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# Helen Oyeyemi and Border Identities: Contesting Western Representations of Immigrants through Transnational Literature

## **Abstract**

Oyeyemi is a Nigerian-British writer whose writing, like other immigrant authors', participates in a dialogue about and contestation of essentialized immigrant and ethnic identities that are a result of global and local processes. Her writing produces counter-narratives in which immigrant identities are multiple, conflicting, intersectional, and most of all self-represented. This paper explores readings of Oyeyemi accompanied by the following: an examination of globalization and flows of migration; the connections of national epistemologies through media to processes like migration: how literary canon has excluded transnational fiction from the mainstream, thereby decreasing the ability of multi-ethnic and im/migrant writers to represent themselves successfully; and finally the literary shift into a more nuanced understanding of multiculturalism, diaspora, nations, and borders through persistent critiques and re-interpretations by minority writers.

## **Keywords**

immigration, Oyeyemi, nation, globalization, immigrant identities, transnational fiction, diaspora

## **Disciplines**

Fiction | International and Area Studies | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

## **Comments**

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**Helen Oyeyemi and Border Identities: Contesting Western  
Representations of Immigrants through Transnational Literature**

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May 2018

## Introduction

In 2004, Shelley Fisher Fishkin<sup>1</sup> told the American Studies Association that transnational American literature has reshaped our thinking of nation and empire. Fishkin gestured to a long, sanitized history of literary studies that was focused within the nation, championed its empire, and reinforced its borders between “us” and “them,” “domestic” and “foreign,” and “national” and “international”; meanwhile, works that have crossed and interpenetrated these borders, challenging nation and empire, usually fall to the wayside in both mainstream and academic study. What results, she argued, is a widespread epistemology that upholds the nation and its borders, which is evident in both liberal and conservative political discourses, institutions like the government, military, education, and healthcare, and, overwhelmingly, in media and literature.<sup>2</sup> As these discourses permeate society, they have real effects upon the lives of perceived “outsiders,” who face institutional oppressions or hardships, and are often subjected to widespread societal distrust. The “outsiders” I will be focusing on are immigrants, who are seen as “others” to the nation, and who are put under scrutiny for supposedly endangering the health of the state and its borders. Single-sided representations of immigrants in media and literature contribute to a distrust of the “Other.” Yet literature by immigrants, hereafter referred to as transnational literature, challenges these epistemologies by providing alternatives to conceptions of nation, by representing a multiplicity of voices, and by speaking themselves from a history that has been “interrupted, divided, or compromised by instances of loss.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 17.

<sup>2</sup> Here I refer broadly to Western societal and imperial epistemologies and institutions, as my focus for the paper is on English-language literature and immigrant experience in America and the United Kingdom.

<sup>3</sup> Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

In this paper I focus on immigrant narratives and how immigrant writers challenge privileged Western epistemologies of nation and identity, thereby switching stereotypical, formulaic narratives of migration on their heads. I explore how immigrant writers contest common epistemological frameworks like colonialism and post-colonialism, in order to represent themselves and redefine what is an “acceptable” representation of immigrants and their stories. In the first section I provide context about globalization and flows of migration, and demonstrate the connections of national epistemologies to these processes like migration. In the second branch of this argument, I explore how the literary canon, based on these epistemologies, has excluded transnational fiction from the mainstream, thereby decreasing the ability of multi-ethnic and im/migrant writers to represent themselves successfully. Finally, I examine the literary shift into a more nuanced understanding of multiculturalism, diaspora, nations, and borders through persistent critiques and re-interpretations by minority writers. Accompanying these analyses is my reading of Helen Oyeyemi’s fiction as it participates in this re-interpretation: Oyeyemi is a Nigerian-British writer who is known for writing supernatural and fairy-tale novels. Immigrant writing, like Oyeyemi’s, participates in a dialogue about and contestation of essentialized immigrant and ethnic identities that are a result of global and local processes; by so doing this writing produces counter-narratives in which immigrant identities are multiple, conflicting, intersectional, and most of all self-represented.

### **Novel Summary**

*The Icarus Girl* (2005) by Oyeyemi follows Jessamy, an eight-year-old Nigerian-British girl whose young life is punctuated by episodes of emotional instability, spurred by her

psychological problems, that manifest in “psychosomatic fevers.”<sup>4</sup> She is taken to Nigeria to visit her mother’s family, and while there encounters a strange little girl, whom she calls Tilly Tilly, who has uncanny magical abilities. Upon their return to England, Jess’s episodes begin again, and Tilly Tilly reappears. With Tilly Tilly’s encouragement, and possibly under her influence, Jess begins to act out at school and break valuables at home. Meanwhile, Tilly Tilly is on a mission to “get” everyone whom she doesn’t like or who is mean to Jess, including Jess’s parents. She also informs Jess that she was a twin, *ibeji*<sup>5</sup>, but her sister Fern died in childbirth. In Yoruba culture, Jess’s mother tells her, *ibeji* are bad luck, and live “in three worlds. [Jess] lives in this world, and she lives in the spirit world, and she lives in the Bush.”<sup>6</sup> Jess is diagnosed with multiple personalities by an English doctor, who believes that Tilly Tilly is a part of her that comes from the anger and emotions that she cannot control. After Jess’s friend Shivs falls (or was pushed by Tilly Tilly/Jess) down the stairs, Jess’s parents take her back to Nigeria. Jess’s grandfather believes that Tilly Tilly is an *abiku*, a “spirit-child that returns to torment the living,” that has come to Jess and tried to inhabit her living body.<sup>7</sup> He gives her a statue that is meant to provide the living twin with a double that represents her lost sister, thereby keeping Fern in remembrance and soothing Jess’s soul. The final pages imply that Tilly Tilly has been banished by this statue, because she has been trying to take over the spiritual void left by Fern’s absence.

