

Negotiating Borders of the Indian Diasporic Identity

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Diaspora is spreading of the seed when planted in different parts of the world, absorbs unique characteristics from the local soil. Every story about the Diaspora thus becomes a unique context, a coordination of space, time and experience, which someday will collectively tell the whole story of a Diaspora.

~ Pradeep Anand

Introduction: Signifying Culture

When I first moved to America from India in 2013, I took a job working morning shifts at Chick-fil-A. Each morning, I was in charge of making biscuits. In a frenzy to make enough for the steady stream of morning cus-

tomers, I would sometimes make too much before the 11 a.m. cut off time that signaled the switch from biscuits to sandwich buns. On these occasions, I was told to empty my uncooked trays of biscuits into the trash. Horrified, I asked if there was any way to save them. “No,” the manager told me, without further explanation, “You must throw them away.” The excessive waste did not end there. Moving from the breakfast to the lunch menu, I sliced tomatoes and peeled apart lettuce layers. I was told to toss the two top and bottom slices of each tomato. If the lettuce leaves were too small, I had to throw those in the trash too.

The idea of throwing so much food away without a second thought stunned me. In India, millions of people were starving, and could live on the food I was forced to toss. Treating perfectly good food as disposable was a cultural practice I had never before encountered. Through my experience working at Chick-fil-A, my eyes were opened to America’s nonchalant policy of waste. So different from the culture I had come from, where everything was preserved, every scrap of food eaten and used, food became a signifier for ideological differences between India and America, and signaled the beginning of a long and ongoing process of evaluation concerning the cultural values and practices of both countries. This process has allowed me to position myself within the cultures of both America and India, often leading to hybrid cultural practices and principles in my own life.

Food acts in a similar fashion in the fictional lives of Jhumpa Lahiri's characters in *Interpreter of Maladies*. A short story collection documenting the experiences of Indian migrants to America, *Interpreter of Maladies* uses food as a medium through which to discover the intersecting cultural spaces the characters encounter. "A Temporary Matter" uses mealtimes in the quiet of candlelight to illumine a couple's past of tragedy, revealing points of similarity and difference that become a metaphor for the Indian diaspora. In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", food reinforces cultural cohesion while simultaneously crossing boundaries of nations to transcend binary categories of identity based on culture of origin. "Mrs. Sen's" expresses the ways in which food acts a catalyst for cultural hybridity, leading to the potential for change and individual agency. Although food plays a less significant role in "This Blessed House", it remains a tool for characters to delineate cultural difference. Thus, food becomes a lens through which to look at aspects of transmigration, transculturation and diaspora.

Transcending the boundaries of a singular culture can prove challenging. For transmigrant individuals, this requires a grappling with the cultures of the countries both newly entered into and left behind. What takes shape in the midst of this struggle is a hybridization, an ongoing formation and reformation of identity, hanging in the narrow space between two recognized cultural spheres. Globalization as a recent world phenomenon has led to

an increase in migration, facilitating interactions between people of different cultures, ethnicities and geographical locations. As migrants collide with differing world views, customs and cultures, they must reevaluate their identities in the midst of an ever more cosmopolitan world. Interrogating the question of identity formation among the Indian diaspora, this paper focuses on Bengali immigrants who have made their home in the United States. Basing my investigation on *Interpreter of Maladies* by Indian migrant author, Jhumpa Lahiri, I will use these stories as case studies to analyze the experiences of the Indian migrant population. Through *Interpreter of Maladies* and its engagement with food as a cultural signifier, I hope to come to an understanding of identity that necessitates the dismantling of binaries such as Self/Other, Colonizer/Colonized and East/West which support essentialist understandings of cultural and diasporic identity, by revealing the arbitrary nature of such binaries in the first place. This paper will endeavor to reveal the potential of transcultural individuals, who, caught in the in-betweenness of culture, are able to deconstruct barriers separating seemingly distinct peoples, cultures and countries through writing about the experiences of their diaspora, making explicit the process of hybridity.

