatory of immigration processing on the way to deportation. Ellis Island no longer operated as a gate into America, but rather as a stop on the way out.

While Ellis Island was a gateway-turned-gate for immigrants from Europe, Angel Island focused on immigrants from Asia. Located off San Francisco, Angel Island served as the central processing station for the majority of Asian immigrants coming to America

from 1910 to 1940, at which point it was claimed by fire. In particular, Chinese immigrants were targeted following an 1882 Act that restricted the types of Chinese nationals permitted entrance to America, legislation aimed at reducing the number of labor workers immigrating to the United States and accepting low-wage jobs. Until Angel Island became a center for detainment and deportation, Chinese immigrants made up the single largest ethnic group entering the United States via the West Coast (USIS).

In 1940, Angel Island was slated to close (a move hastened by the fire that claimed the administrative buildings). Its work was to be transferred to the mainland as the power to detain and deport noncitizens (the Immigration and Naturalization Service, or INS) moved from the Labor Department to the Justice Department, marking a shift that would forever link immigration and law enforcement in a way never before possible (Cannato 350), and paving the path for today's linkage between immigration and the criminal justice system. Following the attacks on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued three proclamations tied all the way back to the power of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, coupling "enemy" and "alien" and further muddying immigration's waters. One group facing particularly merciless scrutiny were the Japanese Americans as detention began its history as a "solution" following attacks on American soil.

In 1924, the National Origins Act had banned Japanese immigration, the effects of which are narrated in many novels and memoirs penned by and about Japanese American families. But following Pearl Harbor, the American government became sharply divided between reason and panic, leading President Roosevelt to issue Executive Order 9066, "which targeted Japanese Americans for special persecution and deprived them of their

rights of due process and equal protection of the law” (Takaki 15). It specifically authorized and directed “all Executive Departments, independent establishments and other Federal Agencies, to assist the Secretary of War or the said Military Commanders in carrying out this Executive Order, including the furnishing of medical aid, hospitalization, food, clothing, transportation, use of land, shelter, and other supplies, equipment, utilities, facilities, and services,” which amounted to the hasty and infamous organization of internment camps to hold Japanese Americans.

As a result of Executive Order 9066, Japanese Americans from the West Coast of the United States were sent to the injudicious internment camps constructed further inland in states including Colorado, Arizona, Wyoming, Arkansas, Idaho, and Utah. These centers were utilized as a solution to the panic rising from the smoke of Pearl Harbor.<sup>16</sup> Of the 120,000 internees, two thirds were American citizens by birth. While the government claimed military necessity and national security, “scholars now agree that this decision was not simply the product of wartime hysteria but reflected a long history of anti-Japanese hostility fueled by economic competition and racial stereotypes” (Murray 5).

To understand the way in which Japanese internment was often narrated in fiction and in memoirs, we must explore the customary route taken by detainees who were being forced from their homes and into camps. Japanese Americans faced a two-step interment program, first going to “assembly centers” before being moved to “relocation centers”

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<sup>16</sup> For additional information on the construction and administration of internment camps, see Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps USA: Japanese Americans and World War II* as well as Peter Irons’s *Justice At War: The Story of the Japanese American Internment Cases*.



(Murray 9). In the relocation center/camps,<sup>17</sup> the “internees were assigned to barracks, each barrack about twenty by 120 feet, divided into four or six rooms. Usually a household was in one room, twenty by twenty feet” (Takaki 395). Internees could not leave the camps except for emergencies, “and then only if chaperoned by someone not of Japanese ancestry” (Murray 12). The camps held adults, children, and babies, side-by-side in a prison-like setting (Weglyn 156). While communities of Japanese Americans certainly formed in the camps, they lost their freedom as immigrants and could not ameliorate or expunge the scars of detention that lingered for decades. Monica Sone was herself born on the West Coast of the United States in 1919. In her lifetime, the “Nisei [second generation] constituted 27 percent of the mainland [America] Japanese population in 1920 and a majority, or 52 percent, ten years later. By 1940, on the eve of World War II, 63 percent of the [mainland Japanese American] community were Nisei” (Takaki 214). This rapid increase in Nisei is directly tied to the prohibition of immigration from Japan. No longer were there first generation immigrants, only second-generation Japanese Americans, who were citizens by birth. The Nisei bore witness to WWII and its long-lasting effects, and due to their upbringing as multicultural citizens, they were in the best position to write history down, to transcribe and transmit it to future generations. As such, Sone’s memoir brings to light the effects of American laws regarding Asian Americans through three generations of the Sone family – her grandfather, her mother, and herself.

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<sup>17</sup> I use “camp” most often to refer to the relocation centers. Both Roger Daniels and Michi Nishiura Weglyn refer to them as “concentration camps,” as do other scholars, especially researchers who began investigating the history of the camps in the 1970s (Murray 20 – 21). However, my use of “camp” is not shorthand for “concentration camp,” but rather the same referent used by Monica Sone in *Nisei Daughter*.

### III.

Although relatively sparse to begin with, the existing scholarly work on *Nisei Daughter* does not focus on the detainment narrative within Sone's memoir. Instead, critics have examined fictional narratives such as John Okada's *No-No Boy* and Jean Wakatsuki Houston's memoir, *Farewell to Manzanar*<sup>18</sup> when studying Japanese American internment. When turning to Sone, scholars have instead focused largely on the various ways in which Sone's literary construction of self evolves as the memoir progresses. This focus on the development of a female identity favors ethnic studies owing to the emphasis placed on the marginalization of a recognized group (Japanese Americans) and that group's subsequent journey into a dominant (white) American culture. Of course, within this generalized context, there are specific critics who stake their claim in particular critical schools.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim, for instance, argues that *Nisei Daughter* is a text about feminism and patriarchy in crisis given that Sone ultimately "adopt[s] the discourse of the paternal organization. She is now in the same (patriarchal) system as 'the men in Washington' and speaks in the same language of democratic and individual idealism (299). For Lim, Sone's assimilation into America required a rejection of her mother's Japanese culture and an adaptation into the dominant, patriarchal, white American "mainstream" (300). In keeping with a focus on adaptation and an acceptance of life in America, Sone's integration (rather than simple assimilation) is also examined by

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<sup>18</sup> Sone's story, while a standout example of a Japanese American memoir, is not alone in its subject or its turn from prejudicial treatment to American adjustment. Mine Okubo's *Citizen 13660* is an autobiographical collection of drawings detailing her time at the Tanforan Assembly Center and the Topaz War Relocation Center. Jeanne Wakatsuki and James D. Houston's *Farewell to Manzanar* chronicles Wakatsuki's time at the Manzanar internment camp. Janice Mirikitani wrote poetry about her family's time at the Tule Lake camp. Most recently, Mary Matsuda Gruenewald penned *Looking Like the Enemy*, which also chronicles a family's experiences at the Tule Lake camp.

Stephen Sumida in “Protest and Accommodation, Self-Satire and Self-Effacement, and Monica Sone’s *Nisei Daughter*.” Sumida argues that Sone goes “against the grain of assimilationist ideology” (207) by writing with an “awareness of pluralism” (211) and even an emerging multiculturalism; however, Sumida’s argument is still rooted in an awareness and navigation of the subordinate position of Japanese Americans following Pearl Harbor. Finally, Warren Hoffman claims that *Nisei Daughter* is not necessarily about adjustment or multiculturalism, but an exploration of the cultural idea of “home” in a place that is not necessarily one’s homeland. For Hoffman, the concept of home in “*Nisei Daughter* is not only multifaceted but also tenuous and unstable;” (231) “[o]nly in the shape of the textual narrative... can Sone attempt to create a home—a unified whole (or the promise thereof) that brings together the disparate parts of her identity” (231). While internment is certainly part of these various analyses, it is just that, a part, a piece of the way that critics have traditionally puzzled through Sone’s construction of home and self.

In my reading of *Nisei Daughter*, however, the internment of Japanese Americans is the central pivot, the hinge on which the true meaning of Sone’s memoir relies. In Sone’s memoir, in other words, the collective effect of America on immigrant families is most clearly illustrated through her family’s experience as detainees. We see this through Sone’s construction not only of herself, but of her maternal Japanese grandfather as well as her mother, a figure popular in not only immigrations, but traditional Japanese narratives.<sup>19</sup> By pulling from narrative traditions of including the

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<sup>19</sup> For work on the absence of Japanese Mothers as an essential trope in *Nisei Daughter* and other generational Japanese American narratives, see Traise Yamamoto’s “Mothers, Daughters and the Trope of Maternal Absence in Japanese American Women’s Fiction” in Yamamoto’s *Masking Selves, Making Subjects*.

chronicling of multiple generations and the layering in of a historical exploration of exclusionary politics, Sone's memoir serves not only as an immigration story, but as an account of how national suffering and fear following the attacks on Pearl Harbor came to be displaced on a particular race of individuals.

However, the complicated fact is that—to follow Lim's argument—*Nisei Daughter* is simultaneously a story of anti-immigration sentiment as well as a collective story of an immigrant family's adjustment, with its protagonists ultimately becoming United States citizens even after suffering the realities of incarceration brought about by its government. The sometimes troubling paradox in this work is that Sone desires to be part of a nation that had so severely mistreated Japanese Americans. Looking back on her narrative—though there is no evidence that Sone consciously drew on prior traditions—we can see the ways that *Nisei Daughter* reworked some of the conventions that Tim Prchal identifies as part of anti-immigration camps that existed in America and came to be represented in literature.

The anti-immigration sentiment that Prchal isolates stems from a restrictionist view regarding immigration, which was prevalent at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries (Prchal 192) and called for tough restriction laws regarding countries from which immigration was permitted. For example, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers for fear of *economic* repercussions. In 1921, Calvin Coolidge, who was Vice President at the time, published an article in *Good Housekeeping*, in which he takes an anti-immigration standpoint in the name of *national security*, moving beyond economic and into demographic concerns. He writes, “American liberty is dependent on quality in

citizenship. Our obligation is to maintain that citizenship at its best. We must have nothing to do with those who undermine it” (14). The definition of those who undermine citizenship was extended to include Japanese immigrants when Coolidge, then President, signed the Immigration Act of 1924 into law. This nationalism against Asians, and specifically Japanese immigrants, came to a head following Pearl Harbor, when questionable patriotism was identified as a “negative characteristic allegedly belonging” specifically to Japanese Americans, creating an “anti-immigration sentiment” in the nation, which in turn seeped into narratives penned during and reacting to that particular historical moment (194). It is within this xenophobic climate that Sone was born and raised, experiencing firsthand the effects of various anti-immigration laws aimed at Asians before personally experiencing internment during World War II.

Though likely not writing out of traditions set by earlier authors, Sone’s memoir offers a typical kind of response, an orientation towards prior templates of Asian American nonfiction that respond to the treatment of Chinese and Japanese Americans in the early twentieth century. A founding example is Kathleen Tamagawa’s *Holy Prayers in a Horse’s Ear*, which was originally published in 1932.<sup>20</sup> Tamagawa focuses her autobiography on the feeling of being an outsider in both America and Japan, exploring how alienation restricts national affiliation unless one is willing to assimilate and accept the dominant culture in which they live, regardless of intolerances expressed by national politics and attitudes. Sone picks up on these themes and is able to layer on additional prohibitive legal structures that came to pass while she was an adolescent and young adult.

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<sup>20</sup> Akin to the reprinting of Sone’s narrative in the twenty-first century and aligning with an interest in Asian American Studies, Tamagawa’s memoir was reprinted by Rutgers University Press in 2008 as part of its Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the Americas series.

Tamagawa's memoir was published just a year before America's legalized exclusion of Japanese citizens began with the 1924 National Origins Act. This painful history is not left out of *Nisei Daughter*. It is implicitly narrated through an interaction with Sone's grandfather in Japan in which he describes not wishing to travel to America because of his age. However, his inability to be with his family in the United States is because his restricted movement across America's borders is legal in nature. By quietly referring to restrictions placed on Japanese citizens, Sone sets the foundations of exclusionary politics, which will aid in reinforcing later politics. Even so, Sone's is a traditionally assimilative story, participating in a lengthy literary history that does not yet include the disaffiliation of authors from immigrant traditions. Therefore, as a way to contrast her own American experience to her grandfather's, Sone restates her allegiance to America after her visit to Japan, explaining that, to her (like Tamagawa), Japan is foreign and America is home. While she affiliates as American, this allegiance does not erase her roots.

The inclusion of individual identity discovery is an essential component of what makes Sone's narrative so robust for reading multiple levels of immigrant suffering. Kazuko<sup>21</sup> first learns of her Japanese heritage as a child sitting in her mother's kitchen. "The first five years of my life I lived in amoebic bliss, not knowing whether I was plant or animal, at the old Carrollton Hotel on the waterfront in Seattle. One day when I was a happy six-year-old, I made the shocking discovery that I had Japanese blood. I was a Japanese" (Sone 3). The use of the first person as well as the phrase "made the shocking discovery" is misleading, since Kazuko independently discovered nothing. She was told

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<sup>21</sup> Kazuko Monica Itoi is Monica Sone's birth-given name. For clarity, I will refer to "Kazuko" when speaking of the memoir's central character and "Sone" when writing about the author herself.

about her Japanese heritage by her mother, who informed the three Itoi children of this fact over dinner on a Sunday afternoon (ibid). The narrative continues with Kazuko feeling “nothing unusual stirring inside” her at the news, that is until she learns that she must attend Japanese school after elementary school each day. “Terrible, terrible, terrible! So that’s what it meant to be a Japanese – to lose my afternoon play hours! I fiercely resented this sudden intrusion of my blood into my affairs” (Sone 4). Narratively constructing her personal loyalty to America’s educational and social customs allows for the coming climax internment to resonate with an even greater sense of affliction given Kazuko’s affection for her home country.

Just as the children in *Nisei Daughter* are the means for understanding an allegiance of immigrant children to American culture, the roots of first-generation Japanese American immigrant suffering are set via Sone’s mother. Early in the memoir, Mrs. Itoi is full of life, a woman who writes poetry, cooks for her family, and is an active part of the Japanese community in which they live. As Traise Yamamoto explains, the figure of the “Japanese mother is consistently identified with Japanese culture and, by extension, with the raced subject from which the Japanese American subject attempts to dissociate” (134). In *Nisei Daughter*, this dissociation and erasure is less critical than the clarification of the extent to which America itself has become hostile towards and destructive to immigrants owing to Executive Order 9066, which was issued on February 19, 1942.

While much of Sone’s memoir is quiet in its descriptions, the youthful version of herself overflows with descriptive flourishes when describing her mother in order to mark an incredible alteration that takes place following the family’s internment. Early on,

Kazuko describes Mrs. Itoi: “With her oval face, lively almond-shaped eyes, and slender aquiline nose, Mother was a pretty, slender, five feet of youth and fun” (14). When she arrived with her family in America, Mrs. Itoi and “her sisters sailed into port looking like exotic tropical butterflies” (Sone 6), their beauty radiating forth from the ship to the shore. Kazuko perceives her mother as hardworking (9), hilarious (14), full of laughter (44), and poetic (117-118), a woman who leads her children by example, blending Japanese and American cultures and illuminating positive attributes in people and places whenever possible. Even after the loss of her youngest child (106), Mrs. Itoi is able to regain composure and unwaveringly mother her other three children. She is a woman that is full of life and optimism treks through her life and work with unwavering determination and allegiance to America.

Establishing Mrs. Itoi as a resolute first-generation immigrant sets up an extreme contrast that takes hold following the attacks on Pearl Harbor. “Mother was sitting limp in the huge armchair as if she had collapsed there, listening dazedly to the turbulent radio. Her face was frozen still, and the only words she could utter were, ‘Komatta neh, komatta neh. How dreadful, how dreadful’” (146). The events of December 7, 1941 caused a once vivacious mother, a woman filled with laughter and poetry, to literally collapse, suddenly reduced to an empty shell seemingly melting into the chair in which she sits, becoming fused with an inanimate object. Describing her mother as limp, dazed, and frozen is a sharp juxtaposition to the active and spirited adjectives once used to describe Mrs. Itoi’s personality and presence. The narrative constructions of this moment signal a shift in the reception of immigrants in America. Mrs. Itoi becomes trapped in her Japanese body before literally becoming imprisoned by America owing to Executive Order 9066.



The decimation of individual vivacity is further emphasized by Mrs. Itoi's act of destroying items relating to her Japanese heritage. Even so, this physical manifestation is paradoxical, emerging from a desire to demonstrate her affiliation to America, even when faced with EO 9066. "Mother had the most to eliminate, with her scrapbooks of poems cut out from newspapers and magazines, and her private collection of old Japanese classic literature" (156). Benko Itoi literally placed her passion (poetry) and her language (literature) into the basement furnace, watching her language and connection to Japan "flame and shrivel into black ashes" (155), decimating ties to the homeland in a desperate attempt to avoid the internment bearing down on her family, pledging allegiance to America by breaking her bonds with Japan.

This paradox is narrated by a young Sone after the family is relocated to Camp Harmony. Kazuko "once more felt like a despised, pathetic two-headed freak, a Japanese and an American, neither of which seemed to be doing [her] any good" (158). Meanwhile, Benko Itoi composes a *tanka* in honor of the single weed growing up through the floor of the family's cabin:

Oh, Dandelion, Dandelion,  
Despised and uprooted by all,  
Dance and bob your golden heads  
For you've finally found your home  
With your yellow fellows, *nali keli*, amen! (174)

Mrs. Itoi turns a terrible situation, the uprooting of her family, into an opportunity for tenacity. She believes that her family can find a way to grow and thrive, even in the most unlikely of situations. This single passage, breezed through quickly and quietly in Sone's

narrative, signals that the desire to affiliate and remain in America has not been destroyed; however, this affiliation is not for the Issei, but for the Nisei, who (like the dandelions) have always grown in and on American soil.

After spending time at Camp Harmony, the Itoi family is relocated to the Minidoka internment camp in Idaho. Kazuko explains their journey across the American landscape, “we all pressed our faces against the windows and drank in the extravagant beauty in hushed reverence” (190), which is contrasted against Mrs. Itoi, who begins to wither under the pressure and dismay of internment. Kazuko’s mother is last seen at the gates of Minidoka with Mr. Itoi, looking “like wistful immigrants” (237) as Kazuko leaves the camp and moves out to her new life in America. In this moment, Mrs. Itoi is left at the gates and locked away with other first-generation Japanese immigrants, stripped not only of her role as an American, but as a mother. The internment experience reducing her to nothing more than an unwanted immigrant shut into a large cage on American soil as her American-born daughter moves on to integrate into her home country. Kazuko’s Americanness is innate, a gift through birth that cannot be stripped away.

Although her story includes the injustices of discrimination, alienation, and internment, Monica remained “determined to endure the injustices, bound to America by ‘an elemental instinct’” (Takaki 228), and is therefore steadfastly American. By the end of the memoir, Kazuko explains to her mother, “I don’t resent my Japanese blood anymore... It’s really nice to be born into two cultures, like getting a real bargain in life, two for the price of one... I used to feel like a two-headed monstrosity, but now I find that two heads are better than one” (236). The final time we see Kazuko’s parents, she

reassures them that she appreciates and values her heritage and that they have done well as parents since she is now prepared to embrace life as a Japanese American. Her duality is resolved as another contradiction comes to bear on her mother: Mrs. Itoi is cut off from her homeland of Japan while remaining physically confined in Midwestern America, her situation mirroring the simultaneous shutting in and out of American immigrants taking place in the middle of the twentieth century.

Even though America negatively altered her mother's generation, reducing once active and productive immigrants to prisoners, Kazuko ultimately follows a track of immigrant adjustment in America. Her story concludes:

In spite of the war and the mental tortures we went through, I think the Nisei have attained a clearer understanding of America and its way of life, and we have learned to value her more... I had discovered a deeper, stronger pulse in the American scene. I was going back into its main stream, still with my Oriental eyes, but with an entirely different outlook, for now I felt more like a whole person instead of a sadly split personality. The Japanese and American parts of me were now blended into one. (237-238)

Regardless of what she suffered, Kazuko sees possibility in America, explaining herself as unified rather than split, no longer pulled in two cultural directions, able to integrate the many aspects of her internment experience. As Prchal would explain regarding assimilationist tendencies in anti-immigration narratives, "In a social climate of trepidation over and, at times, outright hostility toward immigrants, there is little wonder that some children of immigrations would dissociate themselves from their own ethnic affiliations and identify more closely with the dominant culture" (197).

While many critics claim that Sone's integrative ending reads as contradictory or ironic, given the overall tone of the memoir, "there is little to indicate that Sone speaks anything but genuinely" (Yamamoto 139).<sup>22</sup> Although detrimental to her Japanese mother (and thus representative of internment's harm), America is fully embraced as Sone's motherland. Allegorically, the memoir speaks to loss for first-generation immigrants (particularly by means of detention), but the possibility that future generations may in fact experience a more open nation with greater possibilities via affiliation. The narrative does not claim that America will be tolerant or easy, but suggests that the resolution of paradoxical political structures is possible when treated with integration, as is traditionally the case in adjustment narratives, which ultimately position America as a nation wherein successful assimilation leads to immigrant success.

#### IV.

Of course, 9/11 was not the only reason that the detention became more the norm than we commonly recognize. Indeed, Japanese Americans were not the only immigrants affected by sweeping, ethnically-based immigration policies. World War I and II immigration quotas stayed in place until the Kennedy Administration, when immigration reform was put on the political agenda alongside and in concert with the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>23</sup> Following Kennedy's assassination, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (a.k.a. The Hart-Cellar Act),<sup>24</sup> which removed

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<sup>22</sup> For a different analysis of Sone's final passage, one that criticizes the simplistic and assimilative nature of Sone's closing words, see Lim, Lowe, and Sumida.

<sup>23</sup> For more on immigration quotas, the National Origins Formula, see Michael Lemay and Elliott Robert Barkan, eds., *U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Laws and Issues: A Documentary History*.

<sup>24</sup> For full text of the Hart-Cellar Act, see <http://library.uwb.edu/guides/usimmigration/79%20stat%20911.pdf>.

national origin formula quotas and focused on family reunification, creating pathways for families of legal immigrants to join one another in America. Specifically, this “new immigration law ushered in a resurgence of immigration from Asia” (Chan 142).<sup>25</sup> Simultaneously, “illegal” immigration, especially from Mexico and the Caribbean, continued to be an issue on the agendas of multiple political administrations, with detainment and deportation most often turned to as accepted solutions for solving issues relating to immigration.

In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan also began a series of immigration reforms aimed at curbing this “illegal” immigration. Policies under the Carter and Reagan administrations began with addressing mass asylum requests from Haiti in the wake of Tropical Storm Jean and massive political unrest.<sup>26</sup> “Haitian boat arrivals had been detected by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) previously, but they did not exceed an average of 3000 per year. In 1980, however, the number swelled to over 15,000” (Portes and Stepick 496). Because of this, a maritime interdiction program was initiated to turn back Haitian refugees at sea” (ibid) as well as forcibly returning immigrants to Haiti or sending them to Guantanamo Bay for pre-screening.<sup>27</sup> Again, detention centers were used as solutions to problems of perceived threats to American national security. Haitian immigrants and their Cuban counterparts were thus denied asylum, depriving them of the benefits granted as part of the 1980 Refugee Act.