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<sup>4</sup>This interpretation of Jess’s illness closely reflects the diagnosis of the English doctor Jess visits; however, Jess’s family in Nigeria tend to view her illness as an effect of the loss of her twin sister. Chineye Okparanta, “Negotiating the Boundaries of Nation, Language, and Race in Helen Oyeyemi’s *Icarus Girl* and Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*,” *Journal of the African Literature Association* 2, no. 2 (2008): 191.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibeji* is a Yoruba term for twin, and in Yoruba culture (originating from Yorubaland, in present-day Nigeria), the death of a twin is bad luck. Typically, a wooden *ibeji* is carved as a representation of the twin who died.

<sup>6</sup> Helen Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl* (New York: Nan a Talese, 2005), 191.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Ouma, “Reading the Diasporic *Abiku* in Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl*,” *Research in African Literatures* 45, no. 3 (2014): 188.

This book—Oyeyemi’s first—was chosen for this paper in part because its reception demonstrates how fiction by immigrants is often assumed to be about their own experiences, and is therefore held to represent “immigrants”—an inarguably monolithic category. Yet Oyeyemi rejects this reading of her work: she said in an interview about one of her later novels that she dreads being asked “How autobiographical is this?”<sup>8</sup> This question, by reducing the novel to Oyeyemi’s own experiences, ignores the way that she pokes holes into our societal narratives, questions assumptions, and addresses issues that are not always seen as “standard” immigrant issues. For example, in this novel, Oyeyemi challenges the idea of a single, “proper,” uncontestable English or Nigerian identity through Jess, who lives uncomfortably in both worlds at the same time. Through Jess, Oyeyemi also challenges the current popular discourse in Britain that celebrates the nation’s multiculturalism and hybridity. Jess’s world, though filled with multiple cultures, does not celebrate multiculturalism and her “hybrid” identity, revealing how bringing together cultures is never an effortless or painless project.

### **Im/migration and Globalization**

Before exploring how Oyeyemi participates in discourses of national identity, representation, and diaspora through *The Icarus Girl*, I first demonstrate the processes of globalization and nation-formation that create and build upon these discourses.

#### *Key Epistemological Debates of Globalization*

My epistemological and methodological approach to migration studies arises from a framework of globalization analysis. Globalization refers to ongoing processes of global

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<sup>8</sup> Emily Pohl-Weary, “‘I Do Not Outline’: An Interview With Helen Oyeyemi,” *Hazlitt*, last modified April 1, 2014. <https://hazlitt.net/feature/i-do-not-outline-interview-helen-oyeyemi>.

interconnectedness and convergences throughout history, which arise in “forms of travel, communication, exploration, conquest, and trade that periodically accelerate in ways keyed to technological, economic, and political change.”<sup>9</sup> Several essential debates over the nature of globalization exist: one, whether globalization is old or new; two, whether Western societies are the main actors in global changes; and three, whether global interconnectedness has decreased the power of the nation state. These three debates, although there are many more, are essential when analyzing global epistemologies in reference to immigration.

The historical debate surrounding globalization questions whether it is a new phenomenon, constituting a dramatic change from a recent past facilitated by accelerated means of travel and communication, or not. Those who argue it is usually agree that globalization began in the 1980s with the advent of the internet and end of the Cold War,<sup>10</sup> which have wholly shifted social, cultural, economic, and political relations.<sup>11</sup> However, many critics argue that this view improperly historicizes many globalization flows, and wrongfully implies that interconnections formed before the late twentieth century do not have a significant effect on the world today. In his book *Global Matters*, Paul Jay discusses the epistemological faults in the “new globalization” argument: “Globalization in our own time should be seen as a significant acceleration of forces that have been in play since at least the sixteenth century and that are not simply Western in their origin . . . We need to . . . reconcile the histories of trade, exploration, conquest, colonization, decolonization, and postcolonialism with the long history of globalization.”<sup>12</sup> Jay’s focus on historicized global forces like imperialism and decolonization

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 34.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Globalization: The Key Concepts* (New York: Berg, 2007), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Jay, 33.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

points to the way that our conceptions of globalization can change with an epistemological shift: “new globalization”<sup>13</sup> can ignore the ways that Western imperial forces have shaped the makeup of many nations, and therefore shaped transnational connections such as migration. But a shift to a historicized globalization works dialogically with a postcolonial perspective, shedding light on the ways in which our conceptions of nation—and therefore conceptions of national identity—are an extension of our colonial history. National identity, as I will discuss later, is regulated and policed both at the physical borders and in the physical bodies of the “Othered” migrant. Therefore, a historicized view of globalization is fundamental for understanding flows of migration in the twenty-first century.

The second debate, over whether globalization is a flattening, Western phenomenon, builds upon the previous debate. This perspective comes from the viewpoint that globalization is a predominantly economic phenomenon, and therefore that the shift to an interconnected, global world occurred due to the spread of capitalism. This perspective also tends to equate globalization with neoliberalism. Many argue that this stance ignores the types of interconnectedness created by non-economic flows, such as the movement of people and ideas, and other cultural producers. A largely economic and neoliberal stance misrepresents the role that people play in creating connections, leaving them without agency in the face of an inescapable Western cultural bulldozing force: in reality, many scholars have analyzed the phenomenon of “re-embedding” and “identity politics” in response to global processes, wherein

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<sup>13</sup> Jay references Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large*, which recognizes globalization as an “absolute break of the past”: a new phenomenon characterized by an explosion of “media and migration” that have shifted the way that we as a global society imagine our communities. While Jay is interested in Appadurai’s concept of new imaginative possibilities through this rupture, he argues that the definition is limiting. Jay, 35-6.

local communities restore their identities and traditions in conversation with globalization.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, a historicized understanding of globalization can also dispel the myth of Westernization, as most of the early cultural and economic powers spread from East to West: for example, around 1000, scientific, mathematic, and technological innovations from China, India, and Turkey moved west and shaped the formation of Western intellectual production. Jay quotes Amartya Sen's 2002 article "How to Judge Globalism," where she argues that "the agents of globalization are neither European nor exclusively Western, nor are they necessarily linked to Western dominance."<sup>15</sup> Sen's argument against solely-Western globalization forces points to the role that international actors perform in the global community and accords agency to non-Western countries. In terms of epistemological significance, Westernization can be extended into "American exceptionalism," or completely ignore global processes that have their roots in non-Western countries. Regarding immigration, this debate is significant for its implication that immigrants are motivated by economic factors alone, or indeed that immigrants only move from Global South to North; both implications form the basis of many common misrepresentations of immigrants and can lead to harmful stereotypes and unhelpful immigration laws, both of which I will discuss later.

