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# Fictions of Belonging: "New Arrival Literature" and Contemporary Discourse on U.S. Immigration

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Fictions of Belonging:  
“New Arrival Literature” and Contemporary Discourse on U.S. Immigration

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University of Vermont College Honors Thesis in English, Spring 2017  
Advised by Dr. Helen Scott

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## Introduction to “New Arrival Literature”

The social and political power of the novel has long been recognized. From the time of its origins in the eighteenth century, people feared that the novel would create false expectations, awaken passions, and misguide youth (Mackay 3). These criticisms “help to explain what was so unusual about the novel when it first appeared in English: *its seductive proximity to the real world*” (Mackay 3). The novel is mimetic<sup>1</sup>: its intimacy with reality makes it a constant site of re-evaluation and contestation. It allows us to enter into fictional worlds that are often inextricably linked with the social, political and cultural circumstances that shape our own.

At the heart of my thesis lies the idea that fiction, and “Literature of New Arrival” in particular, can offer an auxiliary solution to fighting damaging myths about US immigrants: mainly that they drain the US economy, refuse to “assimilate,” and bring crime. In “Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature,” Bharati Mukherjee advocates for the recognition of “Literature of New Arrival” as a sub-genre of US immigrant literature: it “centers on the nuanced process of *rehousement* after trauma of forced or voluntary *dehousement*<sup>2</sup>”

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<sup>1</sup> Mimesis refers to the ability to imitate the world. It is not a phenomenon confined to English criticism, but it very much applies to the novel. Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, brought the novel’s mimetic quality to literary conversations in 1946.

<sup>2</sup> Dehousement is the process of losing home to voluntary or forced migration.

(Mukherjee 683). This genre of literature reflects the new demographic reality in the US: it “embraces broken narratives of disrupted lives, proliferating plot, outsize characters and overcrowded casts, the fierce urgency of obscure history, the language fusion...the challenging shapelessness, and complexities of alien social structures” (Mukherjee 683-4). The narratives in my study are crafted brilliantly through creative and diverse, poly-vocal narratives, humor, figurative language, and code switching. They depict rounded characters with emotional depth who come from circumstances largely related to real-life global, historical relationships. They offer unique insight into the complex realities of “new arrivals,” often the targets of reductive scrutiny and stereotyping in mainstream US discourse, including politicians’ statements, newspapers, pop culture, and social media. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), politicians and media figures alike spread false propaganda that stigmatizes immigrants.

This project looks at works that can be considered part of this “New Arrival Literature:” *Americanah* (2013) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Need New Names* (2013) by NoViolet Bulawayo, *Claire of the Sea Light* (2013) by Edwidge Danticat, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008) by Junot Diaz, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2009) by Mohja Kahf, and *The Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri. Adichie, Bulawayo, Danticat, Diaz, Kahf, and Lahiri are authors who have migrated themselves. Their novels, which were all published in the past two decades, come from major publishing houses, have won various awards, appeared on best-

seller lists, and have been made into films. These authors have received widespread critical acclaim for their literary contributions. Their personal experiences and texts also encompass some of the diverse regions from which immigrants have recently relocated to the U.S.A: Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Syria, and India respectively. These authors have crafted intimate narratives with emotional depth that speak accurately to the complex identities and realities of US immigrants.

My first three chapters each respond to a specific, prevalent myth about US immigrants that has been cited and criticized by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). I discuss contemporary scholarship on immigration to further scrutinize each myth: Deepa Kumar's *Islamophobia*, Vijay Prashad's *The Karma of Brown Folk*, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. From this literature, I draw on mainstream stereotypes of immigrants to show how they are conveniently used to undergird these myths. I use secondary literature in order to contextualize the world that occupies each novel, and to flesh out its relationship with relevant history. The interviews I cite also offer personal insight into the lived experiences of these authors.

After I contextualize a specific myth and offer insight into the authors' experiences, I delve into a close reading of two novels that speak directly to the reductive nature of the myth. I paired each myth with two novels although these novels participate together in a larger

conversation. I explore how each text addresses what's missing in much contemporary commentary, particularly the relevant historical push and pull factors,<sup>3</sup> and the role of global economic forces in shaping diaspora. The texts offer insights into many issues: the human, intellectual and cultural capital immigrants bring to the US; the common experiences of racism and discrimination despite varying mainstream stereotypes about immigrants; the grief associated with leaving behind family and home; the perseverance and desire to “fit in;” the social traps faced by second-generation immigrants; the loss and sacrifice of cultural traditions; the internalization of hatred and discrimination and the dehumanization of “illegal” immigrants. The narratives are mimetic, intimate and emotionally impactful. Most importantly, they reveal the complex, diverse, and *human* side of common immigrant experiences.

Time has made Americans forget that we are all immigrants, or descendants of immigrants<sup>4</sup>. I'm interested in unraveling the forces that remove us from this truth. Anti-immigrant sentiment is strategically employed in order to preserve structural class inequality in America. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, author of *From #Black LivesMatter To Black Liberation*

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<sup>3</sup> Push factors embody what drives someone to emigrate from home: political corruption, lack of educational or employment opportunities, to start a family, in pursuit of adventure, etc. Pull factors embody the aspects that draw immigrants in: economic incentives, educational scholarships, promise of refuge or asylum, the “American dream.”

<sup>4</sup> Native Americans are the only indigenous inhabitants of the US. And yet Native Americans have been targets of genocide, discrimination, and displacement alongside many immigrants.



and professor of African American studies at Princeton University, points out that racism obscures the reality of class divisions and poverty: “the majority of the US poor are white, the majority of people without health insurance are white, and the majority of the homeless are white” (Taylor 214). These common grievances often get lost in mainstream US discourse, but this is materially and culturally consequential to everyone. I’m invested in this project because I believe the politics of solidarity will uncover this truth that lies buried under racism and discrimination.

My final chapter responds directly to the myths of “American exceptionalism” and the “American dream.” These are behind the myths I address in the first three chapters. They have been employed for decades to lure immigrants to the United States, while they simultaneously mask America’s<sup>5</sup> structural inequalities. Lastly, I end on an acknowledgement of, and appreciation for, immigrant art. Authors of “New Arrival Literature” occupy a complex space. On one hand, they *are* the “American dream:” they came to the US and became successful, widely known novelists. But their novels, which undoubtedly draw on their personal experiences and nation’s histories, tell a more holistic, and perhaps realistic, story of immigration.

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<sup>5</sup> Frequently “America” is used to refer only to the United States rather than the whole continent. I mostly specify ‘the US’ but sometimes follow common custom in using “America” to refer to the country.

## Chapter One

### **The myth: Immigrants drain the economy by driving down wages and taking jobs.**

This is perhaps the most prevalent myth about immigrants. And yet evidence indicates that immigrants have an overall positive effect on the economy and the wages of native-born workers (“Immigration Myths and Facts”). In 2007, the President’s Council of Economic Advisers (CEA) issued a report on “Immigration’s Economic Impact,” which concluded that “immigrants not only help fuel the Nation’s economic growth, but also have an overall positive effect on the American economy as a whole and on the income of native-born American workers.” Among other factors, immigrants tend to have different skills than their native-born counterparts, which allows “higher-skilled native workers to increase productivity and thus increase their incomes” (“The US Council of Economic Advisers on Immigration's Economic Impact”). In short, immigrant workers continue to compliment native-born employees, not displace them.

In 2016, The National Academics of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine reaffirmed these findings (Preston). The report highlights the views of “14 leading economists, demographers, and other scholars” who discuss the vital role immigrants play in the US economy. Although many Americans continue to feel “squeezed out” by immigrants, “the prospect for long-run economic growth in the United States would be considerably dimmed

without the contribution of high-skilled immigrants” (Preston). The economy could not survive without immigrant labor.

Immigrants are integral to the labor force. In 2016, the US Department of Labor issued a report that highlights immigrant contributions to the American working class. As of 2015, approximately 16.7% of foreign-born persons comprised the labor force; “Hispanics<sup>6</sup>” accounted for approximately half of this percentage. Hispanic “foreign-born full-time wage and salary workers” earned 80.7% as much as their native-born counterparts. There exists a general wage gap between native-born and foreign-born workers at most educational attainment levels, although it begins to close at higher levels of education (“Foreign-Born Workers: Labor Force Characteristics— 2015”). What this demonstrates is that immigrants undoubtedly provide human capital to the US economy; they neither hurt the wages of US-born citizens nor earn as much as native-born counterparts. Despite the utter falsity of this myth, it is continuously used to dehumanize immigrants, who now make up one in every four Americans.

Mainstream US media exploits the myth that immigrants drain the economy. In effect, all workers are oppressed while different identity groups within the work force are continuously pitted against one another. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explains how the “culture of poverty”

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<sup>6</sup> The Department of Labor uses the term “Hispanic,” but it is a controversial term and ‘Latino/Latina’ is preferred by some.

masks structural class inequality. The “culture of poverty” enforces the idea that “the various problems that pervade Black communities are largely believed to be of Black people’s own making” (Taylor 9). If someone isn’t wealthy or successful in the US, it’s a reflection of *their* personal failure or deficiency. The mainstream American media “provides a very public platform for these ideas,” which are aspects of “American exceptionalism” (Taylor 27).

Junot Diaz, author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and Edwidge Danticat, author of *Claire of the Sea Light*, provide rich insights into the intersection of race, class, and immigration. Diaz and Danticat, born on the island of Hispaniola, or the Dominican Republic and Haiti respectively, themselves migrated to the USA as children. Edwidge Danticat was born in 1969 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Her father left for the US for work when she was two, and her mother left when she was four. Danticat explains that her family was “not a family of means,” so even when she was young she understood what her parents were doing: “trying to offer us a better opportunity” (Danticat *NPR*). For the next eight years, Danticat lived with her aunt and uncle in Haiti. When she was twelve, she migrated to the US and reunited with her parents.

When she arrived in Brooklyn, New York, Danticat spoke Haitian Creole and French but not English. She faced a great deal of hostility. In a *New York Times* interview, Danticat recalled, “Haiti was like a curse. People were calling you, ‘Frenchy, go back to the banana boat,’ and a lot of kids would lie where they came from. They would say anything but Haitian” (Danticat *Times*).

These memories depict how Danticat's nationality was a constant source of alienation in grade school. Danticat wrote to escape isolation, and eventually transformed her passion for writing into a distinguished career after receiving a BA in French Literature followed by an MFA from Brown University.

Junot Diaz is of the same generation and has a similar migration story. He was born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic in 1968 and during his early childhood he lived in Santo Domingo with his mother while his father worked in Parlin, New Jersey. When Diaz was six, they migrated to the US and reunited with his father. Diaz explains why his family left the Dominican Republic in the first place. They emigrated when "everybody realized that the country was going to enter a very dark period after the US invasion" (Diaz *NPR*). Even his father, who was a member of the Dominican military police under Trujillo, wanted to flee the Dominican Republic after Diaz's mother was wounded in the US invasion of 1965. At the time, Diaz did not know much English; his isolation from the dominant language felt like an "extended childhood" (Diaz *NPR*). Diaz attended Rutgers University as an undergraduate. In 1995, he received an MFA from Cornell University.

In an interview with Danticat for BOMB Magazine in 2007, Diaz directly addresses their shared experience as members of the Caribbean diaspora:

So much of our experience as Caribbean Diasporic peoples, so much of it, exists in silence. How can we talk about our experiences in any way if both of our own local culture and the larger global culture doesn't want to talk about them and actively resists our attempt to create language around them? (Diaz *BOMB*)

Diaz wrote *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* with the idea in mind that there are “certain kinds of people that no one wants to build the image of a nation around. Even if these people are in fact the nation itself” (Diaz *BOMB*). Diaz speaks to how the Caribbean diaspora is fundamental to the US economy and yet simultaneously a target of structural marginalization. He embedded code switching<sup>7</sup> from English to Dominican-Spanish in his text in order to represent the multilingual US demographic.

Both authors address the socio-economic forces that continue to push immigrants out of Hispaniola and pull them to the US, including the negative role of US military, political, and economic intervention. Edwidge Danticat's ancestors survived the turbulent US occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934. In “The Long Legacy of Occupation in Haiti,” Danticat describes the damaging effects of the occupation. The US initially involved itself in Haiti because of its

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<sup>7</sup> Code switching is “the alteration of two languages in a verbal or written text” (Torres 77). This strategy is used not only to destabilize the status of Standard English, but also to “legitimize the much-maligned practice of mixing codes in vernacular speech” (Torres 76). According to a 2000 U.S. Bureau Census report, “Spanglish is spoken by approximately 35 million people in the United States,” and yet it is often still perceived as the “hispanizacion” of English, rather than an aspect of US culture (Stavans 556).

economic and political interests; it was concerned with Haiti's debt to its former colonizer, France, and with the fact that other European countries, like Germany, were taking commercial interest in Haiti (Danticat *New Yorker*).

Over the course of the 19-year US occupation, roughly fifteen thousand Haitians were killed. Danticat's grandfather was one of the "so-called bandits" who fought against US forces; he witnessed Marines kicking around a decapitated head to incite fear among anti-occupation movements:

The notion that there were indispensable nation benefits to this occupation falls short, especially because the roads, schools, and hospitals that were built during this period relied upon a tyrannical forced-labor system...Call it gunboat diplomacy or banana war, but this occupation was never meant— as the Americans professed— to spread democracy. (Danticat *New Yorker*).

