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Shifting Identity/Shifting Discourse: Re-Naming in Contemporary Literature by Zadie Smith, Jeffrey Eugenides, and Salman Rushdie

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SHIFTING IDENTITY/SHIFTING DISCOURSE:
RE-NAMING IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE BY ZADIE SMITH, JEFFREY EUGENIDES,
AND SALMAN RUSHDIE

A thesis project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Humanities

by

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San Rafael, California

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Graduate Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts, Humanities. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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ABSTRACT

Re-naming one's self is an empowering act of self-definition; re-naming others is an attempt to codify, contain and censure identity. Re-naming emerges as a compelling theme in contemporary transnational literature, appearing in three notable texts: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* (2002) and Salman Rushdie's memoir *Joseph Anton* (2012). These texts depict stories of diaspora, the forced migration or dispersal away from a homeland. Communities of diaspora negotiate between two cultures: an originary culture and the culture of the new geographic location. From these negotiations emerge a third, hybridized identity that reimagines the majority culture and challenges structural inequity. Personal acts of re-naming parallel diasporic experience, and this thesis demonstrates how re-naming and hybrid identities call for more plural epistemologies of belonging in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world.

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INTRODUCTION

Names as Signifiers: Personhood, Migration and Belonging

This thesis is a study of the performance of language, specifically, the act of re-naming, which serves as a compelling theme for understanding the complex intersections of identity, race and gender in an increasingly globalized world. Three notable contemporary texts depict experiences of personal acts of re-naming: novels *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith (2000) and *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides (2002), and Salman Rushdie's literary memoir *Joseph Anton* (2012). In these texts, characters—and even two of the authors—adopt new names, an act that is deeply personal but also inherently political. Re-naming embodies the confluence of multiple, and sometimes divergent cultural ideologies which make up a hybridized identity. Many characters in these texts reflect the multi-dimensionality of hybrid experience, counteracting the single stories that establish stereotypes and depict incomplete narratives of the human experience (Adichie 2009). Hybrid identities make legible life in liminal spaces, those literal and metaphorical borderlands where the most intense and productive life of culture takes place (Conquergood 1988). Stories of re-naming within these texts open up new possibilities for interpreting gender, race and culture, and call into question power structures that marginalize on the basis of assumed difference.

According to Janet Finch, “the possession of the same name throughout life provides a continuity in one's public persona which contributes to a stable sense of

self, that coherence of personal narrative” (712). Diasporic communities endure a forced or willing migration out of an originary homeland, and because of this, the coherence of a personal or communal narrative is often disrupted. Originating from the Greek term ‘to disperse,’ communities of diaspora develop their own “distinctive cultures which preserve and often extend and develop their originary cultures” (Ashcroft 82). The resulting hybridized identity is multivocal, simultaneously transmitting linguistic, cultural, political and ethnic identifiers that demonstrate the plurality of diasporic experience (Ashcroft 136). Like the development of new community narratives, “a change in name denotes a ‘passage’ in the life course which is part of the creative construction of a personal narrative” (712). In this way re-naming has the potential to constitute and affirm values important to an originary identity situated within a new spatial, linguistic and temporal environment. Re-naming, therefore, mirrors diasporic experience, and is an empowering act of self-definition that responds to and resists potentially ostracizing forces.

Re-naming is a highly selective and curated performance of identity that opens up new ways of being in the world. Two authors at the center of this study re-name themselves: Zadie Smith and Salman Rushdie. At the age of fourteen, the young woman Sadie Smith re-names herself Zadie. The z is sharper and to the point (PBS 2002). By re-naming herself, Smith discursively performs identity in a way that foregrounds power relations between Anglo British culture and her mother’s Jamaican heritage. In this way, Smith’s personal re-naming is inherently political, and so is Rushdie’s. In 1989, author Salman Rushdie goes into hiding after the

Ayatollah Kohemini of Iran declares the *fatwa*. In hiding, Rushdie is stripped of his good name and the fame it carries. By re-naming himself *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie refashions his identity and regains personal freedoms while in hiding. With this new name, he reclaims the ability to rent a home and travel to America where he finds the surprising relief of anonymity in New York City. However, while re-naming establishes a new identity, it is never completely outside of history and without residue of the past. This presents conflicting feelings for Rushdie, and in this way, re-naming is resonant of diasporic experience and hybridized identity in a migratory society.

