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Towards and Across Third Cultures: South Asian American Transnationalisms and Rhizomatic Subjectivities in Jhumpa Lahiri's Oeuvre

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Abstract

Physically and/or figuratively, Bengali American writer Jhumpa Lahiri's hybrid protagonists transcend national borders and form dynamic subjectivities that resist simplified assumptions about transnational migration. However, while some characters like to either accentuate their ancestral South Asian heritage or endorse their assimilation to the United States, others rejoice in embracing third cultures or embarking on unexpected journeys without fixed points, thereby questioning the restrictive container of the nation-state as the dominant category for examining society. Sustained by Homi K. Bhabha's and Stuart Hall's theoretical approaches to cultural identity and influenced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rhizomatic thinking, I will focus on Lahiri's autobiography and her fiction in English that portrays characters who, overexerted by the constraints of the two cultures wanting to claim them, find refuge in a third culture or defy the nation-state completely by considering themselves citizens of the world, or nomads.

Keywords: South Asian American Literature, Transnationalism, Hybridity, Diaspora, Rhizome

Üçüncü Kültürler Arasında, Üçüncü Kültürlere Doğru: Jhumpa Lahiri'nin Eserlerinde Güney Asyalı Amerikalı Ulusötesicilik ve Rizomatik Öznellikler

Öz

Bengalli Amerikalı yazar Jhumpa Lahiri'nin melez ana karakterleri fiziksel veya mecazi anlamda ulusal sınırları aşar ve ulusötesi göçe dair basitleştirilmiş varsayımlara direnen dinamik öznellikler oluştururlar. Lahiri'nin bazı karakterleri atalarından gelen Güney Asyalı kimliğini vurgular veya Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde asimile olmayı uygun bulurken, diğerleri benimsedikleri üçüncü kültürler sayesinde sabit bir noktada durmaksızın, toplumu kontrolü altında tutan baskıcı ulus-devletinin kısıtlayıcı sınırlarını sorgulamayı mümkün kılan beklenmedik yolculuklara koyulurlar. Bu makale, Homi K. Bhabha ve Stuart Hall'un kültürel kimliğe yönelik teorik yaklaşımlarından ve Gilles Deleuze ve Félix Guattari'nin rizomatik düşüncesinden faydalanarak Lahiri'nin İngilizce otobiyografisinde ve kurmacalarında yer alan, üzerinde iki farklı kültürün hak iddia ettiği, bu kültürlerin dayattıkları kısıtlamalar yüzünden yorgun düşen, ancak sonunda bir üçüncü kültüre sığınan, kendilerini dünya vatandaşları veya göçebeler olarak görmeye başlayan ve ulus-devletine tamamen karşı çıkan karakterlerine odaklanacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Güney Asyalı Amerikalı Edebiyatı, Ulusötesicilik, Melezlik, Diaspora, Rizom

Roots, routes, or rhizomes? Throughout her work written in English, Bengali American writer Jhumpa Lahiri's hybrid protagonists transcend national borders—physically and/or figuratively—and form dynamic subjectivities that resist simplified assumptions about transnational migration. However, while some characters like to either accentuate their ancestral South Asian heritage or endorse their assimilation to the United States, others rejoice in embracing third cultures or embarking on unexpected journeys without fixed points, thereby questioning the restrictive container of the nation-state as the dominant category for examining society. To capture complex migratory experi-

ences that challenge essentializing concepts of cultural identity based on roots, scholars of different disciplines have turned to notions of transnationalism and diaspora that apply rhizomatic ideas by shifting the focus to routes without discarding the notion of roots. In this article, I will concentrate on Lahiri's autobiography and her fiction written in English that portrays characters who, overexerted by the constraints of the two cultures wanting to claim them, find refuge in a third culture or defy the nation-state completely by considering themselves citizens of the world, or nomads, in order to propose that transnational frameworks that continue to rely on binary oppositions—even if they highlight spaces in-between cultures—cannot always be sufficient for discussing these South Asian American individuals' negotiations of their hybrid identities.

Make Rhizomes, Not Roots: Theoretical Considerations

Before delving into the textual analysis of Lahiri's autographical and fictional work, some pivotal terms crucial for the discussion of literary productions that are examining transnational migration need to be considered. Making use of the term 'hybridity,' influential postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha emphasizes how individuals in cross-cultural confrontations are situated within a space in-between cultures, which he calls 'third space' (36–39). Against propositions contending that there are distinctive and authentic cultures, he argues that

> [i]t is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space [the third space] of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity. (Bhabha 37)

Thus, the location of culture is positioned in this third space, a hybrid and changing space in which new actions, practices, and identifications can evolve to unsettle reductive contemplations of culture.

Bhabha's viewpoints comply with a poststructuralist shift from considering identities as fixed entities to seeing them as dynamic and in perpetual flux. In this context, cultural theorist Stuart Hall defines two takes on the notion of 'cultural identity': "[t]he first position defines

'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (393). This perspective, although important for postcolonial struggles, sees identity as static, whereas the second one acknowledges how identities are usually not as fixed and instead subjects to change: "[c]ultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (394). In this understanding, identities are not determined by their roots but instead always in production, in process, and in need to be considered in their specific contexts (392). Referring to diaspora experiences, Hall advocates for "a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*" (402) and sees diaspora identities as "those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (402). Thus, this second definition that stresses 'becoming' emerges as crucial for the discussion of hybrid, diasporic identities.

