Listen to the Voices: Immigrant Fiction Re-Considered

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Abstract:

This essay invites a broad overview of immigrant fiction in an era that mocks the social mobility and easy assimilation promised by the American Dream. Attentive reading of immigrant fiction enables us to understand challenges and barriers – topics that recur in immigrant fiction across ethnicity/country of origin. I argue for revision of the traditional paradigm that in the immigrant novel a "hero"/protagonist arrives, after some bumps in the road and modification of expectations, at the desired destination. Today, immigrants face formidable barriers: entry may be denied, the immigrant may be expelled; even if the immigrant can stay, assimilation may be unhappy due to economic stress, social isolation, un(or under)employment, discrimination, or emotional suffering. Immigrant stories reflect lived experience: difficulties with language acquisition and acculturation; inter-generational tension; patriarchal domination often associated with domestic violence; difficulties in assimilation.

Keywords: immigration, fiction, domestic abuse, assimilation, inter-generational, hybridity.

This essay invites reconsideration of the genre of contemporary immigrant fiction. I argue that the paradigm that an immigrant is a "hero" who survives "trials" and arrives at assimilation as a goal are outdated in view of institutional and socioeconomic barriers. While immigrants have always faced acculturation challenges, for many immigrants there is a new defensiveness and insecurity related to the current Administration's antipathy to immigrants. Arab Americans and immigrants from Mexico and the Northern Triangle may feel vulnerable or "targeted." Moreover, assimilation is not necessarily the end game, the goal that motivates, or should motivate, immigrants. There has been considerable scholarship on ethnic literature, of which immigrant literature is a sub-set, analyzing fiction and film by specific nationality. This essay proposes a broader view based on the observation that similar themes arise across cultures and countries of origin.

I begin with a review of the major interpretive theories about the genre; in the second part of the essay, I then use short fiction to revise the usual "paradigm" and illustrate current preoccupations that supplement and largely contradict the "American Dream" narrative.[1] This is not a mere scholarly exercise: The concerns repeatedly expressed in contemporary immigrant fiction communicate the challenges that immigrants on entry and in integration.

As a threshold matter, we might consider why it matter to read and reflect on immigrant fiction: what does it contribute that is not available from statistics or true accounts?

Fiction offers a vicarious experience to help the reader live the life of someone else, who may belong to a different ethnicity, nationality, social class, gender, age, or body status. "Outsider" narratives bring to the attention of middle class readers the effect of policies that hinder the emotional or economic aspirations of minorities and "Others." Immigrants by definition are the ultimate outsiders. Often immigrants are outsiders through multiple intersections – they may be nonwhite, poor, gay or transgender. Fiction invites us to understand and even embrace individuals who are different from ourselves, and include them in our social and political lives.

Reflections on the Genre

Immigrant fiction at a minimum involves an act of relocation, departure from one's home to arrival, directly or indirectly, in a new country. The immigrant narrative has a multi-generational reach and is, therefore, a subset of ethnic literature.

William Boelhower's landmark essay offered some characteristics of the genre: An immigrant protagonist "comes to America with great expectations, and through a series of trials is led to reconsider them in terms of his final status" (1981, 6). The trajectory of the American novel involves identification of a hero, his or her journey, and a series of trials. "Hero" is in effect a defined term; he or she are uprooted foreigners, naïve, ignorant of American life, and lacking in English and cultural competence The journey is not only geographic, but a Bildugnsroman in which the immigrant becomes educated so that (s)he will eventually assimilate successfully into American society. The trials require the immigrants not only to master cultural differences to be integrated in the new country but also to distance themselves from their home.

Madelaine Hron has critiqued this model as a "blame the immigrant mentality" (2014, 17). Boelhower's paradigm suggests that the challenges faced by the immigrant

> may be attributed to their deficient social status, their linguistic or social inadequacies, and their cultural differences or the characteristics of their ethic group, rather than being viewed as problems caused by external socioeconomic or political conditions, or alternately, by the hostile environment of their host nations. (2017, 17)

Hron observes that it is "much easier to dismiss the suffering of immigration as a universal or relative phenomenon, rather than to contend with alleviating specific difficulties that immigrants may face" (2017, 18). Further, Boelhower's model has a teleological push that assumes successful arrival or assimilation but there are many narratives that do not confirm to the "myth of success" (2017, 20).