In chapter one of this study, I will discuss the symbolic power and social positioning of names within the three primary texts. Names hold much significance for the authors and for their characters, and the names selected invoke historic and cultural references. These referents lend important insight into how the authors consider and construct identity in their work. In chapter two, I will demonstrate how personal acts of re-naming expose the inscriptions of power that influence identity construction in the 21st century. Acts of re-naming demonstrate the ability to perform identity, reinforcing an individual's political agency. In addition, examining re-naming exposes structural inequities that marginalize on the basis of assumed difference. In chapter three, I discuss how personal acts of re-naming parallel the negotiation of identity in the contact zone. Re-naming makes evident the qualities of hybrid experience and life in liminal spaces where the edges of multiple cultures mix, mingle and clash. Finally, in the conclusion section of the study, I will

discuss the importance of multivocality in contemporary literature, and present possible threads for future research.

Judith Butler suggests that gender can be understood as the repetition of stylized acts and gestures that produce the illusion of an abiding gendered self (2002:191). As an extension of this concept, it may be argued that identity can be found in the “repeated stylization of the language, a set of verbal constructions that produce a natural sound, a natural dialect or diction” (Burke 2014). If, by extension, names are a linguistic signifier and component of identity, examining the discursive power that surrounds re-naming can serve as an important endeavor for understanding identity in the 21st century.

CHAPTER 1

The Symbolic Power and Historical Positioning of Names in Literature by Rushdie, Smith and Eugenides

Names are linguistic markers of personhood and are simultaneously performed within and ratified by the social order. Given names often reflect the qualities, values and characteristics parents hope their children will have, and they reinforce kinship and familial legacy. Names can be charactonymic: they have the power to suggest traits that a person or fictional character embodies, and we might say that names have a tendency to “fit” a person or character. While the connection between name and persona are important, it is imperative that we examine the social inscriptions of power that frame and situate the person or character’s identity as related to their naming. While a particular name might seem “appropriate,” it does not necessarily fix or predict identity; rather, names produce a naturalized appearance of identity. By analyzing nomenclature of characters in texts by Rushdie, Smith and Eugenides, we can better understand how these authors are representing the formation and articulation of identity in the 21st century.

In an interview with Anita Sethi of *The Guardian*, Salman Rushdie calls attention to the fact that Indian families put great importance on the meaning of names (Sethi 2012). Traditional Indian names marks belonging to a regional culture, names suggest affiliation to certain religious traditions and may imply the language or dialect one speaks (Robinson 283). According to Geetha Ganapathy-Doré, “[i]n his family, there exists a tradition of voluntary changes of names stemming from the

belief that such a change will literally allow the individual to control and shape his or her destiny” (Ganapathy-Doré 18). Rushdie’s grandfather, Khwaja Muhammad Din Khaliqi Dehlavi, possessed a “fine Old Delhi name” (Rushdie 2012:22). This name, Rushdie suggests, “was too heavy to carry around in the modern world,” (Rushdie 2012:22) resonant of an increased importance on the recreation of identity leading up to India’s partition from Britain in 1947. Anis Ahmed, Rushdie’s father, adopts an entirely new name, selecting “Rushdie” out of admiration for Ibn Rushd, the twelfth-century poet and philosopher of Cordoba. Rushd is of Spanish-Arab origins, embodying a pluralistic, hybridized identity. The period in which Rushd lived was a defining moment in the history of the Islamic tradition; it was a time when progressive and conservative forces clashed.

Rushd’s writings advocated progressive and secular thought, and Anis Rushdie’s adoption of this new name conjures up a symbolic history of secularist and liberal philosophy. In recounting his father’s admiration of Ibn Rushd, Rushdie suggests that this new name “stood for intellect, argument, analysis and progress, for human reason against blind faith, submission, acceptance and stagnation” (Rushdie 2012:23). The Rushdie name is situated within a particular history that celebrates democratic dialogue and the critique of blind acceptance of absolutist ideology, a notion that takes on significance and irony when the Ayatollah Khomeini declares the *fatwa* against Rushdie. According to Barbara Bodenhorn and Gabriele vom Bruck, “naming has the potential to implicate infants in relations through which they become inserted into and, ultimately will act upon, a social matrix. Individual lives thus become entangled—through the name—in the life histories of others” (3).