Danticat drives her point home by pointing out that even American blacks at the time lacked democratic freedoms. Despite its "official" goal of spreading democracy, US regional and commercial interests guided all of its decisions in Haiti.

Since the US pulled out of Haiti, "the legacy of the occupation...has continued to shadow Hispaniola" (Danticat *New Yorker*). Yet it's more than just a legacy: "US power continued to hover over Haiti, aiding its dictators and intervening more directly whenever necessary" (Scott

*Third World Traveler*). The US left Haiti with a highly centralized and militarized state; the US “did not disarm but rehabilitated the thugs of the Duvalier coup regimes.” In many ways, these circumstances paved the way for the 1957 election of Francois Duvalier, a brutal, repressive dictator who thrived under American complacency until 1971 (Scott *Third World Traveler*).

Roughly around the same time that the US occupied Haiti, the US occupied the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924. By 1916, “American military and civilian personnel ruled the Dominican Republic directly” (Lowenthal 33). During this period, the US National Guard recruited and trained Trujillo, and later watched his seizure of the DR government with “calm detachment” (Pulley 23). The US remained complacent during Trujillo’s reign because he catered to its financial interests (Pulley 30). Although the US eventually participated in anti-Trujillo efforts, one thing remains clear: the United States has been a predominant influence in Dominican politics (Lowenthal 31).

US favoritism towards the Dominican Republic also inflamed tensions with Haiti. Trujillo’s desire to purge the DR of Haitians came to full view during the 1937 massacre: “Trujillo despised Haitians with a consuming passion. On October 3-4, with well-organized efficiency some 12,000 to 20,000 Haitians living or working in the Republic were slaughtered by Dominican soldiers” (Pulley 25). At the time, the New York Times underreported casualties by



the thousands; this underreporting of genocide was consistent with US geopolitical interests (Pulley 26).

Diaz recognizes “the profound culpability that the European and North American powers bear in Haiti’s immiseration and in the conflict between Haiti and the Dominican Republic” (Andre). He offers his insight into the US political forces that continue to negatively impact the Dominican Republic:

I may be a success story as an individual. But if you adjust the knob and just take it back one setting to the family unit, I would say my family tells a much more complicated story...It tells the story of tremendous poverty, of tremendous difficulty. [The US has a] deranged attachment to some of its myths; its myths of exceptionalism, its unwillingness to look at the immigrant situation, the callous way it exercises military power. (Ying)

Although Diaz acknowledges his success, he emphasizes how different his family’s experience in the US has been. Diaz does not want his fame to be used against him as a tool to legitimize “American exceptionalism.” His family was negatively impacted by Trujillo’s US-backed dictatorship, and their immigration to the US was equally unglamorous. Diaz’s success should illuminate, not bury, this truth. Trujillo’s dictatorship shaped the forces that continue to push Dominicans, like Diaz and his family, out of their homeland and into the United States today.

Ultimately, Diaz and Danticat's texts expose two major objections to the myth that immigrants drain the US economy. Firstly, the US economy does not exist in isolation and has in fact often played a negative role in foreign economies such as the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Throughout history, the US has had both direct and indirect financial control over Hispaniola: direct control through repressive, repetitive land invasions and occupations, and sustained, indirect control through its support, and training, of corrupt dictatorships. At the same time, moreover, Danticat and Diaz (along with Adichie, Bulawayo, Kahf, and Lahiri) are conscious of how the US has historically relied on immigrants to revitalize its economy. The immigration process favors those who are already economically stable, and such immigrants bring small businesses that stimulate the US economy. But working class immigrants are centrally important to the economy, and undocumented workers in particular contribute economically while being excluded from social programs and benefits (see pages 35 and 62-63). Dominant discourses around immigration fail to acknowledge the responsibility the US bears for both creating conditions for out-migration abroad, and exploiting immigrant labor at home.

## *Claire of the Sea Light*

Haiti is routinely portrayed by the American news media as the “poorest country in the Western Hemisphere,<sup>8</sup>” which automatically dehumanizes the richness of its culture and citizens. Although the poverty is real, it is not the *only* truth<sup>9</sup> about Haiti, which is socially and culturally rich and diverse. This reductive portrait suggests that Haitians have nothing to bring to the United States, and would only be a drain on the US economy. Although Haiti faces impoverishing conditions today, it is equally true that the United States bears some responsibility for these conditions. Even so, Haitian immigrants in the US are often categorized as “economic refugees” as if they are fleeing from conditions entirely unrelated to political forces. In *Claire of the Sea Light*, Edwidge Danticat restores vitality and complexity to Haiti and its people, and shows Haiti to be connected to global forces. Danticat’s fiction moves Haiti from a space of objectivity into one of subjectivity, where humanity and culture, despite adversity, flourishes.

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<sup>8</sup> Joel Dreyfuss, a Haitian-American writer and journalist, explains the damaging effects of this widespread depiction of Haiti: “...in this age where an advocacy of free markets is substitute for foreign policy and internet billionaires are created by the minute, being poor automatically makes you suspect. You must have some moral failing, some fatal flaw, some cultural blindness to not be prosperous. And what applies to the individual also applies to entire countries” (qtd in *Wall of Disinformation* 79).

<sup>9</sup> This overpowering, yet reductive portrait of Haiti’s poverty is what Chimamanda Adichie calls a “single story.” In a TED Talk, Adichie describes the danger of single stories that “show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.” Over time, these stories are accepted as the definitive stories of an entire nation’s people. They emerge out of, and perpetuate, power relationships (see Adichie *TED*).

Danticat sets the novel in a small, fictional seaside town named Ville Rose, which she locates just outside of her birthplace and Haiti's capital, Port-Au-Prince. It's home for roughly eleven thousand people, but only about five percent are wealthy or comfortable. Cite Pendue is an extension of Ville Rose where destitution and gang violence are most prevalent (Danticat *Claire* 63). The events of the novel take place between 1999 and 2009, a time-line that purposely leads right up to, but does not mention, the 2010 earthquake. Danticat wrote the novel "with a preoccupation that something very terrible was coming to the country," but wanted to create a sense of Haiti's vitality pre-earthquake (Danticat *Miami*). Nonetheless, at the very beginning of the novel readers are made aware of a "freak wave, measuring between ten and twelve feet high" that takes the life of Caleb, a local, respected fisherman (Danticat *Claire* 3).

Danticat draws on Haiti's environmental realities in order to set the plot in motion. The story concerns Nozias, a local fisherman, and his attempts to make an arrangement to entrust his six-year-old daughter Claire to a local seamstress. This act makes Claire a *restavek*, or a child sent to work in a more financially stable household.<sup>10</sup> Claire is too young to understand the gravity of her father's decision, but she knows "of both fathers and mothers, fishing families, who had given their children, both girls and boys, away. They had taken their children to distant relatives in the capital to work as restaveks, child maids or houseboys" (Danticat *Claire* 228).

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<sup>10</sup> In Haitian Creole, "restavek" means "to stay with."

Ever since Claire's mother died giving birth to her, Nozias has struggled to feed his family.

Unfortunately for him and the other local fisherman,

fishing, was no longer as profitable as it had once been... now they had to leave nets in for half a day or longer, and they would pull fish out in the sea that were so small that in the old days they would have been thrown back. But now you had to do with what you got... You could no longer afford to fish in season, to let the sea replenish itself. You had to go out nearly every day, even on Fridays, and even as the seabed was disappearing, and the sea grass that used to nourish the fish was buried under silt and trash. (Danticat *Claire* 9)

Work is hard to find in Ville Rose. Whereas fishing was once a source of food and economic sustainability, it is now a reminder of economic instability. This speaks to the real-life global environmental impacts that are devastating Haiti today, a nation that contributes least to global warming, and yet suffers disproportionately from its impacts.

Although she acknowledges poverty and hardship, Danticat's characterization of Nozias challenges any reductive portrait entirely. His quest to give Claire to Madame Gaëlle is driven by his mantra that remains at the heart of the novel: *chèche lavi* or "going away to make a better life" (Danticat *Claire* 8, 9). He doesn't want to give up Claire, but he believes that keeping her

would only be selfish. He tries over and over again to make the arrangement with Madame Gaëlle because he can't stand the idea of leaving "something as crucial as his daughter's future to chance" (Danticat *Claire* 9). When Madame Gaëlle asks Nozias "Why would you want your child to be my servant, a restavek?" he replies, "I know she would never be that with you... But this is what would happen anyway, with less kind people than you if I die" (Danticat *Claire* 8). That Madame Gaëlle will not exploit Claire is crucial to Nozias. Even though he is ashamed that his "need for charity" is so obvious (especially when he knows he could never "repay" Madame Gaëlle except with the "humblest, meekest, most self-effacing gratitude every time their paths crossed") he keeps fighting for the arrangement, even at public events like the inauguration of the mayor (Danticat *Claire* 5, 30). Nozias is willing to give up everything— his daughter, his pride and his home— if it means Claire will have a better life.

There are countless emotionally poignant moments in the novel that speak to how much Nozias loves Claire and will do anything to secure her safety. When he talks to Madame Gaëlle about taking Claire in, he takes a risk by setting the terms of the arrangement. Nozias explains,

'I am for correcting children, but I am not for whipping.' He looked down at Claire and paused. His voice cracked, and he jabbed his thumb into the middle of his palm as he continued. 'I am for keeping her clean, as you can see. She should

of course continue with her schooling, be brought as soon as possible to a doctor when she is sick.’ Still jabbing at his palm, after having now switched palms, he added, ‘In turn she would help with some cleaning both at home and at the shop.’

(*Danticat Claire* 7)

Nozias makes it clear that he won’t give Claire away unless he is certain that she won’t be punished physically. He also makes it clear that school and health are Claire’s priorities. She can help clean, but she can neither leave school nor work when she is ill. As he makes his demands, Nozias fidgets with his palms. Despite his obvious nerves, he emphasizes how important it is that Claire be brought into a home where she can flourish. Importantly, he ensures that Madame Gaëlle will not change Claire’s full name: Claire Limye Lanme Faustin. This is why “he had said her full and entire name. He wanted to remind Madame Gaëlle of it. Claire Limye Lanme Faustin. this would always be her name” (*Danticat Claire* 228, 164). Nozias cannot give her away if it means Claire will lose her namesake and her only connection to her mother.

Nozias is haunted by the fact that he cannot provide for Claire. She can only attend school because she received a charity scholarship, yet she is a hard worker who habitually recites new words she is learning. Although Nozias “enjoyed the singsong and her hard work and missed it during her holidays from school,” he’d give it all up if it meant Claire no longer had to

do homework at the small table in the middle of their shack (Danticat *Claire* 8). He knows that Claire wants to learn how to read and write more than just her name, but he's illiterate; he can't be the one to teach her (Danticat *Claire* 13). Most importantly, Nozias worries that, as a man, he is unequipped to care for a little girl. He knows that Madame Gaëlle is not only able to provide for Claire financially, but also emotionally. One day, he witnesses Madame Gaëlle hold her own daughter, Rose, while she dies in her arms. He worries about

so many things that could go wrong, so many hopeless mistakes you could make. He would always need caretakers he couldn't afford, neighbors from whom he'd have to beg favors, and women he could either pay or sleep with so they would mother his child. And even those most motherly acts, like bathing and dressing and plaiting hair, did not include embraces like those the fabric vendor was lavishing on a blood-soaked corpse. (Danticat *Claire* 16)

The love Madame Gaëlle feels for her daughter is palpable, which comforts Nozias because it means he can trust Madame Gaëlle to take care of Claire. Nozias believes that if he keeps Claire, he will risk her safety and her chance at having a motherly figure in her life. If he keeps her, she will have to bear witness to his begging and pleading and his constant inability to provide for her. He might even have to enter into hollow relationships, which won't even secure Claire any



emotional, motherly support. Despite his own devastation at the thought of giving up Claire, he does not regret pursuing a better life for her.

Ville Rose is a tight-knit community where parental love and sacrifice are normative. After Claire runs away (prompted by her realization that she has to say goodbye to her beloved father), the entire community pitches in to help Nozias find her. When Nozias begins shouting her name, “others did too, walking off in different directions. Msye Sylvain and some of his children and grandchildren left the flaming clay oven of their bakery...Myse Xavier, the boat builder, dropped his tools and followed the crowd” (Danticat *Claire* 38). The members of the Ville Rose community do not hesitate to help find Claire. Even Nozias’s neighbors “took turns telling him some variation of the idea that she... would surely be home soon” (Danticat *Claire* 39). This collective effort and sacrifice demonstrates that the people of Ville Rose are a community that cares about the emotional wellbeing of one another, and care about the safety of each other’s children. In this way, Danticat draws a portrait of a lively, diverse, generous community; despite their depleting, uneven distribution of resources, the community continues to look out for one another.

Although this novel takes place mostly in Haiti, Danticat also depicts migration to the US as an ever present and important force in Haitians’ lives. Max Junior is the son of Max Senior, a

wealthy member of Ville Rose and director of the local children's school. Max belongs to the economic top five percent and is also well-educated: "by the time [he] was nineteen and his mother had left, Max Junior had already completed his primary-and secondary-school studies and had also gotten a U.S. mail-order bachelor's degree in education" (Danticat *Claire* 86).