David Cowart identifies recurring themes in immigrant fiction: difficulties in school, especially in learning English; psychological and cultural "doubleness"; exploitation; prejudice; homesickness; eating disorders; inter-generational conflicts; and gradual development of an American identity (2006, 7-8). However, for many immigrants, the United States is relatively

speaking "a promised land," because they have experienced "social, political, and historical horrors" in their country of origin and are grateful for a haven (2006, 207).

Is America really a "promised land" for today's immigrants? Jesse Alemán argues that in a post 9/11 world, immigrants and ethnic others – no matter the status of their green cards or birth certificates – are stigmatized as "barbarians" who "pose a threat to the nation's real citizenry" (2008, 399). Kairos Llobera focuses on fiction about undocumented aliens. "Illegal status adds yet another barrier to the possibility of "attaining the American dream" (2013, 59). To build on Llobera's argument: Undocumented individuals face risk at several stages: in crossing the border; in "passing" as legal to avoid expulsion; in securing employment "under the radar"; in dealing with the threat or reality of deportation. While most immigrants experience nostalgia for their country of origin, over time they or at least their children will "feel American" after a certain period of residence in the U.S. It is more problematic that an undocumented individual will feel socially included in a country from which he has been legally excluded.

Ruth Hsu explores the idea of the American Dream, "a trope that signifies this nation as one that offers limitless opportunity" (1996, 38):

> [T]his is the Promised Land in which anyone who is willing to work hard can see his dreams come true.... "America" is open to all, because it is an inclusive and generous country founded upon the principles of equality, democracy and freedom. What matters in this land are hard work and belief in the fundamental principles that make this country unique in the world. (1996, 38)

Far from being a haven of social mobility and equality, America is a nation of income inequality. On the GINI Index which measures the extent of income inequality, the United States ranks 59th among countries (World Bank 2016).

A second aspect of the American Dream is equally illusory. As Hsu describes the myth:

> In a sense, then, anyone can become an American. The past does not matter; identity is a fluid invention, and America is the place of rebirth, a land in which one may shed old allegiances and Old World notions, or replace one's name and identity with new ones. (1996, 38)

Here again I argue that the current reality refutes this ideal vision. Where one comes from indeed matters greatly. To take three prominent examples: it is virtually impossible to enter the country as a refugee from Syria however one has been vetted; asylum applicants from the Northern Triangle are rebuffed at the southern border; and per country limits indefinitely delay entry for individuals from Mexico, the Philippines, and India who otherwise qualify for visas (Migration Policy Institute, State Department).

We need to remove the rose-colored glasses and examine the obstacles confronted by today's immigrants – obstacles experienced across immigrant groups in the stories discussed below.

Immigrant Fiction: Multiple Challenges; Formidable Barriers

Contemporary immigrant fiction reflects the obstacles that immigrants face. These include, but by no means are limited to: the impact of family separation at the border; pressures to suppress native language and culture; role of patriarchy; domestic violence; inter-generational tension; feelings of hybridity or doubled identity; stereotyping and ethnic bias; resistance to or success in achieving assimilation.

Separation at the Border. It is estimated that over 2800 children have been separated at the border in implementation of the Administration's policy of "zero tolerance" intended to deter illegal immigration (Migration Policy Institute 2018, 2).

