

**READING SPECULATIVE SUBJECTIVITIES:
THE SECOND GENERATION AND THE AFTERLIFE OF MIGRATION**

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Abstract

This dissertation takes a transethnic, transnational, relational, and comparative approach to literature about the children of immigrants, the “second generation.” It argues that second generation is a distinct subject position that is shaped but not wholly defined by race, ethnicity, and nation and, as such, ought to be considered across these boundaries. Negotiations of this subject position itself are also inflected by other factors that are not ethnically or nationally bound, including but not limited to gender, sexuality, age, class, and spirituality. I further argue that, by analyzing second-generation texts from diverse contexts and with diverse forms and styles, the central characteristic and themes of second-generation-focused literature can be discerned. The defining characteristic of second-generation texts and their representation of second-generation subjectivity is a focus on intergenerational relationships with immigrant parents or the first generation more broadly and the enduring effects and affects of that generation’s migration. This characteristic finds its expression through the central themes prevalent in second-generation-focused texts. This project takes up two such themes, the process of coming of age and the relationship between myth, memory, and history, through the analysis and comparison of four nationally and ethnically disparate texts, Lê thi diem thuy’s *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*, David Chariandy’s *Soucouyant*, and Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. I argue that these texts have a future-facing orientation that might seem at odds with the melancholy tones that suffuse them. Despite being deeply interested in looking backwards at how nations and migrations came to be, the second-generation-focused text always seems to turn towards the future. The past of the homeland and the past of the place of settlement are sites of inquiry but not of experience; there is no “back home” to remember as an escape from the flaws of here. As such, second-generation-focused texts are deeply invested in imagining futures that are rooted in an understanding of the past but also a necessary distancing from it, and a skeptical approach to the nation and to racial and ethnic essentialisms.

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At this end of one journey and beginning of another, I am all joy, gratitude, and love.

At other times it seemed the most natural thing in the world that I should remember things that went on before I was born, things that happened in other lifetimes. They happened to me; I was there, and the memories are continuous. Why should they be anything but? I did not realize that other people did not have these memories. I did not think of myself as a child afflicted by history, unable to escape its delights or its torments.

Larissa Lai, *Salt Fish Girl*

History wasn't an easy thing to learn, seemed to be what I was learning. It wasn't a static story about dead people. It was a revolving door fraught with ghosts still straining to tell their version and turn your head, multifaceted and blinding as a cut diamond.

Tanuja Desai Hidier, *Born Confused*

I have lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in nations of others, become a time of gathering. Gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees; gathering on the edge of 'foreign' cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gathering in the ghettos or cafés of city centres; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another's language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the present.

Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

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Looking Sideways: An Introduction

In *elsewhere, within here*, Trinh T. Minh-ha writes that it is clear “for many Third World members of the diaspora that their sense of group solidarity, of ethnic and national identity has been nourished in the milieus of the immigrant, the refugee and the exiled. Here, identity is a product of articulation. It lies at the intersection of dwelling and traveling and is a claim of continuity within discontinuity (and vice-versa)” (31). Trinh’s powerful and poetic description of the way that identity is continuously shaped by migration does not end with people who have themselves migrated. The immigrant, the refugee, and the exiled often produce and raise children whose experiences, while distinct from those of their parents, nevertheless still emerge from these intersections of dwelling and travelling. Despite being born or raised from a young age in one nation-state, despite having no personal memory of the experience of migration, the second generation lives the afterlife of migration through a complex set of relationships: with immigrant parents and the first generation more broadly, with an ancestral homeland of which they have a limited and heavily mediated experience, and with a site of settlement and perhaps also citizenship to which they ostensibly belong but which often casts them as an outsider. Artists from a wide variety of ethnic and national backgrounds have produced creative works – novels, poetry, plays, films, and graphic novels, among other forms – that depict and examine these relationships. Literatures of the children of immigrants – “the second generation” – produce powerful representations of Trinh’s process of articulation through the ways that journeys of migration reverberate throughout settlement and establishment so that the past is always present with the present and the present is always reshaping its connection to the past, producing an uncertain but powerful projection of the future.

Texts that focus on second-generation characters, particularly those that centre racialized

characters, are commonly approached through an ethnonational or a diasporic model. In this dissertation, I put forward another approach, using examples from three national contexts, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, that represent a variety of ethnic identities, while paying close attention to how these national and ethnic signs move in the world. I argue that “second generation” is a distinct subject position that is not exclusively defined by ethnicity and nationality. Rather, it is the journey of migration that creates this subject position more than the points at either end of the passage, even as the “elsewhere(s)” (ancestral homelands), the “here” (the place of settlement and establishment), and the relationship between the two structure the lives of immigrants and their children in profound and distinct ways. Negotiations of this subject position itself are also inflected by other factors that are not ethnically or nationally bound, including but not limited to gender, sexuality, age, class, and spirituality. While the term “second generation” can refer to any and all children of immigrants, this project is specifically concerned with second-generation subjects who are racialized in their country of residence, because of the centrality of the process of racialization to second-generation-focused texts representing a variety of different ethnic and national contexts.

A comparative approach to second-generation-focused literature that purposefully crosses ethnic and national borders, while still attending to their significance but without privileging them, creates room for nuanced and productive readings of second-generation texts and resists the essentialization and reification of ethnic and racial categories as well as national identities.

This approach takes its cue from Avtar Brah’s compelling claim that

the constitution of subjectivity within heterogeneous discursive practices means that we inhabit articulating and changing identities interweaving across relations of race, gender, class or sexuality. How we work with and across our ‘differences’

would depend upon the political and conceptual frameworks which inform our understanding of these 'differences'. It is our political perspectives and commitments that determine the basis for effective coalition building. I believe that coalitions are possible through a politics of identification, as opposed to a 'politics of identity'. (93)

A politics of identification moves away from the search for some intrinsic sameness and towards a sense of shared positioning and strategy for managing such positioning. This project takes up a politics of identification through its exploration of an idea of second-generation positionality that does not take difference for granted but rather seeks to understand its shape and contours. This project also attempts to remain attentive to the matters of race, class, sexuality, and gender in the representation of second-generation positionality, with a particular eye to the ways that race and gender interact with one another. Taking its place at the intersections of multiple axes of identity and power, second-generation literature enacts the process of articulation of which Trinh and Brah speak, offering imaginative engagement with immigrant pasts that reject nationalist futures in a variety of contexts and through various aesthetic means, and projecting speculative futures that insist on new ways of reading and seeing the afterlife of migration.

The defining characteristic of second-generation texts and their representation of second-generation subjectivity is a focus on intergenerational relationships with immigrant parents or the first generation more broadly and the enduring effects and affects of that generation's migration. While this characteristic is certainly tied to the personal and the subjective, it is also deeply intertwined with political and cultural processes and contexts. The complexities of the relationship between generations are not strictly familial matters. Some generational readings of immigrant families (both sociological and textual) make the mistake of accepting the idea of the

private sphere, in which the conflicts of immigrant families are non-political and solely cultural, based on a self-evident “culture clash” between the “traditional” home culture and the “modernity” of Canada, the United States, or the United Kingdom.¹ In reaction to this issue, Lisa Lowe rejects the “master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation” as the primary means of interpreting Asian-American culture because they essentialize and homogenize Asian-American people and “privatize social struggles” (135). Lowe’s critique of this approach to the immigrant family is insightful and important, but rather than take it as an endorsement of throwing out a generational model altogether, I see her argument as pointing out the need to repoliticize readings of generational divides, highlighting the complex ways that they interact with the material struggles, political contexts, and societal pressures that surround and constitute them. This contention is grounded in my engagement throughout this dissertation with erin Khuê Ninh’s brilliant monograph, *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature*, which makes a strong case for a politically astute reading of intergenerational relationships in the same body of literature that Lowe explores. I explore Ninh’s argument in great detail in my discussion of coming-of-age narratives but I want to foreground here her goal of recognizing the immigrant familial space as inherently politically complex and not outside of any discussion of the so-called outside forces that shape immigrant and second-generation life; while she acknowledges that “there is no question that the losses of immigration matter, that institutional racism and media representation figure into the second-generation experience,” she rightly contends that “so too does power [feature] in the most intimate, vulnerable, and formative

¹ Avtar Brah incisively critiques the “simple bipolar cleavage” of the culture clash in the Asian British context, arguing that there is no unitary British culture or Asian culture and that “the emphasis on ‘culture clash’ disavows the possibility of cultural interaction and fusion,” and ignores the fact that “conflict is often a sign of the power relations underpinning cultural hierarchies rather than of ‘culture clash’ *per se*” (40–41). Her points are just as relevant in the context of Canada and the United States.

social contexts – one which may demand that the subject compensate for familial losses by successfully navigating hostile social and political waters, and which may very well redouble the stakes of ‘racial’ failure” (5). A generational reading is one that foregrounds the relational not at the expense of other frames but in conjunction with them. Ninh’s monograph is an important intervention in literary criticism of second-generation literature, and while its focus is Asian American, its approach, insights, and conclusions are deeply relevant to a wide variety of second-generation-focused texts emerging from other national and racial contexts.

This project rejects a focus on generational conflict over tradition, by considering how the generations constitute each other and do not adhere to the narrative of progressive westernization. Popular and to a certain extent sociological discourse assumes that second-generation subjects are naturally more “westernized” than their parents,² moving closer to the ideal, nativized citizen constructed in a given nationalist discourse. Second-generation-focused texts offer a different, more complex view of the afterlife of migration as a process that leads to becoming “unlike both” rather than “more like one,” even for those who do not themselves experience the initial migration. In the majority of second-generation texts, the characters fail to become ideal national subjects, even when they try very hard to be. Yet this failure is primarily portrayed as, if not a good thing, then at least an inevitable one, due to the inherently exclusive nature of nationalist ideologies. I argue that these texts demonstrate that while the immigrant parents have been legally naturalized to the nation as citizens, their children nevertheless remain unnatural to the nation, and the texts are actively engaged in working through the ways that second-generation subjects’ negotiation of their unsettled state can become a creative force rather than a disabling one. David Chariandy makes a strong case for this turn when he argues that “we

² The idea that second-generation subjects are more westernized is implicit in the culture clash narrative that predominates popular discussion of immigrant and second-generation relationships.

have moved into a moment in which belonging has been revealed as a fiction. Second-generation black writing in Canada tells us this. But it also tells us that, belonging or not, we can continue to live both ethically and soulfully” (“The Fiction of Belonging” 828). In this way, this project aims to repoliticize reading immigrant families and de-pathologize second-generation unbelonging.

A generational model for reading second-generation-focused texts also offers the space to differentiate between immigrant and second-generation writing, and such a distinction is vital because of the particular discursive potential of second-generation-focused texts to challenge nationalist discourses in a different way from immigrant-focused texts. Second-generation texts reveal the lie of the national romance. This is their great symbolic power to the wider reading public. Much immigrant literature can be integrated into the nationalist narrative – immigrant struggles are part of what prove the immigrant’s worthiness to belong. In contrast, second-generation-focused texts show that those immigrant struggles do not result in total acceptance and a place within the supposedly coherent, essentially benevolent nation-state. But more than working as documents of alienation, the texts examined in this dissertation ask the question, what now? If the national romance is a fantasy, or rather a promise that cannot be fulfilled, how might the supposed heirs to it develop a different meaning for themselves, a different sense of their place? There is no single answer to these questions just as there is no unitary second-generation experience. But these questions preoccupy much second-generation writing, producing a future-facing orientation that might seem at odds with the melancholy tones that suffuse many of the texts. Despite being deeply interested in looking backwards at how nations and migrations came to be, second-generation writers always seem to turn their eyes to the future. The past of the homeland and the past of the place of settlement are sites of inquiry but not of experience; there is no “back home” to remember as an escape from the flaws of here. Elsewhere has never truly

been home.

In order to explore the ways that the afterlife of migration and intergenerationality are represented in second-generation texts, I further identify two common themes that these texts take up so that I may show the contours and particularities of the two larger foci: the process of coming of age and the relationship between myth, memory, and history. Though each of these themes relates to intergenerationality and the afterlife of migration, I approach these matters from different angles that, together, offer a nuanced view of their workings. Both themes are present in all of the texts examined in this dissertation, but I have chosen to focus in each section on the two texts that are most explicitly concerned with each theme. The overlapping nature of these themes suggests that they inform each other; the process of coming of age is shaped by the passing on or suppression of myths, memories, and histories that result from migration, which are themselves mediated by the familial intergenerational relationship, which is the relationship that catalyzes the process of coming of age. Thus, these themes are not discrete; they are the complex web of matters that second-generation-focused texts weave together in order to create nuanced and evocative representations of second-generation subjectivity.

What Is Second Generation?

In the most simplistic sense, “second generation” refers to the children of migrants. I use the term in this study to refer to the children of immigrants, and also the children of refugees and other forced migrants. Sometimes the term “first generation” is used to describe this group, in order to indicate that they are the first in their family to be born in the adopted country; this identification, however, does not acknowledge the presence and the citizenship of migrant parents in the adopted country. While the term “second generation” typically refers to children born in the country to which their parents migrated, I argue for the inclusion of those sometimes

referred to as “one-and-a-half generation immigrants” – a term coined by Rubén Rumbaut for those who were born in their parental home country and immigrated with their parents as children (Zhou 65) – because they did not make the decision to immigrate themselves and have spent much of their formative years in the country of settlement. There may be significant differences between the experiences of those born in the adopted country and those who arrived as children, and by encapsulating them within the same term, I by no means intend to disregard these differences. Nevertheless, I believe that cultural production concerned with “1.5ers” can be more productively considered alongside second-generation-focused works than those centered on adult immigrants, whose socialization and identity formation take place in the homeland.

As a descriptor, “second generation” is generally followed by a third word. When used specifically, the third word is the country of citizenship; for example, second-generation Canadian. In order to note ethnic identification, a fourth term can be included: second-generation Korean Canadian. When not used in reference to a specific individual or group, the use of “second-generation” as a compound adjective becomes trickier. Often, the term “second-generation immigrants” is used (“The Fiction of Belonging” 819).³ This construction is particularly common in news media; for instance, the *Toronto Star* announces, “Toronto a divided city; second-generation immigrants feel left out,” while the *Toronto Sun* laments, “Second-generation immigrants prone to unhealthy Canadian lifestyle”; even *Canadian Immigrant* magazine claims that “second-generation immigrants fulfill parents’ dreams by becoming successful in Canada.” The term “second-generation immigrants” is misleading but also somewhat telling in terms of how second-generation subjects may be perceived. Second-generation subjects are, after all, not immigrants. To immigrate is an act; an act that, unlike some

³ This term is even used by those who are otherwise critical of the impulse to denaturalize the children of immigrants, as can be seen by Lisa D. McGill’s usage of the term in *Constructing Black Selves*.

other forms of migration, is perceived as voluntary. Since the children of immigrants born in the adopted country did not migrate themselves, and even children who migrated with their parents were not the primary architects of their migration, they do not fit the most basic criteria that would designate them as immigrants. To refer to them as immigrants, then, seems to serve the purpose of identifying second-generation subjects as not “naturally” belonging to their country of citizenship. They inherit their parents’ immigrant status. While it could be argued that this term is an acknowledgment of the ambivalent relationship between the second generation and the state, “second-generation immigrants” as a designation is more likely a symptom of the forces that create that ambivalence. I have thus chosen to use “second generation” without a third word, or, when necessary, to use “second-generation subjects.” The absence of national or ethnic identifiers provides a productive space for the examination of cross-national and interethnic second-generation continuities and connections. Also, the use of “subjects” foregrounds this dissertation’s emphasis on subject formation and subjectivity.

Historical and Political Contexts

The twentieth century has seen a “new age of migration” that “possesses fundamentally different circumstances and dimensions when compared to earlier periods” (Miyares and Airriess 2). This global shift has produced migration in many directions; this project is specifically concerned with the movement of peoples from formerly colonized spaces of the non-white world to the “West,” particularly Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. For long periods of their history, each of these states had numerous laws and policies that sought to severely restrict the migration of racialized people into their borders. These historical barriers and restrictions shape the afterlife of migration and the social and political environment into which second-generation subjects are born. In particular, the overlapping logics of exclusion and white

supremacy inform the construction of citizenship and belonging in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, and similarly shape the formation of racialized second-generation subjectivity in each of these spaces. Audrey Macklin discusses citizenship through a metaphor of capacity, arguing that “citizenship might be thought of in terms of a container that is seldom completely empty (statelessness) or completely full” (337). While she works out her argument through a consideration of statelessness, she also points out that “gross inequalities between citizens of a given polity on the basis of class, race, sex, ability, ethnicity and other variables mean that the heft of citizenship varies internally as well as externally” (Macklin 356). An exploration of citizenship laws in and flows of migration to Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom reveals the way that these discrepancies are produced and remain even after laws are officially changed. The continuation of racial hierarchies within the states shape the second generation’s relationship to them; as Paul Gilroy points out, “where state institutions impose racial categories, the struggle against racism will be a struggle against the state” (*There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* 29).

Canada’s immigration policy was often explicitly white supremacist in nature until the late 1960s. Alongside legislation such as the *Chinese Immigration Act* and the *Continuous Passage Act*, which officially limited immigration, the government and its agents also used unofficial means to restrict the entry of racialized migrants. For example, despite there never being any official policies to prevent the migration of Black farmers from the United States to the prairies, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, border guards used interviews, medical examinations, and arbitrary entry fees to keep them out (Gogia and Slade 21). Thus, while racialized migrants and their progeny have existed in Canada since long before Confederation, their numbers were purposefully suppressed until the post-WWII period, which

culminated in the immigration reforms of the 1960s and 1970s. Bureaucratic movement away from explicitly racist immigration policies was made during the early '60s (Janoski 108), lead to the *Immigration Act* of 1976 and the *Canadian Citizenship Act* of 1977, both of which played a significant role in the arrival and naturalization of large numbers of non-white immigrants. In the 1970s and 1980s, 51.8 and 65.4 percent, respectively, of immigrants to Canada were racial or “visible” minorities⁴, compared to only 10.6 percent of those who arrived in the 1960s or earlier (Reitz and Banerjee 1). Since 1983, at least one but usually both of the top two sources of immigrants to Canada every year have been an Asian country, and from 1998 to 2008, the top two were consistently China and India (Gogia and Slade 136–137). Unlike previous waves of non-white migrants, many of whom came as labourers, those arriving in the 1970s onward came with the understanding that citizenship would be available to them.⁵ The promise of citizenship is not, however, the same as a promise of belonging. In the words of Himani Bannerji, “living in a nation does not, by definition, provide one with a prerogative to ‘imagine’ it” (66). Canada had long-developed ideals that “simultaneously advocated charitable welcome to ‘foreigners’ and other less-fortunate people and, in the very act, represented these others as beneficiaries, rather than full members, of the civil collective” (Coleman 6). This difference between being perceived as a beneficiary and being perceived as a full member is a significant component of the unbelonging felt by second-generation Canadians that was famously documented in Jeffery G. Reitz and Rupa Banerjee’s 2007 study, *Racial Inequality, Social Cohesion and Policy Issues in Canada*.

⁴ Visible minority is a term unique to Canada that is employed by the government.

⁵ Previous openings for non-white migrants to come to Canada often carried restrictions that aimed to prevent settlement. For example, the Caribbean Domestic Scheme allowed women to renew their work visas annually but did not allow them to transform their status from migrant to immigrant (Giles and Arat-Koç 17) until 1981, when the visa system was replaced with a program that allowed women to apply for landed-immigrant status after two years of living with an employer while working in Canada (Silvera 18).

Using data gathered in 2002, Reitz and Banerjee found that racialized second-generation Canadians reported a significantly lower rate of feeling a sense of belonging in Canada than did immigrants, even recent immigrants; according to the study, the portion of “total visible minorities” of the second generation who reported a strong sense of belonging to Canada was 44.1%, with Black respondents reporting lower numbers than the other groups, which were categorized as “Chinese,” “South Asian,” and “other visible minorities” (40). This is in contrast to second-generation Canadians who identified as white and reported a sense of belonging to Canada at a higher rate than did recent immigrants and at a slightly lower rate than did more established “earlier” immigrants; white second-generation Canadians reported a strong sense of belonging at a rate of 57.3% (40). While this aspect of the data has received the most attention, I am particularly interested in the way that this sense of unbelonging among racialized second-generation Canadians is coupled with a strong sense of Canadian identity. All second-generation Canadians reported feeling a strong sense of Canadian identity at a significantly higher rate than did earlier immigrants and, unsurprisingly, by an even larger margin than did recent immigrants (40). Reitz and Banerjee’s sociological findings suggest a gap between what it means to feel like you belong somewhere and to feel like you identify with somewhere. The question, then, is how is it possible to feel Canadian while not feeling like you belong in Canada? This question cannot be answered with sociological data. The realm of cultural production, however, offers an avenue to consider this seemingly paradoxical condition from numerous, and nuanced, positions and perspectives. The historical and sociological conditions that contribute to the production of second-generation positionality are important to understanding it; however, the novels, plays, stories, and poetry that represent second-generation lives and experiences do not simply react to these conditions – they actively engage and interpret them.

Similar to the Canadian context, US immigration policies were long marked by a preference for European immigrants. Legal exclusions included the creation of the “Asiatic barred zone” by Congress in 1917, which included most of Asia and Oceania (Miyares and Airriess 36), and the 1924 *National Origins Act*, which established a quota system that “set the annual quota of any quota nationality at 2 percent of the number of foreign-born persons of that nationality already residing in the continental United States in 1890,” and as a result, “approximately 82 percent of immigrant visas under this law were allotted to northern and western European countries, 16 percent to southern and eastern European countries and 2 percent to all other Eastern Hemisphere admissible nationalities” (Miyares and Airriess 36). This quota system effectively reflects the hierarchy of national origin that remains in the public consciousness; southern and eastern Europeans, while seen as less desirable than their northern and western counterparts, are still perceived as more admissible into the body politic than non-European immigrants en masse. Before these laws were enacted, there of course existed non-white communities in the United States, whether they arrived under compulsion or as willing migrants, but rigorous efforts were made to prevent these communities from growing any larger. The reform that allowed for an explosion of migration from previously undesirable regions took place somewhat earlier in the United States than it did in Canada. The 1952 *Immigration and Nationality Act* contained noteworthy changes; for example, it included the Asia-Pacific Triangle in the quota system and made all nationalities eligible for US citizenship (Miyares and Airriess 37). This act was amended in the *Immigration Reform Act* of 1965, which “finally eliminated national origin, race, ethnicity or ancestry as a basis for immigration” (Miyares and Airriess 39). This change created a significant shift in the demographics of the immigrant population over time; for example, “by the 1990s, nearly half of all new immigrants were from Asian countries”

(Miyares and Airriess 40).

A great deal has been written about the histories of Canada and the United States as “nations of immigrants,”⁶ a problematic concept because it elides the presence of Indigenous people, those whose ancestors were forcibly brought as slaves, and those whose ancestors lived in the territories of the United States that previously were a part of Mexico. It also imposes one nationhood on numerous pre-existing nations who may not recognize Canada or the United States as the supreme state. Nevertheless, the idea that both nations have been historically dependent on migration is widely accepted. This is not the case for the United Kingdom. The history of immigration in the UK is shaped largely by its status as an imperial and colonial power; it has often been perceived as more likely to be sending people out than to be receiving them. Panikos Panayi points this out and states that “while some progress has occurred, immigration is still largely viewed as a peripheral area of academic concern within the discipline of history itself... In society at large, immigration history is still perceived as something separate and different, outside of the accepted scope of popular memory” (10). He argues strongly for a revision of this perception, not least of which because it does not reflect the realities of British history: “A central reason for regarding Britain as a country of immigration lies precisely in the fact that the populations which would eventually become the ethnic majority, originated in movements from continental Europe and perhaps beyond. These consist of Celts, Romans, Angles and Saxons, the central elements used by nineteenth century historians and myth makers to construct the people of England” (11). Nevertheless, he recognizes that the twentieth century represented significant shifts in the relationship between Britain and immigration: “While we can

⁶ This way of conceptualizing the United States is most obviously demonstrated by John F. Kennedy’s book on US immigration, which is literally titled *A Nation of Immigrants*. In Canada, this discourse is present in everything from Margaret Atwood’s *Survival* to contemporary debates over refugee admittance.

argue that migration to Britain had formed a constant stream before 1800, suggesting a country of immigration, after this time, and, in particular, since 1945, the reality, regularity and scale of immigration makes it a central factor in the evolution of the country” (Panayi 23). The vastly increased arrival of voluntary, racialized immigrants began earlier in the United Kingdom than in the United States and Canada, and, once again, the contrast between the numbers before the shift and afterwards is stark; whereas “non-European groups only counted a few thousand people in the period 1800-1945” (Panayi 23), in the post-WWII period, “millions of people have migrated to Britain from the Caribbean, South Asia, Hong Kong and Africa, while smaller numbers have moved from the Americas. By the census of 2001, eight per cent of the population of Britain identified themselves as belonging to a particular ethnic minority” (Panayi 24). Significantly, Panayi points out that “by 2001, the census pointed to the presence of 2,027,000 people of Asian⁷ ethnicity, about half of whom had migrated themselves. The former figure divided into 1 million Indians, 747,000 Pakistanis and 280,000 Bangladeshis” (43); if roughly half of this number had migrated, then the other half must be British-born. Although third-generation and beyond Asian Britons must be included among those born in the United Kingdom, the post-1945 arrival of the vast majority of the immigrants means that the largest part of that number is likely second generation.

This brief description of the legal and historical context of immigration to Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom provides an explanation for the emergence of a large second-generation racialized population across the three countries, but it also demonstrates how this development has challenged long-held ideas about what an appropriate or even legitimate citizen of each country looks like. While there do not seem to be studies in the manner of Reitz

⁷Panayi uses Asian in the common British sense, as a synonym for South Asian.

and Banerjee's Canadian research that focus on immigrant and second-generation subjects' personal perceptions of their own feelings of belonging and national identification broken down by race in the US or UK contexts, second-generation literary and cultural production from both suggest that the gap between the feeling of belonging and the sense of identification is just as prevalent as in Canada. In *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, Gilroy supports such a supposition when he writes,

The two succeeding generations of locally-born descendants [of the post-1945 migrants] are trapped in the vulnerable role of perpetual outsider. Their sense of entitlement makes them reluctant to seek common cause with an underclass of refugees and asylum seekers many of whom imagine that they can benefit if they can win access to the waning prestige of whiteness. (xxxiii–xiv)

Here, Gilroy highlights the insider-outsider position of the racialized second and even third generations, who are not perceived as belonging but who nevertheless cannot or will not identify with migrants. While Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom have significant differences in terms of how they conceptualize their populations, the lived experiences of racialized second-generation subjects seem to bear striking similarities that speak to the characteristics and ideologies that the three nations share. In other words, the ideological biases that undergird the different rhetorics are remarkably consistent and the difference between rhetorics around immigration and race in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom do not necessarily produce absolute differences in each nation's social and political environments. To ignore the similarities across the three nations is to accept the veracity of their national discourses, which we know to be deeply self-interested and at times simply false. All three have been constructed as white nations, and these constructions have been achieved through different

but related discourses that speak to the historical similarities among them: Canada and the United States as settler colonies,⁸ the United States and the United Kingdom as imperial nations, Canada and the United Kingdom as invested in a British identity.⁹ Gilroy notes,

It is not, as many commentators suggest, that the presence of immigrants corrodes the homogeneity and solidarity that are necessary to the cohesion and mutuality of authentically social-democratic regimes, but rather that, in their flight from socialistic principles and welfare state inclusivity, these beleaguered regimes have produced strangers and aliens as the limit against which increasingly evasive national particularity can be seen, measured and then, if need be, negatively discharged. (xxxiii)

The construction of each as a white nation allows each state to use the presence of immigrants and their children for specific political purposes, shoring up national identities that are nowhere near as coherent and distinct as each state wishes to project.

Critical Context and Argument for the Comparative

Scholarship concerning immigrant literatures is widely established, but there is a scarcity of criticism discussing the growing body of texts and other creative works about the children of immigrants. Critics such as Avtar Brah and David Palumbo-Liu have laid important groundwork establishing cultural, political, and literary analyses of the second generation. In *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Brah identifies the emergence of “youth groups” in Britain that marked the “coming of age of a new form of Asian political and cultural agency,” arguing that

⁸ Research that foregrounds the continental United States as a settler colony is less common than such conceptualizations of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, but US-based scholarly attention to this designation is growing (Cattelino 282–283).

⁹ This project does not take up other national contexts that share some of these same characteristics, notably Australia and New Zealand. This exclusion is for the sake of restraining the already sizable scope of this project, not because Australia and New Zealand are without significant similarities.

it is not that these groups are more ‘progressive’ than the parental age group, as they tend to be described in some public discussions. Rather, having grown up in Britain, they articulate a home-grown British political discourse. They lay claim to the localities in which they live as their ‘home.’ And, however much they may be constructed as ‘outsiders’, they contest these psychological and geographical spaces from the position of ‘insiders.’ (47)

Here, Brah recognizes the generational difference that sets the second generation apart from the “parental age group” as well as the insider-outsider positionality that characterizes much second-generation-focused cultural production. Moreover, she draws attention to the way that this insider-outsider positionality is the result of the way that second-generation identities are embedded in not only the national but the regional; she asserts that “Asian-British cultures are not simply a carry-over from the subcontinent but are now ‘native’ to different regions and localities of Britain,” so that each “Asian” culture of Britain is “simultaneously a dimension of region and locality – of ‘Englishness’, ‘Scottishness’, ‘Welshness’, ‘Irishness’, or of ‘Geordiness’, ‘Cockneyness’, ‘Yorkshireness’, and so on” (137).

Indeed, recent interest in second-generation cultural production among literary and cultural critics has been mounting. Both established academics – such as Eleanor Ty, Robin E. Field, David Chariandy, and erin Khuê Ninh – and emergent scholars – such as Lisa D. McGill and Andrea Medovarski – focus on the second generation. This increasing interest can be reasonably connected to the same social and cultural factors that inform this project: the numerical growth of the second-generation population and the resulting explosion of second-generation cultural production, including several high-profile, award-winning works such as

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*, and Chang Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*.

The practice of prioritizing generational perspectives is well established in Japanese Canadian and Japanese American scholarship; there has been sustained interest in considering and comparing the relationship between each generation to the homeland, North America, and each other. This is present in literary criticism of creative texts, notably Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter*, as well as critical and sociological texts, such as Jere Takahashi's *Nisei/Sansei: Shifting Japanese American Identities and Politics* and David K. Yoo's *Growing Up Nisei: Race, Generation, and Culture among Japanese Americans of California, 1924-49*. Another area of inquiry that foregrounds intergenerational relations is Holocaust studies. In that context, Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory explains how a second generation can inherit intangible legacies of trauma from the first. Both of these approaches to intergenerational relationships set a precedent for the following work.

The critics listed above approach generations broadly and the second generation more specifically through either a national or diasporic model. Both approaches are productive, but no one as yet has done what this project does: work comparatively between national and diasporic contexts. There are numerous shared thematic, formal, and political concerns in second-generation literary texts, which focus on various ethnic, racial, and national contexts, including but not limited to questions of political and social belonging; the matrix of assimilation/integration/isolation and space/place; familial relationships and generational conflicts; the connections between memory, trauma, and silence; and the adaptation, preservation, and reformation of "culture" and "tradition" in their myriad forms. Addressing these shared concerns reveals that, while ethnicity and nation are undoubtedly significant factors

in second-generation-focused texts, there are aspects of second-generation experience are irreducible to a strictly ethnic or national origin. Instead, a comparative approach reveals that the *position* of being second generation – a position that is social, psychological, and physical – is marked by specific kinds of experiences, such as the ones listed above, and that necessitates specific strategies for making sense of such experiences, which are explored in this dissertation. A comparative study allows for the exploration of second generationness as a subject position, because it allows me to point to specific textual foci that could be otherwise read as specific to the ethnic or national positioning of the text and instead offer a reading that sees these foci as a part of a different but related conversation that crosses the lines of race and nation that we as scholars rightly regularly critique. Rather than producing a “post-national” or “post-racial” reading, this approach has the potential to provide a reading that denaturalizes race and nation while still recognizing their power. This intervention means to recognize the growing scholarly interest in the second generation in Asian American, Canadian, African diasporic, and Asian British studies, among other areas, and offer a way to see these interests as interrelated and able to inform each other in meaningful ways. Despite the turn towards transnationalism and the rise of critical race theory, national and ethnoracial categories are still primary means by which contemporary literatures are divided up. My comparative approach has not yet been used in relation to second-generation literature, but the groundwork is laid for it in the work of theorists of diaspora such as Paul Gilroy, Lisa Lowe, and Brent Hayes Edwards, who foreground the need to recognize the transatlantic and transpacific histories that are the source of the current political and social conditions that have both created the Western societies that second-generation subjects inhabit and provided the circumstances under which they come to inhabit these spaces.

Argument for Second Generationness as a Literary Lens

Second generation is a state of being, a fact of life, for many people. In this project, I suggest that it should also be taken up by cultural critics and literary theorists as a site of analysis with distinctive concerns and foci. As suggested above, analyses of cultural production by second-generation subjects tend to adhere to the “ethno-national model” in which the work of a given artist is considered in relation to works by other artists who fall into the same ethno-national category – Chinese-American, Pakistani-British, etc. There is value in this model, which recognizes the specificity of locations and experiences, but it can underestimate or fail to consider the importance of transnational connections and movements. Diaspora studies has produced consideration beyond nation. My project deploys the comparative to examine, for example, children born to immigrants of any ethnic background who have grown up in a society where they are racialized subjects, attending to factors that cross national and ethnic lines. Lily Cho has made an important argument in this direction by positing diaspora as a subject position that people can share despite being part of what are generally considered separate, distinct diasporas (“The Turn to Diaspora” 21). No community, whether ethnic or national, lives in a vacuum where there is no interaction with other communities, and this fact is an important part of the reason why approaching second-generation cultural production as a body of work that crosses racial, ethnic, and national borders is necessary. Second-generation subjects of myriad ethnic backgrounds interact and engage with each other within nation-states, are connected to extended family and friends in different regions and nations, and can have parents who come from different countries or cultures. The ethno-cultural model focuses on the similarities between those who share the same ethnic background as well as national affiliation, and the diasporic model generally focuses on those who share the same racial or ethnic lineage but not necessarily the same national location; in both cases, these shared characteristics are seen as important ways

to make connections between people and cultural production. In this dissertation, I demonstrate that there are particular characteristics of shared second-generation experiences that make it a distinct subject position within host societies and that this position has political, social, and artistic implications. Ethno-national or diasporic models are indeed important; what I call “second-generation positionality” provides another productive line of analytical engagement.

Analysis that centres second-generation positionality offers insight into a number of major political and social concerns: the relationship between citizenship and belonging, the processes of racialization that structure Western societies, the problem of the nation-state model in an increasingly globalized world. As insider-outsiders, the second generation is forced to develop certain skills and strategies to navigate the site of settlement. Their position as outsiders to the culture allows them to see the host culture with a kind of clarity that is achieved by having to come to understand a place without the aid of native-born parents. As George Lipsitz argues,

the populations best prepared for cultural conflict and political contestation in a globalized world economy may well be the diasporic communities of displaced Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans created by the machinations of world capitalism over the centuries. These populations, long accustomed to code switching, syncretism, and hybridity may prove far more important for what they possess in cultural terms than for what they appear to lack in the political lexicon of the nation state. (30–31)

The modes of adaptation that Lipsitz highlights are necessities for migrants and their children and are present in second-generation literary production just as much as they are present in second-generation lived experience, enacted at times in different ways as a result of the possibilities of literary forms.

At the same time, the second generation is deeply embedded in the nation-state by virtue of it being the site of their socialization and experience; they are insiders even when they are not acknowledged as such. In his brilliant novel *Native Speaker*, Chang Rae Lee explores this insider-outsider tension, and his second-generation narrator expresses it as an almost prophetic address to the reader:

I and my kind possess another dimension. We will learn every lesson of accent and idiom, we will dismantle every last pretense and practice you hold, noble as well as ruinous. You can keep nothing safe from our eyes and ears. This is your own history. We are your most perilous and dutiful brethren, the song of our hearts at once furious and sad. For only you could grant me these lyrical modes. I call them back to you. Here is the sole talent I ever dared nurture. Here is all of my American education. (320)

The children of immigrants have an American or Canadian or British education formally but also culturally, politically, and socially, an education that is shaped by what each given social order aims to enforce as well as those aspects of itself that it disavows; the eyes and the ears of the second generation are everywhere.

Methodology

In this dissertation, I take a text-led approach, which is to say that I do not apply an overarching theoretical framework to the texts and instead draw from a diverse array of critical sources, from contemporary Asian American literary criticism to classic Caribbean critical theory. This diversity of approaches reflects the way that the texts themselves draw from multiple literary traditions, cultural discourses, and linguistic modes. Comparative, transnational, transethnic, and relational are the four key aspects of my method in this dissertation. Each plays

a significant role in the selection, organization, and analysis of the novels that orient my chapters. My approach is comparative in that it identifies the similarities and differences among texts that are not usually grouped together; this approach will illuminate how the afterlife of migration is creatively represented in multiple contexts within texts that share important thematic preoccupations. My project is transnational in that it foregrounds movement across national lines while still recognizing the immense power national borders have in the lives of the characters represented. My dissertation is transethnic because it addresses a variety of ethnic identities and different literary and critical approaches to the same ethnic identities in order to trace how ethnic categories change in meaning through migration, revealing the borders of ethnic identities to be porous and unstable even when those within and without the borders try to mark them as fixed and solid. Finally, my approach is relational in that it is primarily interested in relationships, using these relationships to guide its exploration of connections and conflicts. This approach addresses familial and communal relationships between generations; relationships between diverse characters who are from the same generation; and relationships between narrators and their subjects, authors and their texts, and texts and their contexts. I consider these texts in their historical contexts while simultaneously attending to the ways that the texts attempt to move beyond the historical to their contradictory presents and uncertain but longed-for futures.

My comparative, transnational, transethnic, and relational approach to second-generation literary texts seeks to challenge accepted nationalist discourses and the models of citizenship and citizens that these discourses create. As previously stated, this project is concerned with second-generation subjects who are racially marked as “other” in their country of residence. Considering processes of racialization in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, I argue that a greater engagement with the interrelated nature of these racialization processes is necessary.

Engaging with texts that confront these processes in each setting allows this project to illuminate the similarities and their consequences.

Structure of the Dissertation

In order to demonstrate the fruitfulness of my comparative, transnational, transethnic, and relational approach, I examine two major problematics that permeate second-generation-focused literary texts: the process of coming of age and the effects of history, memory, and myth on the second generation. In section one, I introduce a theoretical framework for my discussion of narratives of coming of age. In the following two chapters, I explore two texts that focus on coming of age in their exploration of second-generation positionality: lê di diem thuy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* and Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*. In section two, I introduce a theoretical framework for conceptualizing the relationship between myth, memory, and history. In the two chapters that follow, I engage two texts that productively demonstrate the interrelated nature of these three concepts: David Chariandy's *Soucouyant* and Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In the final chapter, I compare all four texts and consider how their shared themes and future-focused orientation reveal the transnational and transethnic nature of second-generation positionality.