When Max Senior wants to send his son to Miami<sup>11</sup>, he can easily do so because of their financial means and Max Junior's educational qualifications—the qualifications he paid for and earned himself. These factors immediately cut against the notion that immigrants are responsible for draining the US economy. On the contrary, immigrants bring money and skills with them.

Another reason Max Junior can migrate is because his mother is already in Miami running a small business. When Max Junior arrives in the U.S., "he chose[s] to stay in Florida, to manage the sandwich shop his mother had opened in Miami's little Haiti neighborhood" (Danticat *Claire* 86). This sandwich shop is an example of the kinds of small businesses that U.S. immigrants contribute. Not only do these businesses bring in revenue, but they also bring cultural currency into the United States. Immigrants like Max Junior—wealthy, educated, and employed—revitalize local economies.

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<sup>11</sup> Max Senior sends his son to Miami because he raped a servant and made her pregnant; we later learn that he is gay.

*The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* follows several generations of a Dominican family, the Cabrals, through a non-linear timeline. The story is narrated by Yunior, who serves as a wavering role model in the life of the novel's titular protagonist, Oscar. Yunior narrates crudely: he curses and uses derogatory language, moves in and out of Spanglish, objectifies women, brags about sex, and rants in blunt, yet informative footnotes. He relentlessly equates Dominican identity with hyper-masculinity. Yunior is fixated on Trujillo's brutal regime as much as he is on masculinity. In many ways, though, Yunior is sensitive and uncomfortable with hyper-masculinity: he loves Oscar's sister, Lola, who is a feminist; when he is Oscar's roommate in college at Rutgers, he tries to help Oscar gain confidence; Yunior even secretly shares some of Oscar's nerdy, supernatural interests, which come through in his narrative decisions. In particular, Yunior casts a supernatural quality over the novel by using the motif of the fukú curse. The curse is used to relay Trujillo's evil that reverberates throughout the Dominican diaspora. Most importantly, Oscar inspires Yunior to write this story—Oscar himself aspires to be a writer, but dies too early. Through Yunior, Diaz paints a complex portrait—one that accounts for the tumultuous history of the Trujillo dictatorship and its lasting, damaging effects on Dominican politics, yet also draws on the resilient, strong, eccentric identities that make up

the Dominican diaspora.

The novel constantly plays with stereotypes. Yuniior introduces Oscar as the fat, love-obsessed, socially introverted, nerdy, “cruelly alone,” un-Dominican hero of the story. Oscar is “one of those nerds who was always hiding out in the library... His adolescent nerdliness vaporizing any iota of a chance he had for young love” (Diaz *Wao* 23). Oscar is isolated on all fronts: his inability to have sex makes him un-Dominican within the Dominican community; his Dominican heritage makes him a target for bullying at school; his obsession with ‘white, American nerd’ culture distances him from his Dominican identity *and* any shot at a social life; he’s even isolated by other nerds because he can’t “get girls”; and lastly, his dream of being a “Dominican Stephen King,” a hybrid writer, is another mark of isolation (Diaz *Wao* 27). At the same time, however, his dreams of becoming a writer, the way he buries himself in the library, his obsession with nerd culture, all cut against prevalent anti-immigrant stereotypes. He wants to be more “Dominican” but he’s enthralled by “American” sci-fi culture: “He wanted to blame the books, the sci-fi, but he couldn’t—he loved them too much” (Diaz *Wao* 50). Oscar wants to fit in but he’s too much of everything, and not enough of *one* thing. Ironically, his multicultural identity—the identities that supposedly make America exceptional—brings him isolation and depression.

The text has lengthy, explanatory footnotes that criticize mainstream US discourse for erasing the US occupation of the DR and its contribution to the DR's subsequent political and economic turmoil. The first footnote explicitly speaks to "those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history" (Diaz *Wao* 2). It's used to establish Trujillo's brutality in relation to the US:

Outstanding accomplishments include: the 1937 genocide against the Haitian and Haitian-Dominican community; one of the of the longest, most damaging US backed dictatorships in the Western hemisphere (and if we Latin types are skillful at anything it's tolerating US-backed dictators)...the systematic bribing of American senators..." (Diaz *Wao* 3)

The text, and its footnotes in particular, do not let readers forget the direct, strategic relationship the US had with Trujillo. When Yunion describes Oscar as a *pariguayo*, the footnote explains how the word, which means "party watcher,"

came into common usage during the First American Occupation of the DR, which ran from 1916 to 1924. (You didn't know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when you have kids they won't know the US occupied Iraq either. (Diaz *Wao* 19)

Another footnote is used to describe the events that triggered the Dominican diaspora, which of course, also relates to the US occupation of the DR. Trujillo sustained his dictatorship because of US complacency, and even when he was killed, the political climate of the DR was sustained.

When Joaquin Balaguer became president of the DR: “he unleashed a wave of violence against the Dominican left, death-squandering hundreds...It was he who oversaw/initiated the thing we call Diaspora” (Diaz *Wao* 90). Dominican emigration may have occurred years after the US occupation of the DR, but the political and economic forces driving the diaspora are rooted in US-DR relations. These footnotes are normative throughout the text. They rewrite the history of the Dominican diaspora. Dominicans were driven out of their homeland by conditions created and sustained by the US, yet contemporary US discourse on immigration strategically omits this information.

The motif of the fukú curse is also used to communicate the lasting power and extent of Trujillo’s evil, which continues to drive Dominicans out of their homeland into the US. Yuniors states: “No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master,” but “the Europeans were the original Fukú, no stopping them. Massacre after Massacre after Massacre” (Diaz *Wao* 244). Trujillo’s relationship to the fukú is somewhat ambiguous, but the source of the fukú is not: it undoubtedly came from European and American forces. The curse brought

ingredients originally unknown to the DR: violence, genocide, patriarchy and dictatorship.

Yunior often wonders if Oscar's misery is a result of the fukú that cursed his ancestors during Trujillo's regime. It started when Oscar's great grandfather, Dr. Abelard, refused to give up his daughter, Jacquelyn, to Trujillo—a man who created a climate in which “hoarding your women was tantamount to treason,” and “acted like he owned everything and everyone, killed whomever he wanted to kill...took women away from their husbands on their wedding nights” (Diaz *Wao* 217, 225). Abelard was a highly successful and wealthy doctor who worked nonstop to protect his family from Trujillo. Despite Trujillo's wishes, Abelard refused time and time again to bring his wife and daughters to Trujillo's parties; “when [Trujillo] couldn't snatch her, out of spite, he put a fukú on the family's ass” (Diaz *Wao* 243). From thereon, Dr. Abelard was imprisoned by Trujillo's secret police, scapegoated as a communist, tortured, “manacled to a chair, placed out in the scorching sun, and then a wet rope was cinched cruelly about his forehead” (Diaz *Wao* 251). His family was destroyed, save for Abelard's third and final daughter, Hypatia Belicia Cabral, or Beli.

Beli is the epitome of Trujillo's unbounded evil. Trujillo normalized violence, corruption, and patriarchy— norms that transcended generations of families and dictatorships in the Dominican Republic. Although Beli later became Oscar's mother, she lived a torturous life,

cursed by Trujillo's fukú. At six months old, with parents and siblings murdered by Trujillo, she was sold to a stranger and "became a criada, a restavek" (Diaz *Wao* 253). Although she was eventually rescued by Abelard's distant cousin, La Inca, Beli is permanently scarred: she didn't speak for the first nine years with La Inca, and "for *forty years* she never leaked one word about her life," not even to her children (Diaz *Wao* 258). Under La Inca's roof, Beli becomes a mistress to the Gangster, who turns out to be the husband of Trujillo's sister: "This was the affair that once and for all incinerated Beli's reputation in Santo Domingo" (Diaz *Wao* 127). When Trujillo finds out that Beli is pregnant with the Gangster's child, he sends the secret police after her:

How she survived I'll never know. They beat her like she was a slave. Like she was a dog. Let me pass over the actual violence and report instead on the damage inflicted: her clavicle, chicken-boned...five ribs, broken; left kidney, bruised; liver, bruised; right lung, collapsed; front teeth, blown out...Was there time for a rape or two? I suspect there was.

(Diaz *Wao* 147)

This scene, and Beli's story in general, is disturbing and heart-wrenching. Trujillo's men, who are responsible for her orphan status in the first place, beat the life out of her and kill her child. Beli flees to the US because to stay means certain, brutal death.

Even though Beli eventually gives birth to Oscar and Lola, and creates a 'life' for herself



in the United States, generations of torture under Trujillo shadow the family. Even though Trujillo was ironically killed during Beli's kidnapping, "after death his evil *lingered*" (Diaz *Wao* 156). La Inca is devastated because she not only lost Beli to emigration, but also her own parents to Trujillo (Diaz *Wao* 80). Beli's relationship with her children is damaged by the fukú curse, and she's too enveloped by her own trauma to foresee Oscar's attempt at suicide. Ultimately, though, the fukú curse isn't supernatural: it's the part of the Dominican conscience that carries and passes on the trauma of Trujillo's legacy, one that began under the US occupation.

## Chapter Two

**The myth: Immigrants refuse to learn English, become citizens, and otherwise assimilate.**

In response to these charges, the ACLU purports that they are “no truer today” than they were when the first wave of immigrants arrived in the US. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines assimilation as the “process through which individuals and groups of differing heritages acquire the basic habits, attitudes, and mode of life of an embracing culture.”

“Assimilation,” therefore, is associated with a willingness to forego traditions in order to acquire new cultural practices. The ACLU describes the process of naturalization as follows:

Most immigrants are ineligible to apply for citizenship until they have resided in the US with lawful permanent resident status for five years, have passed background checks, have shown that they have paid their taxes, and are of ‘good moral character,’ demonstrate knowledge of US history and civics, and have the ability to understand, speak, and write English.

In part, “assimilation”— through competency in US history and the English language— is a prerequisite for citizenship. This pairing of assimilation with citizenship asks immigrants to quiet their own languages and identities in order to become US citizens, ironically undermining

“American values’ of diversity and freedom. It expects immigrants to acquire new practices while giving up old ones. As a result, assimilation is significantly different from amalgamation, or “the blending of cultures.”

Most immigrants do strive for competency in English, eligibility for citizenship, and social acceptance through “assimilation.” The U.S. Chamber of Commerce supports these findings: “immigrants are not settling into ‘ethnic enclaves’ that exist apart from mainstream America. Rather, they are becoming progressively more ‘American’ in every sense of the word.” More than ever, immigrants are applying for citizenship, buying homes, and in some cases moving up the socioeconomic ladder. In 2000, demographer Dowell Myers projected that the share of immigrants “that speak English ‘well’ or ‘very well’ is projected to grow from 57.5% to 70.3%” by 2030 (“Immigration Myths and Facts”).

And yet the demand for assimilation may be costly for immigrants. It asks newcomers to cut off parts of themselves and their pasts in order to be accepted. It requires them to conform to a restrictive, narrow definition of “success” that does not represent their full potential and experiences. There are also obstacles to assimilation: racism, social isolation, distance from home and, often times, family. These costs render “assimilation” an alienating and dehumanizing process.

*The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by Mohja Kahf respond to this myth in unique and crucial ways. These texts not only undermine the myth by offering individualized narratives of immigrants who *desire* to fit in, but also illuminate the challenges immigrants face. The fictional narratives provide insight into how US immigrants face contradictory forces: on one hand, they *must* assimilate at the demands of conformity, but on the other they face racist discrimination that prevents them from “fitting in.”

Despite their differences, *The Namesake* and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* take readers through some common experiences of immigration. Importantly, these narratives are grounded in a similar historical context: they speak to the wave of immigrants who came to the US after the enactment of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. Rather than an act of tolerance, this legislation was the result of a US political and economic agenda. It was “designed primarily to attract skilled labor from around the world...which resulted in a substantial migration of highly skilled South Asians, particularly in the fields of science, engineering, and medicine” (Tayyab Mahmud). Although the act impacted South Asians in particular, it represented a broader response to a need for skilled and educated workers. The US drew in immigrants from around the world in order to exploit their economic and intellectual ability. Kahf and Lahiri both write narratives about educated, employed, middle-class immigrant families. That this was a time

when the US *desired* immigrants is at odds with the way their protagonists face alienating stereotypes and discrimination.

Mohja Kahf is a Syrian-American novelist and poet, as well as a professor of comparative literature at the University of Arkansas. Kahf was born in Damascus, Syria in 1967, but moved to the US before her fourth birthday (MacFarquhar). Although Kahf insists *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is not autobiographical, she certainly drew on her own experiences for the novel. For instance, her protagonist Khadra Shamy grows up in Indiana, where Kahf also spent her childhood and similarly experienced hostility towards her religion. Importantly, Kahf also decides that Khadra will remain veiled by the end of the novel, “at least along the lines that Kahf is herself— she covers her hair for public appearances, but lets it slip off in restaurants and is less than scrupulous about it on hot days” (MacFarquhar).

