

ASSIMILATING INTO THE TRANSNATIONAL: EXAMINING TRANSNATIONAL  
IDENTITY IN GLOBAL CITIES THROUGH IMMIGRANT NARRATIVES

A Thesis

by

CALLIE T. WALKER

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This thesis meets the standards for scope and quality of  
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

Dale Pattison, PhD  
Chair

Kevin Concannon, PhD  
Committee Member

Sarah Salter, PhD  
Committee Member

December 2019

## ABSTRACT

As cities become more globalized due to technological advances and increasingly interconnected flows of humans, capital, and goods, movement of people into new spaces has raised questions about belonging and identity within a global system of national boundaries. Ideas about immigration and assimilation have fluctuated throughout modern history, often on a scale between liberal ideas of cosmopolitanism and modes of belonging that favor national identity as a defining characteristic of community. This thesis explores immigrant narratives written by transnational individuals in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century for the purpose of re-conceptualizing belonging, identity, and assimilation in increasingly transnational urban spaces. By establishing a framework within which postcolonial theories of hybridized identity such as those put forth by Homi Bhabha and Gloria Anzaldúa are applied to the work of urban theorists like Michael Peter Smith and Sassia Sasken, this thesis pushes against the notion of assimilation as working toward “sameness,” and asks readers to consider the ways in which transnationality and globalization complicate notions of belonging and community-building. Rather than thinking of assimilation as a process of acquiring national membership, I argue that membership in the transnational world should be considered locally within the communities in which individuals live and operate as a mode of the sort of civic citizenship described by urban theorist Benjamin Barber. Within the following chapters, the city provides a locus for the argument that true belonging and “assimilation” are achieved through engaging transnational identity and adaptability as a mode of moving through the transnational urban. Chapter one focuses on the transnational flexibility of individuals in the works of Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie. Chapter two challenges the notion of assimilation as developing a fixed identity based on cultural

background through Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*. Chapters three and four look at hybridized identity within *There There* by Tommy Orange and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. These chapters explore transnational spaces more broadly by applying Deleuze and Guattari's theory of smooth and striated space to describe the impacts of hegemonic systems on individuals who resist assimilation into the socioeconomic systems imposed on them by the nations in which they move.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my daughter, Jenna Walker Park, with whom I have traveled around the world and back again. May you grow to understand that the time and effort I have put into this endeavor serve not only to provide an example for you of the value of academic pursuit, but also to contribute to a field of discourse I believe has the power to make the world a better place for you to live your best transnational life.

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## INTRODUCTION

We live in an increasingly globalized world. Because of technology and the movement of capital across, between, and around national boundaries, individuals have become more mobile, migrating to different countries for myriad economic, political, personal, and social reasons. As the world becomes more interconnected, individuals must learn to exist and live in communities within cities that sometimes mirror the communities they've left in their homeland, while often working or moving through other communities within cities. Further complicating a migrant person's adaptation to new places are institutional and societal power dynamics resulting from the phenomenon of transnational urbanism, as cities (and neighborhoods within cities) themselves struggle with establishing or maintaining identities against populations in flux, political interests and maneuvers, and forces of globalization (economic and cultural). Through the use of immigrant narratives, this project aims to explore how identity and belonging are shaped by the competing cultural interests developing within particular locations in tandem with continuous fluctuation between liberal ideas of cosmopolitanism and movements toward an embrace of nationalism. This study invites us to rethink what it means to "assimilate" into spaces that are becoming increasingly transnational in nature and composition. One such space is the American city, where scholars like Michael Peter Smith, Sassia Sasken, and Benjamin Barber, among others, have theorized cities in America as increasingly inter-connected with individuals, other cities, and nations around the world. Examining literature written by immigrants about immigrants in transnational urban environments offers the opportunity to look beyond nationalist narratives of assimilation to facilitate more nuanced engagement with the ways in which the development and expression of transnational identities occur in increasingly globalized spaces. This perspective invites readers to re-think what it means to assimilate as internationally mobile

individuals in a transnational world, recognizing that expressions of transnational identity might necessarily be fluid rather than fixed in order to adapt to changing cities around the globe.

The topics of immigration and assimilation can hardly be discussed without acknowledging present ideologies and rhetoric. One dominant narrative of assimilation in the Western world established by white hegemony places certain expectations upon immigrants moving into the United States (as well as other countries with similarly Western cultures). Some might suggest that “assimilation is based on pragmatic considerations, like achieving some fluency in the dominant language, some educational or economic success, some familiarity with the country’s history and culture” (Lalami). However, with the rise of nationalist movements in Western countries, assimilation increasingly means “relinquishing all ties, even linguistic ones, to the old country” (Lalami). Lalami argues “one reason immigration is continuously debated in America is that there is no consensus on whether assimilation should be about national principles or national identity” noting that voices on the far right whose views are again becoming increasingly elevated in the mainstream believe that “nothing short of the abandonment of all traces of your heritage will do” (Lalami). Immigrants have been positioned as an economic threat to Americans. Fears related to immigrants range from immigrants taking jobs and economic opportunity away from other Americans to the government supporting immigrants with money that should be reserved to support other native-born Americans. These fears sometimes increase demands on immigrants to be seen as productive members of society, but perhaps not *too* productive lest they be seen as a threat to the economic security of native-born Americans.

The common thread between the texts explored in this project is the efforts taken, whether intentional or inadvertent, to dismantle our assumptions of how assimilation and cosmopolitanism function in the transnational urban of global cities. By looking at works by

Chimamanda Adichie, Chang-rae Lee, Tommy Orange, and Junot Díaz, I will show how the identities of transnational individuals living in transnational cities are often at odds with expectations put on immigrants as members of national and international communities (because all immigrants can be said to belong to both, simultaneously). Transnational migration into urban spaces has created neighborhoods and pockets of culture, which facilitate or necessitate the expression of identity to be fluid rather than fixed or unidirectional as individuals move through these spaces. As power dynamics shift when one enters new neighborhoods, or new transnational spaces, the ability of the immigrants featured in these texts to adapt to systems of fluctuating cultural and political power *is in fact* a sophisticated practice of assimilation. Therefore, I will argue that the immigrants portrayed in these texts *are* assimilating to the demands of the nation into which they've moved - they are assimilating into transforming, transnational spaces created by changing societal, economic, and political power structures within cities. And these immigrants are adapting in ways that can be difficult for groups calling for assimilation to see, because those that would uphold their existing national structures and power framework often fail to see that their own economic priorities can be a significant cause for the increasingly transnational movements in the world.

Terms like “transnational” and “global” are used in various ways to describe the increased connectivity and activity between peoples in different parts of the world. Perhaps the earliest combination of the prefix trans- with the word ‘national’ was coined by Randolph Bourne in an essay from 1916 published in *The Atlantic*. Bourne’s use of the term “transnational” suggests the movement of individual groups to new places on the globe. But “transnational” has evolved into a different meaning in contemporary scholarship, and is now used to describe the increased global connections between independent countries and societies in

the world, which have become more interconnected, less independent, and more dependent on global networks to move capital and people, along with the cultural elements they bring with them. In *The Global City*, Saskia Sassen defines a global city through the economic machinations that have led to a few highly concentrated urban centers as being the leaders of production for an economy that has largely moved from being based on manufacturing to being service-based. This has led to a phenomenon that she refers to as “spatial polarization,” creating new patterns of organization and an upsurge in informal economies (Sassen 293-294). Sassen’s focus on the economic control of the world largely overlooks the effects of changing economic structures within and through nation-states on individuals. In *Transnational Urbanism*, Michael Peter Smith emphasizes the differences between globalization as something that occurs in a larger, separate “space of flows” above the bounds of society and the nation-state and transnationalism, which “insists on the continuing significance of borders, state policies, and national identities even as these are often transgressed by transnational communication circuits and social practices” (Smith 3). Smith takes the position that transnational urbanism describes the way in which various “transnational social practices” converge and “enter into the contested politics of place-making, the social construction of power differentials, and the making of individual, group, national, and transnational identities, and their corresponding fields of difference” (5). Smith’s position on the transnational urban differs significantly from Sassen’s in his emphasis on individual agency and “the impact of ordinary women and men - their consciousness, intentionality, everyday practices, and collective action - on the social construction of urban life” (6).

As Smith’s “ordinary women and men” increasingly contact and interact with people from different cultures and realms of experience, they are forced to either experience the

discomfort of cultural clash or attempt to reconcile their differences to find common ground. Kwame Anthony Appiah envisions a world in which seemingly disparate cultures could coexist among each other peacefully if they could agree on basic outcomes of what qualifies as “good” and “bad.” The cosmopolitanism Appiah espouses calls into question the need for full assimilation of migrating individuals into societies by establishing that people can keep their customs and practices if we can all learn to tolerate that different peoples use different means to achieve similar ends. While cosmopolitanism as an ideology may not be considered mainstream, immigrants in many ways adopt the principles outlined by Appiah when they enter new transnational spaces to live and work. Cities provide a transnational locus, which encourages new, different modes of assimilation than those built on nationalist ideologies. Within the model I am building upon, cities—and the transnational spaces contained therein—replace the nation as the organizing principle upon which belonging becomes contingent. As individuals move through spaces in cities influenced by a variety of transnational elements, identity can be seen as less tied to national markers of similarity, and rather is conducted to adaptability and the ability to relate to individuals from myriad backgrounds and origins as a mode of building relationships and community.

Each of the following chapters aims to build on the frameworks of transnational urbanism and the global city as the setting where the work of examining transnational immigrant identity occurs. Chapter one introduces Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridized third spaces as a phenomenon not just applied to individuals, but which can also be extended to encompass the cities and neighborhoods occupied by Chimamanda Adichie’s Nigerian immigrants in *Americanah* and *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Chapter two explores how children of immigrants follow different models for assimilation than those of their parents, adopting a

transnational flexibility that complicates ideas of fixed identity and cultural loyalty as demonstrated through Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*. While chapters one and two emphasize the city as the locus of the transnational urban and its influence and interplay on individual experience, chapters three and four cover novels still very much impacted by the transnational urban, but attempt to look at tensions between national narratives and identities in transnational spaces more broadly. Chapters three and four utilize Deleuze and Guattari's theory of smooth and striated space to explore the implications of power and the imposition of systems that reorganize existing communities in Tommy Orange's *There There* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Overall, each chapter aims to explore how living as a transnational individual in an increasingly interconnected world highlights a different mode of citizenship and belonging contingent on civic engagement and interpersonal relations, rather than focusing heavily on some form of national identity or similarity as a key social determinant.

While literature does not catalog human events and actions in the same way as disciplines like history or political science, works of literature are based on lived human experience. What's more, literature offers us glimpses into thoughts, emotions, and perspectives that are not readily available to us through other means or disciplines which focus heavily on a disciplinary conception of objectivity. Literature is a record of human emotion and what it means to be a part of the lived human condition. It allows us to look beyond objective facts about historical and present situations—which are often too fraught with layers and complications to be considered an accurate representation of reality despite an apparent surface objectivity—to see how events and decisions affect the lives of individuals on subjective levels. The reliance on empiricism to maintain a level objectivity employed by social science or economic approaches to looking at the movements enacted by immigrants and the conditions they face in global cities can function to

rob us of empathy, leading to increased polarization of opinion, as well as reducing our ability to come to common ground. As many increasingly realize that objectivity is difficult to achieve in such a way that removes underlying bias, it becomes more difficult to agree on what the facts are anyway. Policy made under these conditions and without empathy and understanding of human impact can lead to literal pain and suffering for people moving transnationally for a variety of reasons, while compromising the moral codes by which we claim to live. Empathy is achieved through listening to the experiences of others. Literature is one easily accessible method by which we can look closely at a broad range of experiences.

Though the locations and systems (economic, political, and social) in which the transnational occurs and is at work have been considerably theorized, less attention has been given specifically to how these systems affect individual people. This project explores how these competing and at times overlapping theories affect individual lives as they move through the world in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of how transnational identities are shaped by varying levels of enfranchisement and membership in multiple communities. While theorists try to understand the transforming shape of the world, at times the understandings reached seem to minimize the impacts of economic and political policy on migrant individuals, whose right to membership and enfranchisement are often called into question. Through examining literature, both fiction and narrative nonfiction, the broader implications of the policies governing the transnational on individuals can be seen in more than the fleeting snapshots provided by our personal interactions and what is made available to the general public through media narratives. Part of the value of this approach in using literature to examine assimilation and immigration is that it allows us to look at these issues through the framework of interpersonal relationships and community engagement to expand upon existing data in the humanities and social sciences. This

deeper understanding of the idea of transnationality as it shapes individual identity and experiences should lead to a greater empathy for migrant individuals, challenging nationalist narratives about assimilation and belonging.

## **CHAPTER 1 – FINDING BELONGING WITHIN A THIRD SPACE**

The transnational world as described through processes of globalization, global capitalism, and trends in urban development has been widely addressed through scholarship in a number of disciplines, at times with great overlap. Addressing the intersections of these theories, Michael Peter Smith notes that scholars studying these phenomena have a tendency to “essentialize social actors ‘from below’ in these transnational spaces by portraying them as disconnected victims of global processes, entirely lacking in the dynamic connections to transnational flows” (108). Taken in tandem with theories of post-colonial curation, Smith’s conception of the transnational as occurring between individuals and systems rather than being wholly imposed on individuals by institutions breaks the prevailing model of assimilation as a uni-directional forced adoption of the culture and practices of a new space onto migrating individuals. Rather, Smith’s model allows for the possibility that immigration and transnational movement are in their own right mechanisms of assimilation into an increasingly global society that exists in cities as the site of the transnational urban. This model asks us to question whether nationalist narratives of assimilation—which often consist of adopting a new language, pursuing capitalist acquisition of material objects and money, and abandoning one’s cultural heritage—are actually productive for describing successful integration into a new space as defined by the socioeconomic situation and possibilities in that space. Problematizing assimilation as a process in constant flux as individuals move through transnational spaces, rather than as a linear process with a clear beginning and endpoint, allows for assimilation to be re-defined as the ability to integrate oneself into local manifestations in cities of the larger global economy in order to provide socio-economic stability for oneself and one’s family. Cities themselves exist as a mode of organizing humans more efficiently under some sort of power structure. Smith notes,

however, that this same function of organizing people brings together myriad cultures and identities into the same geopolitical area, as increasingly interconnected economies rely on transnational flows for sustaining modes of production (Smith 105-107). While acculturation may at times be a necessary component of assimilating into a new place, the city's demand for labor and transnational capital flows override acculturation as a priority, which can be seen in emerging literature on the immigrant experience.

Part of the tension in defining belonging through assimilation as the adoption of a new identity in a new culture is that identity itself is neither geographically bound nor fixed, but rather is mutable and inconsistent, even among those who are considered to be a part of the same in-group. Emerging literature on identity in our networked world discuss cracks in the way individuals and groups of people categorize and identify themselves, which troubles the notion of assimilation by describing differences existing within collections of individuals that have been categorized together (whether by themselves or others). This theory of identity as being somewhat illusory and divorced from the concept of true belonging is outlined by Kwame Anthony Appiah in his recent book, *The Lies That Bind*. While Appiah is not denying the impact of our socially constructed identifiers on the lived experiences of people, he pushes against the ways in which myriad groupings of people have tried to essentialize themselves and others based on inconsistent, mutable categories of identifiers. Using assimilation as an endpoint for achieving membership in a new culture group doesn't work because "culture is messy and muddled, not pristine and pure" (Appiah, *The Lies That Bind* 210). Rather, Appiah might argue that our social realities are constructed around the habitus we manifest in the particular environments in which we find ourselves. While social realities might seem fixed in locations with relatively little demographic changes or shifts in capital flow over time, social reality is in flux in places where

the human and capital composition of society changes, as it does in increasingly transnational cities. Appiah's argument on culture underscores the point that culture does not exist within tightly controlled borders or boundaries such as those around nations, but rather moves fluidly through human geographies and experiences, which I argue are ultimately grounded in the cities in which people live. Still, by acknowledging the tendency of people to essentialize themselves and others, Appiah brings to light the ways in which dominant narratives about people and their motivations carry the weight and power of those who move to enforce and control the movements of people, creating asymmetries in cultural expressions. When applied to contemporary immigrant literature, one can see how identity becomes transnational in nature, shifting according to the cultural/socioeconomic situations in which an individual might find herself, particularly in transnational, urban environments. The Nigerian immigrants chronicled in the works of Chimamanda Adichie provide useful case studies for examining how identity and belonging manifest for individuals engaged in transnational movement. In this chapter, I will explore differences in the experiences and practices of a host of fictional Nigerian immigrants living in American cities through examining how identity and belonging are manifested by individuals in Adichie's novel *Americanah* and collection of short stories *The Thing Around Your Neck*.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha theorizes postcolonial identity as occupying a third space between a first and second space comprised of the identities of the oppressed and the oppressor. This third space is the locus of hybridization, where ideas about one's identity take shape both because of and in resistance to attempts to essentialize culture and character based on national origin. Bhabha's third space is a place where transnational identity is established for an individual to dissolve the tension between the culture an individual may identify with by virtue

of birth and the culture into which an immigrant moves. However, Bhabha's model seems to imply that each identity or culture occupying the first and second spaces of an individual's identity would be static. But culture and identity are not static concepts, as illustrated by Appiah and as acknowledged by Bhabha as well. As such, culture and identity could be conceived of as moving targets, constantly in flux, which makes defining belonging in terms of nationalist assimilation ineffective. Rather, this project invites readers to consider belonging as meaningful civic engagement and the development of interpersonal connections, which are highlighted in literature with a level of nuance and specificity that may be hard to achieve through other modes of academic work used to understand social issues like immigration. Further, if we apply Bhabha's concept of a third space for hybridization to the transnational urban, the city itself—or neighborhoods within cities—becomes the literal manifestation of a hybridized third space where national identities and different cultures meet and coexist together in one geographically-defined but less restrictively bound place.