In each text-focused chapter, I consider the way that a specific text explores intergenerational dynamics and the afterlife of migration through its representation of either coming of age or the use of mythological figures and concepts to mediate between memory and history. I have chosen texts that have a variety of relationships to ancestral homelands and sites of settlement so as not to privilege one kind of relationship to homeland (e.g., economic immigrants, refugees, etc.). Different waves of immigration are also reflected in the texts. In my comparative conclusion, I compare second-generation texts of different ethnic and national

contexts to each other with attention to how they approach the common concern, the formal means by which they explore the effects of migration in relation to it, and the factors apart from (though still related to) nation and ethnicity that shape the texts' approach to their themes and characters. I chose the four texts with which I engage substantially because they are disparate in their characters, settings, and national affiliations yet share similar preoccupations, themes, and conflicts, which, when compared, reveal something meaningful about the nature of second-generation subject positionality: that the continued significance of migration to the lives of the second generation, perhaps counterintuitively, leads to a future-focused orientation that itself is invested in the crossing of national and racial borders.

This introduction's title, "Looking Sideways," is inspired by the words of actor and rapper Riz Ahmed, who in an interview with *The Fader* magazine says,

Part of dealing with the anxiety of code-switching is you create a false sense of home. So you will say, 'I'm Pakistani' but if you go to Pakistan you don't fit in at all. And when I really started traveling, going to places like Toronto, New York, Durban, I realized there's another way of feeling like you're less alone. And it's not about going back to your "roots" or going "forward" and "progressing" away from your identity: it's looking sideways. It's going, *Shit, there are people in NYC that don't fit in in exactly the same way I don't fit in. Maybe we are a new category in itself.*

The act of looking sideways is a recognition of the need to look not just behind to ancestors or ahead to the future but also beside oneself where fellow travellers between these two points can be found, those who share one's fears and concerns and who can share one's strategies and triumphs. Looking sideways is also an exercise in empathy as it asks readers not to allow

obvious differences of ethnicity and nationality to overshadow the very real existence of a shared form of alienation that can lead to a new kind of belonging, one that has the potential to work towards a world that rejects calls for purity and embraces a wide field of human connectivity. This dissertation looks sideways as well as demonstrates how the literary texts themselves are engaging in this practice. The sideways look is not homogenizing; this is not a looking into the mirror but a recognition of shared ground with an “other” who is closer than they might initially appear. My investment in this practice comes not only from the texts but also from a lifetime of looking sideways and consistently finding myself metaphorically shoulder to shoulder with those who do not share the same national or ethnic identities as me but who nevertheless have shared many of my experiences, questions, and preoccupations; I have looked sideways and found many people I have encountered in my daily life, but I have also had the experience of finding myself shoulder to shoulder with an unexpected travelling companion by way of reading Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* for the first time, or seeing Hari Kondabolu do stand-up, or listening to the music of Bloc Party. As this dissertation explores a diverse set of second-generation-focused texts, it attempts to show the ways that looking sideways produces an understanding of migration’s continued shaping of the second generation and second-generation subjects’ mediation of the multiple social spheres, cultural influences, and political realities that orient their lives. Second-generation-focused literature’s exploration of intergenerationality, along with its apparent investment in futurity, produces a space in which the present can serve as a space of productive uncertainty, one where second-generation unbelonging is contextualized and not pathologized, and where the question is not how to become acceptable national subjects but rather how to live genuinely in the world, so that we can, to return to the words of David Chariandy, “live both ethically and soulfully” (“The Fiction of Belonging” 828).

Section One

Imagining Oneself into Being: Coming of Age in Second-Generation Literature

Members of the second generation are categorized as such because of their position as the children of immigrants. In this section, I focus on the first part of that position: children. More specifically, this section considers how second-generation-focused texts represent the process of coming of age in order to explore how subject formation takes place in the contexts of multidirectional difference. “Coming of age” here refers to the narrative depiction of the emotional, physical, psychological, and social growth of a protagonist; the transition from childhood to adolescent or adulthood. While dictionary definitions of “to come of age” focus on its endpoint – the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as “to attain adult age and status; (in extended use) to reach full development or maturity” – the use of the present participle “coming,” when applied to novels, is indicative of the conceptualization of coming of age as a process.

The most common approach to stories of coming of age in fiction is to consider them as part of the genre known as the bildungsroman. There has been much critical writing about the bildungsroman, and there is by no means a clear critical consensus on its parameters. The philosopher credited for popularizing the term, Wilhelm Dilthey, defines it as a text in which

a regulated development within the life of the individual is observed, each of its stages has its own intrinsic value and is at the same time the basis for a higher stage. The dissonances and conflicts of life appear as the necessary growth point through which the individual must pass on his way to maturity and harmony.

(quoted in Swales 3)

A broad definition of the bildungsroman that closely follows this early formulation is a novel that focuses on “the intellectual and social development of a central figure who, after going out into the world and experiencing both defeats and triumphs, comes to a better understanding of self and to a generally affirmative view of the world” (Hardin xiii). Several aspects of the definition are notable here. First, the focus is a single individual. Second, the individual must go out into the world; that is, the individual leaves a place that is ostensibly not a part of the world: the home. Finally, coming to understand the self and gaining an affirmative view of the world are linked. Indeed, in both definitions, the result of the coming-of-age process is characterized by harmony with the world or society. The bildungsroman, then, is primarily about mobility and integration. Second-generation-focused texts would seem to fall easily into the genre as they too are often concerned with these two themes. Yet whereas Hardin’s definition of a traditional bildungsroman identifies both mobility and integration as beginning with the process of coming of age, second-generation-focused texts about racialized characters in a similar vein have a complex relationship to both ideas. In second-generation-focused texts, home itself is the direct product of mobility. Moreover, a “generally affirmative view of the world” is elusive for subjects whose world is fragmented, multiple, and itself mobile. The goal of coming to terms with society is complicated by the presence of multiple, sometimes overlapping, and sometimes competing societies to which the central character might belong, especially because one or more of those societies may resist the individual’s claim to a place inside.

The purpose of this section is not to argue for the inclusion of second-generation coming-of-age narratives in the grand tradition of the bildungsroman. Such arguments have been made elsewhere,¹⁰ and whether or not they are accepted, I contend that it is possible to discuss the idea

¹⁰ See, for example, Bolaki and Lowe.

of coming of age without a necessary return to Goethe. Many critical interventions into the study of the bildungsroman have been made to recognize the ways that the genre has changed over time (Moretti), is politically situated (Jameson), and is highly gendered (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland; Fraiman; Rishoi; Kamugisha). This important work need not be rehashed here. I argue that the ubiquity of coming-of-age narratives necessitates recognizing that the human experience of transitioning from the social position of child to the social position of adult or even adolescent has been approached in literature in a variety of ways. Not all coming-of-age narratives are bildungsromane, and other approaches to narratives of the transition from child to adult are productive.

Coming of age may also be approached as a thematic concern, especially when the process of subject formation is also the text's focus. The texts in this section suggest the processes of coming of age and the processes of subject formation are interconnected. In his work on coming-of-age narratives in American literature, Kenneth Millard notes that

the contemporary novel of adolescence is often characterised by a concerted attempt to situate the protagonist in relation to historical contexts or points of origin by which individuals come to understand themselves as having been conditioned. The individual novel often reveals a temporal structure in which the contemporary moment of coming-of-age is contextualised gradually by a consciousness of historical events that are antecedent to it and deeply inform it.

(10)

Narratives of coming of age are invested in coming to understand the self as historically and socially situated, and as such, coming of age is intrinsically tied to subject formation. Subject formation refers to the idea that power does not just subordinate humans, it forms them into

subjects, “providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire” (Butler 2). Both coming of age and subject formation are processes of becoming. While subject formation can be considered a lifelong experience, it is particularly visible in childhood. In her work on the topic of subject formation, Judith Butler notes that “a child’s love is prior to judgement and decision; a child tended and nourished in a ‘good enough’ way will love, and only later stand a chance of discriminating among those he or she loves” (8) and connects this point to the idea that “there is no possibility of not loving, where love is bound up with the requirements of life. The child does not know to what he/she attaches; yet the infant as well as the child must attach in order to persist in and as itself” (8). For Butler, this is an example of the nature of subjection, whereby “a subject is not only formed in subordination, but that this subordination provides the subject’s continuing condition of possibility” (8). Children are literally the subjects of their parents, and this relationship reflects their position as subjects in the wider social world. The processes of subjection that take place in childhood are not separable from the other elements of identity formation that we tend to associate with coming of age because they are mutually informing; the desire for individuation so central to discourses of coming of age is simultaneous with the sense that “the desire to persist in one’s own being requires submitting to a world of others that is fundamentally not one’s own (a submission that does not take place at a later date, but which frames and makes possible the desire to be)” (Butler 28). The combination of these two interconnected yet distinct processes, subject formation and coming of age, in literature suggests that portraying what is traditionally thought of as the transition from innocence to experience is an attractive means to make intelligible the complex process of subject formation, which draws attention to the social construction of identity. That is to say, such texts use the depiction of the seemingly universal and natural process of growing up to explore how the social,

political, and discursive context into which the child emerges is what creates the “self” of the child, who is a subject in the Foucauldian sense.

Contrary to a vision of coming of age wherein the process results in an autonomous and internally coherent individual, the coming-of-age narratives in this section instead produce an image of their protagonists that makes visible the forces of power that turn them into subjects. The “modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects,” particularly what Foucault terms “dividing practices” by which “the subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others” (208), are foregrounded. In conceptualizing subject formation in the context of coming of age, I draw on Avtar Brah’s point that

identity may be understood as that very process by which the multiplicity, contradiction, and instability of subjectivity is signified as having coherence, continuity, stability; as having a core—a continually changing core but the sense of a core nonetheless—that at any given moment is enunciated as the ‘I’. (123)

The process of coming of age is the process of creating this sense of a core; it is the articulation of the “I” out of the complexities of subjectivity, not as a denial of these complexities but as willful acts of amalgamation.¹¹ Many novels focused on coming of age explicitly explore such acts and, by foregrounding theme instead of genre, critics can prioritize the representation of subject formation. Furthermore, this project’s focus on racialized subjects connects subject formation with processes of racialization. In these texts, becoming subjects means becoming imbued with a racial identity that is produced both internally and externally. The characters’

¹¹ Perhaps by bringing together the exploration of subject formation with the process of coming of age, another approach to the bildungsroman might be developed that foregrounds the ways that scholarship concerned with the genre can contribute to larger conversations about the ways that novels represent the relationship between the social and the psychological.

coming of age is inextricably linked to a form of subject formation that is simultaneous with the development of a form of racial identification.

Coming-of-age narratives, whether they adhere to the generic conventions of bildungsromane or not, are concerned with how people come to be. In the second half of the twentieth century in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, there has been a great deal of interest in novels in which the process of coming into being involves some form of departure from previous ways of being. Texts that focus on the children of immigrants, and by extension, the effects of migration, necessarily grapple with the theme of difference from previous ways of being because the fact of migration creates a literal and figurative departure. This departure is compounded by the simultaneous difference that is a result of arrival. Through depictions of coming of age, second-generation-focused texts explore how *coming into being as coming into difference* is a multidirectional experience. This multidirectionality means that a model of understanding coming-of-age narratives that assumes a singular society that the protagonist must conform to or reject is unsuitable.

This multidirectionality is a key element of second-generation narratives of coming of age. Second-generation-focused texts often highlight the plurality of societies with which second-generation writing engages. As children of migrants, second-generation subjects must define themselves in relation to ancestral homeland(s), the mainstream societies of sites of settlement, the unique communities formed by immigrants in sites of settlement, and the other minoritized communities that they may encounter.

One of the ways that it has been argued that immigrant and second-generation texts have differed from the traditional bildungsroman is that they rework the genre in a way that includes political and communal elements while resolutely keeping hold of a focus on individual

subjectivity in a way that breaks down binaries between the public and the private, the individual and the group(s). In her discussion of “ethnic American” coming-of-age novels, Bolaki rightly critiques the false binary between ruthless individualism and communalism and the idea that not communalizing means “surrendering to a destructive individualism” (29), instead arguing that these works produce hybrid spaces that defy the binary. Building on her point, I argue that the production of hybrid spaces is necessary because the nation-state demands that immigrants become productive and integrated individuals while simultaneously taking them as a group, creating a contradiction that shapes second-generation subjects ambivalently. The communal is therefore not simply the will of the community itself but can also be an external expectation from the wider society. The two novels I discuss in this section are invested in exploring hybrid spaces that deconstruct this binary, even as they mark how difficult producing and maintaining such spaces can be.

It is no coincidence that many second-generation texts are told from a first-person perspective – they are fundamentally concerned with subjectivity and subject formation. But the emphasis on subjectivity does not mean a disregard of the perspectives of others, especially parents. Since novels of coming of age are by their very nature concerned with coming into being, narratives of second generationness and narratives of coming of age are a logical combination. Indeed, many of the issues that this dissertation identifies as primary concerns of second-generation identity formation surface first and sometimes most starkly in childhood. Questions of political and social belonging; the matrix of assimilation/integration/isolation and space/place; familial relationships and generational conflicts; the connections between memory, trauma, and silence; and the adaptation, preservation, and reformation of “culture” and

“tradition” in their myriad forms all manifest themselves in narratives of second-generation coming of age.

One of the intriguing aspects of exploring these conflicts and questions through a child protagonist is that her process of coming to understand the role that they play in her life can take place slowly over the course of the text; the reader is able to experience how the child protagonist first feels her complex place in her social and familial world and then witness how over time she may come to be able to articulate it. At the same time, the novel is able to convey information that the narrator may not understand or may not desire to state explicitly by allowing the child protagonist to describe or report events, feelings, and thoughts without the narrator’s interpretation. The combination of these two ways of seeing – through the eyes of the narrator and over the narrator’s head – is a particularly productive technique in coming-of-age narratives as it mirrors the way that subjectivity is formed both consciously and unconsciously, from within and from without. Especially in the context of racialized characters whose identities are unavoidably marked by their racial difference, this emphasis on the interrelated as well as oppositional relationship between self-identification and social construction is relevant.

Second-generation-focused coming-of-age narratives generally do involve “going out into the world,” but in these texts, family is not outside of the world in the way that Hardin’s definition of the bildungsroman suggests. One of the stated goals of this project is to repoliticize the discussion of intergenerational relationships and conflicts in the reading and analysis of second-generation texts. This approach has been modelled powerfully by erin Khuê Ninh, whose monograph *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* provides a thoughtful model for such repoliticization as well as insight into the particular theme and texts of this section. Ninh’s work is also a model for this project in that she argues for the necessity of

looking at the ways that textual themes and conflicts cross a multitude of differences; she points out that “the intergenerational conflict – its forms of power, its discourses of subject formation – replicates with compelling faithfulness across an era of seemingly imposing historical change” (3). The value of identifying and examining such consistencies across difference is at the very heart of this dissertation. Rightly positing that “a theoretical reappraisal of generation and family need not be guilty of ahistoricizing, dematerializing, aestheticizing, or commodifying Asian American culture; it need not accept, in other words, that the familial space is exclusively ‘private’” (5–6), Ninh goes on to build an argument for just such a reappraisal that moves beyond the unhelpful binary of private and public, which oversimplifies familial relations and provides an atavistic depiction of immigrant families. Ninh argues that the Asian American immigrant family is a particular “production unit” that aims to produce good capitalist subjects (2) and takes as her subject of analysis “the political-economic structures of power obtaining between parents and daughters in the immigrant family” (6). After discussing the need to recognize the material consequences of the model minority concept as not simply something enforced from without but also as an internalized identity marker that the Asian immigrant family might wilfully apply to its own members (9), she takes the position that “the paired structures of the model minority and intergenerational conflict are, like the class struggle itself, neither ahistorical nor historically bound. The relative autonomy and persistence of this narrative being among its more defining characteristics, to subordinate it entirely to historical explanations is to risk misconstruing it fundamentally” (14). For Ninh, these structures produce several results, the most prominent of which is “designated failure,” which she describes as “a key stone of familial discourse.” She continues, “the construct of ‘filial obligation’ defines the parent-child relation as a debtor-creditor relation, but within the system without contract or consent, the

parent-creditor brings into being a child-debtor who can never repay the debt of her own inception and rearing” (16). This debtor-creditor relationship defies the idea that the daughter’s life can be her own; how can she come of age and go out into the world if her life is just an extension of her parents’ lives because of her unending obligation to fulfill a debt that she never wilfully incurred? Although Ninh does not conceptualize these texts in terms of coming of age, she analyzes several Chinese North American women writers whose novels and memoirs tackle this very question from a variety of directions.

Ninh applies her challenging and compelling argument about the immigrant family structure specifically to the work of Asian North American women writers. While her corpus is primarily Chinese American and Chinese Canadian, she argues that her analysis could successfully be extended to cover women writers from other Asian American communities, which she models in her “Afterword” discussion of texts that feature families that “hail from ‘humble’ Bengali, ‘middle-class’ Pakistani Muslim, and refugee Vietnamese backgrounds” (160). She asserts that while immigrant families do not uniformly apply the systems she identifies, “if the question is whether these daughterly narratives equally know the model minority and model filiality as a common paradigm, then – incredibly across ethnicity, class, religion, and immigration decade – I believe the answer would have to be yes” (162). I take her argument further. Her description of the debt-bound daughter and the political economy of the immigrant home can be found in American texts about other immigrant communities, for example, Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl Brownstone* and Taye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go*, as well as Asian and non-Asian immigrant communities in Canada and the United Kingdom, for example, Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For*, SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Ins Choi’s *Kim’s Convenience*, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*, and, along

with her text analyzed in this section, Meera Syal's second novel, *Life Isn't All Ha Ha He He*. Indeed, Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which is discussed in the next section, demonstrates masterfully how the debtor-creditor relationship between parents and children does not require the model minority position in order to function. Through the character of Lola, the daughter-as-debtor and the patriarchal control practised by mothers are shown as a feature of a community that is by no means conceptualized through a model minority lens, either by outsiders or insiders. By engaging with Ninh's argument in this section, I demonstrate how productive it is to cross the ethno-national lines of much literary criticism in order to identify those characteristics of second-generation-focused texts that are not bound by ethnicity and nation. Indeed, by doing so I am reinforcing Ninh's argument that the fraught politics of the family that she identifies are not products of ethnically specific "old country" ways but in fact adaptations to immigrant positionality; she "offer[s] a reading which sees the immigrant for the opportunistic, survivalist *first-generation American* he is – one whose relentless adaptation process is driven by the pragmatism of household governance, and the demands of thriving in capitalist America" (22). Yen Le Espiritu expresses a somewhat milder but also broader version of a similar sentiment: "An irony in refugee life – indeed, in immigrant life generally – is that the steep sacrifices intended to achieve mobility for the family can end up tearing the family apart" (103). Similar forces exist in Canada and the United Kingdom. Recognizing immigrants as first generation allows for a reading of second-generation subjectivity that acknowledges it as a reaction to a context rooted in the site of settlement just as much as, if not more than, the ancestral homeland. The second-generation subject position and the texts that represent it must be read as springing from multiple public spheres within a shared location and any reading of the private must be understood as responsive to and productive of these publics.

Ninh makes the astute point that “while there is no question that the losses of immigration matter, that institutional racism and media representation figure into the second-generation experience, so too does power in the most intimate, vulnerable, and formative social contexts – one which may demand that the subject compensate for familial losses by successfully navigating hostile social and political waters, and which may very well redouble the stakes of ‘racial’ failure” (5). The site of the family as a refuge from the hostilities of, or even the experience of invisibility in, the outside world makes the familial home all the more complex and dangerous when it is also a site of rejection, excessive discipline, or even trauma. Just because authority is not malicious does not mean that it is incapable of doing harm (Ninh 8). The familial home is not outside of the West nor is it outside of politics, economics, and social relations; it is embedded in them, reacts to them, and often replicates them. The novels discussed in this section, lê thi diem thuy’s *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* and Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*, reflect this as narratives of coming of age both through the eyes of children and through the eyes of adults looking back on childhood, as both novels’ style of narrative weaves together the present and future of the texts. By doing so, Syal and lê explore the inner lives of daughters who, in two vastly different circumstances, must navigate the position of debt-bound daughter as children and as adults, but with greater emphasis on the ways that this position is molded in and molds girlhood. The texts only contain hints about the adult lives of the protagonists, keeping the emphasis on the process of development rather than any definitive results of it.

Ninh’s work is interested in how docile, diligent immigrants’ daughters are produced and the cost of this subject formation, whether “successful” or not (2). The two novels that this section explores take up this process and this cost in two very different ways. The protagonist in lê’s work shares a great deal with the rebellious daughters discussed in Ninh’s text; she is able to

come of age only by continuing to love her family, but from afar and in isolation. Syal's protagonist, in contrast, is able to combine the ways that she succeeds as an immigrant daughter – good grades, loyalty to the family and the community – with the ways that she fails – rejection of immigrant-daughter-appropriate career goals, desire for sexual exploration, being “too much” – in order to produce an identity that is imbued with self-determination without a wholesale rejection of communality. Yet even with this relative success, there is a mournful element in the ending of Syal's novel that signals the loss of something more than just her friendship with Anita, her white neighbour who shares the novel's title. Nevertheless, the texts' divergent outcomes are in part a result of the differences in the contrasting affective relations in the family structures represented in each novel. Ninh recognizes that her model is “uncompromising” but hopes that “the hard line drawn here may allow for greater latitude in later analyses of intergenerational conflict, such that its future scholarship may theorize the family's structure of feeling as fully as its structures of power” (162), a hope that this section aims to fulfill.

Critical writing that addresses second-generation coming-of-age narratives, bildungsromane, or both in such terms are relatively limited, even though much critical writing on second-generation-focused texts is about texts that depict processes of coming of age. In her discussion of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* in “Writing the Second Generation,” Robin E. Field argues for the distinctive nature of second-generation positionality:

The second generation seems uniquely situated in this liminal space of cultural borderlands. For it is the second generation who are actively choosing and discarding pieces of their parents' cultural legacy. This generation will decide, consciously and unconsciously, which pieces of their cultural inheritance to

incorporate into their lives as Americans, which parts to alter, and which practices to adopt. (167)

Here, Field marks the specificity of second-generation subject formation even though she does not phrase it in those terms. Her argument is more “cultural” than my own in that she identifies “cultural inheritance” as the primary thing that immigrant parents pass down to their children as opposed to this project’s premise that the intergenerational relationship between immigrant parents and second-generation children is just as marked by the political and the social as it is by the cultural.¹² Cultural readings risk accepting the idea of the private sphere, in which the conflicts of immigrant families are non-political and solely cultural based on the “culture clash” between the “traditional” home culture and the modernity of Canada, the United States, or the United Kingdom. Also, Field’s reading marks second-generation self-formation as largely a matter of choice; although she recognizes the existence of racism and the possibility of unbelonging, her description of second-generation picking and choosing can be seen as underplaying the ways that the politics of citizenship and hegemonic discourses of American identity limit the kind of American lives available to second-generation subjects. Nonetheless, her essay is a good example of literary criticism that names second generationness and deals with coming of age without naming it. David Chariandy’s seminal essay on second-generation Black writing in Canada also focuses on two texts that are preoccupied with the process of coming of age: Andre Alexis’s *Childhood*, which is arguably a failed bildungsroman, and Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For*, which is deeply invested in the subject formation of its four protagonists. Chariandy’s reading of these texts and the rise of second-generation Black writing in Canada

¹² Culture as a concept should not be divorced from the political and the social but, as many critiques of multiculturalism demonstrate, it often is when used when discussing immigrants, where such discussions of culture can distract from the realities of racism and other forms of discrimination. For more on this topic, see Himani Bannerjee’s *The Dark Side of the Nation*.

generally is more explicitly political than Field's analysis of Indian American second-generation writing, as he recognizes the agency of self-definition asserted in second-generation-focused narratives while still holding to account the political and structural circumstances that lead to "a moment in which belonging has been revealed as a fiction" (828). This section is therefore following a path that is often suggested in critical writing about second-generation texts but usually not pursued.

While the two texts examined in this section, lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* and Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*, emerge out of very disparate contexts and have been dealt with very differently critically, they share a fundamental connection not just in terms of their theme of coming of age but also in their perspective, in that they both hinge on the idea that imagination and creativity make survival, and even further, subject formation, possible. In the poetic and heartbreaking world of lê as well as in the comic world of Syal, the first-person narrators demonstrate how their child selves used their imagination to create places for themselves where none existed and how their adult selves engage in creative reconstruction of their pasts to continue this process of coming into adulthood.

This theme of imagination is significant in both texts. The concept of imagination is as ubiquitous as it is difficult to define; after all, "the history of imagination is the history not simply of a word, but of a category of mental activity whose definition and interpretation has varied very greatly from age to age and from author to author" (Murray xiii). Nevertheless, its usage in this chapter is in keeping with the Romantic idea of imagination as "no longer simply a 'reproductive faculty which forms images from pre-existing phenomena, but a productive and creative power which autonomously frames and constructs its own image of reality" (Murray viii). This Romantic notion of the imagination might seem somewhat at odds with the otherwise

rather materialist framing of this section, but it is impossible to discuss these texts without recognizing the degree to which the protagonists' imaginations are emphasized, serving as the primary means by which each protagonist withstands hardship and develops a sense of self in the face of the often-alienating process of racialization. The significance of imagination in all four texts that are discussed in this dissertation is taken up in the final chapter of the project.

“I Was Certain I Saw My Future in Him”: Coming into Intergenerational Empathy and Escape in lê thi diem thuy’s *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*

The 2003 debut and, to date, only novel from lê thi diem thuy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, explores its unnamed narrator’s coming of age particularly through an exploration of her relationship with her father, both in terms of their actual interactions as well as her understanding of herself through her understanding of him, including the ways that she sees herself being or becoming him. While the novel contains many of the common elements of coming-of-age narratives, including depictions of schooling, sexual awakening, and coming to understand the world through the loss of childhood innocence and ignorance, it works through these common themes in a very uncommon fashion. The primary means by which the narrator comes to understand herself and the world is through an imaginative empathy with those around her, most prominently her refugee father. Yet her empathy is also a burden that, while shaping her subjectivity, constrains her sense of self. Thus, the novel raises a question that arises in numerous one-and-a-half and second-generation texts: how is it possible for the children of immigrants to form their own identities in the shadow of their parents’ suffering and sacrifice? This novel stresses the necessity of working to understand one’s immigrant parents as well as the simultaneous potential necessity to distance oneself from them.

The novel has a poetic and nonlinear narrative, structured almost but not completely like a series of short stories; it follows the growth of an unnamed girl narrator, who arrives in the United States as a small child with her father and “uncles” and is eventually joined by her mother. Sociologically, the narrator would be considered 1.5 generation in that she was born in Vietnam and has memories of life there, but as I argued in the introduction, 1.5-generation cultural production can be more productively grouped with that of the second generation than

with cultural production about adult immigrant experiences. The narration is retrospective but with a strong emphasis on the affective experience of childhood, the family, and the institutions and public spaces of California.

Critical writing on lê's novel has so far been relatively limited. Much of it has been interdisciplinary, including sociologist Yen Le Espiritu's discussion of it in *Body Counts* and Jutta Gsoels-Lorensen's article focused on the role of the photographic in the novel. Isabelle Thuy Pelaud takes an intersectional approach to the novel and the circumstances of its publication, stating that her article "brings forth the notion that Vietnamese American identities and imaginaries are multilayered, complex, and diverse and that Vietnamese American women writers of the 1.5 generation in particular are exceptionally burdened by being refugees, people of color, and female" (96–97). She highlights the ways that the novel has been seen as semi-autobiographical even though lê has tried to resist the overdetermination that can come from such a reading, usefully engaging with lê's own commentary on the reception of her work within and outside of the Vietnamese American community. My reading of the novel will not retread this ground but will draw from Pelaud's analysis and insights into the tension between the communal and the individual when representing refugee communities.

The novel begins with place. However, rather than this description of place suggesting a groundedness, it is used to emphasize movement. The narrator begins by saying, "Linda Vista, with its rows of yellow houses, is where we eventually washed ashore" (3), at first giving the impression that this neighbourhood was their point of arrival in the United States. The next sentence, however, reveals this impression to be false: "Before Linda Vista, we lived in the Green Apartment on Thirteenth and Adams, in Normal Heights. Before the Green Apartment, we lived in the Red Apartment on Forty-ninth and Orange, in East San Diego" (3). Immediately, the

novel interrogates what it means to arrive and, by using the phrase “washed ashore,” questions what arrival looks like. What does it mean to wash ashore years after literally arriving? The narrator, her father, and the uncles did not even arrive by boat but rather by plane, so the idea of washing ashore is metaphorical even as it is grounded in physical experience; just as a person can still feel the water rocking beneath herself after getting off a boat, Lê’s characters remained at sea long after leaving the boat behind. From the beginning, this novel identifies migration as an ongoing experience rather than an action with a defined beginning and ending.

The defamiliarization of space and distance permeates the novel. The use of a child narrator makes this device plausible, but also suggests that confusion around these dimensions is a natural result of migration. The narrator wants to go to the beach because she believes her mother is there, but her father tells her no: “‘You told me she was at the beach,’ I said. ‘Not the beach here. The beach in Vietnam,’ Ba said. What was the difference?’” (13). One of the reasons that reading 1.5-generation texts alongside second-generation texts can be more productive than reading them alongside adult immigrant narratives is that the experience of migration for children can be disorienting in a way that is even more pronounced than for adults who move under their own power, even if not wholly voluntarily. Without a developed understanding of spatiality or geography, migration is experienced by impression rather than knowledge, and distance is an abstraction.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator is six years old. At every point in the text, the narrative voice reflects her age, so that her level of understanding the world around her is always expressed. The non-linear narrative forces the reader to adjust to multiple ways of seeing throughout the novel. One of the first examples of the reader’s forced adjustment is also an early indication of the importance of the narrator’s imagination throughout the text. After arriving in

the airport in San Diego, she sees an advertisement in which a man and a woman lie on a beach. The description of it indicates that it is supposed to be a sexy ad, one that suggests luxury and heat. The image is capped by “large block letters that looked like they were on fire: SUNNY SAN DIEGO” (6). At the same time, the narrator’s perspective desexualizes it, turning it into a site of a different kind of longing: “The woman was lying on her back, with one leg down and the other leg up, bent at the knee. I looked through the triangle formed by the woman’s tanned knee, calf and thigh and saw the calm, sleeping waves of the ocean. My mother was out there somewhere” (6). The narrator projects her mother’s presence into the advertisement, reframing its ocean as a site of longing rather than a site of luxurious leisure. This passage also reframes San Diego from the tourist haven that the poster suggests to a more complicated space where arrival is not always voluntary.

Imagination is not just central to the narrator’s child perspective but also to the retrospective voice, the voice that draws attention to the adult woman who makes a few appearances in the text. When describing their first night in America, the narrator imagines the conversation their sponsors have outside their door, re-creating an exchange she could not have understood at the time because she did not know English. Understanding her past through narrative requires this kind of imaginative reconstruction. When she imagines Mel, the man who inherited the position of their sponsor after his father’s death, telling his mother, “I feel like I’ve inherited a boatload of people. I mean, I’ve been living here alone and now I’ve got five men I’ve never met before, and what about that little girl?” (6), her imagining seems a realistic reproduction of what a man in Mel’s position might think, but it also is inflected by her own approach to language, as can be seen by the use of the term “boatload,” which is more in keeping with her preference for sea-related figurative language than Mel’s way of speaking.

The narrator's imaginative approach to her life is a direct result of her lack of control over what takes place around her, as well as her understanding that this lack of control extends to those she loves. First literally and then figuratively buffeted around by the ocean, she has the limited agency that all children have in the world of adults; this lack is compounded by her position as a refugee, as a racialized girl with damaged parents living in poverty or close to it. Her isolation and her lack of freedom are explored symbolically through her relationship with a butterfly encased in glass. Mel is an important but distant figure, whose role of benefactor does not fit him or the narrator, Ba, and the uncles comfortably. Yet this relationship has defined terms; the narrator muses, "If it was true that this man Mel could keep us from floating back there – to these salt-filled nights – what could we do but thank him. And then thank him again" (8). There is no question here; the clause is completed by a period, not a question mark. All they can do is thank, repeatedly. The compulsion to be thankful is the defining feature of the relationship.

Mel's paperweight is the externalization of the narrator and her father's lack of freedom. The glass encases a butterfly, and the narrator finds the artifact immediately troubling. Her child's mind is confused by how such a thing could come to exist: "Though I turned the glass disk around and around, I could not find the place where the butterfly had flown in or where it could push its way out again" (25). She goes to her father with her concern for the butterfly, which she believes she can hear rustling in the disk (25). She tells Ba, "I found a butterfly that has a problem"; she believes that it is alive but trapped, and that it wants to get out (25–26). When he asks her how she knows, she says, "Because it said this to me: 'Shuh-shuh/shuh-shuh'" (26). Her father refuses either to tell her she is wrong or to offer to help the butterfly, instead choosing to pretend to knock the butterfly's sound out of his head so that he can sleep (26). This

reaction is telling. Their kinship with the trapped butterfly is apparent, but for Ba, there is no room for empathy with it. This lack of empathy is reinforced when the narrator takes her concern to the uncles. They tell her that “that butterfly got itself into a lot of trouble flying into a disk” and that there is nothing they can do about it (27). The narrator demands they empathize, asking, “But doesn’t it sound terrible?” (27). They resist, stating, accurately, that the butterfly must be dead. But when the girl insists that she can hear it rustle its wings, they tell her, “Listen to me, little girl, no butterfly could stay alive inside a glass disk. Even if its body was alive, I’m sure that butterfly’s soul has long since flown away” (27). All of the uncles agree that the butterfly’s soul must have departed even if its body remains. Here, the uncles give her a lesson that defines the nature of their American life – that it is possible to continue to live only in body, especially when one is confined. They explicitly connect the butterfly’s plight to their own. When the girl argues, “If there’s no soul, how can the butterfly cry for help?”, the uncles answer, “But what does crying mean in this country? Your Ba cries in the garden every night and nothing comes of it” (27). Whether or not the girl’s concern for the butterfly is consciously a substitute for concern for her father, who she knows cries at night but whom she is powerless to help, the butterfly paperweight is the first symbolic site of the narrative’s preoccupation with how the feeling of being trapped shapes subject formation and how escaping it is necessary to come of age with any degree of hope. At the same time, this escape is characterized as an unavoidably violent and destructive process, despite or because of its necessity.

When the narrator tries to free the butterfly, the paperweight’s metaphorical significance is made even more explicit, as her actions cause herself, her father, and the uncles to be expelled from Mel’s home, suggesting the incompatibility of her longing for freedom with the terms of their American life as refugees. Their banishment is stated before the incident that precipitates it

is described, creating a cause and effect relationship in order to reveal their expulsion's unreasonable nature through the telling of the story. Her father's reaction to the incident is also revealed beforehand: "Ba said it wasn't my fault, wasn't anybody's fault" (31). Her father's response – his unwillingness to blame his daughter for her desire for freedom and his inability to blame Mel for his grasping for the first excuse to kick them out – reflects the fatalism that the novel suggests is a result of both wartime experiences and the experience of migration. Her father's awareness of his lack of control makes him vacillate wildly between calm acceptance and enraged lashing out so that his behaviour throughout the text is difficult to anticipate for both the reader and the narrator, seeming as it is untied to the severity of any infraction.

Indeed, her father is harshest when the narrator's only mistake is seeing him:

One night when my father was sitting on the couch looking sad and broken, he turned and realized there was someone standing where he had thought there was only a shadow. He came for me because I had seen him. I leapt through a window and ran from the house, but before I could make it to the street, he caught me by my hair and pulled me back inside. Gripping my head with one hand, he raised the other and demanded to know what I had seen. (117)

Ninh points out that immigrant parents exercise sovereign power over their children in numerous ways, one of which is enacting discipline without revealing expectations: "the fact that infractions are typically identified as such *only after the fact* makes obedience less a question of walking a line than of picking one's way through a field of land mines" (43). As the above scene suggests, this power is menacing because it is wielded by someone who is otherwise deeply powerless; the narrator's transgression is seeing her father "looking sad and broken," and his power gives him the right to punish her for this act of sight. Ninh draws on Giorgio Agamben's

theorization of sovereign power to demonstrate that filial guilt is structural and that the immigrant parent, as the sovereign in the familial structure, “traces a threshold between that which is inside and that which is outside of the law (15), ‘producing’ his subject as such [the child], as well as deciding from among the activities of living what may fall under governance” (43). The narrator in Lê’s novel accepts her father’s role as sovereign; in response to his demand to know what she saw, she narrates, “To protect myself, I tried to forget everything: that first night at the refugee camp in Singapore; those early morning walks after we arrived in America; the sound of his voice asking a question no one could answer” (118). Her attempt at forgetting not only this but other instances of seeing her father is her response to his position as sovereign over her, and she is unable to submit fully: “The only thing I couldn’t drive away was the memory of my brother, whose body lay just beyond reach, forming the shape of a distant shore” (118). She is unable to forget everything that she needs to forget in order to avoid transgressing her father’s unspoken rules.

Significantly, the narration of the event stops as her father is poised to strike; whether he actually hits her in that moment goes unrevealed. This silence is reflective of the way the novel grapples with representing domestic abuse. A few pages earlier, the narrator describes her father’s vacillating extremes:

He becomes prone to rages. He smashes televisions, VCRs, chases friends and family down the street, brandishing hammers and knives in broad daylight. Then from night until early morning he sits on the couch in the living room, his body absolutely still, his hands folded on his lap, penitent. (116)

The narrator describes him chasing “friends and family” but does not say she herself is chased; in this passage, she withholds explicitly stating whether she is subjected to his violence. This

withholding can be read as holding back from addressing abuse directly, yet the withholding adds to its menace rather than diminishing it, reflecting the uncertainty experienced by the narrator. Nevertheless, the narrator's recognition of her father's authority over her remains even in the face of American structures of authority, as can be seen when he comes to pick her up from the shelter and she feels protective of him in the face of the counsellors there (118–119), a passage later discussed in greater depth.