Christina Henríquez's "Everything is Far from Here" recounts a woman's vain search for her son who was separated from her during the woman's flight across the southern U.S. border. The "coyote" who led them out separated the men and children from the women. The coyote has taken the narrator to a warehouse, a virtual prison, with no means of locating her child or finding what has become of him. She later meets with a lawyer who reviews whether she meets the "well-founded fear" criterion for asylum. When she tells him she has been raped, he responds in cavalier fashion that "after all, she is pretty" and "boys will be boys" (2017, 54). The woman finds no one to help her locate her son. When she screams in despair, authorities put her solitary confinement, a spider-filled detention box. The woman is punished for no offense; she is a victim, not a criminal. Her neighbor in the adjacent box is a woman who has similarly been confined for no good reason; her only crime was that she threw up. One day the narrator spots a small boy of similar appearance. She grabs the child thinking that it is Gabriel, but instead it is another woman's son. The cruelty of the narrator's predicament is underscored by a lack of sympathy from Americans who picket outside the facility with posters saying, "illegal is a crime" and "send them back with birth control."

This powerful story is focalized on the mother's suffering; the child is the absent center. The mother is anonymous and even her country of origin is unidentified. Following a court ruling, many children have been reunited with their parents (Jordan 2019). Although the separations were traumatic, we can rationalize that in time the families may be able to relive their lives. Henríquez does not palliate the ending; at the end of the story there is no hope of reunification.

*Learning English and Forgetting Native Culture***.** For many immigrants language acquisition is a significant challenge. 57% of lawful immigrant adults are proficient in English, while only 34% of unauthorized immigrants are proficient. (Pew "U.S. Unauthorized Immigrants" 2019).

Despite high levels of education, 61% of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. ages five and over report limited English proficiency, compared to 49% of the total foreign born population (Pew 2017). Ken Liu's science fiction story, "Paper Menagerie," illustrates the inter-generational strains between a Chinese immigrant mother and her American-born son.[2] A young boy enjoys playing with origami animals that his mother creates for him. The story is embellished by magical realism: it is the mother's love that transforms animals made from wrapping paper into wonderful animated creatures. When the bonds of love are severed, the animals are degraded to garbage.

As a boy of ten, Jack overhears some neighbors commenting critically on his "Chinesey appearance," eyes and face that don't seem "right" (2011, 67). A classmate makes fun of the paper tigers and calls them "trash" (2011, 68). Jack is bothered by difference, and wants to associate with his American father; he insists on speaking only English at home, and eating American food. He rejects the paper menagerie in favor of Star Wars toys. His mother's English is so limited and embarrassing that she turns to mime; communication with Jack comes to a halt. Jack is ashamed that his father purchased his mother from the pages of a catalog. Jack blames his mother, not the situation in China: "What kind of woman puts herself into a catalog so that she can be bought?" (2011, 65). Jack's mother then dies suddenly and unexpectedly from a cancer that was too advanced to treat.

As an adult, two years after his mother's death, Jack comes across an old shoebox containing the paper menagerie. Only then does he come to appreciate the love and caring that went into his nurture and specifically into the animals that she created. He also finds a moving letter in which his mother describes her love for him and why she left China. During the Cultural Revolution she found herself friendless and abused:

> Son, I know that you do not like your Chinese eyes, which are my eyes. I know that you do not like your Chinese hair, which is my hair. But can you understand how much joy your very existence brought to me? And can you understand how it felt when you stopped talking to me and won't let me talk to you in Chinese? I felt I was losing everything all over again. Why won't you talk to me, son? The pain makes it hard to write. (2011, 76)

Too late the son appreciates the circumstances that led her to immigrate and regrets his failure even to talk to his mother, much less to thank her.

In Lan Samantha Chang's "Unforgetting" (1998), a couple's determination to abandon Mandarin and suppress their Chinese roots is all too successful. The parents immigrate at great cost: the father who wanted to be a scientist becomes a repairman for Xerox copiers. Ming's occupation is fitting, in effect he seeks to fashion his son into an imaginary replica of an ideal American. When a teacher tells the parents that their young son's English is substandard they resolve to stop speaking Chinese at home. As a teen-ager Charles thrives in school. But in a significant moment he closes the door on his father, a physical separation that reflects emotional estrangement. The boy is frustrated by his parents' inability to tell him anything about his Chinese culture; in an effort to Americanize their child they have deprived him of the roots and history that he craves. Ming has forgotten so much about China that he can't remember when Charles asks him about the economic circumstances that led a prior generation to come to America and work on railroads. Ming's wife is equally unhappy: tired of cooking Betty Crocker recipes, she yearns for Chinese food and relives meals that she and Ming prepared in China. The couple switches from English back to Mandarin as they debate the decisions that led them to lose the affection of their son. The son is accepted at Harvard but because he has become a stranger alienated from his own family, the parents experience

no joy from the success that had initially been their goal. The cost of acculturation has been too high; what appears a successful assimilation is a failure.