While each text addresses immigration and transnational identity in its own measure, one work in particular, *Americanah* by Chimamanda Adichie, thoroughly addresses processes of immigration and transnational identity through focusing on one individual as she makes the decision to move to America and then spends her life navigating the aftermath of that decision. Adichie's novel is positively preoccupied with the exploration of the intersection of transnational identity and immigrant identity and provides a compelling case study to use as a comparison tool with other American and world Anglophone literary works such as those featured less prominently in this chapter. *Americanah* follows a Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, through her adolescence in Nigeria to immigrating to the United States to attend an American university, into an adulthood of seemingly complete integration into an Americanness defined by the affluent,

academic community in which she works and socializes. Ifemelu lives in America for more than 13 years under a variety of socio-economic conditions before eventually deciding to quit her job, close her blog on race relations in the U.S., and seek employment in her home country, returning to Nigeria. Reaching a high level of what might be defined as assimilation into American life while retaining a transnational identity and somewhat strong ties to her motherland (if not outwardly expressed), Ifemelu maintains relationships with Nigerian friends while also establishing meaningful relationships with American-born citizens, both personal and professional. Because her adoption of a new habitus as she integrates into American life is so successful, at one point in the novel she recounts a moment of pride that quickly moves to shame when a telemarketer is impressed with her accent, telling her, “Wow. Cool. You sound totally American” (Adichie, *Americanah*, 215). The telemarketer’s comments to Ifemelu awakens in her a resistance that the process of assimilation into American culture had previously broken, wondering, “Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American?” (Adichie, *Americanah*, 215), a question Adichie explores in greater depth throughout the novel.

Scholarship on Adichie’s *Americanah* and *The Thing Around Your Neck* has addressed transnational identity as a theme in the novel in different ways. In addition to pointing out that “Adichie’s book of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and her most recent novel, *Americanah*, are set in different places: Nigeria, the United Kingdom and America” (Murphy 95), Elena Murphy points out that Adichie herself is a transnational figure, whose work “was produced, in part, while she was living in the United States” (95). Mindi McMann discusses the implications of globalization on the ways in which Black Africans must adapt to their racial identities when moving into new cultures (201). Chinenye Amonyeye invokes Gayatri Spivak in describing how “America seems to be continually mired in this race politics” consisting of the

“detritus of Western culture industry in a globalized world” (1). While this scholarship largely addresses transnational identity in Adichie’s work as transitional and marginal states between two or more cultures, these analyses fail to account for the particularity of the transnational settings in which Adichie’s characters find themselves. Scholarly exploration of the novel addresses transnational identity within U.S. culture, without acknowledging the U.S. city as a transnational space. By looking at the movements of Adichie’s Nigerians as taking place in transnational spaces within American cities, a more nuanced approach to immigrant identity emerges as it relates not just to markers of identity like race and language, but also class and community.

Ifemelu’s immigrant narrative does not begin with a fervent desire or need to leave her home country. Rather, her decision to go to America is the result of economic and socio-political forces that inhibit her ability to succeed economically in Nigeria. She leaves in response to frustration with the increasing frequency and duration of faculty strikes at the university she attends, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Ifemelu makes a decision with her partner that she should finish her education in America, where her aunt had moved to years before to avoid becoming collateral damage in a failed military coup. For Ifemelu’s Nigerian family and friends, immigration to America is seen as aspirational. Moving to the United States puts Ifemelu “in this place of affluent ease” as “someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty” (Adichie, *Americanah* 1). Ifemelu notes in the first chapter that “Nigerian taxi drivers in America were all convinced that they really were not taxi drivers” (Adichie, *Americanah* 10), when describing how such taxi drivers are eager to level their accolades and those of their children against her so as to not seem to occupy a lower socioeconomic status as a fellow immigrant. This competitiveness conveys the complicatedness

of the intersection between economic success and assimilation for contemporary immigrants. While the metanarrative of immigration to the United States for Nigerians within their culture indicates prosperity, the reality of life in America reveals that prosperity continues to be aspirational once one reaches America.

Throughout the novel, successful assimilation is spoken of in economic terms. When traveling to Trenton from Princeton to get her hair braided at an African salon, Ifemelu recognizes that “it would look, she was sure, like all the other African hair braiding salons she had known: they were in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings, and no white people” (Adichie, *Americanah* 10). She goes on to describe the average immigrant woman she would encounter in these salons as using a variety of languages broken and then pieced back together in such a way that “it took many repetitions for Ifemelu to understand” (Adichie, *Americanah* 11) what the women were saying. But more troubling to Ifemelu is the evidence in the salon of socioeconomic insecurity within culturally hybridized parts of the city. She speaks of these immigrant women as if their existence in America, so different than her own, is somehow lacking. She refers to Aisha, the woman braiding her hair, as a “true market woman, immune to the cosmetic niceties of American customer service” (Adichie, *Americanah* 15) and imagines the woman back in Ifemelu’s Nigeria, unable to reconcile this woman’s presence as an example of “Americanness.” At the same time, she resists the deep connection to her Nigerian roots Aisha makes in her demand for Ifemelu to speak to Aisha’s Nigerian boyfriends about proposing marriage. After learning that Ifemelu shares similar Igbo heritage with the two men that Aisha is dating, Aisha asks Ifemelu to “tell them Igbo can marry not Igbo” and that they will listen to her because she is “their Igbo sister” (Adichie, *Americanah* 21). Ifemelu resists this connection, telling Aisha ““No, really. I can’t do that”” while judging Aisha as “a small,

ordinary-faced Senegalese woman with patchwork skin who had two Igbo boyfriends, implausible as it seemed” and contemplates writing a blog post about Aisha titled in part “How the Pressures of Immigrant Life Can Make You Act Crazy” (Adichie, *Americanah* 21-22). This judgment reveals disbelief that one in Aisha’s position would be seen as desirable while also contemptuously casting Aisha’s attempt to build a family and find belonging as delusional and crazy. Because Aisha’s immigrant existence doesn’t follow the narrative Ifemelu has allowed to shape her own experiences, she sees Aisha as a failed attempt at assimilation. This contrast emphasizes how Ifemelu has integrated herself successfully into a third space comprised of a certain affluent, primarily white academic community that for her represents Americanness. The way these women live in poor socio-economic conditions replicating the culture of their home countries through their speech and the media they consume therefore does not represent Americanness to Ifemelu. Despite the fact that they too are surviving and engaging in commerce, building personal and professional lives and attempting to make meaningful connections and relationships, they do not represent a full commitment to the American way through the ways in which they hold on to the cultures of their countries of origin.

Despite the dominant narrative she has been taught about the economic prosperity associated with immigration to America, Ifemelu early on experiences dissonance between her socio-economic expectations for life in America and the reality of the conditions under which other African immigrants, including her Aunt Uju, live and work. Interestingly, Ifemelu sees—but does not seem to fully understand the depths of—cracks in the facade of immigrant prosperity even before leaving Nigeria. When discussing the series of strikes among professors at Ifemelu’s university, Aunt Uju suggests that Ifemelu should enroll in an American university, telling her, “I am sure you can easily get a scholarship” (Adichie, *Americanah* 121).

The complaints which follow about Aunt Uju's own financial situation sit in sharp contrast to her assurances to Ifemelu which seem to promise some level of financial security. Aunt Uju goes on to reveal that "the small money" she herself earns does not stretch far, and she herself has not achieved the promised prosperity of the immigrant to America because she has not yet passed her exams to begin her medical residency. Aunt Uju understands that the poverty in which she lives is less about achieving some kind of cultural "Americanness" and more about the realities of being a single mother trying to survive in an urban environment while working toward integrating herself into the socioeconomic structure of the city as a physician. Ifemelu doesn't seem to understand that when Aunt Uju tells her, "you can help me take care of Dike" (Adichie, *Americanah* 121), she is really asking Ifemelu to offer some relief to her financial situation. Yet still, as Ifemelu discusses this possibility with her partner Obinze, they agree that the move is a good idea because "Aunt Uju is there so at least you have a foundation to start with" (Adichie, *Americanah* 121). The idea of Aunt Uju as a "foundation" of support doesn't necessarily imply that the support should be financial. However, Obinze's intentions become clearer as he describes how he cannot come to America until he completes his first degree, but will come later because "international students can get funding and financial aid for graduate school" (Adichie, *Americanah* 121). These conversations reveal important discrepancies between the expectations of the narrative of immigration to America that Ifemelu has become accustomed to in Nigeria versus the lived reality of the difficulties in achieving economic stability. These conversations reveal that while Ifemelu's expectation of assimilation and success is related to place, she sees that place as being the nation to which she has moved. In reality, she quickly learns that to belong, she must adapt to the socio-economic conditions of the city.

While she experiences a number of difficulties and failures experienced in her first few years in America as a college student, Ifemelu overcomes the obstacles to successfully integrating herself into life in America. This success is largely contingent on Ifemelu's proven ability to work her way into the capitalist economy of America. Ifemelu's success and economic stability indicate a level of assimilation envied by other African immigrants she encounters, particularly the women she interacts with at the hair-braiding salon in Trenton. Still, Ifemelu herself experiences profound feelings of being unsettled in her surroundings despite her relative comfort. The novel opens with Ifemelu recounting the symbols of her assimilation. "Her blog was doing well, with thousands of unique visitors each month, and she was earning good speaking fees, and she had a fellowship at Princeton and a relationship with Blaine" (Adichie, *Americanah* 7). Ifemelu's assimilation is undeniable, yet she describes that "there was a cement in her soul" (Adichie, *Americanah* 7). "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's experience problematizes the notion of assimilation as the end goal of successful immigration through showing how even successful assimilation itself does not necessarily lead to the feelings of membership that allow one to feel settled in a new place. Indeed, because Ifemelu's identity is rooted in transnationality, she seems to be able to effectively adapt to new situations without feeling permanently settled.

Ifemelu's deployment of her transnational identity serves her well by allowing her to establish and maintain successful relationships while building a career through which she can sustain herself. Despite her career success and seemingly meaningful relationships, Ifemelu's responds to her increasing assimilation into American culture with a deep sense of dissatisfaction. She becomes the titular *Americanah*, a term used by Nigerians to describe other

Nigerians who immigrate to America and return with changed accents and mannerisms. Compounded with her dissatisfaction with American life are comments made by her friends, family, and acquaintances questioning whether or not she will be able to re-adapt to life in Nigeria once she has shared her decision to return to her home country. The common question asked of Ifemelu is, “Will you be able to cope?” While Ifemelu resists answering this question, if one considers the process of assimilation to create a lasting change in an individual, the question is not unreasonable. However, because Ifemelu has not assimilated along a uni-directional trajectory toward Americanness, but rather has engaged in creating a transnational identity in Bhabha’s third space that she carries with her and molds into different shapes to fit the variety of cultural situations she finds herself in daily, the question to Ifemelu seems irrelevant. Why would coping with varied cultural situations in Nigeria be any different than adapting to the variety of situations she faced in America? Because Ifemelu has moved through her environment recognizing the different cultural, social, and economic forces that have produced and shaped that environment, she understands that the same adaptability that facilitated her transition into life in America will serve her as she returns to her homeland.

The use of the term “Americanah” in the novel connotes an understanding within globalizing Nigeria that to immigrate necessitates transformation and that transformation can mean compromising aspects of your identity. Ifemelu recounts an instance in her youth of her and her friends somewhat derisively using the term to describe “Bisi, a girl in the form below them, who had come back from a short trip to America with odd affectations, pretending she no longer understood Yoruba, adding a slurred *r* to every English word she spoke” (Adichie, *Americanah* 78). Within the context of the novel, an Americanah is someone who plays a part—one who embraces Western hegemony and its cultural practices and then steadfastly applies them

to their own daily practice in order to project successful assimilation. By using the word “affectation” to describe Bisi’s behavioral changes after experiencing American culture, Ifemelu and her friends define Americanness as a forced hybridity. Perhaps this understanding of assimilation as something that is artificial or surface level contributes to Ifemelu’s ultimate dissatisfaction with her life in America.

One might argue that Ifemelu’s dissatisfaction with the life she built in America is the result of failed assimilation. Ifemelu initially resists changing her accent and behaviors to be more American, which is ingrained in her as being a critical part of becoming truly Americanah. However, evidence from the novel suggests that Ifemelu’s dissatisfaction comes not from her life itself, but from a lack she feels in her personal relationships. Her transnational fluency and adaptability allows her to envision the world as a place that can be easily traversed without fears of being able to make a new life in a new place. Rather than seeing two distinct cultures in America and Nigeria, Ifemelu moves through the two countries as if they exist on a gradient of culture, rather than as two distinct places with firm borders demarcating lines of cultural difference. The external membership she achieves in her socioeconomic professional world shows that she can adapt well into the economy of modern, transnational cities. Ifemelu assimilates into life in American cities because she thrives in hybridity. While she is able to settle everywhere, as long as everywhere is a transnational city where she can do her transnational work, she is not able to remain settled in any particular place until she does so with Obinze. She finds belonging in Nigeria not because it is the culture with which she is most at home, but because it happens to be the place in which she reunites with her first and enduring love, Obinze. Both possessors of transnational identities in their own rights, Ifemelu and Obinze achieve true belonging when they see the world together through a cosmopolitan framework.

While Ifemelu in *Americanah* builds a life of great freedom and mobility within Western culture, the Nigerians in Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* exist and maneuver in considerably more liminal transnational spaces, often the result of suppression or limitation placed on their ability to develop a third space in which to navigate their transnational situations. One story from the collection in particular, "The Arrangers of Marriage" shows how the deliberate limiting of one's tendency toward hybridization prevents an individual from being able to form meaningful ties. In this case, Chinaza is a young Nigerian woman who has immigrated to the United States at the behest of her aunt and uncle, who have arranged for her to marry Ofodile Udenwa, a Nigerian immigrant finishing his medical residency who goes by the name "Dave Bell," much to Chinaza's confusion. Chinaza shows an understanding of the ways in which transnational immigrants adjust in order to better situate themselves in their new location. She acknowledges that Nigerian immigrants often change their names to be easier for Americans to pronounce by noting that she "had heard about a Waturuocha that changed to Wataru in America, a Chikelugo that took the more American-friendly Chickel" (Adichie, "The Arrangers of Marriage" 172). But what she sees her new husband doing is less hybridization, and more a partial—and at times contradictory—rejection of his Nigerian identity. As she internally questions his change "from Udenwa to Bell," she tells him, "'That's not even close to Udenwa'" (Adichie, "The Arrangers of Marriage" 172). His response is to tell her that if she fails to "be as mainstream as possible" that she "will be left by the roadside," (Adichie, "The Arrangers of Marriage" 172), a threat that while presumably is not meant literally, underscores earlier interactions in which Ofodile corrected Chinaza's behavior and words in order to reach his standard of Americanness. His attempts to steer Chinaza's identity and behavior toward this standard of Americanness are solidified in an act of control, when she watches him apply for her

Social Security card under the name “Agatha Bell” despite her earlier protestations that she has “been Chinaza Okafor my whole life” (Adichie, “The Arrangers of Marriage” 172-173). Chinaza doesn’t see the use in rejecting her Nigerian identity when she could instead operate perfectly well from a third space in which she would make adjustments without abandoning parts of herself. She doesn’t recognize the abandonment of her name in favor of a more American moniker as a necessity to acclimating to life within America.

The tension between Chinaza’s desire to adjust to America by creating a third space for herself in which she can experience Americanness without rejecting her Nigerianness is manifested throughout the story. One of the first interactions she has with her husband the morning after she arrives in America is to request dried milk for her tea, only to be told ““Americans don’t drink their tea with milk and sugar”” (Adichie, “The Arrangers of Marriage” 171). She immediately asks him ““Ezi okwu? Don’t you drink yours with milk and sugar?”” (Adichie, “The Arrangers of Marriage” 171), not understanding why the fact that Americans don’t enjoy their tea a certain way should inhibit her or anyone else from enjoying their tea to their own preference. He later goes on to make pointed criticisms of other immigrants as they shop at the grocery store, complaining of a Spanish-speaking family as those “who immigrate and continue to act as if they are back in their countries” (Adichie, “The Arrangers of Marriage” 175). He follows up this derision with the judgment that “they will never move forward unless they adapt to America. They will always be doomed to supermarkets like this” (Adichie, “The Arrangers of Marriage” 175). Ofodile’s judgment contains the underlying assumption that to be successful in America, one must engage in some kind of upward socioeconomic mobility, and that speaking in one’s native language with one’s family somehow hinders integration into a new culture. This scene is only one example of Ofodile’s attempts to judge and police the language

use of others. When Chinaza welcomes him home using an Igbo greeting, he tells her, ““You have to speak English at home, too, baby. So you can get used to it” (Adichie, “The Arrangers of Marriage” 178) despite the fact that Chinaza is demonstrably fluent in English and shows no trouble communicating effectively with other Americans throughout the narrative. While Chinaza’s hybridization of language use in sprinkling Igbo words into her English sentences represents an attempt to create a third space in her home where she can retain some of her home culture while adapting to life in a new place, Ofodile constantly corrects her attempts to do so.