To return to the incident of the butterfly, the narrator resolves to break the disk, choosing a portion of the wall in Mel's office to throw it against, carefully measuring it with her hand (34). Before she throws it, she listens to it one more time: "There, very faintly, was the sound. It was like a light almost transparent curtain rippling across a window" (34). She is in a room with an open window but at this point, she re-locates a real sound – the curtain in the breeze – to a different source, one of the many times the novel shows her using her imagination to manipulate the world around her. Instead of hitting the wall, the disk crashes into a display case containing glass animals collected by Mel's parents over the years. Everything shatters, but the narrator reacts only by spinning herself in the desk chair, "scanning the ceiling for the butterfly" (35). Her imagined sound of the butterfly wings "shuh-shuh/shuh-shuh" is interspersed with the sound that is suggested to be her father saying "suh-top!/suh-top!" (35), a word he has been practising reading on a stop sign while walking her to school. This moment marks her father's desire to protect her from grasping too hard for freedom as well as his understanding of why she grasps for it. It also signals the novel's questioning of whether freedom is an illusion. The narrator, of course, does not find the butterfly on the ceiling. Her attempt to free it is futile, and her imagination has succeeded only in alienating their already reticent benefactor.

The events of their departure are not described. It is taken as a given that they should all be expelled because the girl broke the figurines. This exile marks how they are taken as a group, as family, even without blood relations. The uncles are expelled because of her; they are held responsible for a child they are connected to solely through migration and the accident of being, literally, in the same boat. This theme, of being taken as a group, is present throughout the text and, indeed, most second-generation-focused novels. Group bonds are not solely externally enforced, however, as the earlier description of the uncles as connected to them “not by blood but by water” (3) suggests; the connection through water is still a real, lived bond.

The bonds of migration expand beyond those with whom one migrates; they extend to other migrants as well, and again these bonds are both chosen and imposed. The narrator is subjected to a homogenizing gaze at school as the white kids call all of the Southeast Asian kids “Yang,” based on one year when “a bunch of Laotian kids with the last name Yang came to [their] school” (89). The narrator is a part of a “we” that, while being greater in numbers, is not recognized as being made up of individuals. In the yearbook, they are “not the most of anything” (89). The novel connects this homogenization to American militarism, as the white kids are the children of people in the Navy. The parents have made the Southeast Asian children’s ancestors the subject of US racism and military intervention, resulting in their own children calling all the Southeast Asian children Yang. The fact of the Southeast Asian children’s continued marginalization at school despite greater numbers also highlights how social hierarchy withstands changes in demographics.

Yet in their rundown housing complex the family is also able to find community in shared poverty with their migrant neighbours (51). The narrator acknowledges how the adults bond over “jobs and cars and what was on sale at the grocery store” as well as the negligence of

their landlord (51). For the narrator, the community among the children is, of course, more important. The novel contains paragraphs-long descriptions of the children's play. Much of their play is imaginative, reflecting both those things they lack and the circumstances that shape their lives. In terms of the former, they often use what they have on hand to pretend to have more; they make a trampoline out of a mattress and pretend to find and devour "French fries, hamburgers, and fried chicken" in the kitchen of the burned-out house next to the complex (57). What the children can actually afford is to pool their pennies in order to buy single boxes of candy that they share among themselves, so they supplement their desires through their imagination. In terms of the latter, the children use the neighbouring Jehovah's Witnesses church as the site of a game they call Kingdom, which goes through a telling transformation: "At first, Kingdom was about pretending that we were in Heaven. We tried to be the people in the little books [Jehovah's Witness tracts]. We swept the stairs and kept the castle clean. We walked around smiling, waving to invisible people in our heavenly community.... When we got bored, Kingdom became about having fights and waging war" (49). Many children play war games, but the war games represented here clearly draw from the experiences of the children and their parents related to actual war and forced migration. Interestingly, the children still filter these experiences through the terms of imagination: "we made up stories about ships at sea, on the lookout for pirate ships" (49); they "made up" these stories even though the narrator and presumably some of the other children have had this very experience. The children's game is a parody of war, satirizing its consistent elements, such as its self-perpetuating nature: "We fought over which side had killed more people and because we usually couldn't agree, we'd have to collect more eucalyptus cones and have another war" (50). Here, the novel demonstrates how children like the narrator use play to survive and even recast painful memories and histories.

The novel is constructed as an act of recuperation. It is a first-person narrative in which the narrator imaginatively inserts herself into the minds of all of those around her. She is, at the end, far from her family, yet the very act of producing this narrative expresses a need to come to understand her family and her past in order to face her future and create for herself an identity beyond becoming her father. The unsteadiness of time in the novel suggests that when she describes her parents' feelings and thoughts and actions in scenes she has not witnessed, this is information that she might learn from them once they can speak to each other freely and be together without filling her with the need to run away. The project of recuperation informs the text as a whole, including in how characters are named.

The naming of characters is very important to the text, both in terms of who is and who is not named, as well as how nomenclature changes at various points in the novel. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator's parents are called Ma and Ba. As the novel goes on, the narrator at times identifies Ma and Ba as "my mother and father" (43). Which designation she uses is significant. When she describes what they do, she calls them mother and father: "I lived upstairs, in a one-bedroom apartment with my mother and my father. She worked as a seamstress, doing piecework at our kitchen table. He worked as a welder at a factory that made space heaters" (43). But when she describes what they want, she calls them Ma and Ba: "Neither of them wanted to be doing it; Ma wanted to have a restaurant and Ba wanted to have a garden" (43). The use of Ma and Ba seems sometimes to indicate the child's perspective and at other times to indicate a sense of intimacy.

Most significant is that the narrator is unnamed. The parents are given names, Minh and Ahn (82). The parents' identities are given more coherence than that of the narrator. She is not simply passively unnamed, but rather her name is willfully withheld. She describes an interaction

with another child in her apartment complex while they play: “Upside down, you look like a boy. You look like the brother of...’ And then she said my name” (71). The narrator refuses to share her name with the reader. Part of the narrator’s namelessness is an act of separation. She not only declines to name herself to the reader, she also refuses to answer to her name when hailed on the street by someone from home after she has left Linda Vista. He calls her a liar for not responding, and her description of how she experiences this moment of naming is telling: “I kept moving as the lilting syllables of my own name fell around me like licks of flame that extinguished on contact, never catching” (100). By denying her name, she becomes untouchable. Yet denying her name still connects her to her family, as she attributes her ability to do this to her father: “It was my father who taught me how to do this, how to keep moving even when a bone in the leg was broken or a muscle in the chest was torn” (100). She has inherited her father’s abilities of self-preservation but embodies them differently. She uses the lessons she has learned from him to distance herself from him.

The fact that the novel foregrounds the narrator’s relationship with her father, and even further, the idea of her becoming her father, is vital to understanding how it frames subject formation and familial relationships. In one of the novel’s many heartbreakingly beautiful passages, the narrator asserts her childhood belief about her identity in relation to her father: “I grew up studying my father so closely as to suggest I was certain I saw my future in him” (116). She sees herself becoming her father physically, “I would inherit his lithe figure and beautiful smile,” as well as in action, “I would build and break things with my hands. I would answer to names not my own and be ordered around like a child. I would disappear into every manner of darkness only to awaken amid a halo of faces encircling my body” and in emotion, “Shame would crush me. I would turn away from the people I loved. I would regard with suspicion the

bare shoulders of a woman I desired” (116). She also suggests that she will inherit his memories: “The sight of two boys shooting marbles in a dirt yard would fill me with sadness.... The sight of a young girl playing house, sweeping out an imaginary courtyard with a branch of eucalyptus and the little song she sang, about a fluttering butterfly, and the way her arm described the course of its body in flight, would haunt me” (116–117). She will not only inherit her father’s memories of her brother, but even memories of herself. She will haunt herself through memories of herself unconsciously passed down from her father. The narrator’s subjectivity is formed through this layering of her own experiences with her father’s experiences, her own emotions with the father’s emotions, which she watches closely both for self-preservation and for prediction. Yet while this description of her father might suggest that she has also inherited his fatalistic approach to life, she develops a different approach: “Whereas my father would disappear into himself when haunted, I would leap out of windows and run. When there were no windows, I would kick down doors. The point was to get to the street, at any cost. I would come to see running as inseparable from living” (117). The daughter of migration responds to being haunted with movement instead of stillness; for her, the outdoors feels safer than the home, but not just, or even primarily, because of the threat of physical violence: “I would choose falling asleep on rooftops and on the lawns of strangers to lying in my own bed, surrounded by knots of memories I had no language with which to unravel” (117). For the narrator, the absence of language that can make sense of the memories, both those of her parents and her own, is a greater threat even than her father’s rages. As I argued in the introduction to this section, home cannot be seen solely as a place of refuge from the world, as the conflicts of the world are embedded in the home. The narrator’s stretching towards freedom is contrasted to her father’s withdrawal. Still, the narrator’s description of her teenage self demonstrates that she cannot escape being like her

father: “Yet exactly like my father, I would become suspicious of tenderness and was calmest when I had one hand quietly lying over the other, both ready to be raised in an instant, shattering to the bone whatever dared come too near to me” (117). This section repeatedly uses the word “would” to indicate both possible future occurrences and common past behaviours; by framing these directions of the narrator’s gaze using the same heavily repeated word, their supposed distance is questioned. The narrator can distance herself from the home space, but she carries her father no matter how far away she goes.

The narrator’s childhood is also shaped by warnings against danger. While her father takes a fatalistic approach to life, her mother tries to keep her safe through fear. Her mother warns that cars “can hit you and keep going,” that the sewing machine needle “can move much faster than you can run,” and, significantly, that boys “will try to press you into it” (44). Some of her warnings are more esoteric but are all centred on keeping the narrator contained: “‘If you dance with your shadow,’ she’d say, ‘You’ll go crazy.’ ‘If you run around barefoot all summer, your feet will burn and fall off.’ ‘If you swallow fruit seeds, trees will grow inside of you until branches come out of your ears’” (47). These warnings are all about the dangers of the physical and carry the implicit message that if the narrator tries too hard to be free, if she does too much, her own body will punish her for it. Ninh notes how such warnings are key aspects of the familial and social control of girls’ bodies (128).

The threat of sexuality is a quiet undercurrent in the text, which is to be expected as the development of sexuality is one of the most consistent aspects of coming-of-age narratives. In keeping with the narrator’s general longing for liberty, her developing sexual desires are aroused by symbols of freedom. The boys in the apartment complex are subtly sexualized as they play in and around the swimming pool, a symbol of freedom. The water is described as plastering each

boy's hair against his forehead "as if he was headed for the first day of school or a church for communion or a meeting with a girl" (45). The narrator's first sexual experience is described in delicate detail. She goes with a boy into "The Room," a cardboard box the children play in, and they share tentative caresses. She feels that she ought to want to resist; when he touches her chest she says, "Hey," but not in the way she expects: "I thought my voice would come out high like an alarm but it came out low and quiet with a lot of space around it" (58). She is aware of the prohibition against this behaviour, but here as elsewhere, her desire outweighs her willingness to be "good." Yet parental expectations are not totally forgotten: "Someone's mother called her name. It wasn't mine, but I opened my eyes anyway and backed out of the box" (58). The mother's voice reminds her of her own mother's admonishment. Later, as she contemplates the boy while lying in bed, the narrative gestures to the way that her desire is firstly self-directed: "I brought two fingers to my throat and imagined they were lips – mine and then his – feeling for a pulse" (59). By having her first imagine her own lips against her neck, the narrative asserts the narrator-as-child's agency in her sexual awakening, in contrast to her mother's warnings.

Instances of the narrator's sexual exploration are intercut with moments of her exposure to her parents as sexual beings. These moments exploit the child's perspective so that the reader is able to see how the narrator sits in the space between understanding and not understanding, ignorance and intuition. The narrator's mother bumps into a man who is suggested to be but not explicitly named as an ex-boyfriend or ex-suitor from Vietnam. The narrator-as-child can perceive from her mother's body language that something is going on: "My mother kept smiling and tucking her hair behind her ears. She had just gotten a haircut so actually her hair was already behind her ears" (59). The narrator refuses to smile at the man and spies on them from behind the washroom door when her mother sends her to wash her hands again so that they can

continue talking. Yet the narrator-as-child does not consciously comprehend what she has witnessed; when her mother explains that “that was a friend from home. From when I was a girl,” the narrator’s response is “‘Oh,’ I said, nodding, as if I understood” (60). The narrative thus emphasizes how outside forces unconsciously shape sexual awakening.

This is further underscored as the paragraph that follows returns the narrator-as-child to “The Room,” now called “the kissing box” (60), which is then followed by a vignette describing the narrator’s witnessing of her parents’ intimacy. Living in a one-bedroom apartment means that the narrator is intimate with her parents’ intimacy. She describes her parents’ bodies as becoming “long and dark bodies rising and falling like waves” (61). The water-based metaphor is significant – sexuality is tied to the many things that water represents in this text: freedom, danger, mystery, and home.

The novel shows the sexual and the physical to be deeply intertwined with the emotional, especially those emotions tied to loss and migration. The narrator’s feelings about her “paltry” breasts (69) and her fleeting desire to “run around with [her] shirt off all the time and spend [her] days climbing trees and [her] nights sleeping in one of these towers” (70–71) are tied to the loss of her brother. This is made clear when her friend begins to ask if it is true that she had a brother, although the narrator cuts the friend off before she can utter the word “brother.” The narrator reacts by pulling away from her friend and reaching for her shirt, cutting off the possibility of being both herself and her brother. Her sense of self is irrevocably shaped by the loss of her brother, whose presence she never leaves behind. She describes a moment when, walking back from the store with ice, she *feels* her brother’s presence. The experience is described in such a way as pre-empt reading it as a hallucination. She describes it instead as “just a feeling. Like heat or hunger or dizziness or loneliness or longing” (74). Feelings that are usually separated as being

either bodily or emotional are here brought together in order to explain another feeling that is just as bodily as it is emotional. Indeed, the novel frequently demonstrates the ways that bodily action and emotional state reflect each other. The narrator's longing for freedom is both physical and emotional, and her physical actions regularly reflect this. Her feelings about the loss of her brother are described in active terms of going or not going with him (74–75). When she “feels” her brother, he casts no shadow (74), which calls back to her mother's seemingly esoteric pronouncement against dancing with one's shadow. Her brother is her shadow, “walking behind [her]” (74) and dancing with him, “going with him,” means embracing death. This chapter, so centrally concerned with sexuality, ends with a different physical image – the narrator-as-child “[weeping] into the desert of [her] palms” (77), her fingers wrinkled from carrying the bag of ice. The body is a site of desolation as well as pleasure. The transition from innocence to experience, the novel suggests, requires a recognition of this uncomfortable truth.

As I have previously suggested, much of the symbolism and figurative language in the novel revolves around water. Indeed, water is the central symbol of the text. Its role is both life-giver and life-taker, a constant as well as something that can be missed, a marker of distance and a means of travel – in short, the very essence of contradiction. Contradiction, the novel suggests, is also the very nature of subject formation as a Vietnamese refugee and, I argue, as a second-generation subject more broadly. The specificity of water and its importance to Vietnamese people is made clear in the novel's epigraph; the first thing the reader sees after the dedication is this: “In Vietnamese, the word for water and the word for a nation, a country, and a homeland are one and the same: nu'o'c.” The relationship between nation and water predates the mass migration that resulted from the Vietnam War and its aftermath; it is embedded in the language. But just as migration can create or exacerbate an ambivalent relationship to nations, it can do the

same with water. This is not to say that the multifaceted nature of water went unacknowledged in Vietnam; the discussion of the “bad water” swallowed and then transported into the home by the narrator’s drowned brother makes it clear that the menace of water was not only acknowledged but mythologized (130). Nevertheless, the characters’ relationship to water is made even more ambivalent through their migration. When the family lives in the rundown apartment complex with a pool in the courtyard, the narrator observes, “Though my parents didn’t want me to play near the swimming pool, they both liked having the pool in the courtyard. My mother said it wasn’t the sea but it was nice to open the door and have some water” (51). The parents fear the water taking another child from them but also long to be near it. When the pool is filled with concrete because the landlord discovers children jumping off balconies into it, tension arises between the narrator’s parents. It angers her mother, but her father tries to shrug it off, another instance of his fatalistic attitude. Her father responds to her mother’s complaint by saying, “He’s the landlord. It’s his building” (154). This statement emphasizes the lack of control the characters have over their lives and environment and that they cannot expect beauty. The narrator does not say anything; after all, “What was there to say?” (54). Her manner of coping is neither the self-inflicted indifference of her father nor the vocal complaints of her mother but rather a quiet, thorough remembering of what she saw in the swimming pool. The memory of “the body of a boy, gliding along the floor of the pool, sunlight streaming across his bare back...the reflection of clouds, and birds migrating...the leaves that floated to the edges of the swimming pool and nested” (54) is her active form of preservation. She narrates, “But what I remembered most were the boys, flying, I remembered their bodies arcing through the air and plunging down. I remembered how their hands parted the water and how as they disappeared, the last thing I would see were the pale soles of their feet” (54–55). This memory establishes the

pool as a site of freedom, of escape, foreshadowing her later practice of jumping out of windows to escape her family. At this point in the narrative, her longing for freedom is established, but her attempts at achieving it have been forestalled. Her imagination, however, continues to provide her a space for this longing to flourish.

The way that time functions in the novel is directly tied to the way that the narrative subtly constructs the adult version of the narrator and her imaginative engagements. This is particularly evident in the novel's final chapter, which jumps back and forth in time. The first section, which describes a seemingly average day for the narrator's father, is unmarked, but the next section, focusing on the childhood death of the narrator's brother in Vietnam, starts with "twenty years ago" (126), which suggests that the previous section is meant to take place in the present as told by the adult narrator. Yet later in the same chapter, her father is described as having arrived in the city of San Diego "more than twenty years ago" (140). This description thus indicates that these sections of the chapter take place not in the present of the text but the future. As such, these sections can be read as future projections, even though they are written in past tense. The repeated use of "more than twenty years ago" (143) allows a vague sense of how far into the future these events could be taking place since just how much more than twenty years have passed remains unclear.

The narrator introduces information about her adult self third-hand. In describing how her parents' apartment building functions as a village, she notes what the neighbours know about her parents' absent daughter:

It was known that my parents had a daughter who lived on the East Coast, somewhere near New York. Some people heard that she had run away and some people heard that she had simply gone away. That was many years ago and now

the rumor was she was writing stories. No one had read them and no one had met her. They imagined that her English was very good. (148)

This passage sets up her life as open for interpretation; what is the difference between her having run away or simply gone away? The narrator has already revealed that she has done both. Having already run away, she calls her parents to let them know that she is going to the East Coast to go to school (119). Regardless of the nature of her departure, the real news is the rumour of her writing. Her parents' apartment building, which it is implied is inhabited primarily by first-generation Vietnamese refugees, is disconnected from the second generation in part through language. The stories the narrator is rumoured to be writing lead them to imagine "that her English was very good" – that conclusion is all they can or will make of her writing. This metatextual moment creates a doubling for the reader. The narrator is said to write stories and the text is ostensibly a story of the narrator's, as indicated by the times that the novel directly addresses the reader (99). Of course, the narrator herself is the creation of the author. The reader is thus asked to imagine how these subjects of the story, who are fictional, might react to the way they are portrayed in a story they will never read and would not read, even if they were not fictional. The disconnect between the writer and the community about which she writes is foregrounded here, but even more so is the paradox of audience for this type of text. The narrator is telling her own coming of age, but she is also telling the story of her parents because that story is necessary for her self-representation. Yet working-class Vietnamese migrants to the United States are unlikely to choose leisure reading that chronicles their own suffering. Thus, an exercise in better understanding the first generation is also a site of further alienation. The slippage between author and narrator, reinforced by the narrator's lack of name and identity as a writer, is a challenge put to the reader, demanding that the reader consider how subjectivity is

constructed narratively. The narrator is like the author but is not the author, and the novel asks that one engage in the imaginative empathy displayed by the narrator towards the narrator, without having to know what is “true” in the story, despite the common desire among readers to read this text and others like it as autobiographical (Pelaud 99). Describing herself as a “fellow traveler” with her narrator (Pelaud 99), lê uses a designation that stresses the kinship between author and character as well as the novel as reflective of a journey: the process of coming of age.

The tension between the narrator’s empathy for her father and her need to be distant from him is the heartbreaking centre of the novel. She feels the need to shield him from institutions even as she needs to run away from him. When he comes to pick her up at a shelter after she has run away, two counsellors speak to her and her father. The narrator says her father “apologized for what his hands had done,” and while the counsellors take this to mean that was he is “taking responsibility for his drunken rages,” the narrator understands that something else is going on; he “spread his hands wide open, and said, in Vietnamese, to anyone who could understand, there were things he had lost a grasp of” (118). The narrator casts her father’s statement as a plea for understanding from anyone, but the only one there who can understand what he is saying is her, in terms of both the language he is speaking and what he is talking about. The narrator states, “I thought [the counsellors] had no right to frown at my father” (119). While she wants to escape him, she cannot bear to see him scrutinized by those who cannot understand him, especially those who are representatives of government or social systems with which she and her father both have an ambivalent relationship. The final line of this section is telling: “I remember crossing the parking lot, my hand in my father’s hand, the two of us running to the car as though we were escaping together again” (119). The shared experience of escaping together from Vietnam has produced an us-versus-the-world dynamic between them that survives even their

conflicts. The next section makes it clear that she runs away again, however, and eventually does so for good. Her desire to shield him from the counsellors does not negate her need to escape from him. She cannot or will not depend on the state in her quest for freedom and selfhood, but that quest continues.

The narrator's imagining of her estranged father's empathy towards others is one of the most interesting aspects of her imagining of him. She describes him as watching a news report on mute of a woman crying in a field somewhere in Europe (126) and, after thinking about it for hours, realizing that the woman is indicating that bodies are buried in the field (152). Her father's fixation on this scene continues to re-emerge throughout the chapter until it culminates into a fully realized desire to show solidarity. He imagines that the woman "would not be able to rest until she had dug, with her own bare hands, through that field" (156) and consciously connects this to his own wartime experience: "Thinking of the bright green field she stood in, he remembered the bodies that floated through rice paddies during the war" (156–157). His reaction to this connection is to want to help her in the task he has imagined for her: "Sitting on his porch in Linda Vista he thought about loading all his gardening equipment into his truck. He would drive to wherever she was and offer her his help, his hands" (157). The very next paragraph reminds the reader of the estrangement between the narrator and her father, drawing attention to the degree to which the narrator puts herself into an omniscient role when imagining her father's life without her. She narrates, "Often when he said a word in English, he would think of how his daughter might say it" (157). He can only imagine how she "might" say it because they rarely speak. This reminder of the narrator's distance from her father even as she imagines his feelings of closeness to a person far away from himself is one of the ways that the novel ambivalently constructs the idea of the narrator becoming her father; she has been formed by him and this

means that she has inherited his capacity for empathy. However, that is not his only legacy in her. Another is a feeling of being trapped; in earlier portions of the novel during which Ba takes a fatalistic approach to life, his lack of control over his life is central and the narrator frames herself as a daughter who simultaneously relates to and tries to push back against such helplessness. Near the end of the novel, her father's lack of agency is symbolically conveyed by his reaction to the phone ringing: "though my father didn't feel he could answer it, he also didn't feel he could disconnect it" (139). This description of powerlessness is one of the many moments in the text where the narrator demonstrates an empathy for her father that is in contrast to her actual actions. The novel produces a compelling sense of empathy while resisting any suggestion that it is wrong for the narrator to separate herself from her father. Thus, lê's novel is a relevant text to consider when responding to Ninh's critique that "Asian American studies has thus far shown itself, nevertheless, to be mainly invested in a defense of immigrant parents against their reproachful daughters" (122); this novel offers critics an opportunity to consider how both the reproach and the defence might be already embedded in narratives and in fact inextricable from one another. Rather than defend immigrant parents, critics might consider how second-generation reproaches nuance interpretations of immigrant positionality. In texts like the ones that both Ninh and I analyze, the desire to understand is deeply interwoven with the desire to reproach.

The imaginative empathy of the narrator extends far beyond her parents, even to the man who comes to tell her mother that her husband knows of his son's death. She describes the man's interaction with her mother, imagines how he feels: "He looks at the young woman. She is probably the same age as his wife was when they first met. He wants to tell her there is nothing to do but to bury her son and be patient" (136–137). This section of the text emphasizes that the

war, though officially over, still shapes their lives; her father cannot return because he is in a re-education camp. Their tragedies and traumas are layered, connected to the war in ways both direct and indirect. But the narrator's exercise in understanding the perspective of the man sent to tell them her father cannot return is also an exercise in solidarity; she narrates, "How many times has he seen this? He looks away. He doesn't say anything" (137). He looks away from the family, but the narrator does not look away from him; she acknowledges that her family is among many who have lost things to the war. This practice of projecting herself into the past, piecing together not just events but emotions, signals an investment in understanding and representing how being born into the context of war is a fundamental factor in who she becomes, even if her direct experiences and memories are minimal or nonexistent. Espiritu identifies this turn as common among those she refers to as the "postwar generation," arguing that their "practice of looking to their present conditions in order to understand their parents' past corroborates one of the strongest and most enduring premises of Walter Benjamin's conception of history: the belief that it is not history that enables us to understand the present but, conversely, the present that enables us to understand the past" (170). The narrator's present understanding of herself and her parents informs her reconstruction of the past, which she then uses to further construct her vision of her present.

The narrator comes to understand herself through her family. By reaching outside of herself, she accesses herself. When her father returns from the re-education camp, she describes his arrival, noting that she was staring into the family well and did not notice him arrive. She narrates, "I stood leaning over the mouth of the well. The stillness of my body led Ba to understand that I had just lost something in the water, something I could not see much less retrieve" (144). They have, of course, both lost something in the water – his son and her brother.

This loss is communal. She processes her loss through him. Until this point the narrator has described her child self as unable to accept her brother's death. She reanimates her brother, imagining him laughing at them at his funeral and hiding behind gravestones in the cemetery (141–142). Her loss can only be acknowledged through the conduit of her father.

The central mystery of the text – what happened to the narrator's brother – turns out to be not directly related to war or migration. Her brother's death by drowning demonstrates that the events that define the family's life are complex and cannot be solely equated with the primary narratives associated with refugee life. As Espiritu argues, personal secrets and traumas are tied up with war secrets and traumas so that the personal cannot be extricated from the social and political (154). The loss of the narrator's brother haunts the entire family and contributes significantly to the intergenerational tensions that crackle through the text, as well as shapes the narrator's understanding of herself. Her brother's death is not directly caused by the war, but it takes place in the aftermath of the war, and the events that follow, including the father's absence during the time of the boy's death, are a direct result of the war even though it has ended. The narrator's feeling that she must become both herself and her dead brother is not unrelated to her experience of migration, as the loss of her brother is also tied to her loss of Vietnam, but it is also not solely a product of it.

Although in the present of the text, the narrator is estranged from her parents, the novel's emphasis on their interiority along with that of the narrator conveys a hope of future reconciliation or at least a longing for continued familial investment, even from a silent distance. The novel's ending vividly illustrates this longing. Rather than ending in the present of the text, the novel concludes with a past event that simultaneously points to the future. "One night during [their] first spring together in California" (157), the narrator's father takes her and her mother to

the beach, where they see “small silver fish whose bodies gave off a strange light” (158). These fish are being washed ashore, but the narrator describes them from the perspective of a child: “Up close, their little mouths moved busily, as if they could not get enough of the cool salt night air” (158). The narrator’s father “pointed at the fish as if we knew them” (158), establishing the family’s kinship with creatures who are washed ashore, left gasping on the beach. This image calls back to the very first sentence of the novel, in which the family, at that point an unexplained “we,” “eventually washed to shore” in Linda Vista (3). Yet Ba is “smiling broadly” (158) as he gestures, not casting this shared condition in a mournful light. Most significantly, this final scene exemplifies the novel’s theme of the complexity of belonging to family. This is a happy memory. The parents’ connection and mutual dependence is emphasized, but the narrator is described as being separate. This separation is represented both in memory and in action. She describes how each of them remember this event:

My father remembers stroking my mother’s face.

My mother remembers wearing my father’s coat.

I remember taking off my sandals and digging my heels into the wet sand. (158)

Her mother and father remember each other, while the narrator remembers her physical connection to the ground, not the solid ground, but wet sand. She grounds herself in instability. She is connected to place even as that place remains unsteady.

The last sentence of the novel demonstrates that this separation takes place in action as well, mirroring the narrator’s earlier reflection on her need to run in comparison to her father’s stasis: “As my parents stood on the beach leaning into each other, I ran, like a dog unleashed, toward the lights” (158). This moment indicates the narrative’s turn to futurity; here the narrator sees herself not as running away from her parents but as running towards something. That these

lights are dying fish on the seashore does not make her running in vain. By ending the novel on this solitary yet strangely beautiful note, the novel completes its coming-of-age story in a space where past, present, and future converge. The adult narrator's aloneness is active and her simultaneous need to understand and love her family and to be distant from them reaches a delicate balance. The recuperation that the novel has been enacting opens up a space for a future responsive to but not overcome by the past.

The complexity of love – that it can coexist with violence, that a couple can fight constantly physically and verbally and also eventually settle into happy mutual dependence, that despite this, the past is not changed and its effect on the narrator remains – is central to the novel, and, I argue, is a theme present in many second-generation texts that deal with the afterlife of migration. Especially in texts concerned with the coming of age of protagonists, the familial ruptures that result from migration pose a specific set of obstacles for the development of selfhood. In Lê's novel, how the children of migrants come into being while navigating the dangers of both the home and the outside world, physical and psychological, is explored. Rather than casting the family home as outside of the world, the novel demonstrates how deeply embedded it is in the world and, significantly, the multiple communities that have made up and continue to make up the narrator's social world, from Vietnam to the particular world of the boat and the ongoing community it produces, to the family's various homes in California, to her own eventual home in some unspecified part of the East Coast, from the imaginative world of working-class children in the apartment complex, to the alienating experience of going to school with the navy children, to the seemingly lonely but resolute life she builds for herself away from the physical space of her parents.

“A Real Tollington Wench”: Multidirectional Coming of Age in Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*

Meera Syal’s 1996 debut novel, *Anita and Me*, follows the development of Meena, the British-born daughter of two Indian parents in the 1960s. Set in the working-class, former mining village of Tollington, the three main external events that precipitate Meena’s coming of age are her fraught friendship with her slightly older white neighbour Anita, the rearrangement of her family life following the birth of her younger brother, and the townspeople’s anger about the soon to be built motorway that they fear will change the town beyond their recognition. For some of Tollington’s residents, this anger is channeled into xenophobic discourse and actions that change Meena’s relationship to individuals and the town as a whole. Syal’s novel is semi-autobiographical and often comic, reflecting her other career as a comic actress. Formally, the novel is mostly linear and retrospective with, at times, an episodic structure.

Anita and Me is the first-person, retrospectively narrated story of Meena. The novel traces her coming of age in that it focuses on her transition from innocence to experience. This transition is precipitated both by internal development, such as her changing relationship to her body and her feelings about her family and community, and by external events, including the personal, such as her impending transition from primary school to grammar school, as well as social and political changes within the wider community. Indeed, these external and internal forces are deeply intertwined, and their depiction is strongly inflected by the narrator’s second-generation subject position and the novel’s investment in exploring how this position comes to be and how it can be navigated. As such, the novel produces a narrative of second-generation subject formation that marks coming into one’s difference from both parents and peers as the necessary prerequisite of coming of age. That this process is necessary does not, however, mean that it is without a profound sense of loss; the novel’s depiction of loss, along with its comic

elements, produces a complex image of second-generation subject formation that asserts the creativity inherent in the production of individual identity *as well as* the importance of connecting across difference – of being in communities of difference.

Critical writing on Syal's novel has generally focused on it as a coming-of-age novel, as this chapter does, although through a variety of lenses. Berthold Schoene-Harwood considers *Anita and Me* in relation to the genre of the bildungsroman and the process of coming of age. Categorizing Syal's novel as post-colonial and ethno-British, he argues that the process of *Bildung* is fundamentally deformative for the "post-colonial self – invariably a Kristevan 'subject-in-the-making'" (159). He then turns to a discussion of Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space" as the place into which the post-colonial self can emerge instead of the conformist requirements of "perfect societal integration" (159). But he finds existing in the third space to also be untenable, asking, "But what kind of self would ever be able to settle in a place that is momentary and impermanent by definition, forever dismantling and re-inventing itself?" (160), and then going on to claim that "according to Meera Syal in *Anita and Me*, hybridity is prone to disturb and weaken rather than facilitate the counter-discursive potential of the self" (160). Furthermore, he argues that "to survive and prosper in the Third Space, the postcolonial self must not enter but come out of *Bildung*. It must learn to evade and resist rather than yield to the inscriptive gaze of both mono- and multicultural perception" (160). While I agree that historically the bildungsroman produces the unification of the individual and (usually) his society and that this coming together is not available to subjects like Meena, Syal's protagonist, I argue that this novel is deeply invested in the distinct creative power of Meena's unstable position in her home, in the village of Tollington, and in the wider culture of England. The novel represents what Schoene-Harwood calls the "onerous ordeal" of hybridity in order to demonstrate its

creative potential while also resisting its romanticization. Like many second-generation texts, *Anita and Me* represents hybridity as a fact of the characters' lives; whether it is to be celebrated or mourned is beside the point, as the real questions are more complex. How is hybridity experienced and how does this experience change over time? How do characters like Meena make use of their hybrid position, a position that they did not choose but must nevertheless live in? Like many comedians, Syal recognizes the link between pain and creation.

In his analysis of Syal's two novels, Devon Campbell-Hall is also critical of positive readings of hybridity, and focuses on intra-familial conflict, arguing that "the second-generation British Asian youth within [Syal's] novels are shown to be less concerned with their state of cultural marginalization than with the tension between their desires and the expectations of their first generation parents" (289). Campbell-Hall sets up a false choice between the supposedly external problem of marginalization and the supposedly internal problem of parental expectation rather than recognizing the interrelatedness of these two conflicts and the way that each one is both an internal and external force. His argument, then, is most useful in this chapter as an example of the kinds of generational arguments that Ninh rightfully argues that we can move beyond.

Graeme Dunphy takes up the intertextual connections between the novel and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, indicating both structural and thematic echoing. The most valuable aspect of Dunphy's discussion for the purposes of this chapter is his argument that recognizing Anita as Meena's alter ego brings the two books close together and gives Syal's novel greater psychological depth than Lee's (643). Anita's complex role in Meena's coming of age is considered at length in this chapter and Dunphy's reading offers a fruitful line of consideration.

In her analysis of *Anita and Me* and *White Teeth*, Burcu Kayışçı focuses on the rejection of home as a fixed position and, importantly, draws from feminist criticism to argue that at the end of the novel, Meena is “now ‘unhomely’, ‘not being home’ which is ‘a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself’ (Martin and Mohanty 296)” (47). My argument acknowledges this unhomeliness and then goes further to consider what this unhomely state produces for the emergent subject.

Sara Upstone critiques the common perception of humour as the “dominant feature” of Syal’s work and argues that “Syal’s use of comedy is more significant for its engagement with the broader conventions of the genre than its evocation of humour” (122). Her analysis of the novel is rich and will be engaged with further but the primary aspect of her critique that sets it apart from other readings is her identification of Meena as a self-consciously untrustworthy narrator who forces the reader to call into question the veracity of the novel’s events (123). This reading takes Meena’s admission in the unmarked prologue of the novel that “I’m really not a liar, I just learned very early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong” (Syal 10) to mean that the novel itself can be read as such a mythology.

At the beginning of the novel, Meena offers two versions of her origin story – one that begins before her birth and one that begins with her first memory, one that is fabricated by her and one that is produced in her by a fabrication by others, that is, a joke on the television (Syal 9–10). The fabricated story is a romantic immigration narrative that involves “early years of struggle and disillusionment” and depicts her parents “living in a shabby boarding house room with another newly arrived immigrant family, Polish, I think would be quite romantic” (9). From

the very beginning, the novel signals that truth, whatever it might look like, is not a priority for Meena, as a child or as an adult. The above-mentioned evocative line that closes the unmarked prologue, “I’m really not a liar, I just learned very early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong” (10), serves as a sort of thesis for the story, a lens through which the reader is encouraged to see the rest of the novel. This novel is tightly focused on the process of coming of age as experienced over a fairly short period of time, no more than two years. Yet the novel begins with a glimpse into the mind of the adult that the process depicted is going to produce. The narrator Meena of the prologue is just as imaginative as her child self and has learned to use her imagination to get what she wants.

The prologue alerts the reader to the mistake of reading Meena’s life through the tropes of a stereotypical immigrant narrative, particularly one that constructs her parents as lost colonials awed by the glory of the mother country: “You know, my windswept, bewildered parents in their dusty Indian village garb standing in the open doorway of a 747, blinking back tears of gratitude and heartbreak as the fog cleared to reveal the sign they had been waiting for, dreaming of, the sign planted in the tarmac and emblazoned in triumphant hues of red, blue and white, the sign that said simply, WELCOME TO BRITAIN” (9). Meena tells this story only to reveal that it is a fabrication she has created in order to manipulate situations where she has less power than those with whom she is interacting: “this is the alternative history I trot out in a job interview situation or, once or twice, to impress middle-class white boys who come sniffing round, excited by the thought of wearing a colonial maiden as a trinket on their arm” (10). Right away, Meena has revealed that she has on occasion allowed herself to be a “trinket” to a slumming white boy. Yet the use of a fake life story as a mode of seduction allows her to create some distance between herself and these boys while still presumably gaining something by

consorting with them. Nevertheless, the falsehood of her “alternative history” does not mean that the novel discounts the importance of her parents’ lives, pre- and post-migration, to her own. Indeed, it can be read as actually emphasizing it, as this false story at the beginning of the novel serves as a wooden and lifeless point of comparison to the actual complexity of her relationship to her parents and to her parents’ pasts.

Meena’s knowledge of her parents’ lives before her birth comes, by necessity, through their recounting. The novel reveals these stories by describing times when Meena’s parents told her about their pasts or by Meena describing instances of eavesdropping on her parents’ conversations. That she primarily expresses her understanding of her parents’ lives as narrative is indicative of the fact that her access to India is heavily mediated – it is the India of her parents alone. In second-generation texts, the importance of the ancestral home and its mediated nature are not contradictory; the “truth” of India or any other ancestral homeland is rarely the primary concern. The ancestral homeland looms large in the lives of second-generation subjects because of the previous generation’s affective, personal, social, and political relationships to it and because of the ways that the ancestral homeland is perceived and constructed in the site of settlement by those within and outside of the ethnic community. Meena describes her mother’s life by recounting what her mother tells her while engaging in domestic tasks:

As she chopped onions for the evening meal or scrubbed the shine back onto a steel pan or watched the clouds of curds form in a bowl of slowly setting homemade yoghurt, any action with a rhythm, she would begin a mantra about her ancestral home. She would chant of a three-storeyed flat-roofed house, blinkered with carved wooden shutters around a dust yard where an old-fashioned pump stood under a mango tree. (34–35)

Meena's experience of her mother's childhood home is vivid, ritualistic (hence the emphasis on rhythm), and repeated, a mantra. At first, her mother's stories of home activate her imagination; she "would listen entranced to this litany of love" and imagine her mother when she was a young woman and "actress, athlete, teacher" (36) in Delhi in her life before. Meena's interest does not stick though: "But gradually I got bored and then jealous of this past that excluded me" (36). Her feeling of exclusion from her mother's past can be seen as a natural result of events simply taking place before she existed, but her jealousy suggests that these stories are what first impress upon her that she lacks access not just to the past but to another place, a place that shaped her parents. Her parents' elsewhere is both present and distant.