Hall's thinking was, as Kobena Mercer suggests, heavily impacted by Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), which "reconceptualiz[es] diaspora not as a tragic loss of organic *roots* but as a polycentric network of cross-cultural *routes* that give black culture its transnational dynamism" (Mercer 8). Examining hybrid diaspora models, Michel Bruneau notes how Anglo-American authors discussing the Black diaspora like

> Hall and Gilroy . . . refer to the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari and to the image of the rhizome as opposed to that of the root—i.e. to a world of dissemination and hybridisation, as opposed to a world of filiation and heritage. There is no hard core of identity . . . but a variety of formations. This hybrid diaspora rejects all reference to the nation and to nationalist ideologies. (Bruneau 37)

Based on the botanical rhizome, denoting plant systems with a subterranean stem and aerial offshoots, the notion of the philosophical 'rhizome' was introduced by philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari to propose a horizontal, postmodern view on knowledge organization opposing hierarchically structured paradigms that rely on the model of the tree, or 'arborescence.' "Make rhizomes, not roots, never plant! Don't sow, grow offshoots!" (Deleuze and Guat-

tari 4), they request, and remark that "[a] rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*" (25), creating a flexible metaphor fruitful for reflections on hybrid identities. Questioning fixed rootedness and the notion of a center or single point of origin, the rhizome destabilizes hierarchies and emphasizes deterritorialization and movement. Among its characteristics are the principles of connection, heterogeneity (7), and multiplicity (8). Whereas the tree is structured by filiation, the rhizome is an anti-genealogical (21) concept and organized through relations, or alliance (25); "unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature" (21). Despite their preference of routes and open-ended rhizomes, Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge that roots and rhizomes can also coexist: "there are very diverse map-tracing, rhizome-root assemblages, with variable coefficients of deterritorialization. There exist tree or root structures in rhizomes; conversely, a tree branch or root division may begin to burgeon into a rhizome" (15). Through this web of alliance, new roots can be spread that do not originate from one's ancestral culture. In the consideration of diaspora identities, the rhizome can serve as liberating model because to consider identities as rhizomatic allows individuals to move beyond the constraining roots of both their ancestral and their newly adopted cultures.

Deleuze and Guattari's figure of the nomad, identified as antipole to sedentariness and the state accordingly, sheds light on such individuals who are characterized by absolute movement in smooth, and thus open-ended spaces: "[t]he life of the nomad is the intermezzo" (380). Nomads, just like migrants, are located in-between, but their in-betweenness is even more autonomous and not positioned between merely two points, distinguishing the nomad from the migrant—albeit they might mix—as follows:

> [t]he nomad is not at all the same as the migrant; for the migrant goes principally from one point to another, even if the second point is uncertain, unforeseen, or not well localized. But the nomad goes from point to point only as a consequence and as a factual necessity; in principle, points for him are relays along a trajectory. (Deleuze and Guattari 380).

Considering some of Lahiri's characters, who defy being claimed by either home- or hostland, the figure of the nomad moving

in a multidirectional, open-ended rhizome system offers suitable outlooks.

However, Deleuze and Guattari's take on nomadism, and mobility generally, has been criticized (e.g., Marder) as romanticizing view of the transformative power of opposing the state and sedentariness. By idealizing mobility and neglecting imposed mobility, privileged individuals jovially travelling the world and refugees violently forced to leave their homes are seemingly put into the same category. The nomad thus also encourages a link to cosmopolitanism, which has similarly been judged for its elitist class-bias. Whereas transnationalism questions the category of the nation-state by merely transcending and blurring national boundaries, cosmopolitanism rejects the ideology of the nation-state altogether and instead offers "a new moral and ethnic standpoint suitable for 21st-century global life" (Roudometof 113) to include each and every one as 'citizen of the world,' which resonates with the nomad's open-ended movement. Despite the class-based criticism of these concepts, they are well-suited for the rhizomatic subjectivities that Lahiri presents in her work; an intersectional analysis of her South Asian American characters reveals how their race—and, in many instances, their gender—might complicate their routes, yet their (usually) advantageous class position can facilitate comparatively free movements.

Wandering the World: Autobiographical Correlations

Some of the experiences that Lahiri's fictional characters recount throughout her oeuvre recur in her linguistic autobiography *In Altre Parole* (2015), in which she details her fascination for the Italian language and her negotiation of her hybrid identity. Mirroring its transnational contents, the Bloomsbury edition *In Other Words* presents the original Italian text next to the English translation by Ann Goldstein. Although the genre clearly distinguishes this work from Lahiri's other literary productions, the topics she discusses remain the same: "[t]he themes, ultimately, are unchanged: identity, alienation, belonging. But the wrapping, the contents, the body and soul are transfigured" (*In Other Words* 211). The metaphors Lahiri introduces can become useful in the exploration of hybridity and the relationship between roots and routes.