By invoking the history of Ibn Rushd, Anis Rushdie simultaneously replicates and manifests the qualities that are most important to him, and he confers this name onto a subsequent generation. The Rushdie name embodies the quest for rational thought over conservative forces. Salman Rushdie suggests that “[i]t's interesting that my father chose that name. I ended up becoming part of the same battle. It's the extraordinary predictive power of my father's naming” (Sethi 2012). This new name is then passed onto his son through a patrilineal naming tradition, becoming a dialogic, intergenerational performance of Rushd’s philosophical legacy, steeping the lineage of the Rushdie family in the values of progressive philosophy and hybridized identity.

Rushdie might suggest that the power of the name resides in some kind of nominative determinism; in their intellectual development and philosophical conceptions of faith, both Anis and Salman live up to the Rushdie name. In fact, Rushdie credits this very name with the empowerment and resilience he exhibits in the face of the *fatwa*. This name inspires perseverance in response to fundamentalist ideology that attempts to contain and censure his creative and intellectual work.

Rushdie’s name is historically situated, preserving the legacy of Rushd’s political values while simultaneously giving the author access to various subcultures in India. In 1987, Rushdie is persuaded to write a “state of the nation” for the BBC about India’s fortieth anniversary of independence. While filming in India, Rushdie visits the Juma Masjid, the great mosque of Old Delhi. Here, Rushdie meets the Imam

Bukhari, “a firebrand and an ultra conservative [who] agreed to meet him because ‘Salman Rushdie’ was a Muslim name” (Rushdie 2012:82). Here we see that the Rushdie name holds valuable Islamic social capital; it is his name that grants access to a filmed interview with the conservative leader. We learn that sometime later, Bukhari is the same imam who decries Rushdie after declaration of the *fatwa*. Somewhat ironically, he fails to remember the author’s proper name, referring to him as “Salman Khurshid,” a prominent Muslim politician. That the imam misappropriates the author’s name is significant: he drops that part of Rushdie’s identity that symbolically critiques the conservative ideology that informs the *fatwa*.

Rushdie understands a name’s ability to wield symbolic power, underscored by the naming of his children. His eldest son is named Zafar, meaning victory in Arabic, dating back to the last Mughal emperor of India (Ganapathy-Doré 19). The name Zafar embodies reclamation of an historic identity, resurrecting the last emperor to govern India prior to British rule. Rushdie builds on his family’s symbolic naming tradition when he names his second son, Milan, during the *fatwa*. Milan, Rushdie notes, means, “to mix or mingle or blend” (Rushdie 2012:505). The name was chosen in honor of author Milan Kundera, the great Czech writer living in exile in France. The name Milan connotes layered meaning about the diasporic experience and of Rushdie’s own exile from India. It also conveys the cultural mixing that characterizes Rushdie’s personal experience of life in London as an author of Indian ancestry. In this way, the name Milan seems to embody an important statement about life in the twenty-first century: it signals a movement away from cultural isolationism toward inter-cultural understanding (Gomarasca 68).

Rushdie and Smith write about this cultural mixing, and both authors are keenly aware of the symbolic importance of names. The names of characters in *White Teeth* transmit important aspects of culture and kinship. Clara Bowden, who becomes Clara Jones, is a first-generation Jamaican woman living in England who names her daughter Irie Ambrosia Jones. The name relays information about her daughter's hybridized identity: her forename conveys a connection to her mother's homeland, while the middle name is etymologically Greek, and her surname is the Anglo-Saxon name she inherits from her father. We learn the meaning and symbolic importance of Irie's names at various points throughout the novel. Irie's father would have preferred the Anglicized name "Sarah," however Clara rejects this name, selecting Irie for her daughter, keeping intact the historic and cultural lineage passed down through the women of their family. Explaining to her friend, Alsana, Clara elucidates the meaning of this name: it's "patois. Means everything OK, cool, peaceful" (Smith 64). The name Irie embodies Clara's hopes and aspirations: that her daughter will lead and exemplify a peaceful life. It also calls attention to Jamaica's linguistic history where nearly 80 percent of the population is bilingual, speaking both patois and English, the country's national language (Cooper 16). Irie's forename retraces familial origins to a Jamaican homeland, and by foregrounding patois, Smith engages in a dialogic performance that brings vernacular language and Jamaican history into view.