In the early 1990s, Haitian immigration received yet another blow, this time in the form of an executive order 12807 from President George H.W. Bush, which made official

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<sup>25</sup> See Takaki’s chapter “‘Strangers’ at the Gates Again” for additional information regarding post-1965 Asian immigration.

<sup>26</sup> See <http://trac.syr.edu/immigration/library/P960.pdf> for full report on immigration and detention policies related to Haitian asylum seekers.

<sup>27</sup> See <http://trac.syr.edu/immigration/library/P4230.pdf> for additional details.

an interdiction program. As a candidate for President, Bill Clinton promised to abolish this order as soon as he was elected; however, this promise fell to the wayside when he took office (Lennox 688). Instead, President Clinton supported the unattainable standards set for Haitians seeking asylum, standards that “resulted in the rejection of 98 percent of Haitian asylum claims” (ibid) and concretized problematic policies regarding Haitian immigration.

In 1996, President Clinton passed sweeping immigration reforms that cemented the role of detention in immigration processing owing to the conflation of immigration and illegality, the roots of which set the foundation for policies in the aftermath of 9/11. The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) and Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), passed in April and September of 1996, respectively.<sup>28</sup> The AEDPA “narrows the grounds on which successful habeas corpus claims can be made [by detained immigrants]” (“AEDPA” Cornell). In combination with the habeas corpus changes of the AEDPA, the IIRIRA created paths to deportation that were previously unavailable (i.e. shoplifting) while also mandating that immigrants taken into custody could be held for a maximum of two years before being seen in front of an immigration board, meaning that many detainees can be placed in

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<sup>28</sup> The AEDPA was set in motion by the World Trade Center and Oklahoma City bombings, both of which were acts of terrorism and it “greatly expanded the list of crimes for which noncitizen, legal residents (officially known as ‘resident aliens’) can lose their residency” (Nevins 179). These changes affected millions of lives but remained mired in political and legal jargon, inaccessible to most and posing an even greater challenge for those with English as a second language. While the AEDPA brought a series of reforms, the most critical to detention and deportation concerned changes to the interpretation of habeas corpus, the right to go before a judge. The U.S. Constitution has a habeas provision in Article One, Section Nine stating that “the privilege of the writ of *habeas corpus* shall not be suspended, unless when in cases of rebellion or invasion the public safety may require it” (“U.S. Constitution Article 1”). Habeas Corpus is a legal action or writ by means of which detainees can seek relief from unlawful imprisonment.

detention centers with no paths out for months or years at a time.<sup>29</sup> Since 9/11, these detention provisions have been vigorously defended to hold detainees without hearings in the name of national security.

Detention centers themselves in the United States are as controversial as the laws that govern their practices. What we see in twenty-first century America is an interconnected system of detention centers that includes a combination of both military (Guantanamo and Bagram) and domestic (Krome, Stewart, South Texas, and Northwest, to name a few) prisons. “Many US detention centers are situated on sites which were originally either prisons or bases for US armed forces. This connection suggests both a criminalization of immigrants and their embeddedness in international military conflicts” (Waller 362), the foundation of which was set in the mid-twentieth century. This connection became further solidified by policy changes in the wake of the 9/11.

Following the attacks on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush signed the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), “a congressional resolution authorizing him to ‘use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons’” (Hafetz 11). Note the proximity of “nations, organizations, and persons.” In this statement, the United States government reserves the right to use force against entire nations in the same way that it can utilize power against lone individuals. It is the “persons” with which the authors in this chapter are most concerned.

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<sup>29</sup> For full text of the IIRIRA, see <http://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/ilink/docView/PUBLAW/HTML/PUBLAW/0-0-0-10948.html>.

Six weeks after the 9/11 attacks, the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001 was passed. Better known as the USA PATRIOT ACT, this move widened the use of surveillance while simultaneously expanding the already murky definition of “domestic terrorism” (Hafetz 13). Specific to detention practices, Title IV, Subtitle B, Section 412 of the PATRIOT ACT states that immigrants taken into custody such “shall be maintained [in custody] irrespective of any relief from removal for which the alien may be eligible, or any relief from removal granted the alien, until the Attorney General determines that the alien is no longer an alien who may be certified” as dangerous.<sup>30</sup> In addition, those “aliens whose removal is unlikely in the reasonably foreseeable future, may be detained for additional periods of up to six months only if the release of the alien will threaten the national security of the United States or the safety of the community or any person.” Determinations regarding potential threat to national security are made behind closed doors and can involve allegations ranging from money laundering, to shoplifting, to murder.

Despite the apparent similarities these changes might offer to Japanese internment, there have been some important alterations as well that will be vital for understanding Danticat’s memoir. Not only is detention more widespread now, it’s also been widely privatized. Meanwhile, there is a greater range of offenses for which detainment is authorized; detention centers are now prisons rather than camps; centers exist both in and outside of America’s physical borders (but still detain immigrants and suspects under American law), and (owing to the speed at which the PATRIOT ACT and

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<sup>30</sup> See also “8 USC § 1226 - Apprehension and detention of aliens” for complete text of United States Code relating to the apprehension and detention of immigrants:  
<http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/8/1226>.



DHS were created) there are enormous gaps between the written governance and actual practice of detaining individuals on suspicion of immigration and terror-related violations. Meanwhile, because of this imprecision and uncertainty, “the inmates of detention centers are suspended in time and place, ‘disappeared’ into a void” (Waller 359). According to an Associated Press investigative report from 2009,

An official Immigration and Customs Enforcement database, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, showed a U.S. detainee population of exactly 32,000 on the evening of [January 25, 2009]. The data show that 18,690 immigrants had no criminal conviction, not even for illegal entry or low-level crimes like trespassing. More than 400 of those with no criminal record had been incarcerated for at least a year.” (“United States Detention Profile”)

In 2011, the *daily* population of immigrants in United States detention centers soared to 32,095 in 204 facilities. There were over 3,000,000 immigrants held in United States detention facilities over the past decade (Gavett). As Danticat highlighted in her testimony for the House Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law, “They are called detainees, but really they are prisoners. As family members we quickly learn that. But even prisoners deserve to be treated fairly and decently and humanely. This is what we consistently tell jailers of other countries. How about we practice some of it here ourselves?” (“Hearing”). Detention narratives comment on the failings of United States immigration policies that separate families and cause generational harm. Nonfiction writing is not a genre traditionally considered in studies of immigrant narratives (or

“serious” literary analyses);<sup>31</sup> therefore, attending to nonfiction, and specifically detention memoirs, enables a widening of genres used in conveying immigration narratives and the ways in which they are transmitted, adding literary analysis to the discussion of immigration detention.

## V.

Edwidge Danticat’s parents immigrated to America when she was a child, leaving her and her brother in Haiti with their Uncle Joseph and Tante Denise. Danticat emigrated from Haiti to the United States when she was a young teenager, finally joining her father and mother after they established themselves in New York; however, unlike Sone, Danticat sees herself as writing from a diaspora even though she is an American citizen. In Haiti, Danticat had been raised by her Uncle Joseph in a house “filled with children whose parents had migrated to other countries - the US, Canada, France, the Dominican Republic” (Jaggi). What makes Danticat’s immigrant story so fascinating and complex is that she chooses to transpose her Uncle Joseph’s story onto the immigrant narrative paradigm rather than simply focusing on her personal experience. In other words, she transforms Joseph’s story, which I will soon explore, into an immigrant tale in order to examine twenty-first century acts and laws that negatively impact entire immigrant families by linking him to her own experience as well as the experience of her parents.

Her family’s story, told through *Brother I’m Dying*, serves as a testament to the experiences of Haitian immigrants from the late twentieth century to the present. This is

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<sup>31</sup> Philip Lopate, among others, claims that the “literary establishment... still turns up its nose at [memoir]” and nonfiction more generally (208).

important because the United States is “home to the largest concentration in any single country of Haitians abroad” (Terrazas); therefore, Danticat speaks to and for a considerable population of immigrant America. In transforming Joseph’s story into an immigrant narrative, Danticat hinges his experience on detainment; an interesting choice given that it comprises only a small portion of his larger lived experience, unlike the Itoi family, who lived for a sizeable amount of time as internees. However, I argue that Danticat focuses on Joseph’s relatively short (but yet ultimately eternal) experience as a detainee in order to identify crucial elements of modern day immigrant detainment – loss of familial contact, information blackouts, medical neglect, and a loss of trust in America – that in turn transform the possibility of immigrant adjustment into a rejection of the United States on the grounds of its mistreatment of immigrants.

As with *Nisei Daughter*, not much has yet been written about *Brother I’m Dying*. The existing critical analyses attend to various facets of the narrative not directly related to detainment. For example, Marta Carminero-Santangelo focuses on “texts [that] offer counter-discourses... construct[ing] alternative notions of ethical communities” (158) in terms of undocumented persons and border crossings. Her focus, then, is “illegality” and “aliens,” and the way that certain works of literary journalism intervene in the rhetoric to reframe human movement as non-threatening “to the existence of the nation” (158). Nicole Waller closely examines *Brother I’m Dying*, but attends to physical space rather than the full picture of Danticat’s narrative. Waller argues that Danticat’s memoir, when paired with a US Supreme Court ruling, illustrates the ways in which detention centers are “envisioned as removed from standard legal and social structures but simultaneously determined and circumscribed by political interests” (357). Waller then goes on to

question whether legal or literary discourse can intervene to correct the damaging course of detention practices in contemporary America. Whereas Waller touches on the role of written and oral culture in Danticat's memoir, orality is the focus of Brenna Monro's analysis. Monro argues that Danticat is "compelled by the border between orality and writing, and, appropriately enough as a transnational writer, attempts to reimagine that border" (123). Monro's work is highly literary, expending its energy on drawing borders through rhetorical analysis, which fails to remove *Brother I'm Dying* from scholarly discussions that tend to disregard historical and political circumstances.

While Carminero-Santangelo, Waller, and Monro reveal much about contemporary immigrant experience via various forms of literature, none argues for the inclusion of *Brother I'm Dying* as a narrative that represents the rich and disturbing fabric of immigration detention as a solution following events that literally began wars. Like Sone's memoir, Danticat's book is not solely about the individual; instead, it is an extended representation of the effects of contemporary detention and its consequential effects on multiple generations of immigrants within a specific ethnic cohort. Also akin to earlier memoirs regarding detention, Danticat's story focuses on parental figures; however, this time a "father" is the centerpiece—or rather, an adoptive and second father. By placing her uncle at the heart of her memoir, Danticat reveals that the politically patriarchal culture of America spares no one, not even its masculine counterparts. Whereas adoption by men would traditionally provide protection from an unbalanced culture (Prechal "The Bad Boys" 188), Danticat makes clear that that shield is no longer viable in contemporary America. But she means also to link the paternal role of her uncle with the "adoption" by American of its forlorn immigrants, by creating a bridge between

parental and descendant generations, readers are prompted “to envision the long-term consequences” of immigration policies (Prchal “American of the Future” 191). In an open letter to the *New York Times* in 1981, Haitian detainees asked, “Why are you letting us suffer this way, America? Don’t you have a father’s heart?” (Lennox 687). Danticat clearly answers that, no, America does not, and its lack of paternal empathy damages individual immigrant experiences while transforming traditional views on adjustment.

Whereas Sone’s memoir stays true to traditional immigrant narratives that transition from anti-immigration to adjustment, Edwidge Danticat’s memoir questions why immigrants would wish to be part of the contemporary American nation, pushing back against the assumed acceptance of assimilation so common to immigrant narratives of adjustment. In *Brother, I’m Dying*, Danticat tells the story of her uncle, Joseph Dantica, a Baptist minister who entered the United States through Miami with a valid visa but chose to seek asylum in 2004 after fleeing Haiti following threats made to his life by an angry mob.<sup>32</sup> *Brother I’m Dying* is a memoir and autobiography, bringing together multiple generations of the Dantica/Danticat family in order to narrate a story far larger than a single clan, not unlike Sone. But, “there is a step beyond truth. For the writer, the ultimate reward of memoir may be to produce a work in which the facts are preserved but the experience is transformed” (Kidder and Todd, ch.3). Danticat tells her personal story, blending it with her uncle’s narrative and factual information regarding his detention in order to present a story that conveys the deep grief of a family while implicating a history of Haitian repression via Executive Order 12807 combined with flawed post-9/11 policies in the creation of that suffering. While weaving a tale of suffering brought upon

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<sup>32</sup> For clarity, I will refer to the author (Edwidge Danticat) as “Danticat” and her subject either by his full name, “Joseph Dantica,” or simply by “Joseph.”

immigrants by governmental policies, Danticat's memoir also represents a contemporary turn in immigration narratives, a move away from American assimilation. Danticat narrates this turn by breaking an expected chain of immigrant families – her Uncle raised and nourished her in Haiti, she relocate to the diaspora to rejoin her nuclear family, but Joseph could not make this move with Edwidge, instead succumbing to the country that now housed his adopted daughter.

Danticat mirrors the American policies that cause her narrative shift by describing the experiences of her father (Mira) and her Uncle Joseph. Pre-9/11, the two men are affected by responses to an increase in Haitian boat arrivals and the enactment of EA 12807, both taking place in the later decades of the twentieth century. After 9/11, their story becomes infused with the collateral damage of the AEDPA, IIRIRA, and PATRIOT ACT. While the first two legislative alterations were passed in the late 1990s, they were trotted out after 9/11 as justifications for immigrant detention. In the early part of the twenty-first century, the PATRIOT ACT became the *modus operandi* for detainment rationalization.

As with Sone, Danticat's narrative begins long before the enactment of United States political justifications involving detention came to bear on her family. Therefore, she takes a significant early portion of the memoir to set up the importance of and connection to her family, which will later be tested by America as she transitions from a family memoir to an immigrant narrative. When she was a young child, Danticat's parents, Mira and Rose, departed for the United States, fleeing Haiti and the dictatorship of Papa Doc Duvalier. Danticat subsequently bonded with her uncle Joseph, living "in his house from the time [she] was four until [she] was twelve years old" (34). The Dantica

brothers (Mira and Joseph) were separated by twelve years, with Joseph serving as “more a parental figure than a fraternal figure” for his baby brother (95). Time and again in the narrative, Joseph acts as “Papa,” building his parish “up from the ground” (34) to provide love for his parishioners, helping to raise an abandoned young woman (Marie Micheline) and her children as his own (133), and proudly referring to Edwidge Danticat as his daughter (66). He was a man who always had “more work to do, more souls to save, more children to teach” (140). These descriptions bring forth an individual who is in no way threatening or dangerous, establishing the life of a man radiating a devoted fatherly presence and setting up the importance of generational love (and tension) that exists in so many immigrant narratives. In this way, Danticat constructs a narrative of Joseph that can then stand in for the majority of immigrants in detention: members of families simply aiming for better, safer lives, with no ties to violence or criminality.

In addition to fashioning the story of her uncle as a double for innocuous immigrants, Danticat carefully composes emotional paradoxes throughout *Brother I'm Dying*. She describes her tugs of loyalty because of the love she was able to feel for both her own father and Uncle Joseph as paternal figures: when Mira returned to Haiti for a visit, Danticat made sure “to kiss [her] uncle first” when entering the living room, demonstrating her affectionate allegiance to her Uncle (95). When Danticat and her brother were finally approved to emigrate from Haiti to the United States, she did not want to leave Joseph for her “real parents” (107), knowing that her leaving would result in “one papa happy, one papa sad” (111). Referring to both men as Papa cements the emotional undercurrent of the narrative: two men striving to do what is best for their children, namely migration to a country that promises to provide safety, economic

prosperity, and reunion with one's nuclear family. When Joseph visits New York, Mira asks him, "Do you see *your* children? Do you see how much they've grown?" (emphasis added), further emphasizing the fluidity of this particular family's composition. This parental flexibility, the male members of the village raising Danticat, move with relative ease between Haiti and the United States; that is, until post-9/11 policies raised the ghosts of Haitian prejudices, combining to create an catastrophic storm that claimed the life of Joseph Dantica.

In 2004, Joseph faced Customs and Border Protection officers in Miami, Florida. At the time, he was eighty-one years old and fleeing threats on his life born of violent unrest in his Haitian hometown. Through the establishment of paradoxical violence: the lawless violence of street gangs in Haiti versus the legally-sanctioned violence of American customs officials, the memoir (like Sone's) makes the results of American politics all the more surreal. Officer Reyes, from the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection, interviewed Joseph upon his entry to the United States from Haiti with a valid visa. Joseph anticipated a longer stay and therefore requested asylum, endeavoring to maintain adherence to immigration laws. Confusion ensued regarding Joseph's eligibility status, which led to his detention at the Krome Service Processing Center in Miami. While detained, he was allowed little contact with his family, all of it confused. Through a narrative of speech woven through Joseph's story, we see him preach passionate sermons in Haiti, lose his ability to speak in the United States after surgery for throat cancer, return to Haiti and find ways to communicate nonverbally, regain a mechanized voice in the United States via a voice box, return to Haiti and use his new vocal abilities,



and then permanently lose his voice (literally and figuratively) while in United States detention.

“My uncle was now alien 27041999” writes Danticat, describing her uncle Joseph’s alien registration number and illustrating the way that individuals are demoted from persons to numbers. This stripping of a name leads to less-than-human treatment of detainees, as is demonstrated by the events that soon transpire. After being booked into the Krome Detention Center in Miami, Florida, Joseph was taken to a trailer for his credible threat hearing.

The interpreter had trouble understanding my uncle’s voice box, so Officer Castro asked my uncle to move his mouth closer to the phone. As my uncle leaned forward, his hand slipped away from his neck and he dropped his voice box. The records indicate that my uncle appeared to be having a seizure. His body stiffened. His legs jerked forward. His chair slipped back, pounding the back of his head into the wall. He began to vomit. Vomit shot out of his mouth, his nose, as well as the tracheotomy hole in his neck. The vomit spread all over his face, from his forehead to his chin, down the front of his dark blue Krome-issued overalls. There was also vomit on his thighs, where a large wet stain showed he had also urinated on himself. (212)

Joseph was pronounced dead at 8:46 p.m. when an immigration guard found him “pulseless and unresponsive” in his bed in the prison ward at Jackson Memorial Hospital (218). He did not die at the hands of violent Haitian mobs, but slowly and painfully in a place that purported to be safer for immigrants. Joseph was stripped of his name, his ability to communicate, and then his life. It is only through reviving his narrative that

Danticat is able to reanimate and speak for Joseph while concurrently shaming the nation that so brutally abused and rejected her adoptive father, demonstrating that adjustment can no longer be the assumed culmination for contemporary American immigrant narratives.

Danticat could have ended Joseph's narrative with the events of his death, but instead she concludes the story of Joseph's physical presence through her own eyes. "My uncle did not look resigned and serene like most of the dead I have seen. Perhaps it was because his lips were swollen to twice their usual size. He looked as though he'd been punched. He also appeared anxious and shocked, as though he were having a horrible nightmare" (250). Danticat was not able to be in the room with Joseph, but rather she was shut outside, peering at him through the window as he laid on the metal gurney draped in a tarp. This echoes the final time we see Sone's parents as she leaves the internment camp; however, the clear difference is that her parents are alive and Danticat's Uncle is dead: longer-term detainment is survivable in the context of immigrant adjustment narrative while short-term incarceration can be lethal when combined with contemporary weaknesses in immigration processing. For example, his swollen lips, while a physical representation of Joseph's suffering, act as a metaphor of his repressed speech, his inability to get his words out, his lips swelling under pressure from the hopeless task of trying to communicate with immigration officials and the impossibility of communicating with his family. This projection of emotions onto Joseph's corpse gestures to the invisible link between the generations, the anxiety and shock that Danticat herself feels going through this experience, and the incredible reach of immigrant suffering at the hands of government policies particular to information blackouts and the ways in which detainees

physically and metaphorically disappear into processing centers. Tragically, Joseph's death isn't even enough to escape his detainment, his physical body held at a mortuary awaiting instructions for its transfer to its final resting place, which ultimately (and inescapably) turns out to be America.

After Joseph's passing, Mira uses his voice to speak against what was inflicted on his brother, "He shouldn't be here... If our country were ever given a chance and allowed to be a country like any other, none of us would live or die here" (251). Danticat herself asks, "What would he think of being buried here? Would he forever, proverbially, turn in his grave? ... He would become part of the soil of a country that had not wanted him" (250-251). In these pages, a distrust and disdain for America is most clearly articulated, as is the memoir's disaffiliation from traditional immigrant narratives via an emotional enigma that turns its back on affiliation and traditional acceptance of adjustment as the immigrant endgame. For it is America that provides Danticat with the opportunity for her highly successful career, but it is this very same soil that claimed her Uncle without leaving him with a single shred of dignity; therefore, she capitalizes on her success to get this story told while the memoir itself ultimately participates in a turn away from America in terms of immigration narratives of adjustment after the treatment of immigrants as dangerous masses.

By participating in a contemporary turn in immigrant stories, Danticat provides the "I can" that operates as an absolution of both her Uncle Joseph and her father's final words: "'M pa kapab.' I can't" (235, 264). While these two men use the phrase to communicate their physical passages as well as their inability to continue living with their individual pain, Danticat makes their words literary, placing an allegiance to family

and desire to infuse their deaths with meaning above an allegiance to America, reconnecting the family chain that her new home country so violently severed. Finally, Danticat's father was laid to rest along her adoptive father "in Queens, New York, after living apart for more than thirty years" (269), placing the men in physical and emotional proximity to one another for eternity. By ending the memoir with the death of two father figures, the impossibility of surviving America hangs heavily in the air. Two strong men who cared for and loved their families, who did their best to adapt to and survive in America literally become part of American soil, something for which they never would have wished. This tale of entrapment – Mira in his own body and Joseph in a detention center – comments on an urgent need to revisit immigration policies and devalue detention as a solution since it does nothing more than pass national suffering onto individual families with no links to criminality.

By writing Joseph's story in memoir form, Danticat participates in what Toni Morrison describes as the process of "journ[eying] to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply" (216). For Danticat, the truth comes through recollections of her childhood in Haiti with her Uncle Joseph combined with official court records and immigration documents, the oral account of Joseph's death given by his lawyer, and the death certificate information and investigation that followed. She aims for, as Philip Lopate describes, "both the literary and literal truth" (81) in order to illuminate the multifaceted reality of American immigration detention. In writing *Brother I'm Dying*, Danticat endeavors to exhume her Uncle's remains from the official account given by the Krome Detention Center, narrating the fullness of an individual immigrant life that tragically and needlessly ended

in death within detention. As she describes, "I live in a country from which my uncle was catastrophically rejected, and come from one which he had to flee. I'm wrestling with the fact that both places let him down" (Jaggi). *Brother I'm Dying* pointedly takes aim at America's unwillingness, and perhaps inability, to examine and revise its calamitous detention history, expressing the ways in which one family's tragedy can and will replicate itself for the anticipatable future. As long as America continues to use internment and detention to imprison immigrants following national tragedies, this country cannot continue to define itself in recognizably familial, open terms.