Theoretical Triangulations

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, working in conjunction with Mary Louise Pratt's notion of autoethnography and Stuart Hall's understanding of diasporic

identity, constitute the grounding theories for my paper. Bhabha's key theory of hybridity takes on particular significance in conversation with Edward Said's *Orientalism*, where Orientalism gives rise to binary systems such as West/East, Dominant/Submissive and Self/Other (Said 1979, 2). Hybridity works as a counter to these binary structures, where it can be understood as constituting the liminal space existing in-between the borders of dichotomies (Bhabha 1994, 3). The slash between Self and Other denotes "that from which something begins its presencing", rather than the point at which something stops, meaning that aspects of the Self can be found in the Other, and vice versa (7). For Pratt, the term "contact zone" replaces Bhabha's hybridity, where it is defined as the "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today" (Pratt 1992, 4). The contact zone is therefore a meeting place of culture where individuals encounter "identity friction" and must choose what to do when confronted in this manner (4). When considering cultural identity and its specific location, Bhabha and Pratt theorize that culture can be found in this hybridized space of the contact zone, where cultural difference is negotiated between the borders of established identities (Bhabha 1994, 19).

Hall's discussion of diasporic identity relies on two potential definitions of this word, the second one incom-

prehensible without taking hybridity into account. The first definition provides an essentializing yet powerful idea of identity as rooted in a particular past, while the second forwards a non-essentializing understanding of identity built upon diasporic differences as well as points of similarity (Hall 1994, 225). This last definition of identity opens up the hybridized space in which, “cultural identity...is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (225). Hall’s second definition affords members of a diaspora the ability to engage within the present, rather than tethering themselves to a particular past to which they can no longer fully be a part. Including this understanding of diaspora into one’s ideology allows for engagement with the process of hybridity, ultimately revealing a transmigrant’s lived experience as one which exposes the flawed nature of binary constructions, since identity is an ongoing and never ending process of “evolution and revolution” (Friedman 1998, 8).

Pratt takes autoethnography to be an artistic production which occurs in the hybridized space of which Bhabha speaks, produced by the type of diasporic identity Hall considers. This artistic production takes the form of writing, where a subordinated person seeks to represent themselves in conversation with and against colonizer representations of their people (Pratt 1992, 7). Pratt views autoethnography as a tool for subverting fixed binaries relating to identity especially as it is represented by dominant cultures (Pratt 1991, 35). Autoethnography is a form of resistance born out of the kind of grap-

pling with identity which takes place within the space of hybridity. It is from this place that an individual can challenge binary structures, understanding the arbitrary nature of such dichotomies for themselves. Thus, hybridity, autoethnography and diasporic identity work in tandem to deconstruct binaries and patterns of fixed and static thought.

Challenging Representation of the Other in “Mrs. Sen’s”

“Mrs. Sen’s” is a story illustrating the ways in which cultural interaction leads to a hybridized space of cultural negotiation and transcendence. The story chronicles the relationship of an American boy named Eliot and his nanny, Mrs. Sen. Of particular interest in this story is the way in which the binary of Self/Other and East/West are subverted, wherein both American and Indian characters experience subtle yet significant change in the hybridized space their friendship makes possible. According to Said, subjugated peoples of the East have historically and indeed contemporarily been represented wholly by their dominant Western counterparts, specifically in a literary context (Said 1979, 3). This mode of representation is known as Orientalism, which is “a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient” (2-3). Thus, representation of Eastern subjects as Other is used to promote cultural hegemony, where the West is seen as superior to the

East. “Mrs. Sen’s” challenges this asymmetrical relationship of power by placing both Eliot, a representation of the West, and Mrs. Sen, a representation of the East, on an equal plane, where they mutually influence one another by opening up the cultural scope of their respective identities.

Mrs. Sen, newly arrived to America from Calcutta, refuses to adapt to her new American surroundings, revealed through her preparation of elaborate meals each night for dinner, despite the fact that she now only cooks for herself and her husband (Lahiri 1999, 117). As a signifier of cultural roots, “food has a symbolic value for the immigrant’s experience,” and Mrs. Sen is able to reconnect to her home culture through the act of preparing Indian food (Caspari 2014, 246). Eliot, whose mother is a single parent unable to look after him while she works, spends afternoons with Mrs. Sen, watching intently as she sits on the floor, cutting vegetables for dinner (Lahiri 1999, 112). Eliot notices that “her profile hovered protectively over her work, a confetti of cucumber, eggplant, and onions skins heaped around her” as she tells him about times spent preparing food for weddings in India where neighborhood women “sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night” (115). Mrs. Sen’s action of bending protectively over her work translates to safeguarding memories like the wedding preparation which links her to India. Her protection of her food