While the majority of Ofodile’s efforts to bring Chinaza up to his standard of Americanness are based on appearances and attempts to reduce difference, he rejects her attempts to make connections to himself and the other inhabitants of the city in which they live. Chinaza attempts to connect with him through cooking him a Nigerian meal of coconut rice. Despite “smacking his lips like Uncle Ike sometimes did to show Auntie Ada how pleased he was with her cooking” (Adichie, “The Arrangers of Marriage” 179), Ofodile presents Chinaza with a quintessentially American cookbook, telling her that he doesn’t want them “to be known as the people who fill the building with smells of foreign food” (Adichie, “The Arrangers of Marriage” 179) in response to a complimentary comment from the building’s superintendent about the rich smells of the meal. When Chinaza finally becomes friends with Nia, another building resident who is a Black American with such an appreciation for African culture that she changed her own name when she was eighteen, Ofodile tells her to “be careful because she can be a bad influence” (Adichie, “The Arrangers of Marriage” 181). When Chinaza inquires as to why she doesn’t yet have a work permit, which would allow her even greater integration into the community around her, Ofodile reveals that he married an American woman to get a green card and was not yet divorced when he married Chinaza, further complicating her life and severing any connection

she might have been beginning to feel for her husband. After asking him why he married her, he tells her, “I wanted a Nigerian wife and my mother said you were a good girl, quiet” (Adichie, “The Arrangers of Marriage” 184). While this statement directly contradicts his attempts to make her more American for the sake of appearances, it does perhaps explain why Ofodile is uncomfortable with the idea of Chinaza working and making meaningful relationships with other Americans. He deliberately stilts her efforts to create for herself a third space in which she can live comfortably in a new country because he brought her to America to service his own needs, as well as to cling to the Nigerian culture he left. Ofodile claims to wholly embrace Americanness while simultaneously seeking out a marriage arrangement that is distinctly Nigerian. Rather than inhabiting a third space where he can smoothly integrate his Nigerian identity with his American identity, he attempts to force Chinaza to wholly inhabit an interpersonal relationship with him based on his expectations of a Nigerian marriage while outwardly presenting a face of Americanness to the world. When Chinaza attempts to create a third space for herself in the city by making friends and seeking work, Ofodile thwarts her efforts. Unable to reconcile these conflicting expectations and internal divisions, Chinaza builds resentment toward Ofodile’s attempts to force her into a form of assimilation that to her feels unnatural and limiting.

While Chinaza in “The Arrangers of Marriage” is inhibited by her husband in her attempts to build a third space and make meaningful connections with her new home, Ukamaka, the protagonist of “The Shivering” from *The Thing Around Your Neck* hinders her own ability to create a third space in which to establish meaningful relationships through her codependence on her ex-boyfriend Udenna. The story begins with Ukamaka in her Princeton apartment learning the news of a plane, of which she assumes her ex-boyfriend to be a passenger, crashing in

Nigeria. While she panics alone in her apartment, another Nigerian, living in her building, Chinedu, comes to her door. Having recognized Ukamaka as Nigerian, Chinedu asks Ukamaka to pray with him over the news, leading the two to strike up a platonic friendship. The narrative, which consists of vignettes of her interactions with Chinedu, reveals little about Ukamaka's actual integration into American life. Rather, the story focuses on her complete preoccupation with her ex-boyfriend, whose presence in her life served as the foundation for "aligning her plans" (Adichie, "The Shivering" 150) big and small, from asking a family member about "finding her a job in Abuja after she graduated because Udenna wanted to move back when he finished graduate school" to adjusting her cooking, making "her stews with hot peppers now, the way he liked" (Adichie, "The Shivering" 148). Ukamaka explains to Chinedu over the course of their friendship that despite her satisfaction with her life at Princeton, Udenna "was always telling me how Princeton was a boring school, and that it was out of touch" (Adichie, "The Shivering" 148). She realizes and acknowledges Udenna's judgment as an effort to "manage the amount of happiness" (Adichie, "The Shivering" 148) that Ukamaka was able to enjoy from her surroundings, but still cannot break her codependent longing for their relationship.

In contrast to Ukamaka's unsettledness in her interpersonal relationships is Chinedu's precarious position in U.S. society, affecting the ways in which he is able to integrate himself into the city around them. As Ukamaka's narrative voice describes the ways in which the foreigners in her building show "indifference" to one another, she notes that "it surprised her that as she and Chinedu walked to the parking lot, he would wave to somebody, say hi to another" (Adichie, "The Shivering" 154). She assumes these relationships stem from being in the same academic program, but Chinedu informs her that he "had to make the effort to make friends in this building" (Adichie, "The Shivering" 154) or he would have no means of getting to the

grocery store or church. Chinedu's statement implies that the friendships he has established are necessary to his ability to successfully navigate the city in which he and Ukamaka live and work. He integrates himself into the lives of others in order to better adapt to the socioeconomic conditions he faces in America. After a fight with Chinedu which leaves Ukamaka in an isolated state feeling "a sudden fear" that moves to "becoming a panic" (Adichie, "The Shivering" 163) that he will find someone else to spend his time with, Ukamaka finally visits Chinedu in the apartment he calls his own. He reveals that he is in the country illegally, telling her, "my visa expired three years ago. This apartment belongs to a friend" (Adichie, "The Shivering" 163), enlightening Ukamaka to the deeply vulnerable state in which Chinedu exists in America. Interestingly, it is because of this vulnerability that Chinedu has been able to integrate himself more deeply into the city in which both he and Ukamaka live their daily lives.

While Ukamaka lives in relative comfort and stability, Chinedu finds himself caught in the intersections between transnational belonging and the national politics of citizenship. Ukamaka lives her life in an emotionally unsettled state, showing a willingness to follow her ex-boyfriend wherever he might ask her to go, despite her status as a person of means attending a prestigious university. Chinedu is offered by Adichie as a foil to Ukamaka's privileged form of transnational assimilation. Ukamaka's narrative implies an economic stability within a new city and nation that is not reflected in Chinedu's experiences. Despite her statements about enjoying her studies at Princeton, Ukamaka's preoccupation with her ex-boyfriend as well as her gratitude to Chinedu for his thankfulness in her providing transportation to church because it means "having somebody who would listen to her talk about Udenma" (Adichie, "The Shivering" 155) betray her loneliness and isolation and transnational codependence. The story ends with her thinking longingly of Nigeria, showing that her time in America is perhaps transient and seen as

being temporary. She critiques the “subdued Catholic Masses” of America, remarking “how in Nigeria it would have been a vibrant green branch from a mango tree that the priest would dip in a bucket of holy water” (Adichie, “The Shivering” 166). This thought represents a rejection of the only meaningful civic membership afforded to Chinedu in light of his precarious position within American society and politics. The only American with whom Ukamaka speaks in this glimpse of her life is Father Patrick, the Catholic priest to whom she is parishioner. But as soon as Ukamaka befriends Chinedu, her relationship with Father Patrick becomes deficient, as she now has someone to tell “things she could not or did not want to tell Father Patrick” (Adichie, “The Shivering” 154). While Ukamaka finds solace from her failed relationship in a religious community, as soon as she meets a friend with whom she can revert to discussing her relationship with Udenma endlessly, she distances herself from this American religious community, expressing silent preference for her ties to Nigeria. Despite her integration into the Western religious community, Ukamaka’s transnational background seems to overrule other efforts to assimilate into Americanness. She prefers to pick and choose elements of culture present in her immediate urban surroundings, without feeling the need to put down roots in her American city. Ukamaka’s experience shows that belonging is deeper than gaining entry into a specific community, but it also shows that Ukamaka’s assimilation into a transnational identity has allowed her the flexibility to move between Western culture and Nigerian culture with a degree of smoothness.

Interestingly, Ukamaka has largely done the work established by the dominant narrative of assimilation for immigrants coming to America. Her success as a content graduate student at Princeton indicates a future that would likely be prosperous in terms of her socioeconomic position. She has found a church community in which she participates regularly. But still,

Adichie closes the narrative by showing how Ukamaka continues to feel unsettled. Her relationship with Chinedu, another Nigerian immigrant, is the only meaningful relationship she cultivates during her time in America. While one might argue that Chinedu's status as a Nigerian is what holds their relationship together, the narrative demonstrates that this is not the case. Rather, the building of Ukamaka and Chinedu's friendship is contingent on his recognition of her former relationship with Udenna and his willingness to allow her to work through her feelings on the relationship, which perhaps indicates a shifting codependence in Ukamaka from Udenna to Chinedu. What Ukamaka's relationships show is that working toward the kind of surface-level assimilation prescribed by dominant political and media narratives does not satisfy the internal need for connection that allows an individual to establish strong roots in a new place. Further value for Ukamaka's experience is derived from realizing that perhaps the sort of roots that lead to a more meaningful version of connected assimilation are not geographically or culturally bound, but rather exist through the connections we make with the people we encounter in our daily lives.

Through Adichie's characters, a more nuanced depiction of the factors that dictate the successful integration of immigrants into new spaces emerges, showing how often, civic ties to the communities and cities into which individuals immigrate can help establish a life and belonging, but ultimately do not override the transnational identities individuals develop as they move around the world. Further, socioeconomic success and cultural assimilation cannot account for the deep, meaningful bonds people rely on to find comfort, stability, and contentedness that allows for individuals to settle into a condition of belonging. A truly connected assimilation is not geographically or culturally bound but exists through coalition building within communities and cities with less concern for the borders and boundaries around nations. The Nigerian

immigrants inhabiting Adichie's works show how transnational individuals living in transnational cities are not prevented from achieving belonging because they are unable to adapt to cultural differences. Instead, the factors that prevent Adichie's Nigerian immigrants from being settled deal with personal relationships, interpersonal conflicts, and legal and economic restrictions largely imposed by a national government. The stakes of this argument lie in overturning the idea that nationalist assimilation and achieving some legal standard of citizenship are the most meaningful pathways to membership in globalized cities existing within national boundaries.

Rather than exploring these texts solely through the framework of transnational identity, this chapter has used the framework of Homi Bhabha's third space as a way to explore identity in the sort of transnational urban environments described by Michael Peter Smith. These fictional examples of Nigerian immigrant experiences largely reflect the failings of nationalist narratives of assimilation as a means of achieving a deeper sense of belonging in a society. Thinking about Michael Peter Smith's concept of transnational urbanism through a postcolonial lens as illustrated by Homi Bhabha's idea of third spaces of identity can be productive for moving from thinking about culture in terms of boundaries. Instead, culture and identity can be seen as phenomena moving in flux within global cities functioning as a macro-level, physical manifestation of Bhabha's third space. Because transnational individuals do not actually move into static new cultures, but rather move into transnational urban spaces as described by Smith, nationalist narratives of assimilation prescribing the abandonment of one culture for another break down and are made less effective for describing real membership. When taken together, these frameworks suggest that perhaps assimilation into transnational spaces and cities creates a more productive mode through which belonging and membership can be explored. In chapter

two, I aim to further explore the ways in which cities and communities shape the way immigrants and their children assimilate into the transnational urban spaces they come to occupy.

## **CHAPTER 2 – FIGHT OR FLIGHT: THE IMPACT OF WHITE FLIGHT ON ASSIMILATION AND IMMIGRANT IDENTITY**

The Industrial Revolution brought with it the rise of the American city as an arrangement of families and individuals most conducive to a rapidly solidifying culture based on capitalist production. As the nation built more wealth based on production, cultural shifts toward consumption and acquisition collided with the decline of the American city center toward the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. During this time, white families moved out of city centers and into suburban communities in an effort to acquire greater space and wealth of their own, as well as to escape cities becoming increasingly diversified by the need for a continuous influx of workers, a significant percentage of which were immigrants. Immigrants have historically moved to and within America in search of greater economic opportunity and in pursuit of a wealthy lifestyle mirroring that of the descendants of the first white colonizers of the North American continent. In analyzing suburban development trends, Robert Beauregard coins the term “parasitic urbanism” to describe how this process of moving into the suburbs eventually turns into white flight *from* the suburbs to new, sprawling sunbelt cities. This new flight is largely in response to immigrant families increasingly achieving similar levels of affluence to their white counterparts who first moved into suburban areas. White flight embodied movement away from city centers by middle class white people in search of safer neighborhoods where one could own their own property. Beauregard describes this process of white flight as one of the mechanisms driving urban expansion and contraction. Perhaps because this tendency is so highly connected with white communities attaining wealth and affluence, movement from city centers to sprawling suburbs has become a sort of tenet of a nationalist mode of assimilation largely defined by aspirational whiteness.

This nationalist mode of assimilation in America encourages immigrant individuals to attempt to integrate themselves seamlessly into a culture established by white hegemony. This narrative particularly demands economic participation in the project of capitalism, requesting the abandonment of foreign cultural practices in favor of buying into the Western consumer culture of aspirational whiteness. This aspiration to the socioeconomic lifestyle enjoyed by middle class whites is reflected in patterns of movement, as immigrant families seek to situate themselves in the suburban settings symbolic of middle-class white achievement. Perhaps the intended effect of these expectations of aspirational whiteness on immigrant identity is for individuals to largely abandon their old ways and old culture in favor of a brand of American identity that largely promotes consumerism, capitalism, and the overall acquisition of more wealth and property. Chapter one explored the ways in which immigrant identities shift as immigrant individuals move into transnational cities and integrate (or fail to integrate) themselves into local communities and culture in specific ways that show deficiencies in nationalist narratives of assimilation that prescribe adopting “new” identities. Chapter two takes this exploration further by looking at the ways in which children of immigrants—particularly Henry Park in Chang-rae Lee’s novel *Native Speaker*—might overcome or move past the need to aspire to whiteness in order to find belonging in transnational cities. By looking at aspirational whiteness centered in suburban America contrasted with the sort of transnational assimilation that occurs in the transnational urban, two different modes of assimilation emerge to achieve similar socioeconomic ends.

The negotiation of space by immigrants in the city is catalyzed by neoliberal development policies as described by Beauregard. The immigrant experience necessitates flexibility and adaptability to allow one to survive and thrive. Scholars writing about *Native*

*Speaker* have discussed the novel in ways that read immigrants, embodied by Henry Park, as spies down below in the underbelly of society-subverting the norms of white hegemony.

However, I think we should read these immigrant experiences as the reclamation and enactment of agency in a world that increasingly demands the kind of adaptability that children of immigrants, like Henry Park, possess often in greater quantity than individuals who are steadfastly committed or opposed to hegemonic cultural practices and institutions. Rather than being subversive to—or subscribing to—white hegemony, this chapter considers that immigrant children often work within a white hegemonic system to further their own idea of success without fully subscribing to that system. Processes of parasitic (sub)urbanization in particular oversee the transmission of wealth from cities to affluent, white suburbs. The immigrant or minority individual becomes an intruder in the hegemonic white order, leading to tension that can only be resolved through the appearance of an acceptance of whiteness. This tension is the focus of scholars who have interpreted Henry Park’s occupation as a corporate ethnic political spy. While discussing the trope of the immigrant as a spy, Ju Young Jin argues that

the minority subject’s oppression stems from the dominant community, in which the subject performs his socially prescribed role as either model minority or a cynical businessman; the profession of spy, while foregrounding the unique constructedness of minority identity, also produces the minority subject’s existential angst arising from his double life. (225)

Jin argues that “the ethnic spy in *Native Speaker* and the political spy in *Your Republic is Calling You* are both ‘unassimilable immigrants,’ in white America and South Korea respectively” (225). Jin goes on to invoke Homi Bhabha’s concept of “third space” in her argument as a structure that limits full assimilation or integration into society as it “unsettles concepts of unitary Western

modernity embodied in the Western nation state” (226). But if we consider the ways in which transnational urban spaces themselves embody a hybridized third space, the hybrid individual can be seen as less subversive and more adept at adapting to transnational cities and suburbs in flux.

Overall, scholarship on *Native Speaker* tends to treat Henry as an individual who operates from a position of otherness or disadvantage within a hegemonic system without affording Henry agency with which he leverages his flexible identity. Perhaps Henry does engage in “selling his otherness, his ethnic culture” (224), as posited by Jin. However, his motivations for doing so could have less to do with a strong feeling of displacement from his ethnic culture and more to do with a vested self-interest and the results of his father’s investment in the project of hegemonic whiteness. Lee doesn’t lead us to believe that Henry somehow unwittingly rejects his ethnic background, but rather makes it clear that Henry understands that he is exploiting his ethnic identity for personal gain in order to improve his own economic position within the transnational city. Henry notes that while “each of us engaged our own kind, more or less” (Lee 17), that he and his coworkers “split up the rest, the Chinese, Laotians, Singaporans, Filipinos, the whole transplanted Pacific Rim” (Lee 17). Henry’s engagement in “selling his otherness” (Jin 224) is not because of the cultural disconnect he feels to Korean culture. Instead, he sells his ethnic identity because it allows for his own economic success as an individual moving through a transnational American city. J. Paul Narkunas makes a similar argument that Henry’s profession as a spy is a product of a global capitalist system, invoking Paul Gilroy’s concept of ‘corporate multiculturalism’ (Gilroy 31) as a field upon which “a phenomenological scene of epidermalization” allows Henry and his coworkers to blend in with different ethnic groups. Narkunas’s argument highlights *what* Henry is doing and describes *why* Henry exploits his

ethnic identity for capitalist gains. While Narkunas makes convincing arguments about Henry's place as an Asian-American immigrant in a transnational, capitalist world from a macro level of colonial, hegemonic legacies, he seems to ignore that what ultimately motivates Henry's movements is self-interest and the ways in which Henry's ability to move in third spaces changes how he navigates communities with competing interests within urban environments.