The significance of Irie's middle name comes into focus when she runs away from her childhood home to stay with her grandmother, Hortense. Irie is an astute observer of her surroundings, linking together the many family relics that decorate

the home. Pouring over the contents of dusty cupboards and neglected drawers, Irie is reconnected to a past she had never before imagined. Hortense's home serves as the physical site in which she discovers her roots, a primary concern for characters in the text. In this scene, we learn that Irie's middle name, Ambrosia, belonged to her great-grandmother. Ambrosia, Hortense explains, is "[d]e stuff dat make you live forever" (Smith 318). Irie's careful study of family mementos reconstitutes the family history; her great-grandmother, along with her great-grandfather Charlie "Whitey" Durham, live on. These mementos grant access to the roots Irie so deeply craves, providing her an entry point for imagining an originary homeland. Her imagined family history is inextricably linked to the naming of Jamaica:

Somewhere Columbus called St. Jago but the Arawaks stubbornly renamed Xaymaca, the name lasting longer than they did. *Well-wooded and Watered...* This all *belonged* to her, her birthright, like a pair of pearl earrings or a post office bond. X marks the spot, and Irie put an X on everything she found, collecting bits and pieces (birth certificates, maps, army reports, news articles) and storing them under the sofa, so that as if by osmosis the richness of them would pass through the fabric while she was sleeping and seep right into her. (Smith 331)

Irie's roots are linked to the discovery and fantasy of her family history, although it is not without complications. Her romantic view of the past informs an opinion of Jamaican life that is historically inaccurate, and she glosses over issues of poverty and racial tension that are central to understanding Jamaican history and her family's legacy.

Irie's assumptions about her ancestry and Jamaican history underscore the complexity of an imaginary homeland. In his essay of the same name, Rushdie writes

that “[m]eaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved” (Rushdie 1982:12). Irie constructs a family narrative from found and recovered mementos, creating meaning in a way that underscores the complexity of diasporic experience. Rushdie likens this nostalgic perspective to looking into a broken mirror; despite the fragmented reflection of the self, looking into the mirror becomes an important exercise for understanding the present (Rushdie 1982:12). Irie’s creation of a family narrative reflects “the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group” (Rushdie 1982:20). Despite the instability of her fantasy family and homeland, her imagination demonstrates an ability to cope with a new world, bridging past with present. This is central to understanding migrant experience. Irie’s construction of family narrative opens up a third space of identity that is neither exclusively Jamaican nor English, neither Black nor white, rather, a blending of the two. This blending challenges a reductive understanding of race, culture and identity, underscoring the dialogic nature of identity construction in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world.

Irie’s last name, Jones, is the surname passed down by her father, Archie. The Jones name signals a lineage of English and Welsh heritage, and it is one of the most common surnames in Wales and southern central England (Oxford Reference 2006). That Irie carries a common English name suggests she shares a common lineage with many other English citizens, and when combined with the patois and Greek

fore- and middle names, her character linguistically reflects hybridity in a post-migratory society.

By naming Irie Ambrosia Jones, Smith constructs a multidimensional character that resists a simplistic read of second-generation experience of Jamaican diaspora. Benson suggests “we are named by others and, in many naming systems, *for* others: in a critical sense, then, names belong as much, if not more, to the givers of names as to those that bear them” (180). Indeed, the narrator of *White Teeth* tells us that Clara is cautious, “because naming seems to her a fearful responsibility, a godlike task for a mere mortal” (Smith 64), stressing the importance Clara puts on naming her own child. In this way, naming Irie becomes a declarative act of identity and agency for the mother and daughter characters. It embodies the personal experience of Clara’s migration to Britain and her marriage to an Englishman. The name Irie Ambrosia Jones is palimpsestic: it is resonant of both narratives of the Jamaican and British history, and the island nation’s reclamation by African diaspora in the mid-twentieth century. Clara’s careful selection of her daughter’s name confers and projects the values she wants her daughter to have, and the name holds promise of a peaceful future in which the hybrid identity thrives. In this way, Irie Ambrosia Jones becomes her family’s namesake, embodying the confluence of plural identities that characterize migrant experience.

Twin boys Magid and Millat also represent the complexity of second-generation diasporic identity. While pregnant with the twins, their mother Alsana Iqbal, née Begum, tells Clara about the baby names she’s considering. While Clara

takes a contemplative and auspicious approach to naming her child, Alsana is quick and decisive. She proposes “Meena and Malānā, if they are girls. If boys: Magid and Millat. Ems are good. Ems are strong. Mahatma, Muhammed, that funny Mr. Morecambe, from Morecambe and Wise—letter you can trust” (Smith 64). Alsana suggests that names beginning with “M” are strong, however she does not distinguish between the saintly Sanskrit Mahatma, the prophetic Arabic Muhammed, or the comical British Morecambe. She collapses distinctions between these identities, demonstrating the cultural mixing that occurs within the contact zone.