## VI.

We live in a time when "people affected by larger historical shifts, past and present, turn to life narrative as a means of translating their lived experiences into texts" (Karpinski 1). Sone and Danticat take their lived experiences and combine them with the nitty-gritty details of legal briefs, immigration policies, and political acts, infusing them with human interest, translating the literal facts of their stories into digestible, understandable, and effective narratives. What's more, these authors take immigrant autobiography, oftentimes marginalized as "aesthetically poor" (Karpinski 7) and elevate it critical literary status. They blend literal and literary in such a way that those interested in immigrant narratives must attune to nonfiction as an important genre, a genre through which stories are told through generational suffering. As Edwidge Danticat explained in an interview, "I am saying in [*Brother I'm Dying*] that something was done wrongly, unjustly, and inhumanely, and saying it in a larger forum that we would have in any court" (Berger). Through their works, Sone and Danticat write internment detention into

American immigrant history, making it known as part of a larger historical and literary narrative.

Sone utilizes accepted tropes that are well defined in immigrant literature, most specifically affiliation as a necessary step in constructing an American identity regardless of prior treatment of immigrants. Through *Nisei Daughter*, Sone fits her narrative into a literary tradition of adjustment while simultaneously exploring the damage done by Japanese internment following Pearl Harbor. As such, even in spite of her family's pain, the expected outcome is that Sone is able to affiliate and integrate into America, ultimately adhering to literary traditions. Danticat also accepted tropes with her focus on multiple generations of immigrant family, but expands the narrative beyond its expected borders. Unlike Sone, Danticat does not position herself as faithful to traditional literary outcomes, instead utilizing her narrative (and subsequent testimonials) as a call for change, a desire to see alteration on the part of immigration policy, expressing a need for detainment to be a less common part of immigration reality. Sone and her family were able to survive the deficient policies of the WWII era. As a counterpoint, Danticat highlights that, in too many cases, contemporary politics have literally become unlivable for immigrant families. By attending to the ways in which authors use detention as a device for communicating narratives regarding national suffering and immigrant affiliation, we can deepen the ways that we read authors such as Sone and Danticat.

The memoirs in this chapter ask readers to question immigration and detention policies in the contemporary United States, and accept detention as a real component of American immigrant narratives. What's more, they do so by foregrounding familial experience and the damage that faulty policies have afflicted on multiple generations of

immigrants. We now turn to film, which further fragments the traditional immigrant narrative while simultaneously commenting on the deeply damaged position of contemporary America, this time through an examination of failed American families rather than their immigrant counterparts.

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3.

***THE HELPLESS HELPER:***  
**ILLEGALITY, BORDERS, AND FAMILY REUNIFICATION**

You can't just take people away like that. Do you hear me? He was a good man, a good person. It's not fair! We are not just helpless children! He had a life! Do you hear me? I mean, do you *hear* me? What's the matter with you?

- Richard Jenkins, *The Visitor*

## I.

Human beings are not illegal. People cannot be illegal. “The term ‘illegal immigrant’ or the use of ‘illegal’ to describe a person” shall no longer be sanctioned. “Instead... ‘illegal’ should describe only an action, such as living in or immigrating to a country illegally” (Colford).<sup>1</sup> In other words, immigrants are not illegal, but sometimes their actions are, which leads to an illegal status in the United States. Since September 11, 2001, there have been major changes to immigration laws and their enforcement, complicating not only people’s understanding of immigration issues, but also the consequences that follow when laws are violated. These issues and their potential penalties become increasingly murky to navigate when questions of illegality become displaced onto reforms focused on family unification. As Doris Meissner, former Commissioner of the Immigration and Nationalization Service (INS) stated following 9/11, “Family reunification has long been a cornerstone of both American law and INS practice;” however, the realities of America’s contemporary political and social climates have caused that cornerstone to erode. In 2014, the number of permitted individuals under family reunification law was capped at 480,000 per year (Library of Congress), and is further limited by four preference categories.<sup>2</sup>

Family reunification debates are most regularly articulated with regard to America’s physical borders with Canada and Mexico. In recent decades, “The Beast” has become a focus of both border crossing and family reunification policies. The Beast is “a

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<sup>1</sup> See Haughney and Guskin for additional information regarding the rhetoric of “illegal” when used in discussions involving immigration and immigrants.

<sup>2</sup> The four preference categories are: 1) unmarried sons and daughters of United States Citizens (USCs); (2) spouses and adult, unmarried sons and daughters of legal permanent residents of the United States (LPRs); (3) married sons and daughters of USCs; and (4) brothers and sisters of adult USCs (over twenty-one years of age) (USC Title 8 1153).



network of freight trains that runs the length of Mexico, from its southernmost border with Guatemala north to the United States. In addition to grain, corn or scrap metal, these trains are carrying an increasing number of undocumented immigrants whose aim is to cross into the U.S.” (Sayre). One of the most complicated issues with The Beast is not that it carries “nearly a half-million migrants” each year, but that increasing numbers of children—especially unaccompanied minors—are making the journey (ibid). “In 2011, U.S. border patrol detained around 6,800 undocumented children. In 2012, that rose to 13,000; [in 2013] it was 24,000. Most estimates predict more than 60,000 minors” will have been detained in 2014” (ibid). So what happens to these undocumented immigrants and often unaccompanied minors? Often, these individuals are traveling to the U.S. with the goal of reunifying with family members (often parents) who left their home countries years earlier in order to set the foundation for a better—mostly safer and more economically secure—life in America. Unfortunately, this path to reunification oftentimes involves arrests at the border followed by lengthy detainment while families are located, immigration status is verified, and individuals are processed. This detention habitually comes with abuses, confusion, and unfortunately, deportation, displacing the issues present in America’s immigration system onto individuals who seek to navigate its pathways.

Although Canada and Mexico are the borders—owing to their physical connection to America—most frequently brought out in family reunification talks, issues of (re)uniting immigrant families are not limited to North America’s tangible geography. The UN Refugee Family Reunification program brings refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Somalia to America in large numbers, granting a path to citizenship based on ties to

established immediate family members (UNHCR). Naturally, a particular subset of American society feels uneasy about this connection owing to the proliferation of terrorism in those particular countries; therefore, imagined illegality (in the form of terrorism) is infused into debates regarding immigrant resettlement in America. One publication recently announced that “Terrorist sleeper cells and Lone Wolf participants will abound, thrive and flourish under this resettlement program” (Bradley County News), endeavoring to create a climate of fear around programs aimed at keeping families together as legally processed American immigrants.

Of course, debates with regard to family reunification are not new, they have been a longstanding component of discussions surrounding American immigration reform, especially after 1965; however, alterations to the tone and focus of those negotiations are traceable along economic, legal, and political lines from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present. While America’s borders were initially closed at the start of the twentieth century, mid-century politics worked towards making them open again (especially following the Immigration Act of 1965). Unfortunately, the twenty-first century then goes in reverse. This new era of immigration reform began after the 9/11 attacks and involves multiple justifications for the shuttering of immigration byways (i.e. undocumented Mexican laborers are “stealing” American jobs, terrorists are taking advantage of reunification programs to propagate their agendas within the United States, and a host of other unsubstantiated accusations). As the social tone of these debates changed, economic alterations also happened via increased funding to support the founding and operations of the Department of Homeland Security as well as an increase

in the amount of money spent on detainment each year and the resulting sharp increase in deportations.

In 2011, there were a record-high 188,000 criminal removals – both deportations and “voluntary” departures. Legally, local law enforcement officials have been turned into immigration officers via the Secure Communities program. In addition, a political change has shifted some prison ownership and management to private corporations, the two largest of which are the Corrections Corporation of America and the GEO Group. The way that these changes—prison privatization, border detainment, the processing of undocumented minors, and failed family reunification—are imagined narratively and the characters utilized to aid in their resolution are the focus of this chapter. Specifically, this chapter examines the ways in which particular filmic representations of what I call American “helper” figures become altered in the face of contemporary immigration challenges and how those figures are represented through the medium of film. In the films I analyze, the suffering of immigrant families designated as somehow “illegal” are often displaced onto a white, parental helper figure in order to scrutinize their processing and treatment. In other words, the films that I scrutinize utilize American protagonists rather than immigrants (a significant alteration to prior genre traditions) to probe the labeling of individuals as “illegal” and then their subsequent incarceration and immigration processing.

## II.

As soon as immigration narratives arrived on the Hollywood big screen, a predictable series of motifs and characters emerged. Loneliness, a desire to belong, and

navigating as a newcomer are explored in iconic American immigration films such as Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1917), *West Side Story* (1961), and *The Godfather, Part II* (1974). In addition to narrative tropes, certain figures – the newly-arrived immigrant, the antagonist, and again an archetypal mentor figure<sup>3</sup> – become concretized in films ranging in scope and chronology from *My Girl Tisa* (1948) to *Gangs of New York* (2002). In this chapter, I am most interested in a variation on this American figure, which I refer to as the helper, a character that represents mainstream (white) America's desire not simply to welcome, but to actively help immigrants assimilate into America and become Americans. These helper figures assist their immigrant protagonists by providing wisdom that is cultural, linguistic, and/or political, hoping to aid in the successful navigation of a new world. Traditionally, helpers have the power of belonging and perspective, giving them an ability to guide their immigrants through challenges that are both legal and economic in nature.

Helper figures draw upon archetypal conventions that appear prominently in quest and coming-of-age tales, making them a natural fit for advancing immigration stories. Additionally, helper figures are ensconced in American culture. In older variations on the character, their link to America's economic, legal, or political life seems secure (often via a career in law enforcement, or politics, or education) even though they themselves may possess a quality (racial, ethnic, or familial) that marks them as an outsider. We are all outsiders in one way or another, especially in a nation of immigrants: therefore, this archetypal doubleness, paradoxically, allows such helpers to act as representatives of the nation and characters with whom mainstream audiences may identify. In addition, the

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<sup>3</sup> By archetype, I am following Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell. See also Iaccino's *Jungian Reflections Within the Cinema*. For additional depth on the use of archetypal figures in cinema, see Chang and Ivonin.

helper figure implicates the viewer since Directors often leave gaps in these characters' biographies, allowing audiences to be drawn into and help imagine the broader story of immigrant rights and suffering (King 62). Viewers are required to fill in these spaces, perhaps even to share the anxieties and discomfort of the helper figure in his or her quest. Even when helper figures are traditionally secondary characters, film viewer can even be asked, at times, to share in the grand project of nation-building.

An early example of the American helper figure in immigration cinema can be found in Charlie Chaplin's *The Immigrant* (1917). An artist (Henry Bergman) represents America's economic promise when he pays for two immigrants' (played by Chaplin and Edna Purviance) dinners and subsequently hires them to be his models. The fact that his ethnicity is unclear marks him as something of an outsider himself, making his interaction with the immigrant couple easy-going; we suspect he knows what it feels like to be on the other side of acceptance. The artist's economic good fortune envelops the two immigrants, making it possible for them to experience their own financial success setting them up for an integrated life in New York. This activates a chain of events that includes their wedding and a tidy happy ending that leaves viewers satisfied with the possibility that these two lovebirds will "make it" in America thanks to the assistance of their helper figure. We never actually see them succeed, but utilize the narrative we're given to build the outcome we imagine.

This traditional narrative pattern, pairing immigration and falling in love, persists well into the twentieth century, linking the desire to assimilate with romance. This is especially true for stories involving individuals from Europe, who made up seventy

percent of immigrants to America in the first decades of the twentieth century (Kraut).<sup>4</sup> Aside from country-specific quotas, immigration law and restrictions remained largely unchanged through the first half of the twentieth century, favoring European immigrants over any other ethnic group. In the decades after World War II, especially with the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, there was a gradual movement toward greater acceptance of ethnic diversity. But much work was still to be done and thus social and political debates surrounding immigration reform increased.

1948's *My Girl Tisa*, for example, depicts a helper figure mired in politics, conflating immigration and political affairs. Tisa Kepes (Lili Palmer) is a naïve and beautiful immigrant hoping to find a way for her father to come from Europe and join her New York. She encounters various helpers, of varying degrees of help, along the way, including her employer (economic representation) and a lawyer (legal representation), each of whom is involved in Tisa's fight against deportation. In the ultimate example of the American helper, Teddy Roosevelt (Sidney Blackmer) makes a "deus ex machina" appearance and solves Tisa's imminent deportation via his incredible political clout. As a politician, Roosevelt was in favor of immigration, especially the classic narrative of adjustment, saying "we should insist that if the immigrant who comes here in good faith becomes an American and assimilates himself to us, he shall be treated on an exact equality with everyone else, for it is an outrage to discriminate against any such man because of creed, or birthplace, or origin" (Fonte). Tisa is a Roosevelt-ian immigrant, striving to belong in America. Given his political position, the Roosevelt character in *My Girl Tisa* is situated to provide a neat and tidy Hollywood ending for an otherwise

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<sup>4</sup> This is, of course, in large part due to the 1917 Immigration Act, which blocked South and Southeast Asians from immigrating to the United States.

defeated young Tisa, stopping her deportation order and predicting that fortunate times are in her future. The helper figure allows the viewer to draw hopeful conclusions about her eventual integration into America.

After the watershed cultural moment of 1965, the ethnic make-up of immigration narratives in Hollywood widened to reflect the influx of South Asian and Latino immigrants during that decade. For example, *The Party* (1968), starring Peter Sellers and directed by Blake Edwards (most famous for their collaborations on *The Pink Panther* films) follows a bungling actor named Hrundi V. Bakshi (Sellers), an Indian actor hoping to succeed in Hollywood. The film, while offensive in its use of brown-face for Sellers to play an Indian actor, includes the representation of South Asian immigration, a storyline not plausible pre-1965. In *The Party*, the helper figure comes in the form of a comedic partner, Steve Franken, playing a drunken American waiter at the Hollywood heavy-hitter's party to which Bakshi was accidentally invited. In a wordless exchange, Bakshi and the waiter collaborate to create physical comedy gold involving a roast chicken, a tiara, and the horror of high-class American film executives. While not political like many of its counterparts, *The Party* participates in the genre of immigration narratives in that it highlights a different way for immigrant characters to participate in becoming assimilated, through comedic collaboration with bumbling American helpers.

Moving towards the end of the twentieth century, the helper figure continued to aid in the assimilation of their immigrant counterparts. As the Soviet Union collapsed throughout the 1980s, immigration to America from the USSR steadily increased. Of course, Hollywood reflected the era's focus on Soviet-American relations, utilizing its own comedic spin. In *Moscow on the Hudson* (1984), Robin Williams plays Vladimir

Ivanoff, a circus musician who defects to America from the Soviet Union while on tour. Enter Lionel Witherspoon (Cleavant Derricks), a security guard at Bloomingdale's. When giving his identity, Witherspoon proudly announces, "I'm Security Officer Witherspoon and I understand how this man feels. I'm a refugee myself from Alabama." Lionel is a black man, his racial identity and link to the America South providing the outsider link, but he is now a New Yorker sworn to protect American commerce, therefore linking him to both economic and judicial pieces of America. Witherspoon becomes Vladimir's host and American helper, teaching the Russian saxophonist how to physically navigate New York, and metaphorically, his new life in America after receiving asylum. When Vladimir praises his "greatest friend," Lionel responds with a humble, "I'm just a citizen," underscoring that helping another belong is just a basic part of American citizenship.

In all of these films, the helpers embody older values of welcoming immigrants, providing them with positive potential futures. They all involve a happy ending wherein the immigrants are granted relief from legal immigration issues via the intervention of American helpers who solve economic, legal, and political problems. These endings serve the purpose of compositional motivation in the narrative, disrupting the uncomfortable possibility of the aforementioned immigrants *not* becoming integrated Americans. As we move forward to the twenty-first century, America's place as a desirable, safe, and welcoming nation begins to destabilize owing to economic, political, and legal changes to immigration and deportation processing; thus, films reflect this instability, representing it through narrative and form. This instability also begins to envelop families rather than just affecting individual immigrants, offering a departure



from established character and plot compositions in order to advance atypical narrative aims. In this context, the helpless helper fits with the collapse of the assimilation model: immigrants can no longer be assimilated, so helpers can no longer perform their function. This is especially true in independent cinema, where an aesthetic of verisimilitude, while still formulaic in its own right, offers a departure from canonical, comfortable happy endings associated with Hollywood.

### III.

When referring to independent cinema, I mean films not produced by the major (or “big six”) studios,<sup>5</sup> but rather under independent auspices. In independent cinema,

Greater scope has been found for more liberal, open or radical treatment of contentious issues... freed to a significant extent from the relatively narrow moral economy typically operative in Hollywood. Independent features have in many cases been able to avoid the kind of ideologically loaded imaginary reconciliations used in Hollywood features to smooth away any awkward social or political issues that might initially be confronted. (King 199)

Given the controversial nature of immigration politics in the United States, independent features are freer to present strong views and realistic portrayals of immigration experience, communicating a shift in traditional immigrant narratives and the way they have historically been presented on film. What’s more, the pressure to provide a reconciliatory ending is not present. Mine is not an argument solely concerned with film

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<sup>5</sup> The big six include Warner Brothers Pictures (Time Warner), Walt Disney Studios (The Walt Disney Company), Universal Pictures (Comcast), Columbia Pictures (Sony), 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox (21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox), and Paramount Pictures (Viacom). Of course, many of the larger Hollywood studios have their own independent houses, clouding the definitions of independent studios; however, the overarching aesthetics of independent film (and its resulting formulas) operate freely from traditional Hollywood subsidies.

genre, but one that simultaneously focuses on a subversive and politically-loaded reversal of a familiar archetype (the helper figure) as demonstrated through independent cinema. By destabilizing the helper figure, the films examined in this chapter offer endings that reflect the difficulties of America's current political climate, especially with regard to issues of familial reunification.

Generally speaking, cinematic immigrant narratives undergo a shift in the twenty-first century, moving away from both comedic and assimilative tendencies and becoming deeply ingrained in highly political and polarizing debates regarding immigration America (such as detention policies, family reunification, and the processing of immigrant minors); therefore, independent cinema is the best suited medium through which to construct and share revised filmic representations. Specifically, independent films that select immigration as a central topic shift from presenting a strong and reliable helper figure to instead favoring a helpless helper, one who fails in their project of not only welcoming and integrating immigrants into America, but ensuring that these immigrants are united with their families. This figure becomes the protagonist rather than a secondary character when immigrant struggles are displaced onto them, allowing for detrimental consequences to play out on protagonists that are Americans. In other words, contemporary immigration policies aimed at helping families ultimately fail both Americans and immigrants, and that is an extremely important distinction between film and its literary counterparts. In literature, immigrants are the ones who suffer the consequences of America's policy deficiencies; but on film, Americans suffer as much – if not more – than their immigrant counterparts, emphasizing elevated stakes and effects with regards to immigration reform.

The helpless helper, as I refer to the reimagined central character, aims to operate as a guide to the contemporary American nation; however, this has come to be a place that is fractured in comparison to its earlier incarnations, leaving the helper in a position of helplessness. What's more, these helpless helpers are frequently imagined as single parents, no longer parts of identifiably stable family (American) units of belonging and support, linking their struggles to that of family reunification since they long to piece together familial units for themselves as well as their immigrant counterparts. Their status as parental figures who deeply desire to help, but ultimately fail comments on just how fractured, incomplete, and broken the American civic nation-state has become: familial integration is a near impossibility. The helpless helper therefore becomes not only a character in these films, but an "organizing principle... a means of structuring" (Fischer 4) the films around a critique of contemporary immigration issues in America. And the failure of a given film's protagonist is conveyed utilizing an uncomfortable degree of political and social proximity: the helpless helper could very well be you or me owing to the use of displacement to shoulder these characters with immigrant struggles. This is "quintessentially independent territory, restricting the likely audience and inviting attack from the forces of conservatism" (King 199), and the films in this chapter use that restriction and freedom to their advantage. By examining two independent films that take up the issue of immigration and familial reunification in contemporary America, I aim to show how particular filmmakers grapple with issues regarding the navigation of post-9/11 America for immigrant families. It must be noted that the films in this chapter are most certainly left-leaning, ushering in not only an alternate version of immigration narratives, but a more politically radical alternative as well, criticizing immigration

policies as failing not only immigrants, but Americans, imagining the suffering of both literal and larger metaphorical families.

The films that I place at the center of this chapter's analysis, *The Visitor*, *Frozen River*, and *Crossing Over* utilize classical narratives to tell their immigrant stories.<sup>6</sup> This classical narrative structure employs two major plot lines: the "quest or mission of some kind" and the "romance" (King 61). This is often the case with independent films in general, which make use of a classical and therefore familiar narrative structure before subsequently departing from this formula not in the structure itself, but in the characters used and the political message. The characters therefore become "goal-oriented, [with the] narrative emerging largely from their desires" (King 61). In *The Visitor*, *Frozen River*, and *Crossing Over* the "quest/mission" revolves around navigating contemporary immigration while the "romance" is not solely about romantic or intimate love, but the romantic notion of family. The political message layered onto the story is one of legal vs. illegal paths traveled in order to achieve family reunification. In *The Visitor* and *Crossing Over*, helper figures attempt to traverse legal channels to help their immigrants become documented Americans and complete families. *Frozen River*, on the other hand, offers an alternate version wherein immigration and family reunification are structured around illegal border crossings. In all three films, the helper figures fail at family reunification, but in different ways depending on their position regarding legality.

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<sup>6</sup> While I select *The Visitor* and *Frozen River* as stand-out examples of how the helper figure is altered to aid in the narration of post-9/11 familial immigration issues, other contemporary films take up this pattern as well. For example, Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* pairs a Korean War veteran with Hmong immigrants in Detroit. The ending of the film leaves ambiguities regarding the helper's success as he ultimately gives his life for his immigrant counterpart, but racism persists through multiple generations of fragmented families who are left behind. Another example, Philippe Falardeau's *The Good Lie* (2014), narrates the role of an American employment specialist (Reese Witherspoon) tasked with aiding Sudanese refugees with their relocation to America, endeavoring to build a new family structure for these young men in the United States.

It is important to note that in analyzing fractured families and their component parts, I am not arguing for masculinity or femininity in crisis, which is a favored mode when analyzing representations of familial construction from post-WWII to the present. Analysis along those lines made its widest strides from 1990-2000, a decade which saw a burgeoning of critical works studying the internal struggles of both masculine and feminine figures in the shadow of a new millennium. Key works in this canon include Guy Corneau's *Absent Fathers, Lost Sons: The Search for Masculine Identity* (1991), David Blakenhorn's *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (1996), Susan Faludi's *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (1999), and *Sacred Cows: Is Feminism Relevant to the New Millennium?* (1999). My argument, certainly influenced by, but not aligned with these works in terms of understanding the construction of paternal and maternal figures, centers on the idea that single parent figures stand in for America when utilized alongside immigrant narratives. The parent, before a helper figure, becomes helpless in the face of the contemporary immigration climate and its challenges, defining America as parentally inept (to the point of being hostile and dangerous) while rewriting a key trope, the helper, regardless of the figure's masculine or feminine construction. As I will demonstrate, contemporary immigrant helpers convert to helpless figures shouldering immigrant struggles that have been displaced onto them irrespective of their identities as men or women.

Tom McCarthy's *The Visitor* (2007) utilizes a widower to illustrate a deeply flawed political system that favors deportation over family reunification. It pulls its narrative drive from not only reunification reform, but specific policing policies and programs such as the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS),

which was a system that required certain groups of non-citizens to register with Immigration and Customs Enforcement under the guise of tracking potential terrorists.