Patriarchal Control. The problem of patriarchy has been tacked in many immigration stories, across ethnicities. Gloria Anzaldúa has written about the double bind that confronts Mexican-American (c*hicana*) women in the United States:

> We shudder in separate cells in enclosed cities, shoulders hunched ... daily drinking shock along with our morning coffee...Shutting down. Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey. (1987, 42)

In Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, many women are confined as *ventaneras*, those who sit by the window all day because their fathers or husbands don't allow them to leave. An example is Rafaela, whose husband locks her in their apartment while he goes out to poker games; she is too beautiful to be allowed on the streets. Another *ventanera i*s Sally, who married in the eighth grade to escape her father's tyrannical restrictions, but her new husband is even worse. Sally is not allowed to use the telephone or even to look out of the window. All she can do is to look at the towels, toasters, alarm clock, drapes and the linoleum roses on the floor. These vignettes are narrated by a young girl full of hope, fittingly named Esperanza, who longs to escape the confines of Mango Street. Two women encourage her to continue her writing and win her freedom: Minerva, who writes poems although trapped in an abusive marriage, and her Aunt Lupe, an older woman who is dying. Esperanza will eventually "say goodbye to Mango," without forgetting "the ones I left behind," the women who cannot leave (1991, 110).

The Nigerian-American writer Chinamanga Adichie describes a very different but equally pernicious form of patriarchal control. Women in Nigeria are socioeconomically politically disempowered, and culturally assigned to subordinate roles (Kalunta-Crumpton 2013, 224-25). These hierarchies carry over after immigration and define their marital relations and intimate partner conflicts in the U.S.

In "New Husband," Chinaza's uncle arranges for her to emigrate to the U.S. and marry a fellow countryman who is purportedly a doctor, but in fact a poorly-paid intern. The new husband has changed his name from Odofile to Dave. Everything about him is false. "Dave" forces Chinaza to change every aspect of her identity. Not only does he compel Chinaza to call herself Agatha but he requires only American cooking, American slang, and American habits. He lectures Chinaza on how to succeed in America, notwithstanding his own financial difficulties. Chinaza's friend and neighbor reveals that she had previously had a brief fling with her new husband. It turns out that "Dave" is concealing an even greater falsehood: he is not yet divorced; thus her marriage is illegal. But Chinaza is trapped; her aunt and uncle don't want her back and unemployment is rife in Nigeria. Chinaza's inability to exit her spurious marriage reflects her precarious immigration status. Lacking an independent basis for a green card, she is going to have to abide a distasteful marriage and suppress her husband's bigamy.

Domestic Violence. Domestic violence is a recurrent theme in immigrant literature, as reflected in stories involving the Latino, Nigerian, and Arab-American communities.[3]

Undocumented Latina immigrants represent a subgroup that is more vulnerable to domestic violence. A survey of Latina immigrants in the D.C. area found that 49.3% reported physical abuse by an intimate partner during their lifetimes, 11.4% reported sexual abuse (Hass *et al.* 2000, 106-09). Unlawful status is a major obstacle when attempting to escape domestic violence. 72.3% of abusive citizen or resident spouses have never filed immigration documentation to legalize the status of their abused spouses (Espino-Piepp, 2018, 352). U.S. Citizen or Permanent Resident spouses threaten to deport undocumented wives and children. Escape is also deterred by cultural barriers, "expectations by other members in their community to keep the family together and protect it from shame" (2018, 352).