While the names are aligned with cultural mixing, they nevertheless invoke the family’s ancestral lineage. They are etymologically Arabic, establishing a connection to the family’s Muslim faith and originary homeland of Bangladesh. According to Janet Finch, “names can act as a connector which locks an individual into a cross-generational history which stretches into both the past and the future” (Finch 712). By naming their sons Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal and Millat Zulfikar Iqbal, parents Alsana and Samad engage in a declarative performance of kinship, and the names serve as an important link that preserves and conveys the family’s ethnic and religious identity. In this way, the names belong as much to the boys as they do to their parents. The boys’ names, then, reflect personal identity and also imply expectation of the values they will live up to. As Benson points out, names “are what we must ‘own up to’” (179). As children of Bengali diaspora, the boys must live up to the expectations of their parents, simultaneously negotiating between their home life and the world at large. They negotiate between history and

the present, between an originary familial identity and the culture of a new geographic location, their neighborhood of Willesden in north west London.

From these negotiations emerge hybrid identity. Millat, we're told by the narrator, "was neither one thing nor the other, this or that, Muslim or Christian, English or Bengali; he lived for the in between, he lived up to his middle name *Zulfikar*, the clashing of two swords" (Smith 291). For Millat, tension erupts from his life in this liminal space, a symbolic borderland between two religions, languages and identities. His middle name dialogically represents the violence that sometimes emerges from tense negotiations between two cultures in the contact zone. This tension is fully articulated by Smith's narrator who tells us that "it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears—dissolution, *disappearance*" (Smith 272). Millat's story reflects another facet of diasporic experience, demonstrating the friction between ancestry and an originary culture and national identity. National identity is reinforced by a national language, English, which threatens erasure and denial of Bengali names and dialect and, by extension, identity. I will expand upon this in the next chapter in my discussion of the politics of the personal re-naming of Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal.

Looking at *White Teeth* and *Middlesex*, two cases of aptronymic naming are worth noting. Early on in *White Teeth* we learn the origins of friendship between young Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal. They are in a small French

village in the spring of 1945, serving out the final few weeks of their tour of duty in the British Army. The war ends, although Archie and Samad do not know this until two weeks later. Here they learn of a French doctor who has gone into hiding, a Nazi sympathizer whose research focuses on the study of eugenics. Dr. Marc-Pierre Perret, referred to by the village children as Dr. Sick, is aptly named for his physical appearance and ideological pitfalls. Smith's narrator tells us "Dr. Sick was as good as his name, sitting in an armchair in front of a wood-burning fire. Sick. Huddled in a rug. Pale. Very thin" (96). Dr. Sick suffers from diabetic retinopathy, a condition that makes his eyes stream with tears of blood. His physical condition allegorically represents the feebleness and fragility of fundamentalist thought, and by naming the character Dr. Sick, Smith launches an important dialogic critique of ideology that informs Nazi eugenics.

Another noteworthy aptronym is found in the pages of *Middlesex*. The narrator's brother is referred to as Chapter Eleven, a name suggestive of a mishandling of the Stephanides family business, Hercules Hot Dogs. We never learn his given name, and this nickname conceals his ancestral identity, distancing him from Greek heritage and aligning his character more with the United States bankruptcy code. A third-generation Greek-American, Chapter Eleven rejects many of the traditional values espoused by his parents' and grandparents' generations, underscoring the tension of hybridized experience among communities of diaspora. While away in college, he begins to look and behave like John Lennon; he becomes a lacto-vegetarian, buys a motorcycle and begins to meditate. His rebellion culminates in an intense Ping-Pong match with his father Miltiades "Milton" Stephanides; he

wins, which Cal suggests was a heroic feat considering he was high on LSD. After dropping out of school and retreating to the woods for some time, Milton welcomes him home to the tune of handing over the family business. The name Chapter Eleven, therefore, hints toward a poor handling of the family business and fortune, as well as improper stewardship of Stephanides family values.