The tale of her mother's youth that Meena finds most compelling in the end is the story of the time her mother witnessed a man being stabbed during the Partition riots. In one of the many instances in the text of self-deprecating humour, Meena states, "the last time I had asked her to tell me the Rickshaw story, she looked at me much as I imagine Damien's mother looked when she gave her smiling baby his first shampoo and found three sixes curled up like commas behind his tiny pink ear" (36). Not only does Meena here interpret herself through a pop culture lens, in keeping with her obsession with film and television, first flagged during the prologue's recounting of her first memory, but she also identifies herself as, in some way, fundamentally wrong. She references the 1976 film *The Omen*, in which the child Damien is discovered to be the Antichrist. Significantly, in the film Damien is actually adopted; Meena here foreshadows her own feelings of not belonging to her mother. Nonetheless, Meena claims her morbid interest is not about the appeal of violence but rather "this meeting of the two worlds, the collision of the epic with the banal" (36). Her desire for an epic life sets the stage for her coming of age because part of her self-development is learning that what she considers epic is, in the end, banal; that

these two supposed poles are much closer together than she first anticipates. She ends the chapter by asking, “When would anything dangerous and cruel ever happen to me?” (37); the answer is, in fact, very soon, but it will not look as epic as her child self might expect. As in the subjects of Ninh’s study, this moment in the narrative of *Anita and Me* reflects a second-generation subject’s longing for “suffering which may be more justifiably documented: something with physical evidence, historical scope, epic drama – suffering with a good plot” (114). Meena is unsettled by her distance from the more dramatic nature of her parents’ lives as well as in the place of her birth, but this feeling requires something substantial to ground it, to make it possible to articulate. Whereas the texts that Ninh discusses are either memoirs or novels that are even more thinly separated from the real lives of the writers than *Anita and Me* is, Syal’s choice to convey this story as not just a novel but a novel of coming of age allows for a plot that does rise to the epic.

The relationship between Meena’s invention and self-interest continues throughout the novel. Her style of lying frequently draws on the orientalist lens through which she is seen by the wider society, but, as in the preface, she evokes that lens in order to benefit herself. Her lies are self-conscious and exploit the ignorance of those around her. She tells her classmates she is a Punjabi princess with a pet elephant, and her teacher that she did not finish her homework because of an “obscure religious festival involving fire eating” (28). At this early point in the text, we see Meena as being aware of her difference and, rather than erasing it, seeking to have agency over it. It is actually this quest for agency within difference to which she must return to successfully come of age. Attempts to choose between Indianness and Englishness prove fruitless, because these two sites of identification are inextricable for her.

Another way that Meena experiences her parents’ past is through the interpretation of photographs. This is one of the ways that she is able to create an understanding of her parents’

story and, by extension, her own when her parents are unwilling to tell. Meena describes the picture of her father leaving her mother behind in Delhi in order to go to England in vivid detail:

Papa is leaning out of a steam train window in a brilliant white shirt, an overcoat slung over his waving arm. The smoke rises like cold-morning breath around his face and he is backlit by a rising sun. He is smiling his gap-toothed smile, though his eyes are intense. Mama stands on the platform, the fingers of one hand slightly raised, as if she is afraid to wave him goodbye. She is impossibly young and utterly bereft. (31–32)

Meena insists on imbuing her parents' photographs with deep emotions and shapes them into narratives that give events in her parents' lives a meaning that is for her benefit. She cobbles together a narrative of her parents' courtship through snippets of the Aunties' conversation that suggest that her parents were a love match. Her excitement over the idea of her parents' love story comes from her desire to build her own personal mythology. Meena-as-narrator acknowledges the imaginative nature of child Meena's approach to her parents' past; when child Meena envisions her parents' courtship, she imagines "them chasing each other around old Indian streets (which were basically English streets with a few cows lounging around on the corners)" (32). Meena-as-narrator humorously signals the unreality of child Meena's imaginings but this narrativization of her parents' photographs fills the space made by her mother's refusal to tell her the real story; her mother reacts to her questions about their courtship by saying, "Don't be so silly! [...] We were introduced by an uncle. It all was done through the proper channels. Listening to your elders' conversations again..." (32). Despite her mother's admonishment, Meena continues to try to fill in the gaps of what she is told. In her description of her parents' single wedding photograph, she overrides her father's interpretation of the picture

with her own: “But mama is not crying, although her head is bowed, her gaze is direct and calm, and there is a light in her pupils which papa said was the camera flash, but which I recognise as joy” (33). Meena’s preoccupation with love and romance is validated not by her parents’ active lessons but by her own reading of their lives through photographs.

Upstone claims that “caught up in this wider history of settlement, Meena sees herself transformed from an individual to an Asian, to a migrant (even though she isn’t one), to part of a group which, as the novel points out, she ironically has little physical or emotional connection to” (26). Yet the novel contains a great deal of evidence that Meena’s connections to the Indian community of the Midlands are actually fairly strong. Indeed, every weekend is spent “visiting Indian families or being invaded by them” (Syal 29), and she refers to the “Aunties” as the “Greek chorus to mama’s epic solo role in [her] life” (29). The Aunties’ way of bossing her around and “having a go” at her (30) is part of the production of diasporic extrafamilial structures that are supposed to make up for blood family to whom Meena is introduced through being “forced to memorise [her] parents’ many brothers and sisters by name, occupation, and personality quirks” (30). Meena explains the value of the Aunties’ behaviours to both herself and her parents: “I rarely rebelled openly against this communal policing, firstly because it somehow made me feel safe and wanted, and secondly, because I knew how intensely my parents valued these people they so readily renamed as family, faced with the loss of their own blood relations” (31). As Meena begins to come of age, she does start to rebel more openly, but this later rebellion does not erase these familial structures even when she is at times alienated from them. Perhaps Upstone mistakes a feeling of unbelonging as a lack of emotional and physical connection when in fact these things can and often do go hand in hand. Indeed, despite Meena’s lack of closeness to Pinky and Baby, the children of her parents’ friends, she longs for them in a

moment when she realizes that Anita, her “best friend,” cannot understand her feelings about Sam in the way that Pinky and Baby would (274); because of their shared second-generation positionality, Pinky and Baby also know what it is like to be insider-outsiders. That she does not, in fact, get to discuss her feelings with the two girls does not invalidate the desire, even as it does suggest that the desire to connect with people she can relate to often goes unfulfilled.

Indeed, the Aunties play an important symbolic role in the novel because they offer a means for the novel to highlight Meena’s feeling of unbelonging while simultaneously asserting the diversity of Indian womanhood. One of the most often quoted passages of the novel is when Meena lays out the crisis of her position in explicit terms: “I was always getting told off, but I was beginning not to care. I knew I was a freak of some kind, too mouthy, clumsy and scabby to be a real Indian girl, too Indian to be a real Tollington wench, but living in the grey area between all categories felt increasingly like home” (149–150). This passage needs to be considered as a stage of the emotional arc of the novel rather than a definitive statement on what each of these identities means – Indian girl, Tollington wench, grey-area dweller. This section of the text explores the ways that Meena feels like a bad Indian girl by comparing herself to the other Indian girls she knows, who are “polite and sweet and enjoy spending time with their families” (148). But this passage takes place only two pages after Meena-as-narrator reveals how child Meena begins to develop a sense of self-hatred sparked by her fear of never being desirable to boys (or one boy in particular) because of her Indianness (146), a section of the text that is discussed in more depth below. Meena’s feeling of alienation from other Indian girls, who are “pleasant, helpful, delicate, groomed, terrifying” and unimpressed by the slugs and dead baby birds she shows them in the garden (149), and her grotesque description of “cramped terraced houses in streets which seemed full of nosey Indians who all know each other and if you farted, would

phone you up to complain about the smell” (149), are inevitable symptoms of her contemporary state of self-distan. Even if child Meena can see only one kind of Indian girlhood that she cannot fit into, earlier in the novel she has already recognized that there is more than one kind of Indian womanhood and the possible effect of these different kinds of womanhood on her.

Meena describes the Aunties as divided into two groups:

Most of the Aunties were in the Shaila mode, plump, bosomy women with overactive gap-toothed mouths, fond of bright tight outfits accentuating every cherished roll and curve of flesh, bursting with optimism and unsolicited advice for everyone’s children, upon whose futures they pinned all their unfulfilled desires. Mama was in the minority group of Auntie types, the slender, delicate soft-voiced women with the sloe-eyed grace captured by the Mughal miniature paintings hanging on our front room wall. Their serenity masked backbones of iron and flare for passive resistance of which Gandhiji himself would have been proud. (110)

Seen through the eyes of a child, these two different camps of Aunties are defined primarily by their relationship to children. The overt and jovial power of the majority of Aunties and the subtler power wielded by the minority group are nevertheless united in their control over children. Yet these two groups also offer contrasting images of womanhood for the child observer. Indeed, it is by observing her mother interact with Auntie Shaila that Meena comes to a realization about herself: “I realised what part of my problem was – I had been born to the wrong type of Indian woman” (110). Meena’s sense of self develops in contrast to her graceful, slender mother: “If I had been given a mother like Auntie Shaila, the fat loud type who didn’t mind the patches of sweat forming under their sari blouses after a good dance, I would not be so angry at

my body.... But next to mama, I would always feel lumbering and clumsy” (111). This realization refuses a homogenization of Indian womanhood or a universalization of Meena’s experience. But what, then, can be made of this gap between the singular form of girlhood that Meena sees around her and the somewhat more open world of womanhood? Surely the Shailas of the world were not demure and tidy girls. Part of this gap can be attributed to the realities of migration. As I point out in an article discussing the novel *Blue Boy* by Indian-American Rakesh Satyal, a novel that shares a number of thematic and stylistic similarities to Syal’s work, “forms of otherness that might be at least tolerated in India must be repressed and expelled in order to ensure the community’s safety and coherence in the US” (Jeffers 87), or, in this case, the United Kingdom. Expectations of behaviour are tightened for the children of immigrants because the imperative to protect culture and family is intensified in diaspora and because the economic and social stakes of unacceptable behaviour are more serious outside of established networks of interdependence.

Part of what sets *Anita and Me* apart from the narratives found in Ninh’s *Ingratitude* is that there is a sympathy towards the parents, an understanding that they too find themselves in a position that produces certain behaviours and ways of being that are less about who they are and more about the demands of immigrant life in a capitalist context. One of the moments in the text where Meena-as-narrator overtly reveals lessons that she learned later in order to illuminate the present of the text is when she discusses coming to understand her father and, indeed, the first generation more broadly. While her child self is irritated by her father’s “particular brand of fiery caution,” she explains that “it was only because [she] had not yet realised how he, and everyone else of his generation, had taken enough risks already to last a lifetime” (183). This rare moment of retrospective revelation suggests the importance of the second generation coming to

understand the first, whether this is learned by the protagonist or made evident through the text by way of narrative or form. This idea runs through all of the texts in this study. The moment in the text that most overtly addresses the ways that capital shapes Meena's life through her father's immigrant experience is when she discovers that her father could have worked in films had his own father allowed him. She first mourns for the possible other life she could have led, thinking, "Maybe I could have grown up in a palace, had baby elephants as a pet and held my papa's hand as he Namasted his way through crowds of screaming fans" (82). But in an uncharacteristically selfless turn, she acknowledges, "But if I was disappointed, I could not begin to imagine how papa must have felt" (82). She sees how her father "became himself when he sang" (83), a version of himself far truer than the man who did a job that Meena never hears him talk about (82-83). The narrow space available to the immigrant is explicitly addressed in the text; when her father tells her that his college degree is in liberal arts and philosophy and she asks what precisely these things are, he replies, "A damn waste of time in this country as it happens" (84). After this description, Meena "did not ask again" (84). This narrowing of her father's horizons by his positioning as an immigrant who, ironically, has achieved the liberal arts education championed by Britain only to find it useless to him when actually living in Britain in turn narrows the scope of what he can picture for Meena's future. He will not even explain a liberal arts education to her, and it is fair to presume that she does not ask again not because she is uninterested but because the bitterness her father displays when discussing it unsettles her. Meena's father here embodies the "survivalist" behaviour required by capitalism that Ninh ascribes to the first generation (22); he is not immune to it, even as the son of a communist. Like the fictional immigrant parents examined by Ninh, it was not his "culture" that makes him pragmatic in his approach to immigrant life but the realities of immigrant life itself.

The pressure to succeed in capitalist terms is here much subtler than in the texts Ninh addresses but it is no less present. Meena acknowledges this pressure to conform to capitalist logics near the end of the text in the lead-up to her taking the exam that will determine where she attends secondary school, stating, “I know how much was riding on this [exam] paper – my parents’ hopes for my future, the justification for their departure from India, our possible move out of Tollington” (306). That at the age of eleven she is expected to justify choices her parents made before her birth through her academic achievement, even if “none of this was ever directly said” to her (306), conveys how the terms of the relationship between parent/creditor and child/debtor transcends the particularities of the people involved. The lives of Meena as well as the protagonists that Ninh discusses are an extension of their parents’ lives; they are the holders of their parents’ “unfulfilled desires” (Syal 110) and failing to live up to these desires is a dereliction of duty. Meena passes the exam and thus, for all her moments of rebellion, she continues to uphold her end of the unasked-for bargain. This does not mean that she completely submits to either her parents’ or the community’s expectations of her, as is discussed below, but it does mean that the novel ultimately identifies the parent/creditor-child/debtor relationship without undermining it.

As I pointed out in relation to *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, coming into sexual awareness is one of the most significant elements of coming of age in most fiction. For Meena, sexual awakening is deeply tied to coming to understand herself as an outsider. Her racial difference becomes more real to her as she becomes more aware of herself and others as sexual beings. This process is all the more complicated because the object of her desire is Sam Lowbridge, an older neighbourhood boy with whom she has always been friendly, who becomes a skinhead through the course of the novel.

Meena, fearing that no boy will ever notice her, pens a letter to an advice column in a teen magazine. She writes, “Dear Cathy and Claire, I am brown, although I do not wear thick glasses. Will this stop me getting a guy? Yours, Tense Nervous Headache from Tollington” (145). The text of the letter itself demonstrates how Meena has already internalized the stereotypes attached to her body; she feels compelled to mention the absence of spectacles as if she cannot imagine Cathy and Claire picturing her without them. The answer she receives is a sharp parody of teen advice columns; she is given vague makeup tips and told to smile. Most tellingly, the response has a post-script: “Michael Jackson seems to do alright, and he’s got the added problem of uncontrollable hair! Most of all, BE YOURSELF!” (146). The advice columnists conflate her experience with an African-American male pop star, creating a false equivalence that undercuts any actual comfort the letter might have provided. The invisibility of not just Indians but women of colour more broadly is reinforced. In a letter that is meant to advise a young brown girl, sly anti-blackness is employed in such a way that it suggests that she should be happy that she is not black, otherwise she too would have uncontrollable hair; yet it also reminds her that in the eyes of the wider society she is not far away from the blackness that they can consume through pop culture but to which they have no interest in having physical proximity. This ambivalent connection to blackness is imposed from the outside but it is also enacted by the community itself; in the context of the novel, this is exemplified by the family’s keen eye for a “brown or black face” on the television (165) and Meena’s parents’ conversation about Anita’s mother naming her dog Nigger, which ends with Meena’s father saying, “You ask any man on the street to tell the difference between us and a Jamaican fellow, he will still see us as the same colour, Daljit” (90). The final irony of ending the advice letter with “BE YOURSELF” in all capital letters is particularly rich in this context because it goes against all of

the forgoing advice offered by Cathy and Claire and because it is a common platitude that presupposes a coherent identity already exists to which one simply needs to continue adhering. The process of subject formation as explored in this and other coming-of-age narratives rejects that very assumption.

Receiving this advice produces an acute realization of difference in Meena, “a strange new feeling for which I yet had no name” (146). She notes that other letter writers “would grow out of whatever it was that impelled them to write” (146) but that this is not true for herself. This fundamentally changes how she relates to herself: “I had never wanted to be anyone else except myself only older and famous. But now, for some reason, I wanted to shed my body like a snake slithering out of its skin and emerge reborn, pink and unrecognizable” (146). Sexual awakening is what makes Meena desire to be white. Here, we again see how the power of the personal and intimate weighs more heavily than overt racism or lack of representation. Being called a “wog” and not seeing herself reflected on television affects Meena, but not nearly as starkly as realizing that her racial and cultural identity may make her sexually undesirable to boys. As a result of this fear, her behaviour drastically changes:

I began avoiding mirrors, I refused to put on the Indian suits my mother laid out for me on the bed when guests were due for dinner, I hid in the house when Auntie Shaila bade loud farewells in Punjabi to my parents from the front garden, I took to walking several paces behind or in front of my parents when we went on a shopping trip, checking my reflection in shop windows, bitterly disappointed it was still there. (146)

It is not just her looks she resents; she also avoids clothes that mark her as Indian and tries to be physically separate from her family, as if without them present she might be able to pass. These

changes in behaviour again reveal that Meena's distancing herself from other Indians is not about feeling unconnected to them but rather a result of feeling *too* connected to them – too visible in her difference by virtue of her kinship. These events take place around the time of her tenth birthday (146). Her prepubescence is significant because it suggests how early issues of race and sexuality begin to shape the lives of second-generation subjects, despite the social fiction of childhood unawareness of these matters.

Coming into sexual awareness is also complicated by the community's discourses around sexuality. While risqué joking is acceptable among the men of the community who gather in the family's living room, any indication of sexual awareness, or even unknowing sexual references, are unacceptable for Meena. When she recycles a phrase that she heard from Anita and says she could “shag the arse off” the song “We Wear Short Shorts” (115), the adult reaction is extreme, despite the fact that her usage makes clear that she does not really understand what the words mean: “In a split second, my beaming admirers had become parodies of Hindi film villains, with flared nostrils, bulging eyes and quivering, outraged eyebrows” (115). Her otherwise highly tolerant father is so outraged that she has to repeat to herself – “Papa has never hit me, never hit me” (116) – and her mother rushes her upstairs. This incident takes place in front of their friends, so the imperative of sexual purity is even stronger. Ninh argues that the “prohibition against sex for the second-generation daughter” produces a “particularly gendered subject” (128). She points out that it makes sense that “it is the appearance of virginity rather than its fact that matters, if its primary function is not as economic resource but as a symbolic product of willing accommodation to power” (Ninh 142). It is significant then that Meena's transgression follows directly after her performance of two songs for the entertainment of the Aunties and Uncles. Her acquiescence to power – to perform when she is asked to perform – is undermined by her

supposedly innocent use of a sexuality explicit metaphor. The novel demonstrates that the boundaries of acceptable willfulness are vague but stark once they have been crossed. When Meena sings “We Wear Short Shorts,” ripping her pants because she finishes by doing the splits, there is a pause before its enthusiastic acceptance (115). She has pushed at the boundary but not crossed it. But her following infraction is worthy of the most anger she has ever seen from her father – even worse than her shoplifting and lying at the beginning of the novel – because its public nature threatens the family’s reputation.

The “cruel and dangerous thing” (37) that happens to Meena is the rise of racist rhetoric and behaviour in Tollington, stirred up by the community’s displeasure with the building of the motorway. The threat of the motorway is the conflict that maps out the sharp distinction between Meena’s two publics: the public world of Tollington and the public world of the Indian community in the Midlands. This is not because the two groups have entirely unaligned interests, but rather because the motorway comes to represent the full extent of the village’s marginalization. The two most powerful people in the village, Mr. Pembridge and the Reverend Ince, do not share the working-class positionality of most of the village’s inhabitants, marking them as members of the elite who are outside of and untouched by the public opinion of the villagers. Mr. Pembridge pays lip service to the threat of the motorway to the village’s way of life but, as Sam Lowbridge points out, “he’s a bloody builder and all, in’t he?” (192). Mr. Pembridge benefits materially from the project, which the villagers see as directly against their best interest. Reverend Ince is able to commandeer the money raised by the annual Fête to put a new roof on the chapel when public opinion would have the money go to several other causes, expressed as if with one voice: “the school appeal, of course...A shelter for the bus stop, it’s frigging freezing there of a morning...A gate round the mine shaft, I dread the little’uns falling

in one day...Nah, a bloody big party, free booze, we deserve it” (191). Representing the will of the community in this way suggests that the discussion of what to do with the money was hashed out through public discourse for quite some time. Yet while Sam Lowbridge and his gang call out Pembridge and Ince, with the support of a few other villagers, they ultimately turn their wrath not towards these representatives of the unequal power structure that marginalizes them, but rather towards the threat of outsiders; Sam asserts, “This is our patch. Not some wogs’ handout” (193). Although many villagers react negatively towards Sam’s xenophobic discourse in this instance and others, this persistent element in the village’s public life changes forever the relationship Meena and her family have to Tollington.

The rise in xenophobic discourse precipitates Meena’s coming into knowledge about the danger of wishing for a more exciting life:

When I had whispered up all those silent prayers for drama and excitement, I had not imagined this, this feeling of fear and loneliness. But tonight I finally made the connection that change always strolled hand in hand with loss, with upheaval, and that I would always feel it keenly because in the end, I did not live under the same sky as most other people. I did not need a bra or some blue eyeshadow to appear older, not tonight. (197)

Meena’s desire to leave childhood behind is, in fact, one of the things she must outgrow in order to come of age. She describes childhood as “something [she] was desperate to wrap in rags and leave on someone’s doorstep with a note, Take It Away” (148). Yet when the time comes for her to grow up, she mourns the loss of the very childhood she had wished to give away. This is because for her, coming of age is about coming into difference. Meena finds herself set apart not only from her parents, who have an elsewhere that sustains them through memories and

maintained connections, but also from Anita, whose whiteness and grounding in Tollington allows her to feel no connection to the targets of Sam Lowbridge's nativist rhetoric and who therefore can see his behaviour as rebellious and exciting. "In't he bosting!" (195) she says to Meena, unable to recognize how much differently his words affect her friend.

Meena's coming to understand her multidirectional difference is contrasted with the symbols she had previously associated with growing up, training bras and make-up, in order to highlight how her coming of age is shaped by this realization more than by traditional markers of female maturation. Yet the role that Sam Lowbridge plays in her sexual awakening means that it is necessary to understand these factors – racial difference, physical maturation, gender expectations – as inherently intersectional. Coming-of-age narratives that trace the subject formation of second-generation racialized subjects require a recognition that their protagonists are not simply going through a "normal" coming of age with the added trials of racialization and the legacy of familial migration but rather that these latter aspects are fully integrated into all of the more common elements of coming of age, such as sexual development, education, finding a vocation, and so on. In this way, these common processes are revealed to be just as contingent on space, identity, and subject position as race and immigration status.

It is, therefore, vital to the novel's coming-of-age narrative that the object of Meena's emergent desire is not just any boy but Sam Lowbridge, who can, on the one hand, rail against racial others by publicly proclaiming his disdain for "wogs" and, on the other, call Meena "the best wench in Tollington" (314). Her affection for him starts because he is kind to her, certainly, but she remains drawn to him, if much more ambivalently, even when she knows he has enacted xenophobic violence on the Indian bank manager (277). Drawing from the work of Michelle Massé, Ninh points out that the debt-bound daughters of her study perform acts of "masochistic

rebellion” (84) but that masochism can be a “(problematic, but nonetheless viable) form of agency” (116). Meena’s relationship to Sam reflects this masochistic rebellion as well as its potential for agency.

After Meena confronts Sam about his violent act, he kisses her (314). She is breaking with familial expectations by engaging in sexual behaviour at a young age and outside of marriage; she is undermining her own morality by kissing a boy who she knows has hurt innocent people; and she is crossing the bounds of friendship because he is her friend’s boyfriend (reflecting triangulated desire as her feelings towards Sam are certainly influenced by her passionate, complex feelings towards Anita, which are discussed below). Indeed, Sam’s kiss is implied to be at the very least aggressive, as “his face darkened, maybe it was another shift of the moon” and he demands, “But yow wos never gonna look at me, yow won’t be stayin will ya? You can move on. How come? How come I can’t?” (314). Despite what might seem like a remarkable power imbalance in that moment, as Sam is significantly older and larger than Meena is, as well as male and white, she does not experience the kiss as a moment of being conquered but as a conquest of her own. In fact, she feels triumph: “And then he kissed me like I thought he would, and I let him, feeling mighty and huge, knowing I had won and that every time he saw another Meena on the street corner he would remember this and feel totally powerless” (314). She *lets* him kiss her, taking a passive role, but she recasts this role as active because she sees it as the point from which she will begin to haunt him. This is an ambiguous yet powerful moment. What does she mean by “another Meena”? Is she seeing herself as “taking one for the team” and changing his relationship to Indian women? Is this a fulfilment of her romantic desire or a reimagining of that longing as a desire for power? But perhaps power has always played a central role in her desires; her anguish at potentially being undesirable to men can be read as a fear of

being locked out of one of the few places she sees women having power over men. While the novel leaves these questions resolutely unanswered, this passage does suggest a coming into kinship with other Indians. Whereas earlier in the novel, Meena felt compelled to distance herself, in this moment with Sam she asserts her connection to the Indian bank manager: “The man from the building site. The Indian man. I know you did it. I *am* the others, Sam. You did mean me” (314). Also, her invocation of other Meenas suggests a greater understanding of herself as not alone – her position is distinctly hers, but it is not unique. These moments of identification reflect Avtar Brah’s vital argument that “the *proclamation* of a specific collective identity is a political process as distinct from identity as a process *in and of* subjectivity” (124); Meena does not abandon her individual subjectivity by proclaiming her connection to other Indians.

The climactic moment in the text crystallizes Sam as a symbol for one of the faces of England. Sam’s relationship to Meena mirrors the wider English relationship to immigrants and their children; his ability to separate Meena, the girl he knows and evidently desires, from immigrants and foreigners, towards whom he directs his frustrations with his working-class, post-industrial life, reflects the wider community’s need to enact a similar separation between people they know and attitudes toward “the other.” Meena’s family experiences this process of classification in milder ways, such as when neighbours compliment Meena’s mother by telling her, “you’re so lovely. You know, I never think of you as, you know, foreign. You’re just like one of us” (29). Of course, the underlying shakiness of this distinction is revealed in the “compliment” itself; to be a foreigner is to never be “one of us” and to be “like one of us” is still not to be “one of us.” Meena’s mother is keenly aware of this. When Meena’s father claims, “They have accepted us, have we ever had any trouble from people round here? You know, like

Usha had over in Willenhall, those shaved head boys shouting at them, pushing the kids around?”, Meena’s mother points out, “Just because it doesn’t happen to us, does not mean it is not happening! And they leave us alone because they don’t think we are really Indian” (172). Child Meena, who overhears this conversation between her parents, reacts to this moment viscerally, picturing “Auntie Usha being shoved about by anonymous white fists,” an image that makes her feel “both impotent and on fire” (173). In one of the key moments in the text where the narrative structure exploits the distance between child Meena’s understanding and the presumed knowledge of Meena-as-narrator, the narrative hints at the larger structures of racism without naming them as such:

Mama seemed to imply that there was some link between Mr. Ormerod’s earnest ramblings [about the need to send Bibles to Africa and the Third World’s supposed desire for handouts] and the activities of these unnamed boys, that one was merely an inevitable consequence of the other. I could not understand this then, I simply divided the world into strangers and friends and I reckoned if I stayed amongst those I knew, I would be safe. (173)

Thus, the narrative notes child Meena’s lack of understanding but does not explain what it is that Meena-as-narrator knows now, forcing the reader to formulate the connection between colonial paternalism and xenophobic violence. This passage also highlights the way that xenophobic discourse creates the strangers it says must be feared. The supposedly natural impulse to divide the world into strangers and friends presupposes that those whom you categorize as friends claim you as such. But Meena can be just as easily cast as a stranger instead because of her racial difference; the safety that she imagines is built on the false premise that there is a clear line between friends and strangers and that one is safer where one is known. Child Meena has begun

to reach this realization: “but since joining Anita’s gang, I had become more suspicious of how the familiar could turn into the unknown and what happened at the Fête revealed how many strangers did indeed live among us” (173).

Meena’s mother is, of course, right that their acceptance is based on a willful unseeing of their difference that can be undone by circumstances beyond the family’s control. At times when the community’s way of life is threatened, as when the motorway is planned, their tentative, backhanded acceptance is quickly undermined. Skinheads are the more extreme incarnation of the attitudes that shape Meena’s position as an insider-outsider. Sam is the England that both draws Meena in and pushes her away, sometimes without even knowing it. When Meena tells Sam that he has not succeeded in driving her out, he is genuinely surprised, asking, “Wharrave I done?” (313) and claiming that the sexual and threatening notes that she’s been receiving were actually meant to draw her in: “To bring yow back. I only wrote half of ’em, the nice ones mind. Anita did the others, wouldn’t let me send mine on me own. She’s dead jealous, you know. About us” (313). Apart from once again highlighting the triangular relationship between Anita, Meena, and Sam, this revelation also shows how Sam has sublimated the contradictions in his feelings towards Meena. Yet this sublimation is not complete; as quoted above, before Sam kisses Meena, he says, “Yow can move on. How come? How come I can’t?” (314). He recognizes that he is stuck in place and that there is a difference between himself and Meena, that the upward mobility that he resented in the Indian bank manager whom he assaulted is also present in Meena. Her recognition of this distinction between her and Sam’s positions is part of what makes this interaction with Sam a triumphant moment for Meena; the desire to be a real Tollington wench falls away.

Yet even as the novel suggests that one can learn to read life through an empowering lens, so that Meena can see being kissed by Sam as a moment of agency, the novel also highlights that not all experiences can be recast in this way. A passage that calls back to Meena's longing for dramatic suffering and her re-evaluation of this desire in the face of real loss and pain takes place while she is hospitalized for a broken leg and is informed that her grandmother, her Nanima, is returning to India (288). Nanima's return to India, and the reality that Meena may never see her again because she is getting too old to travel, is a true loss that is just as real as the pain of a broken leg. Both experiences are simultaneously more affecting and less dramatic than any exciting and dangerous experiences she might have imagined for herself. Central to her coming of age is not abandoning her imagination but rather gaining control over it so that she, at least, knows her truth from her fiction. She narrates,

After so long of living in the dusk where my fantasies almost met reality, where longings could become possibilities, where I tortured myself sweetly with dramatic scenarios of near-disasters and doomed love affairs, I was having to learn the difference between acting and being – and it hurt. I had enacted loss and departure so many times and thrilled to the tears I could make myself shed, but now, I could not cry at all. (289)

The distinction between acting and being is the crux of her development. As is clear from the preface, this lesson does not lead to the abandonment of acting but rather to an acknowledgement of the need to distinguish it from the realm of genuine emotion and experience. The novel therefore resists a reading that everything is performance, instead suggesting that performance is necessary but also dangerous because of the way it can overshadow real human connection.

Upstone, in arguing that Meena is a self-consciously untrustworthy narrator, contends that Harinder Singh, the mysterious Indian man living in the big house who saves Anita's sister Tracey from drowning after Anita's angry reaction to the kiss between Sam and Meena results in a scuffle that sees Sam accidentally throw Tracey into a pond, is imaginary and meant to be read as such (124). If Mr. Singh is an illusion, he is a collective one, as Meena's parents meet and interact with him, a meeting that is represented in the realist mode (327). Nevertheless, whether or not one accepts Upstone's argument, Mr. Singh's appearance so soon after Meena's declaration of her connection to other Indians is clearly meaningful. Precisely what the meaning is, however, is quite unclear. I read his appearance, or Meena's imagining of his appearance, as an assertion of the long-standing and continued presence of Indians in Britain, even when this presence is invisible. The idea of India and Indians as always already part of the English landscape is earlier emphasized by Mr. Topsy/Turvey's conversation with Meena's grandmother, during which he reveals that he served in India and says, "We never should have been there" (Syal 222). Mr. Singh can also be read as the embodiment of the idea that one can be Indian, and feel an affective kinship to other Indians, while not actually being socially engaged or culturally embedded with other Indians. This interpretation is valid whether he is read as a real person or as a figment of Meena's imagination.

While Sam may be Meena's first object of sexual desire, it is Anita whose centrality to the narrative is made clear in the title and whose influence is felt throughout the novel, to the very last sentence. Anita is Meena's first object of desire, not sexually but existentially. Meena's feelings about Anita are complex; she wants to be her, she wants to be with her, she wants to be liked by her, she wants to be feared by her.

It is tempting to read Anita as another analog for England alongside Sam. She is the abusive yet undeniably attractive object of Meena's desire and identification; she can love Meena one moment and push her away the next; she can absorb a go-along-with-the-crowd xenophobic attitude while not being able to understand its effect on Meena. Anita is symbolic, certainly, but not just as representative of the nation-state; she is also Meena's mirror self, as Dunphy points out (643), Meena's foil, and the locus of the melancholic core of this comic novel. The presence of Anita in the novel demonstrates that in the process of coming of age, it is not just the pasts of immigrant parents that can haunt the second generation; the second-generation subject may also be haunted by the physically close yet inaccessible alternative life of the non-migrant, which can maintain its appeal despite its obvious undesirable aspects. As stated above, Campbell-Hall's analysis of the novel creates a false dichotomy between the supposedly external problem of marginalization and the supposedly internal problem of parental expectation. Meena's relationship with Anita marks the way that parental expectations and the second-generation subject's reaction to them are shaped by processes of marginalization, including ones that are deeply intimate. As Ninh points out, "it would seem that a critique of familial domination can operate in conjunction with a critique of social and political domination, and indeed that one may animate the other" (108). It is not only possible also but necessary to recognize that the marginalization experienced by immigrant parents is inextricable from their expectations of their children, just as the child's rebellion against parental expectation is tied to her desire to overcome her own marginalization. In this text, Meena attempts to overcome her marginalization through her identification with Anita, but her coming of age is made possible only by the melancholic realization that she neither can be nor should want to be Anita or even like her, just as she cannot be the kind of English that is fully recognizable to those around her,

even though Anita is still an undeniable part of her that she can never fully dismiss. Thus, while Syal's novel presents a more positive model of coming of age for the second-generation subject than *Le's*, there is still an unsettled core to the novel that is characteristic of second-generation coming-of-age narratives because coming of age in relation to multiple axes of difference remains a dynamic process.

Meena's friendship with Anita is, from the beginning, aspirational. The earliest mention of Anita Rutter is the first time that Anita ever speaks to Meena, and Meena wonders what she has done to deserve it (18). Significantly, her first words to Meena are a lie about her origins, just as Meena's first words to the reader are; Anita tells Meena that the cardboard cut-out of a sailor in Mr. Ormerod's shop window is her father (17). This shared tendency to lie to make their lives more interesting is the first evidence of their similarity but far from the last. However, Meena does not simply relate to Anita; in fact, she does not realize that Anita has lied to her. Meena's physical reaction to interacting with Anita is much more akin to a romantic crush; her heart is "unaccountably flipping like a fish" when Anita first comes up to her and she describes being looked at by Anita in rapturous terms: "Then Anita broke into a beam of such radiance and forgiveness that my breath caught and my throat began to ache" (17). The next time they interact, Anita shows her butterfly eggs, purposefully destroying them in the process (38). This is another moment that sets up the mirroring between Meena and Anita. Later in the novel, Meena despairs that the Indian girls she knows are disgusted by being shown bits of nature (149), although Meena's actions are not destructive in the way Anita's are, suggesting that Anita serves as the extreme version of the character that Meena desires to be. When Anita asks Meena to follow her, Meena describes herself in humble terms: "I was happy to follow her a respectable few paces

behind, knowing that I was privileged to be in her company” (39). Meena immediately positions Anita above herself.

Anita is the embodiment of the “real Tollington wench” that Meena can never be. Meena describes her vividly:

Anita was the undisputed ‘cock’ of our yard, maybe that should have been hen, but her foghorn voice, foul mouth, and proficiency at lassoing victims with her frayed skipping rope indicated she was carrying enough testosterone around to earn the title. She ruled over the kids in the yard with a mixture of pre-pubescent feminine wiles, pouting, sulking, clumsy cack-handed flirting and unsettling mood swings which would often end in minor violence. She had the face of a pissed-off cherub, huge green eyes, blonde hair, a curling mouth with slightly too many teeth and a brown birthmark under one eye which when she was angry, which was often, seemed to throb and glow like a lump of Superman’s kryptonite. (39)

Anita’s physicality, her mix of vulgar femininity and violent masculinity, and the power that it imbues her with, awes Meena and draws her in. By almost every adult-approved metric, Meena’s life is better than Anita’s: Meena has loving, together parents while Anita has a shrewish mother and an often-absent father; Meena does well in school while Anita does not; Meena’s family is better off financially, eats better food, is generally more refined. But these adult-approved metrics are irrelevant to Meena. Like the Asian American daughters of which Ninh writes, Meena’s rebellion is against the seemingly benign, even benevolent. The imperative to be good, to “prove you are better. Always” (Syal 45), is a difficult burden for which to garner sympathy. Ninh describes how “even when it is legitimate to say that the child’s position in the model

minority machinery is an unreasonable or unbearable one, her condition is materialized in terms so frivolous as to be an impossible grievance to present” (113), resulting in a sort of “masochistic envy: for a recognizable and validated hurt, something very bad, and something that, having been identified, can be treated” (114). I have already pointed out the ways that Meena feels a masochistic envy towards her parents, but Meena’s envy is also directed towards Anita. Just like the daughters that Ninh describes, the object of Meena’s aspiration represents a set of desires different from those imposed on her by either her parents or her social positioning. Anita’s appeal is not a better life but a freer one. The freedom that Meena perceives in Anita is the result of a profound feeling of being in place.