Jhumpa Lahiri, born Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, was born in 1967 in London, England to Bengali parents from Calcutta, India. When she was two years old, her family migrated to Rhode Island. Her father was a university librarian and her mother was a schoolteacher. She grew up in a household that celebrated Lahiri’s cultural heritage while completing her education in the US. In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2008, Lahiri protested the stereotype of the Indian “model minority:” “People of Indian origin, like myself, they're still engineers and doctors and professors, but they are also writers, cooks, dancers, rock musicians, actors. They're not here for

the one purpose of having a respectable job” (Tayler). She paints a more holistic, rounded portrait of the Indian diaspora while also acknowledging the incentive underlying the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. She also speaks to the push factors that drove middle-class families out of India during the late twentieth century:

It wasn't war, famine, persecution or anything like that driving them out. Nothing drove them out: it was a choice. But I think it was a conflicted choice. And it wasn't a particularly romantic choice... It was a combination of hunger for new experiences, perhaps wanting a better quality of life, and furthering one's education. But it was accompanied by a certain sense of misgiving. They were leaving behind their families, essentially for personal gain. (Tayler)

Here, Lahiri draws on a more comprehensive understanding of the difficulties that come with leaving home.

The stereotypes addressed in each novel are different— Lahiri tackles the stereotype of an Indian “model minority,” while Kahf tackles the stereotype of a “Muslim extremist.” Yet both speak to how all “kinds” of immigrants who desire to “fit in” are met with fervent resistance. Assimilation, or at least successful assimilation— one that considers the political, economic *and* social circumstances— is inherently incompatible with pervasive racism and stereotyping.

Reductive and racist stereotypes of the “Muslim World,” and Islamophobia in particular, are rooted in European and US “Orientalism,”<sup>12</sup> a theory that divides the world into distinct civilizations and races. This paradigm became widely accepted in the nineteenth century, and enabled the “systematic use of scholarly knowledge to serve the needs of empire” (Kumar 26). “Orientalism” holds that the West is free, rational, progressive, democratic and scientific, while the East is its antithesis: “Predictably, the world of Islam was characterized as premodern, backward, primitive, despotic, static, undemocratic, and ridged” (Kumar 26). Although “Orientalism” originated in Europe, it has also played a role in the US: “Such sweeping generalizations, characteristic of Orientalist scholarship, were influential in the United States because they provided a quick and easy way to grasp a large and complex region” (Kumar 35). In many ways, this school of thought has accompanied US foreign policy in the Middle East, in service of its oil interests in the region, and particularly the ‘war on terror’: The “essence of the argument is that Muslims are like ticking time bombs programmed by their religion to inevitably turn to violence and as such do not belong in American society” (Kumar 52). The events of 9/11 solidified this portrait of Muslims—who are now routinely depicted as “terrorists” by mainstream media both at home and abroad. Muslim citizens and immigrants have since been

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Said published *Orientalism* in 1978. Said was one of the first scholars to challenge the polarizing nature of “Orientalism” and its political, social and cultural impacts in academia.

subject to random arrest, extended periods of detention, and preemptive prosecutions (Kumar 146-147).

Today, Islamophobia is evident more than ever as demonstrated by President Trump's proposed travel ban. The ban targets migrants and refugees from seven predominantly Muslim countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. That such a ban is being considered illuminates the inability of our country's highest leaders to acknowledge not only the diversity of people who practice Islam but also the plethora of ways Islam is celebrated. Although the ban doesn't represent the entirety of the American public's view of Muslims and Islam, it certainly solidifies that Islamophobia is an existing dominant ideology in the United States.

Jhumpa Lahiri's text objects to the myth of the Indian "model minority," which is wrongfully used to suggest that some immigrants, by nature, are more successful at assimilating than others. When juxtaposed with the stereotype of the "threatening Muslim," the "Indian model minority" label may seem less damaging. In *The Karma of Brown Folk*, Vijay Prashad rejects this logic: "many folks feel, it seems, that to make positive statements about what they consider to be a race is just fine; racism in this light becomes the use of negative statements about a people." Yet Prashad explains racism as "the very conceptualizing of a people as having discrete qualities" (Prashad 4). Any sort of blanket generalization about a group of people,



whether positive or negative, is inherently racist.

Like Islamophobia, the myth of the Indian “model minority” is an aspect of “Orientalism.” Prashad explains that as “poor and unfree” as the “East” was, it was also seen as the “domain of spirituality, albeit a spirituality that many saw as inferior to the real sacrament, Christianity” (Prashad 42). This is what underlies exoticism and tokenism. These romanticized ideals of Indian spirituality and individuality transcended time, and became the crux of “New Age Orientalism” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

Within the framework of New Age orientalism, the Indian is seen as intensely spiritual and apolitical, as noble but silent, as knowledgeable but not cosmopolitan. The Indian is a passive character absorbed in the pursuit of pleasure and success without a developed social consciousness, one who embodies the script of US orientalism from its dawn to its yawn. (Prashad 68)

Other generalizable qualities about Indians came out of these notions, assuming that “Asians (in general) and South Asians (in particular) are especially endowed with an ability to be technically astute” (Prashad 70). With the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, the US turned to South Asia for scientists and medical personnel. Between the years of 1966 and 1977, “of the Indian Americans who migrated to the United States, 83 percent entered under the occupational

category of professional or technical workers” (Prashad 75). These demographic factors fed into the generalizations of “US orientalism” that pigeonhole members of the South Asian diaspora as “role model[s] for success” (Prashad 9).

The myth of the “model minority” is also used to support the “culture of poverty” surrounding black America as identified by Taylor (see page 11). The socioeconomic “success” of South Asian immigrants in the US is used against racial groups who face economic insecurity. Rather than being a result of natural or cultural selection, differences in success between these identity groups “are the result of *state* selection whereby the US state, through the special-skills provisions in the 1965 Immigration Act, fundamentally reconfigured the demography of South Asia America” (Prashad 4). Members of the South Asian diaspora, Prashad argues, are used as a “solution;” they make certain that the “culpability for black poverty and oppression...be laid at the door of black America” (Prashad 6). This becomes more and more believable as the history of immigration falls to the wayside, and as people forget “the Immigration and Naturalization Services’ rigorous filtering out of those who are not already furnished with the cultural capital for success” (Prashad 6). The “culture of poverty” and “model minority” myths conveniently work together to justify racism and the systematic marginalization of many minority groups.

## *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*

*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* speaks directly to the Islamophobia that continues to prevent Muslim immigrants from integrating smoothly into mainstream America by presenting Islam as a monolith associated with terrorism, repression and crime. In particular, Kahf addresses the reductive stereotype of the threatening, fundamentalist Muslim, and that of the repressed, veiled Muslim woman. Through Khadra's dynamic relationship with Islam, Kahf demonstrates how individuals perceive and practice Islam differently. Kahf's portrait of a heterogeneous Muslim community succeeds in debunking the myth that all who practice Islam are disinterested in assimilating. Rather, her novel addresses how Islamophobia impedes assimilation.

Throughout the text, there is evidence that the US was actively pulling immigrant families like the Shamys in during the 1970s. Khadra explains how her family moved from Syria to Indiana "for God" (Kahf 18), but there were other 'push factors' behind their migration. Khadra's uncle, Shakker, was jailed for "saying things against the Syrian government. [Khadra's] father said Syria was a mean government, and that Shakker had told the truth to its face...and that's what a good Muslim should do" (Kahf 20). In part, the Shamys were driven out of Syria by a repressive government, but their migration was possible because the US *invited* immigrants. Khadra says of her first neighborhood, "A lot of the children in Square One were from other countries besides America" (Kahf 10). The Shamys are attractive prospects because

both Khadra's mother and father, Ebtejah and Wajdy respectively, have college degrees and are eligible to work (Kahf 21). Khadra makes note of how other Muslims around her are working within the fields of science, engineering or medicine. For instance, Uncle Jamal works at "a big pharmaceutical company" (Kahf 21). Even though Khadra's father chooses to become an officer for the Dawah Center alongside other practicing Muslims who wanted to help the local community practice "Islam better," they "denied themselves other careers where they could have made more money" (Kahf 40). It's clear the option to get a higher paying job is available to Khadra's father. Despite his relatively low income, the Shamys can still afford to live in Indianapolis, a centrally located city with an international airport and low crime rates (Kahf 44). So, although the Shamys may have been pushed to leave home, it's also evident that they play a structural role in the US economy.

Khadra's childhood features a diverse range of practicing Muslims. At the Dawah Center, she is not only introduced to her parent's specific notion of orthodox Islam, but also to other sects of Islam. Aunty Khadija, for instance, is a member of the Dawah Center who practices Islam differently than the Shamys. Even after changing her name from Kacey Thompson to Khadija, which represents her devotion to Islam, she still lives a lifestyle disapproved of by Khadra's parents. Khadra's parents don't understand why Khadija still listens to her hi-fi stereo and record collection because for them it represents a "monument to [Khadija's] pre-Muslim

years” (Kahf 22). Since Khadra is too young to understand that Islam is practiced in diverse ways, she also doesn’t understand Aunty Khadija’s beliefs. Khadra feels “alarm” when Aunty Khadija says that all it takes to become Muslim is the “Belief that God is One” (Kahf 24). From her parents, Khadra learned that Islam is much more than that: “When you do the Five Pillars...and follow the Quran and the Prophet and wear *hijab* and follow the Islamic way of life...” (Kahf 24). The contrast between her parent’s notion of Islam with Khadija’s notion, who is another devout Muslim, begins to unravel the notion that Islam is a uniform faith.

The novel depicts pervasive Islamophobia in many ways, which contributes to the alienation of Muslim communities. During a quiet prayer one evening, Khadra hears a “Slurb! Thwack! Plshst!” coming from outside. Yet the women continue praying despite the “assault of the world.” When they emerge from prayer, this is what they find outside:

The struggling boxwood hedge at the entrance was slimed with rotten eggs and tomatoes. Toilet paper was everywhere. Markings in white spray paint were blazoned across the windowpanes of the clubhouse. Aghast, Khadra snapped a picture of them: FUCK YOU, RAGHEADS. DIE. They were signed, KKK, 100% USA. (Kahf 82)

The vandalizing and hate-speech is directed at the Dawah community when they are practicing their religion quietly and privately. That the attack occurs when Khadra and her community are

within the safety of their own homes demonstrates how arbitrary and non-specific the hatred and racism directed towards the Muslim community is.

The world of the novel demonstrates how mainstream US media participates in alienating Muslims and perpetuating reductive stereotypes. Khadra notices how the “only Muslims on television were Arab oil-sheiks, who were supposedly bad because they made America have an energy crisis... Nasty Arab sheiks appeared on *Charlie’s Angels*, forcing the shy angel, Kelly, to belly dance” (Kahf 83). When the only Muslims who appear on television are either perpetuating the American energy crisis or harassing America’s favorite sweetheart, it begins to make sense to Khadra why Muslims in America are under attack.

With the murder of Zuhura— a character that serves as a role model to Khadra— Khadra’s skepticism of the media solidifies. Zuhura was an activist and dean’s list student at Indiana University (IU) who spoke out about the persecution of Muslims across the globe (Kahf 61). Zuhura was also the first Muslim woman to head the African Students Organization, and the first Muslim woman to wear hijab in this role (Kahf 74). Her activism is what made her a target of the Martinsville community through which she crossed to get to IU, a community that everyone in Indiana knew “was no place to be unless you were white” (Kahf 61). On her way home from an activist meeting one night, Zuhura is murdered. Khadra explains how mainstream media misrepresents the murder:

The *Indianapolis Freeman*... said it was about race, how could it not be, in light of the Skokie affair and recent area rumblings from the Klan? It called Zuhura “a young black woman” and didn’t mention that she was Muslim at all. On the other hand, the *Indianapolis Star* pretended like race wasn’t there at all, calling Zuhura a “foreign woman” and “an IU international student,” as if her family didn’t live right there in town. The *Indianapolis News* article treated it like just some random crime, giving it one tiny paragraph on the back pages. (Kahf 95)

None of these versions do justice to Zuhura’s humanity.

Zuhura’s murder is then used to support another stock myth about Muslims, the ubiquitous “honor killing.” When Luqman, Zuhura’s boyfriend, is interrogated about the murder, he calls Zuhura an “honorable” girl. This leads an online paper to run an article titled *Murder Possible Honor Killing— Middle Eastern Connection* with a sidebar on “the oppression of women in Islam” (Kahf 97). In this case, the paper criminalizes Zuhura’s Muslim boyfriend because it fits the dominant stereotype that Islamic women are oppressed. When a paper finally acknowledges Zuhura’s Muslim identity, it is only to prosecute another Muslim.

Furthermore, the novel speaks to how media depictions of world events support dominant currents of Islamophobia. In particular, Kahf draws on the Gulf War and the 1979 Iran hostage crisis. In the novel, at the start of the Gulf War in 1990, “New broadcasts spoke of the ‘video-

game precision' of the bombing and the White House Press Office infamously called the casualties among ordinary people 'collateral damage'" (Kahf 340). The mere act of referring to civilian deaths in Baghdad as "collateral damage" removes the American public from the reality of innocent people dying at the hands of the US government. This is an example of a reporting tactic that undermines the severity of the issue— had US civilians been killed, the reports would surely not refer to American casualties as "collateral damage." For example, when the Iran hostage crisis happens:

Where was the soul at peace? Somalis were in the grip of a terrible famine...Pataini Muslims were being persecuted in their Buddhist-dominated country...None of this was an important part of news in America. Whereas the minute details of the lives of the American men held hostage, and the tears and hopes of their mothers, fathers, grandparents, and second cousins in Kissimmee made news every day. Only they were human, had faces, had mothers...Anchorman Walter Cronkite counted out the days of their captivity at the end of each news broadcast. (Kahf 122)

Here, mainstream news media fail to capture the multitude of grievances around the world, and instead focus solely on the American hostages. Only the American hostages "were human, had faces, had mothers," and the rest of the victims are either deserving of their suffering or non-



existent. Khadra's relationship with the media is one of disdain because it dehumanizes Muslims, perpetuates divides, and always omits the human side of the story.