and therefore her culture indicates that these memories are not only dear to her, but are under threat given her new surroundings. Thus far, Mrs. Sen is engaging with American culture through resistance, choosing to cling fast to her known culture, rather than embrace that of the foreign. Brought to America by her husband, “here in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me,” and not through her own will, her only avenue for agency in the process of migration has been to resist her new cultural environs by holding fast to her roots (115). However, Mrs. Sen comes to realize that some level of acculturation is necessary and begins to assert her agency over the process of hybridity through negotiation of the border between Self/Other.

Not only does food signify connection, but a sort of new agency; food preparation becomes a symbolic action for hybridity (Caspari 2014, 247). It is Mrs. Sen’s connection to food, at once a cultural signifier meant to reinforce ties to India, which pushes her to analyze her dichotomous thinking and affords the beginnings of cultural negotiation. Mrs. Sen loves fish as Eliot notes, “the other thing that made Mrs. Sen happy was fish from the seaside” (Lahiri 1999, 123). However, fresh fish, again a symbol of her food habits born of Indian cultural practices, is difficult to find, and Mrs. Sen must wait for Mr. Sen to get off work in order to drive her to the fish shack along the coast. Mrs. Sen does not know how to drive, and although Mr. Sen has been trying to teach her,

it is clear that she is fearful (119). Driving a car becomes a symbol of cultural difference. In India, Mrs. Sen is accustomed to having a chauffeur, and driving represents participation in an American cultural norm (113). Mrs. Sen's exaggerated fear is therefore not just about driving, but about engagement within U.S. culture. One day, Mrs. Sen desperately wants fish but cannot get a hold of Mr. Sen (133). Caught between her fear of driving and her desire for fresh fish, Mrs. Sen decides to drive to the fish shack along with Eliot, asserting her agency in the context of a new cultural space in this moment of decision.

Mrs. Sen is on the brink of reconstituting her cultural identity. She has overcome her fear of driving, a symbol of the American way of life to which she has previously been so adamantly opposed, only to crash the car on her way to getting the fish (134). Since Eliot is riding with her, she is seen as an unfit caretaker, thus ending their transformative relationship. Cut off from this life-altering relationship, the reader is uncertain as to whether or not Mrs. Sen will be able to continue to adapt to her new culture, but is also left with the assurance that she has not gone unaffected by Eliot's influence. Importantly, Eliot is just as unable to continue unchanged as is Mrs. Sen. Eliot, who watches the cultural habits of Mrs. Sen, begins to turn a critical eye on his own culture, remarking that his mother does not prepare her own food, but merely orders pizza each night (118). His experience as a single child with a single parent is not normative, and

through acting as witness to another culture embodied in Mrs. Sen, Eliot is pushed to think about how his cultural practices are not universally shared (Caspari 2014, 250). His character too remains unresolved, as the final sentence of the story leaves him on the phone with his mother while he “looked out the kitchen window, at gray waves receding from the shore, and said that he was fine,” a state of being we know to be false (Lahiri 1999, 135). In Eliot’s lie to his mother that he is fine, the reader comes to understand that he feels a sense of loss at his separation from Mrs. Sen.

The meaningful cultural interaction between Mrs. Sen and Eliot challenges the common cultural discourse in which the West dominates the East, by stepping outside the dominance/submission dichotomy. Through their interactions, both characters engage within the contact zone, where they influence each other. Eliot as a member of American culture, does not impose his lifeways on Mrs. Sen. Instead, he takes the passive role of observing her cultural practices. Along with food which acts as a catalyst, Eliot is Mrs. Sen’s point of entry to American culture, as she finds herself unable to completely resist contact with her Western surroundings. In return, Mrs. Sen affords Eliot a window into aspects of Indian culture, causing him to evaluate his own cultural positioning. For Mrs. Sen and Eliot then, the Other no longer remains a distinct entity, but shares aspects of the Self. Their relationship proves the intertwined, fractal

structure of transculturalism and the complex encounters with the Other, leading to a hybridized identity in each of them (Gilroy 1993, 4).