Lahiri[1] chronicles her engagement with the Italian language and culture, a challenging journey in which each step on the way becomes crucial for her to come to terms with her in-between identity. In 1994, when she is in her mid-twenties, she first travels to Italy and is immediately allured by the language, feeling an instant desire to get to know it better; it is "[l]ove at first sight" (*In Other Words* 15). Back in the U.S., she starts taking elementary courses and returns to Italy six years later, only to realize that she needs more opportunities for dialogue. Her longing to improve her Italian is vigorous as she feels "tortured" (29) and "incomplete" (29) without it, thus she resolves to keep on studying in New York with a private teacher. Still, when she takes part in a literary festival in Rome, she fails to properly converse in Italian despite her preparations. The birth of her daughter puts a temporary halt to her active efforts to improve her Italian, but when she is invited to promote her short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* in Italy after its publication in 2008, she finds a new teacher to continue her courtship of the language. However, she is discouraged again when she still does not manage to use it fluently; hence, she finds another private teacher, with whom "[her] strange devotion to the language seems more a vocation than a folly" (33). Her lessons become her favorite activity and she ventures to take a bold next step by moving to Italy with her husband and their two children in 2012. Six months before their departure, Lahiri stops reading in English, making her a "divided person" (37) as she is about to finish writing her novel *The Lowland* in English while only reading in Italian. Once in Rome, despite facing many difficulties, her linguistic journey succeeds on more solid paths as she automatically starts writing her diary in Italian, and, after a while, she even crafts pieces of prose in Italian. Her very first complete story written in Italian, "Lo Scambio"/"The Exchange," in which a woman sets out to live in an unknown city, features as a chapter in *In Other Words.* As stated in the afterword, Lahiri has to return to the U.S. by the end of 2014, but today's readers know that this will not mark the end of her relationship with Italian: more than two decades after first getting in touch with the language, her first novel in Italian, *Dove Mi Trovo* (2018), is published.

In Other Words goes beyond delivering insight into the author's physical life journeys and getting to know a foreign language; what makes the work unique for the discussion of transnational and diasporic identities is how Lahiri sees her hybridity as the reason for her fascination for Italian and captivatingly depicts her relationships with

the three languages as well as their significance in shaping her identity. Moreover, in doing so, she provides compelling images to visualize the workings of spaces in-between cultures. The unresolved conflict between her two first languages—Bengali, the mother, and English, the stepmother—illustrates the ambivalence of inhabiting a hybrid space: "[t]hose two languages of mine didn't get along. They were incompatible adversaries, intolerant of each other. I thought they had nothing in common except me, so that I felt like a contradiction in terms myself" (*In Other Words* 149). Lahiri sees her refuge in Italian as a reaction to her inability to properly access either her Bengali or her American roots:

> Because of my divided identity, or perhaps by disposition, I consider myself an incomplete person, in some way deficient. Maybe there is a linguistic reason—the lack of a language to identify with. As a girl in America, I tried to speak Bengali perfectly, without a foreign accent, to satisfy my parents, and above all to feel that I was completely their daughter. But it was impossible. On the other hand, I wanted to be considered an American, yet, despite the fact that I speak English perfectly, that was impossible, too. I was suspended rather than rooted. I had two sides, neither well defined. The anxiety I felt, and still feel, comes from a sense of inadequacy, of being a disappointment.
>
> Here in Italy, where I'm very comfortable, I feel more imperfect than ever. Every day, when I speak, when I write in Italian, I meet with imperfection. . . It betrays me; it reveals that I am not rooted in this language. (111/13)

Lahiri's three languages become proxies for the three cultural systems framing her identity. Before the arrival of Italian, she does not find peace in the third space that unfolds between her ancestral culture and her American environment and is struck by her fruitless endeavors of reaching perfection, of not meeting expectations on either end. On the surface, it can be argued that by becoming a critically acclaimed writer in the English language narrating the South Asian American immigration experience, she has nevertheless managed to reconcile the two forces trying to absorb her and taken her hybridity as opportunity. However, as Lahiri explains in *In Other Words*, she needed to take her liberation one step further: her contentment is reached via escape to Italian, a language that is in not rooted in her heritage and has no claims on her—"no family, cultural, social pressure. No necessity" (153)—

thus focusing on routes rather than roots.

In order to picture her linguistic journey, Lahiri envisions a triangle, each corner marking an actor affecting the production of her dynamic identity without any of them taking full control:

> The arrival of Italian, the third point of my linguistic journey, creates a triangle. It creates a shape rather than a straight line. A triangle is a complex structure, a dynamic figure. The third point changes the dynamic of that quarrelsome old couple [English and Bengali]. I am the child of those unhappy points, but the third does not come from them. It comes from my desire, my labor. It comes from me.
>
> I think that studying Italian is a flight from the long clash in my life between English and Bengali. A rejection of both the mother and the stepmother. An independent path. (*In Other Words* 153)

The metaphor of the triangle offers an enriched understanding of hybridity; Lahiri not only deconstructs the binary opposition of Bengali and American by moving between two cultures but by expanding her third space towards a third polarity. The first and second poles, although she never reaches their foundations completely, are rooted, whereas the third is specifically different and flexible, an additional layer she fashioned herself—her own "independent path," her own route.