While mainstream US media casts a net of Islamophobia over Muslim communities, Khadra also personally experiences unfounded, individual resistance to her religion. Even though she grows up in the US and eventually becomes a citizen, her heritage isolates her. In elementary school, Khadra was "bottom-of-the-barrel untouchable" and "uninvited to parties unpopular" (86). At thirteen, her classmates didn't understand how her hijab feels like a "second skin;" instead, they would constantly ask her and other hijab'd girls, "Aren't you hot?" (Kahf 113). Other classmates yanked her hijab off her head, tore it up, and waved it in front of her face. A teacher who bore witness to the bullying, "gave her a look of mild disapproval, and went back inside" (Kahf 125). Khadra likens this humiliation to having her skirt ripped off in front of the entire middle school (Kahf 125). As soon as she starts wearing one, the hijab becomes a constant site of hostility and questioning from others. When Khadra gains US citizenship, any excitement is quelled by the fact that she spent her entire formative years defending her identity against "the jeering kids who vaunted American's superiority as the clincher put-down to everything she said, everything she was" (Kahf 141). Kahf's depiction of Khadra's hostile experience is not unfounded. Several Muslim women who attended one of Kahf's reading in San Francisco "said that in growing up as the only Muslim girls in their communities, they wish they had had Ms.

Kahf's book to read so they knew they were not alone" (Macfarquhar). This alone demonstrates that many women *choose* to veil themselves even in the face of racism, which cuts against the stereotype of the oppressed Muslim women.

The novel additionally breaks down the stereotype built around the "Islamic terrorist." Khadra's father is a writer for *The Islamic Forerunner*, which he uses to attack the Syrian dictator constantly. Wajdy's critiques of the Syrian government results in him being labeled a "terrorist." If he were ever to return to Syria, "he'd be sent to the reeducation camps in the desert" (Kahf 132). Wajdy is a devout Muslim, but he's labeled a "terrorist" because he participates in Syrian opposition movements. Later on in the novel, Khadra finds out that Ramsey Nabolsy, a redhead boy she went to Muslim Youth camp with, died in a suicide bombing he committed at an Israeli military checkpoint. Ramsey had made it to the checkpoint "because racial profiling made it easy. The Israelis were disarmed by his fair-skinned, redheaded Midwestern looks, his buzz cut and style of dress" (Kahf 355). As Khadra and her friend discuss whether or not Ramsey is a "terrorist," they mention "radical Muslims" beginning to define "suicide bombers as martyrs." Khadra concludes, "It was stupid, senseless violence that accomplished nothing" (Kahf 356). Here, Kahf draws attention to several issues: firstly, not all Muslims look the same (and some Americans convert to Islam); secondly, racial profiling for

terrorism is often inaccurate; and thirdly, not all Muslims tolerate or support violence—the vast majority of Muslims aren't terrorists.

The idea that there exists no singular profile of a terrorist emerges again when Khadra gets into an argument with her friend, Blue, who is a Zionist. The two women can't agree on the legitimacy of Israel. For Khadra, "Israel was illegally made— by terrorists emptying out villages and forcing a mass exodus of Palestinians" (Kahf 320). Yet for Blu, Israel represents salvation for the ancestors she lost in the Holocaust. When Khadra asks Blu if she recognizes the Palestine Liberation Organization as a legitimate Palestinian government, Blue responds "Of course not. They're a terrorist organization," to which Khadra replies, "Yeah— according to the United States. *Today*. In 1987. But the whole rest of the world recognizes them. Who's gonna be America's pet terrorist twenty years from now, I wonder?" (Kahf 321). This conversation emphasizes the complex intersection of history and identity; both Khadra and Blu have lost ancestors to war and terrorism. Their religious beliefs, however, do not make them terrorists.

Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* ultimately rejects the myth of the threatening Muslim in several ways. It illuminates how, throughout history, the US has *desired* foreign, human capital, and favored well-off immigrants including those from Arab nations. The text also speaks to the diverse ways in which people practice and understand Islam and the Quran. Perhaps most importantly, Kahf humanizes an immigrant's struggle to "assimilate," and

the misguided definition of “assimilation” used today. At times, despite Khadra’s innocence, she is met with racism and resistance by broader communities. Even so, Khadra does not sever ties with Islam. In the end, she amalgamates: while part of her has adopted “American” traditions, she continues to wear a hijab and to practice Islam.

### *The Namesake*

*The Namesake* concerns the story of a first and second-generation immigrant family, the Gangulis. Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli migrate to the US from Calcutta, India at the very beginning of 1967. Ashoke dreams of leaving Calcutta after undergoing a near-death experience in a train crash. After the accident, Ashoke returns to college and graduates with a degree in engineering; his dreams of travel are made possible when the US offers him a “full fellowship” to attend MIT (Lahiri 16). Ashoke’s education is appealing to the US, not only because he is highly-skilled, but also because the meat of his education has been financed elsewhere— as Prashad points out, the US economy benefits from pulling in immigrants whose home countries already invested in educating them (Prashad 71). Within a matter of years, Ashoke lands a job as a university professor (Lahiri 49). Soon after, he is able to purchase a spacious home in the suburbs of Cambridge, where Ashima and their two children, Gogol and Sonia, can live comfortably (Lahiri 52). Their home on Pemberton Road, and the fact that they have enough

money to visit Calcutta every few years, establishes the Ganguli's economic security in America (Lahiri 64). Yet these achievements hardly secure their social acceptance or happiness, as we see in the stories of the novel's protagonist, Gogol, and his mother Ashima.

Whereas the Shamys in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* are fleeing a repressive government, Ashoke moves to the US in pursuit of new experiences. Despite these different push factors, the Gangulis and Shamys alike are faced with obstacles on their quests to "assimilate." The text shows that even a "positive" generalization about a minority group is isolating, and makes "assimilating" to dominant, American culture difficult; even immigrants who fit seamlessly into middle-class America are not protected from racism and exoticism. Ultimately, it reveals the larger emptiness of the "American Dream," or the notion that people should be able to *be* whomever they want and *achieve* what ever they want in the US. As a second-generation immigrant who grows up in mainstream US culture, Gogol is not only alienated from his parents and cultural heritage, but also tokenized by others who have absorbed reductive stereotypes.

Ashoke's financial success can do little to comfort Ashima during her adjustment to the US and her pregnancy with Gogol, which immediately cuts against the "American Dream." Ashima is miserable despite her competency in English. When she makes the small mistake of forgetting to pluralize words: "This error pains her almost as much as her last contraction.

English had been her subject” (Lahiri 7). Her previous experience tutoring English to neighbors and children in Calcutta can’t even give her solace, as a simple mispronunciation becomes a site of alienation, of people smiling “a little too widely.” Ashima goes through her pregnancy and the birth of her first child alone: “Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt by her side, the baby’s birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true” (Lahiri 24, 25). And although she eventually builds a “circle of Bengali acquaintances” from Calcutta, whose “husbands are teachers, researchers and engineers,” she misses deeply her family, her favorite meals, and her life back in Calcutta. America, despite its comforts, cannot alleviate the distance and loss Ashima feels.

When Gogol’s first schoolteacher denies Ashoke’s Bengali tradition of giving Gogol his “good name,” Gogol’s existential crisis begins. Without even knowing it, this is Gogol’s first experience with racism. The narrative explains that it is common within Bengali culture to be given two names: a good name and a pet name. Whereas a pet name is “the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments,” a good name is for “identification in the outside world... Good names tend to represent dignified and enlightened qualities” (Lahiri 26). Ashoke chose Gogol as a pet name for his son. But on Gogol’s first day of school, Ashoke decides to introduce his son by his good

name, Nikhil. Gogol is shy and unresponsive when his teacher addresses him as Nikhil.

Although it seems appropriate that a young boy might refrain from responding, Mrs. Lapidus assumes something else is preventing Gogol from speaking. She asks Ashoke, “Mr. Ganguli, does Nikhil speak English?” (Lahiri 58). Mrs. Lapidus immediately presumes that Gogol cannot possibly be competent in English. Even though Gogol resists departing from his pet name, Ashoke explains to the teacher that, “It is very common for a child to be confused at first” (Lahiri 59). Again, Mrs. Lapidus doesn’t understand the concept of a good name; she decides that Ashoke must be talking about a nickname or middle name. She questions Ashoke’s reasoning because “she has not had to go through this confusion with the other two Indian children” (Lahiri 58). Her assumptions are racist: she not only implies that Ashoke misunderstands English, but also implies that he is wrong because this issue didn’t come up based on her minimal interactions with other Indian families. Instead of respecting Ashoke’s wishes, Mrs. Lapidus asks Gogol what he’d like to be called. Although this might seem fair and freeing for Gogol, it represents quite the opposite: this moment in which the teacher belittles his parents’ culture sets up a tumultuous coming-of-age for Gogol, a boy that grows up to resent his name and the culture that “gave” it to him.

The Ganguli family faces both overt and subtle racism in and beyond the suburbs of Cambridge. One morning, Gogol discovers on the family mailbox,

That [his last name] has been shortened to GANG, with the word GRENE scrawled in pencil following it...something tells Gogol that the desecration is intended for his parents more than Sonia than him. For by now he is aware, in stores, of cashiers smirking at his parents' accents, and of salesmen who prefer to direct their conversation to Gogol, as though his parents were either incompetent or deaf. But his father is unaffected at such moments, just as he is unaffected by the mailbox. (Lahiri 67-8)

Gogol notices that his local community is more hostile towards his parents than they are to him, but he is still affected by it, despite his father's studied nonchalance. These aggressions show that no matter how seamlessly the Gangulis fit into middle-class America, they are treated as undesirably different by some.

Throughout his adolescence and young adulthood, Gogol resists his parents' cultural traditions and expectations. In part, this is archetypal of a young adult establishing independence from their parents. Yet the pressures of racism and his compulsion to "assimilate" also shape his decisions. Before college, Gogol legally changes his name to Nikhil because it has become a source of embarrassment. Gogol doesn't understand the naming tradition that his parents cherish: "I don't get it. Why did you have to give me a pet name in the first place? What's the point?" (Lahiri 99). When his mother responds, "It's what Bengalis do," Gogol still doesn't understand. Despite his parents' resistance to his name change, he goes through with it because "it was a



right belonging to every citizen. He read that tens of thousands of Americans had their names changed each year” (Lahiri 99). After college, Gogol further distances himself from his parents and cultural heritage by moving to New York City. There, he hopes to shed entirely the part of him that is associated with Bengali culture: “He didn’t want to attend his father’s alma matter, and live in an apartment in Central square as his parents once had...he didn’t want to go home on the weekends, to go with them pujos and Bengali parties, to remain unquestionably in their world” (Lahiri 126). For Gogol, “their world” of Bengali traditions, is at odds with his desire to “assimilate.”

In New York, Gogol has a series of unsuccessful relationships that represent different “cultural identities.” His first girlfriend, Maxine Ratliff, and her parents embody everything Gogol’s family is not: white, upper class, metropolitan and bohemian. Maxine’s mother, Lydia, is a “curator of textiles at the Met” and her father, Gerald, is a lawyer (Lahiri 134). Gogol immediately admires “how much Maxine emulates her parents, how much she respects their tastes and their ways” (Lahiri 138). It doesn’t take long for Gogol to fall in love with Maxine, “for to know her and love her is to know and love all these things” (Lahiri 137). As he begins to embrace their idealized American traditions, he feels “free” from his parents and his heritage (Lahiri 158).

Gogol's newfound sense of "freedom" dissipates as the Ratliffs make assumptions about his identity. Though Gerald and Lydia are intellectual figures, they treat Gogol's Bengali heritage as a commodity: "They are at once satisfied and intrigued by his background, by his years at Yale and Columbia, his career as an architect, his Mediterranean looks" (Lahiri 134). Instead of asking Gogol about his family history, Lydia asks if Calcutta is beautiful. After Gerald responds that Calcutta "sounds like Venice," and Maxine expresses her desire to visit, the conversation is over (Lahiri 135).

The Ratliff's world displays cultural ignorance and "orientalist" assumptions. At a birthday party the Ratliffs throw for Gogol, an unfamiliar guest asks him when he moved to America from India:

'I'm from Boston,' he says. It turns out Pamela is from Boston as well, but when he tells her the name of the suburb where his parents live Pamela shakes her head. 'I've never heard of that.' She goes on, 'I once had a girlfriend who went to India...she came back thin as a rail, and I [was] horribly envious of her... But you must be lucky that way.'

(Lahiri 157)

Although this passage displays the humor that runs throughout the novel, it's also emblematic of racism. Pamela's stereotypes are so embedded within her psyche that Gogol and she couldn't possibly share the same birthplace. She also assumes that his heritage makes him immune to the

food and water in India, unlike the average tourist. This is entirely racist. Upon overhearing this conversation, Lydia asserts, “Nick’s American... he was born here” (Lahiri 157). But Gogol notices Lydia’s unsure expression after she says this, that “after all these months, she herself isn’t sure” if what she has said is true. Even though Gogol is living with them, Lydia didn’t even know where he was born. The Ratliffs’ multicultural tolerance is revealed to be a performance. To them, Gogol is an exotic pet rather than a full-fledged individual.