Hybridity in “This Blessed House”

Transmigrant responses within the contact zone are as various and as diverse as the individual experiences are themselves. Expanding on the concept of hybridity in relation to *Interpreter of Maladies*, it is seen as a dismantling of the Self/Other dichotomy where Lahiri’s characters are in the process of “(re)constructing their subjectivity, (re)asserting their agency, or negotiating their identities through either silence, resistance, negotiation, acculturation or assimilation” (Bahmanpour 2010, 44). Engagement within the contact zone can result in a complete rejection of, or a total assimilation into another culture, and may not represent both cultures equally. Hybridity is a grappling with identity that can take any number of forms and is in constant motion (Nair 2015, 141-142). Some of these ways of engaging with hybridity can be found in the story “This Blessed House”, a piece about a newlywed couple, Sanjeev and his wife, Twinkle. While Twinkle, a second generation immigrant, has no problem engaging within the contact zone, effortlessly negotiating between her two cultural identities, Sanjeev, a first generation immigrant much like Mrs. Sen, refuses to engage with the culture he deems as Other.

Instead of food as a cultural signifier, religion comes to represent cultural identity in “This Blessed House”. Twinkle and Sanjeev are in the process of moving into a new house, and discover Christian paraphernalia as they unpack (Lahiri 1999, 136). This house moving can be read as a movement into America, where the couple cannot help but come into contact with cultural aspects of the West (Bahmanpour 2010, 47). Pratt argues that while subjugated peoples often do not have a choice as to whether or not they are exposed to the culture of the dominant group, such as when Twinkle and Sanjeev find the Christian relics, they can to some extent decide what aspects of this culture they will integrate into their own practices (Pratt 1992, 6). Upon finding the first object, “a white porcelain effigy of Christ,” Sanjeev tells Twinkle, who is reluctant to throw it away, “We’re not Christian” (Lahiri 1999, 136-137). In response Twinkle shrugs, “No, we’re not Christian. We’re good little Hindus.’ She planted a kiss on the top of Christ’s head” (137). Twinkle’s seemingly contradictory statement and subsequent action reveals that she is operating in a hybridized space, where she is unafraid of accepting aspects of the West. She maintains that she is Hindu at the same time as asserting her love for the Christ figure she has found.

Sanjeev is not so open to accepting objects representing American culture. When Twinkle finds a poster portrait of Christ he says, “Now look. I will tolerate, for now, your little biblical menagerie in the living room. But I re-

fuse to have this...displayed in our home.” (139). Here, Sanjeev is engaging within the contact zone through resistance, refusing to engage with the relics signifying a culture other than his own. However, cracks in his defensive barrier begin to appear as he realizes he must negotiate between cultures in order to remain content with his marital partner, “He was getting nowhere with her, with this woman whom he had known for only four months and whom he had married, this woman with whom he now shared his life” (146). At the end of the story, Twinkle finds a “solid silver bust of Christ” in the attic of their house, which she asks Sanjeev to carry into the living room (156). Although Sanjeev “hated that it was in his house, and that he owned it,” he negotiates his urge to refuse keeping the bust in his home by engaging within the contact zone through silence (157). The story leaves Sanjeev as he “pressed the massive silver face to his ribs, careful not to let the feather hat slip, and followed her,” for once refraining from arguing with Twinkle (157).

“This Blessed House” suggests that to engage with hybridity, there needs to be some form of negotiation between cultures. Although Sanjeev and Twinkle have both been thrown into the contact zone where they are exposed to aspects of Western culture inside their own home, only Twinkle engages in the process of hybridity as she is able to positively negotiate between these cultural religious objects and her own religious beliefs

as a Hindu. Whereas Sanjeev remains opposed to the religious artifacts hidden in the house, Twinkle opens herself up to their mystery, enjoying their foreignness instead of rejecting them for being so. In so doing, Twinkle and other subordinated individuals are constructing their counter to dominant representations of themselves by refusing to remain entirely Other. It is important to note that Sanjeev too, seems to be opening himself up to hybridity. His engagement within the contact zone shifts from one of complete resistance to one of silence. Like “Mrs. Sen’s”, “This Blessed House” remains open ended, suggesting that the process of reevaluating and reasserting identity in an ongoing and never ending process.