In Cisneros's "Women Hollering Creek," a young Mexican woman grows up in Mexico under the protection of a loving father. However, Cleófilas, romantic and starry-eyed, marries a young man who takes her across the border to Según, Texas. The marriage proves disastrous; her husband beats her until she spits blood. At first Cléofilas resolves to hide her bruises and pretend she was injured in a fall. Typically the women in the community passively accept their fate. For example, two of her neighbors, Soledad and Dolores, are, as their names suggest, solitary and mournful women. They spend their time grieving for husbands who have left them, never to return. After discovering evidence that her husband is unfaithful, Cleófilas finds comfort in visiting a creek near her home, known as *La Gritona*, "Woman Hollering Creek." The name of the creek evokes the legend of *La Llorona*, a mother who weeps for the children she has drowned in response to her husband's infidelities (Almería 2010, 67). On the banks of the creek, Cleófilas awakes to the extent of her danger and decides to save herself and her child. She bonds with a bold and unusual woman, Felice (husband), a woman so extraordinary that she lives without a man and drives her own pick-up truck. With Felice's help, Cleófilas escapes with her child back across the border. She is transformed from a "wailing woman" to a "hollering woman." When Cleófilas crosses the creek to return to her home in Mexico, Felice hollers out a loud yell. For Cleófilas, this yell represents a woman shouting her joy, a new-found self-assertion. The story celebrates successful resistance, an escape achieved by female solidarity as well as Cleófilas's own courage.

Muslim-American communities also face a heightened risk of domestic abuse. Surveys suggest that ten to twenty percent of Muslim women are victims of physical violence each year, as against seven percent of the general population of American women (Finigan 2010, 144).

> Muslim-American women face numerous cultural pressures that discourage reporting of domestic abuse... Some of these pressures – language barriers preventing effective communication with law enforcement – are shared with many immigrant communities. However, other pressures – such as religious texts that cast doubt on domestic violence even being a crime, cultural pressure to be loyal to one's husband, and reluctance to exacerbate existing stereotypes about Muslim-American men – are especially prevalent in Muslim-American communities. (2010, 144)

In "Sand and Fire" by Lila Halaby, a young teen-ager, born in California, is divided between her American identity and her Palestinian origin. One of Khadija's problems is her name: "In America my name sounds like someone throwing up or falling off a bicycle. If they can get the first part of it right, the "Kha" part, it comes out like clearing your throat after eating ice cream" (2003, 36). A more serious problem relates to excessive parental control. She insists that she an American, not a Palestinian, which outrages her mother. Her mother lectures her daughters about the importance of virginity; to lose it is shameful and would make her unmarriageable. However, Khadija's major problem is with her father.

> Sometimes my father loves my mother – and the rest of us – so much that he becomes a kissing and hugging machine. Sometimes, though, he is an angry machine that sees suspicious moves in every breath. But most of the time he is sad, his thoughts somewhere I cannot visit. (2003, 37)

Khadija's mother shares many of her husband's views and is generally compliant and subservient, but that does not prevent her from being beaten. Her father's alcoholism precipitates a crisis: he pours alcohol down his daughter's gullet and then accuses Khadija of drinking.

> I remained where I was, but the fire went from my belly to his eyes and he pulled me by the arm and then by the ear and dragged me into the kitchen where my mother was cutting vegetables.
> "Oh Mother of Shit," he called to her. "Your little dog of a daughter has been drinking. Smell her mouth." (...)
> I screamed and screamed and finally got free and ran to my room. I opened the closet and closed the door behind me and prayed to God the fire would burn somewhere else. (2003, 38-39)

The father is not very specific about his complaints against the United States, although he is disappointed in his job as a mechanic at a service station.

The father blames his violence on his immigration experience:

> My father has many dreams that have been filled with sand. That's what he tells me: "This country has taken my dreams that used to float like those giant balloons, and filled them with sand. Now they don't float, and you can't even see what they are anymore"... "My ache comes from losing my home." (2003, 37, 39)

There is no excuse for her father's egregious behavior and no escape for his wife or daughter.

Sex and Gender. In many immigrant stories, inter-generational tension arises from dating preference and sexual activity. For example, in Halaby's "Sand and Fire," the parents are concerned, or more accurately obsessed, over their daughter's dating habits in an effort to preserve her virginity. She is in fact falsely accused of promiscuity when it is Khadija's friend who has been sexually active.