While Chapter Eleven's name is disconnected from the family's Greek origins, the protagonist/narrator's name establishes a direct connection to familial lineage and ancient mythology. Analyzing the name Calliope "Callie" Helen Stephanides is relevant for understanding the protagonist's re-naming, which will be discussed in the next chapter. The character's forename, Calliope, invokes the mythological history of the ancient muse of epic poetry. Considered chief among the muses, Calliope is thought to have been the source of inspiration for great poetic works including Homer's *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (Encyclopedia Britannica: Muse 2014). As a muse, Calliope is the object of inspiration and desire, capturing the masculine heteronormative gaze. That the *Middlesex* character is named Calliope is subversive: Calliope is simultaneously constituted as subject and narrator, muse and author of her family story, a narrative of epic proportions.

Calliope's middle name, Helen, reinforces expectations that she will be a proper custodian of her family's ancestral Greek identity. The name is resonant with the Hellenic Age, the period between 323 and 30 BCE in which Greek culture expanded throughout the Mediterranean, Africa and southern Asia (Encyclopedia Britannica: Hellenic Age 2014). The name Helen, therefore, further embeds her

personal identity in Greek history, and the name suggests that she will serve as a contemporary steward of Greek history and identity. One component of her cultural stewardship is the expectation that, as a girl, Calliope Helen will remember important dates and occasions. She is “supposed to provide the feminine glue that keeps families together, writing thank you notes and remembering everybody’s birthdays and name days” (Eugenides 72). As a girl, her personal memories are powerful: they constitute the family within the narrative of Greek history.

In addition to denoting the family’s cultural history, Calliope’s given name conveys critical information about the character’s gender identity. Predicting the sex of an unborn child is an important tradition in the Stephanides family, and it is tied to a child’s naming. Desdamona, Calliope’s grandmother, dangles a silver spoon on a string in front of a mother’s pregnant belly to discern the sex of the unborn child. According to Calliope, Desdamona correctly guesses the sex of twenty-three children in a row, remarking “[s]he’d known that Tessie was going to be Tessie” (Eugenides 5). Tessie’s name, in this case, is presented as a gendered noun, supplanting a gendered pronoun: she wasn’t just going to be a girl, rather, she was going to be a Tessie. This methodology of naming assumes gender is a naturalized product of biological sex, a notion that Calliope’s identity and personal re-naming complicate, which I will discuss further in the following chapter.

Names hold symbolic power and are historically situated, as we see in the case of Salman Rushdie. He is empowered by his name, inspired by Ibn Rushd, a name chosen and passed down by his father. The name is historically important, and

illuminates the values that Rushdie holds dear. He carefully considers the names of his children, selecting names that convey important meaning about diasporic experience. The nomenclature of characters in *White Teeth* and *Middlesex* relay important meaning about the characters in this way, as well. While not necessarily predictive of one's qualities, names invoke important histories, and the act of conferring a name is a symbolic act that has potential to impart values that are just as important to the recipient as they are to the giver of names.

CHAPTER 2

Re-Naming in 21st Century Literature:

Exposing Binaries and Resisting the Ready-Made

Like identity, names are fluid and changeable. Re-naming embodies a linguistic performance that can be renegotiated over the course of one's life. The act of personal re-naming unhooks an originary identity, allowing the creative construction of a new identity (Finch 712). The ability to renegotiate identity through re-naming renders names "a powerful political tool for establishing or erasing formal identity, and gives them a commodity-like value. And it is precisely their detachability that allows them to cross boundaries" (Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 4). Just as diasporic identity crosses boundaries and resists binary categorization, so too does the act of re-naming. Therefore, re-naming may be understood as an empowering act of "symbolic expression and performance as effective action" (Bodenhorn and vom Bruck 4), and the act of re-naming can be understood as an empowering act of agency. However, the residue of an originary identity is nevertheless present, which may present a conflicted concept of identity. This underscores the emotional, intellectual and political complexity of re-naming, and demonstrates how this action further resonates with aspects of hybrid identity that is often a facet of diasporic migrant experience.

