Naming Jhumpa Lahiri

Canons and Controversies

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Chapter 4

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Intertextual Readings of The Namesake

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In March 2007, Fox Searchlight Pictures released Mira Nair's film *The Namesake*. Based on the 2003 novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* foregrounds the generational difference between the American-born Gogol Ganguli and his parents Ashima and Ashoke, both immigrants from India. That same week Sepia Gallery, a private gallery in Manhattan, premiered *Namesake: Inspiration*, an exhibition of photographs that inspired Nair's making of the film. Promoting the film, the exhibition, as well as the novel, Nair and Lahiri made a number of joint public appearances and interviews. In New York City, the burst of publicity accompanying these events made the experiences of middle-class Indian immigrants immediately visible on screen, on the page, and in the gallery setting. No longer were Indian immigrants, as Lahiri protested in an interview, absent from books and other forms of public culture. Rather, Lahiri's novel itself has become a classic text of immigration, and Nair's film among the most widely distributed visual representations of South Asians in the United States. The photography exhibition that accompanied Nair's film amplified the specific history of middle-class Indian immigrants, but its diverse selection of images underscored how immigration is also perceived as a universal experience, common to all Americans.

In this chapter, I foreground the intertextual relationship between the literary, cinematic, and photographic versions of *The Namesake* in order to examine how this text circulates in U.S. public culture as an "ethnic" story that engenders "universal" narratives of belonging to America. *The Namesake* spans over three decades, tracking the Ganguli family's migration from Calcutta to Boston. At the crux of the novel is the generational encounter between Ashoke Ganguli and his son, Gogol. While Gogol chafes

against his peculiar name—a name that he feels is redolent of his father's history in India, not his own life in America—I demonstrate how the story of Gogol's namesake generates a transnational story of belonging. Drawing upon Gayatri Spivak's notion of "catachresis," I argue that "Gogol" is a metaphor for the ways in which the novel unevenly binds together the disparate histories of postcolonial India and contemporary America.

As a film, *The Namesake* generates a cinematographic representation of India and the United States—and of Indians *in* the United States—that is distinct from the novel. If the novel suggests that Indian immigrants are postcolonial subjects, bound by histories of nationalism on the subcontinent, the film emphasizes the ways in which South Asians are racialized and classed subjects in the United States. Reading Nair's adaptation requires attending to the cinematographic techniques and screenplay that distinguishes her iteration of *The Namesake* from Lahiri's novel. Because the film circulated as a dominant visual representation of South Asian immigration, it also requires being read in relation to major ethnographic studies of South Asian immigrants that have emerged over the past decade. Finally, the brief exhibition of photographs in *Namesake: Inspiration* displaces both the literary and cinematographic narratives of *The Namesake*. Though some images in the exhibition drew directly from the film, the majority of photographs had no relation to India or to the United States. The lack of geographical reference and historical narrative in the exhibition generated a quintessentially "American" story of immigration. Thus as *The Namesake* transformed from novel to film to exhibition, so too did its textual narrative transform from a postcolonial critique of Indian and U.S. nationhood, to a racialized portrayal of South Asians in America, and finally to photographs that capture a "universal" experience of migration.

Karen Cardozo has argued in this volume that the novel *The Namesake* is itself an intertextual narrative, for Lahiri's novel draws upon the short story "The Overcoat" by Nikolai Gogol. I build upon Cardozo's argument to consider how *The Namesake* engenders other forms of intertextuality across a variety of media including cinema and photography. Reading the transmutation of the novel in each of these different genres alerts us to the necessity of developing an interdisciplinary framework of analysis, one that situates a literary reading of Lahiri's text alongside an ethnographic and spectator-based reading of the exhibition and the film. Bringing together these different modes of analysis opens out *The Namesake* beyond a singular focus on the novel's intergenerational narrative of migration, and toward a more capacious understanding of the transnational experiences of belonging that structure both the reader and viewer's engagement with the text.

Whereas the novel sharply demarcates the historical and temporal distance between India and the United States (delineated through the first-generation immigrant experience of Ashoke Ganguli, and the second-generation experience of his son), the film binds together these two national spaces through establishing visual continuity between scenes shot in Calcutta and in New York City. Nair produces a sense of visual and spatial continuity in the film through her use of several cinematographic techniques: among them, substituting New York for Boston in the novel, as well as her consistent use of bleached bypass. Yet while the cinematic version of *The Namesake* ties together India and America seamlessly, Nair's representation of Indians in America elides class differences within South Asian immigrant communities. As I argue, Nair's *Namesake* celebrates the achievements of upper-middle-class and upwardly mobile South Asians, even as actual immigration from the subcontinent has resulted in increasingly large working-class South Asian communities. The dissonance between the cinematic representation of South Asian Americans in *The Namesake* and ethnographic evidence on the working-class composition of immigrant communities in New York highlights how middle-class narratives of South Asians continue to circulate in popular culture as a dominant representation of a heterogeneous immigrant community.

I conclude with a brief reading of *Namesake: Inspiration*, the photography exhibit that coincided with the film's premiere in New York City. Unlike the novel or the film, these photographs do not detail South Asian immigration to the United States, nor are they limited to images of India or America. Instead, the exhibit featured prominent photographers from Asia, Latin America, and Europe whose meditations on migration featured abstract images of movement, such as airports, escalators, and suitcases. The geographical and temporal dissonance among the photographs curated for the show created a narrative distinct from the novel and the film. Whereas Lahiri's and Nair's versions of *The Namesake* foreground the experiences of Indian immigrants, the images that composed *Namesake: Inspiration* were unmarked by differences of race, class, and national origin. The dissolution of a specific immigrant experience from the photography exhibit, therefore, complicates Lahiri's assertion that South Asians are absent from public culture. Although Lahiri's own novel provides what she describes as an "affirmation" and "acknowledgement" of the journey that middle-class Indian immigrants made to the United States, the photography exhibit erases the history of South Asians in U.S. public culture. The journey that *The Namesake* makes across three distinct media delineates the ways in which this story of South Asian migration consistently negotiates national and ethnic categories of belonging, and critiques universal notions of citizenship.