Lahiri frequently relies on imagery defending a 'routes rather than roots' angle; in several instances in her autobiography, structures like bridges or paths are employed as metaphors emphasizing the ever-changing, multidirectional nature of identity quests in which the journey is the reward: "It [the autobiography] recounts an uprooting, a state of disorientation, a discovery. It recounts a journey that is at times exiting, at times exhausting. An absurd journey, given that the traveler never reaches her destination" (*In Other Words* 213). Nevertheless, the narrator's ultimate stance towards the tension between roots and routes remains ambiguous. Occasionally, Lahiri entrusts in roots; for example, when she returns to the U.S. after her very first trip across the Atlantic, she considers herself to be in a linguistic exile from Italian by not being in Italy: "[e]very language belongs to a specific place. It can migrate, it can spread. But usually it's tied to a geographical territory, a country" (19). This passage considers languages to be terri-

torially bound to certain nation-states, an assessment that transnational approaches to migration negate. This passage also indicates that Lahiri, the narrator of *In Other Words*, as well as her characters in other works, frequently do not unconditionally eliminate national borders despite transcending them.

However, Lahiri later contradicts this viewpoint when she re-evaluates the notion of exile:

> [t]hose who don't belong to any specific place can't, in fact, return anywhere. The concepts of exile and return imply a point of origin, a homeland. Without a homeland and without a true mother tongue, I wander the world, even at my desk. In the end I realize that it wasn't a true exile: far from it. I am exiled even from the definition of exile".(*In Other Words* 133)

She describes herself as a nomad-like wanderer going from point to point, moving in a rhizomatic web of relations and celebrating the unpredictable intermezzo. Thus, it can be argued that "she keeps moving along her nomadic trajectory and encourages the reader to, likewise, always seek new ways of thinking with the world and inhabit it in a rhizomic way" (Austin 185). Nonetheless, despite her insistence on the apparent open-endedness of her route, it should not be neglected that eventually, *In Other Words* is a love story dedicated to a specific language—Italian—that acknowledges how the first two languages—Bengali and American—remain important; Lahiri enjoys the autonomous in-between, but these three cornerstones are more than mere relays. This distinguishes her from the Deleuzian nomad, for whom "[t]he water point is reached only in order to be left behind; every point is a relay and exists only as a relay" (Deleuze and Guattari 380). By using a triangle, naming its points, and highlighting the dynamics of the structure, Lahiri manages to embrace routes without denying the relevance of points along the way, which are not all rooted, but fixed to the extent that they are clearly identifiable.

What further deserves contemplation when investigating the interplay between roots and routes as presented in the autobiography is Lahiri's identity as a writer, which she recognizes as crucial for the negotiation of her identity: "[b]efore I became a writer, I lacked a clear, precise identity" (*In Other Words* 83). Her self-acquired identity as a writer explains her incessant focus on language: "I'm a writer: I iden-

tify myself completely with language, I work with it" (143). Lahiri's identity as a writer supports her acquisition of a new language—whilst she feels rooted as a writer, her different layers of languages and cultures are less stable. Nevertheless, her identity as a writer is not a totalitarian root because it is interconnected with her languages and cultures, meaning that their change also causes a change in Lahiri's identity as a writer.

This proposition is strengthened by the above-mentioned short story "Lo scambio"/"The Exchange," featured within the book, in which the parallels between Lahiri and the protagonist are unmistakable. A woman, a translator by profession, moves to a new city and loses her sweater. When it turns up again, she does not recognize it; it does not feel comfortable anymore, making her question her decision of leaving for another place: "[t]he translator felt disconcerted, empty. She had come to that city looking for another version of herself, a transfiguration. But she understood that her identity was insidious, a root that she would never be able to pull up, a prison in which she would be trapped" (*In Other Words* 79), seemingly representing a view on identity with only little flexibility. The next day, however, the translator rediscovers hope when she realizes that the sweater really was hers, it had just mysteriously changed shape, and yet she starts to prefer it that way because "[n]ow, when she put it on, she, too, was another" (81). After finishing this short story, Lahiri comprehends that the sweater is language. The metaphor of the sweater as language implies that a layer to identity susceptible to change can in turn also change the base of identity. In Lahiri's case, as she openly identifies as a writer, it suggests that Italian, which she had tried to study for years just like the narrator had already owned the sweater before her trip, suddenly takes on new forms when she arrives in Italy and ends up changing her identity as a writer, too, drawing a rhizomatic image in which everything is interconnected. Lahiri has "object[ed] [herself], as a writer, to a metamorphosis" (161); her Italian grows and transforms until she is even able to compose stories in it, pivotal for her life as a writer. Her acquisition of a new language thus destabilizes the idea of an insidious, root-based identity after all; although Lahiri has become an individual moving in a rhizomatic space, she is no Deleuzian nomad in a strict sense.

Ultimately, Lahiri's position towards roots versus routes remains ambivalent. Although her preference of routes is apparent, the amount to which she relies on roots cannot be ascertained. Her for-

mulation of a Bengali-English-Italian triangle seems to demonstrate that frequently, her reasoning is still guided by ethnic and/or linguistic categories. Besides, her overarching identity as a writer, although produced by herself over time and in continuous transformation, has developed a root-like status despite not belonging to any national territory. Eventually, Lahiri does not deny roots but focuses on routes and her designations of identity cannot be captured by transnational or diasporic approaches that foreground a hybrid space between two polarities rather than three or more. Bhabha's model might be adapted to fit these circumstances, but Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome seems to be better equipped to envision the involved dynamics, which is adequate for the discussion of Lahiri's flexible identity that springs from different sources.