Part One: Diasporic Identity in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”

“Identity is not as transparent or as unproblematic as we think” (Hall 1994, 222). Complicating understandings of diasporic identity, Stuart Hall provides two different ways in which cultural identity can be defined. The first definition asserts the notion of a shared identity, an underlying essence to a group of people (223). Finding cultural identity involves excavating that unchanging meaning to which members of a diaspora belong (223). This understanding of cultural identity as static and rooted in the past can be seen in Lahiri’s story, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”. The story opens with the civil war

raging in Pakistan, 1971. East Pakistan, soon to become known as Bangladesh, is struggling for independence (Lahiri 1999, 23). Meanwhile, across the world in America, Lilia's Indian parents and their East Pakistani friend, Mr. Pirzada, watch the turbulent birth of this nation on the evening news as they eat Indian food prepared by Lilia's mother (24).

Lilia's father is adamant that she understand the differences between her Indian family, and Mr. Pirzada, a distinction which stems from India's history of decolonization. Immediately upon gaining independence from Britain, India was carved up into different nation-states. Lilia's father dramatically describes to his uncomprehending daughter, "One moment we were free and then we were sliced up,' drawing an X with his finger on the countertop, 'like a pie'" (25). India became Pakistan and now Pakistan too, is breaking apart. This experience of dispersal, revealed in Lilia's father's metaphor of a pie, relates to "the ways transnational groupings are fractured by nation, class, gender, sexuality and language," and to an uncovering of the history of the term "diaspora" as first relating to the exile of the Jews from Israel (Edwards 2003, 12-13). This understanding invokes the forceful movement of peoples across cultural and physical borders due to external pressure which makes a nation unable to support its citizens (13). Perhaps it is this displacement which brings Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's family together, merging understandings of diasporic identity.

Lilia's family at first sees only the differences between themselves and Mr. Pirzada. Mr. Pirzada is Muslim and therefore was relegated to East Pakistan when India was carved up post decolonization (Lahiri 1999, 25). Lilia's father tells her that, "during Partition Hindus and Muslims had set fire to each other's homes. For many, the idea of eating in each other's company was still unthinkable" (25). Despite this fact, Mr. Pirzada and Lilia's parents partake of meals together almost every day. Lilia notices the similarity of their actions concerning how they eat their food. She brings them chili peppers "which they liked to snap open and crush into their food" (30). As they watch the latest news coverage of the East Pakistani fight for independence, they relish in the food that reminds them of home, seemingly not realizing the ways in which food brings them together. Lilia however, notices their similarities, narrating, "Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same" (25). In her childhood innocence, Lilia does not understand the differences of nation which her father is so insistent on explaining.

One of the most powerful lines in this story comes in the tense days leading up to East Pakistan's emancipation. Lilia recalls, "Most of all I remember the three of them operating during that time as if they were a single person, a single body, a single silence and a single fear" (41). Despite Lilia's father's adamant insistence upon

Mr. Pirzada's identity being distinctly different from his own, in this moment where they are consumed with the events of the Pakistani civil war, both Indians and soon to be Bangladeshi, find themselves acting as "a single person" (41). Ultimately, the fact that the East Pakistani is Muslim and the Indians Hindu, does not matter. Their customs centered around food, language and humor serve to bring them together, becoming individuals whose sense of identity has expanded to encompass one another, even as their representative countries ally together to fight for independence. "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" relays Hall's first definition of diaspora as one which acknowledges similarity within members of a diaspora. Although fractured, East Pakistan was once a part of India, and it is this shared past which Lilia's parents and Mr. Pirzada return to as they gather together over a matter of mutual concern for the world events taking place. The borders of identity have merged among this group of friends just as the borders of their homelands are thrown into question by war.