THE NOVEL: NAMING AND BELONGING TO AMERICA

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, the protagonist Gogol Ganguli despairs over the circumstances of his unusual name. For Gogol's parents, Ashima and Ashoke, their son's name is an unexpected consequence of living in the United States. Though they expected Ashima's grandmother to choose a name for their child, her letter from Calcutta never arrives. Ashoke is left to record the name of his favorite writer, the Russian author Nikolai Gogol, on the official record of his son's birth. For the young Gogol, his name is a constant reminder of his parents' racial and historical difference: it represents their tastes, preferences, and customs, a way of being that marks how foreign they are in his world. Originally a "pet" name to be used in the privacy of family and other intimates, Gogol also comes to function as a "good" name in the public domain of school and work. As an adult, Gogol legally changes his name to Nikhil, but even this name falls short of establishing a new "American" identity. Nikhil proves to be an awkward fit for Gogol, for the men and women who come to know Gogol only as Nikhil have no idea of the histories that shape his family's life in United States. Given that Lahiri herself publishes under her pet name, Gogol's discomfort with his namesake represents the ambivalence of immigrant identity.[1] As a pet-name-turned-good-name, "Gogol" is a metaphor for the ways in which the novel binds together personal and national history, private and public space, India and the United States.

The Namesake evokes the transnational subjectivity of South Asians in the United States by establishing an intertextual relationship between the novel and Nikolai Gogol's short story, "The Overcoat." As a latent and infrequent motif in *The Namesake*, "The Overcoat" circulates throughout the novel as an anachronistic historical referent. Certainly, Gogol Ganguli views this short story and its author as a relic of past time, an example of his father's odd literary tastes. However, by foregrounding the ways in which Ashoke Ganguli identifies with "The Overcoat," I demonstrate how notions of postcolonial subjectivity bind together first- and second-generation experiences of immigration to the United States.

Less than a decade before the birth of his son, a young Ashoke travels from Calcutta to rural Bengal to visit his grandfather. Ashoke's blind grandfather has requested the company of his grandson to read him aloud the newspaper in the morning. The daily act of reading the newspaper incorporates Ashoke and his grandfather into the imagined community of the Indian state, participating in the project of postcolonial citizenship.[2] In addition to reading the newspaper, Ashoke's grandfather has a second request: to read aloud Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy in the afternoon, not contemporary Bengali authors

but the great Russian writers. At the end of this trip, Ashoke has also been promised an inheritance: the vast store of European and American novels that are housed in his grandfather's bookcase. Ashoke boards the overnight train to his grandfather's home engrossed in a collection of Nikolai Gogol's short stories. His journey is soon interrupted by an accident: the train derails, and Ashoke is left for dead under a pile of corpses. In his hand he clutches a single sheet from "The Overcoat." Fluttering in the wind, the piece of paper enables Ashoke's rescue, his recuperation in Calcutta, and his eventual departure to the United States. At the time of Gogol's birth, Ashoke remembers the story that saved his life, and names his son after its author.

First published in 1842, "The Overcoat" is the story of Akaky Akakyevich, whom Nikolai Gogol describes as "a Civil Servant who cannot by any stretch of the imagination be described as in any way remarkable" (5). In fact Akaky's name is the most unremarkable thing about him, for it is a repetition of his father's name and thus carries with it the burden of genealogy without any distinctive identity. The theme of repetition and reproduction is extended throughout the short story: Akaky is employed as a civil servant in St. Petersburg, and his only responsibility is to copy government documents. The act of duplication is his single greatest source of pleasure; even when his superiors request him to change words in a particular text, Akaky cannot bear to do so. Indeed, it seem as if "his very lack of identity is the source of his happiness" (Caesar, "Gogol's Namesake" 104). However, this lack of identity changes when Akaky decides to buy a new overcoat. As he scrimps and saves toward this goal, the thought of owning a new overcoat fills Akaky with a sudden and overwhelming desire: "His whole existence [. . .] somehow [seemed] to have become fuller, as though he had got married, as though there was someone at his side, as though he was never alone" (*Overcoat* 28). Yet Akaky's personal transformation is short-lived. On the first night he wears his new overcoat, he is accosted by thieves and robbed of his coat. Akaky complains to various members of the imperial bureaucracy, but he is left powerless by their brutality. Consumed by fright and anxiety, he dies shortly thereafter. For many weeks following his death, the ghost of Akaky is rumored to haunt St. Petersburg, stripping citizens of overcoats in all shapes and sizes.

What makes "The Overcoat" so compelling to Ashoke Ganguli, who is drawn to the story of a man who occupies another place in another time? In contrast, what does Gogol Ganguli's abhorrent reaction toward the short story and its author tell us about his desire to establish a singular notion of selfhood, distinct from his father? In her chapter "Gogol's Namesake," Judith Caesar writes that, "One can read the story as a kind of parable about identity theft and shifting identities, in which Akaky goes from being no-one, to being an overcoat, to being a ghost, and finally to being, perhaps, a version

of the very person who robbed him [. . .] The true protection seems to lie in not being known, not being knowable" (105). Expanding upon this reading of shifting identities, I focus on the spatial and temporal relationships established between "The Overcoat" and Ashoke Ganguli, and between Ashoke and his son. The relationships between these fictional characters in nineteenth-century Europe and twentieth-century America illustrate the historical production of transnational subjectivities.