No Claims: Third Culture Triangles

The goal of this article is not to compare Lahiri's autobiography and other accounts with her literary work to attest any supposed factual origins for her stories or to risk committing intentional fallacies. Rather, the images she uses to approach her hybrid identity—especially the triangle—can serve as additional tools for analysis when considering her fiction because in the same manner as narrator-Lahiri seeks refuge with Italian to help her stabilize her identity, some of her characters have escaped to other third cultures in order to come to terms with their hybridity. This phenomenon is most frequently encountered with second-generation immigrants who feel torn between their parents' Bengali culture and their everyday American environment. Whilst some reconcile their two spheres of influence over time by moving comfortably in a hybrid third space, others want to expand it by departing to a completely different, new culture; "double displacements result in feelings of unbelonging in both spaces, and hence we often find in Lahiri a tendency to allow her second-generation subjects to explore a 'third space' and culture quite different from what they've known as 'home'" (Dutt-Ballerstadt 173). In this section, some examples will be considered through the lens of Lahiri's triangle introduced in *In Other Words*.

Moushumi, Gogol's (ex-)wife in the novel *The Namesake* (2003), has always rebelled against her parents' expectations and found solace in the French language and culture, with which she could engage without pressure:

> At Brown her rebellion had been academic. At her parents' insistence, she'd majored in chemistry, for they were hopeful she would follow in her father's footsteps. Without telling them, she'd pursued a double major in French. Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge—she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever. (*Namesake* 214)

Similar to Lahiri's flight to Italian, Moushumi flees to French, which emerges as the dynamic third point of her triangle. For some time after college, she moves to Paris and undergoes a social and personal metamorphosis: "in that new city, she was transformed into the kind of girl she had once envied" (215). Gogol is jealous of Moushumi's experiences in a country other than the United States or India: "Moushumi had reinvented herself, without misgivings, without guilt. He admires her, even resents her a little, for having moved to another country and made a separate life" (233). In this passage, the lack of "guilt" and "misgiving" is emphasized once again, expressing the liberating nature of third cultures. Moushumi pursues a PhD in French literature to write a dissertation on francophone Algerian poets, indicating that her dynamic third pole is hybrid by itself. Her love for reading persists; whereas Lahiri as the narrator of *In Other Words* relies on her identity as a writer as the base for her other alternative selves, Moushumi's identity as a bookworm underpins her other layers, but it is similarly enmeshed with them in a rhizomatic web since her reading has changed, too.

While Moushumi's example almost flawlessly fits into the triangle paradigm proposed in *In Other Words*, Hema's escape to a third culture in the three short stories making up the second part of *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) does not properly correspond with the acquisition of a third language. After her breakup with a married American man and before her arranged marriage to Navin, Hema enjoys a period of comfortable solitude in Italy. Referring to Moushumi and Hema, Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt claims that their flights are "a rebellion that is provoked by their position of being ethnic Bengali and women within the Indian patriarchal framework" (170). Although Moushumi's escape resembles a rebellion, Hema's is of a more impermanent nature as she merely wishes to have some time by herself before flying to India to at-

tend her marriage—it is more of a break than a rebellion. Furthermore, what distinguishes her from Moushumi is that her knowledge of the local language, Italian, is only broken, and she feels more like a guest than an actual resident in Rome. She is, however, diligently acquainted with the region's ancient history, which is what drew her to the country in the first place. This tension between familiarity and distance reminds her of her relationship to Calcutta:

> [l]ike Calcutta, which she'd visited throughout childhood, Rome was a city she knew on the one hand intimately and on the other hand not at all—a place that fully absorbed her and also kept her at bay. She knew the ancient language of Rome, its rulers and writers, its history from founding to collapse. But she was a tourist in everyday Italy. ("Going Ashore" 299)

Hema's immersion into a third culture is at once more constraining and more flexible than narrator-Lahiri's or Moushumi's; because Hema fell in love with Latin, which has been "an addiction" (299) ever since she was a teenager, she cannot claim a living culture, though at the same time, her endeavors are less territorially bound. She enjoys being a visitor in Italy, but her greatest passion is concentrating on her work as a professor in classical studies—for which she could technically reside anywhere else in the world, even if Rome is an advantageous standpoint to make trips to historic sites and access local libraries. However, another problem that arises from Latin's limited use is that Hema's engagement with a third culture remains a lonely commitment that manages to ensure stability in her job, but not to rhizomatically interconnect with other aspects of her life. Hema, who has always been keen on keeping her independence, tries to convince herself that she fancies her solitary routines, and yet "what constantly re-surfaces in the text is her anxiety that the alchemizing and stabilizing process inherent in her self-confessed 'addiction' to reading Latin should be restricted to her professional life only" (Munos 117). Narrator-Lahiri, in comparison, emphasizes the importance of friends in her efforts to improve her Italian and create a dialogue, while Moushumi enjoys being a popular socialite in Paris.