Gogol’s relationship with Moushimi, another Bengali second-generation immigrant, signals his return to his name and his family: “He decides that it is her very familiarity that makes him curious about her” (Lahiri 199). Moushimi and Gogol find each other after they’ve each failed relationships with white, upper class intellectuals. When he meets her, Moushimi is a candidate for a Ph.D at NYU (Lahiri 195). At Moushimi’s place, “[Gogol] recognizes versions of things he knows from home” and “they talk about how they are both routinely assumed to be Greek, Egyptian, Mexican— even in this misrendering they are joined” (Lahiri 212). Their relationship epitomizes everything they spent their childhoods running away from: romantic involvement with another of Bengali heritage (Lahiri 213). The very things that isolated them from fully “assimilating” are now their greatest source of attachment and acceptance.

Yet ultimately neither Moushimi nor Gogol is happy in their relationship (and eventual marriage) because they remind one another of their failed “American dreams.” While Moushimi

is particularly enthralled with her white, married, university-type colleagues, “Gogol has nothing to say to these people” (Lahiri 237). Gogol’s observations of Moushimi’s friends are sharply humorous:

They are an intelligent, attractive, well-dressed crowd. Also a bit incestuous... Astrid is showing a few people paint chips, which she’s lined up in front of her like tarot cards, versions of an apple green she and Donald are considering for the front hallways. She wears glasses that might have belonged to Malcolm X. She eyes paint chips with precision; though she seeks the advice of her guests, she has already made up her mind about which permutation of the shade she will chose. (Lahiri 237)

Gogol quickly picks up on the empty conversations that take center stage among Moushimi’s crowd. He realizes that after seeing her friends, Moushimi “is gloomy in the aftermath, as if seeing them serves only to remind her that their own lives will never match up” (Lahiri 238).

Soon afterwards, Gogol comes to term with his own unhappiness in the relationship: he constantly feels compared to Moushimi’s ex—a member of Moushimi’s desired crowd—Graham. When their marriage fails

He can’t really blame her. They had both acted on the same impulse, that was their mistake. They had both sought comfort in each other, and in their shared world, perhaps

for the sake of novelty, or the fear that the world was slowly dying. Still, he wonders how he's arrived at all this: that he is thirty-two years old, and already married and divorced.

(Lahiri 284)

The text depicts Gogol in a state of remorse and regret. Moushimi and Gogol expected their mutual second generation experiences to save them from their alienation, but it is not enough to mask their lack of genuine connection.

In many ways, Gogol checks the boxes that fulfill the stereotypical expectations of him: he graduates from the architecture program at Columbia at 1994 and later becomes a licensed architect (Lahiri 125). Although he tried to shed the expectations of his parents, in many ways, he comes to realize they were protecting him:

Like the rest of their Bengali friends, his parents expect[ed] him to be, if not an engineer, then a doctor, a lawyer, an economist at the very least. These were the fields that brought them to America, his father repeatedly reminds him, the professions that have earned them security and respect. (Lahiri 105)

It wasn't just their Bengali traditions that pushed Gogol away, but their desire to shape Gogol's career choices, ones that would secure him the opportunity to be "respected" in the US. At first,

he blames them for his inability to fully integrate, to shed the assumptions, racism and expectations. Gogol's coming-of-age consists of a series of attempts to "correct that randomness, that error" of his name. By the end of the novel, however, he realizes that "it was for him, for [his sister] Sonia, that his parents had gone through the trouble of learning these customs. It was for their sake that it had all come to this" (Lahiri 286). No matter the sacrifices and compromises the Gangulis made, no matter how far or near Gogol is from his heritage or how "successfully" he integrates into middle-class America, he still struggles to "assimilate," to be accepted for who he is.

## Chapter Three

### **The Myth: Immigrants are criminals, especially undocumented immigrants.**

The ACLU states that “immigrants maintain low crime rates even when faced with adverse social conditions such as low income and low levels of education<sup>13</sup>.” A report by the *Immigration Policy Center* supports these findings: “The problem of crime in the United States is not ‘caused’ or even aggravated by immigrants, regardless of their legal status.” The overall trend shows that crime rates have declined as immigrant populations have increased (Rumbaut & Ewing). Writ large, immigrants have lower crime rates than their native-born counterparts (“Immigrant Myths and Facts”). Despite this, mainstream media and US policymakers alike continue to perpetuate this dominant misconception, which serves to perpetuate divisions between ‘native’ and immigrant workers and undermine the solidarity that would lead to improvements for all workers.<sup>14</sup>

Today, there are approximately eleven million unauthorized immigrants living in the United States. As of 2007, undocumented immigrants made up about one third of the total

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<sup>14</sup> This includes President Donald Trump, who grounded his 2015 presidential campaign in racist, anti-immigrant sentiment: “You have people come in and I’m not just saying Mexicans, I’m talking about people that are from all over, that are killers and rapists and they’re coming to this country” (Edelman 2016).

immigrant population. Often, undocumented immigrants are believed to be inherently criminal because their entry was not authorized. Yet about half of the ‘illegal’ immigrant population migrated to the US *legally* via temporary work or student visas. This means they were subjected to the disciplined inspection process before entry. They became ‘illegal’ only when they didn’t leave the country when their visas expired (“Immigration Myths and Facts”). The financial and social obstacles to achieving legal status are immense.

President Trump’s proposal to build a wall rests on an inaccurate stereotype of ‘illegal’ and criminal Mexican immigrants. Of the eleven million undocumented currently residing in the US, approximately 6.2 million emigrated from Mexico. Yet approximately five million are from other countries. Approximately sixty percent of this composite population has resided in the US for at least a decade, according to the *Migration Policy Institute*. Roughly one third live with at least one child who was born a US citizen. Only an estimated 7.5% of these eleven million have been convicted of a crime, and less than three percent have committed felonies (Yee, Davis, & Patel).

In *Illegal People: How Globalization Creates Migration and Criminalizes Immigrants*, David Bacon addresses the myth of ‘illegal’ immigrant criminality. He asserts that undocumented immigration “has become economically embedded in US society” (Bacon 80). As addressed in chapter one, immigrants have a generally positive impact on the US economy.



Even undocumented residents pay property and sales taxes, and make payments “for Social Security and similar state-mandated programs” (Bacon 81). At the same time, they are not legally eligible for the services that these programs provide.

Although undocumented workers are portrayed as a social burden, their isolation from national and state benefits make them easier to exploit and underpay (Bacon 81). Generally, unauthorized immigrants are less likely to protest inadequate wages and long hours, sexual harassment, or health and safety violations. These complaints put them at risk for getting fired or deported. Criminal activity is another factor that makes immigrants vulnerable to deportation, which is a further factor in their low crime rates.

*We Need New Names* by NoViolet Bulawayo and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi

Adichie develop evocative narratives with female protagonists who legally migrate from Zimbabwe and Nigeria respectively, before moving into the ‘undocumented’ category.

Bulawayo’s central character, Darling, is admitted into the US in the early 2000s, but ultimately overstays her visa. Adichie’s protagonist, Ifemelu, is allowed into the US on a student visa shortly before 2001, and ends up working “illegally” in order to support herself. Together, these novels concern immigrant populations from Africa who are often grouped together under reductive stereotypes; the fictional works present a far more complex and diverse portrait of undocumented life.

The Hart-Cellar Immigration Act of 1965 marked the beginning of the “new African diaspora”. Today, African immigrants make up the fastest-growing population of immigrants in the US (Chude-Sokei 59). By changing the global pattern of immigration to the US, the act “cleared the way for not only a redefinition of ‘white’ America, but also of ‘black’ America” (Chude-Sokei 59). Immigrants from African nations are generally cast under the racial category of “black” and are “expected to assimilate into either a white American and/or a ‘black’ social world that may exhibit its own prejudices against them’ (Chude-Sokei 55). Chude-Sokei argues that African immigrants are vulnerable not only to prejudice from whites, but also to exclusion from black American-born populations, some of which view black immigrants as “intra-racial, cross-cultural threat” (Chude-Sokei 63). Immigrants from diverse African countries might also be grouped under the continent of Africa, even though there is “no evidence whatsoever of a Pan-African movement, ideology, or even sensibility attempting to unite them” (Chude-Sokei 58).

As discussed in chapter one, the US immigration process favors educated, middle-class immigrants. The Hart-Celler Act triggered what is often called a “brain drain” from postcolonial Africa. In contemporary US culture, immigrants from African nations “tend to be better educated than most native-born Americans of any color. Almost half arrive with bachelor’s degrees...

making them the most ‘highly educated population in the United States’ (Chude-Sokei 61).

Nigerian immigrants stand out, surpassing the median household income for black Americans by approximately \$15,000 (Chude-Sokei 64). The discussions in Chapter two of the “model minority” and “culture of poverty” myths are both relevant here.

The two authors addressed in this chapter are part of the same generation within this “new African diaspora,” but their very different circumstances and stories indicate the perils of over-generalization. Elizabeth Zandile Tshele was born in Zimbabwe in 1981. She adopted the penname Noviolet Bulawayo when she moved to the US at the age of eighteen in 1999. Her first name means “with Violet,” in honor of her mother, Violet, who passed away when she was an infant (Smith). Her last name, Bulawayo, honors the city where she grew up. In the US, she lived with her aunt. She published her first novel, *We Need New Names*, in 2013.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born on September 15, 1977, in Enugu, Nigeria. She grew up in Nsukka in the house previously occupied by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. Before leaving for the United States at nineteen, she studied medicine at the University of Nigeria, where she edited *The Compass*, a student-run magazine. Adichie received a scholarship to study communication at Drexel University for two years. She completed her degree in communication

and political science at Eastern Connecticut State University in 2001. From there, she went on to complete a master's degree in creative writing at Johns Hopkins University (Tunca).

Bulawayo was part of the first generation of children born after Zimbabwe gained independence from British colonial rule in 1980. She grew up under Zimbabwe's first president, Robert Mugabe. At the time, whites owned 70% of all viable farmland, yet made up less than 1% of the population. Mugabe's human rights abuses intensified soon after Bulawayo's migration to the US in 1999. In 2000, Mugabe initiated "land invasions" of white-owned commercial farms with the "intention" of reclaiming the land stolen under colonial rule. The invasions were violent, killing and torturing hundreds. Mugabe's mandate amounted to immense poverty and suffering. Mugabe distributed food to his political supporters only. He denied international agencies permission "to bring food into the country to feed the starving, and he intimidated, threatened, and imprisoned all opposition" (Howard-Hassmann 901). By 2009, roughly 75% of the nine million people left in Zimbabwe relied on the World Food Program for sustenance.

Mugabe's human rights abuses resulted in mass social and economic breakdown. Tens of thousands of Zimbabweans were displaced by land invasions and killed by state-sponsored violence during the 2008 elections (Howard-Hassmann 906). This human rights crisis "caused a massive outflow of refugees" from Zimbabwe into neighboring countries. These forces continue to shape the Zimbabwean diaspora today.

Bulawayo described her difficult return to Zimbabwe after thirteen years of living in the US. She found that Mugabe's dictatorship destroyed the home she once knew. In part, this reality inspired her novel *We Need New Names*: "In the States, people actually hail [Mugabe] as one of Africa's leading statesmen, but the reality is the people on the ground have a different story and that's part of why I wrote the book" (Smith). Bulawayo has described her novel as "very much born out of politics" (Rosen).

Similarly to Zimbabwe, Nigeria is a relatively new state; it gained independence from British colonial rule in the 1960s. Its contemporary political and economic circumstances are also inextricably linked to British colonialism and US foreign policy." When Nigeria became an independent state, it launched into enormous foreign and domestic debt in an effort to ameliorate the "neglect of the country's infrastructural and social development by the colonial authorities from 1900-1959" (Ogunyemi 33). Only seven years after its "independence," Nigeria erupted into a civil war,<sup>15</sup> in response to a group of rebels under the Biafran leadership who wanted to secede from the state with control over the oil-rich Eastern region of the country (Uche 111). This war lasted thirty months, and amounted to lasting ethnic, political and economic turmoil (Uche 115). Although British forces re-involved themselves with the "official" intent of establishing a 'One Nigeria,' its motives were largely rooted in commercial interests, particularly

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<sup>15</sup> Also known as the Biafran War.

in oil (Uche 112).

An investor living in Nigeria<sup>16</sup> wrote about the immense corruption and despotism that survived its civil war. In 1995, Dictator Sani Abacha was responsible for pocketing billions of dollars from Nigeria's oil reserves, and "US government officials involved with Africa [were] aware of this diversion" (Beran). Not only this, but Nigeria's armed forces were some of the most corrupt in the world, using embezzlement money to smuggle heroin to the US through Nigerian gangs. Under Abacha, fear of detention, violence, and execution blanketed the nation. Yet the US based its treatment of Nigeria on its "catch-all" policy on all African nations, despite their immense diversity (Beran). In conclusion, "US policy has the effect of lending support to the Nigerian military dictatorship, degrading the lives of the poor and the disappearing middle class, propelling the potential breakup of the country, and facilitating the flow of drugs into the East Coast of the US" (Beran).