Although the young Ashoke has never been outside of India, much less anywhere outside of Bengal, he identifies strongly with this nineteenth-century short story set in St. Petersburg. Akaky's government job reflects the mundane clerical occupation of Ashoke's own father; his mouth waters at the prospect of the celebratory meal that Akaky eats the night he wears his new overcoat, despite the fact that Ashoke has never tasted such food in his life. Though Akaky's life acquires absurd and tragic proportions, what draws Ashoke to this fictional protagonist is his desire to inhabit alternate identities. Like Akaky, who one day gives up his anonymous existence for a beautiful overcoat, Ashoke also occupies multiple identities. He nurtures an academic interest in engineering and a passionate love of literature; he is a dutiful son to his parents but also yearns to move away from home; later in life he is both Bengali and American, and known by both his good name as well as his pet name, Mithu. For Ashoke, Akaky's desire to inhabit a new overcoat mirrors his own desire to become someone else.

In his translator's note to the 1956 edition of the short story, David Magarshack writes that Nikolai Gogol emphasizes "the inalienable right of every human being to freedom and happiness" (*Overcoat* 63). In the aftermath of the train wreck it is this pursuit of happiness—a sentiment legally enshrined in the U.S. Declaration of Independence—that motivates Ashoke to migrate overseas. When he is immobilized at home for a year to recover from his injuries, Ashoke uncharacteristically abandons Nikolai Gogol's stories, and focuses instead on his study of engineering. Ultimately, it is his engineering degree that gains him, along with so many other South Asian immigrants in the mid-1960s, admission to the United States. Many years later Ashoke recalls "The Overcoat," and he thanks its author not only for saving his life but also for the gift of beginning a new life through his son.

In contrast to his father's veneration of Nikolai Gogol, Gogol Ganguli hates his namesake. Throughout his awkward teenage years, Gogol feels that his given name is symptomatic of his discomfort between worlds. It is not simply the fact that his full name is neither Russian, nor Indian, nor American; instead, what is most disturbing is the fact that his name collapses the distinction between public and private lives. With a "good" name supplementing his pet name, Lahiri writes that Gogol "could have had an alternative identity, a B-side to the self" (76). But for Gogol, there is no other identity that provides refuge, no distinction between an intimate interior life and the public persona he exhibits at school and work. As a teenager Gogol is unaware of the circumstances of his father's accident, and the first time Gogol confronts his namesake is in a high school English class. Here Gogol learns of the circumstances of Nikolai Gogol's life and death: the writer, afflicted with depression, reputedly died of self-imposed starvation as a means of purging himself of homosexual desire.[3] Hearing his teacher read these details aloud in the classroom, Gogol feels betrayed; without an alternate name to shelter him, he feels that his own life (his small circle of friends, his inexperience with women) is exposed to public view. Whereas the short story enables Ashoke to fictively inhabit multiple identities, for his son the Russian writer limits his own growth. So crowded is his given name with various narratives of the past that there is hardly any room for Gogol himself.

The fact that Gogol shares his first name with the writer means that his name is never uniquely his own: it contains histories preceding his birth, histories that link Gogol to his parents' lives in India. The word "namesake" is variously defined as, "A person or thing that has the same name as another"[4]; "that shares the same name as someone or something else previously mentioned"; "named after or for."[5] As Nikolai Gogol's namesake, Gogol Ganguli mirrors Akaky Akakyevich, a man who assumes that his life can only function as a duplicate or copy, a reproduction rather than the original. These biographical parallels to Nikolai Gogol's fictional character prompt Gogol to mistakenly conflate the temporal and spatial distinction between himself and his namesake. Because he is named after the writer, Gogol assumes that his name is already crowded with the history of "someone or something else." Throughout his adolescence Gogol struggles with the burden of distinguishing his experience from the experience of his namesake. In the process he denies not only his relationship to the Russian writer's homosexuality and depression, but also to the time of his father's life in India.

In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Gayatri Spivak argues for the reintroduction of the word "catachresis," which she defines as a "false but useful analogy" (179). Discussing the term in relation to J.M. Coetzee's novel *Foe*, Spivak describes the pedagogical process through which Friday, the African "native informant" in the novel (who is tongue-less, and therefore speechless), is taught the word "Africa." She writes, "*Africa* is only a time bound naming; like all proper names it is a mark with an arbitrary connection to its referent, a catachresis" (189). Confronted with the word "Africa," Friday denies its pedagogical repetition, choosing instead to write the four letters "h-o-u-s." Whether finally "hous" comes to stand in for "house" and is made synonymous to "Africa" remains unclear in the narrative of *Foe*.

Like the name "Gogol" which has only an arbitrary link to its literary and historical referent (the author Nikolai Gogol and Ashoke's train accident), Gogol Ganguli's relationship to his namesake is defined as a time bound naming. It is of course literally bound by space and time, a pet name to be used only in domestic circumstances. The problem with this proper name is that it exceeds its bounded confines, slipping into the realm of the "good name." When as an adult Gogol confronts the history of his namesake, he decides to write back another word, this time the proper name "Nikhil."

Officially changing his name to Nikhil at age eighteen, Gogol aims to mark an entirely new temporality from the history of his namesake. Yet in exercising his legal right, Gogol joins the ranks of the thousands of men and women who have changed their names in America. As Lahiri writes in *The Namesake*, Gogol's decision to change his name is far from ordinary, for "European immigrants had their names changed at Ellis Island, [and] slaves renamed themselves once they were emancipated" (97). Though Nikhil is ostensibly a self-chosen name, it was the original "good name" that Ashoke and Ashima selected for their son, which Gogol rejected as a child. Even in the act of changing his name Gogol unwittingly echoes his namesake, who shortened his surname from Gogol-Yanovsky at the start of his writing career. As Gogol learns by reading an issue of *Reader's Digest*, changing one's name is "a right belonging to every American citizen" (99). His legal change of name is thus not only a personal rite of passage; it is also emblematic of consenting to the rights and constraints of American citizenship.