Nevertheless, neither Moushumi's nor Hema's flights to a third culture detangle them from their uneasy relationships towards their hybridity. Both have found temporary solace in their additional, independently chosen third culture, but their wish for an uncomplicat-

ed family life makes them return to their Bengali roots by entering arranged marriages. Moushumi's marriage, however, ends in divorce because she cheats on Gogol—an alternate way of regaining freedom, as Min Hyoung Song suggests: "[w]hen she [Moushumi] plunges into bodily pleasures, she comes as close to a feeling of freedom as any she has ever known" (361). Hema's future is not painted too brightly, either; marrying Navin is a recourse to roots to which she does not feel connected. In this respect, Sudha—protagonist of "Only Goodness" in *Unaccustomed Earth*—has found more happiness in her third culture, but her situation differs significantly. Sudha's parents emigrated to London before settling in the U.S. and Sudha was born there, facilitating her move on a legal level because of her British passport. Moreover, her competence in English assists her on a practical level. On an emotional level, going to London is also a return to her geographical roots and makes her feel closer to her parents, whose life together had started there, giving Sudha "an instinctive connection to London, a sense of belonging though she barely knew her way around" ("Only Goodness" 144). The distance from her parents and the resulting absence of not necessarily cultural, but familial constraints are additional factors for Sudha's success in London. Furthermore, London is the place where she meets her British husband Roger, who enjoyed a privileged upbringing in English boarding schools all over the world and was born in India. These preconditions make him more appropriate as interracial marriage partner in the eyes of Sudha's parents: "[i]t helped that he'd been born in India, that he was English and not American" (152). Her third point is much more fixed than narrator-Lahiri's, Moushumi's, or Hema's due to these favorable circumstances and Sudha becomes virtually assimilated to her third culture, settling down in England and adopting a British accent. However, her family and the contact to the U.S. keep important positions in Sudha's life, a life that has been marked by rhizomatic routes but also by planting new roots, which is why the image of the triangle is fitting for the discussion of her hybrid, trinational identity.

The third points these second-generation women choose to complete their third culture triangles with are based on individual nation-states; Moushumi moves to France to engage with French culture, Hema to Italy to follow her interest in classical studies, and Sudha escapes to England. Supported by their privileged class status, they are free in their choice to move to Europe. In Paris, Rome, and London,

they are considered foreigners, which is exactly what they seek: a new culture that has no claims on them, meaning that "[these] second-generation women approach their *intentional foreignness* as liberation" (Dutt-Ballerstadt 170) in their third cultures, whereas their unbelonging to the U.S. and India had always been a source of anxiety.

Nevertheless, although they move in rhizomatic spaces in-between and emphasize routes and new roots instead of predetermined roots, these women's decentered subjectivities eventually continue to be directed towards certain nation-states. By focusing on transcending and blurring national borders without getting rid of them, their migratory experiences remain transnational, but they evade and thus question transnational frameworks that are built around two polarities. At this point, Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor of the rhizome emerges as helpful to describe how different components of their multi-layered identities are linked in a web of alliances. Although their intermezzo spaces evolve rhizomatically, the metaphor still does not hold completely as certain points remain important anchors in these women's lives and could be called "knots of arborescence in rhizomes" (Deleuze and Guattari 20) forming "rhizome-root assemblages" (15). Thus, just like narrator-Lahiri, they are not truly Deleuzian nomads despite their temporary nomadism and partly rhizomatic identities, which distinguishes them from the characters considered in the subsequent subsection, whose nomadic sensibilities are more palpable.

Forging Rootless Paths: Nomadic Subjectivities

Whereas Moushumi, Hema, and Sudha turn to a third culture, others find comfort as global citizens in the world, or as individuals who neither identify with national nor transnational categories. Instead of resulting in the celebration of a space in-between two or more cultures, their becoming or negotiation of their diaspora identities necessitates movements beyond this space, and sometimes beyond roots altogether. Most of these characters can be found in Lahiri's latest novel written in English, *The Lowland* (2013), in which "Lahiri switches her attention away from roots and the accompanying debate on hybridity and authenticity in favor of the stems of the plant, and especially the kind that grows without having one central root according to which others are situated in a hierarchical relation" (Austin 175). As Kaushik's example in *Unaccustomed Earth* shows, some of these issues

sporadically surface in her earlier work.

After graduating from college, Kaushik sets off on a journey to Central America and, more by chance than by choice, he starts travelling the world as a photojournalist, a job that "allow[s] him permanently to avoid the United States" ("Going Ashore" 305). Kaushik's circumvention of this country and his restless wandering in the world arise from his unusual upbringing marked by transnational relocation and the death of his mother in the U.S. For the first nine years of his life, Kaushik grows up in Boston, but then his parents decide to move to Mumbai. Seven years later, his mother is dying from cancer and, "not wanting to be suffocated by the attention" ("Once in a Lifetime" 250) she would receive from her relatives in India, the family returns to the U.S. Thus, both Kaushik's home- and hostland are marked by a void; he inherits the loss of his ancestral culture from his parents as a young boy in the U.S. and experiences it himself as a teenager when leaving India. Similarly, he lacks belonging to the U.S. without his mother, who after her death remains "an un-dead presence which, like the motherland, can be imagined as disowning finitude through her everlasting impact on her offspring" (Munos 19). Without a home to return to, Kaushik's movement becomes a necessity, "a willingness—and . . . perhaps this was also a need—to disappear at any moment" ("Going Ashore" 317). As a consequence, his "hyper mobility seems to render the very idea of home obsolete, since Kaushik's endless travel rejects the possibility of becoming familiar with the places he visits" (Stoican, "Traumatic Effects" 92). In that way, he can truly be understood as a Deleuzian nomad: the places he visits become mere relays on his trajectory to which he rarely looks back to since to keep on moving rhizomatically has become his only purpose. Nevertheless, his origins have a permanent traumatic effect on him, making him, despite his incessant need for mobility, yearn to reconcile his roots by retrieving them instead of escaping them via routes. This paradox, "an inability to balance the need for the stability provided by structures of attachment (family, places, relationship) with the impulse to preserve a sense of detachment meant to avoid the trauma of another loss" (94), obstructs his bond to Hema. Hema shares his hybridity and through her, he seemingly wishes to conjure ties to his host- and homeland simultaneously, but he is unable to form true attachment because of the loss of his mother, his motherland, and his host country.