The program was a complete failure because

Although NSEERS was conceived as a program to prevent terrorist attacks... the government did not achieve a single terrorism-related conviction. NSEERS proved completely ineffective as a counterterrorism tool while failing to give proper notice to many of its targets and often violating their right to counsel. This led to the deportations of thousands of men and boys from Arab- and Muslim-majority countries for civil immigration violations. (Rickerd)

The NSEERS program boasted a rate of “Zero for 93,000. That was the government's terrorism conviction record resulting from several preventive immigration measures that targeted citizens of principally Arab- and Muslim-majority nations” (Rickerd), and thus the program was suspended in 2011. In *The Visitor*, Walter Gale (Richard Jenkins) comes directly up against the effects caused by programs such as NSEERS while also aiming to construct a new American family with him in a central role. Walter is a university Professor, a historically nurturing role in that professors pass along knowledge to new generations of students; however, Walter can barely be bothered to white out a previous semester's date on a syllabus to hand it out to his new group of “children,” demonstrating an inconsideration for the rising minds that exist within a traditional university structure and beginning to convey to the audience just how disconnected Walter is from his typical American life. In addition, Walter is a widower who embodies an absolute absence of female life: his wife has passed, we see none of his female colleagues on film, and he even goes as far as to fire his piano teacher, the only woman who crosses into the

personal space of his home (to teach him the very instrument of which his wife was an expert). He is a shell of a human until encountering vibrant immigrants who alter everything about him, telling not only the story of a changed man, but a country in real trouble legally with regards to immigration.

In Courtney Hunt's *Frozen River* (2008), Ray Eddy (Melissa Leo) is a white single mother living in a deteriorating trailer in upstate New York. Surrounded by grey, wintry weather while wearing outdated and disintegrating clothing, Ray chain smokes while an extreme close-up of weathered face conveys the desperation she navigates while working not to lose the double-wide trailer that she dreams of providing for her two boys. In addition to Ray, we are introduced to the character of Lila Littewolf (Misty Upham), also a single mother who resides in a decaying trailer home, but a Native American. Lila is a financially and socially troubled widow whose mother-in-law stole her son the day he was born, leaving Lila desperate to define her role within a family, desiring to care for her offspring. In this film, economics and the law (or willingness to break it) are the driving forces that motivate both Ray and Lila to action, motivation born from their need for economic stability in order to provide for (unify) their own fractured families. This desire for stability leads to illegal actions on the part of the film's protagonists as well as its immigrants, reflecting "the [family reunification] system's multiple shortcomings, [which] have led to a loss of integrity in legal immigration processes. These shortcomings contribute to unauthorized migration when families choose illegal immigration rather than waiting unreasonable periods for legal entry" (Abraham and Hamilton 22). *Frozen River* asks its viewers to understand that the conflation of economic and legal issues

rarely produces straightforward results, instead harming families (both immigrant and American) that break the law in desperate attempts at reunification.

Wayne Kramer's *Crossing Over* (2009) tackles multiple storylines in addition to failing helper figures, combining aspects of *The Visitor* and *Frozen River* with an explicit critique of particular post-9/11 American government institutions. In Kramer's revised immigrant narrative, the failed helpers are Denise Frankel, an immigration lawyer (Ashley Judd) and Max Brogan, an ICE enforcement officer (Harrison Ford), who are both single parents working towards family reunification. Both Brogan and Frankel are tasked with the legal enforcement of immigration law, but from different sides of the courtroom. Frankel aims to help immigrants navigate the path to citizenship while Brogan arrests those who travel the path illegally. Unfortunately, both are unstable protagonists who fail in their roles as helper figures, thwarted by immigration's conflation with other issues including blackmail, terrorism, oaths of citizenship, and human trafficking.

Contemporary immigration films depict Americans who are not only working to unite immigrant families, but struggling with their own familial construction. Walter Gale, Ray Eddy, Lila Littewolf, Max Brogan, and Denise Frankel are all divorcees, widows, or widowers and in each storyline, the futures of not only adults, but children are at stake. In these films, immigrants from Syria, China, Bangladesh, and Mexico are all separated from their countries and their families, facing dangerous policies that ultimately result in deportation from the United States. This throws into relief the issue of family reunification because not only are the immigrants themselves deported, but their struggles for family unity are displaced onto American characters. The filmmakers studied in this



chapter endeavor to critique this fracturing of families, which affects both immigrant and American families in the twenty-first century.

For example, there were at least 3.1 million United-States-citizen children with at least one immigrant parent of illegal status as of 2005 (Preston “Immigration Quandry”). From 2005 to 2007, at least 13,000 American children had one or both parents deported (Passel). As of the early twentieth century, family reunification accounted for approximately two-thirds of permanent United States immigration each year (McKay); however, for all of the successes, there are far more failings, taking apart families and highlighting problems with contemporary immigration policies. In this chapter’s films, the arrests and initial imprisonments, the situations that regularly fill a movie’s action sequences and high-drama, are glossed over and largely undepicted; however, the physical captivity and restraint brought about by immigration policies and the way that this physical removal affects familial units is extraordinarily real. The selection of reality over drama mirrors the authenticity of contemporary immigration experience, wherein the effects of imperfect policies are not felt in high-drama situations, but in everyday life of families entangled in sorting out the contours of immigration and illegality.

#### IV.

Such is the case in Tom McCarthy’s *The Visitor*, which explores the effects of displacing the struggles of an unauthorized Syrian immigrant onto a white American father. In a traditional Hollywood formula, the desire to believe in a perfect father is rewarded with a clean and satisfying ending that unifies family regardless of issues unfolding over the representation of time within the motion picture. Utilizing

formulations set forth by Stella Bruzzi in *Bringing Up Daddy*, I attend to the use of the father figure, in this case *The Visitor*'s Walter Gale, as a way to understand the aspiration versus the reality (viii) of immigration policies. Bruzzi argues for a pattern of fragmentation of the father figure in film, a pattern that was established pre-2000 (153-192), and I pick up her argument and add filmic representations of immigration narratives, contending that this fragmentation becomes further exaggerated and a disintegration of the heretofore strong father-as-helper figure occurs in twenty-first century. Character fragmentation mirrors political fragmentation: as immigration law becomes harder to understand and compartmentalize so too do the protagonists responsible for its navigation. By centralizing family disintegration and ultimately focusing on the failings of the father figure, *The Visitor* critiques contemporary national attitudes and processes, exploring the ways in which America's immigration policies have become insurmountable, thereby presenting a nation that no longer creates metaphorical and literal families, but instead splinters and harms both immigrants and Americans.

In *The Visitor*, Walter aspires to save the family in which he becomes involved (as a helper figure), but the reality is that he fails (becoming a helpless helper) because of indecipherable contemporary policies related to immigration and detention. He is a man well-versed economically and politically, but even his knowledge and status as an American does not permit him to rise above the failings of contemporary policies; however, his status as an educated white male allows access to the process of detention and deportation that could otherwise not be penetrated by immigrants or likewise marginalized characters. In other words, we need Walter and his intellectual and financial

access to lawyers and the legal process of attempting to gain citizenship in order to see exactly what happens to the immigrants in contemporary America.

The banality of Walter's life, his everyday routine and its predictable and dispassionate pace highlights that everyday situations regarding immigration do not unfold in gripping courtrooms, harried police stations, and intense political debates; instead, the reality occurs in living rooms, offices, and unremarkable detention locations. Emphasis on the mundane highlights just how common the helplessness that pervades these films has become. While formally composed of multiple doors and doorways, the compositional space of *The Visitor* leaks out into the audience owing the cinematographic choices that immerse the viewer in Walter's quotidian life. We are with him in his kitchen, witnessing him on his couch, omnipresent in his office, and so on. The continuity editing and eyeline matching present in the film allow us to not only see what Walter is seeing, but to feel as if we, as viewers beyond the fourth wall, are in an unspoken conversation and participation with him. We are additional participants in every one of the film's interactions.

*The Visitor* opens with classical piano music and a medium long shot of Walter watching out the window of his Connecticut home with his back to the camera. It is clear that he lives in a nice house, but an air of depression as well as anxiety hangs heavily over the scene. Walter waits for a visitor, glass of wine in hand, before moving through the house, traversing multiple open doorways before reaching the front door, building expectation and suggesting traversable borders. Again, Walter's back is to the camera as he opens the front door, blocking the viewer's angle of the visitor that he greets and suggesting that these potentially open borders are somehow unnavigable. The

cinematography betrays nothing of Walter's emotion or inner life. The woman, a piano teacher, has come to instruct Walter, which proves fruitless owing to his lack of natural talent and absence of passion. Walter's late wife was a professional pianist, and these lessons are his unsuccessful attempt to keep her alive in the home, the first failing the viewer experiences of Walter endeavoring to create a family where none is actually present. This also opens the possibility of Walter creating a new family later in the film since his desire to belong to a familial unit is established by his aims to connect with his deceased wife.

After dismissing the piano teacher, a single cut brings us to the campus of Connecticut College, linking Walter's passionless and banal personal life to his professional life, building a bridge of absence that permeates Walter's life in Connecticut. His world is dominated by privilege and Eurocentric values (everything from the classical music to his white students to the European art on the walls of his home), and Tom McCarthy directs that world in such a way as it leaches out to the viewer, bringing us into Walter's universe owing to our desire to see and experience more than is being presented. The visual presentation of both Walter's home and Connecticut College is devoid of color, plainly demonstrating that a world without immigrants is monotonous and cold.

At Connecticut College, Walter dispassionately lectures to a partially-filled room of students on trade in the Middle East. He is an economics professor with a specialization in developing nations. Professor Vale is an accomplished scholar when it comes to explaining borders, trade, and commerce, but is inexperienced in concretizing that knowledge in his interactions. He lives a life within the walls of an upper-middle-class home, a predominantly white liberal arts school, and as we will soon see, the

conference rooms of an elite conference comprised of older, established academics. Walter, his specialization in capital, and his educationally elite status allow him to stand in for America as he is representative, on paper at least, of a successful representation of America's dominance over and command of foreign policy; however, he is detached from the lived realities of globalization, just like contemporary America.

After learning he must attend the Developing Nations Conference on Global Policy and Development after his colleague (Shelly) is put on bed-rest, a head-and-shoulders tracking shot follows Walter as he moves from Connecticut to New York City. Shelly's need to attend to her unborn child sets in motion a chain of events that finally permits Walter to re-experience the creation of family and love in his own life. As we will see, the movement of Walter into the multicultural surroundings of New York coincides with the rising importance of him as a helper figure. This emphasis on Walter as a helper is not only reflected in the narrative plot of the film, but in the compositional *mise-en-scène*, which becomes urgently colorized as the film progresses, mirroring the personal changes in Walter and undeniably linking the helper figure to a political American message.

Walter arrives to find his New York pied-a-terre occupied by Tarek (Haaz Sleiman) and Zainab (Danai Gurira), immigrants from Syria and Senegal, respectively. Tarek is an Afrobeat djembe drummer and Zainab a jewelry maker, both sharply contrasting Walter's cerebral profession and personality. After a confrontation between the three, revealing that Tarek and Zainab have been tricked into illegally renting Walter's apartment, we are presented with a medium shot of Walter in the living room, drinking a glass of wine on the couch while watching Tarek and Zainab pack their things

to hastily vacate his apartment. Once the front door closes behind them, silence fills the screen as Walter sits alone on the couch. Two massive open archways fill the space to his left, leading into the dining room, signaling a left-leaning openness that has been awakened in Walter through his confrontation and interactions with Tarek and Zainab. Mid-century Modern furniture decorates the apartment, with four chairs at the dining room table and four seats in the living room, each waiting to be filled. There is a familial unit waiting to be established around Walter, with the events of the evening beginning the process; however, none of the seats in either the dining room or living room are entirely unobstructed to the viewer, signaling that the configuration of this family will not be simple. A single cut jumps to Walter at the window, but this time we see him from the outside in a wide shot as he decides to welcome Tarek and Zainab back into his home, we can read his face and are introduced into his emotional life. This is a quintessential narrative turn for the helper figure in immigration narratives: the moment they decide to reach out to their immigrant counterparts. In the case of *The Visitor*, this gesture even goes so far as to present Walter accepting complete strangers into his home, exaggerating and underscoring his role of integrating Tarek and Zainab into his world. This is the first of many amplified yet cinematographically quiet moves that *The Visitor* makes in order to critique America's role as a helpless helper to contemporary immigrants. Here, Walter embodies earlier incarnations of American immigration stories: he welcomes immigrants into his world and endeavors to create a family unit bound by experience rather than citizenship or ethnicity.

The growth of Walter emotionally echoes twentieth century attitudes that welcomed and embraced immigrants into America. At 17:14 and 19:45, the viewer is

treated to our first glimpses of Walter as a warm human rather than just a person going through necessary motions. He shares a slight smile with Tarek (the first he gives in the film) and then a heartier laugh as the two men bond over music. Walter's presumably lifelong Eurocentric taste in classical music expands to include Afrobeat Jazz as he and Tarek warm to one another, metaphorically representing the positive influences of non-Western culture infiltrating traditional American spaces and individuals. Tarek invites Walter to join him and Zainab for a home-cooked meal in their shared apartment, further solidifying their representation as familial; however, it is in this scene that foreshadowing begins to figure heavily, darkening an otherwise warm moment of bonding between complete strangers.

The meal begins with Walter and Zainab seated at the table while Tarek is out of frame on the phone, foretelling of a time in the near future where Tarek will be removed from the this nontraditional family. Once Tarek joins them, he speaks of his mother Mouna (Haim Abass) who "worries if she doesn't hear from [him] everyday," bringing her to the table with them through conversation and foreshadowing her physical presence in mere days. As Walter pours the wine, Tarek accepts and Zainab declines, with Tarek explaining, "She's a good Muslim, I'm a bad one," a joke explaining why one imbibes while the other abstains, but also representative of how Tarek and Zainab are stereotyped as African nationals in post-9/11 America. Walter then explains that his conference at NYU is on developing nations. Again, Tarek sets forth identity categories for him and Zainab: "That's us. Syria [indicating himself]. Senegal [indicating Zainab]," identifying them not only as individuals but as nations, setting up a clear triangulation between Senegal (Zainab), Syria (Tarek), and America (Walter) that will play out via immigration

and detention politics. It is at this point in the film that Walter is also welcomed “home” by two different occupants of his building: a neighbor that grew up around the Vales and Tarek, the newest resident to the building, bookending the emotional lifespan of Walter’s time in his apartment. Tarek’s utterance of “welcome home” solidifies the family unit of which he and Walter are the generational cornerstones. As Walter’s comfort with Tarek and Zainab increases, so too does his appreciation of Afrobeat Jazz, African food, and multicultural locations such as Central Park drum circles and Village artists markets. This appreciation mirrors the notion that America needs its immigrants to make it into a great and diverse nation. The world of *The Visitor* comes alive when it moves out of white-dominated conferences and classrooms and onto multicultural streets.

Tarek’s world and djembe call to Walter as the Professor begins to transition from academic to experiential, Tarek’s life and music become Walter’s teachers, especially when Tarek explains that Walter can no longer “think in 4’s,” which literally refers to the difference between the 4/4 rhythm of classical music and traditional Afrobeat, which requires counting in threes instead; however, metaphorically, Tarek is foreshadowing that Walter will soon be responsible for three people in an imagined familial unit: himself, Tarek, and Mouna. In addition to the familial triad, *The Visitor* offers a cinematographic/compositional counterpart: Walter’s physical world will begin to be dominated by three colors: red, white, and blue whenever he is involved with the fight against Tarek’s deportation. This color trifecta initially gained significance when explained for The Great Seal of the United States, linking them to politics and signifying the pervasive and omnipresent nature of politics in America. According to the Secretary of the Continental Congress, when speaking about The Great Seal, “The colors of the



pales (the vertical stripes) are those used in the flag of the United States of America; White signifies purity and innocence, Red, hardiness and valor, and Blue, the color of the Chief (the broad band above the stripes) signifies vigilance, perseverance, and justice” (publications.usa.gov).<sup>7</sup> As we will see in *The Visitor*, it is Walter’s innocence (white) in the face of vigilance and justice (blue) that end up robbing both he and Tarek of their hardiness and valor (red).

*The Visitor* spends the first third of its total running time devoted to establishing a familial bond (Walter’s potential to become part of a family unit rather than a widower) as well as his identity as an American (an economics professor), both of which figure heavily in the forward-motion of coming events. After a misunderstanding in the subway station at 72<sup>nd</sup> and Broadway, at the geographical center of Manhattan, Tarek is arrested for fare evasion and Walter is left to carry two djembe’s home to Zainab. He assures her that he “went down to the precinct to make a statement,” assuming (as a privileged white male could in pre-9/11 America) that his statement would carry weight; however, this is post-9/11 America and Walter’s helplessness as a helper figure begins to centralize in the narrative. Tarek is moved from the police station to the UCC, or United Correctional Corporation, a windowless warehouse in Queens that is the fictional partner to the actual Queens Detention Facility, which is run by the privately-held GEO Group. The actual facility is an unmarked warehouse geographically close to JFK airport, a hotbed of asylum-seeking activity.

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<sup>7</sup> It should also be noted that The Great Seal is more official than the Stars & Stripes. “The obverse front of the Great Seal, which is used 2,000 to 3,000 times a year, authenticates the President's signature on numerous official documents such as treaty ratifications, international agreements, appointments of Ambassadors and civil officers, and communications from the President to heads of foreign governments. The design of the obverse of the Seal, which is the U.S. coat of arms, can be shown on coins, postage stamps, passports, monuments and flags, and in many other ways. The American public sees both the obverse and less familiar reverse, which is never used as a seal, every day when exchanging the \$1 dollar bill” (publications.usa.gov).

With Tarek's arrest and subsequent detention, Walter transitions into a guide role. No longer is he the embodiment of a nation that welcomes immigrants, but now the escort through post-9/11 America, a place that is hostile and confusing, especially with regards to male immigrants from Arab and Muslim nations. This transition is conveyed not only through the narrative, but the mise-en-scene. The introduction of the UCC opens with a wide, overhead shot of Walter looking like a lost tourist in an urban wasteland, working hard to reestablish himself in this new reality. There are no other people, the cityscape is bleak and run-down, and Walter pathetically emerges from the subway still dressed as a preppy professor from Connecticut. At this point in the film, Walter's desperation steadily increases alongside deeply-hued reminders of America's ever-present power, with the UCC sign in bold blue affixed to the red and white warehouse that holds its immigrant inmates captive. The privately-operated prison stands as a representation of American economic and legal debates taking place inside the privately-operated walls of detention centers. These prisons are sanctioned via so-called Intergovernmental Services Agreements, which permits towns and cities to control immigration detention centers (for profit) while the detainees inside the walls are technically still ICE inmates awaiting legal processing (Burnett).

In the UCC waiting room, an image of the Statue of Liberty looms on the wall while visitors must pass under a framed print of the Twin Towers while going through the security pat down, which is staffed solely by black security guards. This small detail highlights that African Americans have far outpaced immigrants when it comes to social standing in contemporary America, further emphasizing that we are no longer in the twentieth century. The sealed space between the waiting room and the visitation room is

a white box with a red fire extinguisher and blue signs on the walls, and viewers are forced to try to read and navigate the colors and meaning of this cramped and confusing box alongside Walter, the camera's overhead angle reinforcing a feeling of inescapable incarceration and surveillance. Once inside the visiting station, visitors are seated on one side of a glass partition with inmates on the other. The space is composed again of white walls, but this time the chairs are red and the prisoner uniforms are blue. In case the color composition did not seep into the minds of viewers, Tom McCarthy overtly conveys the omnipresence of 9/11's aftereffects with a mural on the visiting room wall that depicts the Statue of Liberty, the Twin Towers, July 4<sup>th</sup>, and a large American flag. Lady Liberty's face, however, is distorted and downtrodden, reflecting the same feeling that Walter has as he crosses past the mural after his first visit with Tarek inside the detention center, emphasizing Walter as a stand-in for failing American archetypes: Lady Liberty is no longer a maternal beacon that welcomes immigrants to the United States just as helper figures are no longer useful to the process of immigrant integration.

As the color images of America increase, so too does the prevalence of red in the red, white, and blue color scheme, mirroring increasing passion, both paternal and romantic. When Tarek's mother, Mouna, arrives from the Midwest, Walter greets her at the door of his apartment, a medium shot/reverse that displays their emotions at this first meeting, and also allows the viewer to see that the door to Walter's apartment is painted red (the hallway walls are white and the banisters are blue). As he welcomes Mouna into his home, she crosses the threshold of red and also enters Walter's passions as the two become, albeit innocently, romantically linked, suggesting the possibility of a country in which Muslim-American relations can be positive and familial. Walter and Mouna have

interactions at the dining room table and in the kitchen, two quintessential domestic spaces, the latter of which is decorated in white and blue tiles with a red pegboard for hanging utensils (read: utility and usefulness). When Walter introduces Mouna to Zainab, the three bond over their love for Tarek and take a ride on the Staten Island ferry, drinking in freedom of movement, images of the Statue of Liberty (although never fully in focus), and Ellis Island (which is obscured by the Statue), signaling that their perceived freedom is not fully attainable since this is a fleeting moment encapsulated in the reality of Tarek's detention, which is entirely confined. By involving the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, viewers are reminded of Walter's desire to create a space linking back to earlier incarnations of America, a place where immigrants were welcomed rather than targeted and shunned.

When Walter must return to Connecticut to attend to university business, he brings Tarek's djembe, never leaving this bond in New York, but physically taking it along with him. In Connecticut, Walter's home, university lecture hall, and campus office are all devoid of red, white, and blue, but most especially red, gesturing to the very passion that allows him to be the helper he wants to become. When Walter turns on a CD from Tarek and practices djembe in his Connecticut home, we are again flooded with colorful touchstones of Walter as the American helper: the red drum, a white tee shirt, and blue boxer shorts. It is only with Tarek's presence that the red, white, and blue come together and Walter comes to life. Upon his return to New York, after taking leave from Connecticut College, Walter arrives wearing new glasses and literally seeing the situation with new eyes. Freed from his ties to Connecticut, including selling his wife's piano, Walter is able to tackle Tarek's issue and his relationship with Mouna.

In the last scene of Walter and Tarek together, red becomes a color of despair and frustration, shown most clearly and literally in Tarek's eyes. The young man frustratingly cries to Walter: "What do they think? I'm a terrorist? There are no terrorists in here. Terrorists have money, they have support. This is just not fair." Walter works to sympathize, but his compassion only further aggravates Tarek, causing his eyes to become more bloodshot and painful in the same close-up that shows his white tee shirt and blue detention uniform. Walter is rendered speechless, an awareness of his helplessness starting to crest in his consciousness and the reality of America's attitudes towards and treatment of immigrants coming into focus.

In an attempt to regain control, Walter focuses on the romantic potential of his narrative, taking Mouna to Broadway to see *The Phantom of the Opera*. Of course, the actual phantom is Tarek, a presence that has brought Mouna and Walter together even though this imagined family has never been physically in the same place at the same time since Mouna cannot enter the UCC. At this moment, the film could take a Hollywood turn towards a happy ending. It's conceivable that Walter and Mouna could unite romantically since they make a lovely match for one another, Tarek could get out of detention, and they maybe, just maybe could start a life as a family in New York. Of course, this is independent cinema and not focused on the "could-be" of a tidy ending. Therefore Tarek is deported to Syria at the very moment that Walter and Mouna are enjoying their night on the town, with legal issues ultimately destroying the possibility of this new family and an integration of Tarek and Mouna into Walter's world.