The final globalization debate concerns the role of the nation in a globalized world: many critics<sup>16</sup> have said that the rise of international cooperation, and the increasing purview of global governments over economic, political, and social issues within nations, have given greater power to a global community over any single nation's power. Erickson points out that while international cooperation has increased, the extent of the power global governments wield is

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<sup>14</sup> Eriksen, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Jay, 39.

<sup>16</sup> See Eriksen, chapter 1.

dependent upon the context of the nation-state and its willingness to give up sovereignty. Therefore the state still holds considerable power in a globalized world.<sup>17</sup> Although this debate is complicated, it is essential for migration scholarship to privilege an analysis of national power and sovereignty over global institutions, especially with my current focus on American and English nations, which are less likely to submit to international regulations. The nation's role in shaping immigrant experience is based much more upon its own epistemologies than a shared "commitment to a transnational good."<sup>18</sup>

*Immigration, National Identity, and Nation-Formation*

The common thread of the globalization debates discussed above is that each one points to the relationship of immigration, (a global process), to the nation-state. As the nation shapes and regulates immigration and immigrants, so immigrants also have a lasting effect on the norms of any society. At the risk of identifying immigrants as a monolith, however, I use Eithne Luibhéid's definition of immigrant, which

makes no distinction among legal immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, or undocumented immigrants . . . Such distinctions do not reflect empirically verifiable differences among migrants, who often shift from one category to another. The distinctions are imposed by the state and general public on migrants in order to delimit the rights that they will have or be denied, and the forms of surveillance, discipline, and normalization to which they will be subjected . . . these distinctions [between types of migrants] function as technologies of normalization, discipline, and sanctioned dispossession.<sup>19</sup>

This definition is useful for expanding our conception of who is an immigrant, which is necessary because immigrants and refugees are governed by different laws and are treated

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<sup>17</sup> Eriksen, 77.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Eithne Luibhéid, *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xi.

differently by societies. For example, refugees tend to receive sympathy and aid, whereas immigrants are seen to be moving for economic gain and are therefore treated with distrust. Meanwhile, as Luibhéid points out, the delineations between types of migrants are often unclear or fail to reflect an individual's reality. Her definition also lays out how these distinctions function to control migrants. For example, Luibhéid comments upon how nations can control how many 'outsiders' gain citizenship with a combination of refugee/asylum seeker laws and immigration control: the former is regulated by global governance, meaning nations must accept refugees and asylum seekers under a wide set of circumstances; however, the process is expensive, lengthy, full of loopholes, and therefore still exclusionary. Meanwhile, immigration law is nationally regulated and can be discriminatory: exclusionary immigration laws are technically allowable because the refugee/asylum method theoretically exists for many to access.<sup>20</sup>

Immigration control is almost always among a nation's main priorities, shifting position as real and perceived threats to the nation change. Immigrants, as both "outsiders" and the unknown "Other," represent a threat both to a nation's physical borders and to the national identity.<sup>21</sup> Therefore the act of policing borders is also an act of policing national culture. These supposed threats are in many cases more about shifting norms, cultural mixing, and a fear of the unknown. It is worth mentioning that actual risks from immigration and perceived risks have

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<sup>20</sup> Luibhéid, xiii.

<sup>21</sup> Of course, not all immigrants are considered threats to the nation-formation, nor is immigration consistently policed in every country (for example, Global North to North migration is encouraged). However, even though some types of immigrants are welcomed, especially if their labor is considered useful to the nation, others still face exclusion. In any case, I am attempting to demonstrate that the nation has a vested interest in controlling and surveilling the actions of immigrants. Even "preferred" immigrants are subject to control by the nation, and a documented immigrant one day can become undocumented, and therefore "illegal," the next.

become conflated for many nations after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.<sup>22</sup> These attacks were targeted not against individuals but against the existence of the Western state, and were carried out by people who had successfully passed through immigration controls—“bona fide residents of the US.”<sup>23</sup> The result, therefore, was the state increasing its power over its borders and reasserting its sovereignty. However, Eriksen also points out that “what we fear is rarely that which actually kills us,”<sup>24</sup> suggesting that the perceived risk of terrorism leads to high levels of xenophobia and discrimination against the immigrant “Other” (usually racially and ethnically identified) that is in many cases unwarranted.

Most of the perceived “threats” created by the presence of immigrants are viewed as an attack upon cultural norms, solvable through immigration control or through assimilation. Luibhéid comments that immigration and citizenship has historically been “gendered . . . an idealized heterosexual family sphere,”<sup>25</sup> implying that those who do not comply to these norms have been excluded. For example, men have been privileged in their pursuit of citizenship, living space, and work in other countries, yet were generally discouraged by the receiving state from marrying or engaging in sexual relations outside of their race or ethnicity. Meanwhile, unmarried women in the United States<sup>26</sup> have historically been barred from crossing borders, as typified by the Page Law of 1875, which was a gendered exclusion of female Asian immigrants due in part

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<sup>22</sup> Eriksen, 136, 138.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 134.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 138.

<sup>25</sup> Luibhéid, xix.