Perhaps there's something to be said for the ways in which suburban areas near metropolitan locations are ideal aspirational landing sites for immigrant families because of Beauregard's assertion that "elastic cities in contrast to inelastic ones are ostensibly less racially segregated, the income gap between the central city and suburbs is smaller, public schools are less racially divided, bond ratings are higher, and poverty rates are lower" (50). While engaging in this project of aspirational, middle-class suburban whiteness, immigrant parents may find it easier to flourish economically while having the flexibility of maintaining relationships of their choosing rather than the geographically bound relationships that might result from living in a more inelastic city center. Meanwhile, their children experience both hegemonic white culture through the school system and their ethnic culture at home, leading to an increased ability to adapt the transnational flexibility demonstrated by Lee's Henry Park. In Lee's *Native Speaker*, readers see how a child of immigrants rejects the version of suburban, middle-class whiteness his parents aspire to in different ways. In particular, Henry seems to reject the half-assimilation many first-generation immigrants achieve through becoming socioeconomically integrated into white suburbia while refusing to integrate culturally into white communities, and in some cases, leaving behind their immigrant communities as well. Henry pursues a career outside of the path prescribed by his parents, who accept that divergence because their child is still pursuing the project of capitalist, socioeconomic success, while even more fully integrating himself into

Americanness in a way that his parents failed to do. In this chapter, I argue that the children of successful immigrants often achieve the sort of socioeconomic success included in aspirational whiteness as a mainstream mode of assimilation into American life. However, they do so—as shown by the example of Henry Park—by rejecting the cultural imperative of “becoming American” in favor of adopting a highly flexible transnational identity to leverage to their advantage as they enact agency in transnational urban environments, which fluctuate in response to the demands of white flight.

*Native Speaker* tells the story of Henry Park, the only child of first-generation Korean-American immigrants. Because Henry’s mother dies while he is young, Henry is primarily raised by his father and cared for by an unrelated Korean woman who comes to live with them. Henry goes on to marry a white woman and work in a role somewhere between spy and private investigator, despite his wife’s opposition to his trade. The novel primarily takes place during Henry’s last assignment, which requires him to integrate himself into the life of another immigrant, John Kwang, a successful and rising New York City councilman defined both by his transnational identity and ability to embody the aspirational whiteness of the suburbs. As Henry himself narrates, his relationship with his father follows common tropes of the immigrant family experience. Scholarship on the experience of immigrant families describes how first-generation immigrants often assimilate into American society in ways that are incomplete. The children of first-generation immigrants experience American culture and society in different ways than their parents, not only because of better language fluency, increased opportunity, or increased adaptability, as exemplified by the experiences of Henry Park versus those of his father, but also because of the transnational spaces in which they live. While Henry’s father rejects a cultural assimilation into Americanness despite fulfilling the socioeconomic precepts of assimilation, he

nonetheless embodies an ethos of aspirational suburban whiteness; his son, significantly, rejects this brand of assimilation. As Henry demonstrates, the children of high achieving immigrants often seek their own version of transnational Americanness in bustling metropolises. This pattern of urban migration reflects Beauregard's assertion that urbanization, both as we traditionally understand it and the parasitic urbanization of suburbanization and creation of sprawling metroplexes, occurs as "both cause and consequence of the wavelike rhythms of development that follow technological advances, bursts of investment, the geographical extension of markets, and population growth" (51). The connection between aspirational whiteness and Beauregard's concept of parasitic urbanization is soldered by the way that success as defined by aspirational whiteness is a moving target. As immigrants such as Henry's father achieve affluence and move into white suburbs, white people begin moving back into new or gentrified urban environments in an attempt to reclaim space from immigrant communities. This need to reclaim and control space, along with the changing target of economic success dictated by where affluent white people want to live, continually complicates the idea of what it means to be socioeconomically successful in America. But it also troubles the notion of assimilation for immigrants who achieve socioeconomic success. As successful immigrant families move into white communities, Beauregard shows that white families tend to move out of the very same communities. If assimilation is achieved by finding belonging within white communities, immigrant families must continually chase whiteness and the locales favored by aspirational whiteness. Beauregard's argument of parasitic suburbanization shows how aspirational whiteness controls the ecogeographical situations in which immigrants must aspire to in order to achieve the vision of what American life should consist according to nationalist narratives.

While Henry marries a white, American woman, sets up his life in New York City, and reaches a level of middle-class economic success, his non-traditional career as a sort of private investigator as well as his immigrant identity complicate the way in which he integrates himself into his surroundings. As a professional informant or mole, Henry must learn to integrate himself into the lives of others under false pretenses while he collects information and reports it to his employer, who runs a mercenary spy agency set apart by the fact that “there were no other firms with any ethnic coverage to speak of” (Lee 18). In this role, his immigrant identity is seen as something of an asset for how it seems to set up an expectation for him to fail to meet certain expectations of American identity. Henry describes himself and his coworkers as a group of individuals who “pledged allegiance to no government. We weren’t political creatures. We weren’t patriots” (Lee 17). Showing loyalty neither to the country to which they and their families immigrated, nor to the country from which their families came, Henry’s occupation requires him to create “intricate and open-ended emotional conspiracies” (Lee 18) from which he can create profiles on immigrants in America who are perceived to be a threat by some entity such as “multinational corporations, bureaus of foreign governments, individuals of resource and connection” (Lee 18). In this way, Henry Park’s economic success as the child of first-generation Korean immigrants hinges on his own ambiguous connections between cultures and his ability to move fluidly through the transnational city, infiltrating pockets of culture. Rather than assimilating into some concept of “Americanness,” Henry vacillates between competing identities in his personal and professional lives as he moves through New York City immigrant communities, integrating himself into one community or another while spying on key participants in those communities.

Henry Park defies ideas of successful immigrant assimilation as defined by an adjustment to or acceptance of cultural norms despite achieving a certain level of socioeconomic mobility and success, as demonstrated through his ever-fluctuating expressions of identity. When examined from a socioeconomic context, Henry's father appears to also adopt American values for social mobility, achieving great economic success and moving his family from the Queens inner-city immigrant communities where his businesses are located to the more suburban environment of Ardsley, New York in Westchester county. Henry's father's movement of his family mimics the migration of affluent white people from city centers to suburbs, thereby playing a role in the redistribution of resources from inner-city largely immigrant and minority communities to the suburban white communities seen as epitomizing "Americanness." While Henry's father clearly subscribes to the vision of Americanness that emphasizes economic success as an indicator of belonging, throughout the novel Lee reveals the ways in which Henry's father's adherence to his Korean identity is critical to his economic success. As Henry does in his own way, Henry's father also defies expectations to adjust or accept American cultural norms not only in his everyday life, but also in the foundation on which his business was started. Henry admits "the truth, though, is that my father got his first infusion of capital from a *ggeh*, a Korean 'money club' in which members contributed to a pool" (Lee 50) showing that the economic success of Henry's father would perhaps not have been possible without the support of the Korean-American immigrant community. In addition to relying on his immigrant roots for professional success, Henry describes how his father primarily socialized with other Korean families during Henry's childhood. Henry notes that the same businessmen who comprised the *ggeh* from which his father drew capital for his businesses would "all get together, these men and

their families, drive up to Westchester to some park in Mount Kisco or Rye” (Lee 50), showing a hesitancy to fully integrate their families into white suburban communities.

Henry’s father ultimately begins detaching from his immigrant identity while also avoiding integration into white suburbia. Henry describes how “over the years my father and his friends got together less and less . . . They all got busier and wealthier and lived farther and farther apart” (Lee 51). His father laments that “In America, [he said,] it’s even hard to stay Korean” (Lee 51), showing a strong desire to retain his Korean identity despite aspiring to success as defined by aspirational suburban whiteness. After leaving his *ggeh*, Henry’s father “complained about all the disgraceful troubles that were now cropping up, people not paying on time or leaving too soon after their turn getting the money” (Lee 51), showing how the hardships of economic integration into the American socioeconomic system as an immigrant eventually seems to lead to the breakdown of the Korean cultural institutions Henry’s father held on to when moving to America. Henry notices that his father “worked hard and had worries but he had a joy then that he never seemed to regain once the money started coming in” (Lee 51-52), leading Henry to “wonder if my father, if given the chance, would have wished to go back to the time before he made all that money, when he had just one store and we rented a tiny apartment in Queens” (Lee 51). Henry’s description of his parents’ lives ultimately describes discomfort with the reality of living in white suburbia, disconnected from the Korean community that supported them early on after their move to the United States. This discomfort ultimately seems to stem from a sense of not belonging in the white, suburban community to which their family moved. Through Henry’s descriptions of his father’s life upon achieving middle-class affluence in America, Lee shows how eventually, socioeconomic success fractures immigrant communities as

families integrate into suburbs, leading to a sense of displaced identity and cultural disappointment.

Interestingly, despite his attempts to hold on to his own Korean identity, Henry's father encourages Henry to "make a display of" (Lee 53) his Americanness by showing off his English skills in front of customers at his grocery store, asking Henry to "casually recite 'some Shakespeare words'" (Lee 53). When Henry marries a white woman, his father takes pride in introducing her to his Korean workers and would "tell them proudly in English that she was his daughter" (Lee 57). As Henry reflects on why his father would approve of him marrying a non-Korean woman and therefore defying Korean cultural norms, Henry recognizes "the assumption being that Leila and her family would help me make my way in the land" (Lee 58). In this way, Henry works to fulfill a more complete integration into American society that his father could not, or would not, try to achieve. Henry's father's understanding of community membership is described as extending from his own experiences in his home country of Korea, further complicating understandings of community integration as an essential component of assimilation. Henry notes that he "never learned the exact reason he chose to come to America" (Lee 57) in regard to his father. But Henry explains that "He once mentioned something about the 'big network' in Korean business, how someone from the rural regions of the country could only get so far in Seoul" (Lee 57). Henry's father seems to understand integration into a community in entirely economic terms. If one can reach socioeconomic success, one doesn't need to feel a sense of community membership. Even as he considers his son's life, Henry notes that "he'd just inquire if I were earning enough for my family and then silently nod" (Lee 57) rather than show any interest in what Henry was doing to earn said money. The social aspect of Henry's profession was unimportant to his father – only the economic component mattered. To

Henry's father, successfully becoming "American" is more closely tied to economic position than to cultural assimilation, which actually serves to benefit Henry's ability to assimilate both culturally and socioeconomically. The socioeconomic success of his father affords Henry opportunities to be educated in suburban schools among middle-class white children. The greater resources of these schools funded by larger tax bases, as well as Henry's immersion into white culture, provides an overall educational experience that allows Henry greater flexibility to move within a country built on aspirational whiteness.

Henry's father's lack of concern for Henry's profession mirrors his lack of concern for his family's ongoing connection to Korean culture – while he lives a Korean lifestyle in his home, he becomes increasingly uninterested in interaction with a Korean community. Rather, he is singularly focused on Henry's complete adoption of a capitalist American lifestyle in order to achieve certain assimilative goals. These goals are accomplished through economic advancement and integration—however shallow—into the affluent, white suburban dream. Ultimately, readers should also recognize in the differing experiences and aspirations of Henry and his father the profoundly different ways in which they negotiate the space around them. Henry's father rejects occupying space within the suburban community outside of his home and space within the city beyond the doors of his shops. Alternatively, because his father's project of Americanizing Henry has been so successful, Henry is in many ways able to reject some of the more racialized spatial aspirations his father sought out for Henry through his movement of their family to an affluent, mostly white suburb. Rather, Henry reaches a level of success less dictated by affording a nice house in the suburbs, and more contingent on his ability to integrate himself into myriad diverse spaces within transnational urban America. His economic means of supporting himself literally require Henry to be adaptable and to place himself into disparate communities within the

transnational city in which he works in order to acquire information about the people in those spaces.

While the economic success of Henry's father is catalyzed by cash from a Korean *ggeh*, the same cultural construct ultimately leads to the downfall of Henry's professional target for most of the novel, John Kwang. Henry introduces the reader to John Kwang in glowing terms. He notes that the city councilman "was Korean, slightly younger than my father would have been, though he spoke a beautiful, almost formal English. He had a JD-MBA from Fordham. He was a self-made millionaire" (Lee 23). Despite Henry's acknowledgement of his father's financial successes, compared to the way that he speaks of Kwang, he undermines his father's successes by revealing the support his father received through the Korean immigrant community as a member of a Korean money club, or *ggeh* (Lee 50). Henry emphasizes Kwang's reputation for "his integrity, his intelligence," (Lee 23), noting that "he looked impressive on television" and was "irreproachable" (Lee 23). Henry admires Kwang for all of the qualities he perceives his father to lack. While Kwang achieves an extraordinary level of affluence that Henry perceives to be made entirely on the councilman's own merits, he appears to embrace his immigrant roots as a rising political star advocating for immigrant communities in the city. Instead of openly aspiring to whiteness, Kwang maintains his ties with immigrant communities and works those connections to his advantage (one might even argue he does this more for his own political advantage than out of affinity for his immigrant compatriots). Rather than just placing himself in a community that reflects aspirational whiteness and affluence, Kwang thoroughly integrates himself into Americanness as defined by aspirational whiteness, participating in American public life while continually cultivating his connections in immigrant communities as well.

As Henry becomes increasingly close to John Kwang, he eventually comes to see cracks in the façade of Kwang's carefully cultivated image of Americanness. Kwang naturally embraces the shared cultural heritage he holds with Henry, inviting him out to dinner at his favorite Korean establishments several times in the latter half of the novel, where Henry is fully integrated into Kwang's office as a public relations/communications intern. At these dinners, Kwang begins to reveal the struggle he faces in trying to cater to multiple constituencies who are untrusting of his seemingly fluid loyalties. He notes that at NAACP meetings, "they're not sure if I'll promote an agenda that suits them. I can support social programs, school lunches, homeless housing, free clinics, but if I mention the first thing about special enterprise zones or more openness toward immigrants I'm suddenly off limits. Or worse, I'm whitey's boy" (Lee 194-195). Kwang's identity and trajectory place him in a peculiar divide. In many ways, he reflects the same journey toward aspirational whiteness as followed by Henry's father. However, Kwang's need to appeal to minority communities competing for scarce city resources necessitates his downplaying of his own aspirational trajectory in order to relate to black communities and immigrant communities in the city. Kwang is both literally and figuratively positioned in a space between white suburbia and the struggling inner city, as he reveals that his wife and children spend time both in their house in Flushing and another house upstate on Cayuga Lake. At the first of these dinners, Kwang's appearance as a community leader whose reputation is built on integrity begins to unravel for Henry with the appearance of Sherrie Chin-Watt, Kwang's lead staffer. She opaquely updates Kwang on a mysterious issue to which Henry is not privy, when "in a small voice she said the situation was *getting serious now*" (Lee 201). Further undermining Kwang's integrity is the position of his hand on Sherrie's lower back, "slipped beneath her blazer. It looked natural at first, tender and friendly, but his hand stayed there" (Lee 201). Kwang's image as a family man

is challenged by evidence that implies infidelity. While this first dinner introduces Henry to the idea that perhaps Kwang is not as honest and upstanding as he is projected to be, that idea is solidified as the pressures of Kwang's impending campaign eventually lead him to figuratively implode largely resulting from a literal explosion at one of his campaign offices.

While watching the news with his wife, Henry sees "the last big story is a fire. It is burning even now. A two-alarm blaze at the main offices of City Councilman John Kwang, and the building next door. The cause is suspicious. Witnesses say there was a small explosion" (Lee 247). At this point in the narrative, Henry suspects that his boss might have something to do with the explosion and fire, which end up killing one of John Kwang's favorite staffers, Eduardo Fermin, a college student working to support his immigrant family. Kwang isolates himself in a downward spiral, before drawing Henry into the scheme Eduardo was working on before his death, a spreadsheet list of contacts with demographic information and dollar amounts, Kwang's own *ggeh*, a program in which "if you give a few dollars you can expect to receive a few hundred. The more you give, the more you can ask for" (Lee 280). The news describes the program as "a pyramidal laundering scheme, a people's lottery, an Asian numbers game," (Lee 301), speculated as being somehow sinister and the cause of Eduardo's death, driven by Kwang's refusal to publicly address the incident and the rumors. Kwang's *ggeh* is ultimately misconstrued by the public at-large and portrayed in the media as being "alien" and "foreign." While Kwang himself embodies a transnational identity, perhaps because he lacks the transnational adaptability to translate his *ggeh* into terms of hegemonic whiteness, his project is met with anger and distrust, and he is instantly thrust back into the position of the immigrant 'other,' marked as foreign and subversive. Rather than face the problems caused by his attempt to use a Korean money lending system in a country that is suspicious of his intentions, Kwang takes Sherrie and

Henry to another Korean drinking establishment, where he forces a physical altercation with Sherrie, who leaves Henry and Kwang alone at the restaurant with a young Korean girl working as an escort. Here, Kwang reveals that he orchestrated the explosion that killed Eduardo because of Eduardo's own infidelity in spying on Kwang for his political opponent. By morning, Kwang has crashed his car, and the young female escort who was riding with him is killed (Lee 322). Ultimately, what leads to Kwang's downfall is the foothold he keeps to his immigrant heritage. The impending scandal of the leak of information about his *ggeh* leads to Kwang's existential crises which leaves a trail of bodies in its wake.