Back at UCC, Walter's anger and helplessness burst forcefully from his body as he yells, "WE ARE NOT JUST HELPLESS CHILDREN!" to uninterested black guards

at the detention facility, screaming at the top of his lungs in a waiting room that is empty of all people and life, instead full only of empty American icons: the Statue of Liberty, a Coca-Cola vending machine, I.C. E. flyers, and an ironic poster that reads “Immigrants Are Our Strength.” Walter embodies the helplessness of Americans, the inability to welcome immigrants via older American traditions, and the uselessness of trying.

In the most anguished moment of the film, Walter takes Tarek’s djembe and recedes underground to the Broadway and Lafayette subway station, a place where Tarek always wanted to play. The station is white and blue, devoid of red, as Walter plays the djembe with sorrow and anger, his passion drained but his anger fully present. The loss of red, of the blood of the nation, its immigrants, has robbed Walter of his charisma, but spurred him forward to do the work of immigrants via Tarek’s music. As his angry drumming resounds through the subway, the film fades to black, the rhythms of the djembe echoing off the screen. As a helper, as a father, and as a guide to contemporary America, Walter has failed. He could not save Tarek, and subsequently Mouna after she chose to relocate back to Syria to be with her son (exiting the film under an enormous American flag at JFK airport), his desired family ultimately unattainable without true immigration reform. The only way that immigrant families are able to reunite is outside of America’s borders since the limitations set by current policies are insurmountable and unrealistic. As Mouna and Tarek reunify in Syria, Walter is left alone and angry, a state in which America could very well find itself if unable to acknowledge and keep the red, the blood, the immigrants, which are essential to this country being whole.

*The Visitor* initially presents the possibility of an ethnically-mixed family consisting of Americans and Muslims, an idealized space in which immigration is no

longer a threatening and unstable force. However, owing to the reality of policies regarding family reunification as well as legal limitations caused by programs such as NSEERS and its resulting attitudes, this integrated vision is rendered impossible. Instead, the film presents viewers with an American protagonist who cannot successfully navigate his own country, demonstrating that America will continue its course to global demotion if it cannot find a way to again assimilate, and therefore heal the nation, via the inclusion and reunification of immigrant families.

Where *The Visitor* heavily critiques legal issues, *Frozen River*, while utilizing similar narrative and character structures, engages with economic realities and the resulting desperation caused by fractured family units. Naturally, legality figures into the film as well, but *Frozen River* uses economic destitution in order to justify a transition into illegal immigration activity.

However, *Frozen River* is a complicated and ambiguous film, and one that does not provide for tidy analytical framing. In the arc of this chapter's discussion, *Frozen River* operates as a contested and knotty middle ground, an uneasy pairing with the other two films, but one that is necessary in order to fully move through and examine the genre alterations that are in process. *The Visitor* is extremely clear in its critique of NSEERS as well as its quiet desire for family reunification. It is a film with a clear identity in independent cinema that progresses in measured steps, echoing the music that lives at the cores of its central characters. On the other end of the spectrum, *Crossing Over* is brash, unapologetic, and blaring in its condemnation of contemporary policies that lead to the literal destruction of immigrant families. Kramer's film, while technically independent, casts Hollywood heavy hitters to draw attention to and condemn a multitude of perceived

sins on the part of the American government. In an extremely different way, *Frozen River* examines family reunification and immigration difficulties, but with additional complications of economic and illegal problems brought about by Americans who desire (and fail) to become helper figures. The physical space of the film (the river and Upstate New York) share stillness and pace with *The Visitor* while the chaos of illegality and the splitting of families more closely align with *Crossing Over*. In addition, Courtney Hunt creates problematic protagonists who are difficult to like and engage in human trafficking; however Ray Eddy and Lila Littlewolf simultaneously evoke sympathy from viewers, making the film complicated in its subject matter and analysis. Even with its complications, *Frozen River* remains an important component within the metamorphosis of the helper figure and the ongoing alterations to immigrant film narratives.

## V.

As Addison, Goodwin-Kelly, and Roth explain in *Motherhood Misconceived: Representing the Maternal in U.S. Films*, since the start of the twenty-first century, “motherhood has been central to debates regarding... U.S. domestic and foreign policy” (1), and this debate is centralized (although not directly addressed) in *Frozen River*. What’s more, all of the mothers in *Frozen River* are without husbands, whether via death, abandonment, or narrative construction, forcing them into a sisterhood and imagined family unit that they may or may not have actively chosen. This “central focus on relationships between women is a defining characteristic of many independent features made by women” (King 226), and Courtney Hunt’s *Frozen River* is no exception. Through this female relationship, the viewer is permitted access to both political and



economic issues. Lila is a member of an ethnically marginalized (Mohawk) population; however, the overwhelming influence of economics on both Lila and Ray makes clear that immigration issues are in fact American rather than ethnic in nature. Both women attempt to fill the helper role, but become helpless in the face of their own illegal actions, requiring them both to be cast out of their particular American lives. By displacing the struggles of immigrants onto American female helpers, Courtney Hunt complicates views on illegal immigration, requiring her viewers to think beyond simplified sound bites, especially since she involves both immigrant and American families via parents and children. In *Frozen River*, Americans become surrogate figures responsible for the well-being of immigrants, and when that accountability fails, weaknesses in America as a safe and welcoming place (a new family) for immigrants come into relief. In addition, when family reunification succeeds (as it does in one of the smuggling storylines), the success of one family's reunification leads to the tearing apart of the protagonist's nuclear family unit, suggesting an either/or dichotomy: either helpers work legally and fail their immigrants or work illegally and fail their own families. In both situations, family reunification for both immigrants and Americans is impossible.

Hunt does not depict a world in which life is easy for her single mothers. In fact, their worlds are barely survivable and the trauma caused by the loss of husband/father figures hangs heavily over Ray Eddy and Lila Littlewolf even as they attempt to provide for their children. As David Peterson del Mar highlights in *American Families*, "single mothers are at a very high risk of poverty" (130), and this is represented unapologetically in *Frozen River*, casting a realistic view of the lives of Ray and Lila and forcing the audience to grapple with uncomfortably palpable destitution. In addition, the physical

space within *Frozen River* is simultaneously vast and constricting, allowing momentary glimpses of freedom only to be overcome by feelings of entrapment. The landscape of upstate New York State, the Mohawk Reservation, and Canada are introduced and sustained through long shots, suggesting an expansive and abundant land; however, this abundance is kept at a distance owing to the viewer's separation from the land, marking it as unattainable. Simultaneously, Hunt utilizes close shots in cramped internal spaces with absolutely no depth staging. Tiny Bingo parlors, decaying trailer homes, and uncomfortably restrictive automobiles encourage "the viewer into a position of close proximity with rather than distance from central characters" (King 254), especially since Hunt rarely goes wider than a medium shot when characters are in the frame.

The film goes out of its way to emphasize triads both visually and within the plot: homes always have three windows with three front steps leading inside, the futures of three little boys (Ray and Lila's sons) are at stake, a three-bedroom doublewide trailer is the ultimate goal, and the landscape participates as well via the three land nations (the United States, Canada, and the Mohawk Nation) depicted in the film. This trifecta underscores three operational elements of American immigration reform – economic, legal, and political – that are scrutinized in the film; however, it is the economic struggles of families that the film identifies as fundamental since insolvency is the problem that leads the film's protagonists into criminal immigration activity.

Ray Eddy is the central figure onto which the displacement of immigrant struggles is cast. Ray is not just a single mother, Hunt wrote her as a single mother whose husband ran off to gamble away the balloon payment for their doublewide, leaving the family in financial ruins immediately before Christmas. Her husband's disregard for

sensible economics is counterbalanced by Ray's desperate attempts to become a full-time employee at Yankee One Dollar, the name of the store evoking both founding Americans and a common goal. She is a hardworking woman in New York State's northern country, a white American woman trying to make her measly pay to reach the dream of owning a home to make her sons proud.

When Ray's younger son questions what will happen to their old home, she responds with her version of the American/Chinese export/import process:

RICKY: Mommy? What's going to happen to our old house when we get our new house?

RAY: They're going to flatten it and send it to China.

RICKY: Then what?

RAY: They're going to melt it down and make it into little toys.

RICKY: Then what?

RAY: Then they're going to send them back here so I can sell them at Yankee Dollar.

RICKY: Can you get me some?

RAY: That's right.

RICKY: Yes! [He excitedly runs into the other room]

Along with Ray's version of how Chinese manufacturing flattens American houses to make toys, there is a recognizable parenting pattern here of a young child repeatedly asking the same question to his mother, making Ray accessible to any viewer who has ever parented or even conversed with a toddler. This accessibility portrays Ray as an everyman, an essential element of the helper figure since they must be linked with the

viewer in order for the viewer to fill in the space between the film and the larger narrative it aims to convey. Within the interaction, China is highlighted as the necessary support for the American economy – without the trailers and toys made in China, there would be nothing to sell to Americans, no way for Americans to capitalize on economic exchanges.

Ray makes her meager living by selling worthless toys made in China from American homes; however, in order to truly become active in the American economy, Ray must resort to illegality in the form of smuggling Chinese immigrants. Ironically, her husband's Dodge Spirit (the spirit of country embodied by a good old American automobile) is there to aid in the process. After getting a taste of the money available through human smuggling, Ray approaches Lila for another run, "I was to get more of those Chinese" to make the balloon payment on her doublewide. Now the import-export process is illegal and dangerous. Ray must illegally import Chinese immigrants in order to continue to cycle of purchasing a home that, if she eventually upgrades again, will be sent to back to China to become plastic toys.

Lila is equally in need of economic relief as she works to regain her son from her mother in law. Her husband died on a smuggling run between the United States and Canada, his car falling through the frozen river, dropping him directly through the liminal border zone that straddles not only countries, but legality in the film. Lila and Ray initially come together after she steals the Dodge Spirit (this time the Native American is pilfering the spirit from the white American) and essentially kidnaps Ray to make a run across the Canadian border to smuggle in a pair of Chinese immigrants. According to Lila, stealing the car has no ramifications because the New York State Troopers "have no jurisdiction... this is Mohawk territory," revealing her understanding of the laws

governing jurisdiction over property on the reservation. According to the Federal Enclaves Act, “Indian land is treated as a ‘federal enclave,’ similar to a federal building, park, prison, or military base,” with a few exceptions. One is “crimes by Indians against other Native Americans,” (Bulzomi) which savvy Lila clearly understands because she stole the Dodge Spirit from Ray’s husband, who is implied to be a Native American. This creates a trust regarding Lila’s understanding of legal processes concerning Mohawk land in New York State. Unfortunately for Ray and Lila, her understanding of the law stops there and becomes fatally flawed with regards to immigration, borders, and the protection offered by familial links to Mohawk roots. It is in Lila’s illiteracy that Hunt capitalizes on specific immigration issues, not relying on a general sense of immigration in America, but honing in on a particular border at a particular time. By focusing on immigration between the United States and Canada, Hunt constructs a larger narrative regarding immigration failings and the inability for surrogates to successfully navigate contemporary political reality regardless of which physical American border is in question.

According to the New York State Senate, “The [St. Regis Mohawk] tribal police department, through the operation of a New York State statute, has become a State-recognized and certified police department whose members have successfully enforced the law and prosecuted cases in New York courts. They have proven themselves as an important partner in the fight against drug smuggling and other border related crimes and offenses” (Act to Amend Indian Law). The St. Regis Mohawk Tribe is part of the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne, the land depicted in *Frozen River*, which straddles both sides of the St. Lawrence River between Canada and the United States. While Mohawk

people are allowed to freely cross between the sides of the river without a “border,” this does not extend to persons smuggled into either country by Mohawks. So when Lila reassures Ray that “there’s no border” and their actions are therefore not problematic, her understanding of legality is revealed to the viewer as flawed because they are smuggling pairs of Chinese immigrants from Canada to New York States and Ray is the one driving the Dodge Spirit, not Lila. While Lila endeavors to be a helper figure, providing economic opportunity to Ray and arranging the passage of immigrants to America, she is actually creating what will become a helpless situation for everyone involved. To Lila, her actions are nothing but helpful because she believes that the economic exchange of humans is without legal ramifications owing to an (imagined) protection from the Mohawk tribe. The Native American woman helps the white American to illegally import people into the United States via the deliberate evasion of immigration laws, which is a federal offense. Lila explains that even the State Troopers used to smuggle, again working to reason with Ray, but this was “back when it was cigarettes and everyone did it.” Regrettably for Ray and Lila, these are not cigarettes and everyone is not doing it. However, this rationale creates a link between Ray and the State Police, which plays out through the character of Trooper Finnerty (Michael O’Keefe). Again, Hunt sets up a narrative of displacement: one New York State Trooper stands in for the whole of law enforcement with regards to immigration.

State Troopers are central figures in the imagined system of justice within the film, but we only ever see one, commenting on the perceived strength of immigration law enforcement, but the reality of its weaknesses. Trooper Finnerty offers the potential for a classical film formula romance (not unlike Mouna and Walter in *The Visitor*), pushing his

character into sentimental territory. Stereotypically, this strong and tall man is looking out for the weakened and desperate single mother, but the possibility of a romantic connection never comes to fruition. As Hunt says in her commentary on the film, “American films are dying for romantic pairings, ways to save the desperate woman,” and the viewers of *Frozen River* are no exception. In these encounters, Finnerty enters Ray’s economic space, comments on her literally broken Spirit, and enters her domestic space, reinforcing the perceived reach of the law. In each scene, the two are cinematographically placed in the frame together; emphasizing Finnerty’s literal towering over Ray since he is already a tall actor who is then topped off with a sizeable State Trooper hat. Hunt provides the visual pairing, and the audience utilizes that information to create the expected response: the romantic pairing. The audience’s trained desire to link Ray and Finnerty romantically, to save Ray by placing her within a more traditional family unit (held together by a law enforcement agent, nonetheless), is essential because it overtly gives the audience a familiar narrative touchstone in order to keep them engaged with the film while simultaneously developing a more sinister commentary on the inability for surrogate figures to resolve immigrant struggles.

Naturally, Ray does not rely on Finnerty (who could have turned out to be a traditional helper figure if the narrative of this film played out differently); instead, she joins an uneasy pairing with Lila, creating a surrogate family based in illegal activity paired with a desire to provide for their sons. According to Hunt, the Mohawk “tribe is a matriarchy... the ladies are running things,” and this matriarchal reliance permeates Ray and Lila’s relationship. The two come together as abandoned women, single mothers, and individuals in need of relief from destitution; they also serve as vehicles for the

displacement of immigrant struggles. Mirroring their deepening bond, each run that Ray and Lila make across the frozen St. Lawrence River becomes more narratively and cinematographically detailed. The first voyage is quick and at Lila's demand, establishing the women's partnership and the involvement of Chinese immigrants as part of the smuggling operation. The second run is explored further and takes place at Ray's demand, deepening Ray and Lila's involvement with one another while still smuggling Chinese immigrants. Their third run is mutually undertaken and therefore an equalizing force now that Ray trusts Lila to help her succeed in this illegal trade business. It also happens to be the essential narrative of the film, bringing together every issue that Hunt has placed in the film's orbit given that it no longer involves pairs of male immigrants, but a traditional family unit involving a mother, father, and infant child. It is in this middle narrative that *Frozen River's* interest in family reunification becomes centralized.

Hunt's wide shots of the slushy frozen river are longer and more menacing when establishing the nighttime environment for this smuggling run, heightening the danger of the river as well as placing, and therefore reinforcing, physical borders within the visual narrative. This cinematography forces viewers to see borders not only as physical demarcations of space, but as expressive vehicles as well. What's more, by adding the dimension of Christmas Eve, viewers are made to understand that there is somehow an added psychological and mythic pressure to this particular smuggle, further centralizing mothers and sons. Ray tells her boys that she is going "Christmas shopping," when in reality she is illegally importing humans for a profit, economically framing the smuggling run while reminding the audience that there are families at risk in both sides of this illegal human exchange. In addition, the immigrants in this particular narrative are not Chinese



(which we have come to expect given previous patterns), they are Pakistani, completely altering the dynamics of the smuggle: no longer is this about an economic exchange with China, now an undercurrent of terrorism blends into issues of family reunification in addition to economic gain.

“I just hope they’re not the ones to blow themselves and everyone else up,” Ray comments as the Pakistani couple climbs into the trunk of her Spirit while she loads their duffle bag into the backseat. Here we also see the addition of a woman as an immigrant, destabilizing the two-personal matriarchal community that Ray and Lila have formed together and creating heightened familial stakes. Previous smuggles have been pairs of Chinese men, but now a husband and wife pour themselves into the cramped space of Ray’s trunk, reemphasizing that Ray and Lila are without husbands, that they are fragments of typical familial unions regardless of their ethnic or national heritage. Halfway across the river, Ray stops the car and offloads the couple’s duffle bag under the guise of sudden patriotic conscience: “Nuclear power, poison gas. Who knows what they might have in there? I’m not going to be responsible for that.” This comes after Ray earlier scoffed at the incredible sums of money that immigrants pay to snakeheads to arrange their passage across the border to build lives in America, “To get *here*? No fucking way.” When it comes to Chinese immigrants, Ray mocks their desire to travel to the United States; however, her view on the subject changes when it involves Pakistanis.

Of course, the duffel bag does not contain physically explosive substances; rather, its contents are emotionally explosive instead. After dropping the couple at the Pioneer Motel (yes, this is where the snakehead on the American side runs his operation), Ray and Lila learn that the bag contained an infant, a child that they inadvertently offloaded

into the middle of the frozen river. In this moment, two women have blatantly acted in defiance of the familial principles that allegedly govern contemporary immigration policies. If reunification is the ostensible goal of much immigration reform in the twenty-first century, this scene demonstrates how American economic interests and misinterpretations of legality do the complete opposite. Ultimately, the child is saved (perhaps even brought back from the dead), but saving the baby and thereby successfully reunifying the Pakistani family causes further distress and fragmentation to Lila and Ray's families as they eventually become cast out and incarcerated for their illegal smuggling activities. In other words, when immigrant family reunification succeeds, it does so at the cost of American family reunification—both cannot exist simultaneously.

The State Police enforce this impossibility in the film. They are aware that Ray and Lila crossed the river as smugglers and are now on the New York Mohawk Reservation, having been alerted to their crossing by Canadian police on the other side of the border. Continuing the film's affinity for trifectas, three Tribal Council members meet as Ray and Lila take shelter in a Mohawk home:

TRIBAL COUNCILMAN: We have a situation with a couple of smugglers. They tried to go across the river, but their car went in. And now the troopers know that they're on the reservation.

ROSALIE: Who are they?

TRIBAL COUNCILMAN: Lila Littlewolf and some white woman.

BERNIE: What do the troopers want?

TRIBAL COUNCILMAN: They want the surrender of the illegals. Second, they want the surrender of the non-native smuggler. They really mean to set an example over here.

The conversation between the three Tribal Council members is intercut with shots of the State Police waiting at the New York State border of the Mohawk reservation. As their fates close in, Ray explains to Lila, “Baby stuff is in the shack. Get a good, used singlewide. Insulation’s the key thing. [Hands her a large sum of money] It’ll leave enough for you and the boys to live on for a couple of months.” After the rebirth of the Pakistani immigrant baby and the reunification of that three-person family unit, Ray attempts to protect the future of her own children even as she is taken from them. While Ray is removed from her boys through incarceration, Lila is expelled from the reservation and therefore severed from her familial Mohawk roots—both women are torn from their particular families. The two women give into the Tribal Council and the State Police, striking a deal for Ray to serve the time in prison since she is white and “not on the watch list” while Lila serves her expulsion sentence as a mother to three boys outside of Mohawk territory. Given Ray’s fate as a single mother struggling with destitution in upstate New York, the film leaves little hope for Lila now that she is an outcast and “nothing stands between her and the Troopers” since the revocation of protected status as a member of the Mohawk tribe. Both women resorted to smuggling immigrants for economic gain in desperate attempts to reunify their own families; however, this illegality ultimately reunited a Pakistani family while fragmenting the familial units directly linked to the failed American helper figures.

## VI.

While Tom McCarthy's *The Visitor* and Courtney Hunt's *Frozen River* are quiet and complicated (respectively), Wayne Kramer's *Crossing Over* brazenly brings together multiple storylines to weave its narrative regarding contemporary roadblocks to family reunification. By far the most scathing and overt critique of America's treatment of immigrants in the twenty-first century, Kramer's film wrenches at the guts of its viewers, forcing them into an uncomfortable partnership that requires the examination of the policies and practices that are literally and figuratively ripping apart both immigrant and American families.

For the sake of simplicity, I will dismantle the multilinear and deliberately chaotic nature of Kramer's film in order to streamline the six narratives present in *Crossing Over* and their particular criticisms of American immigration before delving more deeply into the individual storylines and representations of helper figures as illustrated through the characters of Max Brogan and Denise Frankel.

- i. Max Brogan, ICE Special Agent. Played by Harrison Ford, Brogan's motivation throughout the film is conflicted and multifaceted: professionally, he roots out undocumented migrants via large-scale raids, and personally, he is obsessed by desire for the reunification of Mexican National Mireya Sanchez with her toddler son (a pair torn apart by a raid on a garment factory).
- ii. Denise Frankel, Immigration Defense Attorney. Frankel is played by Ashley Judd and the character is responsible for representing children in immigration proceedings. Frankel's narrative focuses on both Taslima Jahangir, a fifteen-year-old accused terrorist sympathizer from Bangladesh, and Alike, a young

girl from Nigeria who has been in immigration detention for nearly two years as her mother dies of AIDS while awaiting asylum processing.

- iii. Cole Frankel, Immigration Officer. Cole Frankel (Ray Liotta) is an immigration officer who trades sex for Green Cards, specifically with an aspiring actress from Australia. The actress ultimately rolls to the authorities, Cole is arrested, and his marriage to Denise is destroyed. In this thread, dirty politics are the focus, with Cole using his position of power to enact blackmail on a young woman desperate to become an American citizen.
- iv. The Bararheri Family – Brogan's ICE partner, Hamid Bararheri is a Pakistani national-turned-naturalized citizen whose father is in the process of naturalizing as well. This family's storyline revolves around renouncing their roots in favor of American citizenship as well as the murder of Hamid's sister, who is the only natural-born American in the family and threatens to tarnish the family's reputation through her promiscuous and rebellious behavior. Hamid's story represents the corruption of a naturalized immigrant once he becomes an ICE agent, suggesting an inescapable depravity within the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.
- v. The Kim Family – On the eve of their naturalization ceremony, the eldest son of this Korean family, Yong, is involved in a botched robbery-turned-murder, but spared by Hamid Bararheri as a conscience-clearing attempt for the murder of his sister. The Kims are hardworking immigrants who own and operate a dry cleaning business. The Kim's storyline positions Asian American immigrants as fortunate by comparison to their Mexican, South

Asian, and Middle Eastern counterparts, depicting a stereotypically hardworking and honest immigrant family as succeeding only when their eldest son comes to accept the American Dream and citizenship over a life of crime.

- vi. Gavin Kossef, the British Jew. Gavin, as the sole immigrant representative of European immigration and Jewishness in America, coasts through his immigration proceedings on lies and luck, receiving a Green Card and ending up in his desired romantic pairing. In this storyline, Kramer critiques the ease with which European immigrants continue to enjoy unparalleled access to America when compared with their peers from other parts of the globe.