In Achy Obejas's "We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?" (1994), the immigration officer asks the narrator's parents why they left Cuba. The father replies: "We came

for her, so she could have a future" (1994, 113-14). The narrator's mother hopes that her daughter will become "the wife of a boyishly handsome North American man who drinks Pepsi for breakfast" (1994, 117). Although the father wishes for his daughter privileges which would likely be reserved for a son in a patriarchal system (Cooper 2003, 79), his gender views are unyielding and he is appalled by his daughter's lesbian style of dress.

> In 1971 I'll come home for Thanksgiving from Indiana University where I have a scholarship to study optometry. It'll be the first time in months I'll be without an antiwar demonstration to go to, a consciousness-raising group to attend, or a Gay Liberation meeting to lead. (...)
> We left Cuba so you could dress like this? My father will ask over my mother's shoulder.
> And for the first and only time in my life, I'll say, Look, you didn't come for me, you came for you; you came because all your rich clients were leaving, and you were going to wind up a cashier in your father's hardware store if you didn't leave, okay? (1994, 121)

The narrator's mother will rebuke her daughter for rudely responding to her father.

> And I'll say, It's a free country, I can do anything I want, remember? ...And then my father will reach over my mother's thin shoulders, grab me by the red bandanna around my neck, and throw me to the floor, where he'll kick me over and over until all I remember is my mother's voice pleading, Please stop, please, please, please stop. (1994, 121)

Obejas's story is another indication of the thin line between apparently civilized patriarchal control and domestic violence; the father is on edge because he has not only lost control of his daughter as she enters adulthood but finds his heteronormative expectations shattered.

Immigrants' own racism. While it comes as no surprise that immigrants are the victims of racism, recent fiction by Gish Jen illustrates that immigrants often are themselves perpetrators of prejudice based on stereotyping.

In "No More Maybe," a daughter-in-law of Chinese heritage presents her husband's parents in sympathetic terms; it is her duty to protect them. It is as if her mother-in-law "was born inside a box" and "can never really stand up straight" (2018, 78). She is crippled by a disadvantage, through no fault of her own, that prevents her from reaching her full potential. The narrator's father-in-law was a beloved professor and an outstanding scholar when he was young, but now is diminished. He has grown "crazy wild" (2018, 77). When her mother-in law voices a desire to attend free English classes, her father-in-law expresses an irrational fear that "maybe it is a trap," and that the "government here spies on people" to catch illegal immigrants (2018, 77). His fears infect his family: they carry their "visas everywhere" as they keep "a list of places" they should not go to and avoid talking "too much to outside people" (2018, 78).

After her father-in-law accidentally washes their neighbor's car, their neighbor, an African-American, comes over with a cake as a thank you. However, her father-in-law exhibits hostility, and

asks the neighbor Jeff whether the car is really his. Jeff interprets this as a slight, as an implication that he has stolen the car. Inevitably, Jeff pushes back with his own vulgarity by writing "Fucking As" on top of the cake (2018, 83). The family attributes the incident to race hatred: "blacks do not like us" and "they are afraid China is going to surpass America" (2018, 83).

What has gone wrong here? Among other problems, the narrator's family is too insular; they have not sufficient experience with other ethnicities and races. The father-in-law has been venerated – in effect his authority has gone unchecked and his misguided judgments have infected the family.

Among other problems (such as conflating and generalizing among all Asian ethnicities), the "model minority myth" exemplifies a new kind of discrimination: Asian-Americans once were marginalized because of their ethnicity. Now they may be re-marginalized because of their cultural differences including their success (Chou 2008, 222). Asian-American immigrants who occupy an intermediate and insecure status may perceive themselves as superior to other groups. Elaine Kim has cautioned against the kind of racial competitiveness that leads Asian-Americans to be "positioned in a racial hierarchy meant to perpetuate white privilege at the expense of both Asian- and African-Americans" (1998, 4).