And yet "Nikhil" also functions as a catachresis, a useful (but ultimately false) analogy. Unlike the name Gogol, which was bound to the past, Nikhil is bereft of a sense of historicity altogether. Describing the aftermath of his name change when Gogol begins his freshman year at Yale, Lahiri writes, "There is only one complication: he doesn't feel like Nikhil. Not yet. Part of the problem is that the people who now know him as Nikhil have no idea that he used to be Gogol. They know him only in the present, not at all in the past" (105). Nevertheless, it is as Nikhil that Gogol engages in a series of romantic relationships and establishes his professional career. These accomplishments are tempered by his increasing realization that a name change alone cannot alter the historical past, for even as Nikhil his first name continues to reference the author Nikolai. As Spivak comments, "All longings to the contrary, it [the proper name] cannot provide the absolute guarantee of identity" (*Critique* 188).

Gogol's incomplete transition from pet name to good name reflects the temporal disjuncture between identity and citizenship that structures the immigrant narrative of *The Namesake*. The disparity between naming and belonging, however, is also mapped through Gogol's spatial relationship

to the United States. Unlike Ashoke, who imaginatively located himself in another place and time via the act of reading, Gogol insists on identifying only with America. At the same time, he is constantly reminded of his limited claims to this land. Although Gogol was born and raised in New England, he is prevented from claiming that terrain as his birthright. For example, as a child on a school field trip he cannot find his family name on the tombstones at a local cemetery. He brings home an illustration of someone else's tomb, a drawing that his mother immediately discards. As an adult Gogol trains to become an architect, aspiring to create new ways of inhabiting physical space. It is in this professional capacity that he begins a romance with Maxine Ratliff, whose wealthy New England parentage provides her with a right to property that Gogol cannot imagine. Indeed, despite his efforts to assimilate into Maxine's landscape, Gogol is insistently reminded of his racial difference.

As a child, Gogol's spatial environment is defined by his parents' aspirations for middle-class success: a home in a safe neighborhood, a good education for their children. The Ganguli home in suburban Massachusetts builds upon these ideals of prosperity and security: its quarter-acre of land in the front yard, the thick carpeting, the velvet-upholstered chairs in the formal dining room, a newly installed alarm system. However, the mere ownership of property is insufficient compensation for their distance from India, and so to feel at home Gogol's parents routinely fill their house with fellow Bengalis over the weekend. Though they own a house in Massachusetts, their life is underlined by a sense of contingency that comes with knowing that their "real" home is elsewhere. Even at home, Lahiri underscores that the Ganguli family will always be immigrants, always foreign to the land that they inhabit.

In contrast, the Ratliff family confidently lays claim to their properties in New York City and New Hampshire. Their genealogical right to the land is reflected in their conviction that their lifestyle need not change to accommodate others. Their summer home faces mountains and a wide lake; it is rooted in the place where generations of Maxine's family have been buried. As Gogol remarks, "The family seems to possess every piece of the landscape, not only the house itself but every tree and blade of grass [. . .] The Ratliffs own the moon that floats over the lake, and the sun and the clouds" (155). Sequestered within this idyllic rural terrain, Maxine and her family inhabit an America untransformed by the desires of new immigrants. The vast spaces the Ratliffs own offer the luxury of privacy, and in contrast the Gangulis' need for physical proximity to other Bengalis appears stifling to Gogol. However, Gogol is also reminded of the fact that it is his presence in the Ratliffs' world that is contingent, and their experience that is universalized. Apart from their

obvious affluence, the Ratliffs inhabit their property as if it were an extension of their body. This form of ownership is not only a matter of a legal right to property; it is also about inhabiting a naturalized relationship to the United States that Gogol and his parents, as racialized immigrants, cannot claim.

Toward the end of the novel, as Gogol reflects on his ambivalent relationship to his name, his parents, and their homeland, he notes that:

> He had spent years maintaining distance from his origins; his parents, in bridging that distance as best as they could. And yet [. . .] he has always hovered close to this quiet, ordinary town [. . .] for most of his adult life he has never been more than a four-hour train ride away. (281)

Despite Gogol's desire to create a life distinct from his parents, he has always stayed close to home. It is his parents who have left behind their homes and families in India, and it is they who have given up the intimacy of their pet name to be known in the United States only by their good name. After the death of his father and pending departure of his mother to India, Gogol recognizes that no one in the United States will call him by his pet name. He will now always be known as Nikhil, the name that offers only a partial narrative of self. Without a name that explains his birth in America or the circumstances that persuaded his father to leave India, Gogol is unmoored from a sense of history. Reading "The Overcoat" provides one way for Gogol to link his immigrant identity to his father's claims to postcolonial subjectivity. Returning to the cold St. Petersburg winter that transformed Akaky Akakyevich, Gogol begins to reconcile, somewhat inconclusively, the distance between himself and his namesake, and between his life in America and his parents' memories of India.

Although *The Namesake* is conventionally read as a coming-of-age story, the intertextual relationship between the novel and "The Overcoat" engenders a different set of spatial and temporal relationships that bind postcolonial India with contemporary America. As I have argued, Ashoke's identification with Akaky Akakyevich engenders a notion of transnational time and space; in turn, naming his son after Nikolai Gogol ties the Ganguli family's experiences in America to their life in India. However, as an adult Gogol attempts to produce and inhabit a sense of locality that is distinct from his namesake. As Nikhil, Gogol desires a temporal and spatial claim to the land of his birth that establishes his right as a U.S. citizen. Yet it is also as Nikhil that he confronts his racial marginalization in the United States. At the conclusion of the novel, when Gogol rediscovers a copy of "The Overcoat," the short story sutures the temporal and spatial distance between India and the United States, between the past and the present, and between Gogol's racialized identity and the postcolonial subjectivity embodied by his father.