Henry and Kwang share many similarities in how they manifest themselves in the space of the city. Both aspire to socioeconomic success and job fulfillment. Both leverage their immigrant heritage to their advantage at times. But their relationships to the city around them differ in key, generational ways. Kwang, himself an immigrant, pursues the same aspirational suburban whiteness as Henry's father. Like Henry's father, Kwang's household retains Korean heritage. But Kwang also works hard to leverage both his immigrant identity and his aspirational whiteness in contradictory ways. Ultimately, his attempts at integrating key elements of his conception of Korean community building into his larger network of constituencies leads to utter failure. He is unable to appease his employees, who become disillusioned with him to varying degrees. He is unable to appease his political constituency, who come to know of his lack of integrity. And he ultimately fails his family in the culmination of his infidelity and drunk driving. Kwang's failure could be understood as a consequence of his attempts to leverage a transnational identity he doesn't fully embody. Henry, on the other hand, leverages his immigrant identity in ways that allow him to infiltrate the communities and environments of other people, but only to temporarily integrate himself in order to achieve a specific end. Because of the success of his

father's attempts to push Henry into Americanness, he adeptly leaves behind any sense of community with Korean immigrants as a group to which he could potentially earn membership, instead engaging in a different sort of project of Americanness than the one completed by his father and Kwang. Whereas Henry's father and Kwang aim for visible socioeconomic success within communities driven by capitalism, Henry aspires for success and belonging on a personal level with no need for outward affirmation of his ability to be "American."

The contrast between the experiences of Henry, his father, and John Kwang show that successful integration into America through transnational cityscapes necessitates more than either economic success or cultural assimilation. Processes of parasitic urbanism can also be applied to aspirational whiteness—as economic production and benchmarks of success change, so do the end-mark goals of aspirational whiteness. Ultimately, Kwang's downfall in *Native Speaker* reveals that aspirational whiteness itself is parasitic—it feeds on the successes of those who attempt to achieve it. As both Americans and immigrants to America pursue aspirational whiteness, they continually feed into a system that ultimately perpetuates white hegemony. While individual Americans and immigrants may reach higher levels of affluence or ascend to the middle class, these gains are not proportional to the gains achieved by the creators and biggest benefactors of Western white hegemony. Even achieving both economic success and cultural assimilation is not enough for someone to move past the label of immigrant when integrating into American life and attempting to move up the ladder of aspirational whiteness. But rather than limiting our analysis of the immigrant experience in America to one that views the immigrant as subversive or oppressed by a larger system, the experience of Henry Park indicates that children of immigrants can move past the conditions under which their immigrant parents live by enacting agency through adopting transnational flexibility in their cultural

practices and expressions. As the target for aspirational whiteness continues to move and change, the children of immigrants are uniquely positioned to use their flexibility and adaptability as advantages to succeed in a world where the definition of success changes as rapidly as the environments in which we live. With the city as the prevailing locus of transnationality, civic citizenship and the ability to move through communities uninhibited by the expectations of aspirational whiteness open up new modes of belonging contingent on an ability to make interpersonal connections beyond cultural and national boundaries.

### **CHAPTER 3 – THE INDIGENOUS AS IMMIGRANT**

While some markers of identity of Americanness have become entrenched in nationalist rhetoric about belonging, these narratives often disregard those who lived on the land now considered within the boundaries of the United States. It is critical to acknowledge that land upon which American cities are built was inhabited by Native American people, who were forcibly removed from that land by white settler colonists. Forced to live on reservations, Indigenous people had to adapt to new lives with restricted movement to which they were unaccustomed. As U.S. cities have expanded and become globally interconnected, many Indigenous people have left reservations and built communities within transnational American cities. Postcolonial scholarship has extensively explored the impacts of Western white hegemony on immigrant individuals and communities while Indigenous studies have examined the effects and aftereffects of colonization on Native American communities. Less work has been done to compare the experiences of immigrants and Indigenous people. Processes of colonization on the North American continent tore apart Indigenous communities. Through laying claim to the land of Indigenous people and then inflicting forced relocation or internment of Indigenous people, white immigrants to North America branded themselves settlers or colonists and made Indigenous people immigrants on their own land. The history of settler colonialism on the North American continent should render the argument for immigrants to subscribe wholly to the culture and practice of hegemonic whiteness in order to become “like us” and earn belonging as a complete fabrication. Ultimately, as studies of Indigenous literature remind us, the “we” of hegemonic whiteness has only been present on the land of the North American continent for a few hundred years and has not existed as a statically-defined concept for much of that time. While the study of Indigenous literature can help dismantle the myth of how we presently define

what it means to be “American,” it also often exemplifies the deep and lasting consequences of marginalizing groups of people for generation after generation. *There There* by Tommy Orange weaves together intersecting lives of Native American individuals in the United States making their way to a Powwow in Oakland, California. Orange’s novel shows how when hegemonic forces take over a land, cultures that previously existed in that space are irreparably altered, whether through assimilation and adaptation, being rooted out and destroyed, or some combination of these processes.

In contextualizing the history of Native American genocide in America, Orange narrates through the imaginary voice of a teddy bear talking to his owner, Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield. Orange outlines for the reader how “They tried to kill us. But then when you hear them tell it, they make history seem like one big heroic adventure across an empty forest. There were bears and Indians all over the place. Sister, they slit our throats” (Orange 51). He goes on to quote Teddy Roosevelt as saying, “I don’t go so far as to think that the only good Indians are dead Indians, but I believe nine out of every ten are, and I shouldn’t like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth” (Orange 52). Opal’s teddy bear tells her how the U.S. government’s policy of “speak softly and carry a big stick” (Orange 52) is a lie in its implication of mercy or compassion. In reality, Orange describes how this policy was used to make Native Americans “foreigners on our own land” (Orange 52) and strangers in cities springing up around them. In describing the genocide of Native American peoples, Orange tells us that “with their big sticks they marched us so far west we almost disappeared” (52). After being thrust into a project of civil disobedience in which Native American people occupied Alcatraz Island, Opal’s mother insists that they “have to know that we should never not tell our stories, and that no one is too young to hear. We’re all here because of a lie. They been lying to us since they came. They’re

lying to us now!” (Orange 57). The project of Indian removal blurs the fine line between efforts to assimilate and efforts to destroy, showing how colonization creates similar conditions for people forcefully displaced by white hegemony as the conditions under which immigrants live in America. While immigrants often relocate willingly, they also do so because of the impact on their countries of origin by conditions created by white hegemony. Because of the similarities in how white hegemony impacts both Indigenous people and immigrant individuals, connections can be drawn between the movements of both communities.

Because movement lives at the heart of immigration, colonization, and displacement, movement as a theme is commonly explored in Native American studies. Native American studies emphasize movement unrestricted by the sorts of borders developed to divide the modern world. In their introduction to a special forum issue of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies* titled “Charting Transnational Native American Studies,” Hsinya Huang, Philip Deloria, Laura Furlan, and John Gamber point out that before white people came to the American continent and waged wars to establish territorial boundaries, Indigenous people moved more freely through “routes of interconnection” creating “a large world in which indigenes mingled, unhindered by boundaries erected much later by imperial powers” (6). In describing Maximilian C. Forte’s collection of essays titled *Indigenous Cosmopolitans*, Huang et al. suggest that “indigeneity is experienced and practiced along translocal pathways.” While these translocal pathways do not reflect the same striations and divisions created by Western imperialism, the nature of translocality as embodied by Indigenous Native American tribes creates a form of cosmopolitanism that isn’t technically ‘transnational,’ but that does transcend boundaries and cut across cultures. This sort of flexible cosmopolitanism seems to be a critical component of the experience of Indigenous people, not just in modern times, but throughout recorded history. In

the introduction to her book *Indigenous Cities: Urban Indian Fiction and the Histories of Relocation*, Furlan expands on the importance of movement to Native Americans and how forces of settler colonialism changed the ways in which Indigenous people were able to move and interact with the land on which they and their ancestors had lived. Furlan describes how the play *Body Indian* shows the “historicity of railroads constructed across Indian lands in the nineteenth century” and how the history of railroad development “aligns twentieth-century relocations with prior reterritorializations of the continent as US space and property, suggesting that movement away from Indian Country participates in the loss of sovereign space” (6). The play’s protagonist, Bobby Lee, is physically and figuratively broken by the railroad system. He’s lost his legs as the result of an accident involving railroad tracks, but Furlan notes that he has also lost his community through the historical process of reallocating tribal lands, “fracturing the tribal land base and dismembering the nations” (6). Using the framework of smooth vs. striated space outlined by Deleuze and Guattari, in this chapter I argue that the efforts employed by Indigenous people to resist the restrictions white hegemony would impose on their movements both within and between cities mirror the same tactics employed by immigrants. Both Indigenous individuals subjected to displacement and immigrant individuals entering new spaces use similar tactics to navigate surroundings that are often hostile to the differences they bring with them into spaces defined by white hegemony.

Deleuze and Guattari define a smooth space as a space that is not organized by the hierarchical principles upon which capitalism depends to reproduce mechanisms of wealth production. Once organized for production, “labor performs a generalized operation of striation of space-time, a subjection of free action, a nullification of smooth spaces, the origin and mean of which is in the essential enterprise of the State” (Deleuze and Guattari 491). Furlan’s analysis

of *Body Indian* shows the impact of colonial efforts to striate spaces where once Indigenous peoples moved smoothly and freely. The striation of space can be described as the same mechanism by which cities set out to impose organization on their inhabitants. While Furlan describes the devastation wrought by these striations, I argue that by using a historical tendency toward living more smoothly and less rooted by boundaries and striations, Indigenous peoples living in Tommy Orange's Oakland have adapted to the fluctuations between smooth and striated space within the transnational city. Returning to a freedom of movement inhabited pre-colonization, Tommy Orange's Native Americans move through the transnational urban and build an inter-tribal community, creating an interconnected trans-tribalism that might not have become possible without the development of transnational cities.

Though not illustrated in these terms, Furlan's description of movement and transportation invokes power. In a pre-colonization America, Indigenous peoples existed in their own mode of transnationality, moving and interacting between tribal boundaries with more fluidity than our current system of national borders allows. For Indigenous people, processes of modernity and imperialism have created a situation in which what scholars might have described as transnational becomes translocal in that competing systems of cultural and national borders exist simultaneously in the same geographic area. When establishing the bounds of the early American nation-state, colonists created and then increasingly expanded the boundaries in which they sought to exert power, eventually engulfing Indigenous societies. But as the modern American nation-state has undergone waves of immigration, cities have become sites where the striations imposed by colonialism begin to smooth out as individuals carve out their own spaces using tactics as conceptualized by Michel de Certeau to subvert the strategies put in place by city builders to discipline the city spaces in which people live. Furlan argues that modern Indigenous

texts “articulate displacement in the era of relocation, but they also suggest that cities are where identities are remade and where intertribal collectivity offers the greatest means of survival and resistance” (7). Urban Indian literature chronicles the struggles of both individuals and cultures to adapt for survival amidst “ongoing strategies of removal and assimilation” (Furlan 7). Pushing back against stereotypes of Indigenous people as being “rooted” (Furlan 8) scholarship on Indigenous literature increasingly explores the ways in which Indigenous people have shown mobility and flexibility within rapidly changing environments. This chapter argues that by looking at the movements of Indigenous people in transnational urban spaces through Guattari and Deleuze’s framework of smooth and striated space, new possibilities for belonging emerge that are not just transnational, but translocal. These translocal modes of belonging reveal how identity is not just interconnected or hybridized within spaces, but overlap and develop simultaneously for individuals existing between cultural or societal systems. What translocalism as a form of transnationalism shows us about the city is that third spaces and hybridization do not occur only as a *response* to hegemonic systems. Orange’s novel about Urban Indians shows that Bhabha’s third space *develops alongside* hegemonic systems, present from their inception within the individuals in the system.

Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of smooth and striated spaces offers a unique framework through which to understand the ways in which Indigenous North Americans were made to be immigrants in their own land. Deleuze and Guattari are careful to point out that societies referred to as “primitive” by many working in the social sciences “are not without laws” and “are not societies of shortage or subsistence due to an absence of work, but on the contrary are societies of free action and smooth space that have no use for a work-factor, any more than they constitute a stock” (491). When white settler colonialists invaded the North

American continent and attempted to striate life according to the capitalist principles upon which Western society functions, the displacement of Indigenous peoples became necessary to exercise power over the natural resources of the continent. In regard to the response of Native Americans to settler colonialism, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that “it seems to be true that the Indians had no understanding of, and were unsuited for, any organization of work, even slavery: the Americans apparently imported so many blacks only because they could not use the Indians, who would rather die” (491). The resistance of Native Americans to be forced into a striated life antithetical to their lives, which were lived with greater regard to parameters outlined by the natural world as opposed to manmade manipulations of the environment, was punished with displacement and genocide.

In response to that displacement and genocide, Indigenous peoples as evidenced by history and described in Orange’s novel have learned to adapt to some of the unique challenges facing their communities. Though this adaptation has not always led to what Western culture might call “success,” it has led to survival; individuals of Native American heritage in *There There* react to their environments in a variety of ways and retain their Indigenous cultural heritage to differing degrees. Deleuze and Guattari describe smooth and striated spaces as in constant flux – smooth space is open to striation and striated spaces become smooth over time and are then striated again. As an imposition of capitalist organization, “the city is the striated space par excellence,” functioning as “the force of striation that reimparts smooth space, puts it back into operation everywhere, on earth and in the other elements, outside but also inside itself. The smooth spaces arising from the city are not only those of world-wide organization, but also of a counterattack combining the smooth and the holey and turning back against the town” (Deleuze and Guattari 481). If one is to understand that all spaces are in flux and smooth spaces

represent a lack of rigidity, it seems reasonable to assume that individuals in societies accustomed to smoothness would hold a higher adaptability than those who rely on heavy striations to dictate their actions and decision-making. Often described as nomadic, Furman points out that Native American tribes do not live by the same boundaries established and imposed by white, Western culture. But Deleuze and Guattari point out that “we can say of the nomads, following Toynbee’s suggestion: *they do not move*. They are nomads by dint of not moving, not migrating, of holding a smooth space that they refuse to leave, that they leave only in order to conquer and die” (482). Deleuze and Guattari describe Indigenous nomadic existence in North America as a “voyage in place” (482), with place referring to the continuous smooth landscape of North America before it was North America. As Indigenous people in North American voyage in place, they are forced to continually assimilate to the changing conditions around them, changing and becoming increasingly adaptable in ways that those who exercise power of Indigenous communities do not.

Through Deleuze and Guattari’s framework, we can understand the city as a continual locus for observing the phenomenon of smoothing and striating space in flux. Through successive waves of immigration continuing through the present, cities grow and change as demographics shift. Both local, state, and national governments and capitalist developers in the United States have put great efforts into continually striating cities, creating and fortifying new structures and strategies within which to stratify people and their lives. Processes of gentrification aim to transform socioeconomic conditions in neighborhoods, often pushing out individuals of lower socioeconomic standing in order to make room for somebody else’s idea of progress. These continual efforts to reclaim space in cities and by extension, society, is perhaps most cognizantly recognized in *There There* by the character Dene Oxendene, a young Native

American filmmaker who inherited his camera and concept from his Uncle Lucas, a dying alcoholic Indian who was never quite able to make it in the film industry in which he worked (Orange 30-31). Oxendene earns a grant to chronicle the stories of Native Americans in the city of Oakland. While being “ambiguously nonwhite,” (Orange 28), Dene develops a firm interest in Native American stories and identity to the point of becoming a sort of cultural voyeur, tagging the word “Lens” throughout Oakland as a way of leaving his mark on the world (Orange 33). Of all the characters in the novel, Dene moves through the world in relative isolation. The reader doesn’t see him engage in interpersonal relations or establish solid ties to any particular community in the novel with the exception of the work he does in his project. While Dene does not seem to achieve belonging within a community and has not engaged in the project of aspirational whiteness and striving for socioeconomic mobility, Dene seems to be more at ease and self-aware than any other individual in the novel. Dene recognizes that if he does not catalogue the stories of Indigenous people, nobody will. Their lives are being written over and conflated with dominant narratives, rather than existing as individual stories about individual people. Like other characters, Dene is preoccupied with descriptions of the way he navigates through the city, describing the world through his view from trains and automobiles. He recognizes how “the train floats alongside the freeway next to cars, Each of their speeds is different: The speed of the cars is short, disconnected, sporadic” (Orange 29). The use of cars whether by ownership or through taxi services implies a certain level of economic ability, and Dene’s descriptions of car travel as “disconnected” reveals his deeper disconnection with the world of economic privilege. From his view on the train, which “slither[s] along the tracks as one movement and speed,” Dene ponders how “there’s something cinematic about their variable speeds, like a moment in a movie that makes you feel something for reasons you can’t explain.

Something too big to feel, underneath, and inside, too familiar to recognize, right there in front of you at all times” (Orange 29).