The triangulation of desire amongst Meena, Anita, and Sam is central to Meena’s coming of age as well as to the way that the novel figures her insider-outsider position in English society. Her longing for both Anita and Sam mirrors her desire for Englishness. As I have argued, both characters represent a normative English identity that Meena shares but cannot fully access because of her racial identity, which is perceived as being incompatible with Englishness. Her desire to be with Sam, and to be like and with Anita, is the manifestation of her fight against the outsider position imposed upon her. That this desire is at times fulfilled but never lasts is part of what teaches Meena that she has no choice but to navigate life from an unsettled position, from “the grey area between all categories” (150). Moreover, Meena’s position is not only that of an outsider; Anita does not always have the upper hand in their tempestuous relationship and never-ending power struggle. When Meena is kissed by Sam soon after he has had sex with Anita, Anita demonstrates that she takes Meena as a legitimate threat, yelling, ““You wanna chuck me for her? Her! Yow like her better? Her! Her?”” (314), her objection both a question and exclamation. Meena, specifically, is an offensive person for Anita to lose to in a love triangle

because of her racial difference. Just as Sam's resentment of Meena's upward mobility plays a role in their kiss, Anita's anger towards Meena is tied to being forced to recognize Meena's appeal to the boy they have both lusted after, an appeal that was not supposed to exist because Meena did not conform to local standards of desirability. Meena recognizes the rearranging of the power relationship between herself, Sam, and Anita:

I had lost my best friend to someone who could have been a friend and lost himself, and between them, they had caused me what I thought was agonizing pain, until I met two other people, Nanima and Robert, who had thrown all previous self-pity into stark relief. But I hated Sam and Anita even more then, for making me believe that the power they had exercised over me was important, everlasting. I had been planning a spectacular revenge for so long and now, finally, I was ready. (324)

Meena's revelation – that the power she perceived Sam and Anita to have over her was not nearly as strong as they all seemed to imagine – is ultimately what leads her to forgo her revenge for their torment of her, enacted through explicit and violent notes and xenophobic rhetoric and violence. Even though she knows the police would be happy to have a reason to lock up Sam, she tells the truth, recognizing that her revenge has come without her having to do anything at all: "I saw that Tollington had lost all its edges and boundaries...my village was indistinguishable from the suburban mass that had once surrounded it and had finally swallowed it whole. It was time to let go and I floated back down into my body which, for the first time ever, fitted me to perfection and was all mine" (326). Letting go of the village is tied up with no longer needing to aspire to be a "real Tollington wench" because that very world is passing away, not due to the influx of immigrants as politicians like Enoch Powell were claiming but to

the forces of capitalism and suburbanization. Meena experiences this realization as an out-of-body experience. She is able to rejoin her own body and for the first time find it to be a perfect fit by recognizing that fighting to be a part of something that she was already a part of – “my village” – that was in and of itself no longer what its inhabitants imagined it to be had held her back from developing her own sense of self. The village, which can no longer hold on to its rural, working-class English identity because of its growing interconnectedness to the rest of the region and its lack of mining industry, cannot provide a coherent identity for its inhabitants, even the white ones, in the way it did in the past. Seeing her own body, “watching a fat brown girl chew her lip and talk in faltering sentences” (325), is necessary for this milestone in her maturation to take place as her embodiment has played a central role in the formation of her subjectivity throughout the novel.

The family’s departure from Tollington marks a separation that has already taken place: “Only Mrs. Worrall was invited from the village to our leaving party. We felt we had already said our goodbye to everyone else” (327). Their belief that they belonged in Tollington has been broken. Yet their leaving also marks their transition to another site of unbelonging. Auntie Shaila, representing the wider Indian immigrant community, gives the family gifts that demonstrate expectations that do not fit the family as the reader has seen it throughout the novel. She gives Meena’s mother “a metal OM to hang above the door of [their] new bungalow” and assures them that it will not be stolen because they are moving to a “nice area” where “half of [their] neighbours are Hindu” (327). As a Sikh woman and an only nominally Hindu man, Meena’s parents’ comfortable fit into middle-class Hindu English life will also include performance, not just religiously but also through their self-representation, signalled by Shaila’s gift of a car cleaning set to Meena’s father (328). The expectation of proving their fulfilment of

the immigrant success narrative is established even before they arrive in the neighbourhood where their greater proximity with other Indian immigrants will once again reform their relationship to the physical space of Britain.

The novel's end signals Meena's maturity in that she "opted for a gracious silence and kept [her] options open" when Auntie Shaila suggested that she will become a doctor (328). Meena's coming of age has taught her some restraint but has not resulted in a capitulation to the community's demands for capitalist conformity. She knows she will follow her own path but also recognizes that such a path needs to be neither approved by nor hidden from the community. Auntie Shaila's gift of an engraved pen "for all those top class medical essays you will be writing at your grammar school" (328) is used for other purposes much more in keeping with who Meena has become. As the representative of the community, Auntie Shaila has given Meena a gift that she is able to mobilize for her own purposes. The symbolism is clear – the second generation is given resources by the first generation but the first cannot direct how such resources will be used. Meena uses the pen to write to Anita, informing her of the impending move, a letter that she leaves in Anita's mailbox and to which she never receives a reply. Thus, the novel ends with Anita as a still powerful yet absent figure.

Anita and Me is a classic coming-of-age narrative as well as a thoughtful and subtly complex exploration of second-generation subject formation. That Ninh's insights can be appropriately and usefully applied to it demonstrates the productive nature of considering the second generation in a transnational context. The novel balances a melancholic vision of second-generation multidirectional unbelonging with an emphasis on personal agency that offers a more hopeful vision than Lê's novel, even as both texts engage with the complexity of second-generation subject formation, particularly for girls.

Section Two

Variables of the Imagination:

Myth, Memory, and History in Second-Generation Literature

When people migrate, they do not simply bring their physical bodies and their material belongings. They do not even bring only their own memories. Migrants carry with them histories, official and unofficial, and mythologies of various kinds. The site of settlement also has its own histories, official and unofficial, and mythologies, and migrants create new memories for themselves on arrival. Creative texts that focus on the lives, experiences, and journeys of immigrant and second-generation characters often grapple with the significance of memories, myths, and histories of the homeland to the identities and present lives of the characters. This preoccupation is present in a diverse range of texts, including those written for youth audiences such as Tanuja Hidier Desai's *Born Confused* and Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*, non-realist narratives such as Larissa Lai's *When Fox is a Thousand* and Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, films such as Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* and Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham*, and dramas such as Trey Anthony's "Da Kink in My Hair" and Ayub Khan-Din's "East is East." Many texts also examine the role of the mythology and history of the place of settlement on the lives of the characters, particularly the way they shape how characters are read and received by the state and the dominant culture; this is evident in novels, plays, and films such as Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*, Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*, the works of Dionne Brand, Teju Cole's *Open City*, Chris Morris' "Four Lions," Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, and Andrew Moodie's "Riot." The two texts that I examine in this section, Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and David Chariandy's *Soucouyant*, engage substantially with histories, mythologies, and characters' memories produced in the texts' "heres" and

“elsewheres” and, in so doing, reveal the ways that these diverse forms of meaning-making give shape to the identities and experience of their characters but are also mobilized by the characters themselves in order to grapple with their presents and project their futures.

Three concepts orient this section: memory, history, and myth. Because each of these concepts is quite large and unwieldy, I choose specific interpretations of these concepts in order to explore how they function in the context of *Oscar Wao* and *Soucouyant*. These three concepts are related to each other in vexed and unstable ways, which makes them fruitful to interrogation in relation to one another. By exploring how these three concepts function in conjunction and contradiction with one another in two second-generation novels, I consider how ancestral memory, history, and myth from “elsewhere” are inescapable discourses that continue to influence the site of settlement for the second generation, despite their limited experience of their parents’ homelands, creating a kind of haunting that has the potential to be both damaging and productive. I also consider how the history and myth of the site of settlement, as well as the new memories and relationships with old memories produced in the “new” land interact with each other and help to create a haunting. I argue that myth can serve as the bridge between memory and history; it is self-consciously narrativistic and imaginative, and it rejects a claim to the “real” that is central to both memory and history and instead focuses on the meaning produced by both.

Memory

Memory is, of course, a concept of great interest across a variety of disciplines. This section does not take up the psychological or neurological concerns associated with memory and instead focuses on how memory is represented discursively. As such, memory can be considered to be the stories that people construct for themselves of their own past experiences, and although this definition might suggest some degree of control, the texts that this section examines make

clear that this construction is not always conscious until memories are being articulated to others. In his influential work on collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs points out that “memories as psychic states subsist in the mind in an unconscious state and that they can become conscious again when recollected” (39). The act of recalling memory gives it form. Memories therefore can change over time and can be expressed differently depending on to whom they are being expressed and in what context. Memory is personal, but its expression is relational.

Much important work has been done exploring the relationship between memory and migration. The relationship between migration and memory has been explored with regards to the ways that memory has been mobilized to include or exclude immigrants (Glynn and Kliest; Burrell and Panayi; Hintermann and Johansson) as well as the ways that literary representations of migrant memories try to negotiate the movement of memories across space and, in doing so, reframe migrant and second-generation relationships to the local and the global (Larsen; Goodwin; Reive Holland). In her introduction to an edited volume that explores migration and memory, Julia Creet has argued for a rethinking of the relationship between the two that troubles Pierre Nora’s argument for the necessity of fixity for memory and sees “movement as the condition of memory, and our desire for its fixity, or at least the fixity of its geographic and temporal origins” (9). The desire for fixity, then, is the result of the reality of movement. She also notes that there are consistent themes that arise in the works that comprise the edited volume on memory and migration she is introducing: “value, melancholy, the absence of origins, the inability to return, and the suspension of memory itself as an effect of migration” (10). These themes permeate much writing on migration and memory, including this dissertation. What she refers to as the suspension of memory can be seen as precisely the phenomenon with which the texts in this section grapple, and this engagement leads to the mobilization of myth as a way of

both retrieving memory and utilizing it for the needs of the present. The conclusion that Creet draws from the essays in the collection, that “place matters with respect to memory, not because it is a stable location from which one departs, or because one never has to think about it or use artificial architectures, but because displacement is more likely to produce immobile memories and radical forgetting” (10), is borne out in this section as radical forgetting practised by the immigrant parents and ancestors of each novel’s protagonists shapes their way of understanding their familial pasts as well as their own presents and futures.

The concept of memory that is most relevant to the texts in this section is Marianne Hirsch’s idea of “postmemory,” which has been discussed in several other critical writings¹³ on these novels and, indeed, many second-generation-focused texts that deal with family histories of trauma. Coming out of her work on a different second generation than the one discussed here – that is, the generation of children of Holocaust survivors – Hirsch sees postmemory as “a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove” (106). She writes that “postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (107). Clearly this emphasis on the narrative aspects of postmemory makes the concept particularly compelling for scholars of literature. Texts by second-generation writers (both in Hirsch’s sense and my own) that attempt to grapple with the experiences of the previous generation can be seen both as enacting and as attempting to represent postmemory. Chariandy and Díaz’s novels are engaged in the creative projection of spatial-temporal places that predate their own. While these texts are not autobiographical, Chariandy and Diaz create stories that depict people of their own

¹³ See, for example, Mackey, Moosa, and Delisle.

generation coming to terms with the lives of people of the generation of their own parents, coming from the places that their own parents came from. While it is not necessary to plumb these novels for autobiographical detail, and I would argue that they actively resist this reading approach through their use of non-realist elements, the second-generation positionality of the authors is relevant to this study because of the way that the novels are themselves in the process of doing what the characters in the novels are also attempting to do. Hirsch writes, “Postmemorial work, I want to suggest – and this is the central point of my argument in this essay – strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (111). In this section, I analyze two texts that choose to do this memory work through unconventional means, means that attempt to overcome the personal and ephemeral nature of memory through the construction of and an engagement with myth.

History

In each of the texts I discuss, there is the presence of what one might call “official” histories; that is, histories sanctioned by the state or other hegemonic forces, and what one might call “unofficial” or “counter-” histories, meaning histories that are produced by those not in power either independent of or actively in contradiction to official histories. In this section, I will examine how the texts differentiate between these two forms of historical narrative and reflect on the uses or pitfalls that each offers to the characters, suggesting that histories play a necessary yet dangerous role in the identity formation and lives of second-generation subjects, a role that must be tempered by other forms of meaning-making in order to resist overdetermination of identity by both the dominant discourse and by the past in all of its guises.

Official history is generally used by historians to refer to histories sanctioned by governments, but in this context, I also use it to refer to historical narratives that reflect the values and beliefs of those in positions of power more generally, in order to recognize the critiques of the dominant discourse of Western historiography by scholars such as CLR James and the members of the Subaltern Studies group. Since this section is also concerned with myth, it is necessary to consider the possible overlap between myth and unofficial history. A robust explanation of my usage of myth lies below, but for the purposes of describing my differentiation between these two concepts, I want to recognize their connection but establish a simple definition of unofficial history that marks it as distinct from any of the primary definitions of myth that I explore. This distinction between myth and unofficial history can then be complicated and teased out in productive ways. Simply, I will consider unofficial histories to be narrativizations of the past in which 1) events are believed to have taken place at specific times, 2) the people involved are widely believed to have existed or still exist, and 3) no supernatural events are claimed to have taken place. This description of unofficial history in comparison to myth is particularly important for my discussion of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

In both of the texts in this section, as well as in many other second-generation-focused texts that engage significantly with the past, discourses of history are established and then contrasted to the lived experience of characters. Since the texts themselves deal explicitly with history and consider it from a variety of standpoints, this section will take a text-led approach to conceptualizations of history, using Lyotard's concept of metanarrative. Lyotard sees science, including the science of history, as "obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game," and he classifies as modern "any science which legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the

hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth” (xxiii). Grand narratives, then, are the ideological bases upon which ways of approaching the world are built; here, Lyotard classifies religious perspectives and political or economic philosophies as of a piece. He goes on to argue that “if a metanarrative implying a philosophy of history is used to legitimate knowledge, questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing the social bond: these must be legitimated as well. Thus, justice is consigned to the grand narrative in the same way as truth” (Lyotard xxiv). One legitimation leads to another in order to maintain the coherence of the grand narrative. Paul Connerton usefully summarizes the most salient aspects of the concept for this project: “Metanarratives are institutionalised, canonical and legitimating; they pretend to represent an external object and then they pretend not to be a narrative; they issue from what [Lyotard] calls ‘the grand institutionalised narrative apparatus’; they are ‘official’; they are the ‘legitimations of theorists’; they tell stories ‘which are supposed to rule’” (2). I use this concept in order to foreground the ways that historical discourse is inherently narrativistic but masks its narrative qualities, in contrast with the overtly narrativistic nature of myth.

Nevertheless, there are a great many historians who have worked to challenge traditional historical discourses and produce histories that are themselves more responsive to the human and that grapple explicitly with what it means to produce histories from below.¹⁴ The narrativity of historical discourse has also been written about extensively, famously by Hayden White. Particularly in the context of histories that concern the Caribbean, producing histories focused on what historian Joan Dayan describes as “what remains to a large extent an unreconstructible past” (xvii) requires an imaginative approach that fills in the blanks: “I try to imagine what

¹⁴ See, for example, E.P. Thompson, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Devoney Looser.

cannot be verified” (Dayan xvii). This historical imagination is an example of how the discipline of history continues to push against its own boundaries, and signifies a rejection of the tendency to hide the narrativistic nature of historical documentation. Yet the very necessity of this imaginative approach demonstrates the ways that history as a discipline is necessarily bound by the kinds of materials available to construct it. Literary texts which engage with the past are able to fill in the spaces where history must leave off; “what cannot be verified” is its whole domain. Whether this takes the shape of historiographic metafiction or, as with the two novels discussed in this section, what I call a more mythical approach, history is supplemented and shaped by narrative forces. The texts in this section add another layer to the way that history interacts with their narratives by placing history in conversation with memory and myth, suggesting that all three are necessary in order to understand the present and look toward the future. This section does not aim to critique history as a discipline but rather to emphasize the way that Chariandy and Diaz’s texts produce a vision of history as possessing an insufficiently emancipatory power for second-generation subjects if it is without the supplementing forces of memory and myth.

Myth

Finally, it is necessary to discuss what I mean by “myth” in this section. The layperson’s definition of this term, “a traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon” (Oxford English Dictionary) is relevant as this section’s novels both engage with what are traditionally considered mythic or folkloric figures and concepts. Also, this definition’s emphasis on narrative – myth as expository – is important for my concerns: myth’s self-consciously narrativistic quality is part of what sets it apart from history, as I have stated above. This emphasis on myth as

story is maintained in most if not all theorisations of myth (Segal *Myth* 5). While this definition identifies the way that myth is often used, more theoretical definitions of myth and mythology are helpful to my analysis.

There have been numerous influential explorations of myth, particularly by anthropologists (most notably Lévi-Strauss and Malinowski), psychologists (Jung), and philosophers (Cassirer; Ricoeur) who have all explored the function of myth for the human psyche and for society, but in quite disparate ways. The diversity of approaches to conceptualizing myth reflects that “theories of myth are always theories of something broader that is applied to the case of myth” (Segal *Theorizing Myth* 1). Myth as a concept is so commonplace and ubiquitous, yet its nature is so hotly contested that various theories of it can define it totally differently and perceive its relationship to related concepts, such as religion, in opposite ways (Segal *Theorizing Myth* 2). Literary criticism on the topic of myth has often been about form or patterns, exemplified by the work of Northrop Frye, whose work foregrounded the identification of archetypes that have their origins in myth and run throughout literature. The conceptualization of myth in this section is grounded in the work of Wilson Harris, whose focus is primarily on the social and psychological function of myth more so than its form. His approach is most suitable to this project because the texts that I explore in this section primarily focus on the function of the myths they incorporate; Diaz in particular draws from a diverse set of mythical forms but unites them all in terms of their function. Harris describes fable and myth as “variables of the imagination” (18) and builds a strong connection between myth and metaphor, whereby myth’s figurative nature creates a way of seeing that is made clearer by way of comparison; that is to say, myth, when functioning as metaphor, can provide a stronger understanding of a phenomenon or figure being explained than a more straightforward

description. He too draws out the inherently creative, meaning-making nature of myth. There are two main aspects of Harris' conceptualization of myth that make it relevant to this section: the way that myth changes when it is moved across spaces and places, and the claim that myth can serve as a galvanizing force for the oppressed more so than even counter-histories.

Myths migrate with the people who believe them. Once moved to a different sociopolitical context, myths come into contact with other myths, which serve distinct functions in the land where migrants arrive, and the interaction between these converging and often conflicting mythologies creates another layer of negotiation with which migrants must engage. Wilson Harris is cognizant of the ways that the movement of mythologies across spaces and times change both their meaning and their function. In his discussion of the differences between African and Caribbean vodun (also known as vodou and voodoo) practices, he notes that while the West African practices of vodun are inherently conservative as they are focused on maintaining unchanging ties with ancestors, Caribbean vodun is self-consciously transgressive (Harris 26)¹⁵. The transition of vodun from its place as a dominant cultural mode to one that was actively suppressed, from a site of continuity and rootedness to a site of disconnection and diversity, made it necessary for those practising it to either give it up or adapt it to their current circumstances. This is not to say that there is no variation among myths in non-diasporic contexts, as anthropologists and folklorists make clear (see, for example, Goody), but that the *kinds* of changes in myths and belief systems that emerge in sites of settlement differ because of the specific effects of migration. While the immigrants and their descendants about whom I write do not, in the present of the texts, have their beliefs and practices actively suppressed in a way similar to those of the enslaved, they still experience the introduction of beliefs and practices into

¹⁵ While I draw on Harris's insights on the re-forming of myths in the diaspora, I do not agree Harris's characterization of Africa as a whole as conservative and somewhat stagnant.

a context of minority status and a particular kind of diversity, by which I mean a context of other minoritized beliefs and practices besides their own.

For Harris, the formation of a social world constructed through conquest, enslavement, and indentureship catalysed the reformation of pre-existing religious beliefs and folklore as well as the formation of new spiritual and cultural forms grounded in the unique circumstances of the Caribbean. As a result, the kinds of myths that interest Harris are produced in a community that is characterized by difference. The multiple, often incongruous sources for Caribbean mythologies include the three *présences*, *Africaine*, *Européenne*, and *Americaine*, identified and explained by Stuart Hall (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 398–402), as well as *présences* he does not acknowledge but that Harris does (as do Chariandy and Díaz), including, in keeping with Hall’s taxonomy, what we might call the *présences Indigène*, *Indienne*, and *Chinoise*.

Another important aspect of myth, as it is defined traditionally and as conceptualized by Harris, is that it is inherently communal. Memory is personal, and history is public but produced and maintained by a few. Harris perceives myth as communal in an organic way, as he notes when he describes how Caribbean vudon “re-assembles an inter-tribal or cross-cultural community of families” (27). The communal nature of myth means that its maintenance is dependent on the participation and investment of the people. In the context of migration, this communality means constant negotiation and renegotiation of the meaning and form of mythologies because while they are shared, they are also malleable, so that variations are not only possible but inevitable.

Myth was a sustaining and sometimes galvanizing force in situations of extreme oppression throughout the colonized world, including in the Caribbean, where beliefs brought from Africa but adapted in the context of slavery helped to facilitate the survival of the enslaved

through providing alternative narratives of history and spirituality to those enforced by the Europeans, and where vodun played an essential role in the Haitian Revolution (Dubois 102). The process of re-forming myths in “the New World” was necessarily self-conscious as the discontinuity with past beliefs and practices, as well as the need to bridge the gaps between a variety of traditions and worldviews, required new ways of being rooted in new circumstances. For Harris, the self-consciousness of these myths is a part of their power. Harris connects this self-consciousness to the centrality of the trickster figure in Caribbean life and art, arguing,

It is this element of tricksterdom that creates an individual and personal risk absolutely foreign to the conventional sanction of an Old Tribal World: a risk which identifies him (the artist) with the submerged authority of dispossessed peoples but requires of him, in the same token, alchemic resources to conceal, as well as elaborate, a far-reaching order of the imagination which, being suspect, could draw down upon him a crushing burden of censorship in economic or political terms. He stands therefore at the heart of the lie of community and the truth of community. And it is here, I believe, in this trickster gateway – the gamble of the soul – that there emerges the hope for a profoundly compassionate society committed to freedom within a creative scale. (28–29)

Here, Harris establishes that myth emerges from “the folk” but is also mobilized by the artist in a way that can be both dangerous and productive. This idea, that myth can be used by artists to advocate and create hope for a freer and more just society, is enacted by the novels on which this section focuses. Both texts mobilize mythological figures and concepts rooted in folk culture and use them as lenses to offer a clarifying and insightful look at the worlds that they depict, attempting to invoke what is true more so than what is real.

For Harris, myth is more powerful and more productive than counter-histories, which are, to him, still too tied to a European model of historiography. Critical of the Caribbean dependence on European historical methods, he argues that

the limbo imagination of the folk involved a crucial inner recreative response to the violations of slavery and indenture and conquest, and needed its critical or historical correlative, its critical or historical advocacy. This was not forthcoming since the historical instruments of the past clustered around an act of censorship and of suspicion of folk-obscurety as well as originality, and that inbuilt arrogance or suspicion continues to motivate a certain order of critical writing in the West Indies today. (Harris 23)

Instead, Harris states, “it is my assumption, in the light of all the foregoing, that a certain rapport exists between Haitian Vodun and West Indian limbo which suggests an epic potential or syndrome of variables. That epic potential, I believe, may supply the nerve-end of authority which is lacking at the moment in the conventional stance of history” (28). Thus, oppressed writers and artists, particularly those coming from a place like the Caribbean with its “apparent ‘historylessness’” (Harris 29), are empowered by a turn to the mythical, the legendary, and the epic. Dayan, while herself writing history, recognizes the work of the spiritual in both preserving history and in interpreting and understanding it. As she makes clear, the relationship between the historical and the spiritual is strong and complex: “I began to consider not only the historical function of vodou – its preservation of pieces of history ignored, denigrated, or exoticised by the standard ‘drum and trumpet’ histories of empire – but the project of thought, the intensity of interpretation and dramatization allowed” (xvii). Here, she critiques what I have called official history as represented by the “‘drum and trumpet’ histories of empire” while drawing attention to

the work that vodou does. Vodun not only preserves an often poorly treated past through artifacts, stories, and rituals, it actively makes meaning of and for that past. As a result, she does not classify vodun as “an experience of transcendence, an escapist move into dream or frenzy” but rather emphasizes “the intensely intellectual puzzlement, the process of thought working itself through terror. That accounts for what I have always recognized as the materiality of vodou practice, its concreteness, its obsession with details and fragments, with the very things that might seem to block or hinder belief” (xvii). Rather than blocking belief, the materiality of vodun adds to its productive power. Harris contends that “the true capacity of marginal and disadvantaged cultures resides in their genius to tilt the field of civilization so that one may visualize boundaries of persuasion in new and unsuspected lights to release a different apprehension [*sic*] of reality, the language of reality, a different *reading* of texts of reality” (50). Thus, it is the production or the reworking of myths that makes space for the perspectives of the oppressed rather than any intervention into a historical discourse that may already be intransigent.

My exploration of myth in this section responds to Daniel Coleman’s question of “what it might mean for us, as scholars of the diverse literatures published in Canada, to read [spiritual] frameworks as serious challenges to, rather than to simply assimilate as supports for, the interpretive epistemologies we have inherited from the secular Euro-American Enlightenment tradition” (54). Coleman’s critique of melancholia and exploration of the productive use of spiritual epistemologies by marginalized writers is instructive and, I believe, can be extended to texts produced in the United States and the United Kingdom as well. Like Harris, Coleman aims to decentre Eurocentric discourses that consign people who have been historically oppressed to a continual state of victimhood. This decentring is at the heart of his critique of racial melancholia,

as he questions “the secular assumption that quietly predominates in much Canadian cultural criticism” to show “how attention to the spiritual counterbalances melancholia theory’s focus on existing power relations with a focus upon the agency of those who live with the heritage of colonial oppression and are working to heal its scars” (Coleman 54). Indeed, Coleman articulates the problem with racial melancholia in a way that echoes Harris’ championing of vodun and limbo, as he argues that “if our attention is wholly taken up with the structures and psychology of domination, conceptualized with exclusive reference to secular, Euro-American epistemologies, we remain ignorant of the values and perceptions out of which those who have been oppressed very often generate their own restoration, healing, and empowerment” (Coleman 54). Both Harris and Coleman recognize that secular Euro-American epistemologies, including the mainstream discourse of history, by their very nature focus on the structures of power as they are set by the dominant class, so that even sympathetic representations of the oppressed are on the terms and through the lens of the oppressors. For Coleman, the introduction of a spiritual epistemology reorients the conversation: “because the original trauma is understood within a spiritual cosmology, power dynamics are configured in a completely different way. Whereas the theory of melancholia assumes the determining power of the existing social hierarchy, these spiritual cosmologies understand both victims and victimizers to be subjects within a larger created order” (60). This argument resembles what Harris calls “tilt[ing] the field of civilization so that one may visualize boundaries of persuasion in new and unsuspected lights” (50) as the spiritual turn produces a different way of seeing relationships of power, one that rejects the idea of the social order as natural and unchangeable; oppression is the aberration that needs righting, not the inescapable order of things. In this section, I look at how each novel positions non-European ways of seeing in the context of migration to and establishment in Eurocentric

societies where Western mythologies are depicted as being nationalistic more so than spiritual and where nationalist myths are perceived as being modern and real while spiritual myths, especially those brought over by immigrants, are seen as “cultural” and therefore non-political and stagnant.

Coleman discusses “spiritual cosmology” (53) and “spiritual frameworks” (54) while I have chosen to talk about myth and mythology in this section. This is not a rejection of Coleman’s terminology so much as means by which to differentiate our arguments; I have chosen myth as my object of analysis because the texts that I am examining do not engage with the spiritual elements they evoke within the context of coherent cosmologies. Coleman acknowledges this distinction when he describes how elements of spiritual cosmologies can become folklore or legend through time as they are isolated from the cosmologies of which they were initially just one aspect (61). He notes that change in Chariandy’s *Soucouyant*; in his comparison between that novel and First Nations writer Lee Maracle’s novel *Daughters Are Forever*, he states that “Chariandy’s [novel] treats the spiritual figure of the soucouyant more as a trope for the ghosts of history than as part of a more explicitly elaborated cosmology such as that presented by Maracle” (Coleman 61). Nonetheless, he argues that this separation from a fully articulated cosmology does not remove all of the power from the spiritual elements that become what I am calling myths: “the ritual elements remain as fragments of, or gestures toward, spiritual cosmologies now lost to him, but even in their reduced, folkloric form, they generate agency in the hearts and minds of those who suffer” (Coleman 65). This remaining power is particularly significant in the contexts of *Soucouyant* and Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which emerge out of multiple displacements, including the initial traumas of slavery, indentureship, and colonization, all of which played a major role in breaking down and obscuring

pre-existing spiritual systems, as Coleman recognizes: “Indeed, one of the main elements of inherited colonial violence is the remoteness from the spiritual traditions both novels set out to explore and rediscover” (61). The novels in this section demonstrate how powerful and enduring myths can be even when separated from a coherent cosmology and from the site of the myths’ emergence. Thus, my identification of the mythification of spiritual figures and concepts is not meant to be derogatory or to submit to Eurocentric definitions of legitimate versus illegitimate spirituality but rather to acknowledge this transformation and its effects.

Despite the aforementioned distinction, it is still instructive to recall that when considering the spiritual, even in its mythic form, one must not oversimplify its relationship to the social and political. Religions scholar David R. Kinsley argues:

To understand religious things one must acquaint oneself with their contexts, one must be sensitive to the cultural setting of a given phenomenon. But what is more important one must seek to discern the visionary aspect of a religious phenomenon, that aspect of the phenomenon that legitimates it as a religious thing. This means going beyond, or behind, the sometimes obvious social, psychic, or economic significance or function of a given phenomenon to grasp what the thing reveals to religious man [*sic*], what the phenomenon reveals to man about that ‘other’ realm of the sacred. This may call for a certain naïveté, a willingness to remain open to possibilities out of the ordinary... One could say, it calls for one to be objective – for it prohibits the temptation to reduce a phenomenon to more easily manageable cause-and-effect interpretations. It does not allow one to foreclose any possibility but demands an openness to a dimension of reality that may not be experienced by the interpreter in his own life.

(4-5)

This directive – to consider the spiritual as spiritual as well as social – is a part of my approach to the texts in this section but also is reflected in the texts themselves. The mythic in each text is dealt with in a variety of ways, but each text takes its representational, psychological, and spiritual power seriously, regardless of individual characters' belief or lack of it.

This leads us to another distinction between spiritual cosmologies and myths that is evident in the texts and productive for an examination of the function of myth in second-generation writing. Part of what separates myth from religion or spirituality is that it does not require belief. It can be useful to the writer, the readers, and the characters while also unconvincing; it lives in the space between belief and doubt, and thus of agency. I have referred to mythology as self-consciously narrativistic. By this I mean that myth, as I am conceptualizing it in this section and as I see it functioning in the literary texts about which I am writing, actively makes meaning of events, experiences, people, and places. In all of its many forms, it is meant to explain, to contextualize, or to bring order to the seemingly disordered. While history and memory are also narrativistic, myth is less burdened by the need to represent the real. As a form of representation that is used to construct and maintain ways of seeing and being, myth plays a role in the construction of identity. As such, I argue that Stuart Hall's assertion that "identity as a 'production' is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside of, representation" ("New Ethnicities" 392) is relevant to understanding how myth can function in the hands of the disempowered. The unofficial yet communal nature of mythology can be used in multiple ways by those who lack political and social power, as will be explored throughout this section.

While Harris' approach to myth orients this section, Roland Barthes' very different usage of myth is also instructive in terms of considering how nationalist mythologies are formed and function. Barthes conceptualizes myth as not a "what" but rather a "how": "myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form" (109). Barthes sees myth as an ever-present form, as evidenced by the very title of the essay, "Myth Today" (Barthes 109). For Barthes, the production of history is not something that happened and then has stopped happening; it continues to do very specific work, which, according to Barthes, is "a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us" (117). To put it succinctly, myth transforms history into nature. The nationalist mythologies depicted in the novels demonstrate this process.

In both David Chariandy's *Soucouyant* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, mythologies of disparate origins converge. The protagonists of each novel must contend with the mythologies of many points of origin that shape their lives. In each of the novels, gender plays a central role in the characters' experiences of immigrant and second-generation life, as do ethnicity, skin colour, age, sexuality, and class. The national contexts from which and to which the immigrant characters migrate have significant differences, but all were sites of imperial and colonial rule that shaped specific hierarchies and social orders that the characters must navigate and the implications of which travel with them. Indeed, both novels contain returns or, in the context of second-generation characters, "returns" to homelands that are productive for the characters; however, ultimately the journey back to the site of settlement must take place for the future to be possible. I do not believe that the texts mean to suggest that there is no future in the characters' homelands so much as that returns to the past, in these instances literally and figuratively a foreign country, cannot house the future. Despite the disparate forms

and ethno-national contexts of the two novels, their shared engagement with myth as a means of understanding the past and envisioning the future for the second generation and beyond makes them fruitful texts to consider side by side.

Mythologizing Memory and Deconstructing History and Heritage in David Chariandy's *Soucouyant*

David Chariandy's 2007 debut novel *Soucouyant* is narrated by a young unnamed man who returns to his mother's house in Scarborough, an inner-suburb of Toronto, after having left her two years before because he could not stand to witness her dementia, manifested through her inability to remember things and her inability to forget to remember others. Upon his return, he discovers a mysterious young woman, Meera, taking care of his mother and living in her home. The present of the novel follows his attempt to come to terms with his mother and unravel the mystery of her caretaker, but the text is also engaged in the gradual revelation of the narrator's mother's traumatic childhood experiences as the daughter of a rural Afro-Trinidadian woman who turned to sex work servicing American soldiers after the US World War II-era military base in Trinidad displaced them from their village.

In *Soucouyant*, the cultural and familial mythologies of the soucouyant, and the national and local mythologies of Canada and Scarborough, exemplified by the community's Heritage Day Parade, shape the life of the narrator as well as the narrative. Both sets of mythology are intimately but tensely connected to history. The participants in the Heritage Day Parade see themselves as invoking real historical moments connected to their community, even if the slightest probing of the past reveals the parade to be engaged in the production of a nationalist mythology that serves a specific and exclusive ideological purpose. The familial mythology of the soucouyant lives at the nexus of memory and history. The narrator's mother uses the soucouyant both to describe and to obscure her traumatic memories, which are rooted in the US military occupation of Trinidad, itself an event that has an official historical narrative that obscures the lived experiences of people like Adele and her mother, instead situating the

displacement and sexual exploitation of Trinidadians, especially women, as a footnote in the Eurocentric historical record of the Second World War. By foregrounding mythical language as a means of making memory and experience communicable, the novel offers a more ethical means of engaging with history than through the historical narratives represented by the librarian who takes the narrator under her wing when he is a child, whose means of knowledge transmission, as well as the knowledge therein, are suggested to be necessary but insufficient. The events behind the story of the soucouyant, and the memory of the narrator's ritual baptism by his grandmother are more powerful than any historical record in making sense of the narrator's past and present. Ultimately, the unnamed narrator sits on the edge of his present, side by side with another second-generation Trinidadian-Canadian, and looks towards a future built upon but actively distanced from the myths, history, and memories he has inherited, and recognizing the need to make his own myths that will carry him on to his future.

Chariandy's novel has garnered a significant amount of critical attention in a relatively short period of time. The excellent critical writing on the novel has thus far paid particular attention to the symbolic role of the soucouyant in the text (Alonso Alonso, Anatol, Coleman) and the novel's engagement with memory, postmemory, and the second-generation positionality of the narrator (Delisle, Mackey, Moosa), both of which are concerns of this chapter as well. As is already clear, Coleman's approach in particular informs this section, not just in my analysis of *Soucouyant* itself but in terms of my overarching argument about the importance of paying attention to the existence of the spiritual in this novel, as well as in others.

Allison Mackey discusses *Soucouyant* as a coming of age novel, bringing it into conversation with Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*, a novel which also explores the lives and worldviews of second-generation characters in Toronto and its suburbs. Her emphasis on the

novel's representation of second-generation characters attempting to enact "ethical acts of relational storytelling" (228) is similar to the reading I provide in this section, but we approach what such ethical storytelling looks like from different starting points.

Farah Moosa's exploration of the relationship between memory and forgetting, and the importance of both to the novel's second-generation narrator, is a particularly fine example of scholarship on *Soucouyant* that addresses the way that the novel embodies the problem of cultural inheritance, what should be passed on and what should not, through the story of Adele's childhood trauma. Moosa's essay lays useful groundwork regarding the relationships between Adele, the narrator, and Meera, which I draw upon here. My focus on the ways that history and myth function in the text expands on her contribution.

Some writing on *Soucouyant* to date has emphasized the folkloric elements in a way that downplays the tension in the text between the historical and the mythical. Maria Alonso Alonso provides a much more positive reading of history than this chapter will provide, writing,

As will be seen, history is usually a fluid mental continuum that changes from one historical period to the next, which might assist a community to create its own distinct spaces depending on the lights and shadows that they want to highlight for their own benefit. Therefore, historiography is revealed through literature as a tool for discovering what has been hidden by previous generations. (14–15)

She does, however, acknowledge that "public or official history is constructed sometimes by the omission of private or unofficial histories of suffering peoples" (18). The difference between our readings may be attributed to my deploying Wilson Harris's critique of historical discourse and his insights into the particular nature of history in the Caribbean. Alonso Alonso writes that "when the construction of a specific national culture is achieved after ignoring or consciously

hiding the violence that was required to found that community as a nation, the evocation of those selected episodes by a group of people (second generation immigrant [*sic*] writers in this case) challenges the official historical version of certain dominant cultures” (23). I argue that this picture of the national culture lacks an acknowledgement of the way that national historical narratives of colonized spaces like the Caribbean are always already contested and violence is much more likely to be justified rather than ignored. *Soucouyant* challenges official histories but at a deeper level that does not accept the idea of national culture itself.

Soucouyant is explicitly concerned with the interrelationship between myth and memory. This is made clear by the title, which is the name for a mythical female spirit who can leave behind her skin and turn into a ball of fire, and by the novel’s subtitle, “a novel of forgetting.” History is also foregrounded in the text through the character of Miss Cameron and the narrator’s exploration of the World War II–era history of Trinidad in order to contextualize his mother’s traumatic experiences and subsequent struggles. The text’s ambivalent relationship to both memory and history is made clear early on, as the narrator states, “Memory is a bruise still tender. History is a rusted pile of blades and manacles” (Chariandy 32). There is much excellent criticism on the issues of memory and forgetting in the novel found in the articles mentioned above, particularly those of Delisle, Mackey, and Moosa, discussions I will not reiterate. This section will rather focus on the relationship between history, memory, and myth in the novel, building on that scholarship.

As I have argued, myth does not require belief to be used effectively, by writers or by the characters they write. In *Soucouyant*, the narrator expresses this idea as he tries to explain his mother’s behaviour to a police officer. He says, “It’s a way of telling without really telling, you see, and so you don’t really have to know what a soucouyant is” (66); the narrative power of

Adele's soucouyant story is not that it convinces anyone of supernatural events so much as it expresses the inexpressible, the horror of an experience that can only be interpreted through symbolic language. Significantly, that is not the end of his statement; he goes on to say, "Well, I guess you do, sort of. What I mean is, I'm not an expert on any of that sort of stuff. I was born here, you see. Not exactly here, of course. In a hospital farther west. But here, as in this land" (66). The officer cannot understand him, nor does he care to do so. The receiver of the story, of the telling, must have some connection to the mythical landscape that is being evoked for its meaning to have explanatory effect. Although the narrator disavows his expertise on the basis of his birth, he still recognizes that despite his birth in this land, Canada, he is still subject to the cosmology through which his mother filters her trauma. He can only "sort of" understand his mother's mind and world but they nevertheless persist in framing his; he is formed by that cosmology yet cannot translate it for others, such as the police officer, because it is not his story to tell despite its centrality to his own life.