THE FILM: A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Discussing the transformation of *The Namesake* from novel to film, Jhumpa Lahiri writes:

> People talk about immigrants as being displaced. I prefer the word 'transposed,' used in music to describe shifting to a different key. That is what happens when a person leaves one homeland for another, and that is what happened as *The Namesake* made its voyage from paper to film. Much like the characters I write about, the story, on-screen, both is and is not itself. Its essence remains, but it inhabits a different realm, and must [. . .] conform to a different set of rules. [. . .] Movies also occupy a much more public place than novels do. They are publicly created, publicly consumed ("Writing and Film" 8).

Released four years after the novel's publication, Mira Nair's cinematic adaptation of *The Namesake* was an intimate collaboration with Lahiri (who, along with her parents and daughter, stars in the film) and with Nair's long-time screenwriter, Sooni Taraporevala. In acquiring the rights to Lahiri's novel, Nair has spoken extensively about her personal investment in *The Namesake* as a tale of love and loss, and in particular how she envisioned the film as a love story between Ashima and Ashoke.[6] By foregrounding the first-generation immigrant experience of Ashima and Ashoke rather than the second-generation story of Gogol Ganguli, Nair was also able to reconfigure the spatial topography of the novel. Not only did Nair substitute New York City for Boston in the novel; more importantly, she established a visual continuity that bound together Calcutta with New York. Whereas the literary narrative of *The Namesake* is premised on the spatial distance between India and America, the cinematic adaptation of the novel emphasizes the continuity between these sites. Nair's ambition was to have New York and Calcutta mirror each other; in her words, to "shoot these two cities as if they were one" ("Photographs as Inspiration" 19). By "transposing" the novel to the film, to use Lahiri's words, Nair creates a visual representation of South Asian America. This imaginary homeland seamlessly intertwines two densely populated cities (Calcutta and New York); it also codifies an upwardly mobile narrative of immigration as the dominant experience of South Asians in the United States.

Nair uses several cinematic techniques to link New York with Calcutta throughout the film. First, medium-shots and still camera images of bridges are consistently used as transitions between countries as well as across time. Second, the camera's consistent focus on modes of transport, specifically trains, buses, planes, trams, and trolleys in both New York and Calcutta produces a sense of temporal and spatial contiguity between two urban sites.

Third, Nair's use of bleached bypass on select scenes throughout the film link together Ashoke and Ashima's memories of home with their present experience in the United States. Instead of being captured through the sepia-tinted lens of nostalgia, Calcutta appears in the film in real time, as a cultural, political, and social space that is integral to the Gangulis's lives in America.

The consistent use of bridges as a visual metaphor in the film links together two distinct urban sites. The film opens with aerial shots of Calcutta and a sweeping panorama of the Howrah Bridge, the sixth-largest bridge in the world. Crossing the Hooghly River, the Howrah Bridge is integral to transporting goods and peoples from one end of Bengal to another. The camera focuses on the young Ashima, who maneuvers the narrow staircases and pavements that run alongside the river. Born and raised in Calcutta, Ashima cannot imagine living elsewhere, but the consistent visual focus on the bridges behind her suggest that Calcutta, as a center of trade and transport, has always been linked to places beyond India. The bridges in this opening scene thus prefigure Ashima's migration to the United States for shortly thereafter Ashima is introduced to Ashoke and becomes his wife. While the imagined national spaces of India and the United States are linked through the Howrah Bridge, later in the film bridges also sever the ties between Indians in India from the lived experience of Indian immigrants in the United States. For example, soon after Ashima gives birth to Gogol, she gazes out onto the George Washington Bridge, which links New York City to New Jersey. The image of the George Washington Bridge fades into another shot of the Howrah Bridge, where in Calcutta Ashima's parents await the news of their first grandchild. The structural differences between the two bridges breaks the visual continuity within the scene, highlighting instead the spatial and temporal distance between Ashima and her parents. While Ashima sits alone in her sterile hospital room, her parents' home is bustling with activity; meanwhile, the George Washington bridge carries a steady stream of cars and train during the evening rush hour, while the cacophony of sounds on the Howrah Bridge (cars, bullock carts, and auto-rickshaws) announces it is morning in Calcutta.

Despite the obvious spatial and temporal breach between New York City and Calcutta, Nair continues to visually bind together both cities by focusing on modes of public transport common to both sites, including trains, planes, and automobiles. Intercutting between long shots of trolley tracks in Calcutta and subway rail lines in New York City, Nair depicts a world in motion. Yet the scale of the camera also makes clear how much has been lost through migration. By interspersing shots of the cavernous Howrah Railway Station alongside the more prosaic Metro-North train station near the Ganguli's home, the viewer recognizes how the scale of the Ganguli's own lives has

become smaller even though Ashima and Ashoke live in a large suburban home. Though Nair emphasizes that the Gangulis are mobile subjects (two major sequences are shot in U.S. airports, at least one scene takes place in an Indian Airlines plane, and several scenes are shot in Indian and U.S. train stations), the same lines of transport that keep the Ganguli family together are also what break it apart. This is prefigured early in the film, when on his way to his grandfather's house Ashoke's body is literally broken by warped railway lines and twisted metal carriages. That accident has a psychic afterlife later in *The Namesake*, for toward the conclusion of the film Gogol is also immobilized on a railway track. At a Metro-North station en route to his family home, Gogol learns that his wife Moushumi is involved with another man. In contrast to Ashoke, who was motivated to leave his parents in India after the train accident, Gogol returns to surburban New York in a state of shock after hearing of Moushumi's affair, as if he cannot conceive of being betrayed by his own family.