Bela, considered "a nomad" (*Lowland* 301) by her father, is an-

other nomadic figure in Lahiri's work whose restlessness can be traced back to the absence of a mother. However, she is not the same type of nomad as Kaushik; she does not travel between countries, but between American States by working as a moving farm worker. Having "forged a rootless path" (273) by never getting close to any place through personal relationships, she lives without stability—"without insurance, without heed for her future. Without a fixed address" (271). Patrycja Austin convincingly sketches the natural imagery employed in *The Lowland* to underscore characters' nomadic sensibilities, which she sees to be completely realized in Bela: "Bela lives in what Deleuze and Guattari term a smooth space; her choices are independent and free, not subjected to norms and regulations, barriers or constrictions of any kind, political or economic" (184), allowing her to move freely without looking back. Nevertheless, similar to Kaushik's struggles, Bela's wandering can be seen as a result of her inability to find her place in the world as a motherless and hybrid South Asian American individual. Her mother Gauri left the family when she was a teenager and despite longing to create an alternative lifestyle free of familial bonds, Bela admits that "[s]he remains in constant communication with her [Gauri]. Everything in Bela's life has been a reaction. I am who I am, she would say, I live as I do because of you" (*Lowland* 316), attesting the mother's presence through absence that has determined Bela's restless path.

Another issue that betrays Bela's independent nomadism is that she knows at least one point of stability in her life: her father Subhash. However, this anchor turns out to be one formed through alliance rather than direct filiation when, towards the end of the novel, she finds out that he is not her biological father, demonstrating that "antigenealogical connotations of the rhizome . . . characterize Subhash and Bela's relationship" (Stoican, "Cultural Dissolution" 39). After his brother's tragic murder in India, Subhash—due to a heightened sense of familial responsibility–marries Udayan's pregnant widow Gauri and brings her to his home in the U.S. to raise the child as his own. By telling Bela about her true origins, Subhash releases her from the shackles of ignorance about her past that have, despite her practice of coping by moving, held her prisoner: "[s]he taught herself to ignore it, to walk away. And yet the hole remained her hollow point of origin, the cold crosshairs of her existence" (*Lowland* 328). The knowledge of her heritage liberates her and puts a halt to her wandering; Bela, pregnant at the time, decides to move back in with Subhash to form an alternative

family—by exploring a new kind of rootedness and by becoming a mother herself, she manages to fill the void created by Gauri. Bela's travels have helped her escape uneasy truths, but it was her eventual accomplishment of planting new roots that made her come to peace with them.

Her mother Gauri's life has similarly been marked by displacement and constant, nomadic-like movement, which is unusual in Lahiri's work for a first-generation woman migrant. Her parents die when she is still young, removing her from her parental home at an early age. She moves to Udayan's home upon their marriage and, marrying Subhash after her first husband's murder, she becomes transnational by crossing national borders to make a new life in the U.S., where she leaves her newly-formed family to become a professor instead of a mother. As an academic, she travels as a privileged cosmopolitan throughout the world to attend conferences and through the rhizomatic structures of the internet, whose "[c]itizens . . . dwell free from hierarchy" (*Lowland* 336), she manages to keep ties to India. On a more emotional level, but occasionally also physically, her captivation with German philosophy and language forms a third culture triangle. As has been discussed in regard to Moushumi, Hema, and Sudha, Gauri's escape to a third culture can be interpreted as a continuous craving for certain roots, even if those are new ones found through routes. Furthermore, the losses of Udayan and Bela accompany her throughout her life, diminishing Gauri's nomadic subjectivity since there are certain points in her life that she has not truly left behind. Nevertheless, in the discussion of her identity, Gauri evokes images of the rhizome by referring to multiplicity, independence, and continuous becoming:

> [H]er role had changed at so many other points in the past. From wife to widow, from sister-in-law to wife, from mother to childless woman. With the exception of losing Udayan, she had actively chosen to take these steps.
>
> She had married Subhash, she had abandoned Bela. She had generated alternative versions of herself, she had insisted at brutal cost on these conversions. Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end. (291)

Rather than emphasizing her genealogical filiations or transnational dislocations, Gauri focuses on the multiple layers of her identity,

her "alternative versions" caused by her changing roles in interpersonal relationships. Eventually, because these relationships—except for her short-lived bond to Udayan—are unsuccessful, she is left by herself and her incessant movement is revealed to be a flight instead of a liberating nomadic preference.