As Dene himself contemplates unnamed forces in the world that shape his experiences, his uncle helps him contextualize those feelings into a curiosity about identity as it is inhabited and expressed by other Native American individuals. His uncle shares with him his own somewhat dystopian vision of what the future of society looks like as lines between race are blurred into lines between people and technology, positing that “over time we’ll merge with the technology, we’ll become like androids, and we’ll lose the ability to recognize each other. The way we used to look. Our old ways” (Orange 31). The future Lucas suggests to Dene could be employed as a metaphor for what has happened to his culture around him. As their Native American culture was displaced by whiteness, the identity that Lucas and Dene manifest in the world has become hybridized – they exist in Bhabha’s third space, but in a new form, unrecognizable as Indian, but also unrecognizable as white. Tellingly, however, the resolution of the dystopia described by Lucas is for “what’s left of the humans to move back to nature. Get away from technology, get our old way of life back. Become human again like we used to be” (Orange 31). Lucas’s worldview can be summarized as deeply resistant to the striations put in place by hegemonic whiteness, which call out and segregate culture that does not contribute to the capitalist project of aspirational whiteness. One could imagine that the internal struggle driving Lucas’s hopelessness and alcoholism is the struggle between trying to succeed socioeconomically in a system designed for whiteness while desperately desiring to hold on to his Native American roots. Lucas’s advocacy for a return to nature represents a desire to exist in a world that has been smoothed of the striations imposed by the processes of gentrification and displacement that continually renew under Western white hegemony. But while Lucas can only

imagine living his life free from the striations of capitalism, Dene actively pursues a life moving smoothly through his environment with easier mobility, perhaps enabled by his rejection of the pursuit of capitalist success. Rather than engage in some kind of job or commerce as the other characters in the novel, Dene applies for a grant so that he can continue his uncle's project of recording the stories of Indigenous people.

It is through Dene that the reader also glimpses the origins of the title of Orange's novel from a quote in Gertrude Stein's autobiography. Dene tells the reader that he "found that she was talking about how the place where she'd grown up in Oakland had changed so much, that so much development had happened there, that the there of her childhood, the there there, was gone, there was no there there anymore" (Orange 38). Dene is offered this quote by a white man applying for the same grant Dene uses to fund his project of recording Native peoples' experiences. The man, Rob, tells Dene that nobody's really from Oakland after Dene asks him where he's from. Dene resists this idea, the idea that Oakland has somehow changed to the point where it is no longer the same place he calls home, driving his desire to "explain that they're not the same, that Dene is Native, born and raised in Oakland, *from* Oakland" (Orange 39). He describes how "for Native people in this country, all over the Americas, it's been developed over, buried ancestral land, glass and concrete and wire and steel, unreturnable covered memory. There is no there there" (Orange 39). Perhaps it is because Dene recognizes how the world is being striated around him that he is able to move through it smoothly, resisting the forces that would categorize him and dictate his movements. Unlike Tony, who recognizes the system that wrote over the existence of Native peoples and tries to game that system to his advantage by selling drugs, Dene outright resists hegemonic, aspirational whiteness. Instead, he lives an

unsettled life with little resources, pursuing a project of passion to document the lives of other Native people as he explores his own identity.

Michel de Certeau describes the striations imposed by institutions like that of white hegemony as strategies for exerting control and power on spaces, typically for economic ends. In response to the strategies of powerful institutions, individuals adopt tactics for navigating or “making do” within the structures and institutions that exert power over their every-day lives. De Certeau describes how “although they remain dependent upon the possibilities offered by circumstances, these transverse *tactics* do not obey the law of the place, for they are not defined or identified by it” (29), going on to describe that tactics are not localizable, meaning these tactics exist as a translocal response that moves through striated environments with the individual engaging in the tactic. The individuals moving toward their convergence at the Big Oakland PowWow in *There There* engage in various tactics as methods of adaptation to the environment that has both itself changed while also forcing the evolution of their Indigenous cultures which were displaced by hegemonic white Western priorities. Their use of tactics to navigate spaces controlled by white hegemony resemble the same used by members of immigrant communities, because as previously mentioned, Indigenous Americans have been put into a similar cultural striation as immigrants by having their cultural legacies largely written over by narratives of white hegemony. The existence of the Big Oakland PowWow itself is a tactic to bring together Indigenous peoples to protect their heritage from erasure, while also providing economic benefits to the community through prize money. In addition to the tactics described to move characters toward the Big Oakland PowWow, Orange describes another tactic taken by Indigenous peoples to restore a former way of life through his emphasis of the occupation of Alcatraz in the 1970s as a defining event for Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield and

Jacquie Red Feather. In explaining to her children why they are moving to Alcatraz, Opal and Jacquie's mother, Vicky, tells them, "We're going over to where they built that prison. Gonna start from the inside of the cell, which is where we are now, Indian people, that's where they got us, even though they don't make it seem like they got us there. We're gonna work our way out from the inside with a spoon" (Orange 48). Vicky sees the striations imposed by hegemonic whiteness for what they are—attempts to control and subject other cultures that are deemed unwanted by those in power. Vicky describes the occupation of Alcatraz as a tactic for reclaiming both their culture and a physical space within which to practice that culture. She gives Opal a card outlining the project of the occupation as:

Upon suffering beyond suffering; the Red Nation shall rise again and it shall be a blessing for a sick world. A world filled with broken promises, selfishness and separations. A world longing for light again. I see a time of seven generations, when all the colors of mankind will gather under the sacred Tree of Life and the whole Earth will become one circle again. (Orange 48)

Recognizing the word "separations" as being synonymous with "striations" in some contexts, it is clear that the project of the Occupation of Alcatraz was one in resisting striations imposed on Indigenous people. The imagery of the Earth as "one circle again" (Orange 48) parallels Deleuze and Guattari's concept of smooth space, space without imposition and division, with fewer regulations designed for the sake of controlling others. While the examples provided by Orange in his novel do not always offer optimistic outcomes for the tactics used to survive in an environment that is at best disinterested in accommodating your cultural identity, these stories are critical to cultivating empathy to respond to increasingly prevalent movements in countries around the world toward xenophobic nationalism. These stories are also important for reaching a

greater understanding of the broader impacts and implications of the strategies used by institutions of power to control individuals.

While their efforts and measures of success may not match those of aspirational whiteness, most of the individuals with Native American ancestry in *There There* by Tommy Orange engage to some degree with the capitalist economy established by white hegemony. Some of these individuals aim to further their own socioeconomic goals by participating in hegemonic capitalism, while helping others like them in the community similarly seek their own economic and social stability. Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield and her sister, Jacquie Red Feather, each manifest flexibility in different ways while engaging with the economics of hegemonic whiteness. Opal spends her days working a desk job and largely ignoring her Indigenous heritage. While raising Jacquie's three grandsons after their mother died, Opal begins to notice the boys cultivating an interest in their Indigenous heritage. She makes little effort to stymie their curiosity, though they take great lengths to hide their plan of attending a PowWow from her. Opal's flexibility lies in her ability to both simultaneously reject her Indigenous heritage while still embracing the Native American community from which she can't entirely escape. Jacquie, an alcoholic in a tenuous state of recovery, works as a substance abuse counselor for Indigenous communities. While her work keeps her more deeply connected to her heritage than her sister, Jacquie has no illusions about the extent to which capitalism has affected Indigenous communities, describing attendees of a Native American conference as "career people, more driven by concern about keeping their jobs, about the funders and grant requirements, than by the need to help Indian families" (Orange 103). What's more, Orange tells us "Jacquie was no different. She knew it and hated this fact" (103). Despite the sincerity with which Jacquie fulfills the obligations of her job, she internally acknowledges that less important

than helping other members of the Indigenous community is fulfilling the expectations for her membership in transnational urban environments.

While Jacquie never achieves a particularly high degree of socioeconomic success, the level of stability she has attained in the novel's present shows remarkable adaptability and resilience. Her and Opal's childhood was defined by transience, her mother described by Opal as "crazy, in and out of work, moving us all over Oakland, in and out of our dads' lives, in and out of different schools, in and out of shelters" (Orange 49). While living on Alcatraz Island in the abandoned prison during its occupation by Native American activists, Jacquie is raped, the result of which is a pregnancy and the birth of a daughter, Blue, who she gives up for adoption. Her second daughter, the mother of her three grandsons, dies of a drug overdose. Jacquie's extensive and personal connections to alcoholism and substance abuse reveal the dire consequences that continual marginalization has had on Indigenous communities in North America. Despite a profoundly difficult life, Jacquie generally seems to move through the world as a survivor who may not always follow the laws set forth by power structures of white hegemony but adapts within the economic and social structures in which she finds herself. Both Jacquie and Opal do not see their community membership as an assimilative process. Instead, their membership is established by the choices they make daily between multiple present modes of existence.

In contrast to Opal and Jacquie's commitment to success within the system of white hegemony, others in the novel employ tactics to attempt to subvert the rules and laws of hegemonic whiteness in America in order to further their economic position. Because of the parasitic nature of aspirational whiteness as outlined in chapter two, communities that have been excluded from systemic projects of wealth attainment instead turn to other means to combat the poverty and lack of public resources that define their experiences in U.S. cities. The first

character the reader is introduced to in the novel is Tony Loneman, who lives with “the drome,” fetal alcohol syndrome resulting from his mother’s alcoholism during her pregnancy. Like several other characters in the novel, Loneman lives with his grandmother as the result of his parents’ inability to care for him. His mother is in jail, and his father doesn’t know of his existence. While Loneman’s interpersonal relationships are inhibited by the symptoms of the “drome,” he navigates Oakland with the familiarity and skill of a native, despite being largely cut off from the economic opportunities legitimized by the city. He expertly navigates the city, “from West to East to Deep East and back, on bike or bus or BART” and acknowledges Oakland as “my only home. I wouldn’t make it nowhere else” (Orange 18). We learn early on that despite his Native American ancestry, Tony is part of a plan to rob the prize money from the Big Oakland Powwow. He admits that his motivations are economic, saying that “everyone’s gonna think it’s about the money. But who doesn’t fucking want money? It’s about why you want money, how you get it, then what you do with it that matters” (Orange 19). Tony’s motivations are understandable. The description he offers of his experience in the education system and being called dumb because of the effects of fetal alcohol syndrome offer little hope for economic success within the white hegemonic tradition.

While Tony’s grandmother attempts to instill in Tony pride in his Indian heritage by telling him he’s a “medicine person” (Orange 17), he shows a sort of derision for the ways Native Americans were abused and removed by white people, suggesting that “they must not’ve had street smarts back then. Let them white men come over here and take it from them like that” (Orange 17-18). Tony introduces the reader to Octavio, a drug dealer who hatches the plan to rob the powwow using 3-D printed guns. Tony begins selling cocaine with Octavio to young white men who come to Tony’s neighborhood to buy drugs (Orange 21). Tony and Octavio show the

unique politics of space as it relates to Native Americans, urban development, and the economics of poverty. In a way, Tony both rejects the project of assimilation into white, hegemonic society, while also rejecting his Native American heritage. Instead, with the help of other disenfranchised individuals like Octavio, he creates his own space in the city to engage in a subversive form of commerce in which the consumers from whom he receives money are mostly the white boys that society would have him aspire to be like. Interestingly, while all of the individuals in Orange's novel move through their lives with some degree of connectedness to their Indigenous heritage, their embodiment of transnational and translocal identities through their shared tribal heritage allows some to demonstrate greater flexibility in adapting to new and contentious situations, whether they do so within the system or through attempts to subvert the system.

By considering the experience of Native American people spatially through Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of smooth and striated space, the reader is invited to attempt to examine Indigenous experience outside of the framework of white hegemony. In an interview conducted by Ana Marie Cox on her podcast, *With Friends Like These*, Tommy Orange expresses that a common problem with how Indigenous art and literature are approached lies with our tendency to relate the experience of Indigenous people to whiteness. The experiences of Indigenous people are always framed in terms of the history of white conquest of the North American continent, while ignoring the experiences faced by individuals and individual tribes. Orange makes it clear that his project is not in perpetuating the idea of Native American culture as a monolith, but rather aims to define "what it means to belong to a city and to a people when in the midst of a city where nothing is recognizably native and maybe nothing about them seems to be" (*With Friends Like These* 16:00). In refuting the idea that he somehow speaks for a monolithic Indigenous community, Orange is emphasizing that Indigenous communities do not conform to

the rules and assumptions that white hegemony places on them. Rather than allowing diverse groups of people with different cultural practices and beliefs to be reduced into a single category, he insists that, “me being the voice for all native people is kind of an absurd thing because we are so many things. We’re over 576 tribes and each – the tribes – are so different in their worldviews and their languages. So it really should be on a tribe by tribe basis the way we talk about native people” (*With Friends Like These* 39:30). Orange resists attempts made to classify his experience in terms of white hegemony, while also acknowledging that “there is a certain pan-Indianism we can’t deny that started in the Civil Rights Era” (*With Friends Like These*) based on the shared experience of othering imposed by the increasingly striated spaces created through white society. Orange’s commentary on his projects offers an interesting metaphor to Deleuze and Guattari’s smoothing and striated spaces. While American culture built on hegemonic whiteness has attempted to fit all Indigenous people into a single category in order to help perpetuate myths about Indigenous identity, Orange resists that classification. This resistance underscores the idea that hybridized individuals who embody Bhabha’s third space are not necessarily created in response to a tension with white hegemony, but rather are ever present alongside forces of hegemonic power. Orange’s push against the attempt to impose a certain order on all Indigenous cultures shows a tendency toward Deleuze and Guattari’s smoothness—a propensity against narrow definitions in favor of a more fluid arrangement of tribes who happen to coexist in a broad geographical area.

Ultimately, what *There There* shows us about assimilation is that through economic and cultural displacement, Native American populations have been put in the position of immigrants in their own lands. But because those populations have existed throughout the history of white hegemony on the American continent, hybridization has occurred long before processes of

immigration threatened demographic change in the North American continent. Deleuze and Guattari's conjecture about space as constantly undergoing smoothing and striating is reflected in the demographic shifts on the American continent increasingly occur, potentially changing the way power operates in society. Because the spaces we occupy are in constant flux, smoothing and striating continuously as power adjusts and changes hands, individuals with hybridized identities will continue to navigate with a measure of success within transnational cities despite the strategies imposed on them from above to limit mobility or control cultural expression. The relegation of Native American peoples to a societal status similar to that of immigrants or foreigners clearly indicates the mutability of power and position, but it also indicates an adaptability held by individuals who occupy third spaces of culture and identity regardless of attempts to assimilate based on nationalist ideas. Perhaps because of the history of Indigenous communities to live smoothly within their environment, individuals like Tommy Orange's urban-dwelling Native Americans are better suited to adapting to the fluctuations inherent within transnational urban systems.

## **CHAPTER 4 – MAGICAL REALISM EMBODIED IN THE CITY**

Chapters one and two primarily explored the United States city as a site of transnationalism, while chapter three connected current patterns of increasing transnationalism to similar mechanisms of colonization that established the United States. Postcolonialism has emerged as a field of inquiry most interested in elucidating the ways in which processes of colonization have created profound and lasting impacts on cultures, communities, and countries around the world through often forced hybridization. Within literary movements situated around postcolonial ideology, magical realism stands out as a genre built on cultural hybridity. Because of this emphasis on cultural hybridity, texts described as belonging to the canon of magical realism often serve as effective sites for the examination of belonging and cultural assimilation. The transnational urban provides one location for examining the intersections of magical realism and postcoloniality as the place where many cultures come together and interconnect in the same geographic area through the migration trends outlined by Michael Peter Smith when describing how America's cities have become more transnational (72-73). Smith describes how "Global cities are depicted metaphorically as magnetic fields attracting global labor migrants as well as capital flows" (72) to explain the trends that have shaped cities like Los Angeles and New York City. Through attracting migrant individuals from a multitude of cultures and countries of origin, cities have become borderlands governed by Deleuze and Guattari's striations, but manipulated by individuals moving smoothly through the fluctuations of imposed striations.

The "magic" of magical realism exists in the borders between what is accepted as normal and what is considered the fantastic, juxtaposing the supernatural with the natural within the same space with equal legitimacy. But in defining this juxtaposition of the natural and supernatural, scholars of magical realism set up a dichotomy that must necessarily deem certain

cultural practices and places as “normal,” while putting other cultural practices, beliefs, or phenomena in a subordinate position. Gloria Anzaldúa describes a borderland as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary,” or a space “in a constant state of transition” (25). Within these spaces, “the only ‘legitimate’ inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites” (25-26). When applied to the idea of assimilation, Anzaldúa’s borderlands exist as separate from, but under attack by, the assimilative world of white hegemony. In a state of cultural limbo, inhabitants of borderlands are of neither one culture nor another. Similarly, magical realist texts rely on a binary paradigm, consolidated within a space that resembles Anzaldúa’s borderland.

The project of defining magical realism as a genre, while extensive, has never successfully agreed upon a definition that would satisfactorily include the variety of texts to which the label has been applied. Perhaps the most basic and broad characteristic of magical realist literature is its positioning of the fantastic as coexisting with the mundane. However, similar to the way critics have placed limits on what might be defined as the American literary canon, scholars of magical realism have imposed their own limiting definitions on what texts qualify for membership in the canon of magical realism. In many ways, magical realism as a field of inquiry has largely been defined as a function or strategy of postcolonialism or postmodernism, as described by Eva Aldea (2). In her criticism of approaches taken to define magical realism, Aldea notes both inconsistency in the application of the colonizer/colonized framework to magical realist texts, as well as the way in which this framework further replicates the standard of Western hegemony as the default by which other cultural practices are deemed strange, “reaffirming the Western stereotype of the exotic ‘Other’” (5). In explicating the magical as “uncanny,” Patrick Manning notes “it is a harsh irony indeed that the fruits of

violence and colonization effectively serve to unite the community through its very uncanniness—a foreignness that has become internalized” (159). By “othering” practices that are foreign to Western hegemony, magical realism as a genre reifies the impact of colonization on individuals living within cultures that have been colonized. This “othering” results in a sort of community and coalition building that ultimately seems to further division over modes of assimilation that might be preferred by the powers that shape the socioeconomic structures of the cities, which serve as new borderlands in which many transnational individuals live.