Nair's color composition of her frames is another visual device that links together the spatial topographies of Calcutta and New York City. Throughout the film, Ashima's home in India as well as her own creation of an "Indian" household in the United States is consistently depicted through densely saturated colors. Despite the worn façade of Ashima's family home in Calcutta, the saris hanging on its balcony, the vegetables sold to Ashima's mother, and the billboards that crowd the streets come to life on screen through a palette of reds, mustard yellows, greens, and blues. That same color palette informs many of the domestic scenes shot in the Ganguli's home in suburban New York: the living room is a vivid red, the backyard a verdant green. Though Ashima is never one to call attention to herself, her elaborately woven saris provide shots of color against the gray Northeast landscape.

Yet at key moments Nair also drains the scene of color through the use of bleached bypass, as if to sever the tenuous links that the Gangulis have retained with their families in Calcutta. Bleached bypass is a photographic technique that literally bleaches color out of the frame and renders the scene in shades of sepia, black, and gray, thereby showcasing the alienation that circumscribes Ashima and Ashoke's new life in America. Early in the film Ashima, Ashoke, Gogol, and the infant Sonia travel to Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Gogol and Ashoke make their way out to the sea, whereupon Ashoke encourages his young son to remember their time together, on these rocks from which there is no place left to go. The entire scene of Ashoke and Gogol facing the Atlantic is bleached in foggy grays and blues, mirroring Ashima and Ashoke's literal location in a country from which there is nowhere left to go. The contrast between deep color and bleached bypass is also apparent in a later scene when Ashima learns of Ashoke's sudden death.

Whereas the scene opens with Ashima resting comfortably on the deep red couch that anchors their living room, softly illuminated with the twinkling lights of a Christmas tree, when Ashima hears of Ashoke's heart attack over the telephone the house is immediately masked in tones of grey. In shock and panic Ashima runs through the darkened rooms of the house, smearing off her *sindoor*, taking off the bangles that signify her marital status. She runs out into the backyard, where at night the Gangulis's neighbors light up elaborate sculptures of reindeers. Yet in contrast with the Christmas tree in Ashima's living room, in this scene after her husband's death the lights are only visible through a haze of yellow, subdued by the darkened and empty streets that surround Ashima's solitary figure. Her loss is magnified through Nair's judicious use of bleached bypass, and it is especially telling that Ashima's face and clothing is only rendered in saturated color when she finally returns to Calcutta at the end of the film.

From Nair's perspective, making *The Namesake* was an opportunity to tie together her childhood memories of Calcutta with her current experience of New York, a city that has been her home for more than thirty years. Equally important, the movie enabled her to portray a different vision of South Asians in Manhattan, one far removed from working-class immigrant communities in Queens. In a companion publication to the film she writes,

> Jhumpa Lahiri's New York is not the immigrant communities of Little India or Jackson Heights but the New York of lofts, Ivy League bonding, art galleries, political marches, book openings, country weekends in Maine with WASPy friends, a deeply cosmopolitan place with its own images and manners. This was the place I had lived in since 1978; this is the city where I learned how to see. [. . .]
>
> New York was my looking glass and in making *The Namesake*, I could show the world the ease and confidence of the new South Asian cool in the city, how the desi demi-monde really lived here—a New York that rarely makes its way onto the screen. In her novel Jhumpa managed to tie this world seamlessly, and with incredible specificity and intimacy, to Calcutta. ("Photographs as Inspiration" 15).

It is striking that Nair claims that this upwardly-mobile version of New York is where she "learned how to see," for it shapes both the cinematography of *The Namesake* as well as how she perceives what it means to be South Asian in America. This notion of being South Asian in Nair's *Namesake* is centrally defined through class. For example, as an adult Gogol is a Yale-educated architect building a professional life in New York; he dates young women who are born into wealth (such as Maxine, whose parents own a large home in the Chelsea art district and a country house in Connecticut),

and marries Moushumi, a woman whose affect (her clothes, mannerisms, and circle of friends) exudes what Nair describes as "ease and confidence." This class-bound New York is the site of what Nair calls "the new South Asian cool," but her version of the city marginalizes most of the South Asians who currently live there. Gogol and Moushumi's on-screen lives are entirely divorced from the large numbers of working-class Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi immigrants who live across the city, even though it is the labor of this immigrant group that constitutes the cosmopolitan character of New York. Even though Nair herself has created films that foreground working-class South Asian immigration (most notably in her 1982 documentary, *So Far From India*), in *The Namesake* the camera's focus resolutely remains on the upwardly mobile lifestyles of middle-class South Asians.

Viewed from this perspective, Nair's *The Namesake* is at odds with several recent ethnographic studies of South Asian immigration to New York as well as other documentary films that profile immigrant communities. For example, in Vivek Bald's seminal 1994 documentary *Taxi-valah/Auto-biography*, Bald interviews Pakistani and Indian taxi drivers who earn their living by driving through the streets of New York. Unlike the depiction of roads, highways, and bridges in Nair's *The Namesake*, in Bald's documentary the roads of New York are treacherous, and the meager wages that the drivers make do not necessarily enable them to go home to the subcontinent. More recently in their 2004 documentary *Bangla East Side (B.E.S.)* Fariba Alam and Sarita Khurana demonstrate how working-class Bangladeshi immigrant youth remap the geography of downtown Manhattan, creating public spaces that link their memories of Dhaka with their everyday lives in New York City. Similarly in her book, *India Abroad*, the anthropologist Sandhya Shukla highlights how working- and lower middle-class Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi immigrants create "Little Indias" in New York City in precisely those neighborhoods that Nair eschews in her film. Neighborhoods like Jackson Heights in Queens are spaces of consumption that are central to what it means to be Indian, for as Shukla writes, "Indians meet there, eat there, and buy and sell there, and essentially perform an Indianness that functions to consolidate their multiple subjectivities" (84). Like other major commercial venues for Asian American immigrants across the United States (such as Koreatown in Los Angeles and Chinatown in New York and San Francisco), Jackson Heights is central to producing and embodying a sense of what it means to be Indian abroad. Recent ethnographies have also demonstrated the centrality of working-class organizations (including labor unions, youth groups, queer and women's rights groups) to the notion of what it means to be South Asian in New York.[7] Such films and ethnographies demonstrate that a South Asian New York is not limited to the upwardly mobile middle-class that Nair