Perspectives on Assimilation. Werner Sollors identifies the conflict between consent and descent as the central drama of American culture: "descent" describes an individual's or character's heritage; and "consent" what the individual does as a matter of free choice (1986, 5). There is a conflict between the ancestral legacy and the adoption of new country values. Boelhower describes a tension between "old world pragmatics" – a "culture of the past, tradition, organicism, collectivism, class theory of society, etc." versus "new world pragmatics" – a "culture of the present and the future, myth, mechanism and industrialism, social mobility, radical individualism" (1982, 47-48).

Some immigrants fail to assimilate because their nostalgia for their home country is too great, and they lack the skills to integrate into their new country. In Jumpha Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's," an Indian woman trails her spouse to Boston. She takes care of a young American boy whose mother is casual and neglectful. Mrs. Sen feeds Eliot snacks, and love: "As they walked back from the bus stop she produced a sandwich bag from her pocket, and offered Eliot the peeled wedges of an orange, or lightly salted peanuts, which she had already shelled" (1999, 119). In contrast, Eliot's mother phones for pizza every night; she sits "at the table as he ate, drinking more wine and asking how his day was, but eventually she went to the deck to smoke a cigarette, leaving Eliot to wrap up the leftovers" (1990, 118). This is a story of reciprocal caregiving: Mrs. Sens nourishes the boy with food and attention; in return, he provides the lonely Indian lady with companionship. For Mrs. Sen, cooking a meal is an art, a source of pride, a time of absorption and care. As she chops the vegetables, Mrs. Sens recalls her life in India with regret: "all the neighborhood women...bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle of the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night" (1999,115). In Boston she has nothing and no one; "everything is there" (in Calcutta) (1999, 113).

Mrs. Sen's husband presses her to drive a car so she can go to the fish market, a most important destination to a woman whose life has centered on cooking. With extreme and almost unimaginable naiveté, Mrs. Sen asks "could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?" (1999, 119). The automobile is the symbol of American mobility; her failure to learn to drive marks a failure to assimilate. Ill-advisedly Mrs. Sen sets off in the car to drive her to the fish market and has an accident. Fortunately they are unhurt physically but Elliot's mother decides to remove her son from Mrs. Sen's care: each of them will return to isolation.

Failure also can occur when an immigrant assimilates all too well, when the pressures to succeed are too great. An example is Sarah, the Palestinian-American figure skater in Alia Yunis's "Girls on Ice." Sarah, the story's absent center is so skilled that she can land the triple axel, and the championship. Beautiful as well as talented, she is the envy of the narrator, her overweight cousin. Her family receives a sudden unexpected shock: the girl with everything has committed suicide: "Yesterday, she became the first Muslim-Palestinian-Arab-Southern California-vegan-left-handed champion skater to kill herself" (2011, no page). No one knows why. Somehow Palestine comes into the conversation: one woman complains that "Instead of killing herself for nothing, she should have gone to Palestine and killed herself for something." The reader surmises that the pressure of needing to win, to be the perfect combination of all-American girl, beautiful and nice, yet loyal to her Palestinian roots was all too much.[4]

Joseph Geha, a Lebanese-American author, addresses the topic of assimilation post 9/11 in "Alone and All Together" (2002, 53). In this story, two sisters confidently identify as American; they were born in Chicago and so were their parents. Yet after the World Trade Center is attacked, they face the stigma of identification as Arab. Libby with blue eyes and light hair "looks American"; her sister Sally who has black, curly hair is yet more insistent on American identity. Libby sees herself as "half in and half out" with a hybrid identity (2002, 51). When the World Trade Center bombings are shown on television, she comments, "I just wish they wouldn't say it's us until, their like, sure" (2002, 53). Libby can "pass" as American; she is grateful for her light complexion when she hears the insults levied at other Arabs. Libby wishes that her friend Jamila would remove her conspicuous hijab, which draws attention and marks her as Muslim. Libby's life of submerging Arab identity changes when she sees bullies attack Jamila's brother and call him a "Raghead" (2002, 50). As she intervenes in his defense, she claims an Arab identity. Sally, meanwhile, has her own transformative experience in New York City. She participates in a candlelight vigil with other women of all nationalities: "We walked to the Promenade. People were praying. They held candles and pictures. Then everyone went quiet… Every one of us… I was alone, and we were all together" (2002, 63).