While magical realism functions to highlight differences between cultures of hegemony and the cultures they subsume, the framework of magical realism could also be used to define specific spaces as they relate to one another. Thinking about magical realism in this way suggests the potential for a productive analysis of the transnational interplay between cultures as they are embodied in physical places. This approach aims to decenter hegemony in order to accept the range of cultural realities made visible by processes of colonization and now globalization. One way to attempt to decenter Western hegemony is by imagining magical realist texts—and the cities and places described within them—as existing within the framework of Deleuze and Guattari’s fluctuating smooth and striated spaces. While culture itself could be seen as an imposition of striations upon the lives of individuals, magical realist texts position individuals as able to move smoothly between differing expressions of the conflicting cultural practices that often exist within the lives and experiences of transnational individuals. Magical realist texts—despite setting up a binary that upholds hegemony—are at odds with modes of nationalist assimilation that emphasize sameness to achieve belonging because they allow individuals to embody multiple cultural identities simultaneously, rather than insisting on the abandonment of one cultural practice in favor of another.

If the same paradigm of magical realism is applied to the actual physical spaces where these cultures exist, not as a binary, but as a continuum of smoothing and striating space, belonging can then be described as a process in motion that changes based on one's tendency toward hybridization. This chapter aims to ask the reader to reconsider the paradigm of cultural hierarchy underlying magical realism by considering the ways in which Junot Díaz uses magical realist elements as physical landscapes to promote a more equitable exchange between white hegemony and the cultures it co-opts within transnational cities functioning as cultural borderlands. Through analyzing elements of magical realism found in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* that in some way subvert conventions of the genre, I will explore how societal ideas about what is considered "natural" as dictated by Western hegemony intersect with the fantastic, creating new cultural realities through shared experiences. In order to apply this framework to the physical places within the novel, I will consider that Oscar's home city of Paterson described by Yunió, the novel's narrator, as urban, represents the "real" of magical realism. Paterson is a transnational urban environment heavily striated and conditioned socioeconomically by processes put in place by white hegemony. However the city of Paterson also functions as a borderland, a place where multiple cultures of different immigrant groups bump up against each other and the culture of white hegemony. For Oscar and other individuals in the novel, the Dominican Republic from which his mother immigrated represents the "magical" place, an imagined homeland where hybridization occurs—smoother, though not without striation and influence of Western hegemony as described by Díaz. Within the Dominican Republic, the city in which Oscar's family lives serves as its own borderland between Dominican culture and the influences of Western hegemony on the power structure surrounding the city. Moving out of the city, the Dominican countryside serves as the location of Díaz's

magic, where the supernatural is embodied and made real. The individuals in Díaz's novel leverage their own hybrid identities in different ways to negotiate the rules of the different city environments which serve as spaces for processes of assimilation as borderlands between cultures.

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* tells the story of the American son of a Dominican immigrant. Through his failure to fully embody both the American culture in which he is immersed and the Dominican culture of his family and immigrant community, Oscar offers a critical example of an individual dwelling within a borderland. This borderland is both imposed on him by his cultural influences and is also of his own making through his pursuit of genre fiction and the fantasies that he internalizes which are reflected back at him through the physical spaces he comes to occupy in the Dominican Republic. Through the narration of Yunior, the best friend of the titular protagonist, the extraordinary reality of life under the brutal Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic is described in a method consistent with generally agreed upon definitions of magical realism. Through Yunior's narrations, the reader comes to know Oscar as an "overweight freak" (Díaz 15) who "couldn't have passed for Normal if he'd wanted to" (Díaz 21). Obsessed with science fiction and fantasy and comic books, Oscar was "the neighborhood parigüayo. Had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male, couldn't have pulled a girl if his life depended on it" (Díaz 19-20). Throughout the novel, Oscar struggles to fulfill both his own expectations for finding love and acceptance, as well as the cultural expectations placed on him by members of his Dominican immigrant community in Paterson, New Jersey, who expect him to manifest a supernatural ability to attract women as illustrated through the description of the "Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male" (20). Oscar, however, prefers to live within a world of genre fiction and comic book culture, a sort of capitalist, mass-

marketed manifestation of what could be deemed magical realism within the productions of Western media. Within Díaz's novel, Oscar's genre fiction serves as the "magic" available to him in Western culture, creating a space of "otherness" in which he can reside. Underscoring themes positioning the magical and fantastic as preferential for Oscar is his seeming preference for the feminine as exhibited through his resistance to Dominican norms of masculinity.

Anzaldúa outlines in *Borderlands/La Frontera* how "Woman is the stranger, the other. She is man's recognized nightmarish pieces, his Shadow-Beast" (39). While Oscar spends much of the novel resisting the striations that have been placed on him by the rules of the city in which he lives and the demands of his Dominican heritage, he cannot deny his impulse to seek female companionship, as promoted both by the culture of Western white hegemony and the culture of his Dominican roots. This impulse ultimately leads to his death at the end of the novel due to his obsessive love with a woman already spoken for by a man who embodies hybridization by being firmly rooted in the reality of the influence of hegemonic whiteness on the Dominican Republic.

A varied and rich field of criticism explores how postcolonialism, hybridity, toxic masculinity, authenticity, and belonging interplay within Oscar's Dominican immigrant community in America as well as the sociopolitical conditions of life in the Dominican Republic under the regime of Rafael Trujillo. While toxic masculinity has been extensively explored through Oscar's interactions with Yunior and other Dominican men as well as through the Trujillo regime's lasting impact on Dominican culture, Elena Machado Sáez uniquely situates Oscar and Yunior's conflict as centered on Oscar's resistance to traditional heteronormativity (524). Rather than focusing on the conflict within the novel "as a transgressive text that challenges the oppressive structures of the nation-state" (Sáez 523), Sáez describes queerness as the obstructive force both "positioning Oscar de León as a subject that the Dominican nation

cannot assimilate” (523) and hindering his belonging within hegemonic white culture as well. While Yunior makes extensive efforts to “ultimately silence Oscar’s points of queer Otherness—his virginity and sentimentality” (Sáez 524), Oscar refuses to operate within the societal norms established by the world around him and upheld by those he interacts with throughout the novel, both male and female. However, while Sáez characterizes Oscar’s refusal to abide by standards of heteronormativity as “endearingly inauthentic” (524), Oscar’s resistance to both Dominican and American standards for behavior as he moves through physical landscapes striated by the organizing principles of the city’s socioeconomic structure exhibit an authenticity beyond the bounds of culture. Rather than assimilate to the expectations of either white hegemony or Dominican cultural expectations, or some hybridization of the two within the borderland of the city, Oscar occupies his own personal borderland between the real and the magical. Oscar cannot effectively live within the striations around him, preferring to navigate smoothly with no regard to societal expectations of the systems in which he lives. Deleuze and Guattari remind critics that “voyaging smoothly is a becoming, and a difficult, uncertain becoming at that” (482). Oscar’s journey through his New Jersey immigrant community to the Dominican Republic of his family heritage shows the danger of authenticity within adverse systems.

The transnational intersection within the novel of casual references to supernatural abilities and real-life superpowers are only one way the magical is manifested in the novel. The mythology of the magical realist elements within Díaz’s Dominican Republic extends beyond the supernatural. Jacqueline Rose makes the point “that we inherit the parameters with which our psychic reality begins” (23) in describing how our ideas about nationhood and culture are all built on shared fantasy. Rose’s exploration aims to answer “what acts of consciousness, what forms of belief or fantasy, constitute the seeming solidity--the reality--of the world and air we

breathe” (20). Through fantasy, social reality is created as individuals who seem to share some similarities suppose that they are then part of the same group. This “forging of the collective will” (3) dictates membership and belonging and what is considered normal, but is based on ideas and thoughts about people rather than about objective truths about our genetics. In the same way that fantasy or mythology can unite individuals in membership toward common goals, it can also help regimes solidify power, as “the modern state enacts its authority as ghostly, fantasmatic, authority” (Rose 9). Individuals moving through heavily striated social spaces under state authority seldom follow rules out of an intrinsic desire or instinct to abide by the guidelines imposed on them. Rather, they do so out of fear of consequences - and that fear is largely based on the possibility that those with power might be watching you, rather than based on the reality of their presence. The presence of Rafael Leónides Trujillo Molina within the footnotes in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* serves to emphasize Rose’s point that states, cultures, and regimes are built on fantasy, but that fantasy and reality are inextricably linked, as lived experience shapes fantasy, which in turn shapes social reality.

The defining social fantasy and magical element described by Yunió as he narrates Díaz’s novel is “fukú,” “a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World” (Díaz 1). By describing “*fukú americanus*,” the most widely explored magical realist element in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in terms of whiteness and as a product of whiteness, Díaz asks the reader to recognize the fukú not as a foreign, mystical element, but as a normalized part of Dominican culture stemming directly from white influence. As narrated by Yunió, “the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we’ve all been in the shit ever since” (Díaz 1). In metaphorical terms, the fukú is a sort of amalgamation of all of the bad effects of white colonialism in the American hemisphere. The word “fukú” is both

used to describe instances that western culture might refer to as “bad luck,” or a supernatural force working against an individual, as well as a curse specifically wielded by those with special powers, in this case, Trujillo. As noted above, the origins of the fukú are distinctly the result of the imposition of whiteness, suggesting that it is a sort of transnational curse. Díaz’s definition of Trujillo’s power and authority within the Dominican Republic replicates itself through both myth and experience, which determine the reality under which people live. The fukú is the manifestation of magical realism’s hybridization. Díaz suggests that while directly created by the influence of whiteness, fukú americanus in the novel does not primarily function in the domain of Western whiteness, as represented by the city of Paterson. Rather, the fukú relies on the hybridized fluctuations between smooth and striated spaces in the Dominican Republic to operate.

As fukú works within the uniquely striated hybrid spaces in the Dominican Republic, its counter, zafa, seems to largely manifest in smooth spaces within Díaz’s novel as represented by the Dominican countryside and the book itself, which is smooth because Yúnior dictates the terms of its existence without being beholden to the rules of someone else. Díaz describes zafa as appearing to both Oscar and his mother in separate dire situations in the form of a magical mongoose in an empty sugar cane field. Zafa comes in the form of a warning to Beli and Oscar, who see men with no faces as they are being forced into mortally dangerous situations. Zafa’s manifestation in the novel seems to serve Beli and Oscar by allowing them to cling to life when power is exercised over them for breaking the rules established by the hegemonic order in the Dominican Republic. While zafa is a manifestation of smooth spaces where the rules of power shift or do not exist, fukú manifests as the result of exercised power, the striations placed on both urban America and Beli’s hometown in the Dominican Republic. The striations put on

landscapes inhabited by individuals are fantasy, immaterial, and constructed by humankind. They are made real, however, through their impacts on individual lives or collections of individual lives. Yuniór's narrative footnotes describing the terror inflicted on the Dominican Republic by Trujillo are what legends are made of, and the far-ranging repercussions of Trujillo's reign carry lasting personal effects on Oscar's family across generations.

Yuniór's elucidation of Trujillo's history and impact as dictator of the Dominican Republic within extensive footnotes structurally mirrors the function of magical realism within a text, as defined by Maria Takolander. Takolander notes that the way "magical realist texts narrate the patently untrue as though it is perfectly true" (96) creates structural irony within fiction. Díaz's Yuniór employs magical realism as irony within his narration, but also sets up a structural irony through his long footnotes chronicling Trujillo's history. While the inclusion of a footnote might indicate that the content within is somehow less important to the narrative than the words contained in the body of a text, Yuniór makes it clear through both his footnotes and Trujillo's presence within the body of the novel itself that Trujillo is not a minor character in this saga. Rather, Trujillo's influence on the lives of those within the novel is critical, a defining feature of life in his Dominican Republic. Takolander's argument of magical realism functioning to "advocate a self-conscious commitment to history as the key to an empowered future" within the novel can extend to Yuniór's use of footnotes. While magical realism legitimates the fantastic through its juxtaposition to elements accepted by hegemonic whiteness as "normal," Díaz's inclusion of Trujillo's story within footnotes—which serve the purpose of providing background information deemed important enough to include but with little place in the narrative—creates a similar structural contradiction. Yuniór describes Trujillo's role in creating and administering the oppression that eventually kills Oscar as critically important to the story

then subverts that importance by relegating much of Trujillo's narrative to the footnotes. Structurally, the footnotes serve the same function within the text as Díaz's use of magical realism—to commit to both the fantasy of Trujillo and the reality of the tangible impacts of fantasy on the lives of individuals.

Oscar's adherence to the magic or fantasy he constructs in his mind throughout his experiences as the son of an immigrant in America and his experiences as the American son of a Dominican woman in her country of origin echo his mother's reliance on self-grandeur to cope throughout the hardships she endured during her childhood in the Dominican Republic. Hypatía Belecía Cabral was born to Abelard Luis Cabral, a doctor, and his wife Socorro, a nurse. Their family had enough standing in the Dominican Republic that they found themselves not infrequently in the presence of El Jefe, Trujillo himself, who takes a liking to Abelard's oldest daughter. Abelard's attempts to keep his daughters and wife out of Trujillo's sight eventually brings the fukú down on the family, leading to Abelard's imprisonment on the ambiguous charge of "Slander and gross calumny against the Person of the President" (Díaz 233). Beli is sold as an orphan to an abusive household "until La Inca—her father's favorite cousin—had finally managed to track her down (rescue her, really) and brought her out of the Darkness of those days and into the light of Baní" (Díaz 82). While Beli's diminished status as an orphan who was "rough around the edges" (Díaz 82), as well as her "darkskinned media-campesina ass," seen as far inferior in the midst of "whiteskinned children of the regime's top ladronazos" (Díaz 83), might have humbled her, Beli refuses to demure to the expectations placed on her in the Dominican Republic's highly hierarchical society under Trujillo. Díaz describes Beli as defiant in a position which "given the delicacy of the situation, another girl might have adjusted the polarity of her persona to better fit in, would have kept her head down and survived by ignoring"

(83) the insults she faced. But Beli refuses to be delicate or accommodating of the judgments of others, choosing instead to embrace her feelings of being “utterly exposed” (Díaz 83) and put herself on further display, both aggressively attacking those who would insult her and pursuing her own desires relentlessly after she reaches the “Summer of Her Secondary Sex Characteristics” (Díaz 91). By thoroughly rejecting the expected behavior for a female of little means within Trujillo’s striated Dominican Republic, Beli creates her own magical borderland through which to navigate. Beli’s experience as a youth in the Dominican Republic shows that belonging and assimilation go beyond national identity. Her experience cutting across lines of class and social standing further highlights difficulties in defining assimilation by emphasizing how even within one culture, belonging is determined by far more than shared identity.

Beli’s efforts to voyage through the world smoothly with little regard for the rules imposed by the oppressive system in which she lives are reflected in her experiences of the supernatural, as she sinks into a fantasy life not based in the reality of her position as an orphan of little means in the highly stratified society of her Dominican city. After a string of affairs with men, Beli falls in love with a man she calls the Gangster, which seems to reawaken the fukú—Trujillo’s mythological and metaphysical wrath—which her father brought upon the family. Beli begins seeing unnatural things as she moves through the world breaking the rules of hierarchy in the Dominican Republic. Shortly before finding out that the Gangster not only has a wife, his wife is Trujillo’s sister, Beli sees a man who “*had no face*” (Díaz 135), a sight that reoccurs throughout her experience of consequences for becoming impregnated by a man with a powerful wife. Beli sees her pregnancy as “the magic she’d been waiting for” (Díaz 136), a subversion of a biologically natural occurrence as supernatural. This subversion results from a youth defined by resisting the ‘natural’ expectations that the double oppression of Trujillo’s regime as a

dictator backed by Western hegemony has placed on Beli's existence. Barriers between natural and unnatural are blurred in the Dominican city serving as a borderland, and her "magic" pregnancy leads to her kidnapping by Trujillo's sister's men, during which she sees another man without a face (141). Beli's experience of visions of men without faces during her magical pregnancy are juxtaposed with La Inca's fervent prayers for her safety, calling on the women of the community to join her. In framing the two characters' experiences of the supernatural in this way, Díaz subverts the expectations of magical realism as dealing primarily with the uncanny, unfamiliar, and foreign by describing the prayers and practice of Judeo-Christianity as supernatural, powerful enough to cause La Inca to feel "her spirit begin to loose itself from its earthly pinions" (Díaz 145). Díaz's use of magical realism to describe the intersection of Dominican culture and western Christianity resists the rules by which we define magic vs. religion, showing how magical realism as a narrative device can work though striated spaces and cultures smoothly.

The magic Beli holds on to through living in a fantasy of her own making, as well as the magic that ultimately saves her from being murdered by Trujillo's sister, only seem to work in the Dominican Republic. Notably, however, the magic in pursuit of her—the fukú—also, in her case, only seems to work in the Dominican Republic. Knowing that she needed to put geographical distance between the curse that would try to kill Beli, La Inca prays for the solution to saving Beli's life, and dreams that her dead husband comes to tell her to send Beli to New York. She first thinks, "His otherworldly advice was too terrible to consider. Exile to the North! To Nueva York, a city so foreign she herself had never had the ovaries to visit" (Díaz 158) but quickly realizes that the foreignness of New York is the very thing that will save Beli by removing her from the land of the magic with which they are familiar, the hybrid curse of fukú.