By using a hyperlink cinematic structure, Kramer not only places various aspects of contemporary immigration in his narrative crosshairs, but he also compels his audience to sort through the pace and confusion inherent in the film's structure, which operates as a metaphor for the turmoil faced by immigrant families hoping to successfully navigate naturalization in twenty-first century America.

*Crossing Over* opens with sweeping helicopter shots of Los Angeles – its maritime port, cityscape, and freeways, representing not only human movement, but points of commerce, establishing the blurring of the two when it comes to immigration politics. The opening shots are punctuated by the cover of night as well as muted coloring suggestive of the barren emotional landscape of contemporary America as well as the desert countries to which characters in the film will soon be deported. As the camera travels, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Detention Center at San Pedro, California, a building located on Terminal Island, fills the screen. The location itself is an

artificial landscape created by landfill in order to house a federal prison. It should be noted that the ICE Detention Center was closed in 2007, two years prior to the release of *Crossing Over*, demonstrating Kramer's awareness of the ICE' facility's lack of concern for the "safety and welfare of the detainees" (Gorman), thereby placing that lack of oversight and concern front and center as his film enters its narrative course.

As the camera pushes in on Terminal Island, through coils of barbed wire, concrete walls, and an entry checkpoint (all under the cover of darkness and shot in deep shadow), we meet Max Brogan, who is attempting to advocate for an elderly Mexican man brought into immigration detainment, efforts that are met with "Jesus Christ, Brogan, everything is a humanitarian crisis with you," establishing Brogan as at least outwardly concerned and in conflict with the rest of his ICE counterparts. Given that Immigrations and Customs Enforcement consists of over 20,000 employees in close to 50 offices ("Who We Are"), Kramer sets Brogan up against impossible odds from the outset of the film, dooming his helper figure to fail as a single human up against an enormous and amorphous government agency.

Brogan's odds against ICE are further emphasized with an introduction to his Pakistani partner, Hamid Bararheri. A jump cut shows Brogan and Bararheri sitting outside a factory discussing Bararheri's father's upcoming naturalization party as they wait for Brogan to give the "go" signal to carry out an ICE raid for undocumented workers, blending narratives about a naturalizing family with that realities of the vast number of undocumented workers who are about to be taken into custody. Chaos and low level violence ensues as the garment factory is swamped with ICE agents checking papers on the men and women hard at work. Brogan stumbles upon Mireya Sanchez and

reluctantly takes her into custody as she passes him information on her son, who is left parentless following her arrest and subsequent herding onto a Department of Homeland Security bus.

Sanchez's parental separation is the emotional bridge that parallels the cinematic movement from one storyline to another. A high tracking shot over freeway cloverleaves carries viewers to the Eastridge Juvenile Facility, with the twisting maze of roads, which ultimately just lead back on themselves, symbolizing the labyrinth of bureaucracy enclosed within Eastridge's walls. Unlike Terminal Island, Eastridge is an imagined space in which Kramer confines juvenile detainees. Denise Frankel comes into focus in the baron waiting room, wearing a gold charm of Africa and anticipating a running bear hug from Alike, a small Nigerian detainee, centralizing the desire for parental connection on the part of child detainees. Frankel presents Alike with a doll sent by her teacher back in Africa to soften the blow of explaining, "Honey, it's going to be a little while longer, but we're working *very* hard to find you a new Mom. She won't ever replace your real Mom, but I promise that she'll never leave you." Note the use of "Mom" rather than "family" or "home" in the linguistic construction of this scene. Like *The Visitor* and *Frozen River*, this places emphasis on single parents rather than families as paths to comfort and security in America. The country no longer represents an open homeland for immigrants; instead, individual parental helper figures are relied upon to fill that role. What's more, Kramer touches on indefinite detention when Frankel explains, "Twenty-three months she's been in there! Twenty-three fucking months. I feel gutted every time I go."



Frankel is quickly made responsible for Taslima Jahangir, a young teenager who stood in front of her class and asked of the 9/11 hijackers,

Should we be so quick to label them as terrorist and monsters and murderers?

Shouldn't we try to understand them as human beings? I believe that they found themselves without a voice and that the only way for them to be heard was to scream with the might of tons of steel and thunderous jet engines behind them.

Upon impact, their voices were heard... what we heard was a cry for justice.

This presentation provided Jahangir with a one-way ticket to Eastridge under suspicion of sympathizing with terrorists and potential jihadist actions, stripping this immigrant teenager of free speech as well as her own potential for justice while disappearing her into the vacuum of immigrant detainment that the film ultimately labels as a space incapable of any resolution other than deportation.

Meanwhile, Brogan voluntarily assumes the physical responsibility for Juan Sanchez, the small toddler son of Mireya Sanchez, paying a corrupt babysitter for the child's release into his care before the two of them embark on a border crossing together in an attempt to return the child to his maternal grandparents in Mexico. Corruption combined with a desired standard of care come together throughout this particular narrative as Brogan operates as a surrogate single father and helper figure for Juan, endeavoring to get the child back to his biological family. Kramer uses this narrative thread to not only further explore Brogan's role as an ICE representative and helper figure, but to comment on the ineptitude of the ICE agency: the only family reunification that Brogan can successfully complete is on the "wrong" side of the border, literally transporting the youngest generation of immigrants back to Mexico in order to reunify him with his

grandparents. Meanwhile, Mireya's deportation is processed; however, she and Brogan miss one another, for as he returns the boy to family in Tijuana and continues to carry out raids in various garment factories (seeing the ghost of Mireya in other Mexican workers), she pays coyotes to move her across the border again into California in an attempt to find her son.

The growing desperation on the part of parents continues to escalate from Brogan's storyline to Frankel's. Unfortunately, her work to keep the Jahangir family together fails miserably. Taslima is incarcerated alongside other juveniles at Eastridge, including Alike, creating a link between these children that is fortified through their bond to Frankel. Unfortunately, in the narrative universe of the film (and in keeping with slowly establishing patterns of immigrant narratives), one child is needed to transition Frankel to a mother while the other is the catalyst for her failure as a helper figure. As the girls bond in the detainment center, Frankel explains to the Jahangir family,

I'm sorry, you have very few options, none of them favorable to your situation. You may request voluntary departure as an entire family and leave the United States immediately or you may choose to fight the matter, which would inevitably lead to deportation... There is a third option, and as painful as it is, I am required to present it to you. One of you could choose voluntary departure, leave with Taslima, one of you could remain in the US with [your other children]. If you select that option, immigration would not seek out the remaining parent provided you kept a low profile. Taslima will be escorted by immigration agents all the way to her departure gate.

Taslina and her mother voluntarily depart, permanently separating their family since they are never again permitted in the United States. Of course, their departure takes place under an enormous American flag (a nearly identical scenic composition to Mouna's departure in *The Visitor*) as they are escorted to their gate at LAX. This storyline, which places Frankel on the immigrant's side of proceedings, demonstrates that failure is the assumed outcome when it comes to family reunification. No matter whether working on the side of immigration or immigrants, contemporary policies and practices leave no room for the successful integration of families into the United States. The film, via Taslima, takes dead aim at the persecution of minors who must select "voluntary departure" in order to avoid the wrath of the Department of Homeland security coming to bear on their entire families, showing that there is absolutely nothing voluntary about the process. In the first half of 2012 alone, "over 11,000 minors" were placed "in deportation proceedings, nearly double [2011's] numbers" (Preston "Young and Alone"), with voluntary departure often selected over deportation given its reduced severity. In addition, Frankel's narrative concerns itself most closely with terrorism and the idea that American immigrant children are somehow being recruited for jihadist missions on behalf of terrorist organizations from around the globe. Kramer is prescient in his use of this storyline, as unprecedented concerns regarding ISIS have recently (2014-2015) surfaced with regard to the recruitment and abuse of U.S. teenagers (Brown and Bruer); however, the actual incidence of successful recruiting remains unsubstantiated. Kramer highlights the absurdity of these claims in order to demonstrate that even children cannot successfully navigate deportation proceedings (let alone hope for reunification with their families) once they are detained by the Department of Homeland Security.

As Brogan's narrative draws to a close, a lone immigration vehicle bumps dustily along the road that hugs the fence along the U.S. – Mexico Border in San Diego. A US Customs and Border Patrol agent scanning the desert as part of his rounds happens upon the decomposing body of Mireya Sanchez, another victim who “looks like she’s been out here a couple of days. I think she paid the wrong coyote to bring her across,” bringing together the failure of Brogan to protect and reunite this family owing to ICE’s detrimental policies as well as the corrupt recurring character of the coyote (or snakehead in *Frozen River*) as the opportunistic catalysts that capitalize on America’s damaged immigration system as a way to participate in the economic exchange of human beings, contributing to the failure of helper figures. Here, ICE’s incompetence and the contested border control policies that regulate movement between the United States and Mexico are criticized by Kramer, reminding his audience that detainment, deportation, and failed family reunification are not confined to countries with links to terrorism in our post-9/11 climate. Instead, Brogan’s storyline in *Crossing Over* makes clear that the failure of Americans to aid in the successful integration of immigrants continues to happen in North America in addition to globally. And this failure will continue to perpetuate itself, as made apparent by the closing shots of the film, which mirror the original composition of Hamid and Brogan in their car awaiting the start of a raid, but this time Hamid is replaced with a newbie officer training under Brogan as part of a new generation of ICE agents.

Both Brogan and Frankel are helper figures who, like those represented in *The Visitor* and *Frozen River* are members of broken families. Brogan is a divorcee with a daughter who no longer speaks to him, tasked with delivering a motherless child to its

grandparents in Mexico before later returning to Tijuana to inform them of their daughter's death. This pattern of failure will continue to replicate itself just as the ICE raids that Brogan spearheads continue as the film ends. Frankel, although initially in a marriage in which the spouses are trying for children of their own, ultimately transitions to become a single parent after adopting Alike on the heels of Cole Frankel's arrest for immigration fraud (he had refused to consider the adoption), opening the path for her to become part of the growing canon of failed, single-parent helper figures represented through contemporary independent cinema. She cannot reunite her adopted daughter with her birth mother and fails to keep the Jahangir family together after terrorism is introduced as a charge against a teenage child who the American government believes could potentially become a suicide bomber. When placed on the continuum of failed helper figures, Brogan and Frankel are the most overt failures owing to *Crossing Over's* manifest condemnations of contemporary immigration politics ranging from the treatment and processing of undocumented laborers to the persecution of alleged terrorists without significant substantiation, all of which negatively affect family reunification policies. The inability for either side of immigration processing to rise above the system and claim success on behalf of immigrants allows failed helper figures to represent just how widespread contemporary immigration problems have become, especially those concerned with either maintaining or reunifying families.

## VII.

As *The Visitor*, *Frozen River*, and *Crossing Over* demonstrate, the helpless helper is rarely, if ever, "offered as an easy subject for unambiguous audience allegiance, a

quality rarely found in the Hollywood mainstream” (King 213), marking the helpless helper as an independent film figure created for twenty-first century immigration narratives in order to formulate critiques regarding political, legal, and economic factors influencing and convoluting successful family reunification. Walter, Ray, Lila, and Max are not easy characters to like; however, the audience is forced into alignment with them via their roles as parents and Americans who shoulder the displacement of immigrant family struggles. The tenor of these films, given their inclusion and exploration of the helpless helper character, generates a political position that comments on the damaging and ineffective climate surrounding contemporary family reunification politics. In addition, since they pull from classical structures, the films do offer story climaxes, marking an adherence to predictable and familiar conventions; however, the outcome of these climaxes is reversed given that the helper figures fail, deportation and incarceration result, and families on both sides of immigration processing are negatively affected, reinforcing a political message that disrupts an expected narrative outcome.

If, as I argue, the American protagonists in these films endeavor to guide immigrants through the contemporary nation, their failures comment on just how fractured, incomplete, and broken the American nation-as-family has become. While white Americans can attempt to bear the effects of immigration reform, it is an ultimately fruitless project as displacement does nothing to actually tackle issues, instead projecting them onto unsuitable surrogates who are likewise unable to successfully navigate immigration law and politics. White protagonists ultimately cannot take on the struggles of non-white immigrants crossing into America under illegal auspices, marking them therefore as helpless owing to an inappropriate pairing. While adding the dimension of

family serves as a unifying human dimension, it is eventually engulfed by the weight and insurmountable nature of immigration realities. This engulfing marks the limitations of films such as *The Visitor*, *Frozen River*, and *Crossing Over*. It's not that the films fail in widening a certain audience's view on illegal immigration struggles, but the widening becomes restricted in the face of actual political reforms. The film succeed in highlighting problems in family reunification processing, but given that they are indeed narratives and not actual reforms, they are restricted to providing insight and commentary rather than enacting actual change. The films studied in this chapter use an alternative point of view – that of American citizens rather than immigrants – to further fragment the traditional immigrant narrative as well as comment on the deeply damaged nature of contemporary America and its inability to unearth a unified political solution to issues regarding illegal immigration. While the films cannot themselves overhaul unstable legal policies, they do alter the traditional narrative structure of immigrant films, and that is an important distinction that helps further the study of genre alterations in the twenty-first century. These generic modifications continue off the screen and into literature, where they become further developed.

Whereas immigrant struggles are displaced onto white surrogates in films such as *The Visitor*, *Frozen River*, and *Crossing Over* an opposing trend is simultaneously traceable in literature. As the next chapter will show, there are narratives that also departures from traditional genre conventions but locate a space wherein immigrants decide to help themselves and are not victims of legal limitations. Likewise, these independent immigrant characters are not reliant on Americans, white or otherwise, to

weave their fates, instead writing independence and individual departure from the US as a new, viable, and non-shameful option.



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4.

***THE END PRODUCT OF OUR DEEP MORAL EXHAUSTION:  
ALTERNATIVE GENRES AND IMMIGRATION NARRATIVES***

History repeats itself... first as tragedy, then as farce.

- Karl Marx

## I.

The narratives in this chapter ask, “If X, Y, or Z were different, what would immigration look like in the contemporary United States?” By creating versions of America that are rooted in reality and yet somehow different, the novels explored in this chapter meditate on the political and social realities of not only immigration, but America’s global position as a social and economic stronghold and, most importantly, how immigration figures in America’s global standing. The authors in this chapter, who are generally associated with “high” fiction genres, dabble in the science-fiction modes of alternate history and speculative fiction in order to weave their immigrant narratives. The writers studied here, Philip Roth, Michael Chabon, and Gary Shteyngart have high literary reputations; however, they turn to genre fiction in order to create twenty-first century/post-911 immigrant narratives, avoiding their own “rarefication” to satisfy a need for what’s popular and “further down” (Mallon and Mishra). I argue that they make this choice not only to dabble in more popular (and therefore more widely read genres), but in order to both acknowledge a narrative trend that writes immigrants as turning away from America while simultaneously utilizing their well-established literary reputations to suggest that this turn-away might also have hints of salvageable pro-America outcomes. In other words, Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart delve into the template of the immigrant narrative of adjustment and rework it into genre fiction in order to incorporate a rejection of America with the possibility that there could still be an American outcome layered into that rejection.

This complex template and genre fusion works beautifully for post-9/11 narratives because of the social exploration inherent in immigrant narratives, alternate history, and

speculative fiction, the genres utilized by Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart. As Aaron Passell frames it, science fiction “novelists are embedded in the social dynamics of their time. Accordingly, whatever it is they imagine, they are departing from and building in their own assumptions, criticisms, and idealizations of how the world works and of how it might be different” (60). For the novels studied here, the social dynamics under examination concern links between America and immigration; that is to say, the novels question degrees of immigrant embeddedness within America’s social structure. What makes these particular novels an integral part of my overall project is the way that they insert themselves into the growing body of post-9/11 immigrant narratives; specifically, how these novels mediate the extreme endings (namely detention, deportation, and reverse migration) of the other works discussed throughout this dissertation, suggesting an option that sanctions staying in, but not assimilating to, contemporary America. These narratives ask: can there be *acknowledgement* of America’s contemporary ideological attitudes towards immigrations without either a full rejection of or integration into the twenty-first century United States?

I begin by exploring alternate history via Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004) and Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* (2007) before transitioning to speculative fiction through a reading of Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010). In each novel, a commentary on America’s global social position is revealed by means of the degree to which the protagonists and their families do or do not become assimilated Americans. As these novels chronologically progress through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, utopia emerges from dystopia as the characters leave behind a damaged America and explore possibilities that are no longer assimilative in



nature. Of course, this is not the case with all progressions of genre fiction; however, the novels studied in this chapter emerge utopic with regard to the immigrant narrative. It nearly goes without saying that Jewish American narratives are at the very foundation of immigrant literature in the United States; therefore, Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart are able to experiment with form via the manipulation of established literary traditions in order to construct narratives that question the incorporation of immigrants into post-9/11 America. In other words, authors who are part of a stable population of immigrants—Jewish Americans—play with form and message, putting themselves in dialogue with contemporary immigrant authors to demonstrate that leaving America isn't always necessary; there is a possible post-9/11 immigrant narrative in which immigrants remain in America while still eschewing assimilation, thereby salvaging their ethnic identities rather than entirely incorporating into the mainstream culture. And they do so via genre fiction, embracing mass culture in a way that their predecessors (like Theodor Adorno and Clement Greenberg) chose not to do (Mallon and Mishra). We need think only of the popularity of zombie fiction as well as the proliferation of crime drama via *Breaking Bad* or *True Detective* to see the ways in which traditionally lowbrow narrative forms infiltrate the range of contemporary American homes.

The two models utilized by Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart, alternate history and speculative fiction, situate themselves in distinctive positions with regard to chronology. Alternate history reimagines a past moment, creating a different version of history that often returns us to events as they actually happened. In these narratives, no matter what changes in the past, “ahead lie the massacre of Europe’s Jews, the bombings of Dresden, Nagasaki, and Hiroshima, and further massacres, bombings, and famines from China and

Cambodia to Ethiopia, Rwanda, and the Sudan. Even 9/11 will arrive on schedule” (Scanlan 517). In this way, alternate history can be read as dystopic in its worldview given that it returns to factual progression and chronology, literally altering history to create a transformed sequence, but offering an imagined alternative in which those events can be read differently. In this way, the genre also allows for an imposing of meaning (via its imagined alternative) onto the factual progression of events, encouraging different interpretations of history outside of the accepted, generally understood evolution of occurrences.

Speculative fiction, on the other hand, begins with a moment in the present or near-future and proceeds out from there, picking up where alternate history leaves off and pushing forward through time. In this way, specific threads of speculative fiction meditate on utopic possibilities, imagining a future that can either be claimed or avoided (depending on its nature), and in the case of Shteyngart’s narrative, eschewing assimilation in favor of a less integrated immigrant experience. In *Super Sad True Love Story*, “the near future operates not only by making the present a historical past for the near future, but also by making the near future the ground for that much more strongly felt utopianism for the far future: a place where one can imagine futurity” (O’Connell 69), and that futurity is an America in which the nation and its immigrants operate independently of one another, both socially and economically.

Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart write from a place of stability owing to their Jewish American roots, and they leverage that stability to both bend and blend generic conventions in order to address the trend of extremes in contemporary immigrant literature. As both members of an assimilated ethnic group and successful literary cohort,

these three authors offer a palliated alternative for contemporary adjustment narratives: immigration adjustment on one's own terms. Their novels suggest that a physical removal from America's borders is not necessary in order to reject America ideology based on its mistreatment of immigrants in the twenty-first century. Instead, Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart write narratives that root their immigrant protagonists in America, but do so without assimilation, rejecting the typical progression of the immigrant narrative of adjustment by incorporating alternate genres, therefore creating a multilevel narrative by layering on rather than completely imploding generic conventions.

## II.

As consumers of fiction, we are constantly asked to suspend disbelief and enter worlds of imagination, an act that makes fiction and alternate history an easy pairing. The genre asks us to defer prior historical knowledge in favor of an alternate version. Indeed, as Gavriel Rosenfeld suggests, "the rise of postmodernism, with its blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, its privileging of 'other' or alternate voices, and its playfully ironic reconfiguring of established historical verities, has boosted the tendency to think in counterfactual<sup>1</sup> terms" ("Some New Points"). By introducing the accepted (and in some ways exulted) concept of postmodernism into an otherwise cast-out genre, Rosenfeld opens the door for high literary figures such as Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart to playfully engage with chronology and genre in order to relay serious messages

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<sup>1</sup> The terms "alternate" and "counterfactual" are often interchangeable. Other terms include "parahistorical" (see David Pringle's *The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction*) and "allohistorical" (see Gordon Chamberlain's *Afterword: Allohitory in Science Fiction*). While some historians object to this conflation of terms, the scholars cited in this article use "alternate" and "counterfactual" interchangeably when referring to this genre of history-writing.

regarding contemporary development of the American nation. Birte Otten further contemporizes this argument, highlighting that “alternate fiction might have gained popularity among non-science fiction writers because its content and structure provide a suitable form for stories engaging with the theme of historical rupture and change... which has dominated the public discourse since 9/11” (np). Otten’s explanation aids in explaining the effect of selecting alternate history for post-9/11 commentaries on American immigration given that the blending of past and present made accessible through alternate history asks us to consider that “history’s course is not inevitable, that historical events are highly contingent, [and that] alternate history can help us rethink our ingrained assumptions not only about the past but about the present” (G. Rosenfeld 396). In other words, successful authors such as Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart are able to trade on both their literary reputations as well as positions as Jewish Americans to construct narratives in which readers are asked to revisit their assumptions not only about immigrant literature in general, but specifically the ways in which that literature is created and read in the twenty-first century.

*The Plot Against America* and *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* use alternate history as a means for constructing critiques of contemporary immigrant experience in America. Both Roth and Chabon choose authentic archival documents to reconstruct new historical engagements with immigration in the United States; however, they wield these historical re-imaginings to very different ends. Roth engages a fearful counterfactual history--the German holocaust come home to the United States-- pushing readers to investigate their own assumptions about American racism and classism through an immigrant lens. Chabon applies a counterfactual framework through a fantastical,

creative world<sup>2</sup>--the resettlement of European Jews in the wilds of Alaska-- to scrutinize the relationships between immigrants and homelands from WWII until 2007. Chabon and Roth engage counterfactual history as a way to destabilize the traditional and comfortable associations that often simply reiterate the assimilation of immigrants into America. By taking on alternate history as an experiment with form, these two authors are able to chip away at more familiar alignments that pair immigration, specifically Jewish immigration, and a desire to assimilate into America's social fabric, incorporating their Jewishness into a more general critique of America as a place for immigrants.

As Jewish artists, Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart occupy a privileged and stable social position that allows for the alteration of familiar narrative progression in favor of examining new possibilities. Regarding this stability, Alan Dershowitz explains,

The good news is that American Jews--as individuals--have never been more secure, more accepted, more affluent, and less victimized by discrimination or anti-Semitism. The bad news is that American Jews--as a people--have never been in greater danger of disappearing through assimilation, intermarriage, and low birthrates. The even worse news is that our very success as individuals contributes to our vulnerability as a people. (1)

This “danger” that Dershowitz--himself an incredibly successful American Jewish intellectual and professional—identifies is what (I argue) Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart play against via their nontraditional assimilative endings. As I will explore, *The Plot Against America*, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, and *Super Sad True Love Story* conclude not with complete assimilation to mainstream America, but with

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<sup>2</sup> In 2008, Chabon's novel won the Hugo Award for Science Fiction, the Sidewise Award for Alternate History, and the Nebula Award for Science Fiction, highlighting its recognition as a popular novel operating outside the boundaries of traditional, straightforward fiction.

acknowledgement of Jewish immigration success coupled with a lingering sense of otherness as immigrants as well as an acceptance of rather than turn away from that otherness in twenty-first century America. Rather than assimilating to an America that presents a damaging climate for immigrants, the protagonists in these novels demonstrate an awareness of that climate, born of out the events of 9/11, and actively reject its overall ideology while simultaneously remaining in America and building their own, livable, acceptable alternate.