<sup>26</sup> This is also true for Germany (such as in the “1913 Empire- and State-Citizenship Law in Germany,” which lists the characteristics of the ideal immigrant).

to “Oriental”<sup>27</sup> conceptions of their sexuality.<sup>28</sup> The policing of sexuality through family formation at the border demonstrates how nations react to perceived cultural threats. Family formation is especially important here due to the role that it plays in ensuring the future of the state and its power; cultural mixing threatens the ideologies of the state and thereby weakens its power. This approach towards nation-formation and immigration threats therefore affects women specifically: women, as child-bearers and (traditionally) their children’s first teachers, are “typically constructed as the repositories of cultural tradition”; therefore their “sexual behavior tends to become viewed—by both migrant communities and dominant cultures—as ‘evidence’ of the worth of the group, and policed accordingly.”<sup>29</sup> Here Luibhéid demonstrates how women can be viewed with particular suspicion and policed for the role they play as producers of culture.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, this can also mean that the role of assimilation also falls to immigrant women and mothers. For example, in *The Icarus Girl*, Jess’s unruly behavior and inability to fit in is often blamed on her mother, Sarah: as the immigrant mother, it falls to Sarah to police Jess, encouraging her either to fit in or to be more Nigerian. Sarah’s failure to help Jess be properly English is then critiqued by Jess’s English father. Sarah therefore falls under suspicion both for her reproduction of Nigerian culture through the way she raises Jess, and for her inability to help Jess assimilate.

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<sup>27</sup> “Orientalism” was the academic study of Asia (by British and Western European scholars) as a singular “geographical, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic unit,” a study which thrived throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Orientalist studies not only failed to recognize the many differences between Asiatic cultures, but also tended to misrepresent and exoticize Asians as “mysterious,” “sensual,” and “profound.” These stereotypes continue today even though the study of Orientalism is now outdated.

Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 50-1.

<sup>28</sup> David Eng, “Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas,” In *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, eds. Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose (New York: Routledge, 2013), 308.

<sup>29</sup> Luibhéid, xxvii.

<sup>30</sup> Worth mentioning is that when women’s sexualities are policed, their bodies come to represent their reproductive abilities (both in terms of work and child-bearing), rather than any other aspect of their identities or creative potential.

The other solution for policing and protecting national identity against an immigrant “threat” is to encourage assimilation, as mentioned before. Assimilation “assume[s] a one-way process . . . of acculturation on the part of the immigrants, of becoming ‘like’ in cultural patterns, such as language, behavior, and values.” On the other hand, assimilation also requires immigrants to become incorporated into the societal institutions of the nation, “educational, occupational, political,” and therefore into the “core society.”<sup>31</sup> The goals of assimilation, however, do not take into account that migrants are “individuals who ‘take actions, make decisions, and develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously’.”<sup>32</sup> For example, Jess is fascinated by classic English literature, especially *Little Women*, which in part demonstrates her ability to assimilate into the English national identity. Yet, she also “itch[es] for a pencil to ‘correct’ with,” scratching out parts of the book that she disagrees with and writing in new versions.<sup>33</sup> Jess cannot assimilate without simultaneously negotiating the terms of her belonging. Therefore, although assimilation is the goal of many governmental policies, as immigrants “become incorporated into a new society, they also transform it.”<sup>34</sup>

C. Kendall Theado points out how the question of assimilation and the ease with which immigrants are incorporated into society has shifted over time and has a racial and ethnic component. Lest we make the mistake of equating all immigrant experiences, Theado spells out

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<sup>31</sup> Ramaswami Mahalingam, *Cultural Psychology of Immigrants* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 41, 44.

<sup>32</sup> Additionally, Luibhéid points out that, historically, immigrant communities and communities of color have found that “adopting mainstream ways did not appreciably alter the racial discrimination to which they were subjected,” which demonstrates the inefficacy of assimilation and the negative effects that government policing can create. Luibhéid, xxii.

<sup>33</sup> Oyeyemi, 109.

<sup>34</sup> Mahalingam, 44.

what I have already gestured to: that reception of white European immigrants, both historically and currently, varies widely from the reception of immigrants whose race and ethnicity are seen as deviant to the “ideal” white American citizen.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, our understanding of national identity and of immigrants’ position in relation to it must take into account both historical and contemporary racializations of the border; the racialized immigrant is the “primary site for the policing of political, cultural, and economic membership in the US nation-state.”<sup>36</sup> We must trouble the popular American narrative that it is “a nation of immigrants,” when in fact it is a nation accepting of a certain type of immigrant. Theado finds that the perceived ability of an immigrant group to assimilate relies in part upon its literacy rates, with “new immigrant groups . . . viewed as suspect . . . as an effect of their high rates of illiteracy.”<sup>37</sup> Literacy is an important symbol of one’s ability to belong to a country, as argued by Benedict Anderson in “Imagined Communities”: an inability to communicate keeps you outside of the collective, “homogenized” national community.<sup>38</sup> As literacy refers not only to familiarity with the English language but also to a perceived awareness and observation of a “unified” national identity, we can draw clear connections between an immigrant’s ability to assimilate and a nation’s willingness to allow a new group of immigrants to be “written into the ongoing construction of the American identity.”<sup>39</sup>

Although assimilation has long been a discursive and material strategy for incorporating immigrants into a society, it is not the only one: diasporas, or communities of immigrants, have

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<sup>35</sup> C. Kendall Theado, “Narrating a Nation: Second Wave Immigration, Literacy, and the Framing of the American Identity,” *Journal of Advanced Composition* 33, no. 1-2 (2013): 12.

<sup>36</sup> Mahalingam, 180-1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Benedict Anderson, “Imagined Communities,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed., ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 1920.