Adele's rewriting of her own memory, substituting the mythical for the traumatic, is based on need, not only a genuine belief in soucouyant. It functions as metaphor, in keeping with Harris's characterization of myth. In a disjointed paragraph near the end of the text that seems to be a flashback to the first time the narrator left his mother, she recounts other mythical figures of the Caribbean: "La Diabliesse, the lady with a cow foot and the face of a corpse. The Douens who is children that died before they get baptize. They feet twisted backwards, afterbirth streaming over they bodies..." (Chariandy 184). The narrator is clearly frustrated, replying, "Are you listening to me, Mother? I'm not talking about superstitions. I'm leaving you now, but I'm telling you what I know, what you accidentally told me..." but Adele continues as if she had not heard him, saying, "...and that's why, child. Why you must always speak the proper rites. Why nothing

dead can lie still without the proper rites. And why you must always curl you body away from the evil at night” (184). This exchange demonstrates that the seeds of these myths are trauma and suffering, even as they may become ingrained beliefs, and that the means developed to deal with the fear of these mythical figures are still marked by the real phenomena that are the root sources of such fear. The novel notes the connection between the soucouyant myth and domestic violence, describing how in order to identify the soucouyant “you’ll only have to look for an old woman in the village who appears to have been beaten. Bruises upon her. Clearly the one to blame” (135)¹⁶. This reading of the soucouyant attaches a troublingly misogynistic element to the figure; its connection to material circumstances of village life marks its social purpose. Similarly, the *douens* reflect a syncretic response to the pain and fear of losing babies, combining the Catholic belief in the need for infant baptism with a non-Christian belief in vengeful spirits who haunt the living. The connection between these very real-world concerns of violence and infant mortality do not negate the supernatural element of these figures; in fact, the importance Adele places on the “proper rites” draws attention to the way that the turn to the mythical offers a particular kind of agency to the believer as it provides a means of managing that which is chaotic and frightening. This use is part of what Dayan refers to as “the process of thought working itself through terror” (xvii); like vodou, folk beliefs like the ones described above offer a way to think through the unthinkable.

An overestimation of the credulity of people like Adele, as expressed by Alonso Alonso, therefore misses the ways that the mythical is always purposeful, especially in the context where it first emerges. Alonso Alonso argues that “in a Caribbean context, the existence of soucouyants is not questioned by the locals because it is an intrinsic element of their everyday life. What is

¹⁶ For more discussion of the history of the figure of the soucouyant, see Moosa 325.

more, a soucouyant for a Caribbean person is not even a folkloric superstition but part of their cultural reality” (19). Yet this distinction between “folkloric superstition” and “cultural reality” does not reflect Adele’s own representation of her story, as can be seen when she responds to the narrator’s question, “Did you really see a soucouyant?” with the question, “Whatever you think you want with some old nigger-story?” (194). Adele denigrates her own tale, but she also emphasizes its status as a narrative. It is both folkloric superstition and cultural reality in so far as, for Adele, the soucouyant is a cultural and metaphorical means of apprehending reality through a folkloric lens that allows her to create some distance between herself and her suffering. The meaning of the soucouyant differs, however, in the life of the narrator and the text as a whole, which will be expanded upon after a discussion of how history and the related and equally slippery term “heritage” function in the text. An understanding of how the novel works through the question of the historical will set the stage for the way that it mobilizes the mythical to intervene into discourses of history.

The narrator’s introduction to history is through the librarian at his local library, Miss Cameron. Miss Cameron is a classic spinster librarian figure whose love of making pickles and preserves, which she shares with the narrator, obviously foreshadows her love of imparting history to him, while her inability to consume her own creations hints at a more complex aspect of their relationship. Miss Cameron is also an outsider to the community, in part because of her dedication to history over heritage, in which the rest of the neighbourhood is more invested; the narrator notes how as a child he “couldn’t recognize how special Miss Cameron was, or how lonely a woman like her would be in any ‘traditional community’ with little genuine interest in the past” (Chariandy 105). I will return to the text’s distinction between the neighbourhood’s obsession with “tradition” and “heritage” below. As Miss Cameron fills the narrator’s stomach

with pickled vegetables, she also fills his mind with local historical facts about the political and economic history of the neighbourhood, including the fact that Scarborough was not purchased from First Nations people in the way that Toronto was and the area's later establishment of legal and illegal industries (Chariandy 103). These lessons ground the history of the area in the larger context of Canada's colonization and settlement. For the narrator, the moral of her lessons was that "things happened here. It wasn't just another suburb. It was a place with a past" (Chariandy 103). Miss Cameron's historical investments and outsider status make her in some ways a natural ally for the narrator, and she demonstrates her desire to show her understanding of his position through her sharing of a poem by a Scottish immigrant from the nineteenth century called "The Scarborough Settler's Lament." The poem, created by Chariandy for the novel, is written in Scottish English and tells of the settler's longing for Scotland: "Awa' wi' Canada's muddy creeks / And Canada's Fields o' pine / This land o' wheat is a goodly land / But ach, it isnae mine" (Chariandy 104). The poetic speaker goes on to describe a dream he had of Scotland, where "each weel-kempt scene that met my view / Brocht childhood's days tae mind" (Chariandy 105). Miss Cameron explains that she shared this poem with the narrator for a reason, saying, "Do you know why I've shown you this? ...He saw himself as a stranger here. He longed deeply for his homeland" (Chariandy 105). Miss Cameron's desire to comfort instead adds to the narrator's alienation; it is clear that he does not belong where he is, but unlike the poet, he has no homeland that he can idealize and dream of, no childhood to remember but the one he is living. The presence of this poem in the text can be read as asserting the non-indigeneity of white Canadians and rejecting the myth of Canada as William Lyon Mackenzie's

“white man’s country.”¹⁷ It simultaneously creates a connection between European immigrants of the past and racialized immigrants of the present while it questions how racialization prevents the “naturalization” of non-white immigrants to the spaces and places of Canada in a way that did not and does not affect white settlers and immigrants. The allusion to Scarborough’s status as stolen, rather than purchased, land (Chariandy 103) prevents an interpretation of this coming into belonging or naturalization as an innocent process, but the novel seems to suggest that a problematic, morally complicated homeland is still a homeland, and needs to be reckoned with.

The narrator’s ghostly yet insistent presence in the nation is metaphorically established through his having left a literal mark on the poem as a child: “I stopped at ‘The Scarborough Settler’s Lament’ and noticed something in the margin. A smudge on the fragile paper not unlike the print of a young boy’s thumb. I brought it up to my nose and caught it, just barely and maybe only because I had been searching for it. The scent of onion” (Chariandy 107). The smell of onion, pungent, associated with foreignness, has become a part of this old and fragile book that he has literally inherited from Miss Cameron after her death, long after he has “broken all contact” with her, and into which she wrote his name (106–107).

Miss Cameron’s desire to insert the narrator into the nation mirrors her desire to insert Trinidad into history but these impulses ultimately drive the narrator away. The narrator states, “Something loomed between us all the same. Something vague and palpable, like a bruise or soreness after a night of fitful dreams” (105–106). This “something” is revealed to be official history. Miss Cameron encourages the narrator to read history because “knowing the history of this place means knowing the history of other places too. History is about relations” (106). Her

¹⁷ By making the poet Scottish, Chariandy is perhaps drawing attention to the way that many of the architects of Canada’s whiteness were Scottish and suggesting that their insistent claiming of Canada for themselves speaks to an overcompensation for their displacement.

vision of history could be compelling if it were not for the fact that the kinds of relations that she lauds are much less cause for celebration from the narrator's perspective. She urges him to be proud of the ways that Trinidad contributed to the British Empire, including providing oil to the rest of the empire, and informs him of "the traffic between the Maritime cod fisheries and the Caribbean sugar plantations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (106). She does not consider the fact that his ancestors would have been working as slaves and indentured labourers on those sugar plantations nor does she care to consider how the resource extraction that produced such a bounty of oil was enacted on a land stolen from indigenous people and populated by those stolen, coerced, or drawn from elsewhere, whose working conditions in the oil industry were unlikely to have been safe or well-compensated. She is right that history is about relations, but the novel reminds us that she has forgotten an important word from her pronouncement: history is about unequal relations.

Most significantly, Miss Cameron gives the narrator the key to his mother's past, which is perhaps both her greatest gift to him as well as the primary source of their estrangement. An understanding of his mother's past makes it impossible for him to embrace Miss Cameron's vision of history. She tells him, "Did you know that [your mother's] island nation was home of some of the most important strategic and training bases for the allied forces during the Second World War...?" (106). The ellipses followed by a question mark at the end of this sentence, which is also the end of the paragraph, is ambiguous and evocative. Does it signify a petering off by Miss Cameron in reaction to the narrator's facial expression or physical response to her question? Is it a typographic representation of the world of understanding and pain that this information opens up to the narrator? Perhaps it is both. What is certain is that Miss Cameron's characterization of this fact as part of the narrator's positive patrimony conflicts with how the

narrator actually experiences the aftereffects of the history she cavalierly presents in strategic and economic terms with no mention of the human costs such a history inevitable carries with it.

For the colonized, history cannot be a tale of glory and triumph as it is depicted by the colonizer. What little is told serves the interests of outsiders, providing a view of the Caribbean that is grounded in what is useful to a tourist, an analyst, or a naturalist. While Miss Cameron valorizes history, calling it “a living book,” “your blood and flesh,” and a “grammar for life” (137), the narrator recognizes that the “grammar” provided for him through official histories cannot offer him much. Instead, he recognizes, “My history is a travel book. My history is a creature nobody really believes in. My history is a foreign word” (137). If, as Wilson Harris contends, this alienation is present even for those who are born and raised in the Caribbean, how can those a generation removed possibly hope to escape the same fate? The history that is available occludes the lives of people like Adele, the narrator’s mother.

Adele’s personal trauma during World War II is the central mystery of the text and her re-imagining of it as a mythical encounter is the novel’s central metaphor. Adele’s wartime experience was at the nexus of numerous personal and political issues that as a young, poor girl living in the bush, she has no way of understanding. Local class, gender, and territorial issues; international conflict; the long history of British colonialism and how it facilitated and was a template for American imperialism on the island; American racial attitudes – all of these larger issues were factors that not only influenced Adele’s experience but in fact created it. Yet much of what shapes her experience is left out from the dominant narrative of the war. During the narrator’s telling of his mother’s story, he consciously slips into a hegemonic, official history voice, stating,

The locals presented their own problems for the base, of course. Few seemed

mentally equipped to understand the logic behind curfews and the rationing of food and the strict rules on movement. Few seemed properly appreciative of the importance of establishing a wide security perimeter around a major military base, and how even a casually lit cooking fire or candle might indicate a target for the enemy. Many blacks and South Asians had been living on the Chaguarmas peninsula for generations, and some had grown attached to the surrounding lands. The bois cano and the howling monkeys. The cliffs to the north looking off onto endless waters. Some of these locals had even come to imagine that they had some sort of right to live there. But, in a relatively short amount of time, they were all transported away under the supervision of British soldiers. (178)

Mackey calls this voice “ultrarational” and “a parody of an objective historical perspective on cultural genocide and forced removal” (240). Under the terms of the larger narrative of the war, the importance of military security and the meaning of the term “the enemy” is relatively clear, but for the people of the Chaguarmas peninsula, the imposition of these logics on their space, a space to which they felt an affective connection and had an ancestral grounding, the supposed necessity of their movement was not so clear. The reference to the physical aspects of the landscape, its flora and fauna, is in keeping with the official historical narrative’s distance from its subject; it represents a bird’s eye view of the land and what makes it distinct or exotic to the outsider but cannot access, and therefore cannot understand, what truly connects the people who live there to the place.

This is one of the moments in the text that explicitly contends with how such events are situated in historical discourses, and in so doing illustrates Wilson Harris’ argument that historical counter-narratives that use the discourse of Western historiography still fail to provide

a liberatory language for the marginalized. The narrator points out how “certain historians and community activists pushing for the island’s political independence would kick up a fuss” about the continued presence of the American military base on the island and the lack of compensation for those who were displaced (178). This argument is put forward as primarily economic, foregrounding the loss of livelihoods, and is clearly mobilizing the displacement for the specific political project of national independence. Yet the subjects of debate are still an amorphous “they” whose suffering is symbolic of the suffering of the nation; they are people without agency whose sexual and physical subordination is presented simply as “the exploitative relationships that inevitably result” from “the arrogance and racism of the soldiers” (178). While this counter-narrative is more responsive to the suffering of people like Adele and her mother, its political and economic focus lacks what Harris calls “the nerve-end of authority” (28) that would give it the strength to resist more powerful historical discourses. The novel presents this historical counter-narrative that fulfills Harris’ pronouncement that “the historical convention remains a stasis which possesses no criteria for assessing profoundly original dislocations in the continuous pattern of exploiter/exploited charted by the historian” (41) which leaves the anti-colonial historical narrative open to a counter-counter-narrative on its same terms:

But other historians would offer what they described as a more ‘balanced’ perspective on these events. After all, the world was at war, and proper measures needed to be taken, even if this meant inconveniencing a few illiterates who, most likely, would not have grasped the severity of the situation, had it been explained to them. And, in any event, the American presence appeared to offer genuine benefits to at least some of the local inhabitants. Those eking out a meager living on struggling plantations had the chance to earn Yankee dollars as road workers,

maids, and latrine diggers. Others who had benefited from a rigorous colonial schooling had the chance to become skilled construction workers, or secretaries, or even entrepreneurs in their own right...People trapped in the aftermath of slavery and colonialism had the chance to encounter the modern world, and to find their place in it. (Chariandy 179)

The above historical narrative re-centres the war in Europe but it also makes an economic argument for the presence of the US army in Trinidad, and finally claims that this presence was actually an encounter with modernity. The text raises the question of how different “the modern world” is from the world of slavery and colonialism by following this passage with a stanza of the famous Lord Invader calypso “Rum and Coca Cola” that tells the story of women working as sex workers for the American soldiers, implicitly drawing readers’ attention to the presence of sexual exploitation in both British colonial and American imperial contexts.

Contrasting the postcolonial historiography of the historians and community activists agitating for independence with the second historical perspective, the counter-counter-narrative, which is in fact just a return to the earlier military logic that governed the actual events and is clearly coming from a non-local perspective, makes apparent historical discourses serve political purposes, whether the purposes are made explicit or are hidden under the guise of objectivity. In either case, the lived experience of those who were displaced and exploited is sidelined. Neither historical perspective, the novel suggests, is an outright lie, although the overall narrative of the novel is clearly more in line with the first historical counter-narrative, but each one focuses on the events that serves their metanarrative while aiming for a kind of objectivity that its proponents hubristically believe describes and makes sense of the events of the past, giving them

coherence and meaning. Yet, this coherence and meaning is not what allows the narrator to understand his mother's suffering and its bearing on his own life.

Soucouyant brings another term into play that, while closely tied to the three that are the focus of this chapter, adds another layer of complexity to the way that the novel conceptualizes the narrativization and mobilization of history: heritage. The Heritage Day parade is introduced as a key moment that showcases the effects of Adele's issues with memory and also serves as a way of characterizing the community of which the family is an uneasy part. The community officially defines itself as "Old Port Junction: The *Traditional* Community by the Lake" (60 emphasis in the original) and this "traditional" self-designation is put on display in the annual Heritage Day parade.

But what is heritage? What differentiates it from history or myth, and what does it mean to invoke it? Laurajane Smith states that "the traditional Western account of 'heritage' tends to emphasize the material basis of heritage, and attributes an inherent cultural value or significance to these things. Furthermore, the sense of gravitas given to these values is also often directly linked to the age, monumentality and/or aesthetics of a place" (3) but she argues that a more useful way to conceptualize heritage is to see it as "not so much as a 'thing', but as a cultural and social process, which engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present" (3) as well as a "multilayered performance" (3). Thus, while heritage is often considered most closely related to history, Smith argues that its connection to memory is one of its most salient features. Heritage is about choosing what is remembered and how it will be remembered in tangible, public ways, and this process reflects "contemporary cultural and social values, debates and aspirations" (3). Smith traces the history of the term heritage, identifying a discourse of heritage emergent in the nineteenth century that was invested

in European cultural supremacy, and arguing that “one of the consequences of this discourse is to actively obscure the power relations that give rise to it and to make opaque the cultural and social work that ‘heritage’ does. While there is a general interest in the past, there is a discourse of heritage that creates a particular set of cultural and social practices that have certain consequences in the context of late modernity” (17). An interest in the past was formed to bolster specific values that served the interests of Europe’s ruling classes while creating something that was ostensibly universal, as she notes that heritage “is as much a discourse of nationalism and patriotism as it is of certain class experiences and social and aesthetic values” (28). Heritage can be seen, then, as both myth and myth maker. Specific myths about the past, about specific kinds of people and places, become heritage but it is also the practice of heritage that makes and sustains these myths.

The Heritage Day parade presents a cultural practice that aims to bolster white Canadian identity spatially and representationally. It is both an assertion and a practice of heritage as described by Smith, and is clearly invested in European cultural supremacy as well nationalistic and class-based values that fit with the community’s simultaneous investment in its status as “traditional” yet modern and staunchly middle class. The paraders march through the neighbourhood in a way that Adele perceives as militaristic and threatening; her fear sparked by the “costumes and uniforms and semi-orderly marching” is exasperating to the narrator as a child but his assurance that it is “just a performance” (60) does not comfort her for good reason. This ritual of spatial claiming seeks to solidify the community’s sense of identity through physically tracing the space that the white residents assert to be their birthright. Even as the parade makes some concessions to the discourse of multiculturalism by distributing flyers that explain “that everyone was invited to participate” (Chariandy 60), the assertion of white Canadian belonging

is maintained: “the Heritage Day parade was being revamped these days to recognize ‘people of multicultural backgrounds,’ and ‘not just Canadians’” (60). “People of multicultural backgrounds” are allowed into the communal myth making of the parade, but only with the recognition that they are “not just Canadians,” which can be interpreted to mean the state of being solely Canadian or the state of being Canadian at all. In order to be included, non-white community members must submit to the ideology that the parade constructs of white Canadian groundedness in the space.

The participants dress in costumes that, for the most part, vaguely reference white settlers from an unspecified and undifferentiated past. When Adele is found disoriented and half-dressed in the midst of the parade, she disrupts the march to the displeasure of “a middle-aged woman in a flamboyantly blue pioneer costume” and “a man holding a bell and wearing a tricorne hat” (Chariandy 62). The costumes are not meant to be historical; their purpose is not to create a realistic re-enactment but rather an affective identification. The only one who shows compassion towards the narrator’s family is an old man who has “an arm missing from the sleeve of his uniform” (Chariandy 62). This man, suggested to be a former soldier, prevents an overgeneralization of the parade’s participants. Yet it is not without significance that this old man who shows a small amount of kindness is possibly a veteran of the same war that traumatized Adele as a child. Regardless of the reason behind an individual’s participation and continued investment in nationalist myths, of which the discourse around World War II is a prime example, the material implications of wars and other major upheavals remain. In her discussion of the children born or raised in the United States by refugees of the Vietnam War, Yen Le Espiritu compares the wealth of discussion and knowledge of the Holocaust with the “representational emptiness and the deliberate concealment of the war’s costs borne by their

parents” (142). While there are undoubtedly myriad representations of and writing about the Holocaust, other aspects of World War II suffer the same representational emptiness and familial and social silencing she describes, as is evidenced so starkly by this novel. As the American cultural imaginary has made the Vietnam War “about” the United States’ place in the world as a benevolent saviour nation and traumatized American soldiers, the narrative of World War II as being about freedom versus tyranny actively overwrites the lives of those whose positioning and suffering do not fit into this metanarrative.

The novel, in a sly way, reveals another problematic facet of the concept of “heritage” when Cheryl Kandarsingh uses the term as a euphemism to help sell Adele’s house after her death (Chariandy 144). Heritage here is a tool for marketing that works under the questionable logic that something is good simply because it is old. The house’s age makes it valuable under the auspices of what Laurajane Smith calls “authorized heritage discourse (AHD),” which “focuses attention on aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/or landscapes that current generations ‘must’ care for, protect and revere so that they may be passed to nebulous future generations for their ‘education’, and to forge a sense of common identity based on the past” (29). Yet the kind of past to which Cheryl connects the house is one of exclusion and deeply entrenched class prejudice; she tries to make the neighbourhood sound appealing by talking about how it prevented the building of condominiums nearby for fear that “some of the units would be set aside for government housing. That the culture of the neighbourhood would change” (145). This conception of the house as a heritage house and the neighbourhood as a place concerned with heritage is alienating for the narrator in part because, the novel suggests, the second generation is more likely to be constrained by the past than to be freed by it and so the discourse of heritage, by either the state or by families, is dangerous for them. Even for the sake

of selling the house, the narrator cannot bring himself to support Cheryl's statement; when one of the prospective homebuyers asks him, "Is it really a good neighbourhood?" he responds by saying, "You get used to it" for which he receives "a sharp look from Cheryl" (145). The kind of common identity that is invoked by the heritage preservation of which Cheryl speaks, however cynically, holds no appeal for the narrator. This heritage discourse is bolstered by the kinds of national mythology categorized as myth by Barthes and as metanarrative by Lyotard; the sense of the neighbourhood specifically and the Canadian nation more broadly having a natural state of white European middle-class homogeneity is reinforced even by those like Cheryl Kandarsingh who herself is meant to be excluded from it. This myth in the Barthesian sense produces an impression of "how things have always been" in order to overlie other ways of perceiving the space that might result in the justification for change rather than rejection of it.

If history, even history that seeks to redress the problematic aspects of previous historical approaches to specific subjects, and heritage are incapable of providing an ethical understanding of the past or a useable map for the future, where is one to turn? The grounding in history provided to the narrator by Miss Cameron allows him to contextualize his mother's experience but it does not allow him to understand it. Only by working through her story with the *soucouyant* as the frame is he able to come to terms with her trauma and its effect on his own life. He must take her life on her own terms to understand her but also to forge his own path away from her. Crucially, this new direction differs from his previous attempt to escape. When he ran away from his mother the first time, he could only survive in the present without any ability to consider the future. The novel's end is unresolved yet hopeful; a future exists for the narrator and Meera beyond their parents' legacies and they are, together, looking towards it.

The novel asserts the primacy of mythical language by beginning the chapter that recounts Adele's wartime experiences with the declarative sentence, "She saw a soucouyant" (173). Although the reality of her accidental setting of herself and her mother on fire and the events that led to it are subsequently recounted, by beginning with her reimagining of the event through myth, the novel reasserts the importance of her use of myth as metaphor for her own experience. The beginning also sets up her mythical recounting as a frame through which to understand the story her son has pieced together over the years through her accidentally revealed memories in conjunction with official histories he has found in books. Mythical time is invoked by the way that her sighting of the soucouyant is described as having "happened long ago in a faraway place" on "a path so old that none could remember its origins" (173). The description of the soucouyant, who will soon be revealed to be Adele's mother, is vivid and visceral: "It was using, as a mirror, some water that had collected in a rusted oil drum. It was putting on its skin, syrup sounds and soft elastic snaps. It was gloving on its fingers when it rolled its eyes towards her" (173). The use of "it" is distancing but through the passage Adele is also simply referred to as "she" so the distancing is double; Adele has narratively distanced herself from her mother and the narrator has done so as well with Adele. Yet the distancing is not complete, as "she" "didn't run, not at first. Even though the creature smiled and beckoned her to horrors. Even though the world wheeled about and everything became unreal, the sky shimmering like a mirage of blue" (173). Thus, the novel suggests that in the very moment of confronting the burning of her mother, Adele begins the process of mythologizing her experience, as "everything became unreal."

The questionable usefulness of history is inserted into the pieced together narrative of Adele's childhood as the narrator tries to explain to his mother the sociopolitical context of her

own life: “World War II, Mother. That’s why the Americans set up the base in the old harbour in Chaguaramas...Also Germany was trying to colonize South America. There were U-boats throughout the Caribbean. Even in Port of Spain harbour...” (175). She interrupts him to say, “The Caribbean, the Carib. The Arawakian, the Arawak. The Cibbonean, the Ciboney” (175) thus reaching for a farther past, the pre-colonial era of the area now known as the Caribbean, and situating the WWII European presence into the wider context of colonization in the Americas. By imagining different names for the Caribbean based on different ethnic groups who also inhabited the region, the Arawak and the Ciboney, she also draws attention to the way that Caribbean history is, in its very name, overdetermined by European characterization of its space.

The narrator perseveres in his attempted lesson, telling his mother, “The base, Mother. The one at Chaguaramas. I learned. It was sheltered from hurricanes, and ideal for military ships and seaplanes. Also, there were tropical staples on the island to protect...But especially, there was oil. Did you know that, Mother? Did they teach you that in the late thirties, that your birthplace was a major producer of oil for the entire British Empire...?” (175). Here the narrator parrots Miss Cameron’s statement from earlier in the text. His mother is unimpressed. After confirming his age (whether because she has forgotten it or in order to emphasize her point is ambiguous), she asks him, “And what some boy who have seventeen year think he know about oil and Empire?” (175). His reply, “I told you, Mother. I learned. I read it in books,” (175) is interestingly phrased. Here he repeats the sentence “I learned” for the second time. His learning is a complete sentence; it is definitive. Yet this learning is incomplete. This scene seems to take place not too long before the narrator leaves his mother for the first time, only to need to return to fully come to terms with the history that he once believed could become clear to him through books. Adele’s reply, that “they always tell the biggest stories in book” (175), is a specific

indictment of official historical narratives. She does not say they tell lies but stories; in the manner of Lyotard, Adele accuses historical narratives of being narratives pretending to be otherwise. Hirsch rightly points out that even the most intimate familial memories are “entrenched in a collective imaginary shaped by public, generational structures of fantasy and projection and by shared archives of stories and images that inflect the transmission of individual and familial remembrances” (114). Because Adele has so little control over the wider discourses, her memories risk being overpowered by these stories. The distance between her memory and the historical narratives that might render these memories meaningless requires an intervention so that the narrator can make meaning out of the past in a way that resists being rendered invisible by metanarratives of noble wars and collateral damage.

The story of Adele’s past requires both history and imaginative mythical construction. Significantly, which aspects of the story are drawn from historical documents and which are imagined is not always clear. The backstory that the novel provides about the “Okie” soldier (177), for example, has no clear source. The recounting of Adele’s own experience is also embellished throughout; she sees her mother in her chiffon gown coming towards her, “a garment without a body, animated through terrible magics” (191) and when her mother’s hand reaches for her, “it holds her with a grip that no human could ever match” (191–192). It is not clear whether these narrative embellishments are the product of Adele or of the narrator; it is evident that Adele’s narrative voice is strong and imaginative as she is directly quoted as having spoken the beautiful and ominous words with which the narrator begins the chapter (190). But the reader is reminded that it is the narrator telling the story. Although the story of Adele and her mother’s partial immolation ends with Adele’s passing out, the paragraph that follows reasserts the narrator’s control over the narrative. He tells Adele, “But it didn’t end there, Mother. I also

know it didn't end there. You were taken in. You were gathered by the people of Carenage who had heard and wanted to help" (193). Despite his successful recreation of her story, he is not satisfied by his own attempt at closure.

In his moment of narrative completion, he sees himself through his mother's eyes: "I caught her reading me all the way through. The person I'd become, despite all of her efforts. A boy so melancholy, melancholy despite the luxuries that she'd worked so hard for him to enjoy. A boy moping for lost things, for hurts never his own" (194). This passage is one of the reasons why several other critics have found Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory so relevant to this text; the narrator is aware that he is burdened by his mother's memories and he is seemingly unable to extract himself from them. He tells his mother, "Please listen to me, Mother. Please believe me. I didn't want to sadden you or betray the spell. I didn't want to tell a story like this. I just wanted you to realize that I knew. That I was always close enough to know. That I was your son, and I could hear and understand and take away..." (195). His plea for her understanding of his understanding recognizes her need to situate her trauma in the mythical, as he refers to not wanting to "betray the spell," as well as to his need to emphasize the way their relationship grounds his experience. He is her son, and as her son he cannot help but be a part of her story, whether she wills it or not. When she recognizes that he is crying, she asks him why and calls him, "child of mine, child of this beautiful land" (195), drawing attention to his dual inheritance of both her legacy and the land to which he was born, Canada. His mother reacts to his tears and his admission that he does not "really understand it all" by asking, "Who people children do such silly, silly things?" (195). It is precisely children of people like Adele who must grapple with that which they do not understand and did not themselves experience for their own survival. Adele's inability to understand him, for all of his efforts to understand her, are not, in my view, an

indictment of her but rather an acknowledgement that it is necessary for the narrator's present and future that he come to terms with his mother's past regardless of what she can or cannot, does or does not do. This coming to terms must happen in order for him to be able to find or create what Farah Moosa, drawing from Paul Connerton, calls a "living space" (Moosa 324).

The final chapter of the novel presents the narrator's retelling of his mother's story to his mother, but also of his retelling of his retelling to Meera. The second retelling is what provides the narrator with an opening for the future. The importance of storytelling, its danger and its necessity, is emphasized by the ending of the chapter that precedes the narrator's storytelling to Meera. Meera tells the narrator, "You don't have to tell me the story" to which the narrator responds, "I know" (172). Of course, he does tell her the story; he may not have to, but he needs to. It is not just the story itself but also the retelling of it, particularly to Meera, that facilitates healing. Mackey insightfully notes that not only does the novel draw attention to "inter-generational relationships, but [it] also signal[s] the importance of forging new forms of intra-generational relations, pointing toward a need for the second generation to come to some sort of new terms with itself" (229). This intra-generational relationship is the key to the novel's forward-facing ending; as Moosa points out, Meera is the ideal listener to the narrator's story as she has an affiliative relationship to Adele's story, not a familial one (335)¹⁸. The narrator's final act of storytelling is to add himself to the narrative by way of two stories, an event that happened to him that he does not remember and his own memory of his mother and his grandmother. The former is a reaffirmation of the role of the spiritual in the novel and the latter is a reassertion of the centrality of family relations. The first is a recounting of his ritual blessing by his grandmother in the ocean during a trip to Trinidad taken when he was four or five. Meera affirms

¹⁸ This turn to affiliative relationships is also present in Díaz's novel, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

his story, saying, “It was an old gesture. Older than anything like religion or history. Your mother told me this many times. She never forgot” (196). The narrator’s experience is here placed in mythical time; he has taken part in something older than history and religion, and its grounding in that realm has allowed it to survive through all manner of suffering and forgetting. The narrator’s inability to remember this event is significant because it reaffirms the narrative’s privileging of myth over memory. This blessing is a part of the narrator’s story despite his inability to remember it. The final story, the narrator’s own memory of his mother and grandmother reaching for each other and holding hands, his realization that “they were just a mother and daughter” (196), marks the familial bond as having survived even the horror of their experiences during the Second World War, even years of distance, a bond that is expressed bodily when words cannot do such bonds justice. The narrator must speak the unspeakable but his mother and grandmother, having lived it, need not.

That these stories are shared with Meera, who is also the second-generation Canadian daughter of a Trinidadian immigrant, is vital because this sharing, across their connected but quite different lives and experiences of second generationness, ends the novel with a new form of connection and the promise that the narrator and Meera can come to understand each other in a way that they were not able to understand their parents. Their future is undoubtedly grounded in the stories of their parents but the fact that they are having this conversation in the shell of the narrator’s parents’ lives, the home emptied and sold, and the vast majority of mementos thrown away, suggests that this grounding does not mean that these second-generation characters must or even could continue their lives in the shadow of their parents’ losses and struggles. The last images of the novel, “a passing train and afterwards the sound of the lake. The splashing of a rogue wave upon a rock. The single cry of a bird” (196) are all of movement, signalling the

imminent departure of the characters from the house and their turn toward an uncertain but wide-open future. As Mackey points out, “the process of growing up entails a separation from origins, on the one hand, and a reworking of self-other relationships and the establishment of new kinds of ties, on the other” (249). This separation from origins is not a complete divorce from family or a total disregard of the past so much as it is a critical evaluation of what can and should be carried forward. The novel ends with the narrator and Meera leaving but also with an invocation of Adele’s influence and creative apprehension of the world; as they go, Meera touches the narrator’s face and says, “Eyestache” (196), Adele’s logical but unusual word for the eyebrow. They take with them the imaginative legacy of Adele even as they leave behind all that remains of her belongings.

Myths of the Past, Present, and Future in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Junot Diaz's 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a generically complex novel that blends multiple forms of writing, drawing from "the highbrow *New Yorker* aesthetic, the immigrant novel, the family saga, the secret history, the Latin American *novela del dictador* (dictator novel), the growing body of Dominican American literature, and, as Díaz points out in an interview with *Callaloo*, also 'the African Diaspora tradition' (Céspedes and TorresSaillant 904)" (Miller 92). Although it is narrated by Yuniors, a Dominican-American man with nerdy interests but a macho exterior, it follows the lives of Oscar, an internally and externally nerdy, virginal U.S.-born Dominican boy, his proud sister Lola, and their difficult mother Beli, whose epic and troubled family and personal history in the Dominican Republic is unfolded throughout the text and is shown to have contemporary resonances in the lives of her children.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the cultural and familial mythology of the fukú is also used to make sense of complex and traumatic histories but, significantly, this novel also demonstrates the way that this mythology was and is involved in shaping historical events as they happened in the Dominican Republic, particularly the dictatorship's mobilization of cultural mythology for nefarious political purposes. Yet the movement of Dominican mythology to a US context reveals once again that the migration of myth alters its meaning and reorients its power so that Dominican myths serve a different role in the diaspora and, especially for the second generation, from that which they served in the Dominican Republic. At the same time, American-made myths also permeate the novel, most significantly, those grounded in comic books and science fiction. While rife with problematic elements of their own, the mythologies the characters derive from these sources are also a means through which to engage with the past,

the present, and the future outside of the restrictions of their lives as poor children of immigrants. In this novel, as well, a mother manages her traumatic memories of sexual violence through the invocation of a mythological figure. In the penultimate chapter, which focuses on Lola's daughter, Díaz's novel also turns towards the future as Yuniór projects what could come of the growth and power of Isis. Isis is the hope for the future; her power will come from the weaving together of myth, memory, and history transmitted through the spiritual power of the women who came before her as well as what remains of her uncle, "her tio's books, his games, his manuscripts, his comic books, his papers" (330), given to her by her could-have-been-but-was-not father. This legacy suggests once again that the creation of new myths is just as, if not more important than, an understanding of the past, for the fashioning of a hopeful future.

This novel has attracted a great deal of critical attention and approaches from a number of standpoints. There is criticism that focuses on the political and historical implications of the text; for example, Rader lauds the novel's contributions to conversations about Dominican history and diasporic politics and Neilson critiques the novel's political lens or a perceived lack of it. José David Saldivar's "Conjectures on 'Americanness' and Junot Díaz's 'Fukú Americanus' in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" mobilizes the novel's concept of the *fukú americanus* to consider the novel's interventions into the silenced histories of oppression in the Antilles. Elena Machado Sáez sees the novel as a "foundational fiction for the Dominican American diaspora" (523) and argues that it follows the logics of the nation that it critiques because of Yuniór's consolidating narrative supremacy and his construction of authentic Dominican masculinity. While Machado Sáez's criticism of the way that Yuniór constructs masculinity is insightful, I see her argument as at times conflating Yuniór and Díaz, obscuring some of the novel's irony. I argue that Yuniór is explicitly constructed as a narrator whom readers should regard with a

critical eye even as we watch him attempting to overcome the very investment in toxic masculinity that is his constant stumbling block and inevitably affects how he frames Oscar's story. The novel's depiction of masculinity is also critically engaged by Dixia Ramirez, who connects the hypermasculinity so present in the text with the "a distinctly circum-Atlantic discourse of magic" (384). In my examination of *Oscar Wao*, I explore connections with and from Ramirez's argument.

Much criticism of the novel is, unsurprisingly, concerned with genre, particularly in relation to science fiction, fantasy, and magical realism (Bautista, Lopez-Calvo, Miller, Hanna). Daniel Bautista proposes that the novel creates a new genre he calls "comic book realism," which "irreverently mixes realism and popular culture in an attempt to capture the bewildering variety of cultural influences that define the lives of Díaz's Dominican-American protagonists" (42). Bautista sees this new genre as a subversive reworking of the magical realism for which many Latin American writers are known. He notes that the mystical elements of magical realism were argued to be authentic representations of the influence on Latin American society of traditional and indigenous beliefs (Bautista 42–43). Although he does not use the term "second generation," Bautista argues that Oscar's position as the child of Dominican immigrants gives him a vexed relationship to the Dominican Republic, which sets the character and novel as a whole apart from the magical realism of authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Bautista's defense of the novel's use of speculative fiction and fantasy as more than just window dressing or even as implicitly anti-nerd, as Henry Wessells accuses it of being (Bautista 42), is important; however, he does not see speculative/science fiction and fantasy as mythologies in their own right. This chapter argues that the novel's fantastical elements are mythological in a way similar

to the text's more traditionally mythical aspects, and identifies science/speculative fiction as myth of the future.

The mythical core of Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is the "fukú," which the narrator, Yunior, describes on the very first page of the narrative as "generally a curse or a doom of some kind" (1). From the opening sentence of the novel, myth and history are intertwined: "They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles" (1). This opening establishes a spiritual genesis for the supernatural concept, while also grounding it in the material history of the enslavement and transportation of Africans and the massacre and usurpation of the Tainos, the indigenous people of the land that would become the Dominican Republic. In so doing, the narrator asserts the primacy of African and indigenous peoples to any narrative of the New World and signals immediately his rejection of the Eurocentric, white supremacist official narrative of Dominican history that begins with "the Admiral" (1), Columbus. The *fukú americanus*'s association with Columbus is twofold, as it is "also called the fukú of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its great European victims; despite 'discovering' the New World the Admiral died miserable and syphilitic, hearing (dique) divine voices" (1). Columbus is therefore still a central part of the history of the New World, which the novel identifies as the mythology of the *fukú americanus*, but his role is reoriented by this lens, which casts his very name as a curse – "to say his name aloud or even to hear it is to invite calamity on the heads of you and yours" (1) – so that the perspective of people who suffered at the hands of Columbus is centered. The opening marks the novel as providing an alternative history of the Dominican Republic but the persistent emphasis

on the supernatural – its assertion that “we are all of us [the fukú’s] children, whether we know it or not” (2) – sets it apart from a realist(ic) counter-narrative. Instead, it takes on the language of myth to produce a different vision of the past of the island, one that aims to make clear the ways the past maintains its hold on even those who spend their lives away from it, and also the ways that their distance shapes its own ways of engaging with the spiritual legacy of a past built upon violence. Saldivar rightly points out that Díaz’s “remarkable framing of the *fukú americanus* as an alternative unit of analysis beyond the unit of the nation-state further allows him to think through the US and Eurocentric structures of hegemonic thought and representation that continue to dominate the globe today” (133); the fukú cannot be contained by one nation even though it was born out of the specificity of the colonization of Hispaniola.