Chimamanda Adichie draws on her perspective as a middle-class immigrant from Nigeria during this time in her novel *Americanah*:

I think the immigration story that we are very familiar with, when it concerns Africa, is the story of, you know, the person who's fleeing war or poverty, and I wanted to write about a different kind of immigration, which is the kind that I'm familiar with, which is of

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<sup>16</sup> Under the pseudonym of Paul Beran.

middle-class people who are not fleeing burned villages and who, you know, had ostensibly privileged lives, but who are seeking what I like to think of as choice. (Adichie *Socialist*)

Here, Adichie cuts against the dominant stereotype that “immigrants are criminals” and compliments what lies at the heart of chapter one: the US favors wealthy and educated immigrants, and she admits to being one of them. Although Bulawayo explores this myth through the stereotype of African poverty, Adichie takes an equally effective, yet opposite approach. Despite differences in social class, both authors incorporate the impacts that imperial powers and ensuing dictatorships have had on their homelands. Adichie has said, “I think it’s impossible to write about Africa in the 1960s or today without engaging with that history” (Adichie *Socialist*).

### *We Need New Names*

Bulawayo wrote *We Need New Names* through the perspective of a young girl, Darling, who grows up in Zimbabwe in a fictional town called Paradise. When she reaches adolescence, Darling migrates to the US to live with her Aunt Fostalina, where she works at a hospital and a nursing home. In Paradise, Darling lives in a “tin;” she shares a small bed with her mother, cares

for her AIDs-stricken father, and lives in a constant state of hunger. But it wasn't always like this. Before her family was displaced, she had a "real house made of bricks...real walls, real windows...real taps and real running water" (Bulawayo 60, 65). In many ways, it is a coming-of-age narrative full of relatable passages that convey what it's like to be a teenager. Yet it's nuanced by Darling's position as an immigrant thrown into the depths of mainstream US culture. Bulawayo uses the reductive stereotypes of the "poor, starving African child" and the "criminal immigrant" to her advantage. Through humor, a collection of powerful omniscient chapters that speak to Zimbabwe's tumultuous history, and Darling's subjective experience, Bulawayo creates a textured portrait of immigrants who challenge the myth of criminality.

The novel depicts the poverty and displacement endured by the black majority after Zimbabwe's independence, and Darling as a member of this majority. The first scene concerns a starving Darling who is just about ready to die for food. She and her friends— Bastard, Chipso, Godknows, Sbhoo, Stina— adventure to Budapest where the white, wealthy minority of Zimbabwe lives, in order to steal guavas. On their way back to Paradise, they "walk nicely like Budapest is now our country too, like we built it even, eating guavas along the way and spitting peels all over to make the place dirty" (Bulawayo 13). Fearlessly, they discuss their dreams of living in homes like the ones they see in Budapest, of moving to LA or Paris. It's here that Darling announces she is going to live with her Aunt Fostalina in America; she is proud and



determined to go. They all make plans to go elsewhere because they are constantly hungry in Paradise.

Yet despite these conditions, Darling enjoys a playful, lively group of friends. Darling often reflects on their laughter: “we laugh and we laugh and we laugh” or “we are running and laughing and laughing and laughing” (Bulawayo 20, 64). They’re hungry, but they’re not miserable. They make up games and go on adventures outside of Budapest. In a neighboring city called Shanghai, they notice Chinese men doing mass construction work. Stina asks one worker, “What are you building? A school? Flats? A clinic?” She’s aware of the kinds of institutions that Zimbabwe needs, yet the men are only building malls (Bulawayo 48). This trip to Shanghai inspires them to make up a game about China.

The games that Darling and her friends play show they are acutely aware of larger, international relationships beyond Paradise. Whenever Darling and her friends can’t come up with a new game, they default to country-game, which starts with everyone picking the name of a country. Darling says,

First we have to fight over the names because everyone wants to be certain countries, like everybody wants to be the U.S.A. and Britain and Canada... These are country-countries... Nobody wants to be rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka, and not even this one we live in. (Bulawayo 51)

This game shows their creativity, yet it also shows their perceptiveness. They understand that some countries are more ‘powerful’ than others. On another occasion, an NGO from the US brings them toy guns and they run off to “play war,” in part because they understand what war looks like (Bulawayo 59). Another popular game they play is called “Find bin Laden” (Bulawayo 71). These games allow them to play and entertain each other. But they also allow them to make sense of the global forces at work and how they impact Paradise.

Darling also belongs to a resilient family and community. During Zimbabwe’s war for independence, whites murdered Darling’s grandfather because he hid and fed “the terrorists” who were fighting to reclaim the land (Bulawayo 22). Though Darling didn’t live during this time, she has experienced being displaced violently, by men with bulldozers, batons, and sticks (Bulawayo 66). Her community was completely flattened, and she lost everything before moving to Paradise. On top of this, Darling’s father was absent for most of her life— until he returned from South Africa to Paradise with AIDS. Darling is deeply resentful of her father and is embarrassed about his illness. Yet Darling’s friends offer her support despite the stigma surrounding AIDS:

I reach out and touch him too because I have never really touched him ever since he came and this is what I must do now because how will it look when everybody is touching him and I’m not? We all look at one another and smile-sing because we are touching him, just

touching him all over like he is a beautiful plaything we have just rescued from a rubbish bin in Budapest. (Bulawayo 105)

This is an emotionally powerful passage in which Darling and her friends surround her dying father. Her friends have an enormous amount of empathy and love to share with Darling. Darling also has incredible emotional depth, which allows her to shed some of her resentment towards her father. These children have experienced poverty, hunger and war, yet they are still full of human compassion.

When Darling leaves Mugabe's Zimbabwe for a better life in America, she quickly realizes it's not the place she had imagined and bragged about to her friends. It has endless amounts of food, "all types and types of food," but her hunger for home is greater than any hunger she's ever experienced: "At times, though, that no matter how much food I eat, I find the food does nothing for me, like I am hungry for my country and nothing is going to fix that" (Bulawayo 155). In her letters to home, Darling is embarrassed to tell the truth about her new life, "like how the weather was the worst...that the house we lived in wasn't like the one's we'd seen on TV" (Bulawayo 189). Sometimes, Darling goes to sleep to the sound of gunshots, and feels afraid to go outdoors (Bulawayo 190). In America, Darling is hungry for home; she's isolated both by her new environment and her distance from Paradise.

Rather than being a criminal in America, Darling is often a victim. When she goes to school at Washington Academy, she admits

When I first arrived at Washington I just wanted to die. The other kids teased me about my name, my accent, my hair, the way I talked or said things, the way I dressed, the way I laughed. When you are being teased about something, at first you try to fix it so the teasing can stop but then those crazy kids teased me about everything, even the things I couldn't change, and it kept going and going so that in the end I just felt wrong in my skin, in my body, in my clothes, in my language, in my head, everything." (Bulawayo 167)

Darling is bullied for being different. She internalizes her classmates' criticisms, which not only isolates her, but also pushes her to self-hate. Even though she comes to the US with a background in Standard English, Darling is ridiculed for her accent. She says, "And the problem with those who speak only English is this: they don't know how to listen; they are busy looking at your falling instead of paying attention to what you are saying... English is like a huge iron door and you are always losing the keys" (Bulawayo 196, 199). This is an effective metaphor used to drive home how isolated Darling feels. When people talk to her, they anticipate failure. In order to sound more "American," in order to "fit in," Darling vows to watch TV. But Kristal, one of her American black friends, criticizes Darling's development of "white folk" English. On

one hand, Darling is criminalized for her imperfect pronunciations of Standard English, and on the other she is criticized for trying to perfect them.

Darling is hardworking and determined. Although she overstays her visa, she does so in order to support herself through community college. She works multiple jobs, none of which are glamorous. At a local grocery store, she cleans toilets, bags groceries, and sorts through dirty bottles and beer cans. Her boss, Jim, makes her uncomfortable; he “has this thing of just touching [her] body” (Bulawayo 258). She despises the way he touches her, but she can’t afford to quit; in fact, she has to pick up as many shifts as she can (Bulawayo 259). Jim also offends Darling; he consistently speaks as if Africa is one country, even though she’s told him many times that “it is a continent with fifty-some countries, that other than my own, I haven’t really been to the rest of it to say what is what” (Bulawayo 255). Darling also has a housekeeping job, where she cleans a three-story home all by herself. She’s not thrilled about it, especially because she has higher aspirations for herself: “When I’m not working at the store, I have to come here, even though I don’t like the idea of picking up after someone else, because in my head this is not what I came to America for” (Bulawayo 265). She’s envious of her boss’s daughter, Kate, who goes to Cornell, but she resents how she starves herself. At one point, Darling almost releases her frustrations at Kate. Darling imagines what she would say:

Look around you, and you have all these riches that you don't even need; upstairs, your bed is fit for a king; you go to Cornell, where you can be anything you want; you don't even have to clean up after yourself because I'm doing it for you, right now; you have a dog whose wardrobe I couldn't afford; and, what's more, you're here, living in your own country of birth, so what exactly is your real problem?" (Bulawayo 270)

Here, Darling points out that "living in your own country of birth" is a privilege—that for some, like her, staying isn't an option. And yet in America, Darling has to work *extra* hard to get even half as many privileges as Kate has. Her jobs expose her to this absurd, gut-wrenching truth on a daily basis. Despite it all, and despite her desperation for home at times, Darling works tirelessly and constantly (Bulawayo 269).

Darling is not alone in her frustrations. The novel's omniscient narrator speak to the obstacles Darling shares with members of the Zimbabwean diaspora. In particular, the chapter titled "How They Lived" paints a portrait of immigrants who are unauthorized work:

Instead of going to school, we worked. Our Social Security cards said *Valid for work only with INS authorization*, but we gritted our teeth and broke the law and worked; what else could we do? What could we have done? What could anybody have done? And because we were breaking the law, we dropped our heads in shame; we had never broken any

laws before. We dropped our heads because we were no longer people; we were now illegals.” (Bulawayo 244)

Darling is part of this “we.” Members of diaspora, although certainly not all, are a part of this “we.” The term “illegal” is criminalizing people who have never broken laws before, and don’t want to break laws now. There is no pride in working “illegally.” There is only necessity. The “illegals” in this passage are people who work “low-paying jobs. Backbreaking jobs. Jobs that gnawed at the bones of our dignity... We took scalding irons and ironed our pride flat. We cleaned toilets. ... We got sick but did not go to hospitals, could not go to hospitals” (Bulawayo 246). They work through shame and dehumanization; they put themselves at risk, but can’t access healthcare. This portrait is the human side of the “immigrants are criminals” myth; it’s not a story of victimization, but one of perseverance. The omniscient narrator provides a vehicle for Bulawayo to extend Darling’s experience to other immigrants. In the Afterward of her book, she writes: “Darling is Zimbabwean, but it is my hope that she is also Mexican and Indian and British, that she is from anywhere else where people live and hope and dream and leave” (Bulawayo 4).

## *Americanah*

At the heart of Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*, lies Ifemelu, an Igbo woman from Nigeria who migrates to the United States during Abacha's regime. Readers meet Ifemelu in New Jersey, where she is finishing her fellowship at Princeton University, and writing popular blogs, mainly about race, for financial support. But at the beginning of the novel, Ifemelu has already made plans to close her successful blog, sell her condo, and return to Lagos (Adichie *Americanah* 16). She's been away from home for fifteen years: "Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil" (Adichie *Americanah* 7). Ifemelu decides to leave despite it taking her years to be "taken seriously among Nigerians in America, among Africans in America, indeed among immigrants in America" (Adichie *Americanah* 19). She was marginalized— even by the very people mainstream US media groups together. Although her longing for her first love, Obinze, draws her home to Nigeria, it's exacerbated by the isolation she feels, and the obstacles she faces, in America.

As the narrative unfolds, readers are given insight into the political forces that drove Ifemelu out of Nigeria in the first place. Under the Abacha regime, military corruption caused university professors to go on nationwide strikes:



Strikes were now common. In the newspapers, university lecturers listed their complaints, the agreements that were trampled in the dust by the government men whose own children were schooling abroad. Campuses were emptied, classrooms drained of life...

Everyone was talking about leaving.” (Adichie *Americanah* 120)

Ifemelu and her generation face unreliable prospects for higher education in Nigeria. Obinze’s mother, who is a middle-class professor at Nsukka University, offers insight into the government’s destruction: “I understand the students’ grievances, but we are not the enemy. The military is the enemy. They have not paid our salary in months. How can we teach if we cannot eat?” (Adichie *Americanah* 111). Students and professors alike are grieving, but campus solidarity is hard to achieve. Various coups speak to Nigeria’s unrest (Adichie *Americanah* 97). Some of Ifemelu’s friends, like Ginika, have already left for the US. When her father loses his job and slips into a depression (despite his qualifications and “formal, elevated English”), conditions at home worsen (Adichie *Americanah* 57). Their landlord threatens to evict them on multiple occasions. And the only reason Ifemelu attends secondary school with middle-class students like Obinze is because she “had done so well on her entrance exam” (Adichie *Americanah* 80). Ifemelu has intellectual potential— she’s at the top of her class and a member of the debate team—yet the financial and political climate of Nigeria does not allow her to fully

realize it. Ifemelu's Auntie Uju, after fleeing Nigeria herself, awaits Ifemelu in America, as does the opportunity to attend college.