As Margaret Scanlan compellingly argues, Roth and Chabon “juxtapose the shock of 9/11 and moral outrage at the War on Terror with the Holocaust, [taking] deliberate risks with history, challenging readers to bring new insight to their own times” (506), allowing for their novels to leverage decisively Jewish events speak to contemporary politics. Scanlan goes on to describe both *The Plot Against America* and *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* as engaged with “the relationship of American Zionists, both Christian and Jewish, to their militant counterparts in Israel, as well as the implications of that relationship for the War on Terror and for the American Jewish community” (ibid). She delves deeply into questions of relations between the United States and Israel, specifically the AIPAC lobby (507-509), building an argument regarding the role of alternate history in contemporary Jewish politics. While Scanlan’s claims are strong, they are narrow. I argue that Roth and Chabon’s narratives, while unmistakably engaging with Jewish identity and concerns surrounding Zionism, become readable on a broader level when paired with Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story*, allowing for a range of alternate history and speculative fiction to come into focus, still with a Jewish twist.

Of course, Jewish Americans are not the only authors playing with history and narrative. Other examples within the discourse of alternate history and speculative fiction as participating in a reimagining of immigration narratives include William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003), Ken MacLeod's *The Execution Channel* (2007) and David Danson's *Faultline 49* (2012). All of these novels, when placed in the larger context of twenty-first century immigrant narratives, push readers to rethink traditional narrative tendencies; specifically, they turn their backs on the need to conclude conventional narratives of adjustment with assimilation into the United States.<sup>3</sup> These novels chip away at this expected literary turn by reimagining everything from where "the bomb" was dropped in WWII to the outcome of the 2000 Presidential (Gore/Bush) election, questioning how every major decision or event could lead to altered outcomes if approached differently. In this way, writers such as Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart expand the immigrant narrative by pushing it beyond its expected outcomes: reinterpreting both genre and history to conclude with incomplete affiliation. However, I argue that their secure position within a well-established immigrant group in America gives them an advantaged station from which to write these novels.

This expanded interpretation is representative of interest in global immigration concerns occurring over time rather than specific country-to-country relations at one particular moment. By moving beyond questions of particular religious and/or ethnic identity and into wider issues of immigration and America's global position, these three novels examine moments of national destabilization such as 9/11 and the events that

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<sup>3</sup> According to Timothy Prechal, the immigrant adjustment narratives "features characters who manage to take root in America, thereby affirming the ideal of the land of opportunity" ("New Americans" 431). David Cowart likewise highlights the assimilative feature of the adjustment narrative, wherein immigrants "must deal with prejudice and homesickness but eventually becomes empowered by a new American identity" (7).

follow. Specifically, Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart focus on issues of surveillance that became centralized in debates regarding immigration and national security. For example, Title II of the PATRIOT ACT is entirely concerned with enhanced surveillance procedures, including “authority to intercept wire, oral, and electronic communication relating to terrorism,” the “seizure of voicemails,” and the “authority for delaying notice of the execution of a warrant.” In other words, America can (and does) spy on its citizens and immigrants with unchecked authority, reducing public accountability for the government while enhancing scrutiny of people within the US. The authors studied in this chapter play with chronology, turning surveillance inside-out by tearing it apart both implicitly and explicitly in terms of its effects on contemporary immigration politics.

In very different ways, Chabon and Roth begin by resituating their particular immigrant histories within an alternate framework, rupturing the assimilationist risk in immigrant narratives that many critics identify.<sup>4</sup> Both reconceptualize the moment when American Jews, in the middle of the twentieth century, “had achieved an unprecedented level of security, affluence, integration, and freedom in the United States” (Moore 5), many having migrated into the suburbs where they experienced, as Hasia Diner has put it succinctly, “the importance of ‘fitting in’” (97). In other words, Roth and Chabon rewrite the typical immigrant story at the outset of their novels, imagining versions of America in which their immigrants can thrive without fully assimilating to their surroundings, constructing a new option out of the materials of traditional immigrant narratives. Just as importantly, *The Plot Against America* and *The Yiddish Policemen’s*

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<sup>4</sup> In his article, “The American of the Future,” Timothy Prechal outlines the “hazards of assimilation” identified by writers and critics such as Mary Antin, David M. Fine, and William Z. Ripley. Among these hazards, Prechal identifies a “social climate of trepidation and, at times, outright hostility toward immigrants” (197), the potential dangers of “assimilation to the dominant culture” (197), and a denial of genetics over environment in the development of individual identities (196).



*Union* show us that “history” is itself a construction of a present moment with an eye to the future. As Walter Benjamin suggested, “the historical index of images not only tells us that they belong to a certain time, above all it tells us that only at a certain time do they become readable” (Geyer-Ryan 68). By assuming that history is potentially fluid, something that is written and understood at a particular time instead of chronologically anchored, these narratives permit possibilities for exploration and expansion with an eye towards the future.

This concept of the past as a fiction that is “socially and ideologically conditioned” (Geyer-Ryan 68) is crucial to alternate history. Alternate history asks “what if?” questions that push the boundaries of interpretive meaning (Ferguson 2-3), which allows them to be easily adapted into fiction as a narrative construction accepted by readers, although not always by critics. Unfortunately, counterfactual fiction has often been disregarded by historians and academics as a “red herring” or “Geschichtswissenschaft (unhistorical shit)” (Ferguson 4-5). In order to counteract this possible dismissal of the form they have chosen, both Chabon and Roth buttress their imagined Americas with documentary effects and returns to lived historical experience, showing their “awareness of the delicate balance between history and fiction” (Anelli 413). In fact, both authors draw their inspiration from historical documents drawn forth from the annals of American politics, documents which presented multiple possible and alternate futures for immigrants to America. And yet for Chabon and Roth, this turn to archival history and to the view of subjugated immigrants yields very different results.

### III.

Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* thoroughly melds archival documentation, alternate history, and an exploration of Jewish immigrant identity in America. Roth's individual history is bred into his novel by virtue of personal struggles with the competing Jewish and American sides of his identity. In fact, Roth has referred to himself as having been an "American child" (Searles 127) rather than a Jewish child, highlighting his roots as selectively American over Jewish. But that did not mean he was oblivious, even as a young man:

I was born to Jewish parents and raised self-consciously as a Jew. I don't mean that I was raised according to Jewish traditions or raised to be an observant Jew, but that I was born into the situation of being a Jew, and it did not take me long to be aware of its ramifications. (Searles 127)

The ramifications that Roth enumerated included "feelings of anger and censure as a human being and a Jew," although he would qualify that by adding that "I would say this is not particularly a Jewish problem, but an American problem" (Searles 2). Such consequences--and, as we shall see, the particular emotion of fear--opened the door for Roth to ask counterfactual questions regarding discrimination's role in constructing American identity for immigrants, especially given that he would posit events applicable not only to the setting of his novel (pre-World War II America), but to our contemporary moment. Although traditional American dogma would claim to embrace all ethnicities and religions equally, Roth's alternate history engages the tensions between racism and this "just folks" mentality.

While Roth dabbled in alternate history with *Operation Shylock*,<sup>5</sup> it is *The Plot Against America* that relies on formal counterfactual experimentation to tell its story. As his jumping off point, Roth employs an actual speech by Charles Lindbergh, delivered in 1941, which lobbied for the need to protect America from the “dilution of foreign races” (*The Plot Against America* 391), a desire to “protect” America from immigrants. In addition, Lindbergh’s personal journals revealed that he believed that Jewish immigrants were “inferior to him” (Roth “Interview”), demonstrating both public and private anti-Semitism. Roth asks “what if” there was an America in which Charles Lindbergh had been elected President and was thereby able to intensify his relationships with Nazis in order to establish programs bolstering anti-Semitic, anti-immigration agendas within the United States. The plot follows the Roth family of Newark, New Jersey’s Weequaic neighborhood as they navigate an ever-changing and increasingly hostile America. In order to investigate these possibilities, Roth creates *The Plot Against America* from the point of view of the people being oppressed within a culture of “perpetual fear” (*The Plot Against America* 1) and sets his world in the time of Lindbergh. In other words, Roth narrates history in the time of and according to the victim, not the victor. This sets up an unusual contradiction wherein Jewish Americans, an otherwise secure ethnic group at the time of Roth’s novel must be concerned about their physical safety within America’s borders. This use of counterfactual history not calls upon an understanding of factual progression with a reinterpretation of key particulars.<sup>6</sup> For Roth, the event in need of re-imagining is a cultural holocaust of American Jews.

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<sup>5</sup> *Operation Shylock*, while fictional, incorporates real people such as John Demjanjuk and Aharon Appelfeld, thus touching on actual history as part of the imagined world of the novel.

<sup>6</sup> This was a central philosophical tenet of Benjamin’s “Theses On The Concept of History,” a foundational document for counterfactual thought. Benjamin’s final work, his “Theses On The Concept of History,” was

Roth's holocaust is homegrown: it comes in the form of the Office of American Absorption (OAA), whose purpose was "to implement programs 'encouraging America's religious and national minorities to become further incorporated into the larger society'" (*The Plot Against America* 85). As young Philip, the novel's protagonist, quickly realizes, "the only minority the OAA appeared to take a serious interest in encouraging was ours" (*ibid*) with initiatives such as "Just Folks" and the "Homestead Program," both of which were focused on relocating immigrant Jews to Middle America. The more haunting of the two OAA programs, Just Folks, sought to "remove hundreds of Jewish boys between the ages of twelve and eighteen from the cities where they lived and attended school and put them to work for eight weeks as farm hands and day laborers with farm families hundreds of miles away from their homes" (85). Essentially, Just Folks lured young Jewish men away from the influences of ethnicity, family, and education in order to breed Christian American-ness into them through manual labor and immersion into Midwestern households. The cultural genocide, or deculturalization, within Roth's novel is carried out through "the educational process of destroying a people's culture and replacing it with a new culture" (Spring 3).

Although his direct inspirations here are open to debate, the deculturalization resulting from Roth's OAA is eerily similar to that of Charles Loring Brace's Children's Aid Society of the nineteenth century, as well as assimilatory boarding schools for Native American children created through the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Both aimed at removing cultural difference in favor of a whitewashed America. The Children's Aid Society was

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not published until after his death in 1940; however, it is thought by many historians (especially those who support the merit of counterfactual thought) to be his "most ambitious intellectual project" (Geyer-Ryan 70) as it sets the foundation for counterfactual history as a useful exercise in the humanities, sciences, and politics.

founded in 1853 and “would primarily send parties of [inner city] children to well-established towns in the midst of prosperous farm country, with 3,000 to 4,000 town inhabitants, good schools, and, ideally, a college nearby” (O’Connor 105) with the aim of “remov[ing] the children from slums” (O’Connor xx) and ushering in the foundations of our modern foster care system. In the case of Native American boarding schools, the aims were less benevolent, instead working to assimilate Native American children into white American culture. According to Thomas J. Morgan, the Indian Commissioner in the late nineteenth century,

It is of prime importance that a fervent patriotism be awakened in [the children’s] minds... They should be taught to look upon America as their home and the United States government as their friend and benefactor. They should be made familiar with the lives of great and good men and women in American history, and be taught to feel pride in all their great achievements. They should hear little or nothing of the ‘wrongs [done] the Indians,’ and of the injustice of the white race. If their unhappy history is alluded to it should be to contrast it with the better future that is within their grasp. (Churchill 21)

By working within familiar tropes of racial and cultural assimilation, Roth imagines his Jewish immigrants as at risk for the same cultural suppression that has befallen other ethnic groups in American history. Instead of seeing Indian children taken away from native homelands, Roth removes Jewish immigrant kids from New Jersey. And by replacing urban adolescents and Native Americans with twentieth century Jewish Americans, Roth realigns traditionally European Jewish identity markers with

marginalized populations, allowing for immigrant identity to be examined in terms of preservation versus loss, not as an offshoot of assimilated American nationality.<sup>7</sup>

Questions of assimilation's effect on individuals are most clearly illustrated through Sandy Roth, young Philip's older brother. In the novel, Sandy gets drawn into the Just Folks program and is placed with a family in Kentucky, learning to work the farm rather than read the Torah. His language immediately shifts, saying things like "'cain't' for 'can't' and 'rimember' for 'remember'" (93), and the distance between Sandy and his roots eventually becomes so great that he refers to his family as "*you* people" (230), squarely delineating himself as an absorbed American rather than an American immigrant. In this moment, the assimilatory work of the Office of American Absorption is complete – Sandy is no longer identifying as Jewish American, but simply American, commenting on the upward mobility and assimilation of American Jews that Roth not only repeatedly explores in his canon of work, but that Dershowitz identified as dangerous to Jewish American identity. Meanwhile, Philip is at home with his Jewish parents (maintaining his ethnic identity) in Weequahic, witnessing Sandy's transformation with a mix of young curiosity and horror.

Alterations in Sandy throw into relief the differences between his acculturation and Philip's maintenance of Jewish American identity. After hearing about Sandy's adventures on the farm in Kentucky, Philip comments, "seemingly as a direct consequence of Sandy's having eaten bacon, ham, pork chops, and sausage, there was no containing the transformation of our lives" (*The Plot Against America* 100). This transformation includes an attempt to relocate the entire family to the Midwest, blatant racism in Washington, DC, and overwhelming fear of persecution wherever they travel.

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<sup>7</sup> For a different reading of this gesture, see Michaels, 296.

Although Sandy returned home to Newark as a proponent of his time in the Just Folks program, Philip later concedes that Sandy

admitted to having been frightened just about all the time: frightened when they passed through cities where Ku Klux Klansmen had to be lying in wait for any Jew foolhardy enough to be driving through, but no less frightened when they were beyond the ominous cities. Frightened because they didn't know whether the killing of Jews had stopped or whether they might be driving right into the thick of the country's murderous rage against people like us. (360-361)

This fear regarding a holocaust of Jewish American identity on American (specifically Midwestern) soil serves as a metaphor for general prejudicial issues that threaten to alter immigrant identities in the United States. What's more, this metaphor opens a space for questioning what has been lost through the alignment of Jewishness with American identity. Roth's prodding of these issues is able to adopt a deep resonance of fear owing to social horrors such as American Indian assimilation and the whitewashing of race, leaving one to question whether American Jews have in fact suffered a profound loss of ethnicity owing to traditional identity alignments taking place in immigrant narratives.

Roth's counterfactual holocaust becomes narratively possible because "older modes of representation... proved inadequate" and he sought "a new and adequate narrative form to take account of such an extreme human experience as the Shoah" (Anelli 410). An extreme event "of such an unprecedented nature [that it] evade[s] ready comprehension within the received categories of historical explanation" (A. Rosenfeld 46), thereby calling for new ways of understanding its traumatic effects. As its own, albeit much smaller scale, version of an incomprehensible event, 9/11 calls upon Jewish

American authors to explore new genres and templates in order to help make sense of unexpected attacks on America, permitting a historical sense of perspective to come to bear on the actual scope and outcomes of September 11, 2001. In fact, Roth uses counterfactual history so well that “one must wonder whether it is not only the best but perhaps the only way for him to adequately discuss such a hot-button topic” (Graham 122). By blending his own anxieties regarding assimilation and a loss of Jewish identity with the counterfactual possibility of a cultural cleansing on American soil, Roth electrifies fear regarding the loss of identity, bringing that topic to the forefront of his novel. Indeed, in response to critics who have interpreted his novel as one that “offers a not-so-thinly veiled critique of the United States under the administration of President George W. Bush” (G. Rosenfeld 156), Roth has said that “intentions... were not to illuminate anything about the Bush administration or the conditions we’re living in now,” but that the “relevant” aspect of the book “is the word ‘fear’” (Roth “Interview”). And that fear is born and sustained through Roth’s counterfactual exercise, especially when considered in conversation with other contemporary immigration narratives, which at their heart have justified fears of surveillance, incarceration, deportation, and death at the hands of America’s immigration system.

*The Plot Against America* serves as a metaphor for the assimilation of any immigrant group. As a post-Bush-era parable, it could have just as easily asked, “what if we started to round up and relocate Muslims?” And we did--to detention centers and deportation processing units. The real fear, the real danger of *The Plot Against America* is that it could have easily taken place today. Whether critiquing Lindberg or Bush, whether examining the twentieth or twenty-first centuries, whether probing World War II or the



War on Terror, fear remains central to the narrative: fear of surveillance, a policing of language, and a loss of ethnic identity via assimilation. Perhaps Roth's novel can awaken sensibilities in readers to question policies and programs, but it does not do more than that. It is a narrative, like most alternate histories, that raises questions and provides no answers. As we will see, Chabon's novel works similarly, but also begins to move away from dystopian conclusions as it delivers its readers firmly into the twenty-first century rather than depositing them back on a track that has yet to pass through the second half of the twentieth century.

#### IV.

The degree to which one identifies with American-ness has often been in the background of Michael Chabon's literary career, and he has often used Jewishness to frame that problem. In *Mysteries of Pittsburgh* (1988), Chabon's protagonist is Art Bechstein, the Jewish son of a mobster. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000) tells the story of two Jewish cousins who are extremely successful and comfortable in their world. Chabon's preference is to take dominant genres and subjects--about crime, bisexuality, and superheroes--and give them a Jewish immigrant twist, probing questions about what it means to be American in the face of competing identity categories. Although he has allowed a more serious exploration of Jewish ancestry to seep into his work, Chabon is still often conceived of as largely as an "American" writer. However, with regards to his personal history, Chabon has said:

For a while, still young and interested in my own pain as an object of the world's attention, I grooved along in my lostness. But after a while I got tired of feeling

that way. I started to light candles; I met and married my present wife, the grandchild of European immigrants... wandering back to a place where I could feel at home.” (“Maps and Legends” 190)

In his quest for understanding, Chabon comes up against the realities of immigration in America, admitting that his personal “freedoms [were] guaranteed,” that he had not known “anything resembling the anti-Semitism that exiled [his] grandparents” (“Maps and Legends” 169). And yet paradoxically, this freedom to investigate, accept, is itself indicative of and essential to the question of whether he or his characters identify themselves as American. In his non-fiction tome, *Manhood for Amateurs* (2008), Chabon continues to probe questions of belonging through his exploration of topics such as being a “bacon-eating Jew” (283) on Christmas in America, ubiquitous American childhood participation in the “Legosphere” (51-57), and his relationship with his Episcopalian ex-father-in-law (87-94).

Chabon’s navigation of the intersection of immigrant identity and belonging is most apparent in *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, a novel that fuses noir detective fiction with American alternate history. When a “yid” is murdered at the seedy Hotel Zamenhof within the Jewish refugee settlement of Sitka, Alaska, Detective Meyer Landsman and his partner, Berko Shemets, are sent on an investigative journey that leads them through Alaska’s rough frontier, strange retreats built by misguided Jewish philanthropy,<sup>8</sup> encounters with evangelicals of both the Zionist and Christian variety, and the realization that an inebriated, junkie Messiah was, in fact, murdered by none other than Berko’s

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<sup>8</sup> Following World War II, the American Jewish community’s contributions to central communal campaigns “soared from \$57.3 million in 1945 to \$131.7 million in 1946 and to \$205 million in 1948” (Goren 188). The retreat that Chabon constructs in *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* suggests a negative critique of this trend with gifts such as holding cells being attributed to Jewish American donors from mainland America.

father. In many respects, the book aims to open up the “mystery” of what it means to be American, and it is not shy about invoking that grand project. At the very start of the novel, Chabon sets out large claims regarding a “people” that coheres and identifies based on shared space and language. About his protagonist, Chabon writes, “because spiting himself, spiting others, spiting the world is the pastime and only patrimony of Landsman and his people” (*Yiddish Policemen’s Union* 11). Despite public declamations, such as his Op-Ed piece in *The New York Times*, “Chosen, but Not Special”--in which he debunks the cultural myth that “that Jews, the people of Maimonides, Albert Einstein, Jonas Salk and Meyer Lansky, were on the whole smarter, cleverer, more brilliant, more astute than other people”--Chabon fuses his smart-talking hero with Jewish immigrant markers, showing one way in which immigrant characters can hold onto their ethnic identities, even under the assimilative pressures of contemporary America.

Chabon uses alternate history to explore sensitive issues, with his “what if” moment derived from an actual 1940 document that contemplated “opening up the Alaskan Territory to European Jews marked for extermination” (Cohen 6). The Slattery Report, officially titled “The Problem of Alaskan Development” was written by Harry A. Slattery, Undersecretary of the Interior below Secretary Harold L. Ickes. The report proposed opening Alaska as “a haven for Jewish refugees from Germany and other areas in Europe where the Jews are subjected to oppressive restrictions” (Medoff “A Thanksgiving plan to save Europe’s Jews”). In Chabon’s novel, Sitka is established, but ultimately becomes a settlement that never offers stable comfort for its immigrant residents. His proposed refugee homeland<sup>9</sup> (albeit temporary) scaffolds a space in which

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<sup>9</sup> For the purpose of this analysis, “homeland” is defined along Theodore Herzl’s terms (via Rubin-Dorsky), which require “one, full participation in the civic and political life of the nation without a corresponding

Chabon can work through immigrant culture and language while also commenting on issues of placement and displacement. (Nowhere is this more apparent than in his choice to name his protagonist *Landsman*). His use of an actual historical proposal removes the parlor game aspect so often attributed to counterfactual thought, and allows his novel to imagine the possibilities of a refugee homeland created in the middle of the twentieth century. Chabon then transports his readers to 2007 in order to examine not necessarily the founding of this state but its progression, the idea of what it might mean to belong to this state today.

Placing a refugee state on American soil of course creates ambiguities from the outset. Here, Chabon characteristically plays both sides of the fence. Chabon returns to the sense of faltering identity and unbelonging that he attributes to himself in his personal essays to create Meyer Landsman, his detective protagonist, who begins the novel as a “mocking asshole” of a Jew (37) who believes “heaven is kitsch, God a word, and the soul, at most, the charge on your battery” (130). However, set against Landsman’s hardened rejection of his culture is Berko, his police partner and the head of a conservative household. Throughout the novel, an exchange ensues: Berko serves as a conservative influence and moral compass for Landsman. Moreover, Berko and his wife exemplify a happy marriage, which is something that Landsman deeply desires and eventually realizes through his return to Bina, his ex-wife and a woman who “land[s] on her feet, hit[s] the ground running, ride[s] out the vicissitudes, and make[s] the best of what falls to hand” (155). She is, it turns out, a “Jewess” (155) who is completely unflappable and represents the strength of Jewish immigrant women in times of tumult.

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absorption into its cultural life (that is, Jews were *not* to become indistinguishable from other citizens); two, freedom from anti-Semitism; and three, a transformation of the Jewish soul, a renaissance and regeneration, so the speak, of the Jewish creative spirit” (83).