The title "Alone and All Together" has a double meaning: the two young women understand that they cannot escape the identity that they as Arab-Americans share with Muslims, a shared vulnerability in light of post 9/11 paranoia over terrorism. Perhaps, however, Geha calls for a broader identification among Americans, such as in the New York City vigil, recognizing that although

native-born and immigrant Americans in some sense stand apart, nevertheless they can find themselves standing together.

Conclusion

American opinion is polarized about the desirability of a border wall and the contribution of immigrants. According to a recent poll by the Pew Research Group, 62% of Americans believe that the country's "openness to people from all over America is essential to who we are as a nation but only 37% of Republicans hold that view (Pew "Growing Share of Republicans" 2019).

There are some parallels between narratives written by persons with disabilities and by immigrants. Both disability and immigrant narratives seek to convey the challenge of overcoming institutional barriers. Individuals with medical conditions or disabilities often describe their pain; social and economic challenges; and their sources of emotional support. The act of writing may be therapeutic and/or altruistic in that the authors share their experiences with the general public. Their narratives often point the way to legal and other institutional barriers that need to be removed.

Similarly, immigrant narratives explain the reasons for migration, translate suffering, and communicate the barriers that the immigrant has faced. These barriers may relate to legal status, schooling, language acquisition, job search, financial hardship, discrimination, and cultural unfamiliarity. Immigrants' trauma can arise at multiple points in their journeys: at point of origin; in intermediate location(s) where they seek refuge; in transit; at the border; at locations within the United States where they settle temporarily or permanently. Immigrant stories typical recount interactions within the family or community – whether these are positive or negative affects the individual's potential for self-actualization.

In offering this comparison I am not "invalid-izing" individuals with disability or predicting a negative outcome for immigrants. On the contrary, immigrants along with individuals with disabilities do in fact routinely thrive once social and legal impediments are overcome. However, discussions of genre that deprecate the seriousness of legal, social, political and economic obstacles are incomplete and misleading.

Attentive reading of immigration fiction enables us to consider the obstacles to a positive outcome. Family separation, which can occur at the border or through deportation, leaves lasting trauma. Immigrant adults will make choices that will affect the likelihood of success for themselves and their children. Immigrants are called upon to navigate the challenges of language acquisition and cultural doubleness: the necessity of learning English while retaining the memory and practice of one's own culture, language, food preferences, and history. Children will resist the efforts of parents to control their choice of language, food, friends, sex life, and romantic partners. Marriages will also be tested by patriarchal domination: some women will remain subordinate while others assert their agency. Disappointment and trauma can lead to abuse, aggravated when men succumb to alcohol or drug addiction. Immigrants who encounter discrimination may be tempted to distinguish themselves from other ethnicities in some cases showing their own stereotyping or bigoted views.

Assimilation can be welcomed or resisted. A refusal to accommodate to new language and practices, or to acquire new job skills, foretells a negative outcome. However, there is also risk when the heritage of one's own country is denied and submerged. Immigrant fiction shows how each individual needs to find his or her own expression of hybrid identity; each immigrant must self-fashion and find a viable path through very difficult terrain.

Endnotes:

1. I focus here on short fiction because it provides an efficient illustrative vehicle, but the comments offered here would apply to poetry, novels, and personal narratives.
2. "Paper Menagerie" won the Hugo, the Nebula, and the World Fantasy awards – the first time that trifecta has been achieved.
3. No community native or immigrant is immune from domestic violence. See, e.g., Chung *et al*. (Asian); Lown *et al*. (Latino); Abuelezam *et al*., Finigan (Muslim and Arab American), Kalunta-Crumpton, West (African).
4. Recent studies among Arab American adolescents estimate that 14% of Arab Americans living in the Dearborn ethnic enclave were diagnosed with depression (Jaber 2015), while another study found that 50% of Arab-American respondents met criteria for depression (Amer *et al* 2012).

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