The second grounding historical figure of the novel is the Dominican Republic’s long-reigning dictator, President Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, most often called Trujillo throughout the text, although he is also called “El Jefe, the Failed Cattle Thief, and Fuckface” (1). Díaz’s exploration of Trujillo, the person and his legacy, blurs the lines between nationalist myth and Wilson Harris’s conception of folk-based myth. The myth of Trujillo’s power and supremacy, his achievement of “forging the Dominican peoples into a modern state” (Díaz 3), fits the kind of nationalist myth that Barthes describes. That is, it makes Trujillo’s dictatorship seem inevitable and necessary, despite the novel’s reference to the mystical. The supernatural elements of the myth that bolsters Trujillo’s reign seem to be propagated by those who oppose him just as much as by those who support him. According to Yunió, “no one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master, its agent or its principal, but it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them two was *tight*” (2–3). This myth justifies his power, but it also denaturalizes it. Putting the atrocities enacted by Trujillo in the context of the wider history of

the Dominican Republic (as the novel does), Dixia Ramirez argues that by “describing this historical trauma as ‘fukú’ or curse, *Oscar Wao* explores how Dominicans and other Caribbean people have not only adopted the language of the occult to comprehend high concentrations of power personified by men like Columbus, Trujillo, and Balaguer, but also how this language is the traumatized community’s way of safely knowing what trauma has rendered unknown” (385). In essence, the Dominican people are able to mobilize the means by which Trujillo upholds his power to criticize that power. Men like Columbus and Trujillo have the means to make history but the common people, the novel suggests, have the means to apply meaning to that history that undermines its metanarrative.

Oscar Wao does not just describe the way that myth can intervene into history, it enacts it. As *Soucouyant* re-centres Trinidad into the history of the Second World War, *Oscar Wao* asserts the centrality of the Dominican Republic to the Americas and the world at large by claiming that it was the fukú which killed John F. Kennedy and caused the US’s loss in Vietnam (4). Once Yunior has established the fukú as far-reaching, he also contextualizes it as one term among others in the same vein, as he points out that it is not just Dominicans who have such stories, but that “the Puertorocks want to talk about fufus, and the Haitians have some shit just like it” (6). Yet the myth’s intervention into history is not meant to replace traditional historical narratives but rather seems to need to exist outside of them, so as to provide a counterbalance to the historical. It does not resolve but rather maintains tension. Yunior sets up the story he is writing (for this text is self-consciously constructed as Yunior’s book) as one of many: “I wish I could say [my fukú story] was the best of the lot – fukú number one – but I can’t. Mine ain’t the scariest, the clearest, the most painful, or the most beautiful” (6). By marking this tale as not even exemplary within the realm of the fukú story, Díaz resists the counter-historical move to

simply replace one story with a better or more nuanced story. Instead, he engages in the process of storytelling from a profoundly personal and subjective space, emphasizing the multiplicity of stories and the need to find patterns and connections, not to consolidate and homogenize¹⁹. His fukú story is not the most unique, “it just happens to be the one that’s got its fingers around [his] throat” (6).

The novel also maintains tensions of how the past is configured through questioning whether or not belief matters. Yuniór’s ambivalence is clear: “Whether I believe in what many have described as the Great American Doom is not really the point” (5), he argues. Yuniór does not see his own belief or anyone else’s as relevant not because there is a clear truth that can be established but because “no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you” (5). This passage is in keeping with my argument throughout this section that myth does not require belief, but it relates to this argument in a slightly different way than that made in regard to *Soucouyant* and reflects this novel’s stronger relationship to magical or marvellous realism than Chariandy’s. In *Oscar Wao*, whether or not one believes in the mythical explanation for terrible circumstances, those circumstances persist until they can be worked through politically, socially, and spiritually. In the context of the Dominican Republic, the spiritual is made up of Catholicism and traditional spiritualities of African and Indigenous peoples. Ramirez notes that “because there were few priests in the impoverished Spanish colony of Santo Domingo by 1809, only about a dozen priests remained compared with the heavy presence of the Catholic Spanish Crown in places like Mexico and Peru, the Spanish crown and the Catholic Church exerted little control over how people used spiritual practices to understand their world” (388). The fukú and the zafa are

¹⁹ This investment in the personal is first hinted at by the novel’s first epigraph, taken from a Fantastic Four comic: “Of what import are brief, nameless lives...to **Galactus**??” (emphasis in the original). Galactus, a supervillain, does not care for brief and nameless lives, but this novel raises one such life to mythical proportions.

mythical concepts that are drawn from spiritual sources not successfully suppressed during the processes of slavery and colonization, similar to the spiritual cosmologies identified by Coleman.

The novel sets up a distinction between the mythical and the speculative only to question if such a distinction is truly valid. Yuniór questions whether Oscar, the ostensible subject of his narrative, would have liked his classification of the story as a fukú story, suggesting that Oscar would have seen it as more sci-fi or fantasy. After all, Yuniór imagines Oscar asking, “What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?” (6)²⁰. Yuniór’s response, “But now that I know how it all turns out, I have to ask, in turn: What more fukú?” (6), at first seems to suggest that he sees the mythical as a more appropriate lens through which to see the events of Oscar’s life and the Dominican Republic as a place. Saldivar refers to “Oscar’s double sciences—the Global North’s science fiction and Césaire’s Global South’s new science or discipline of *négritude*” (131), the latter, I argue, including the language of myth that emerges from an Afro-Caribbean spiritual cosmology. Yet Yuniór’s continued use of science fiction and fantasy allusions and illustrations suggests that not only are both approaches valid, they also are most fruitful when used in concert. Bautista acknowledges this coming together when he states that “the notion that Oscar’s love for the speculative genres actually help him connect with older Dominican and familial beliefs represents an important reconciliation between what had first seemed like two very distinct traditions in the novel” (49). Myth is generally seen as concerned with the past and science fiction as concerned with the future while fantasy can work in either direction, but usually on an alternate plane. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* suggests that the modern world is not where myth goes to die but rather where it is reborn. The novel makes clear that comic books and science fiction are myths just as much as the fukú; they are myths of

²⁰ Bautista usefully notes that this echoes magical realist writer Alejo Carpentier’s question, “After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real?” (Bautista 43).

the future rather than of the past, but nonetheless, like all myths, they tell us important things about ourselves, what we think, what we value, who we are, who we want to be, and who we fear being. Even as Yunion is applying the logic of the fukú to the death of Columbus and the U.S.'s defeat in Saigon, he is comparing the inescapable nature of the fukú to "Darkseid's Omega Effect" and "Morgoth's bane" (5), the former a DC Comics supervillain and the latter an evil character from the fantasy works of J.R.R. Tolkien. Díaz makes inextricable the mythology of his ancestors and the mythology of comic books, fantasy, and science fiction. Both sets of mythical language are a means of interpreting the present, one oriented towards the past and one oriented towards the future, and both shaping his characters' reading of the world. The consistent relevance of mythical language as it is traditionally conceived does not undermine that the reality of the migrant and second-generation characters' lives lends itself particularly well to being expressed through the language of the speculative genres: "You really want to know what being an X-man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest" (22).

Díaz begins the novel with an exploration of a mythical concept, the fukú, that is associated with suffering and destruction, and he ends the novel's first section with the introduction of its antidote: zafa. The power of fukú is, in part, enacted through language. Simply saying "the Admiral's" name (Columbus) can bring down the fukú upon one's head (6) so it is unsurprising that the zafa involves a "simple word" that is set up as the "one surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe" (7). There is a physical action that goes along with it, the crossing of index fingers, but it is clear that the word is the key. Unlike the fukú, the zafa is not discussed with much dignity, as Yunion associates it with his uncle, who uses zafa for all sorts of banal occasions, including watching sports (7). But its comparative lack of power and

gravitas does not stop it from being used by Yuniór: “even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell” (7). The book, then, serves as an antidote, as a means of intervention into a curse that works through words but is also vulnerable to words. One can see Yuniór, then, as an attempt at the fulfillment of Wilson Harris’s belief in “the necessity for the re-visionary, profoundly courageous, open-spirited and receptive artist of conscience whose evolution out of the folk as poet, novelist, painter is a symbol of risk, a symbol of inner integrity” (28), one who

incurs a gamble of the soul which is symbolised in the West Indian trickster (the spider or anancy configuration) ...a risk which identifies him (the artist) with the submerged authority of dispossessed peoples but requires of him, in the same token, alchemic resources to conceal, as well as elaborate, a far-reaching order of the imagination which, being suspect, could draw down upon him a crushing burden of censorship in economic or political terms. He stands therefore at the heart of the lie of community and the truth of community. (28–29)

Yuniór’s flaws as a person – his continued engagement in the Dominican form of hyper-masculinity (see Ramirez), his lack of fidelity to Lola, and his occasional meanness toward Oscar – do not disqualify him from the role of the artist as Harris describes it so much as they make clear how such a role can be embodied even by those whose overall character is lacking. It is significant that Harris associates this role with the trickster figure as such a personage is not associated with morality and goodness but rather with cleverness and insight, attributes certainly compatible with having a questionable moral character. Harris’s figure is an artist, not a historian; he is a storyteller whose imagination is what allows him to see his community for what it is and represent it back to itself. Yuniór takes on this task because he must, because this story

has “fingers around [his] throat” (6), but perhaps Díaz, through his metafictional author-narrator²¹, is demonstrating that he shares Harris’s belief that “it is here...in this trickster gateway – the gamble of the soul – that there emerges the hope for a profoundly compassionate society committed to freedom within a creative scale” (28–29). Yet opening up this potential does not necessarily mean it will succeed. As I will argue in my discussion of the novel’s conclusion, Yunior is the storyteller but not the prospective usher of the social change that Harris and Diaz ardently hope for; that role is reserved for Lola’s daughter Isis.

The novel is deeply concerned with what is often missing from history and the ways that myth necessarily takes the place of historical narrative where silence reigns. In his recounting the story of the downfall of the Cabrals, Oscar’s ancestors, Yunior offers multiple explanations for why Trujillo brought about the family’s destruction: “an accident, a conspiracy, or a fukú” (243); one banal, one realistic but more complex, and one supernatural. Yunior suggests that the banal option, that Abelard drunkenly made a joke about Trujillo (235), is the most likely, but he also presents a second option, that “it had all been a setup, orchestrated by Abelard’s enemies to strip the family of their wealth, their properties, and their businesses” (243). Both of these options are logical in the context of the dictatorship, but neither is verifiable. This uncertainty leaves room for another reading of the event. Yunior notes, “Most of the folks you speak to prefer the story with a supernatural twist. They believe that not only did Trujillo want Abelard’s daughter, but

²¹ I contend that it is necessary to keep in mind Yunior’s role as mediator of the story at all times. This is in contrast to some critics, such as Saldivar, who, with regards to the section that tells the story of Lola’s running away from home and her exile to the Dominican Republic to live with her grandmother, claims that “Díaz then radically shifts narratological focalization by momentarily vaporizing Yunior and allowing Lola de León to take the center stage by narrating from her own locus of enunciation as a US Latina” (127). I question this interpretation because even as this section is written as though Lola is narrativizing her own experiences using the second person, the section contains some of the same sorts of sci-fi and fantasy allusions as the rest of the novel, such as the reference to “photon torpedoes” (53). The presence of these references hints at the continued power of mediation invested in Yunior as narrator. This is not to suggest that Lola’s section is disingenuous or “untrue”; I would argue that this choice is rather Díaz’s acknowledgement of his own position as a Dominican man by no means free from the insistent effects of patriarchy, but who is nevertheless attempting to represent ethically the lives of Dominican women and girls.

when he couldn't snatch her, out of spite he put a fukú on the family's ass" (243). This supernatural reading of the event amplifies the impression of Trujillo's strength but also amplifies the sense of his evil; it supports Dixia Ramirez's claim that "*Oscar Wao* echoes the larger Dominican society's adoption of a magical 'shorthand' for discussing the machinations of unjust power" (386). Supernatural explanations provide a language for power.

This supernatural option is also suggested, however strangely, to be banal in its own right. The frequency of the narrative of "The Girl Trujillo Wanted"²² and the retribution done to said girl's family if they refused is emphasized (244) but it is also suggested to be so common because it is easy and "makes for plenty of fun reading" (245). There is an appeal to this explanation that comes from the need to understand why "terrible shit" (243) happens regardless of people's actions or character, but it also comes from its ability to provide a titillating story. The narrative refuses to choose one of the options as the real; Yunior insists that "you'll have to decide for yourself. What's certain is that nothing's certain" (243). This lack of certainty leaves the field open for interpretation but also offers no satisfaction because each interpretation is presented as equally accurate and equally unchangeable.

²² Interestingly, Yunior contextualizes this trope into the history of Santo Domingo by recounting the story of Anacaona. Her story of resisting the Spanish massacre of the Tainos is told as historical fact, drawing from Spanish documents and quoting Anacaona using formal language: "Killing is not honorable, neither does violence redress our honor. Let us build a bridge of love that our enemies may cross, leaving their footprints for all to see" (244), although he does include some characteristic commentary, as he refers to Europeans as "the original fukú" (244). But he also adds a "common story you hear about Anacaona in the DR" which recounts the night before she was executed. Here, rather than reporting her speech in the formal language of historical accounts, he claims that, in response to an offer to spare her life if she married an obsessed Spaniard, she "was reported to have said, Whiteman, kiss my hurricane ass!" (244). This footnote, then, combines official history and local history and points out how both help to produce the mythical image of Anacaona, as the footnote begins and ends with the recitation of how she is remembered: "The Golden Flower. One of the Founding Mothers of the New World and the most beautiful Indian in the World" (244). These designations are mythical in so far as they are more about producing a meaning from her than about the historical personage. As with many of the novel's footnotes, this one blurs the lines between the historical and the mythical, as Díaz plays with the nature of the footnote and its association with the factual and the peripheral.

In this text, silence is perpetuated on all sides. Trujillo's regime enforces it; Yuniór points out that "they didn't share their German contemporaries' lust for documentation" (243). But silence is also used by those who have suffered Trujillo's wrath, like the Cabrals: "The remaining Cabrals ain't much help, either; on all matters related to Abelard's imprisonment and to the subsequent destruction of the clan there is within the family a silence that stands monument to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction. A whisper here and there but nothing more" (243). There is, of course, a great deal of irony in this passage as what has preceded it is a clear attempt at narrative reconstruction; despite the family's impulse towards silence, Yuniór has clearly ferreted out a not insignificant amount of information.

However, the preceding passage is not solely ironic; the text strongly suggests that Yuniór is using his imagination to fill in those aspects of stories that are not available to him. This admission to not having the complete story reminds the reader that Yuniór is mediating every aspect of the text, even those passages spoken by others (Miller 103), but Yuniór's embellishment is not positioned in negative terms; as T.S. Miller argues, "Díaz has designed the novel to permit a reading that instead ascribes something supernatural to Yuniór's all-seeing eye, or at the very least something defiantly postmodern and antirealist. At almost all points, Yuniór presents two or more such options to us, two or more valid ways of viewing the world: take this discourse or leave it" (100). Yuniór is a myth-maker just as much as he is a myth-receiver. This is not to say that Yuniór's myth-making should be taken for truth, as Machado Sáez points out: "By pulling back the veil of an omniscient voice and revealing Yuniór as the narrator, Díaz underscores the dangers involved in accepting the authenticity of any historical narrative, even the fiction that he himself writes" (527). However, whereas Machado Sáez sees the monovocal nature of the text as supporting a consolidating vision of history that requires the purging of

incongruent elements in the manner of national narratives, I argue that Díaz avoids this foreclosure by presenting multiple interpretations of past events and constantly introducing doubt even when Yunior makes definitive statements. Saldivar argues that Yunior disappears in order to allow other storytellers to speak and Machado Sáez argues that Yunior's control produces a single story, but I see Yunior's role as storyteller as both ever-present and open-minded. The inherent tension of this position is part of what makes this novel so compelling; Richard Patterson rightly points out that even as the novel critiques authority and the possibility of a single story, it incorporates "the notion that the act of telling is itself an exercise of power, into the deepest design of the novel" (5). By acknowledging this fact, the novel raises the question of how this exercise of power can be done in a transformative or at least ethical manner.

In this novel, the past is a series of options. The three previously mentioned versions of the downfall of the Cabral are soon revealed to not be the only possible explanations; a fourth is introduced that is also supernatural but in a different way than the fukú story. In this fourth version, Abelard is targeted by Trujillo because he is writing a book in which he claims that the "tales the common people told about the president – that he was supernatural, that he was not human – may in some ways have been true. That it was possible that Trujillo was, if not in fact, then in principle, a creature from another world!" (245)²³. As I have argued, myths do not need to be believed to be powerful; this novel makes the same argument, particularly in the context of Santo Domingo where "a story is not a story unless it casts a supernatural shadow" (245–246). Yunior describes this fourth story as "one of those fictions with a lot of disseminators but no believers" (246). Yet the story's lack of believers does not make it any less dangerous to Trujillo and any less attractive to Oscar or, however much he denies it, Yunior. Yunior states

²³ This passage is interestingly ambiguous; what does it mean to be a creature from another world in principle rather than in fact?

unequivocally, “I’m sure that this [The Lost Final Book of Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral] is nothing more than a figment of our Island’s hypertrophied voodoo imagination. And nothing less. The Girl Who Trujillo Wanted might be trite as far as foundation myths go but at least it’s something you can really believe in, no? Something real” (246). The invocation of “voodoo imagination” here, whether it is a purposeful allusion to Wilson Harris or not, draws attention to the relationship between the spiritual/mythical and the imaginative as their combination (if they can indeed be said to be separate things) provides a means for apprehending the world for people who suffered for decades under the thumb of a violent and seemingly all-knowing dictator. Trujillo is viewed as a spiritual threat and therefore must be overcome through spiritual means. Dixia Ramirez states that “a disenfranchised citizenry often discursively transforms exorbitant power into predatory otherworldly entities and forces. This malevolent energy tends to manifest itself in communities that are particularly vulnerable to the kind of socio-economic inequality and political exclusion that Trujillo and Balaguer exemplified” (384). While this assertion is valid, in keeping with this chapter’s aim to consider that which is configured as spiritual or mythical on its own terms, I argue that the identification of this discursive transformation should not lead to an interpretation of the novel that sees this mythologization of power as purely a social phenomenon.

In the context of discussing other diasporic and indigenous texts, Coleman argues that, “because the original trauma is understood within a spiritual cosmology, power dynamics are configured in a completely different way” (60). The plane of power in the Dominican Republic cannot be looked at in purely realist(ic) terms because that is not how it is constructed. This version of events is tied to the supernatural both because of the claim that Trujillo is himself otherworldly, and because Trujillo’s means of crushing dissent are seemingly supernatural as

well. Despite Yuniór's claim that he is sure the story of Abelard's book is false, he spends the remainder of the section second guessing himself: "Strange though, that when all was said and done, Trujillo never went after Jackie, even though he had Abelard in his grasp. He was known to be unpredictable, but still, it's odd, isn't it?" (246). Yuniór casts doubt on his own doubt, particularly by noting that "none of Abelard's books, not the four he authored or the hundreds he owned, survive. Not in an archive, not in a private collection...Not one single example of his handwriting remains" (246). This unimaginably thorough act of erasure is as supernatural as many of the unlikely events described. Yuniór is drawn to this explanation for the downfall of the Cabrals because it is the antecedent of his own effort to reckon with the spiritual effects of Trujillo's rule.

Ramirez argues that "the mystery of the Cabral family tragedy that begins with Abelard's imprisonment becomes a traumatic silence that cannot be broken, despite Oscar's attempts to write his family's history" (390). But does not having Yuniór write their story, however incompletely, undermine the idea that it has to be blood family that carries on ancestral memory? Yuniór takes up Oscar's work to tell the Cabral family story and his imaginative reconstruction resists the continuation of the silence. As an outsider to the family but party to its present moment through complex social bonds – ex-boyfriend, erstwhile roommate, biographer – Yuniór is able to preserve their story for the family's next generation, Lola's daughter Isis. This extrafamilial memory demonstrates Marianne Hirsch's argument that postmemory is generational, which opens space for an intragenerational element to its production and maintenance. Yuniór has his own family, and he hints that they too had their run-ins with Trujillo, but it is Oscar and his family's story that has its fingers around Yuniór's neck. Regardless of what we might consider to be his own reasons for needing to tell Oscar's story

(Machado Sáez argues that it is a result of Yuniór's suppressed desire for Oscar (546)), Yuniór's storytelling attempts to undo the silencing of the past (both in terms of the past being silenced and silencing taking place in the past), a silencing that was a direct result of Trujillo's power over the public discourse and imaginary.

Alongside the mythical concepts of fukú and zafa, the novel also prominently features a mythical figure: the golden mongoose. The mongoose is described in a footnote as "one of the greatest unstable particles of the Universe and also one of its greatest travelers" who "accompanied humanity out of Africa and after a long furlough in India jumped ship to the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean" (151). As with the other mythical concepts in the text, Africa is the starting point, but the mongoose's trajectory, as described by Yuniór, takes a different route, making its way to India before travelling on to the Americas. This footnote points towards the mythical origin of the golden mongoose, as there is a speaking half-gold mongoose in the *Mahabharata*²⁴. In the Hindu epic, a blue-eyed half-gold mongoose tells the story of how half of his body came to be gold to a group of learned men whose act of charity he deems insufficiently pious. The mongoose tells how there was once a very righteous man who lived with his wife, son, and daughter-in-law. This man would eat only once a day out of piety. There came a terrible famine in the land and the family frequently had nothing to eat. When they finally did have food, a very small portion of powdered barley, they sat down to eat when a guest arrived. They gave a share of the food to the guest, but when he had eaten it, they saw he was still hungry. One after another, the wife, son, and daughter-in-law each offered their portions to be given to the guest. The righteous man resisted each time and was convinced each time by the humble arguments of his family. Unsurprisingly, the guest, who had now eaten each of their portions, turned out to be

²⁴ Díaz's Mongoose is golden eyed and black pelted (149), so his naming as the golden mongoose is in reference to his eyes rather than his pelt, unlike the mongoose in the *Mahabharata*.

the deity of righteousness and praised the man for his and his family's selflessness and sent them all to heaven. Once they were gone, the mongoose emerged from his hole and is made half gold by his contact with the remains of this remarkable act of charity (*Mahabharata* XC). While the mongoose of *Oscar Wao* is not identical to the mongoose of the *Mahabharata*, the latter serves an intriguing intertextual reference point for the figure in the novel.

The mongoose in the *Mahabharata* has two main characteristics: he is a storyteller and he is not himself good (although neither is he bad) but is rather transformed by the goodness of others. In both texts, the role of the mongoose is as observer, although what the mongooses see differs greatly. In both texts, the mongoose is not necessarily good himself, but neither is he a neutral observer. In the *Mahabharata*, he tells his story to encourage other people to be more giving and even though he does so for a selfish reason, to be turned fully gold rather than simply half, the results of his actions are positive. In *Oscar Wao*, the mongoose provides a sense of continuity and connection for a family that is fragmented; its presence is not enough to stop Oscar's attempted suicide (190) but its connection to his family makes it a powerful symbol and presence when it returns to him in a dream after his beating (301). The mongoose is a prime example of the way that Díaz casts a wide net for his mythical sources, from the Americas to the "old world", even those unconnected to his characters. The footnote also flags the mongoose's other associations. In the English-speaking Caribbean, the mongoose is famously depicted as a wily thief trickster figure, most popularly in the folk song "Sly Mongoose," a version of which was recorded as a calypso by Lord Invader, the same calypsonian whose song, "Rum and Coca Cola," is featured in *Soucouyant*. This trickster association is notable because while the mongoose in the novel does not portray any explicitly tricksteresque characteristics, its presence at moments of pain and suffering, and its role as both an agent and an observer mark it as a

somewhat involved witness in the lives of Oscar and his mother, and perhaps even a story compiler in its own right. This reworking of the trickster figure fits remarkably well with Wilson Harris' revisioning of trickster-as-artist-as-trickster. The subversive nature of the mongoose is explicitly referred to in the footnote: "since its earliest appearance in the written word...the Mongoose has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies. Believed to be an ally of Man. Many Watchers suspect that the Mongoose arrived to our world from another, but to date no evidence of such a migration has been unearthed" (151). The passage, then, connects the traditionally-defined mythology of the mongoose, as a trickster figure and subversive mystical animal, with a speculative comic book-based conceptualization of the mongoose, as an otherworldly, potentially dimension-hopping or perhaps space-travelling entity observed by Watchers. Once again, Díaz blurs the line between multiple mythological vocabularies, drawing on myths that cross space and time; his hybrid vision suggests that a function of myth is to create new myths, reworking the old rather than simply abandoning it or letting it stagnate. The production of a new mythology through a "mash up" of old and new is generative within the text, and outside it as well.

The mongoose's role in the novel indeed is multifaceted. It is introduced explicitly near the middle of the novel during the portion of the story dedicated to Beli's life in the Dominican Republic during the days of Trujillo. In the harrowing chapter that details Beli's kidnapping and beating in the cornfield, the site of her trauma that later is the site of Oscar's similar experience, Yunion claims that it is her anger that saves her life: "Like Superman in *Dark Knight Returns*, who drained from an entire jungle the photonic energy he needed to survive Coldbringer, so did our Beli resolve out of her anger her own survival. In other words, her coraje saved her life" (148). Beli's survival is made mythical in this passage; she becomes a superhero as result of her

ability to survive a relentless beating and possibly rape²⁵. She is also “our” Beli in this moment; in her time of incredible loneliness, when she is sliding into “a loneliness so total it was beyond death, a loneliness that obliterated all memory, the loneliness of a childhood where she’d not even had her own name” (148), the narrative takes her into a communal belonging that includes Yuniór, a young man not yet born when this event is taking place, as well as her prayerful grandmother and her many praying companions, her future children, and the readers who are witnessing her moment of triumph over death, at least her own death. *Coraje* is a Spanish word that can be translated as both valour and anger. Much has been written about Díaz’s use of untranslated, unglossed Spanish in the novel and its many purposes; in this instance, both meanings are apt.

The mongoose appears to Beli in this moment of extreme pain and extreme *coraje*. Whereas most sections of the novel, even the shortest ones, have titles, this one is separated from the preceding one with a simple line. As he has with the fukú and the zafa, Yuniór expresses some doubt about the reality of the mongoose: “Whether what follows was a figment of Beli’s wracked imagination or something else altogether I cannot say” (149). This strategy whereby Yuniór introduces a rational explanation for an event but refuses to endorse it happens throughout the text. Its reason can be explained thus: “no matter what the truth, remember: Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena. How else could we have survived what we have survived?” (149). Here, Díaz invokes the same logic forwarded by Wilson Harris: the only reasonable reaction to the

²⁵ Whether Beli is raped is left untold: “Was there time for a rape or two? I suspect there was, but we shall never know because it’s not something she talked about. All that can be said is that it was the end of language, the end of hope. It was the sort of beating that breaks people, breaks them utterly” (147). The narrative choice to allow Beli’s silence to stand, regardless of Yuniór’s supposition, reflects the novel’s attempt to assert the agency of the female characters over their own experiences while simultaneously maintaining Yuniór’s role as narrator.

incredible nature of the Caribbean and the forces that produced it is to embrace imagination, not in a whimsical, childish way, but in a way that recognizes that the unbelievable can be menacing or beautiful, and is often both. Imagination and survival are here inextricably linked, as they have been in all the texts explored in this dissertation. For the second generation, those born or raised elsewhere, this link between imagination and survival is re-formed to suit their circumstances. For Yuniór and Oscar, this re-formation takes the form of opening up new scopes for imagination and, for Yuniór in particular, taking an active, wilful approach to imagination in which belief and disbelief can co-exist.

The mongoose has come to lead Beli from the cane. In the novel, the cane is a site of sexual and retaliatory violence and it plays a vital symbolic role. The cane can be read as a metaphor for history. Plantation labour built the island and even after the end of official slavery²⁶, the plantation is the site of labour for the poor and oppressed. It is intrinsically tied to the island's history of slavery and served as the crucible of the island's racial hierarchy. The cane's association with the past is referred to explicitly; Yuniór describes the drop off of the city as being "plunged 180 years into rolling fields of cane," which is "some real-time machine-type shit" (146). That the mongoose is charged with leading Beli out of the cane is a powerful symbol of the novel's championing of myth as a necessary antidote to history. Like history, the cane can seem impossible to escape: "As some of you know, canefields are no fucking joke, and even the cleverest of adults can get mazed in their endlessness, only to reappear months later as a cameo of bones" (149). The mongoose, who is now revealed to have a woman's voice, helps her to find her way by singing, in Spanish but in an accent she cannot clearly identify but thinks is "maybe

²⁶ Recall that Beli spends her early childhood as, essentially, a slave (253), so the novel makes clear that the end of large scale plantation slavery was by no means the end of slavery as a practice.

Venezuelan, maybe Colombian” (150); this comment perhaps suggests a pan-Latin American impulse to go along with the novel’s consistent pan-Caribbean orientation.

It is significant that Beli is being led by song. Catherine A. John compellingly argues that

Song functions for the African diaspora subject...as the sign and substance of an alternate mode of consciousness. It is a literal strategy of survival, in which the exclusively rational mode of ‘modern’ Western consciousness has reached its metaphysical limitation and something else must step in to save the individual from psychospiritual death. Within both continental African and African diasporic contexts, a strong oral tradition, characterized by folktales, folksongs, poems, and music, is almost always featured as a predominant trait of these cultures. (2)

The alternate mode of consciousness provided by song is here invoked and combined with the mythical or folkloric as an embodied form of sustenance that saves Beli from psychospiritual as well as physical death. Beli staggers through the cane, following the voice of the mongoose, but “the cane didn’t want her to leave, of course; it slashed at her palms, jabbed into her flank and clawed her thighs, and its sweet stench clogged her throat” (150). The anthropomorphized cane is active in resisting her escape; even as the mythical figure of the mongoose works to bring her out of history, not physically helping her but guiding her through song, history tries to claw her back into itself, to deny her the future that the mongoose has promised her.

Indeed, it is not just the mongoose’s singing that urges her on; when the mongoose first tells her to get up, it tells her, “*you have to rise now or you’ll never have the son or the daughter*” (149). The thought of these future children keeps Beli going: “each time she thought she would fall she concentrated on the faces of her promised future – her promised children – and from that obtained the strength she needed to continue” (150). For the first third of the text,

Beli figures primarily as a difficult, violent, and at times neglectful, mother to her children, especially to Lola, whose section in the limelight of the novel has Beli as the primary antagonist. Here, as in many second-generation texts, including, as I have argued, the other three novels explored in this dissertation, coming to terms with the first generation is a necessary aspect of developing a sense of place and of the future. Coming to understand Beli, not to justify her behaviour at any point but to see how she came to be and how she came to inhabit the places she inhabited, is central to the narrative. This coming into understanding is mostly extra-textual; after all, Beli dies before Lola has her daughter and although Lola is there for her mother during her long illness, there is no narration of a heartfelt reconciliation. When Lola tries to show compassion to her mother on her death bed, Beli turns her back to Lola and Yunior (323). The reader is invited to understand Beli in lieu of her children. It is we who see her defy death in order to have those future-children, we who are expected to contemplate what it means to survive solely based on the desire for a future promised to you by a talking four-legged animal. When Beli finally gets out of the cane, she is almost run over by a car but is saved because the driver “saw something lion-like in the gloom, with eyes like terrible amber lamps” and he “slammed on the breaks and halted inches from where a naked blood-splattered Beli tottered” (150). This report extends the sightings of the mongoose to those outside of the family; this can be taken to either increase the sense that the mongoose is “real” or reinforce the sense that the mythical is simply a part of everyday life in the Dominican Republic.

In keeping with the novel’s self-reflexive style, the short section that follows is titled “Fukú vs. Zafa,” connecting the mythical creature of the mongoose with the mythical concepts that have shaped the text. Once again, Yunior provides multiple perspectives on the event. He presents two differing interpretations of Beli’s beating: one that argues that it is evidence of the

fukú against the family and the other that argues that the fact that she survived in the unlikely way that she did is proof of a blessing instead. Yuniór's own opinion is more explicit than usual in this moment for he states, "the world is full of tragedies enough without niggers having to resort to curses for explanations" (152) but he does not have the last word on the subject, which he leaves to the faith-based perspective of La Inca and the tight-lipped ambivalence of Beli. Moreover, in the very next section he claims that La Inca's prayers "laid an A-plus zafa on the Cabral family fukú (but at what cost to herself?)" (155). As such, this part of the text suggests both that fate is inherently open to interpretation and the importance of interpretation to give life meaning, regardless of what is actually "true," if "truth" can even be discerned. The world is full of tragedies, and making sense of them is, it seems, an irresistible project. The explicitly religious worldview of La Inca, including its synchronic elements such as prayer to ancestors, offers a potent means of meaning-making that the novel's narrative voice does not belittle, but also does not seem to share. Following Coleman's lead, it is important to recognize the novel's investment in a spiritual cosmology that, while not the overarching perspective of the text, still plays a substantial role in the novel's narrative. Syncretic Dominican Catholicism, folk beliefs about curses and blessings, mythical figures like the mongoose and the man without a face, and the language and images of SF and fantasy all work together to create a diverse, multifaceted mythical cosmology that must be taken into account for a meaningful analysis of this text.

The mongoose's first appearance to Oscar on the verge of his suicide attempt is notable because it is described as "something straight out of Ursula Le Guin" (190), once again merging mythologies of the past and the future by invoking the famed speculative fiction writer as an appropriate source for the creature. The discussion of the creature here is much more ambiguous than in Beli's encounter, as Oscar's later interpretation of what he saw indicates: "he would call

it the Golden Mongoose, but even he knew that wasn't what it was. It was very placid, very beautiful. Gold-limned eyes that reached through you, not so much in judgement or reproach but for something far scarier. They stared at each other – it serene as a Buddhist, he in total disbelief – and then the whistle blew again and his eyes snapped open (or closed) and it was gone” (190). Is his designation of it as the golden mongoose, despite the implied inaccuracy of this description, a result of his need to contextualize it within his family's story or does he know that “that wasn't what it was” because he knew he was hallucinating? This is left purposefully unclear as is the question of whether it was the opening or the closing of his eyes that removed it from his sight. The eyes of the creature, mongoose or no, are in keeping with the previous depiction of the creature as it is, still, an observer, not neutral but physically distant. The text leaves the question of what is more frightening than judgement or reproach unstated, but perhaps for Oscar simply being seen as he is could be a more frightening prospect than the judgement he is so used to experiencing. This moment contains an echo of the same sentiment that is expressed in *Soucouyant* when the narrator sees his mother see through him; both Oscar and the unnamed narrator of *Soucouyant* are undone by being seen even as being unseen seems to be an intolerable state for them as well. Like the narrator of *Soucouyant*, Oscar feels the weight of his family's traumas; of his suicide attempt, he tells Yuniór, “It was the curse that made me do it, you know” and although Yuniór tries to deny it, saying “I don't believe in that shit, Oscar. That's our parents' shit,” Oscar acknowledges that such a simple separation is impossible: “It's ours too, he said” (194). The inheritance of fukú and zafa, of the golden mongoose, is not optional, whether Yuniór (at this point as character rather than as narrator) wants to believe it or not.

One of the key ways that the novel demonstrates a stronger affinity to myth than to history, despite its wealth of historical detail, is its emphasis on repetition. Oscar is discovered

having his first kiss with Ybón, the semi-retired sex worker with whom he has developed a semi-romantic relationship, by her military-trained dirty cop boyfriend. Like his mother, his desire for an unattainable person has resulted in his kidnapping. The boyfriend's two henchmen, who Yúnior names Solomon Grundy and Gorilla Grodd after two DC Comics villains, drive him out to the canefields, just as his mother was driven out before him. Yúnior links this experience to mythical time as he asks, "How's that for eternal return?" (296). This eternal return is melded with postmemory as Oscar experiences the space of the canefield as "strangely familiar to him; he had the overwhelming feeling that he'd been in this very place, a long time ago. It was worse than déjà vu, but before he could focus on it the moment slipped away" (298). He also sees a man without a face, which his mother also experienced during her ordeal (141). The man without a face can be seen as a sort of physical embodiment of the fukú. The vision is fleeting, but it is suggested that Oscar is here remembering his mother's trauma as if it were his own. In Hirsch's model, this remembering is imaginative but in *Oscar Wao*, it is also supernatural. Not only does the beating in the cane repeat, so does the singing-as-guide, although this time the singing guides someone to Oscar, rather than guiding Oscar himself. Oscar is dragged from the cane by Clives, "the evangelical taxista" (299) who followed Oscar's assailants, and several Haitian workers from a nearby plantation. The role of the arguably enslaved Haitians²⁷ in Oscar's rescue is significant because it serves as a reminder of the history of slavery and the connection between the cane and violence that this scene reinforces.

The short section that follows Oscar's beating is aptly titled "Close Encounters of the Caribbean Kind," referencing the classic science fiction film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* while reinforcing the relationship between the mythical and the Caribbean, as this section

²⁷ The Haitians resist helping at first because they are afraid of being "whipped as bad as Oscar by their overseers" (300).

concerns Oscar's dream of a conversation with "the Mongoose" (301). In his dream, the Mongoose asks him "What will it be, muchacho? More or less?" (301). He is tempted to let himself die but chooses life when he thinks of his family and his younger, more hopeful self. When he asks for more, the Mongoose replies but his answer is represented as a series of three long dashes. This seeming silence is curious; does it represent something that Oscar cannot remember or never told or never heard in the first place? An answer to this question may be drawn from the title of the section. The aliens in "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" do not speak but only communicate with the humans using hand signals based on musical tones. While it is clear that the Mongoose can speak, perhaps this is not a moment of silence but a moment of a form of communication beyond words. The Mongoose's otherworldly nature is emphasized, as is its role of observer; it does not grant Oscar his "more" but simply witnesses his choosing of it. The way that the mongoose is characterized multiplies throughout the text; in the aforementioned dream, it seems alien, but in another dream soon after, the mongoose is an "Aslan-like figure with golden eyes who kept trying to speak to him but Oscar couldn't hear a word above the blare of the merengue coming from the neighbor's house" (302). Thus, the mongoose is associated with the saviour figure of C.S. Lewis's Narnia fantasy series, but the saviour element of the character is muted by the reality of present-day Santo Domingo.