romanticizes in her film, but instead is produced through the creative cultural productions of working-class immigrants across the city.

The dissolution of class difference from Nair's depiction of a "new South Asian cool" is central to the mass appeal of *The Namesake*. Because the film deliberately evades contemporary histories of South Asian immigration and the racialization of South Asian immigrants (particularly post-9/11), its central narrative propagates the romantic possibility of upward class mobility as an experience common to all American immigrants. What makes the Ganguli family's story recognizably "ethnic" in the film—that is, the difference of race—is also what enables the viewer to elide the difference of class. Nair's celebration of a "desi [South Asian] demi-monde" enables her to showcase the transnational mobility of middle-class immigrants, a mobility that is heightened by her consistent emphasis on bridges and forms of public transport that visually link New York City to Calcutta. Yet while Nair succeeds in establishing a formal visual continuity between two very different urban sites, the cinematic version of *The Namesake* is unable to reconcile the difference between working-class and middle-class South Asian immigrants in New York City. In this context both Nair's version of *The Namesake* and Lahiri's novel foreground a middle-class history of South Asian migration at the expense of the heterogeneous class experiences that define South Asians in the United States. How such a narrative of upwardly mobile Bengali immigrants circulates in public culture as a "universal" experience shared by all Americans is the central problematic of the exhibition, *Namesake: Inspiration*.

THE PHOTOGRAPHS: REPRESENTING THE "ETHNIC" AND THE "UNIVERSAL"

At Sepia Gallery in downtown Manhattan, *Namesake: Inspiration* opened just three days after the release of Nair's film. Curated by Esa Epstein, head of Sepia International, the exhibition was sponsored by the Alkazi Collection, a major private collection of nineteenth-century South Asian photography. The exhibition, however, was not limited to contemporary or archival photographs from South Asia. Instead *Namesake: Inspiration* collated a total of forty-five photographs by thirteen photographers of several different nationalities, taken between 1931 and 2007. While some prints were in color, others were black and white; the images ranged in size from miniature to large-scale prints.[8] Interspersed among these images were stills from *The Namesake*, taken by Nair as well as by her director of photography, Fred Elmes. Although the exhibition was timed to coincide with the film's premiere in New York, the

photographs that were compiled for the show produced a narrative independent of the novel and the film.

The curated works ranged far and wide, from an exquisite miniature accordion-fold book by the Indian photographer Dayanita Singh, composed of sixty gelatin silver prints from *The Namesake*'s shoot in Calcutta; to large-scale images of one of the world's longest bridges in Japan by Jun Shiraoka; to elegiac sepia-tinted prints made in the 1930s by the Mexican photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo. While several prints by the acclaimed photographer Raghubir Singh drew upon his own long-term residence in Calcutta, many other images by prominent travel photographers such as Derry Moore and Adam Bartos had no fixed geographic location. The archival and digital photographs spanned landscape images taken in the 1950s with architectural photographs taken in the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike Lahiri's or Nair's versions of *The Namesake*, therefore, the exhibition did not limit its geographic purview to India and the United States, or its temporal narrative to the late twentieth century. More so than the Ganguli family themselves, *Namesake: Inspiration* traversed across national, spatial, and temporal boundaries.

In Nair's view, collaborating with Sepia Gallery to organize the exhibition was a natural outgrowth of her work for the film. In an interview she commented, "I created it [the exhibit]. I made it happen, because of the photography that I love, and we created a really photographic film."[9] Like Nair's alternating use of color and bleached bypass to create both kinetic energy and stasis in the cinematic frame, the photographs compiled for the exhibition also generated contrasting moods. With the exception of Singh's miniature book installation, many of the medium and large-scale prints focused on solitary figures in anonymous urban or rural landscapes: images that exuded notions of solitude, repetition, and alienation. Though still images from the film (of Ashima and Ashoke, and their homes in Calcutta and Yonkers) hung in one room of the Sepia Gallery, the remaining walls in the gallery were hung with prints that contained no identifying mark. No didactic text noted the photographer, date, or location; these details were provided separately on a flyer available to viewers as they entered and exited the gallery. The literal lack of a framing device for the prints generated an alternative narrative of migration, one unmoored from South Asia and indeed from South Asians. At the Sepia Gallery, the "ethnic" specificity of the Ganguli family was absorbed into a larger, "universal" story of what it means to be an immigrant in the modern world.