Auntie Uju's relationship with The General is emblematic of Nigeria's corrupt postcolonial regime, in which all the nation's wealth lay in the hands of an elite backed by the military. Before she leaves for the US, Auntie Uju becomes involved with The General, who is the epitome of an intimidating military officer: his "solid, thickset body spoke of fights that he started and won" (Adichie *Americanah* 95). Not only can he financially support his wife and children, but also his mistress (Auntie Uju) and her family (Ifemelu and her parents). Yet Auntie Uju's affection for The General is contentious. On one hand, he's the reason Auntie Uju can live luxuriously with a satellite dish, a generator, and a freezer; he's the reason Ifemelu's family doesn't get evicted. Yet while he finances Auntie Uju's lifestyle, she never actually has any money in the bank— she must ask him for it. Auntie Uju is a doctor who tends to patients every day, but she doesn't get paid (Adichie *Americanah* 92). Ironically, The General is a member of the corrupt system responsible for the crumbling healthcare system and Auntie Uju's nonexistent salary. As a result, she is entirely financially dependent on The General, which allows him to control her. Auntie Uju cannot see how she's equally trapped like the Nigerians who are objectified in The General's stories: "the man who had sex with a top general to get an oil block, the military administrator whose children were fathered by somebody else, the foreign prostitutes

flown in weekly for the Head of State” (Adichie *Americanah* 96). A year after Aunty Uju gives birth to their child, Dike, The General dies in a military plane crash. His death leaves Aunty Uju and Dike with no choice but to flee the country: “You have to leave immediately. Make sure you clear the house, take everything...Do it fast-fast before his people come back” (Adichie *Americanah* 105).

Ifemelu follows Aunty Uju to the US, where she is overwhelmed by reductive stereotypes and racial categorizations, which ultimately inspires her to create an anonymous blog about US identity politics. Although these blog posts are often humorous and eventually finance her, they reveal structural racism at work. When Ifemelu arrives in the US, she learns for the first time that she is black— as are all of the other immigrants from other diverse, African nations, and all of the American-born blacks. She mocks this reductive assumption in her blog post, “To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: In America, You are Black, Baby:”

If you are a woman, please do not speak your mind as you’re used to doing in your country. Because in America, strong-minded women are SCARY... When a crime is reported pray that it was not committed by a black person, and if it turns out to have been committed by a black person, stay well away from the crime area for weeks, or you might be stopped for fitting the profile... You see, black people have a gene that makes them not tip, so please over-power that gene. (Adichie *Americanah* 274, 275)

Here, Ifemelu speaks to the absurdity of generalizations about blacks. Yet she's also aware of how these absurdities lie in an extremely dangerous, racist misconception: that blacks are genetically inferior to whites. She observes how easily blacks are criminalized— how the actions of one black person represents the actions of *all* black people, which includes all immigrants from the entire continent of Africa. In another blog post called “Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What Hispanic Means,” Ifemelu takes issue with the category of “Hispanic:” “All you need to be is Spanish-speaking but not from Spain and voila, you're a race called Hispanic” (Adichie *Americanah* 129). Ifemelu gathers that in America, your race and identity is decided for you. But it doesn't stop there. In another blog post, she describes how these categories also pit immigrants against one another: “American racial minorities— blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Jews— all get shit from white folks, different kinds of shit, but shit still. Each secretly believes it gets the worst shit. So, no, there is no United League of the Oppressed” (Adichie *Americanah* 253). Ifemelu witnesses and experiences how these assumptions play out in every dimension of American life: academia, public transportation, dinner parties, and even hair salons.

While it's true Ifemelu works using someone else's Social Security card, she's not a dangerous criminal: she's a hardworking student who is desperate to stop waking up “every day worrying about money” (Adichie *Americanah* 165). Auntie Uju best explains her circumstances:

‘You can’t work with your student visa, and work-study is rubbish, it pays nothing, and you have to be able to cover your rent and the balance of your tuition. Me, you can see I am working three jobs and yet it’s not easy. I talked to one of my friends...I begged her and she agreed to let you work with her Social Security card.’ (Adichie *Americanah* 131)

Ifemelu is hesitant to use Ngozi Okonkwo’s Social Security card; she doesn’t want to jeopardize her visa, but Auntie Uju insists: “‘All of us look alike to white people’” (Adichie *Americanah* 148). Out of financial necessity, Ifemelu adopts Okonkwo’s identity. But even still, work is extremely difficult to find:

She applied to be a waitress, hostess, bartender, cashier, and then waited for job offers that never came, and for this she blamed herself.... She did not imagine a police arrest for not paying her school fees, but what did happen if you did not pay your school fees in America?” (Adichie *Americanah* 161)

Ifemelu is trapped: if she doesn’t work, then she won’t have enough money to pay for school and sustain her student visa. But if she works illegally, then she is also putting her student visa at risk. Even her educational background works against her: “Mwombeki... looked over Ifemelu’s resume and asked her to delete the three years of university in Nigeria: American employers did not like lower-level employees to be too educated” (Adichie *Americanah* 171). The pressure makes Ifemelu blame herself, even though she’s being systematically denied eligibility to work.

Ifemelu's relentless, yet unsuccessful job search triggers her depression and self-hatred, and leads her to cut off contact with the love of her life: Obinze.<sup>17</sup> When she is faced with the reality that she has no means to pay her rent, and the pressure from her roommates is closing in on her, she accepts a man's offer to "help him relax" out of sheer necessity: "She did not want to be here, did not want his active finger between her legs...Afterwards, she lay still, coiled and deadened" (Adichie *Americanah* 177). This experience traumatizes Ifemelu:

She knew there was no point in being here, in being alive, but she had no energy to think concretely of how she could kill herself... Often, in the middle of eating or reading, she would feel a crushing urge to cry and the tears would come, the sobs hurting her throat...She no longer went to class. Her days were stilled by silence and snow. (Adichie *Americanah* 192)

This passage is extremely difficult to read. Ifemelu becomes suicidal and detached; she cannot face speaking to Obinze. The conditions in the US have driven her to become someone she never wanted to be. After this experience, "her self-loathing had hardened inside her" (Adichie *Americanah* 195).

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<sup>17</sup> Obinze is still in Nigeria at the time. He cannot to America as planned because of 9/11. The narrative also follows his emigration to London, where he works without legal status, but this paper focuses solely on Ifemelu's experience.

Ifemelu is not the only target of racist criminalization. The text depicts how Dike is structurally targeted throughout his childhood. After camp one day, Dike describes how his group leader gave all the campers sunscreen except him. Ifemelu tries to comfort him, but the damage is done; Dike replies with a shrug, “I just want to be regular” (Adichie *Americanah* 227). This is incredibly sad and speaks to mainstream ignorance of racist ideology. Auntie Uju describes instance in which Dike is criminalized at his school:

‘The principle called me on Monday to say that Dike hacked into the school’s computer network on Saturday. This is a boy who was with me all day on Saturday... When I asked why they thought it was him, they said they got information. Imagine, you just wake up and blame my son. The boy is not even good with computers.’ (Adichie *Americanah* 433)

The principle assumes Dike committed the crime on the basis of his race. These micro-aggressions add up, feeding Dike’s sense of alienation and worthlessness. When Dike attempts suicide,<sup>18</sup> Ifemelu is haunted by the memories of his laughter: “It was true that he laughed, and that his laughter was convinced with its sound and its light, but it might have been a shield, and underneath, there might have been a growing pea plant of trauma” (Adichie *Americanah* 461, 471). Ifemelu can only think to blame herself and Auntie Uju, which speaks to how deeply she’s internalized the myth of immigrant criminality.

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<sup>18</sup> Oscar also attempts suicide in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

Ifemelu returns to Nigeria at a time when this was a pattern, which is why she joins the Nigeropolitan Club in Lagos: “it’s just a bunch of people who have recently moved back, some from England, but mostly from the U.S... They were the sanctified, the returnees, back home with an extra gleaming layer” (Adichie *Americanah* 499-502). Through the club, Ifemelu meets a female lawyer from outside Philadelphia, and two men from Harvard and Yale with MBAs. Obinze also migrates home from London and becomes a successful real estate agent (Adichie *Americanah* 532) In 2013, BattaBox, a popular Nigerian entertainment channel based in Lagos, explained this phenomenon: “For decades Nigeria has seen a so-called ‘Brain Drain’ as educated Nigerians moved to the West in search of job opportunities - but now that is all changing - with the economic downturn in the US and UK, many Nigerians are returning home – a ‘Brain Gain’” (*Battabox*). Immigrants are migrating back home in part because of structural problems in America that prevent them from feeling accepted, despite their expertise. That immigrants are migrating home cuts against notions of “American Exceptionalism”— America is not a liberating place for all who immigrate. Although it takes Ifemelu time to adjust to Lagos, and although she yearns for American low-fat soymilk, NPR, and fast internet, she is finally at peace: “to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again. She had, finally, spun herself fully into being” (Adichie *Americanah* 586). America was never a place she could fully call *home*.



## **Conclusion: Immigrant Art and the Myth of American Exceptionalism**

Reductive myths about immigrants are undergirded by pervasive stereotypes: that of the South Asian “model minority,” “the culture of poverty” the “Islamic terrorist,” and so on. Yet throughout different waves of immigration to the US, targets of racism have shifted and stereotypes have evolved. US immigration has favored certain “groups” of immigrants depending on US national interests, evidenced by the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. This illuminates how categorizations of immigrants are arbitrary and are often in service of US economic and political gains. They justify and obscure mass structural inequality in the US.

Perhaps the foundational myths are those of “American exceptionalism” and the “American dream.” These myths paint America as “the land of milk and honey, the land where hard work makes dreams come true” (Taylor 25). The US is a place where anyone can “succeed” as long as they are willing to try. Yet these are the very concepts that mask the relationship between structural racism and class inequality:

American exceptionalism operates as a mythology of convenience that does a tremendous amount of work to simplify the contradiction between the apparent creed of US society and its much more complicated reality. Where people have failed to succeed and cash in on the abundance that American ingenuity has apparently created, their personal failures

or deficiencies serve as the explanation... Race and racism have not been exceptions;

instead, they have been the glue that holds the United States together. (Taylor 29)

The concept of the American dream has attracted immigrants to the US since the early twentieth century (Taylor 30). Its promise of freedom and equality lure immigrants from all kinds of circumstances seeking a range of opportunities: employment, education, finances, to raise children and create new homes. But as Adichie, Bulawayo, Danticat, Diaz, Kahf, and Lahiri relay through their own experiences and fictions, the notion that mainstream US culture welcomes immigrants with “open arms” is extremely complex and dangerously reductive.

Their experiences and novels alike address the myth of American exceptionalism. Most, if not all, of these authors were met with discrimination and resistance upon arriving in the US, despite some being granted university scholarships. All were stereotyped on the basis of race, tongue, and homeland. In interviews, several authors have drawn on complex historical and imperial relationships that continue to push people, like themselves, out of their beloved homelands. And many of these forces were US-driven: its occupations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic paved the way for despots and “homegrown” political and economic turmoil. Other authors were stunned by widespread cultural ignorance: Adichie, like Ifemelu, didn't know she was “black” until she realized mainstream US culture groups all immigrants from Africa under the same racial category.

On one hand, these authors are the faces of the “American dream:” they have received widespread critical acclaim for their works of fiction in the US— they have “made it.” They created rounded characters whose stories we laugh, cry, and resonate with, despite the unique narratives they tell. And *yet*, their fiction holds tales of people whose experiences are not so different from their own experiences of migration. Embedded in their humor and craft, are darker, more complex tales of “American exceptionalism,” that speak more honestly about common immigrant experiences. It is worth revisiting Diaz’s words:

I may be a success story as an individual. But if you adjust the knob and just take it back one setting to the family unit, I would say my family tells a much more complicated story...It tells the story of tremendous poverty, of tremendous difficulty. [The US has a] deranged attachment to some of its myths; its myths of exceptionalism, its unwillingness to look at the immigrant situation, the callous way it exercises military power. (Ying)

Diaz, Danticat, Adichie, Bulawayo, Kahf, and Lahiri are all *individuals* who acknowledge their positions of privilege relative to other US immigrants.

Importantly, their novels reveal class inequality in the US, which makes obtaining the “American dream” insurmountable for even the majority of whites who occupy the spaces of “white privilege.” This is in keeping with Taylor’s exploration of “whiteness:” an aspirational category that “invariably collapses important distinctions among whites into a common white

experience that simply does not exist” (Taylor 211). As a result, “whiteness” is a racial category that obstructs solidarity, even among whites. “Whiteness,” moreover, can refer to more than just “whites:” “it can apply to anyone--Black, Latino, Asian, and yes, white people” (Taylor 210).

Certainly there is widespread racial and class disparity, but the myth of “American exceptionalism” places responsibility for failure and exclusion on individuals.

“Literature of New Arrival” is a form of immigrant art that is enriching US culture, changing the shape of the literary canon, and more: “The immigrant artist shares with all other artists the desire to interpret and possibly remake his or her own world” (Danticat *Create Dangerously* 18). These authors challenge the ideologies that dehumanize immigrants while pitting identity groups against one another on baseless grounds. Through their art, and its reflection of shared emotions and common humanity, they fully reveal the grounds for solidarity, helping to “remake” our world.

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