Part Two: Diasporic Identity in "A Temporary Matter"

Though Hall acknowledges that his first conception of identity involves an important "act of rediscovery despite being destroyed, suppressed and overlaid by colonialization," he contends that representations of such a unified identity impose "an imaginary coherence on

the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all dispersed diasporas” (Hall 1994, 224). Whereas this understanding of identity proved powerful in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” by bringing together dispersed members of the India diaspora, it remains a conception of identity that is rooted in a particular past, a past to which it may not always be practical, or indeed possible, to return (224). Instead, Hall proposes a second definition of cultural identity which acknowledges deep differences as well as points of similarity between members of the same diaspora (225). Contending that “cultural identity...is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’,” Hall explains that identity is not rooted to a fixed and stable past to which a diaspora must “make some final and absolute return” (226). Lahiri’s opening story in *Interpreter of Maladies* titled “A Temporary Matter”, struggles with these two contending ideologies of diaspora. Unlike “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, “A Temporary Matter” finds that returning to a specific cultural past is impossible, and perhaps even undesirable given the magnitude of change experienced as time moves forward. “A Temporary Matter” thus reveals how identity is constituted in an ongoing process of evolution and revolution.

Shukumar and his wife Shoba have lost their first child, a tragedy which tears apart their marriage (Lahiri 1999, 3). Communication between them breaks down as Shukumar remarks, “The more Shoba stayed out, the more

she began to put in extra hours of work and taking on additional projects, the more he wanted to stay in” (Lahiri, 2). The death of their child has wrought changes in both of them, portrayed through their practices revolving around food. Shukumar recalls that “when friends dropped by, Shoba would throw together meals that appeared to have taken half a day to prepare, from things she had frozen and bottled, not cheap things in tins but peppers she had marinated herself with rosemary, and chutneys that she cooked on Sundays, stirring boiling pots of tomatoes and prunes” (7). Now, it is Shukumar who does all the cooking, Shoba content with “eat[ing] a bowl of cereal for her dinner” (8). Just as food signifies the ways in which both Shoba and Shukumar have changed since the death of their baby, it also becomes a medium through which pathways to communication reopen.

The couple’s neighbourhood is scheduled for electricity work, meaning that each evening for an hour beginning at eight o’clock, the electricity will be turned off. On the first night, Shukumar prepares rogan josh, a lamb and paprika curry for their meal by candlelight (10). Sharing their meal in the dark, something they have not done in a while since they tend to eat their meals separately, Shoba and Shukumar begin to talk to one another, revealing secrets they have kept from each other, “Somehow, without saying anything, it had turned into this. Into an exchange of confessions—the little ways they’d hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves” (18). This

nightly ritual of sharing confessions by candlelight relates to Hall's definition of diaspora as an excavation of a shared identity. Shoba and Shukumar, as a metaphor for the larger India diaspora of which they are a part, are seeking to return to the way their life was before the tragedy. Food has opened a doorway to communication through which they are able to begin reconnecting with each other, finding healing through the process.

For Shoba and Shukumar, the process of reconnection takes a twist away from a reunited return to the past. At the end of the week of scheduled power outages, Shoba reveals her last secret, "I've been looking for an apartment and I've found one," she said, narrowing her eyes on something, it seemed, behind his left shoulder. It was nobody's fault, she continued. They'd been through enough" (21). In response, Shukumar, too, reveals his last confession. He held his stillborn infant in the palm of his hand while Shoba was sleeping, and had known that he was a boy, something Shoba did not know. Shukumar had "promised himself that day that he would never tell Shoba, because he still loved her then" (22). Through finally reconnecting and reopening their communication, the couple realizes that they have changed to the point at which they no longer love each other in the same way, nor desire a life together. In choosing to go their separate ways, Shoba and Shukumar reveal that identity is determined through difference. Although they share a common past, they can no longer strive to re-

turn to this past, and must move on acknowledging the changes that have been wrought.

As a metaphor for diaspora, Shoba and Shukumar's story suggests an anti-essentialist understanding of identity where it is seen as complex and constituted as much on points of difference as on points of similarity (Edwards 2003, 12). Here, identity is not seen as a pure essence, but is characterized through diversity, and through the process of change. Hall acknowledges diaspora as "a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall 1994, 236). Diversity among diaspora challenges fixed binaries which render identity static. Indeed, differences cannot be represented through binary systems of Self/Other because, "its complexity exceeds this binary structure of representation" (228). Through an ever evolving formation and reformation of cultural identity, as seen in "A Temporary matter", members of a diaspora break down dichotomies by representing the many complex intersections of space and time that take place in the present moment.