<sup>39</sup> Mahalingam, 15.

long been an alternative means of community creation that opposes the “melting pot” assimilation narrative. However, the definition of diasporas has shifted over the past centuries, meaning that the formation of immigrant communities has changed. The term diaspora typically referred to the Jewish population of exiles that formed close-knit minority communities in other countries, all while cultivating the following characteristics within these communities: “a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland”; the belief that they are not “fully accepted by their host society”; a desire to return to the “true, ideal home”; and a commitment to the “restoration,” “safety and prosperity” of the homeland.<sup>40</sup> However, this idea of diaspora has garnered critiques that it is too binary, privileging the homeland and implying that all immigrants share the same connections to their ancestral roots or seek to return. New conceptions of diaspora speak to its “multi-situatedness,” wherein immigrants are not just stuck between two worlds, but exist within multiple worlds; their connections to both homeland and host society are often full of conflicts.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, more recent diasporic theories point to the ways in which diasporas are “site[s] of political interrogation,” conversation, and challenges to accepted norms—or, indeed, a singular national identity.<sup>42</sup> As I will discuss later, Jess’s position in England speaks to the ways that diaspora can challenge nation. Diasporas represent a refusal to assimilate and as such are often considered “threatening” to national identity and national safety.

The thought process that connects immigrants to a “threatened” national identity and leads to the policing of immigrant bodies involves the same logic that identifies immigrants as

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<sup>40</sup> Francoise Král, *Critical Identities in Contemporary Anglophone Diasporic Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 13.

<sup>41</sup> Král, 13.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

the sources of other risks to the nation: therefore, societal prejudice against immigrants is founded upon an epistemology that privileges a specific national identity. Several studies have been conducted on societal perceptions of immigrant populations that link these together. For example, the International Social Survey (ISSP) in 1995 collected data from 17 European countries to measure whether residents believe “immigrants increase crime . . . take jobs away from people . . . and are bad for the economy.”<sup>43</sup> Perceived immigrant threats therefore manifest in both personal and societal anxieties, and the proof of such can be found in the discursive frameworks characterizing immigrants. For example, the idea that the immigrant is “a liability to the economic well-being of the nation” is found discursively in phrases such as “unskilled labor,” “floods/waves of laborers,” and “take jobs away from people” as noted above. In the same way, the idea that immigrants are “liabilities to the moral well-being of the nation” come through in phrases like “immigrants increase crime” or patterns of ethnic or racist connotations of danger, degeneracy, or promiscuity.<sup>44</sup> This is all to say that discursive patterns (found in media and literary representations, as well as public discourse) shape a wider societal opinion of certain types of immigrants; this public opinion towards immigrants directly shapes and is shaped by a perceived national identity. The result is a direct relationship between societal discourse and the material realities of immigrants and their abilities to enter a country and live there peacefully, assimilated or not. Therefore, a closer examination of the history of literary and media representations of immigrants will shed some light upon actual immigrant experiences, and also demonstrate how changes in migration flows (and therefore nation-state perceptions and

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<sup>43</sup> The study found correlations between age and anti-immigrant positions in Western and Eastern Europe, but not in every country. Mahalingam, 98.

<sup>44</sup> Theado, 22.

responses) in an increasingly global era can lead to epistemological shifts in our conceptions of the world around us.

## **Literary & Media Representations and Perceptions of Immigrants**

### *National British and American Literary Canon*

The traditional, “default narrative” for studying English literature until the mid-twentieth century was through the lens of the nation-state, meaning that the literary canon was shaped around artistic production within state borders and therefore often maintained myths of national identity, as mentioned before.<sup>45</sup> The study of literature and the choice of texts to be in the literary canon were based upon Matthew Arnold’s criteria. The “Arnoldian model” describes the ‘best’ literature as that which: “transcends the local, historical circumstances of its production”; “embodies universal truths about reality”; and is “ahistorical,” “singular,” “essential.”<sup>46</sup> The critique of this method is of course that this approach touts itself as “disinterested” and therefore somehow objective and universal, which masks its true nature as “masculine, interested, [and] politicized.”<sup>47</sup> This literary canon, forged by academics hailing from universities that enrolled and hired white men almost exclusively, played a large part (along with other academic fields of study) in “forging an aesthetic and ideological consensus about culture and identity grounded in a limited set of texts unified around certain themes and values.”<sup>48</sup> In so doing, the university as an institution was linked to the nation-state as the protector and producer of the nation’s values and its culture.

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<sup>45</sup> Jay, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 25.

*Shifts in Literary Studies and Globalization*

The university as an institution, as well as literary studies, has shifted since the mid-twentieth century from a policy that privileged “sameness” into a critique of this method. Jay narrates these changes as occurring in conjunction with and due to forces outside the academy,<sup>49</sup> like the Civil Rights movement, the women’s movement, the gay rights movement, and the anti-Vietnam War movement.<sup>50</sup> These social and political changes, along with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 which lifted restrictions on Asian, Latin American, Mexican, and other non-Western European immigration, led to a demographic change in the US population as well as in academia.<sup>51</sup> Literary and societal theories of “sameness” were challenged. Within the literary field, deconstructionists searched for holes and “absences” in traditional narratives, trying to discover whose stories were missing and if there were categories beyond “us” and “them.”<sup>52</sup> Michel Foucault’s theories take deconstruction to a new level and argue how—beyond language and into society, politics, race, gender, and sexuality—all notions of “truth” are products of difference, and are defined and regulated by societal discourse.<sup>53</sup> Foucault’s use of deconstruction has become common for many academic fields, as it encourages reflection about reader perspective, historical, social, and political context, and the possible missing or obscured pieces of a story.

Outside of specific literary theories, the literary field as a whole expanded after the 1960s: “American studies” expanded beyond its limited geographical and historical framework to include literature production across all of the Americas, and study the borders and linkages of

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<sup>49</sup> This section focuses on the United States and its production of culture and national identity.