As we learn in *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie's mother changes her name from Zohra Butt to Negin Rushdie when she marries Rushdie's father, Anis. She casts off her

given name, adopting a new one that signals a shift in identity at a time when she is newly married. By selecting this name, she symbolically conveys her personal value and the reverence she commands in her marriage to Anis. Just as the Rushdie family name embodies cultural mixing, so too, does Negin's new forename; the name suggests a mingling of multiple cultural identities: it is a Muslim name belonging to naming traditions of India and Iran. Her re-naming, however, is not without complications: her sexual past becomes a political subject wherein Negin is asked to shed a romantic history that is too painful for Anis to bear. Rushdie writes, "[w]hen she married Anis she changed not just her surname but her given name as well, reinventing herself for him, leaving behind the Zohra he didn't want to think about, who had once been deeply in love with another man" (Rushdie 2012:19). Negin re-writes a history of intimacy in response to pressures from her new spouse. She re-fashions the self with the aim of erasing her past, unhooking an originary identity, and naming herself anew. This act is a performance, "done" in response to normative expectations of gender: she must surrender her given name and memories of another lover to become a faithful wife. That she is asked to don a new name makes evident the hetero-normative, discursive power operating within Anis and Negin's relationship. It is based upon ideology that codifies and contains feminine identity, assuming that a woman's heart should remain untainted for her future husband, and her body intact.

Like his mother, Rushdie adopts a new name in response to external pressures that attempt to erase his name and identity entirely. After the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran declares the *fatwa*, Rushdie's name is soiled; he is demonized as

his name is equated with the supposed “satanic” qualities of his work. Rushdie explains, “Like many false propositions that flourished in the incipient Age of Information (or disinformation), it became true by repetition” (Rushdie 112). In persecution under the *fatwa*, Rushdie is stripped of his good name, and his authorial identity and fame. Forced into hiding under protection by the British secret service; he is urged to adopt a pseudonym. An intentional measure designed to thwart Islamic fundamentalists, the new name, he’s told, will provide an added layer of protection.

The new name was printed on checks, allowing him the freedom to transact business without detection. It would also give his protectors a way of referring to him without mention of his name. Rushdie writes of the personal and political isolation endured by losing his original name:

His own name was worse than useless, it was a name that could not be spoken. He could not rent a house with it, or register to vote, because to vote you needed to provide a home address and that, of course, was impossible. To protect his democratic right of free expression he had to surrender his democratic right to choose his government. To be asked to give up your name was not a small thing. (Rushdie 2012:163)

The declaration of the *fatwa* marks a significant transition in Rushdie’s life. Initially, it strips him of personhood and blocks his democratic participation in society, simultaneously revoking individuality and citizenship. He is no longer entitled to the freedoms afforded to Salman Rushdie. This has a profound affect on his perception of self, one that is reflected in the narrative structure of his memoir: he does not write in the first person “I,” rather, he gains psychological distance from the threat

of assassination by authoring the text from a third person perspective. The trauma of re-naming is further reflected in the British secret service's instructions on name selection. They suggested he avoid an Asian name, which might alert would-be assassins. Rushdie responds, "[s]o he was to give up his race as well. He would be an invisible man in a whiteface mask" (Rushdie 2012:163). Not only is he stripped of his good name by the *fatwa*, he is stripped of his cultural heritage by his British and Anglo protectors. Confronted with the difficult task of finding a name that will obscure ethnic identity but still preserve dignity, Rushdie considers the authors he most admires and respects, trying on different combinations of names. Eventually, he selects the name *Joseph Anton*, a combination of Conrad and Chekhov's forenames.

Although the circumstances of his re-naming are troubling and deeply painful, Rushdie perseveres and re-names himself, setting forth a new identity that calls upon a richness of literary history. He actively and creatively constructs the self, effectively writing himself back into the narrative of his own life: "[h]e had spent his life naming fictional characters. Now by naming himself he had turned into a sort of fictional character as well. 'Conrad Chekhov' wouldn't have worked. But 'Joseph Anton' was someone who might exist. Who now did exist" (Rushdie 2012:165). By re-naming himself, he takes control and becomes the protagonist in his own story, and in this way, Rushdie's re-naming serves as a declarative act of identity and agency. Rushdie affirms, "'Joseph Anton,' he told himself, 'you must live until you die'" (Rushdie 2012:165). While the *fatwa* tore up all the traditional roots of the self—place, community and culture—Rushdie's re-naming discursively

performs an identity that reiterates authorial agency and further embeds his work into the literary canon. In calling upon the legacy of two notable authors, Rushdie selects a symbolic lineage, an act that repeats Anis' selection of the family name Rushdie.