Two prints from *Namesake: Inspiration* underscore the ways in which South Asian immigration is both central to and displaced from the exhibition. *Suitcase (Voyage)* a monochrome gelatin silver print by the American photographer Alison Bradley, depicts a single leather suitcase, a vintage

model from the 1960s. Its neatly locked buckles and battered leather evokes the memory of past travels, but the suitcase also appears to be packed in anticipation of another journey in the future. Without an identification tag on its handles, the suitcase and its circuits of travel remain anonymous to the gallery viewer. Though *Suitcase (Voyage)* is an isolated large-scale print, at the Sepia Gallery Bradley's photograph was displayed adjacent to a still from *The Namesake* that depicts the marriage of Ashoke and Ashima. The viewer is encouraged to view this suitcase as one among many objects that make the long journey with the married couple from Calcutta to New York; perhaps it is also one of the many suitcases that we later see in the film stuffed into Ashima's garage. Though Bradley's print can be easily incorporated into the narrative framework of Nair's film, the ubiquity of the suitcase (its non-descript design, its lack of visible owner) means that any viewer can claim this object. The suitcase is at once specific to the Ganguli's story, but it also exceeds the journey made by *The Namesake* as gallery viewers incorporate this object into their own (real and imagined) travels.

Further in the exhibition the photographer Mitch Epstein evokes the narrative tension between specific histories of migration and generic images of travel. In a print from his series *Untitled, New York*, Epstein depicts a middle-aged white man wearing a tightly buttoned suit on an escalator. The man is photographed against a crimson red wall, a color similar to the saturated red tones that Nair uses to define the Gangulis's suburban living room. Because the gallery viewer cannot see in which direction the escalator is moving, the passenger appears stuck, forever immobile. To be sure, the man's escalator ride is nowhere near as monumental as the Ganguli's migration. Yet it is precisely the mundane context of the print—the fact that the print could have been taken anywhere (in an office, an airport, a government building)—and the unknown nature of the man's pending encounter that amplifies the solitary nature of his journey. The unnamed protagonist of Epstein's print simultaneously stands in for Ashoke, who made his initial journey as a student to the United States on his own; and for Gogol Ganguli, who attempts to create a new life as an architect in New York City. But *Untitled, New York* also creates a sense of encounter and possibility that can be inhabited outside of the context of the film, perhaps by the gallery viewer herself. Indeed, it is precisely the lack of identifying geographical or temporal markers on the print that enable the viewer to see the print as a story of their own migration to this city.

Namesake: Inspiration showcased the many international photographers who have informed Mira Nair's own cinematic style. Yet the act of displaying and viewing these photographs created an alternate narrative of experience, one that was intensely personalized for the gallery viewer and divorced from

the immediate context of the film. At Sepia Gallery, the narrative of middle-class South Asian migration that was central to the novel and to the film dissolved into a more ambiguous mode of seeing, one that was not framed by differences of national origin, race, or class. The gallery show demonstrated the ways in which "ethnic" stories of belonging are easily (and uncritically) incorporated into "universal" narratives of migration. Even as *Namesake: Inspiration* was widely promoted by Nair as an accompaniment to her film, the exhibition diverged from both the film and the novel as the images generated a quintessentially "American" story of arrival.

As *The Namesake* made its way from print to cinema to photograph, I have argued that each version of the narrative requires distinct and interdependent frameworks of viewing. As a literary text, *The Namesake* focuses on the intergenerational narrative between Ashoke and Gogol, and in particular their different embodiments of nationhood via their reading of Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat." In contrast, the film displaces Gogol's coming-of-age story to focus on the first-generation immigrant experience of Ashima and Ashoke. In so doing, Nair establishes spatial continuity between two disparate urban sites, New York and Calcutta. At the same time, her vision of a "new South Asian cool" deliberately excludes the lives of the majority of South Asians in New York City, particularly those who are working class. Finally, *Namesake: Inspiration* creates a narrative that moves beyond the experiences of South Asians in America. Unbound by markers of place and time, the photographs on display generated an anonymous, even ubiquitous, narrative of movement.

In many ways, *Namesake: Inspiration* is a catachresis for the film, even as it claims to be inspired by Nair's project. As what Spivak described as a "useful but false" analogy, the photography exhibition is analogous to the literary and cinematic narrative but also displaced from it. Like the ways in which "Nikhil" could not capture the long history that shaped Gogol Ganguli, the photography exhibition refuses to historicize the migration of South Asians to the United States. Instead the gallery show circulates as a visual text in its own right, one that references but ultimately elides middle-class histories of South Asian migration. In much the same way that the film, to borrow Lahiri's words, "transposed" the novel onto the screen, the exhibition transposes a specific geography of migration (from India to the United States, spanning the 1960s to the present) onto a visual experience that weaves across time and space. In the process, the fictional Ganguli story becomes a universal story, readily assimilated into the real-life experiences of any viewer. What is lost in translation is the critical intervention that Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake* makes into categories of national identity, citizenship, and belonging.

An interdisciplinary reading of *The Namesake* illustrates not only the thematic convergence between the novel, the film, and the exhibition, but also the narrative dissonances that shape representations of South Asian migration. How middle-class Indians stand in for the heterogeneous class and national composition of South Asian immigrant communities; why "ethnic" subjects are made to embody "universal" stories of belonging; and what histories bind together South Asia and America are questions that circulate across all three texts. Bringing literary narratives in conversation with visual representations of South Asians in the United States, these multivalent iterations of *The Namesake* engender new ways of reading and viewing South Asian American public cultures.

NOTES

1. As Lahiri explains in an interview, she officially has three names, including two "good" names, Nilanjana and Sudeshana. See Glassie, "Crossing Over."
2. See Anderson's seminal work on print cultures and the production of a national imaginary in *Imagined Communities*.
3. See Karlinsky for this account of Gogol's death, one of various interpretations that explain the author's untimely demise.
4. "Namesake," in *Concise Oxford Dictionary* 10th edition.
5. *OED Online*, www.dictionary.oed.com, accessed July 23, 2008.
6. See, for example, Giovanna.
7. See Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants*; Maira, *Desis in the House*; and Matthew, *Taxi*. All three scholars have produced an extensive ethnographic analysis of working and middle-class South Asian immigrant communities in New York City.
8. See Myers for a full review of the exhibition.
9. See Persons.

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