<sup>50</sup> Jay, 17.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

these literatures.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, in Europe, the decolonization process spurred the rise of postcolonial studies, which offered “alternative histories and experiences” on the one hand, and on the other demanded that both colonized and colonizer address texts and issues that “cut across national boundaries”:<sup>55</sup> for example, European conceptions of national identity that were based upon empire, and the use of this epistemology to develop immigration policy during the decolonization era. Postcolonialism tends to be more of a fraught topic in the United States: until recently, the empire has remained absent from American cultural dialogue. In fact, even as studies of the United States’ relationship with Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and Guam have expanded, as have explorations of “militarism and surveillance, war and occupation, and slavery and genocide,” these dialogues have remained discrete from European discussions of colonialism. In much of modern discourse, there remains “no American Empire.”<sup>56</sup>

The changes in literary studies and academic understandings of cultural production, difference, and the nation can be merged with our understanding of globalization. Global forces, both economic and cultural, intertwine with changes within the state (such as the Civil Rights movement) and accelerate them, which leads to epistemological shifts, which in turn can lead to global forces creating new connections and playing out in new ways upon nations and societies. Therefore, although there is no singular “globalization” phenomenon that led to an increase in transnational literature in the United States, the two are connected, and both constitute challenges to “what used to be a largely nationalist enterprise.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>56</sup> Yogita Goyal, “The Transnational Turn and Postcolonial Studies,” *The Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 54.

<sup>57</sup> Jay, 23.

*Immigrant Narratives*

Even as the academic understanding of the nation has shifted congruently with the acceleration of global flows of migration, challenges to established notions of nation and national identity are often met with pushback—as we’ve seen before, through re-embedding or local politics—or, in some cases, a slowness in the “dominant” society to shift with academia. Therefore, immigrants are still likely to see themselves represented as “outsiders” or “threats” within popular media (or, as I will discuss later, are restricted to certain types of self-representation within narratives). Veronica Ramos discusses how the “dominant” society, fearful that what it means to be an “American” will change, constructs “idioms of nationhood” that are used frequently in debates on immigration to keep the “Other” out.<sup>58</sup> Her specific example is of the American Immigration Control Foundation (AICF), which uses “idioms of nationhood” to interpret social circumstances through narratives that frame them as the fault of immigration. For example, Ramos points to the “Fall of Great Civilizations” narrative type, which constructs America as one of these civilizations with the tragic flaw of having too many immigrants—or, “disaffected hordes [with] ingrained customs and attitudes that too often are inimical to our hard won freedoms and our principles.”<sup>59</sup> A second type of narrative is “Us Against the World,” which portrays the US as an independent and sovereign nation under siege from invading “Alien Gangs.”<sup>60</sup> These types of narratives set immigrants in dangerous opposition to a threatened national identity, one which requires the following: “speaking English, getting a job, staying out of poverty, obeying the law, acting patriotically, and, finally, being white and European.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Veronica Ramos, “Images, Symbols, and Words: The American Immigration Control Foundation and ‘True’ American Character,” *The Centennial Review* 41, no. 3 (1997): 593.

<sup>59</sup> Ramos, 595-6.

<sup>60</sup> Qtd AICF. Ramos, 599-600.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 601.

These narratives, as discussed before, have real-world consequences by shifting public perception and conversation on immigration debate: those who do not belong in the national community are more vulnerable to having their rights taken away by the state, as citizenship, or membership in the nation, is a precondition to having certain rights “guaranteed.”<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, even in immigrant fiction, representations of immigrants’ realities have been constricted both by the lingering effects of the literary canon and the restricted accessibility of publishing houses for minority writers in general. In many cases, immigrant stories that sell and linger in the public imaginary tend to follow certain patterns, and deviations from those patterns are less likely to become popular. The most successful immigrant narratives in the past have relied heavily upon the established national identity: in America’s case, the myth of the “Promised Land,” “nation of immigrants.”<sup>63</sup> Narratives that follow this myth usually showcase immigration as the fulfilment of the American dream: poverty to wealth, oppression to freedom, Global South to North, tradition to progress. These dichotomies, obviously problematic both for their limiting binary structure of one or the other, and for their privileging of Western culture and the power of the American sovereign nation, remain popular for the way that they strengthen national ideals. Many typical immigrant narratives following this pattern will use the narrative framework of departure, then crossing, then arrival; other important moments include “receiving news from America, preparing for a journey, crossing of borders . . . and witnessing first sights of the new land on arrival.”<sup>64</sup> Culture shock and nostalgia can also be aspects of these narratives, but acculturation into the receiving society must be the final result.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Mahalingam, 180.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 171-2.

Allison Layfield narrates how these expectations of immigrant fiction play out in the fiction of Nora Okja Keller, who wrote two books, *Comfort Woman* and *Fox Girl*, that were received very differently. Both books were about young Korean women who immigrated to the US: the difference, Layfield finds, is in *Comfort Woman*'s familiar structure and narratives, as well as the (assumed) successful acculturation of the main character to American culture. Specifically, Layfield points to the mother-daughter tale in *Comfort Woman* being a familiar trope of Asian American literature and therefore a "friendly cultural context" for American readers who are already familiar with Amy Tan and other writers who follow this trend. *Comfort Woman* "reaffirms the importance of traditional family bonds," and, in some sense, shows Akiko's move to America as "a means of salvation."<sup>65</sup> Layfield also points to the formulaic role of the mother-daughter relationship in "eclipsing" the immigrant mother's experience: "The Asian American daughter is typically cured of her malaise by hearing about some trauma or ordeal endured by her mother. The more exotic, traumatic, and suspenseful the mother's story, the less necessary it is to have it organically linked to the issues the American daughter is dealing with."<sup>66</sup> The reader remains distant from the traumas of the immigrant experience, and the story remains accessible for an audience that expects to feel a certain way when reading this kind of narrative. Meanwhile, *Fox Girl* never easefully incorporates into American society, has few recognizable passages that mirror the American dream, and features protagonists that are unfamiliar and uneasy. *Comfort Woman* won multiple accolades, whereas *Fox Girl* received bad reviews. As we can see, even immigrant fiction that claims authenticity and speaks to varied,

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<sup>65</sup> Also worth mentioning is that both of Layfield's suppositions here, about "traditional family bonds" and America as "salvation" are complicated within the novel. I use Layfield here for her conversation about audience expectations; I do not agree with her readings of the rest of the novel.