The narrative of Landsman's quest for identity "embeds in it the life of the storyteller [Chabon] in order to pass it on as experience to those listening" (Geyer-Ryan 74).

Equally central to this alternate history is the importance of endowing the reader/listener with wisdom and experience, which is arguably one of the main aims of Chabon's novel as it navigates a wholly immigrant culture in Sitka through the eyes of multiple immigrant characters. Owing to this exploration, Chabon's reader is able to enter a society that is imagined for the sake of learning about the ways in which individuals selectively identify both culturally and nationally. It is ultimately what one learns, or does not learn, about belonging to an immigrant community that is at stake in this text. Meanwhile, one thing remains constant within the entire society of Sitka: language. Chabon's characters do not speak English. Rather, Chabon's audience is asked to believe that his novel is in translation from the Yiddish that, we are told, fills the streets and homes of Sitka, perhaps a nod to the Sholem Aleichem<sup>10</sup> tradition of Yiddish literature, solidifying its project as cultural rather than simply literary. Along with the alternate histories of Sitka as a settlement, the destruction of Israel, and the narrative choice of dropping "the bomb" on Germany rather than Japan, Chabon layers on the linguistic counterfactual of Yiddish, which was (in reality) rejected in 1948 as the official language of Israel ("Maps and Legends" 177).

This focus on Yiddish is central to the novel's concern with cultural belonging. Chabon cites the inspiration for Yiddish as the language of Sitka as a book titled *Say It in Yiddish*, which was written by Beatrice and Uriel Weinrich in 1958 as part of the "Say It" book series ("Maps and Legends" 175). The book provides phrases for travelers to

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<sup>10</sup> Sholem Aleichem was the pen name of Sholem Naumovich Rabinovich, a famous Yiddish author of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For more on Aleichem, see Irving Howe and Ruth Wisse's *The Best of Sholem Aleichem*.

Yiddish speaking countries. Given that Yiddish was not an official national language anywhere in the world at the time of the Weinrichs book's publication,<sup>11</sup> Chabon had apparently wondered about the places for which the book was intended. Since there seemed to be none, he wrote it into Sitka (and, in a metafictional move, Chabon includes a "glossary" at the rear of the novel "prepared by Prof. Leon Chaim Bach"<sup>12</sup> in order to help his readers comfortably navigate the book's "foreign" language). Turning readers into outsiders marginalized by language and customs makes them immigrants into Chabon's alternative-historical world.

Meanwhile, throughout the novel, there are mentions of the coming "Reversion," at which time "sovereignty over the whole Federal District of Sitka, a crooked parenthesis of rocky shoreline running along the western edges of Baranof and Chichagof islands, will revert to the state of Alaska" (7). It is because of this threatened Reversion that characters often refer to their particular historical moment as "strange times to be a Jew" (ibid), musing on the tenuous position of immigrants in lands that are not their own. In Chabon's Sitka, adopted homelands cannot provide true comfort. Rather, strangeness is born of diasporic possibility, leaving readers grappling with the difference between living in a refugee state and belonging to a permanent home. Through his use of alternate history, Chabon thus works to set up a place where immigrants are saved by and housed in America to highlight their potential to be assimilated or "reverted" into a larger national story. However, the potential within this alternate history project of reversion

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<sup>11</sup> In the twentieth century, Yiddish had briefly been an official language in the Ukraine, Belarus, and a few short-lived geographies in the Russian Far East. It also had status as an official minority language in a number of European countries. Unfortunately, it is estimated that the use of Yiddish dropped as much as 80-85% following the Holocaust.

<sup>12</sup> Leon Chaim Bach is an anagram for Michael Chabon and sometimes used by the author as a pseudonym. The glossary was also prepared "with the assistance of" Sherryll Mleynek, a faculty member in the Judaic Studies Program at Portland State University.

remains unrealized, as we never witness the characters becoming permanent citizens in America.

Ultimately, Chabon's alternate history exercise puts his immigrants in conflict with the native peoples who lived in Sitka during the time of Ickes's proposed refugee solution, pitting immigrant Americans against Native Americans and foregrounding questions of what it means to be called American in any sense, tying back to Native American boarding schools in a way similar to Roth's exploration of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.<sup>13</sup> Although the novel may only indirectly acknowledge the factual history, Sitka was a hotly contested area between American troops and Tlingit Indians from the late nineteenth through the mid twentieth century (Mitchell 22-57). By showing his characters striving to create a temporary state on top of already existing Native American communities, Chabon emphasizes the unstable nature of creating new homes where homelands already exist. Since the American government is in charge of the Reversion of Sitka, one could foresee an opportunity for a redrawing of borders that in the long run become more inclusive; however, that redrawing that never happens. By setting the novel in 2007, Chabon makes clear that a modern-day Sitka is as tenuous as anywhere else in America.

## V.

In *The Plot Against America* and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, the use of alternate history motivates a reexamination of immigrant belonging in America. For Roth, the Holocaust is Americanized, threatening fear within and displacement from

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<sup>13</sup> A boarding school at Mount Edgecumbe, near Sitka, was opened in 1947 by the Bureau of Indian Affairs with the aim of "educating American Indians" (Alaska's Heritage), marking Sitka as an active site in the participation of acculturating Native Americans in the twentieth century.

stable immigrant homes. Likewise, Chabon imagines a country in which, though the “homeland” is transplanted, there is little sense of home. However, even with their encouragement of alternative historical meanings, neither book offers an alternate ending; instead, both deposit their readers back into a known chronological sequence. When employing alternate history, there is a difference between posing implausible questions and providing implausible answers (Ferguson 3). By offering questions, these novels explore spaces through which to encourage while both reflecting back on history and looking forward to the future. It is that reflection backward in time with an understanding of the true course of events that has taken us to the present moment that leaves alternate history narratives as ultimately dystopic with regards to immigration. By returning readers to the realities post-9/11 America, Roth and Chabon leave their immigrant characters in a country where detention, deportation, and a sense of homelessness cloud twenty-first century immigration experiences. But the point is that they leave them here at all. Unlike other contemporary authors, these Jewish Americans do not write their characters out of America, instead embracing Jewish American identity in the face of assimilative tendencies, turning their backs on unfortunate immigration politics that plague contemporary America and threaten the maintenance of ethnic identity, but not fully rejecting the country itself. In this way, Roth and Chabon acknowledge the secure status of Jewish Americans and encourage a sense of maintaining ethnic identity even as American politics encourage the policing and surveillance of immigrant groups, including those who are both relatively new to and established in the United States.

Roth’s story ends with FDR becoming President and the United States entering World War II. This is an “acceptable” use of alternate history (in the eyes of historians)



because Roth does not approach “past events with a conscious indifference to what is known about later events” (Ferguson 11). Namely, Roth understood that “most American Jews directed their loyalties to liberal movements within mainstream parties. They admired and supported Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal” (Diner 77), making it impossible to subsume FDR in Roth’s counterfactual exercise. However, even with the reinstatement of business as usual, the fear that Roth writes into the novel leaves “a lingering sense of anxiety... suggesting that the genocide [the novel] alludes to has been a near miss and that the fears Roth has raised cannot be so easily ignored” (Graham 120). In other words, Roth makes clear that immigrant Americans are victims of America’s failure to protect all its citizens, but that this victimization does not necessarily need to equate with leaving America. As Walter Benn Michaels has pointed out, “it’s the violation of peoples’ rights as citizens, the failure of the liberal state to live up to its liberalism” [294] that’s really at stake in *The Plot Against America*; however, given his own success, Roth is an example of how ethnic authors can turn political failures into opportunities for redefinition.

Chabon, on the other hand, imagines a “decline of bourgeois history” (Geyer-Ryan 76), targeting a specific immigrant demographic and asking that demographic to reexamine the ways in which it conceives of itself as belonging to and in American history. In addition to questioning a loss of language through his use of Yiddish, Chabon pushes readers to consider the ways in which they build their identities and the physical place in which those identities are rooted; however, his characters’ lack of a permanent home leaves their American alignment not fully realized, instead perpetuating the idea that many immigrants are bound to become people with “no home, no future, no fate” but

one another (*The Yiddish Policemen's Union* 411). And that might just be enough. Perhaps immigration narratives need not subscribe to a zero-sum view of citizenship in the twenty-first century. Chabon's novel conceives of an alternative that encourages staying within America's borders and defining the nation on one's own terms, reclaiming Jewish American identity even as issues as pervasive as surveillance and detention threaten to damage any (yes, even Jewish) Americans.

Chabon and Roth force their readers to think about segregation, racism, and bigotry through the lens of immigrant experience and imagination, and to contemplate conditions that arise when these issues come in contact with one another in contemporary America. And thus paradoxically, these histories that never happened become "a vital part of the way in which we learn" (Ferguson 2) about immigrant America.

## VI.

It is here, in an unstable contemporary moment, that speculative fiction finds its starting point. In speculative fiction "accepted science and established facts are extrapolated to produce a new situation, new framework for human action" (Heinlein qtd. in Wolfe 16). For Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*, the accepted sciences are personal communication devices and a desire for immortality, producing a revised framework through which to study human action while simultaneously scaffolding a critique regarding immigration and individuality. Importantly, Shteyngart's novel is set in the near future, which like the utilization of archival documents in Roth and Chabon, removes some of the fantasy and parlor game aspect of his fiction. As Gwyneth Jones explains, to be taken seriously by literary scholars science fiction "must be set in a future

as close as possible to us in space and time; and must be set in a world we or our children might possibly live to see. Then the privileges of mainstream realism will be restored, and the language of the novel will become possible” (15). By setting the narrative within a close rather than distant future, Shteyngart’s operates as speculative rather than fantasy fiction. While Shteyngart’s novel teems with its own language to describe technological devices and advances, the way in which individuals approach and interact with one another is familiar to our present time (text messaging, open internet access, wide surveillance practices, and unfiltered online communication), making his slightly off-kilter America undeniably readable for contemporary audiences.

In Shteyngart’s novel, America is a dystopian place, but the novel resonates with utopian possibilities for immigrants thanks to its setting in New York City, even as the greater nation is reworked and globally redefined in less-than-powerful terms. As Michiko Kakutani noted regarding the novel, “Shteyngart at once depicts a dystopian American and a utopian New York” (C1), but I argue that this utopian New York is not simply about an imagined metropolis, but about finding utopic possibilities for immigration in America in the very city that is so often at the center of immigrant experience. It is no accident that this narrative, which centralizes immigration and the economy, is set in the same city that is home to Ellis Island and Wall Street... not to mention John F. Kennedy Airport, which is now a central hub for immigration.

Shteyngart opens his novel with words that echo throughout the text, and ultimately convey the state of affairs for the story’s immigrants: “Today I’ve made a major decision: *I am never going to die*” (1). This overarching message for the novel, laid out in the very first sentence, is a formal device shared by *Super Sad True Love Story* and

*The Plot Against America*; however, where Roth selects an environment of fear, Shteyngart instead chooses immortality. This intertextuality sets up a repeatable pattern of linguistic symbolism that consequently runs through each novel, influencing the environments and decisions of Jewish American characters from the outset—one version of America is driven by fear while the other aims at global immortality.

Lenny Abramov, “a Jewish Everyman who falls in love with an acculturated Korean-American young woman” (Barr 315), is credited with the novel’s opening words, writing them in his diary as he travels from Rome back to his hometown of New York. He claims that he, the novel’s “small nonentity, will live forever” because “the technology is almost here. As the Life Lovers Outreach Coordinator (Grade G) of the Post-Human Services division of the Staatling-Wapachung Corporation” (8), Lenny plans to partake in life extension services. Little does he know that his particular breed of immortality will come not via a futuristic technology but via an established and even archaic one—the book, reviled by many characters in this novel as a smelly and obsolete non-digital means of conveying information.

The world of *Super Sad True Love Story* is abuzz with technological advances, all of which affect not only the daily life of the novel’s characters, but the way they interact with one another. Everyone is engrossed in their personal electronic devices (äppäräts) and online communication accounts, so much so that interacting face-to-face is referred to as “verballing” (45) because it has become the exception rather than the norm. For Eunice Park, the arguably most fluent techy within the narrative, verballing is flat-out bizarre: “Sometimes people verbal me and I just look at their mouth and it’s like WHAT? What are you saying to me? How am I supposed to even verbal back and does it even

matter what comes out?” (48). While *äppäräts*, verballing, and life extension may seem the stuff of fantasy, Shteyngart’s novel is in fact prophetic in nature, linking it to conventional science fiction along with its more unorthodox aspects. “To be science fiction, not fantasy, an honest effort at prophetic extrapolation of the known must be made” (Campbell qtd. in Gunn 86), and this comes via not only personal obsession with technology, but the way that this obsession bleeds into everyday experience.<sup>14</sup> Whereas Americans and immigrants of the twentieth century were concerned with creating a melting pot (or salad bar) of varied experience, the characters in Shteyngart’s novel are far more concerned with saving themselves, leading to an extraction from mainstream America, which in turn causes national social and economic failure.

In addition to interpersonal interaction falling apart, immigration is a faltering business in near-future America. “Only a few of the saddest, most destitute Albanians still wanted to emigrate to the States, and that lonely number was further discouraged by a poster showing a plucky little otter in a sombrero trying to jump onto a crammed dinghy under the tagline ‘The Boat is Full, Amigo’ (10), conjuring images of once-crowded refugee ships that have now dwindled to a tiny trail of immigrants looking to cross America’s borders. Of course, movement away from America is on the rise. Just consider the A-Level Koreans, a respected ethnic group in the universe of this novel, who all “returned to the motherland after the economic scales had tipped toward Seoul” (183). However, those that remained were “less assimilated” than previous generations, “still close to the tremulously beating heart of the immigrant experience” (ibid), emphasizing

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<sup>14</sup> Shteyngart has spoken about his successful and ironic prescience, with *Super Sad True Love Story* correctly predicting the Occupy Wall Street movement, disturbing trends away from privacy, American economic decline, and the never-ending fight for print over digital media. Shteyngart: “I would joke that the book is set next Tuesday. It looks like it's not really a joke anymore” (Satran). See also Bilton.

the unassimilated position of immigrants who are weary of fully committing themselves to an unstable country such as America. Eunice's mother comments, "We are not like American, don't forget! Which is why now Korea very rich country and America owe everything to China people" (73).

In order to drive home the necessity of uncoupling immigrants and America's strength as a nation, Shteyngart links economic security with immigration, demonstrating that without the latter, the former is not possible. As politicians from JFK to George W. Bush have commented, America is a nation of immigrants; however, Shteyngart's America has become unstable, a nation on the brink of both social and economic collapse, one in a position of global fragility rather than superpower. His "depiction of America's economic decline is uncannily accurate. Just before the debt ceiling almost fell, when the proud American eagle was on the verge of becoming Chicken Little, Shteyngart describes the aftermath of American economic collapse" (Barr 311), and he does so while creating a prescient association between the collapses of the economy and immigration. This nexus between the economy and healthy immigration drives home the prophetic extrapolation that makes Shteyngart's use of speculative fiction so fascinating. Truly, "this country is so stupid. Only spoiled white people could let something so good get so bad" (201).

A prime example of the coupling between economics and immigration comes via the demonstrations in Zuccotti Park. Eunice describes the scene to Lenny: "The way they have it set up is pretty amazing. It's a tiny little park, but like every little bit of it is used for a purpose... they're so organized there" (174), demonstrating both the establishment of a unique social structure as well as an economic use of space and resources. Political

protests and a desire for national change come to life in this park, which (again testifying to Shteyngart's prescience) also happened to become the home for the Occupy Wall Street movement just over one year after this novel's publication. Eunice and her sister are drawn to Zuccotti Park out of a desire to connect with humanity and see what exactly New York City's activist population is doing in its makeshift tent village. It is this unexpected link to human connection that infuses the otherwise bleak national situation with a level of human utopianism, allowing speculative fiction to "bring together and challenge a complex network of present cultural desires and disavowals" (O'Connell 72). The desire in *Super Sad True Love Story* is human connection and the cultural disavowal is America's economic position, both of which are narrated through Eunice. The (aptly surnamed) Park sisters lead the readers to Zuccotti Park, allowing for the novel's immigrants to operate as guides to desired change in terms of both economics (the protesters are homeless and unemployed) and community (verballing is the main form of communication for Zuccotti tent city residents).

As much as immigrant families in Shteyngart's New York are infused with utopian possibilities (albeit oftentimes veiled), Americans are targeted by America. In setting up Americans as the group under surveillance, Shteyngart continues to drive home his commentary on immigration. The novel ponders: what if American citizens were the ones under scrutiny rather than their immigrant counterparts? With regards to movement across borders, Lenny explains that "if you spend over 250 days abroad and don't register for Welcome Back Pa'dner, the official United States Citizen Re-Entry Program, they can bust you for sedition right at JFK, send you to a 'secure screening facility' Upstate, whatever that is" (10), echoing the post-9/11 experiences of immigrants and asylum-

seekers hoping to make America home. As if surveillance at borders isn't enough, citizens are also monitored and ranked using categories such as personality, sustainability, fuckability, and credit score (all of which pop up on telephone poles and personal electronic devices), suggesting that one is only as valuable as their perceived worth.

Even while America falters, the ultimate "end product of our deep moral exhaustion" (130) within the novel is utopic in nature. Lenny ultimately decides "*I am going to die*" (299), but his decision to accept physical death is no match for his earlier determination that he will live forever, for it is through his text that Lenny lives on while simultaneously giving immortality to the Park family, the Zuccotti Park protestors, and a changing New York City. "When I wrote these diary entries so many decades ago, it never occurred to me that *any* text would *ever* find a new generation of readers" (321), and it is in this moment that utopia triumphs over America's economic collapse. Lenny earlier deemed his books "sacred ones" that he would one day "make important again" (52), and he has. Lenny and Eunice's story does not die. America's love story is indeed super sad (and the country's problems with economics and immigration, unfortunately true), but its immigrant narratives continue as they progress through new forms, genres, and audiences.

## VII.

The evolving nature of immigrant narratives is illustrated through Lenny and Eunice's writings, which were "published in Beijing and New York two years ago" (327). As immigrants, their writing is what drives the novel forward, without their views on America (and their resulting incomplete assimilations), the nation would not be



viewable or understandable to Shteyngart's readers. By simultaneously acknowledging and rejecting the state of the contemporary American nation, Lenny and Eunice operate as mouthpieces for the revised immigrant narrative that Shteyngart suggests as possible via this novel. Their worlds, their Americas, have survived despite all that the nation has endured, yielding "immortality for individual writers" (Barr 322) and showing how immigrants can remain within America and still carve out a space without assimilation by embracing their particular identities even while the nation strives for demographic uniformity. In other words, a stronger America can emerge when immigration (and its counterparts: detention and deportation) ceases to operate as an industry and again becomes focused on how immigrants diversify, fortify, and ultimately salvage America. This is where speculative fiction emphasizes "the near future as a moment of possibility, a moment for instantiating the dialectical, qualitative change needed to free up the utopian imagination" (O'Connell 83), imagining a future in which individual immigration can flourish regardless of America's political and economic shortcomings and without the traditional turn to assimilation. As economic engines via the publication of their intimate (online!) diaries, Lenny and Eunice demonstrate that their incomplete assimilation only makes them stronger as Americans, suggesting that immigrant groups that are able to hold onto ethnic identity rather than participating in complete adjustment are ultimately more valuable in contemporary America.

By including the traditionally science fiction genres of alternate history and speculative fiction, immigration narratives become an even larger part of the mainstream American tale as authors with personal links to immigration, whether their own experience or recent family history, take to the page. Specifically, by altering traditional

narratives in favor of incomplete assimilation, Jewish American authors such as Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart are able to comment on immigration failings from a place of security, pushing their readers to examine everyone's place in America, suggesting that not even the most acculturated of immigrants is free from the dangers of post-9/11 politics.

As all of the authors in this dissertation have demonstrated, previous models of immigrant writing cannot accurately capture the tenuous position of twenty-first century America and the critical role that immigrants play in stabilizing the country; however, many of those contemporary narratives are extreme in their casting off of America as a potential homeland, creating a new model—narratives of rejection and disaffiliation, which critique and lambast contemporary cultural climates. The space in between older models and narratives of rejection and disaffiliation is therefore made available for writers such as Philip Roth, Michael Chabon, and Gary Shteyngart, allowing alternative genres to become a key part of contemporary immigration narratives and examining a middle ground that permits a view of post-9/11 America that requires neither complete assimilation nor departure, suggesting that there is a moderate possibility of rejection and disaffiliation that does not require a full renunciation of America. As successful Jewish American writers, Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart belong to a privileged group of authors who benefit from an established history of immigrant stability in America; therefore, they are able to deploy that steadiness to suggest an arbitrated and tempered narrative possibility as part of the growing catalogue of post-9/11 American immigrant narratives, evoking an intermediate step in the developing genre and therefore filling out the continuum that we as scholars will hopefully continue to scrutinize and define.

In the traditional high literature of the Novel of Manners and Ethnic Bildungsroman, immigrant protagonists successfully assimilate to America only to turn their backs on the country and literally return to their homelands rather than battle the contemporary nation. Saher Alam's characters return to Pakistan, Joseph O'Neill's go back to England, H.M. Naqvi's Chuck emigrates from America back to Pakistan, and Mohsin Hamid's *Changez* tells his story from Lahore. When turning to nonfiction, a sense of turning away from America remains, even when immigrants are literally interred in United States soil. Edwidge Danticat's Uncle Joseph will be forever "proverbially turning in his grave" at the thought of not being able to return to Haiti after losing his life in immigration detainment, his ghost and its underground movement haunting the American government as it continues to mistreat asylum seekers. As film tackles immigration reform, characters such as McCarthy's Tarek and Mouna are cast out of and selectively leave America, respectively, narrating a return to Syria. In each of these narratives, complete assimilation happened before departure (either selected or forced) from America altered the ending of the immigrant adjustment story. Roth, Chabon, and Shteyngart finesse the issue of completely rejecting America by utilizing their Jewish American platform to envision a possible rejection of American immigration politics without a physical departure from the country's borders, offering a literary middle ground on which to build revised immigrant narratives that will, in fact, carry forward the genre into the twenty-first century without moving it entirely outside of America's borders. In these genre-bending novels by established authors, we can see a place from which to continue this conversation, suggesting a possible containment within the United States of American immigrant narratives if contemporary policies and reforms can follow the

visionary lead of literature and better incorporate immigrants without sacrificing literal and metaphorical lives.

It is within this context that I revisit Judith Butler's quotation regarding post-9/11 America: "It was my sense in the fall of 2001 that the United States was missing an opportunity to redefine itself as part of a global community when, instead, it heightened nationalist discourse, extended surveillance mechanisms, suspended constitutional rights, and developed forms of explicit and implicit censorship" (xi). There is little that writers and filmmakers can do in terms of directly altering policies regarding surveillance or the suspension of constitutional rights (they are not, after all, members of Congress or Supreme Court Justices), but what their work achieves instead is a way of reexamining discourse and the traditions of immigration narratives, thereby rupturing the censorship that Butler rightly attributes to post-9/11 policies and practices. By attending to the work of immigrant narratives in contemporary America, the opportunity for redefinition via critical scholarship is exhumed, no longer buried beneath the rubble of a violent attack or the suffocating policies that it produced.

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