Within the striations of New York, and later Paterson, too strongly representative of the city as a machine of economic perpetuation of hegemonic whiteness, the rules of reality are too grounded in the rules of urban life, preventing the magic of the Dominican Republic from following them there. While these Western transnational cities are inhabited by individuals living in borderlands between cultures, the Western cities are too entrenched in the order that imposes Deleuze and Guattari's striations—too far removed from the magical “other” present in the Dominican Republic—for the influence of Trujillo's regime to impact Beli in direct ways. Still, despite the distance staving off Trujillo's curse, his reach extends far enough to have forced Beli to alter her life drastically by leaving her home and the fantasy she created for herself. Later, when Oscar undergoes a similar experience of being beaten and left for dead in a cane field, Beli's impulse mirrors that of La Inca decades earlier. Like La Inca, “as soon as moms de León got a green light from the doctors she called the airlines” (Díaz 300), knowing that the only way to remove Oscar from the supernatural curse following their family and to break the fantasy he has created in his mind is to send him back to Paterson to reimpose the rules of urban America on Oscar, suppressing his fantasy through the oppressive reality of his position within the socioeconomic order of the American city.

The tangible impacts on Oscar of the fantasy employed by Trujillo to establish and preserve the power of his regime begin with Oscar's grandfather, Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral. The fantasy is perpetuated through his brutal exercise of power, lending Trujillo a reputation that precedes him in all interactions. As Abelard's excuses and attempts to keep Trujillo from the women in his family grow more and more desperate, Trujillo's brutality manifests itself in his life through both fantasy and reality. Ultimately, Abelard's downfall doesn't necessitate Trujillo's physical presence. Rather, Abelard makes a joke which may or may not have included

Trujillo's reputation for storing dead bodies in trunks as the punchline (Díaz 233). Trujillo's presence in the hearts and minds of those suffering under his regime imbues him with supernatural powers; he is able to take down his perceived enemies by manipulating the truth and creating charges with little basis in reality. While some might argue that this influence doesn't count as "magic," Yúnior establishes that within the paradigm of Trujillo's regime, this influence is the basis of the *fukú*, which infiltrates and destroys its victims through multiple generations. The magic of *fukú* is as real as its impact on individuals' lives; it is as real as Trujillo's ability to use his power to manipulate fantasy into reality, to "incur a *fukú* most powerful, down to the seventh generation and beyond" (Díaz 3). Yúnior makes clear that an individual doesn't have to believe in the fantasy to be affected by it, allowing that "It's perfectly fine if you don't believe in these 'superstitions.' In fact, it's better than fine—it's perfect. Because no matter what you believe, *fukú* believes in you" (Díaz 5).

Trujillo's *fukú* works against Beli and her son Oscar throughout the novel. When Beli falls in love with the Gangster, it is Trujillo's sister who sends men to kidnap and murder her. When Oscar finally attempts to have a heteronormative relationship with an older woman speculated to be a former prostitute, Ybón, her boyfriend turns out to be working for "Demon Balaguer" (Díaz 294), who had served Trujillo in his reign. And throughout their troubles, both Beli and Oscar receive supernatural warnings as they see men with no faces, books with blank pages, and are both saved by the recurring appearance of a black mongoose with golden eyes. Díaz's descriptions of the *zafa*, or counterspell to the *fukú* following Oscar's family are interesting in their failure to conform to the same standard of mythology under which Trujillo's *fukú* relies to assist its effectiveness. The mongoose does not seem to be a trope of Dominican culture. Rather, it seems to exist solely for Oscar and his family as an ironically fantastic or

magical hold onto reality in times of deep peril. However, notably, both the mongoose and the men with no faces only exist within the Dominican Republic, a hybridized landscape with Western influence in its cities, but far smoother, magical space outside of the city's bounds. Manning notes that "By focusing on the *páginos en blanco*, the novel becomes a dynamic entity, and like *Beli*, it recreates itself anew through a constant metamorphosis in narration" (153). While Manning views the blank pages in the book as representing a desire to erase the narratives imposed on *Beli* and Oscar by the systems in which they live, I posit that these *páginos en blanco*—the books with blank pages—offer a metaphysical representation of Deleuze and Guattari's smooth space to which Oscar steadfastly clings upon which to write his own fantasy of existence. Oscar insists on living outside of the striations imposed by Western hegemony with the city as its organizing principle. Both in the transnational urban environment of Paterson in America, and the highly hybridized but brutally policed city in which he lives in the Dominican Republic, Oscar refuses to accept the rules imposed on him.

Díaz's *páginos en blanco* ultimately exist for Oscar and *Beli* as places where the fantasy-made-reality of life in the Dominican Republic cannot exercise authority over their narratives. At the end of the novel, Yuniór similarly questions his motivation for narrating and compiling Oscar's story, telling the reader, "Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell" (Díaz 7). Interestingly, through his determination to narrate Oscar's story, Yuniór makes attempts to reclaim his own narrative, pushing back against his own narrative of toxic masculinity as manifested through his inability to hold a relationship with a woman without cheating on her. While he acknowledges the ways in which he himself fits the stereotype of the Dominican male that Oscar fails to embody, Yuniór seeks redemption through his attempts at getting Oscar to improve his life, a self-imposed "Bootie-Rehab" (Díaz

175) during which Yuniór tries to change his ways by changing Oscar. Oscar's story as Yuniór's zafa emphasizes the importance of re-claiming one's narrative while striving for authenticity against forces that would attempt to assimilate or define an individual outside of their lived experiences. If the fukú as the curse of whiteness is read as the attempt of white Western hegemony to impose itself on individuals who adopt transnational, hybrid identities or otherwise resist hegemony by holding on to cultural practices othered as abnormal, then Díaz is clearly defining zafa as the reclamation of one's own narrative. This reclamation can come in the form of an insistence on living a transnationally authentic life, redefining the borderland one inhabits within fluctuating striations of the transnational urban. If the fukú is forced assimilation based on nationalist ideas, zafa represents movement within the borders of cultures, between the striations set in place by power structures in the Western world.

While magical realism as a theoretical apparatus typically serves to highlight differences between colonized individuals and their colonizers, the expected and the foreign, the familiar and the uncanny, Díaz subverts the genre by using it to show us that fantasy *is* reality—they overlap and coexist within systems in borders between cultures for hybridized individuals despite standards imposed on them by western hegemony. Throughout *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz seems to use magical realism to show that fantasy is tangible, but manifests in very specific geographic divides. In Díaz's novel, magic can only exist where not only hybridization occurs, but where striations smooth out. In heavily striated environments, even those in constant flux such as the transnational urban, the magic of magical realism ceases to exist in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. By separating the magic of magical realism from sites of hybridization, Díaz seems to suggest that the transnational is increasingly becoming the world's *modus operandi* by showing that though magical realism is a product of

transnationalism, magic has moved outside of the realm of the transnational, existing separately in only the smoothest of spaces. Oscar's story is unique from many because he moves with a Deleuzian smoothness through two punishingly striated but very distinctly transnational environments. In his urban high school populated largely by immigrants or the children of immigrants, he is seen as a loser because of his obsession for genre fiction that extends so deep that he is unable to extricate himself from the fantasy he has created. In the Dominican Republic, he is not taken seriously because he does not embody masculinity. But Oscar lives in a world in which fantasy and reality are one and the same within social constructs, and as such, does not choose to live his life by the expectations inherent within those social constructs. Oscar is not a typical hero in this story, but Oscar unapologetically lives in his own fantasy which he attempts to make real, moving between striations and smoothness in society without compromising his principles, however unique they may seem to those around him. Unfortunately, this mode of existence does not ultimately serve individuals moving through the transnational urban. Yuniór, offered as a grounding, assimilative force trying to bring Oscar back to the socioeconomic reality in which they live, eventually must reconcile his own fantasy centered around the Cabral family through his friendship with Oscar and love for Oscar's sister Lola, makes sense of his own inner turmoil by putting Oscar's fantasy to paper. Through narrating Díaz's novel, Yuniór shows the reader that hybridization is necessary to survive in increasingly transnational urban environments. However, hybridization must work within the striations of reality.

De-colonizing our approach to writing and thinking about experiences that could be described as having qualities of magical realism is key to breaking down the borders between cultures that white hegemony would place in the minds of those who rely on white hegemony for their sense of stability and self. Díaz's novel offers a unique platform for looking at the ways in

which hybridization serves individuals living in transnational environments, and how transnational influences are becoming normalized and at times used to further the interests of Western hegemony. The transnational spaces within *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* exist on a continuum between heavily striated like both the largely immigrant community of Paterson or smooth and largely free of the impositions of socioeconomic order like the cane fields where both Beli and Oscar are abandoned but find redemption through the efforts of the Mongoose. The Dominican Republic under the regime of a Western-backed dictator represents a space somewhere between as the embodiment of magical realism – the genre represented through place. What this framework means for belonging is the point continually returned to throughout this project—true belonging is built on adaptability in a multitude of conditions of place, rather than defined through a mode of assimilation built on characteristics of sameness.

## CODA

A New York Times article from 2017 describes how the word assimilation “has its roots in the Latin ‘simulare,’ meaning to make similar” (Lalami). But what does it mean in practice to make people similar? Is similarity even a meaningful goal to achieve? Nationalist rhetoric periodically elevated in our media discourse often speaks of assimilation in terms that seem to center national identity—with characteristics of white, Western hegemony as its base—as the most important assimilative variable by which we should coexist with one another in the United States. What I hope to accomplish by looking at immigrant narratives and the modes of assimilation present in this literature is to raise the question of whether or not a movement toward similarity is feasible or productive in a world in flux due to increasing interconnectivity across the globe. The idea I hope to advance in response to that question is that because cities—particularly highly interconnected transnational cities—are the sites where individuals work and live, cities should also serve as a starting point for generating community and membership rather than elevating ideas of national identity as an end point for modes of assimilation oriented toward maintaining in-group exclusivity. National identity at best can only serve as a simulacrum or caricature of what it means to be a human living among other humans searching for belonging and community, particularly in globalized countries whose demographics are becoming more diverse over time. Kwame Anthony Appiah challenges the idea that we live in “a world in which conflicts arise, ultimately, from conflicts between values” (8). He argues that often what differentiates individuals from different cultural backgrounds is not our values, but our responses to values as exemplified in “our acts, our thoughts, and our feelings” (location 566). If people from different cultural backgrounds living together within the same municipal bounds can come to agree that in general, humans are generally motivated by the same basic needs and desires as

driven by pursuit of survival and community, we can perhaps further uncouple our ideas of belonging with national identity or other markers of cultural similarity, and instead focus on community building that advances the interests of people broadly rather than advancing the interests of “people like me” based on an arbitrary identifier.

Fortunately, scholars from across disciplines have taken up this question. In his book, *If Mayors Ruled The World*, Benjamin Barber promotes a world governed by a network of transnational cities where citizenship is conceived of locally, rather than tied to a larger national identity. He expands on a concept of “glocality” in which cities would work together to solve global problems that impact all, emphasizing that “glocality strengthens local citizenship and then piggybacks global citizenship on it” (Barber 21). Barber sees the city as the most logical unit of democracy – an organizational unit by which individuals can most easily make rules and regulations for life logically and compassionately. Each work analyzed in this project exhibits some measure of the “bottom up citizenship” (5) of glocality espoused by Barber, showing how the idea already has purchase in the lives of transnational individuals. Rather than having an identity that is distinctly American or distinctly Nigerian, Ifemelu in Adichie’s *Americanah* builds her life around blogging observations of transnationality around her. Henry Park in *Native Speaker* leverages his transnational identity to move seamlessly through differing cultural communities within the city for his own advantage, while initially admiring John Kwang’s similar ability to appeal to individuals broadly across the city rather than entrenching himself in his culture of origin. Tommy Orange’s Native American individuals subvert rules of city and nation in order to build their own communities and congregate across tribal bounds. Oscar Wao lives his life with little regard to the expectations of either Western hegemony or his Dominican heritage, instead immersing himself in a fantasy of his own creation which is impacted by the

hybridized cities in which he moves. These characters do not abide typical striations imposed top down onto cities from centralized governments. Rather, they live their lives at a local—yet highly transnational—level of community only possible within globally interconnected cities.

Through this project, I have aimed to outline a new mode through which assimilation can be defined. As examined through the chapters in this project, assimilation into the transnational world occurs as individuals move through spaces, adapting readily to changing conditions brought about by increased movement of people and resources throughout the globe. The texts analyzed within this project demonstrate that belonging and success are often distinct from national identity and are not contingent on abandoning one culture for another. Instead, success and belonging are found independently of these variables. The individuals in these texts who achieve the greatest successes or belonging are those that show flexibility. Movements emphasizing nationalist mindsets are often the antithesis of adaptability and flexibility. But life within a transnational city necessitates an adaptability that allows one to move through different cultural spaces without losing oneself. The most successful individuals are those who avoid becoming entrenched in one particular identity, instead moving through the fluctuating striations of the transnational city with particularity.

Looking past fictional accounts of immigrant narratives, one can look to the work of transnational figures like Valeria Luiselli to see transnational assimilation in motion. In the Introduction to her book, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions*, Luiselli remarks about the United States “that the cruelty of its borders was only a thin crust” (2). She says that “once you’re here, you’re ready to give everything, or almost everything, to stay and play a part in the great theater of belonging” (2). Luiselli’s assertion that immigrants are willing to “give everything” (2) implies a sacrifice of giving up the place from whence one came, but her

metaphor of assimilation as playing “a part in the great theater of belonging” (2) suggests a different phenomenon entirely. The metaphor Luiselli creates reveals that immigrants do not have to give up their identity in order to integrate themselves into life in America—rather they learn to adapt and play new roles in the world around them. Her suggestion that assimilation is performative supports a definition of assimilation as the ability to adapt in a changing, increasingly transnational world, as demonstrated by the characters operating in the texts described in this project.

Beyond Luiselli’s commentary on immigration and identity and her own transnational movements, Luiselli embodies a similar kind of civic citizenship demonstrated by the individuals discussed through the literature in this project. Luiselli herself is an immigrant from Mexico, living and working in the United States as a successful academic and author. The span of Luiselli’s writing demonstrates a deep engagement with not only the individuals with which she comes into contact in her transnational movements, but also the physical places in which she finds herself within the cities she travels and makes her home. *Tell Me How It Ends* describes a snapshot of Luiselli’s life in New York City. Luiselli’s life in New York City is not defined by her status as a Mexican immigrant or her aspiration to live in America. Rather, she defines her experience in the book through her work in using her bilingual abilities to work as an immigration court translator for children from Central America trying to apply for asylum in the United States. Luiselli’s efforts in helping these children are not positioned from a place of wanting to help children who share her national origin and desire to live in the United States. Rather, her work is positioned as efforts to use a particular set of skills she has based on her transnational identity in order to help fill a specific need for children within the city in which she lives.

Luiselli's book begins with the question, "Why did you come to the United States?" (7) which is also the first question on the questionnaire she translates for migrant children. The answer to this question is rarely straightforward, but ultimately all support the notion that motivation for migration and mobility is almost always related to security and belonging (10-11). Whether this belonging manifests through "reunification with a parent or another close relative who migrated to the U.S. years earlier" (11) or as the desire to escape unbearable living conditions, the underlying motivations that cause these migrant children to make the journey into the United States bears resemblance to the motivations claimed by those who loudly advocate to keep these children out of the country. This similarity of desiring security, safety, and family, as motivations for two political positions in direct opposition to one another (the rise of acceptance of immigration to the United States and the rise of white nationalism in response) should give pause to those who actively work against allowing others the chance to seek belonging and opportunity and reunification with family. Belonging, power, entitlement, and citizenship are ultimately mutable – those that have these things can lose them, and they can be dangerous when inconsistently and arbitrarily applied or distributed. These abstract categories are the measures by which individuals determine how other individuals should be treated both personally and under the laws of the governments under which we live. The words by which people are described matter. Throughout this project, I have relied on words like "immigrant" to describe people moving transnationally for myriad reasons. These words are increasingly imbued with stark, political ramifications. In looking closely at the texts covered in this project, the authors herein continually demonstrate that the application of labels that sometimes carry derogatory connotations have real, tangible effects that hinder belonging. To combat the narratives that would vilify difference and deride immigrants, stories and accounts that cultivate empathy

should be raised up. Ultimately, membership matters. Belonging matters. But assimilation by any definition does not guarantee those things. It is up to each individual to decide what treatment of others they are willing to support and tolerate, and to decide what similarities and differences truly matter to them.

Luiselli notes how “that fourth sentence in the well-known Miranda rights—‘If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you’—does not apply” to those without United States citizenship. But Luiselli’s own participation in the civic project of helping immigrant children attempt to find belonging in the United States underscores a citizenship that transcends national boundaries. The civic citizenship Luiselli lives relies on working within the structure of the city to help those within her immediate range of accessibility with the particular talents and skills that she has at her use. While the individuals in the narratives described in this project perhaps do not all use their skills and talents as generously to the benefit of other people as Luiselli does through her work and advocacy, they reflect the same civic mindedness and determination to engage with their immediate city surroundings rather than adhering to nationalist modes of identity to dictate how they belong within the communities in which they live. What these texts and Luiselli’s example show are the ways in which transnationality within individuals intersects with striations and smoothing within increasingly global cities, supporting living with greater regard to glocality than national identity. Within cities, transnational individuals can adapt to changes and build community and identity through globally connected systems, creating diverse communities that may not easily fit into a national mode of similarity, but may offer greater support to a broader range of individuals living within them.

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