Allison Layfield, "Asian American Literature and Reading Formations: A Case Study of Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* and *Fox Girl*," *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* 7 (2015): 65.

<sup>66</sup> Layfield, 67.

complex experiences and relationships, can be vulnerable to restriction and criticism if it transgresses an idealized American identity or a traditional immigrant narrative.

### **Immigrant Writing and Contesting Identities**

The unique positionality of the immigrant writer has fascinated many scholars—especially those who study borders and diasporas—for the possible freedoms or challenges of their expression. Although the position of the immigrant is unique and can manifest in political, social, and cultural interrogation, we run the risk of saying that this interrogation and challenge is inherent in immigrant self-representations and narratives. In reality, the potential for multi-consciousness “needs to be actuated and is far from being self-generated by the position of liminality.”<sup>67</sup> In other words, immigrant writers cannot always be labelled as writing about immigrant experiences “by virtue of their transplantation” and liminal position.<sup>68</sup> Their experiences do not dictate their identity or their political consciousness. In the effort to avoid essentializing immigrant writers and immigrant fiction, we must challenge the “reliance on the category of experience as the basis of explanation in literary criticism.”<sup>69</sup>

Helen Oyeyemi is one author who frequently risks, by way of her immigrant identity and experiences, being put into the category of “immigrant fiction” without regard to her political consciousness. As a Nigerian-British writer who immigrated at a young age to London with her family, she is in peril of being treated in the reception of her books “in a way that makes her readable and 'placeable' . . . in a category that enables literary criticism and the reviewers to

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<sup>67</sup> Král, 16.

<sup>68</sup> Carine M. Mardorossian, “From Literature of Exile to Migrant Literature,” *Modern Language Studies* 32, no. 2 (2002): 17.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

interpret her works.”<sup>70</sup> However, although some of her books, like *The Icarus Girl*, involve discussions of immigration, diaspora, and race, these explorations require reader interpretation and evaluation beyond noting her personal history or possible autobiographical standpoint. And indeed, *The Icarus Girl* questions the now-typical representations and formations of multiculturalism and diaspora. Through *The Icarus Girl*, Oyeyemi resists the “placeable” by situating her protagonist, Jess, in three shifting, fragmented worlds at once, questioning singular constructions of national identity.

Although immigrant narratives face resistance from institutions that seek to preserve a specific national identity and formation, literary and media representations continue to be an essential means for immigrants to complicate and challenge official discourses. Jeanne Glesener points to how immigrant fiction “scratches at the foundations of dominant Western theoretical discourse and thought.”<sup>71</sup> Immigrant fiction provides not only a challenge, but a destabilization of norms and hegemonic power structures. Glesener quotes Ian Chambers’s observation that

Western thought with its promise of a mastery of the complete picture is confronted by the incompleteness of the spilled, the broken world (...): a world broken down into complexities, diverse bodies, memories, languages, histories, differences. The postcolonial presence, where the abstract metaphor of the Other is now metamorphosed into concrete, historical bodies, challenges the screen of universal thought.<sup>72</sup>

Immigrant fiction can reveal divisions and holes in the “complete picture.” Just like immigrants physically confront the nation and its borders as “concrete, historical bodies,” immigrant fiction confronts the nation’s imaginary and its borders. For example, in *The Icarus Girl*, Jess, as a partial outsider to English culture, challenges the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale, poking holes in it

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<sup>70</sup> Jeanne E. Glesener, “The Emergence of the ‘Foreign’ Author and the Bewilderment of the Reader/Critic,” *Interlitteraria* 11 (2006): 191.

<sup>71</sup> Glesener, 190.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

and asking questions like “why did the fairy make everyone else fall asleep?” Additionally, she is not satisfied with easy answers like “she was a good fairy . . . she had good intentions.”<sup>73</sup> As Jess takes this answer and struggles with it, she applies it to her own life, imagining herself and Tilly Tilly as the good/bad fairy. Jess is constantly trying to rewrite the English stories that she has heard, because they do not match the world that she lives in. Her presence means that the single national imaginary is not universally true.

Jess shows how a multiplicity of voices can challenge the single, unitary story. Dierdre Lashgari lays out three literary terms that explain what occurs when transnational, minority, and multi-ethnic voices are part of a conversation. The first, heteroglossia, refers to the “unraveling” of binary structures, which allows new truths to emerge and “orthodox truths” to dissolve. Heteroglossia questions what is “normal” and “reasonable” by demonstrating experiences outside of binary structures, thereby exposing those binaries as insufficient. Okparanta notes how Jess does not fit into the binary English/Nigerian structure: “In Nigeria, Jessamy’s identity can never reach a final, complete moment of wholeness because it remains haunted by the missing part: her Englishness. Similarly, in England, a final (full) identity is unattained because there she is haunted by what is lost or missing: the Nigerian part of her self.”<sup>74</sup> Jess inhabits a space outside of the binary, as she cannot fully fit into one or the other. Her presence in England and Nigeria demonstrates how each place is not truly “normal” or “reasonable.” Lashgari also points to dialogics, the “constructive discourse of conflict,” in which she posits that dialogue exposes “discrepancies, contradictions, [and] rifts,” which once exposed can be addressed. Oyeyemi speaks to this as well: throughout the novel, Jess precociously understands what kind of answers

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<sup>73</sup> Oyeyemi, 184.

<sup>74</sup> Okparanta, “Negotiating the Boundaries of Nation, Language, and Race in Helen Oyeyemi’s *Icarus Girl* and Edwidge Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*,” 192-3.

her parents would prefer to hear from her. She is oppressed by the expectations of her family and the people around her: she can only represent her true feelings through screams, which lead to conflict, which leads to the family confronting their problems. Finally, Lashgari points to the “travesia, or crossing,” in which exposure to multiple perspectives, or the “threatening not-known,” leaves you more capable of questioning your own position.<sup>75</sup> This is also reflected in Oyeyemi’s narrative. Jess crosses between Nigeria and England, and between reality and dreams: she encounters the “not-known” in Tilly Tilly, and in dialogue with her Jess questions her own identity. For example, Tilly tells her “There is no homeland . . . There is nowhere where there are people who will not *get* you.”<sup>76</sup> This conflict forces Jess to reconsider her search for a homeland, a resting place for one or the other of her identities. The ability of the immigrant or multi-ethnic writer to represent themselves and speak challenging narratives is directly linked to a breakdown of binaries, the addressing (and possible resolving) of conflict, and the ability of those (natives) who “belong” to the nation to question their national identity and culture.