Subhash, as the third protagonist of *The Lowland*, shares certain nomadic sensibilities with Bela and Gauri. In Calcutta, he stands in his brother Udayan's shadow, thus when he arrives in the U.S., he sees it as an opportunity to grow far away from his parents; "[his] free-willed uprooting reveals the character's transcendent urge" (Stoican, "Cultural Dissolution" 36). Applying plant imagery, Subhash's and Udayan's differing life paths are mirrored very early in the novel in a passage on mangrove trees: "if the propagules dropped at low tide they reproduced alongside the parents, spearing themselves in brackish marsh. But at high water they drifted from their source of origin, for up to a year, before maturing in a suitable environment" (*Lowland* 14–15)—Subhash chose to leave his homeland in order to mature in the U.S. He develops a transnational rather than a rhizomatic identity in his initial years of immigration as he oscillates between assimilation and connections to the homeland. In this respect, Austin argues that because of his continuous ties to India and through viewing his identity as fixed, "[he] epitomizes what Deleuze and Guattari would call an immigrant, but not a nomad" (183). Subhash is indeed not a true Deleuzian nomad, but Austin's assertion that he relies on static identifications for all of his life is misleading; instead, as the novel progresses over decades, Subhash's becoming takes on more rhizomatic features depending less on nation-states or transnational in-betweenness.

This development starts when he realizes upon visiting Calcutta in his later life that without the people that he held dear there, "[t]he rest of the city, alive, importunate, held no meaning to him" (268). His brother as well as his father are dead by that point, his mother is in a deranged mental state and barely recognizes her son. After her eventual death, Subhash keeps the parental home, but he does not return anymore and is certain that he will never live there (308). Similarly, he starts feeling alienated from Rhode Island in his sixties; he has lived there most of his life, but as the town is changing, he suddenly gets the feeling of "still [being] a visitor" (308). He rediscovers stability through marrying Elise, a widowed Portuguese American woman, and through their union becomes part of another transnational family. On

their honeymoon in Ireland, when he ponders his late-found happiness, "[h]e is awash with the gratitude of his advancing years, for the timeless splendors of the earth, for the opportunity to behold them" (402). With a certain degree of cosmopolitan subjectivity, Subhash is at peace with the world and his hybridity. Although his remaining years will primarily be outlived in Rhode Island, where he has sprouted new roots, Subhash is not drawn to the U.S. specifically, but rather to the alliances he made there, and will also be able to travel the world because of his convenient economic circumstances. This exposes how roots evolving in rhizomatic webs—although they might continue to spread arborescently—are independent from genealogy. Furthermore, his Bengali heritage has been detached from specific people as well as geographical locations and yet it persists through memory. Thus, over the course of his life, "Subhash's transcultural development transgresses a dual model based on an opposition between entrapping roots and freeing rhizomes" (Stoican, "Cultural Dissolution" 41) and "[his] rhizomatic profile blends his Indian inheritance with the aerial roots that he develops in the American setting" (41). Subhash is not rootless but has nevertheless become a rhizomatic individual moving beyond and across fixed polarities.

Hence, Kaushik and the main protagonists of *The Lowland* take the ambivalence of hybridity to another level by their rhizomatic and occasionally nomadic explorations beyond spaces in-between specific nation-states. As Subhash's and Gauri's examples show, this sort of becoming is not exclusive to the second generation, suggesting the shortcomings of argumentations based on generational differences only. Although nomadic subjectivities or sensibilities are exceptions across Lahiri's complete works, they have become prevalent in her more recent fiction in English and in her autobiography. However, Lahiri refrains from idealizing the figure of the nomad; discussing the characters in *The Lowland*, Adriana Elena Stoican concludes that "nomadism/incessant mobility does not necessarily entail a beneficial status, as suggested by the protagonists' endless wavering between rooted structures and fluid escapes" ("Cultural Dissolution" 42). This can also be applied to Kaushik and illustrates how these characters, even though they seemingly prioritize rhizomatic routes, keep on seeking roots. Because of this tension, and because many individuals' journeys resemble escapes rather than goal-oriented solutions, nomadism cannot assure fruitful negotiations of their hybrid identities, suggesting that Deleuze and Guattari are indeed romanticizing persistent movement and trans-

formation.

Concluding Remarks: Rhizome-Root Assemblages?

Whereas a lot of Lahiri's earlier literary productions explore diasporic spaces in-between the Indian and the American cultures, other examples examined in this article, dispersed across her autobiographical and fictional work, disclose that transnational frameworks that continue to rely on binary oppositions—even if they highlight spaces in-between cultures—cannot always be sufficient for discussing these South Asian American individuals' negotiations of their dynamic identities. This has become the rule rather than the exception in Lahiri's later writing, asserting that she "no longer feel[s] bound to restore a lost country to [her] parents" (*In Other Words* 221). To picture these extended hybrid subjectivities and heterogenous route systems, Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome provides a fruitful metaphor. Nevertheless, despite Lahiri's characters' nomadic and rhizomatic sensibilities denying or partly denying the importance of nation-states for the making of identities, roots—which cannot only be formed through filiation but also through alliance—continue to be important. Thus, to capture multiple layers of identity simultaneously, the conceptualization of "rhizome-root assemblages" (Deleuze and Guattari 15) based on host- and homeland as opposing roots connected by a rhizomatic tissue might prove to be productive for discussions of hybridity and alternative manifestations of transnationalisms. Furthermore, the open-ended nature of the rhizome would permit the potential extension of the model to include third cultures or other rooting "knots of arborescence" (20). However, it should be noted that not all of her characters share (narrator-)Lahiri's contentment in pursuing a rhizomatic trajectory. Moreover, they are more privileged in freely choosing their paths—for example, due to their favorable class status—than individuals whose mobility or immobility is less self-determined or achievable.

Notes

[1] In this section, I will refer to Lahiri as the narrator of *In Other Words* rather than as the author of the book.

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