The mongoose is future and past and present all at once, but it is not all powerful. The last vision Oscar has of the Mongoose is when he is being driven into the cane once more by Grundy and Grodd. Oscar imagines his whole family, living and dead, aboard a bus being driven by the Mongoose, with the Man Without a Face, who has appeared at other times of distress as a threatening presence, as the *cobrador*, the conductor (320). The metaphorical import of this vision is fairly clear; the mongoose has been a force of zafa while the Man Without a Face has

served as a representation of the fukú, and both, in unison, have been central to his family's story. But this passage of the story is also significant narratively because the source of the details is unclear; whereas Yuniór's knowledge of other events from Oscar's life are explained by their conversations or by reading his diary, Oscar's last moments are narrated without a logical means of conveyance other than Clives, the taxista, but even if he stayed to watch Oscar's death, he cannot have read Oscar's thoughts. Here, then, Yuniór is once again making an imaginative intervention into the story, creating a myth of Oscar's life that transcends the reality of it. As in *Soucouyant*, the intragenerational connection between Yuniór and Oscar and Lola is powerful and extends the significance of the story outside of a specific family unit and into a wider field of association.

Yuniór's role of the storyteller/story-keeper is also imaginatively extended at the end of the novel as he projects the future of Lola's daughter, Isis, in whom he places his hope not just of Oscar's family but for himself. Yuniór's investment in Isis is deeply personal; he states, "[she] could have been my daughter if I'd been smart, if I'd been ----" (329). This silence is one of the moments in the text that reveals Yuniór's simultaneous realization of the consequences of his toxic masculinity as well as his inability to articulate it or to stop enacting it. Yet despite his insurmountable flaw, or perhaps because of it, he sees the importance of Isis even without a blood-relationship; the lack of it "makes her no less precious" (329). In Isis there is the coming together of all of the mythical discourses that make up the novel. She is the wearer of three "azabaches," jet amulets, "the one Oscar wore as a baby, the one Lola wore as a baby, and the one Beli was given by La Inca upon reaching Sanctuary," which Yuniór describes as "powerful elder magic. Three shields against the Eye" (329). Thus, she is protected by a connection to her ancestors as well as by traditional magic objects. This is "backed by a six-mile plinth of prayer.

(Lola's not stupid; she made both my mother and La Inca the girl's *madrinas* [godmothers]). Powerful wards indeed" (329–330); the role of La Inca's spiritual legacy, shored up by that of Yuniór's mother, who is occasionally mentioned throughout the novel, is also present for Isis. All of this, however, is not enough to protect her forever.

Yuniór ominously predicts that "one day, though, the Circle will fail. As Circles always do. And for the first time she will hear the word *fukú*. And she will have a dream of the No Face Man. Not now, but soon" (330). Just as Oscar, Lola, and Yuniór were not free from the forces that shaped their parents' lives, neither is Isis. The *fukú* and its physical embodiment in the No Face Man persist and still need to be grappled with at even yet another remove from whence they came. The difference, this section suggests, is that the second generation has already created some of the groundwork for coming to terms with this complicated legacy, work that can be completed by the third. When Isis comes "looking for answers" (330), Yuniór plans to be ready. This penultimate section of the novel is written as a projection into the future; there is no guarantee that these events will take place, just hope. Yuniór imagines that Isis will come and he will show her everything he has kept: "I'll take her down to the basement and open the four refrigerators where I store her *tío's* books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers" (330). He will have set up the basement in such a way that she can stay with all of these things as she needs to, as many nights "as it takes" (330), but as it takes to what? Yuniór's great hope is that "if she's as smart and as brave as I'm expecting she'll be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it. That is what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream" (330–331). It is significant that he expects that she will come to his home to engage with Oscar's things; he does not plan to give them to her but rather to have her visit with them. The narrator in *Soucouyant* needs to leave behind the physical remnants of

his parents even as he knows that he cannot fully discard their legacy. In *Oscar Wao*, Yunior volunteers to bear the weight of Oscar and his family's struggles so that it is available to Isis, but she is not burdened by it. She will take with her the knowledge and the spiritual legacy of her forebears, blood related or otherwise, but without having to drag their literal baggage behind her.

It is of great importance that Isis, the hope for the future, is a girl. In this novel, while women are by no means idealized, they do serve as the sources and carriers of strength. Masculinity is tied to the island and its legacy of sexual violence from the early days of Spanish colonialism to the dictatorships of the twentieth century. Lola realizes this and knows that she must leave, which allows her to create the next generation, Isis. Her statement that "ten million Trujillos is all we are" (324) reflects the continued pervasive effects of this history. Oscar cannot resist the island's thrall and dies. Perhaps the casting of the hope for the future as a girl suggests a doubt that the toxic masculinity of the Dominican community can yet be overcome (this perspective is supported by the fact that Lola's husband is Cuban, not Dominican). Isis is the heir to the legacy of female power and wisdom that runs through the family. The novel does not tell us what happens to her and indeed this section does not even end with her.

After Yunior has presented his imagined future meeting with Isis, he turns once again to one of the comic books that features most prominently in the novel: Frank Miller's *Watchmen*. Yunior produces a sort of false ending for the novel by quoting the actual ending of the comic. While he has expressed hope that Isis will "put an end to it" (331), the "it" presumably referring to the fukú, he once again seems to question his belief that this is possible through his repetition of the comic's ending. Adrian Veidt asks Dr. Manhattan for validation for his act of killing a significant portion of New York City's population in order to save the world by bringing people together against a common enemy, saying, "I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the

end” to which Dr. Manhattan replies, “In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends” (331). This ominous suggestion leaves the novel’s perspective on the future ambiguous; both the imagining about Isis and this invocation of *Watchmen* are stories, one imagined when Yunior is feeling hopeful and the other when he feels “downtrodden or morose” (331). Yet, neither is the real. Oscar falls victim to the fukú, should one choose to believe in it, and Yunior is not free of it either, whether one believes in it or not. In addition, there are the two stories of the final section. One is the never delivered package of Oscar’s writings while in the Dominican Republic, what he claimed was “the cure to what ails us...The Cosmo DNA” (333). Like the book his grandfather wrote, his own analysis of the Dominican condition is lost. What does make it to Yunior is the final story of the novel, the story of Oscar and Ybón’s weekend away. This feels like a very strange way to end the novel. Machado Sáez sees this ending as Yunior “resolving” the uncomfortable queerness of Oscar (548) but I would argue that by ending the novel in this space of intimacy (and not just sexual penetration but “the little intimacies that he’d never in his whole life anticipated, like combing her hair or getting her underwear off a line or watching her walk naked to the bathroom or the way she would suddenly sit on his lap and put her face into his neck. The intimacies like listening to her tell him about being a little girl and him telling her that he’d been a virgin all his life” (334)) and yet having this space be so disjointed, a supplement to the part of the text that seemed complete, suggests instead an imaginative act of wish fulfilment, a gift from Yunior to Oscar of what he most longed for, not what Yunior wanted him to have. Perhaps this story is the only way that Yunior could end his zafa; knowing as the reader does that it is his relationship with Ybón that gets Oscar killed, perhaps the novel is making clear that fukú and zafa are inextricable from one another and that within every fukú lives the seed of its own zafa and, more unsettlingly, within every zafa is the seed of the fukú.

Returning the Look: A Comparative Conclusion

The four texts explored in this dissertation are representative of common themes, problematics, and narrative techniques that reoccur in second-generation-focused literary texts and cultural production more widely. The temporal spread of the texts reflects the differing timelines of immigration reform that are discussed in the introduction. Syal's novel takes place at the earliest point of the four, in keeping with the earlier changes to British immigration patterns and laws. The other three novels represent different moments of migration to the United States and Canada, all taking place after significant changes to each country's immigration laws and responsive to specific socio-political circumstances that led to large-scale migrations to specific locations in each country: Vietnamese refugees in California, Anglophone Caribbean immigrants in Toronto and its environs, and Dominican migrants throughout the cities of New York and New Jersey.

This project has demonstrated an investment in thinking across difference. The impulse behind this approach is inherently political in so far as it is predicated on a desire to construct a form of solidarity across individuals and communities that recognizes difference but also sees difference as neither absolute nor necessarily based on unchanging and static cultural identities. By reading across difference and seeking to find shared preoccupations and strategies, this project has tried to recognize linkages that can be further pursued both in literature and in lived experience. If, as the forgoing texts seem to suggest, second-generation positionality produces literary texts invested in imagining other futures, pushing beyond the overdetermination produced by race and nation, then second-generation literature can be seen as taking part in the large social project of negotiating a worldview that takes an ethical, productive, and anti-

essentialist approach to differences and creating space for connection and coalition building. In “New Ethnicities,” Stuart Hall argues for

a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position as ‘ethnic artists’ or film-makers. We are all, in that sense, ethnically located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are. But this is also a recognition that this is not an ethnicity which is doomed to survive, as Englishness was, only by marginalizing, dispossessing, displacing and forgetting other ethnicities. This precisely is the politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity. (227)

These new ethnicities, then, are not meant to usurp the place of nationalist identities, engaging in their same rapacious tactics, but rather to reimagine altogether how ethnicity and community interact. The second-generation authors whose texts this dissertation explores demonstrate an investment in this project of examining the tension between being ethnically located and refusing ethnic specificity that restricts the possibility of engaging across ethnic identities. Hall acknowledges that this project is difficult but necessary:

This does not make it any easier to conceive of how a politics can be constructed which works with and through difference, which is able to build those forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities, and which can effectively draw the political boundary lines without which political contestation is impossible, without fixing those boundaries for eternity. It entails the movement in black politics, from what Gramsci called the ‘war of manoeuvre’

to the ‘war of position’ – the struggle around positionalities. (“New Ethnicities” 225).

As such, for the purposes of this project, identifying a racialized second-generation positionality is not about classifying a fixed identity but rather about identifying those forms of solidarity and identification that exist across texts and are explicitly invested in the ways that such a positionality develops, functions, and even changes over time. A politics of identification allows one to come to understand how the processes of racialization and exclusion that second-generation subjects experience are reflective of “understandings of the material and ideological basis of all oppressions in their global manifestations; of the interconnectedness as well as the specificity of each oppression. And it is only meaningful if we develop a practice to challenge and combat them all” (Brah 104). This project does this political work. Future projects might explore texts that actively take up this process of coalition building, such as Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, Chang-Rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*, and Rabindranath Maharaj’s *The Amazing Absorbing Boy*, among others.

So far, I have examined each text individually, grounding my readings in two overarching themes: coming of age and the relationship between myth, memory, and history. In this comparative conclusion, I bring the four texts into conversation with one another, drawing attention to the similarities in both form and content that demonstrate the texts’ shared investment in representing second-generation positionality and the ways that these representations cross ethnic and national lines.

While lê thi diem thuy’s *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* and Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me* differ greatly in terms of the era represented, tone, and ethnic and national context, they share a number of significant similarities. One of the most important of these shared qualities is

that they are narrated by women protagonists whose families have settled in countries with which their homelands have colonial and neocolonial ties. The horrors of Partition loom over Meena's family, and the Vietnam War shapes the lives of the unnamed narrator and her family in lê's novel. Their lives in Britain and the United States, respectively, signal the particularly vexed entanglement of colonial and neocolonial legacies with the life and afterlife of migration when the source of colonial and neocolonial violence that prompts migration is also the site of settlement. Such similarities are particularly worth exploring across these national contexts in order to trace how colonial and neocolonial relationships might share certain similarities in terms of how they produce second-generation subjects whose sense of place is shaped by both the requirement of gratitude from the migrant and the resentments that communities hold as a result of former violence and present marginalization. Espiritu notes that Vietnamese American identity and politics are influenced by the unresolved nature of the Vietnam War in the cultural imaginary (144–145); this lack of resolution about the meaning of the war affects how its resultant migrants and their descendants are perceived. Similarly, the meaning of India and the colonies more broadly in Britain remains a point of contention so that migrants and their children may be seen by the host society as representing a variety of different things: encroachment, heathens needing salvation, exotic difference, adventure. The protagonists in both novels are depicted coming of age while trying to resist these forms of overdetermination.

Both novels also highlight the re-creation of family in the diaspora. In lê's novel, the narrator states that she and her father "were connected to the four uncles not by blood but by water" (3). This connection is suggested to be no less real than connections of blood. Similarly, the community that forms in Syal's novel is a result of the process of migration itself. These bonds are more palpable in lê's novel because the narrator actually experiences the migration

herself, albeit as a very young child, but migrant familial connections still have significant impact on Meena's life. As such, the novels demonstrate that the intergenerational relationship extends beyond the biological family unit and that the extra-familial bounds produced by migration have a strong influence on the protagonists' coming of age. The existence of the Aunties and Uncles who populate both novels creates a distinct form of relationship; the parents who dub these former strangers as family do so in order to replace family that has been lost to them; however, for the second-generation child, the Aunties and Uncles are covering a loss that the child herself may not have experienced, an inherited loss. The enforced remembrance of the family left behind, expressed through photographs in both novels, prevents the diasporic Aunties and Uncles from being experienced as simply biological extended family. It is the first generation more broadly, not just first-generation parents, who help shape the second-generation child's world. By including the Aunties and Uncles in these novels, the authors also suggest that Aunties and Uncles can be part of what creates a less rigid sense of class, religious, regional, and political identity for the second generation. In both novels, the protagonist's parents have already crossed some social or religious boundaries to be together; in *Anita and Me*, Meena's father is nominally Hindu but also the son of a communist whose "experiences around Partition had removed any lingering religious instincts he might have kept through suspicion or habit" (92), while her mother is a rarely practising Sikh. In *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, the narrator's mother is from a middle-class family from the coast while her father is an impoverished South Vietnamese soldier (103–104). The Aunties and Uncles add another layer of diversity. In *Anita and Me*, this is most clearly demonstrated by the family's musical evening during which the elders discuss Partition while Meena eavesdrops from the stairs. This discussion demonstrates the diasporic nature of the community because the Aunties and Uncles

name the perpetrators of violence against them and their families by their religion, yet call each other sister and brother and share in each other's grief across religious lines (73–75). Very little is revealed about the Uncles in Lê's novel, but even this lack of identification is significant because whatever differences of region, class, religion, or politics may have separated them in Vietnam, they lose their power in the face of surviving and becoming outsiders in American society. Both child narrators make note of these diminishing distinctions. Indeed, the way that ethnic and racial identities change in the site of settlement, partly an effect of the ignorance of American and English neighbours, is explored in both novels, for example, in Lê's description of the navy children's renaming all of the Southeast Asian children "Yang" and in Syal's description of Meena's parents acknowledging that the average English person sees no distinction between them and the next Jamaican fellow on the street.

The most prominent thread between the novels is, of course, their shared emphasis on imagination. Both Lê's narrator and Meena seek to construct a place for themselves and a sense of themselves through an imaginative engagement with the world around them. While their circumstances are vastly different, especially because of Meena's much safer and more stable home life, the two girls navigate their marginalization, overdetermination, and their loneliness through an imaginative apprehension of the world. Sometimes this takes the form of externalizing complex inner conflicts, as in Lê's narrator's experience with the butterfly paperweight, or Meena's reconstruction of her parents' early relationship, and at other times imagination allows each narrator a sense of futurity beyond their current circumstances, as in Lê's narrator's projection of her parents' future relationship and Meena's imaginings of her future fame. The texts both assert their narrators' agency and balance their aching uncertainty with a continuous desire to reach for freedom and self-definition. The multidirectional nature of each

girl's life shapes her growth, and neither text allows for a simple celebration of American or British or Vietnamese or Indian "culture," instead emphasizing the unstable nature of each of these categories and the complexity of combining them.

Finally, neither novel allows the reader a great deal of access to the narrator's adult life, revealing only fleeting views, thus emphasizing possibility rather than certainty. The theme of coming of age, these novels suggest, is best explored in literature as a process, eschewing an end-point that suggests a coherent, independent identity in favour of a long-ranging view of subject formation that is constantly reworked over time. The novels themselves are identified as part of this process, as each narrator's investment in storytelling is marked as part of the way that they come to understand what has and continues to shape them as people and as artists. Their position as the children of migrants clearly plays a significant role, as their exploration of intergenerational relationships suggests. As in the other two novels examined in this dissertation, intergenerational relationships and their emotional, social, and political implications in these texts are a powerful force that connects the past, the present, and the future for the second generation.

Myth, memory, and history are clearly central concerns of both David Chariandy's *Soucouyant* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and despite their different styles, there are some significant similarities in how they address these complex and compelling concepts. Both novels reject a "culture clash" narrative and instead mobilize beliefs and practices from places of origin and of settlement that are considered cultural in a way that emphasizes their political and personal nature. In this way, even though traditional mythologies are invoked, the ways that these mythologies function in the ancestral homeland and in the site of settlement demonstrate that myths serve specific purposes that can change when people migrate. Moreover,

the myths that permeate the site of settlement are shown to be just as active, imagined, and purposeful as those myths that are more obviously designated as such.

Soucouyant is generally critical of Canada's myths, particularly of the discourse of liberal multiculturalism and the kind of Canadian identity that is celebrated during the Heritage Day parade. While *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is more positively disposed to the Western mythologies of speculative fiction and fantasy, the novel does not pretend that they exist outside of the white supremacy that permeates the wider society. After his near-death experience in the Dominican Republic, Oscar rereads *The Lord of the Rings*, which is "one of his greatest loves and greatest comforts since he'd first discovered it, back when he was nine and lost and lonely and his favorite librarian had said, Here, try this, and with one suggestion changed his life" (307). As with the narrator of *Soucouyant*, a librarian has an incredible effect on his life and, similarly, what the librarian provides is a double-edge sword. This time, he "got through almost the whole trilogy, but then the line 'and out of Far Harad black men like half-trolls' and he had to stop, his head and heart hurting too much" (307). Fantasy is an escape but a perilous one; although here Oscar is reading the trilogy for "what I'm estimating the millionth time" (307), in this moment he does not have the wherewithal to ignore the racist elements of the text that he has, presumably, previously been able to sublimate enough to gain the comfort that these books have hitherto provided him. Oscar can relate to the outcasts and the downtrodden characters who appear in his books but few, if any, can reflect him back to himself. In *Soucouyant*, the language of history must be supplemented by the language of myth, and in *Oscar Wao*, the mythical languages of fantasy and SF must be supplemented by explicitly anti-colonial mythical languages.

Both novels make clear that the transmission of memory, myth, and history are not always intentional. In particular, the second-generation characters in *Soucouyant* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* seem to inherit postmemories, as theorized by Marianne Hirsch. Yet it is not only memories that they inherit; they also inherit something even less formed and tangible. The narrator of *Soucouyant* states, “At a crucial and early point in my life, something seeped into me. (Is that how to explain it?) Some mood or manner was transmitted, though my parents tried their utmost to prevent this from happening...I couldn’t always produce the feelings that were expected of me, or else translate my thoughts into meaningful statements” (101). This passage makes clear that the intangible legacy of his immigrant parents is more visceral than memory, it is affect. Such a feeling might be termed “postaffect,”²⁸ analogous to Hirsch’s concept but delving deeper into the emotional nature of inherited trauma. While Hirsch’s work addresses the emotional aspects of postmemory, it does not address those inheritances that could not even be termed memory but are rather more amorphous and unspecific. Even before Adele’s traumatic memories seep out, her emotional scars have already been transferred to her sons. Oscar and Lola are also inheritors of their mother’s affective legacy; in the particularly non-linear fashion of the novel, Yunion describes how Beli, “like her yet-to-be-born daughter, would come to exhibit a particularly Jersey malaise – the inextinguishable longing for elsewhere” (78), and Oscar inherits his mother’s ruinous desire for love. Yet both children find out the full story of their mother’s experience only near the end of her and Oscar’s lives.

Espiritu points out that silence is not simply the absence of speaking in the contexts of families who are affected by war and trauma: “As complex and subtle as spoken language, silence, as a language of family, can protect and cherish and/or deny and control” (147). Both

²⁸ Coined by Vinh Nguyen in private conversation.

Adele in *Soucouyant* and Beli in *Oscar Wao* employ silence for myriad purposes but cannot help but fail at maintaining silences because of the mental and physical after-effects/affects of their own suffering. Significantly, in both novels the central women have very complex relationships to the memories and experiences that shaped them but from which they want to distance themselves. The choices and desires of both women mark them not as simply victims but rather as implicated in their own pain. Adele's flick of the lighter causes both her and her mother's physical and emotional scarring (Chariandy 192), which makes her experience all the more traumatic and unspeakable. Beli's desire to be loved and to have power after her early childhood of neglect, and in the context of a dictatorship that exalts violent masculinity, leads her to choose to become involved with powerful older men with whom it is impossible to have equitable relationships. Beli's extreme youth when she makes these choices is noted in the text, but Díaz refuses to deny her agency, even as he demonstrates the toxic and coercive context that compels her choices. In relation to stories of wartime affairs, Espiritu points out that "these stories about 'personal transgressions' and everyday-ness of wartime remind us that, even in the midst of war [or, in the context of *Oscar Wao*, I argue, violent dictatorship], people are always more than victims of their circumstances; they are also desiring subjects with both simple and complex needs and wants" (156). In histories of WWII and Trujillo's dictatorship, women like Adele and Beli barely merit a mention, but Chariandy and Díaz bring them into the centre of these events, presenting readers with desiring subjects whose children inherit their desiring nature, and whose invocation of mythical figures help to shape the meaning of their lives. Rather than reinserting these characters into history, a site that might be too unforgiving and essentially disinterested in the spiritual survival of oppressed people to house their stories, these two novels use the

language of myth to represent these women and their children in a manner both ethical and meaningful.

Adele and Beli are not absolved of the ways that they make their children suffer, but the reasons behind their difficult natures are, for the reader if not always for the second-generation characters, portrayed with empathy and understanding. The texts recognize how the women's traumas spill over to the next generation despite their efforts to escape them. Beli is an undoubtedly difficult mother; she is an "Old World Dominican mother," which means that it was "her duty to keep [Lola] crushed under her heel" (Díaz 55). She verbally abuses Lola and is "that kind of mother: who makes you doubt yourself, who would wipe you out if you let her" (Díaz 56). She regularly reinforces the patriarchal standards that ruined her own life, hoping that Lola will inherit her "train-wrecking secondary sex characteristics" (Díaz 52). Adele is not a mean mother in the same way as Beli is, but her condition and her refusal to acknowledge it causes her children a great deal of anguish. Despite the harsh and even violent aspects of their parenting, the novels affirm the centrality of witnessing parents' struggles to second-generation life and identity. It is no coincidence that both mothers must die before the novels' ends. There can be no projection to the future while they are living.

Despite the harsh reality of Chariandy's and Diaz's texts, both women do experience moments of reconciliation with their pasts through a reconnection with the women who raised them. In Adele's case, this is portrayed through her return to Carenage with the narrator as a young boy (Chariandy 115-117) and particularly the narrator's memory of mother and daughter holding hands on the beach, the final remembrance of the novel (Chariandy 196). For Beli, reconciliation comes when she and La Inca pray for Oscar to survive his injuries after he is almost beaten to death (Díaz 301). Both Adele's and Beli's moments of reconciliation with their

mother figures are marked by silence. No words are exchanged between Adele and her mother in their moment of intimacy. Even as La Inca and Beli re-enact the prayers that La Inca once offered for Beli herself after her own beating, “if they noticed the similarities between Past and Present they did not speak of it” (301). Neither of these events takes place at the end of the characters’ lives; they are not deathbed reconciliations that wash away the past but rather moments of connection for characters whose suffering permeates their respective texts.

All four texts also highlight the significance of non-migrant grandparent figures. Along with Adele’s mother and La Inca, Nanima in Syal’s novel plays a significant role in Meena’s coming of age despite their differences in language. In lê’s novel, the grandparents are physically absent throughout but their presence in a photograph has great emotional resonance. When the family receives pictures of them, which the narrator describes as the time “when we moved my grandparents in” (94), the narrator helps her mother place them in the attic of their home. Her mother tells her, “they had come to live with us, and sometimes you don’t need to see or touch people to know they’re there” (lê 94). The grandparents’ presence is symbolic; they are present but not visible. When the family’s house is being bulldozed, Ma realizes that the pictures are still in the attic and she becomes deeply upset, telling Ba, “Take me back! [...] I can’t go with you. I’ve forgotten my mother and father. I can’t believe...Ahn Minh, we’ve left them to die. Take me back” (97-98). The loss of the grandparents’ photos relives the loss of migration.

While the need for intergenerational understanding, if not reconciliation, is present in the texts, the need for intragenerational connection is even more important for the second-generation subjects. The relationships among the second-generation characters are difficult and dangerous but ultimately productive. Yuniór and Lola cannot love each other the way that they need to in order to have a functional romantic relationship, but their relationship is nevertheless the

imaginary catalyst for the whole novel; if they had not dated, Yuniior would not have entered their lives and would not have written the story of Oscar's brief, wondrous life. Yuniior, Lola, and Oscar are all, at times, terrible to each other, and Yuniior in particular is frequently a poor friend or boyfriend to both siblings, but their connection sustains them, as for all of Yuniior's faults, he is always there when Oscar is in trouble or when the family needs him, even if he is simultaneously sleeping around. The relationship between the unnamed narrator of *Soucouyant* and Meera begins with lies and silences, and their childhood proximity is a source of pain rather than comfort. They hurt each other throughout the text. Yet their coming together at the end of the novel, however provisional and undefined their relationship, suggests that their mutual support is what makes the turn to the future possible.

In the homeland, myth is used to make sense of history, but for the second generation, it creates a bridge between history and parental or personal memory. This bridge allows second-generation characters to come to terms with the chasms between the official narratives, familial experiences, and communal identities that orient their lives. Having done so, they are able to move forward into an uncertain but nevertheless promising future, one that has broken from cycles of the past. In *Soucouyant*, this moving requires getting rid of everything, except for memories; the future is grounded in the coming together, however provisionally, of two second-generation characters whose differences in class background and racialization previously kept them apart. In *Oscar Wao*, Yuniior's hope that Oscar's sister can raise a daughter who is not subject to the violence experienced by her foremothers is one of the ways that the ending of the text is future focused. However, as in *Soucouyant*, the future still requires that memories be preserved and passed on. This need is made tangible by the novel itself as an imaginary document of the complex intersection of memory, myth, and history that, through being

narrativized, accepts the unknowability of the past while maintaining the past's necessary role in the construction of the future. The novel asserts the way that active and self-conscious meaning-making about the past allows resistance to the imposition of official narratives that sanitize, streamline, and mythologize history in the Barthian sense. Both novels are invested in the workings of memory and history for the second generation, as the second generation is separated from the places and spaces where the events that shaped their parents' and their own lives took place, and myth serves as an important means of connecting to those elsewhere imaginatively. By engaging with the past through myth, these novels resist the ways that official or even counter-histories overdetermine the characters' understanding of the past and are able to recast the memories, whether freely shared or suppressed, of the first generation in productive ways that open up rather than foreclose upon the future.

While the African-diasporic context of Diaz's and Chariandy's novels make them particularly suited to a reading grounded in Wilson Harris's conceptualization of history, *lê* and Syal's novels also mobilize myth in ways that are in keeping with Harris's emphasis on the relationship between myth and imagination. This is most obviously signaled in Syal's novel from the very prologue, which states, "I'm really not a liar, I just learned very early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong" (Syal 10). Here, as in Diaz's and Chariandy's novels, what history cannot provide, mythology can. In *lê*'s novel, folkloric beliefs about water play an important symbolic role in the representation of the narrator's brother's death and the family's migration. All four texts mobilize imagination as a key aspect of survival.

Syal's "turn to mythology" suggests that myth-making and imagining are activities that arise from the same impulse: to make sense of the world or to imagine it otherwise than it is in

order to exercise some agency over it. Just as I have argued that Dominicans' use of myth to understand Trujillo in *Oscar Wao* and Adele's use of myth to transform her own experience in *Soucouyant* both mobilize myth to "tilt the field of civilization" (Harris 50), Syal and lê's protagonists also actively and imaginatively narrativize their lives as a form of resistance to outside forces that would marginalize, segregate, and willfully misunderstand. In both novels, imagination serves as a form of self-protection; for Meena, this includes her habit of making up stories about her ancestry to manipulate her teachers and schoolmates (Syal 28), and for lê's narrator, this is most explicitly and beautifully explored through her projection of her anxieties onto the butterfly paperweight. The analogy produced by lê's narrator between herself, her father, and the uncles and the encased butterfly reflects the connection that Harris makes between myth and metaphor; the story she ascribes to the butterfly helps her to understand herself within the novel and creates, for readers, a deeply affecting image of the experience of feeling trapped. Thus, the episode with the butterfly comes to serve as a sort of fable for the experiences of the narrator and her family (by blood and by water).

Second-generation-focused texts often question the psychological value of being accepted by the nation even as they are cognizant of the incredible social and political value of citizenship. National belonging is revealed to be both desirable and repulsive because gaining access to the nation-state's power structure and institutions often requires a performance of not only the "right" kind of national identity but also the "right" kind of ethnic identity. Song-and-dance multiculturalism, as critiqued by Himani Banerjee among others, means that second-generation subjects must perform their ethnic identities in ways that do not threaten the idea of the nation-state as plural and benevolent. This expectation, coupled with second-generation characters' rejections of negative dynamics in their own ethnic communities, means an

uncomplicated turn to ancestral cultures is no solution to second-generation alienation. In all four texts, this tension is present. Both intracommunal and extracommunal forces try to define for the second generation not only the right way to be American, Canadian, or British, but also the right way to be Indian, Vietnamese, Trinidadian, and Dominican. The intersection between these ethnic identities and gender play a particularly significant role in all four texts, as central to their characters' experiences of racialization. This dynamic is part of why it was important to include texts that focus on both male and female protagonists, and the gendered nature of second-generation positionality requires further attention in future projects.

While the topic of gender has been present throughout this dissertation, it has not been the primary focus. Nevertheless, I want to provide some preliminary thoughts on this subject in relation to these texts and, particularly, about these texts in relation to each other because of the way that gender is intrinsically tied to the process of subject formation. The importance of gender to these texts is best explored through comparison, which is why this discussion takes place here rather than in the previous sections. All four explicitly explore how ideas of normative gendered behaviour can restrain the creativity, growth, and happiness of their second-generation protagonists. As discussed in the first section of this dissertation, in Syal's novel, this is explored through the ways that Meena is made to feel ungainly and unfeminine in comparison to her mother, too wild and tomboyish in comparison to her second-generation peers, and sexually undesirable by her white British peers. Meena fails at being an acceptable girl to both her ethnic and national communities, and this failure alternates between causing her to rebel and causing her to shrink into herself. In Lê's novel, the admonishments of the narrator's mother reinforce the containment of girls, and the familial violence that she experiences places her between the danger at home and the institutions which she finds insufficiently equipped to understand her

context. The ways that gender expectations can negatively shape second-generation experience is also present in the texts that focus on male subjectivities.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the inherent violence of patriarchy is presented as detrimental to both girls and boys. Lola's fraught relationship with her mother is addressed, but so too are the ways that Dominican and American masculinity negatively shape the lives of both Oscar and Yunió. Yunió notes that Oscar's attempts at masculinity are neither vigorous nor successful: "He tried a couple of times to exercise, leg lifts, sit-ups, walks around the block in the early morning, that sort of thing, but he would notice how everybody else had a girl but him and would despair, plunging right back into eating, *Penthouse*, designing dungeons, and self-pity" (Diaz 25). Here masculinity is characterized by physical strength and the ability to attract women, and Oscar has neither. His inability to perform violent masculinity in particular is explicit throughout; when his mother tells him to slap a girl to make her respect him, he does not do it, and Yunió claims that "it wasn't just that he didn't have no kind of father to show him the masculine ropes, he simply lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies" (15). Indeed, from the first page of the first chapter, Oscar is set up as outside of Dominican masculinity; his lack of luck with the "females" is described as "*very un-Dominican of him*" (11). Yunió highlights the difference between Oscar and himself, stating, "perhaps if like me he'd been able to hide his otakuness, maybe shit would have been easier for him, but he couldn't...Couldn't have passed for Normal if he'd wanted to" (21).²⁹ Yunió, unlike Oscar, is very good at attracting women (if not so adept at keeping them) and enacting an aggressive, slick form of masculinity that he characterizes as specifically Dominican. Oscar's failure at Dominican masculinity is noted throughout the text and is a large part of what makes his life difficult, but Yunió's comparative

²⁹ *Otaku* is a Japanese word adopted by nerds the world over to describe fans of a specific niche interest who are excessively knowledgeable about it, often to a degree that makes them socially unskilled.

success at masculinity is revealed to be just as detrimental, in a different way. By demonstrating that both failing at and fulfilling gender roles is detrimental to the characters' wellbeing, the novel resists reinstating the importance of adhering to traditional masculinities; masculinity is revealed to be a lose-lose situation, wherein failing at it makes one ostracized but succeeding at it makes one incapable of honest human connection. In an interview on the topic of decolonial love, Junot Diaz makes a significant point about the nature of representing problematic masculine characters in comments on his book of short stories, *Drown*, which is also narrated by Yuniors: "In *Drown* as a whole, the million-dollar question is this: are Yuniors' gender politics, his generalizations and misogyny, rewarded in the book's 'reality'? Do they get him anything in the end?" Diaz concludes that the answer to this question is no: "it appears to me that Yuniors' ideas about women, and the actions that arise out of these ideas, always leave him more alone, more thwarted, more disconnected from his community and from himself" (Moya n.p.). The relevance of Diaz's insight is that when interpreting the representation of a character's potentially problematic romantic or sexual behaviour, attending to the results of such behaviour is just as significant as the behaviour itself.

The complexity of how socially inscribed gender roles are projected onto and embodied by second-generation subjects is also explored in *Soucouyant*, most prominently in the scene in which a group of white boys coerce Meera and the narrator's older brother to kiss on the way home from school, driven by "a floating notion of what a black boy and girl should be willing to do" (Chariandy 159). Significantly, the narrator, here representing Meera's perspective of events, notes that "the older son of the wandering lady could have fought them off. He could have done something to resist, but he didn't. He pecked Meera once with hard lips, their noses bumping" (159). She remembers "the almost perfect circuit of desire and complicity that suddenly emerged

between these boys of different races” (159); in this moment, the shared masculinity of the older brother and the white boys produces a connection between them even as the older brother is also being sexualized against his will. It does not last. They then goad the boy into molesting her, and while she does not actively resist, she does “whisper ‘nigger’ to the older boy, a private message just for him” and feels “a small shiver of pleasure by the water that rimmed his eyes and never hers” (159). The reminder of his racialization and his subordinate position to the other boys undermines whatever superior position he might feel in relation to her by gaining access to her body. Meera does not feel able to resist the white boys, but she does know that she has the power to hurt the older brother, even if doing so means perpetuating her own dehumanization. As Yuniør points out in *Oscar Wao*, “no one, alas, [is] more oppressive than the oppressed” (Diaz 22). Thus, while I did not focus on the coming-of-age elements of *Soucouyant* and *Oscar Wao* in my reading of them, both novels are very invested in exploring how subject formation is inflected by the intersections between race, gender, and sexuality.

The popular discourse about second-generation subjects is that they are “caught between two worlds,” as if the solution is to choose one world to which they can fully commit or as if they simply cannot access one or the other. The texts analyzed in this dissertation and others like them make clear that the multiple worlds (rarely simply two) that second-generation subjects inhabit are not simply inaccessible and that a choice between them is impossible because no single one of these worlds contains what the second generation wants or needs. A turn to the past is needed to contextualize the present, but the future cannot be bounded by the constraints of the past, whether the past of the ancestral homeland or the past of the site of settlement. The discomfort of the present moment becomes an impetus to imagine a different future, even if such a future is hazy and perilous. Even as the two coming-of-age novels contain a future already in

so far as the adult narrators are living the future of the girls whose lives they are narrating, the opaque nature of those adult lives allows the stories to maintain a sense of open-endedness so that the future remains a site of imagination rather than a fully formed picture. In the novels that foreground myth, an imaginative engagement with the past is translated into an imaginative projection towards the future, where a new balance between the forces of memory, history, and myth can be formed. In all of the texts, the turn to the future both acknowledges the power of current racial and national dynamics in the lives of the second generation and rejects the notion that these dynamics can fully determine the future. The authors identify the realm of cultural production as a space wherein the afterlife of migration can be represented as complex, ongoing, and fertile.

In keeping with this project's investment in the future, I would like to consider future applications and directions for this research as I bring this dissertation to a close. This project has argued that a comparative, transnational, and cross-ethnic approach to analyzing second-generation-focused literary production can demonstrate the ways that second-generation positionality crosses boundaries, denaturalizing national borders and essentialist notions about ethnic and racial identities. I have made this argument through the analysis of novels, but future projects would benefit greatly from a consideration of other forms of cultural production. Across the same three national contexts that this project explores, plays like Ayub Khan Din's "East is East," Ins Choi's "Kim's Convenience," the oeuvre of Catherine Hernandez, Ayad Akhtar's "Disgraced," and Lin-Manuel Miranda's "In the Heights," to name but a few, are ripe for exploration and comparison. The world of television is also currently ripe for comparative analysis, as shows like *Master of None*, *Fresh Off the Boat*, and *Jane the Virgin* foreground

second-generation positionality and intergenerational relationships in far more complex ways than did their predecessors.

To turn to concerns of theme, this conclusion has highlighted that issues of gender are a significant area of concern for second-generation-focused writing. The gendered nature of migration carries over into the experiences of the second generation, and multiple systems of gender expectations come into play in the lives of second-generation subjects. The exploration of this theme is central to Ninh's monograph, often cited in this dissertation, and projects extending her form of analysis to other ethnic communities and national contexts could further develop the implications of the creditor-debtor relationship between immigrant parent and second-generation child. My exploration of the theme of myth in this dissertation suggests that a project focused specifically on the ways that spirituality and religion function in second-generation writing could be very rich. It would be particularly interesting to consider texts that depict more coherent religious traditions, such as the representation of Christianity in Chang Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* or the exploration of Islam and the Jehovah's Witnesses in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Bringing into conversation texts such as *White Teeth* and Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For* that directly explore the kind of cross-ethnic solidarities and connections that this dissertation tries to model would be a productive way to consider how second-generation positionality can produce communities that exemplify the new ethnicities that Stuart Hall described.

This project has been largely concerned with the representation of second-generation experience in texts that centre that experience, but one might also focus on how texts such as Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, the works of M.G. Vassanji, and Laleh Khadivi's *The Walking* deal with the second generation from the perspective of the first generation. Such a project might also demonstrate how the first and second generation constitute each other, as I have argued. In this

particular historical moment, when the precarity of immigrant and second-generation belonging has once again become highly visible through sociopolitical events like Brexit, the rise in anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States both on the political stage and in the streets through direct violence and intimidation, and the passage of the *Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act* among other legislation in Canada that increases the possibility of people having their citizenship revoked, the need for imagining other, more ethical futures is great. The critique of the idea of the benevolent nation-state as well as the need to form human and humane connections across difference at the heart of much second-generation-focused fiction offers the opportunity to readers of all backgrounds to see the creative possibilities of non-belonging and of minding and mining the past without being beholden to it, and to turn towards the future with an imaginative and collaborative attitude.

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