The ability of immigrants to question their positions and others has its roots in exilic and diasporic conceptions of immigration. As mentioned before, immigrants have traditionally been seen as exiles to their homeland, forced out against their will and wishing for a return home that could never happen. In these types of representations, exiles straddle “two worlds. . . by virtue of their alienation” and can give an “objective” view of both, as “in-betweens, mediators between two cultures.”<sup>77</sup> This type of conception is demonstrated by Oyeyemi through Jess’s mother, Sarah Harrison, who left her homeland and feels like an exile from her Yoruba name, culture,

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<sup>75</sup> Dierdre Lashgari, *Violence, Silence, and Anger: Women's Writing as Transgression (Feminist Issues: Practice, Politics, Theory)* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>76</sup> Oyeyemi, 260.

<sup>77</sup> Mardorossian, 16.

language, religion, and family. She sees this exile as the reason for her daughter's problems. Okparanta points out that for Sarah, "the return to Nigeria satisfies a delusion of completeness and completion for her daughter's fractured identity. Sarah operates under the assumption (and hope) that Jessamy will arrive in Nigeria and be able to figuratively regain her 'missing half'. The true meaning of being displaced and unable to claim an originary space is most lucid in Sarah's fantasy and in the vain hope that a return to "home" is the logical response to her daughter's fragmented identity."<sup>78</sup> Yet Jess lacks a home-space in Nigeria and England.

This binary logic of exile is one often applied to diasporic groups, which have been seen as "melancholy places of exile and oppression,"<sup>79</sup> fitting in neither here nor there. Like the Jewish diaspora, the African Diaspora was defined by Joseph Harris in 1996 as "a community with an identity linking them to a geographical area of origin; similar physical attributes and derivative cultural traditions; and a passionate commitment, due to a common social condition, to a set of ideals."<sup>80</sup> He expanded upon this definition in 2003, referencing shared diasporic experiences that are linked together by "collective memories and myths about Africa as the homeland or place of origin."<sup>81</sup> With these definitions, the African diaspora is a monolith, with a single tie to the "homeland" within the receiving country. In this view exiles and diasporic groups have a "double-vision" that comes from their liminal positions, which might allow them to critique both "here" and "there."<sup>82</sup> However, this perception has been replaced by the "shift from exile to migrant," which challenges this binary "here" and "there" logic by emphasizing

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<sup>78</sup> Okparanta, 192.

<sup>79</sup> Král, 11.

<sup>80</sup> Okparanta, 87.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

<sup>82</sup> Král, 17.

“movement, rootlessness, and the mixing of cultures, races, and languages.”<sup>83</sup> This change, though small, positions the migrant not in a fixed space, but rather in a shifting locus, a “mode of being in the world.”<sup>84</sup> Therefore the diaspora, as well, is not a place of “double-vision” but of “multi-consciousness.”<sup>85</sup> Jess lives in this place of multi-consciousness. She “inhabits three often overlapping and conflicting worlds, both in the Yoruba sense of having an identity shaped by the past, present and interactions between those and in the pragmatic sense of inhabiting three cultural worlds, of Nigeria, England, and Nigerian-English hybridity.”<sup>86</sup> She lives in the real world, the spirit world, and “the Bush, which is a sort of wilderness of the mind.”<sup>87</sup> And her story—the text itself—lives in an in-between space of fantastic ghost story and realism, never quite revealing which it truly is.

Jess’s multi-consciousness, and that of the book, demonstrates how conflicts between cultures are both created and revealed by hybridity. Stouck points out that “cross-cultural exchanges are not always happy experiences,”<sup>88</sup> yet conflicts do reveal the extent and limits of norms and standards within a culture’s or nation’s epistemology. Jess’s experiences in her multiple worlds demonstrates how painful and isolating it can be to live within an irreconcilable binary. She finds a space in the third world, but even that is not a comfortable (or ghost-less) place for her. Oyeyemi shows that hybridity and “multi-consciousness” is never comfortable,

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<sup>83</sup> Mardorossian, 16.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Král, 15.

<sup>86</sup> Jordan Stouck, “Abjecting Hybridity in Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl*,” *ARIEL* 41, no. 2 (2010): 98.

<sup>87</sup> Oyeyemi, 200.

<sup>88</sup> Stouck, 92.

reconcilable, or without its conflicts, yet it is necessary for the conversations, shifts in epistemological formations, and challenges to essentialized identity that it creates.

## **Conclusion**

Nation-states like the United States and the United Kingdom build up their borders, both physical, political, and social, against immigration. The response of the nation to immigration is due to a perceived threat to the nation's identity, although this identity is often already fraught, normative, and unrepresentative of the nation's collective population. The representations within the media and literature of the immigrant or diaspora as threat both shape and are shaped by legal, educational, political, and other societal institutions that benefit from a unified national identity. Meanwhile, the positionality of immigrants as "in-between," with "multiple-consciousnesses" means that both the physical presence of immigrants and their self-representations question the institution of the nation-state, the meaning of culture and national-identity, and other such norms, boundaries, and binaries. As immigration and other globalization flows accelerate, a larger, interconnecting network forms across borders, the "natural" epistemologies of both nation and culture come into question and move from binaries into heterogeneity. Oyeyemi demonstrates how essential this move from binaries into "multi-consciousness" is, even as she insists that the process is not comfortable, or pleasant, (as many proponents of hybridity and multiculturalism argue), but rather constantly full of conflicts.

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