Autoethnography in *Interpreter of Maladies*

The workings of the contact zone often manifest themselves in what Pratt calls "autoethnographic expression" (Pratt 1992, 7). A form making explicit the process of

hybridity, autoethnography emerges as an art of the contact zone, affording subordinated peoples the ability to express their own “histories and lifeways” (Pratt 1991, 37). Challenging the practice of ethnography (in which Orientalism is a subcategory), where texts are written by Westerners representing their often conquered Others, autoethnography pertains to instances when members of a subordinate group “undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (35). Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* can be seen as one such example of autoethnography, in which Lahiri seeks to give voice to her people, allowing them to tell their own stories through her fictional writing. As a member of a subjugated people group, Lahiri uses autoethnographic expression as a powerful tool to represent the Indian diaspora, often in resistance to Western representations signifying them as Other.

A particular strength of *Interpreter of Maladies* as an autoethnographic text is its form as a short story collection. Through constructing her work as such, Lahiri subverts the common reading of ethnic literature as representing the entirety of the population about whom a text is written. Presenting the reader with multiple representations of the Indian diaspora allows the reader to consider the identity formation of her characters as complex and distinctive, revealing the immigrant experience as one which challenges binarist thinking. In “Mrs. Sen’s”, the reader glimpses the pain of dislocation and the struggle for happiness in a foreign country, moving the charac-

ter from a place of resistance to a place of negotiation. By contrast, “This Blessed House” reveals a female protagonist who negotiates between Indian and American culture with ease, embodying a hybridized sense of self and transcending binary cultural categories. “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” affirms the power of excavating a shared cultural past among members of a diaspora by bringing dispersed individuals back together, whereas “A Temporary Matter” discloses the fact that a return to the past may not always be possible, pointing to an acknowledgement of identity as constantly in motion, operating in the present and leading to deep differences among diaspora. Through her stories, Lahiri represents multiple aspects of the transmigrant experience, revealing the fluidity of identity which constantly transcends cultural boundaries and transgresses the binary of Self/Other.

Autoethnographic texts are powerful because they make explicit the process of hybridity and “foreground the practical impossibility of claims for pure cultural absolutism or an unproblematically static, rooted cultural identity” (Brown. 2006, 689). However, autoethnographic works can only remain powerful insofar as they acknowledge their limitations. Since identity is an ongoing progression, autoethnographic books must recognize that any attempt to speak to this process involves an arbitrary cut in identity (Hall 1994, 230). Remembering that “fixed binaries...stabilize meaning and representation,” there must a realization that texts which serve to shed light on diasporic identity formation, position

themselves at a certain point in the process, stopping the course in its tracks. Indeed, “meaning continues to unfold...beyond the arbitrary closure, which makes it, at any moment, possible” (230). Hall argues that while this cut in identity is needed in order to make identity meaningful, it is simultaneously subjective. This is the limitation but also the promise of autoethnographic expression—that as long as such expression represents a cut in the progression of identity (as it must), there will always be a need for continued expression, for other authors to take up the task of writing about their people, about the experiences of the contact zone, and the transformative power of hybridity.

Conclusion: Across Borders/Binaries

I reflect on the words of Kwame Anthony Appiah who writes, “By the end, I hope to have made it harder to think of the world as divided between the West and the Rest; between locals and moderns; between a bloodless ethic of profit and a bloody ethic of identity; between ‘us’ and ‘them’”(Appiah 2006, xxi). I believe that in order to be citizens of our global community, we must cultivate respect for others and value the specific lives of each individual, made possible through the deconstruction of binaries which delineate separation. Identity formation is not a fixed or static event. Rather, it is a process which occurs in the hybridized space between cultural boundaries, catalyzed by transnational movement across

borders in which diaspora leads to the hybridized contact zone. Such an understanding of identity, revealed through autoethnographic texts like *Interpreter of Maladies*, claims that all human beings are citizens of a world whose borders merge and overlap allowing for transcendence of binarist thinking. As Bhabha indicates, hybridity affords the possibility of transformation as it creates a space for navigating new identities in a simultaneous process of pain and hope, signifying the promise of new beginnings and new knowledges.

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