Several compelling examples of re-naming are presented in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Just as Rushdie's mother Negin changes her name upon marrying Anis, Clara Bowden adopts a new family name when she marries Archie Jones. This social custom marks a transition of identity, signifying Clara's personal commitment to her new spouse and his family. Smith's narrator describes the moment in which Clara signs the marriage license: "Clara wrote down her name (Clara Iphigenia Bowden), nationality (Jamaican), and age (19). Finding no box interested in her occupation, she went straight for the decisive dotted line, swept her pen across it, and straightened up again, a Jones" (Smith 42). On the surface, Clara's re-naming seems rather simple and pedestrian: she need only sign her name along the dotted line to be legally re-constituted as the spouse of Archie Jones. But this act situates her character within the patriarchal, hetero-normative matrix and, like Negin, Clara must give up an originary identity to be legally recognized as Archie's spouse. Furthermore, the information required by the British legal system suggests the system itself is not interested in Clara's occupation; her professional identity is unnecessary and irrelevant to the formation of this union. In this way, the license constrains and limits Clara's legal identity and personhood within the framework of Britain's legal and social customs.

The marriage license is a symbolic space of cultural negotiation, as seen in the requirement to declare nationality. Archie decisively pens in “British.” Although nearly half of Clara’s life has been spent in Britain, her identity reverts back to her Jamaican roots. In this way, the certificate serves as a tangible representation of diasporic experience, underscoring the cultural negotiations and concessions Clara must make between an originary Jamaican identity and her identity as a British resident. Clara’s cultural negotiations are troubled by entrenched, conservative and xenophobic views espoused by the British legal system, as exemplified by the registrar’s reaction to their walking into the office together. The registrar’s reaction suggests that their union is considered unnatural, seen as a marriage of opposites, of “cat and dog” (Smith 42). This ingrained perspective situates Anglo British identity at the center of cultural production, a perspective that marginalizes Clara’s Black Jamaican identity. However, in spite of this, Clara Iphigenia Jones perseveres, and reclaims cultural heritage by naming her daughter Irie Ambrosia Jones, the symbolism of which was discussed in the previous chapter. Clara’s own middle name aligns her character with the mythological daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, an allegorical reflection of her fortitude, strength and sacrifice.

Clara’s personal re-naming reflects the cultural negotiations that often characterize diasporic experience, as does the re-naming of Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal. On his ninth birthday, a group of young, well-mannered white boys arrive at the front door of his family’s home, asking for “Mark Smith.” Magid rushes to the front door, his mother brimming with tears, and departs with the boys to play chess. Upon returning home, his enraged father Samad yells, “I GIVE

YOU A GLORIOUS NAME LIKE MAGID MAHFOOZ MURSHED MUBTASIM IQBAL...
AND YOU WANT TO BE CALLED MARK SMITH” (Smith 126). By re-naming himself, like Rushdie, Magid dons a linguistic “whiteface mask,” engaging in a performance of Anglo identity. Magid believes that to fit in with the group of white British boys he must give up his family’s cultural and religious heritage. He is negotiating between a “ready-made identity given by a fixed name in an entrenched culture and the identity in making of the diasporic” (Ganapathy-Doré 21). This example of re-naming assumes that belonging hinges upon conformity to that ready-made identity reified by British culture.

Young Magid’s re-naming inflicts acute pain on his parents. According to Janet Finch, the surname is an important connector within the family unit, but it is only effective when the individual acts in accordance with the family values (Finch 714). For his parents, the trauma of re-naming is that Magid attempts to blot out his family’s ethnic identity and ancestral heritage with the common anglo-British name “Mark Smith.” Magid is naïve to the complicated colonial history between Britain and his family’s originary home of Bangladesh and to Samad, a man obsessed with the legacy of his great-grandfather Mangal Pande, this writing over the family history is particularly agonizing. Samad credits Pande as leader of India’s revolution against imperialist Britain, a history that has been written over and obfuscated by western historians. Readers come to understand the pain of alterity when Archie points out to Samad the definition of Pandy as it appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

Pandy /'pandi/n. 2 *colloq.* (now *Hist.* Also **-dee**. M19 [Perh. f. the surname of the first mutineer amongst the high-caste sepoy in the Bengal army.] **1** Any sepoy who revolted in the Indian Mutiny of 1857-9 **2** Any mutineer or traitor **3** Any fool or coward in a military situation. (Smith 209)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* is recognized as the foremost source on the English language, and Smith's fictional definition suggests that the surname of Samad's great-grandfather is colloquially synonymic with traitor, fool and coward. This definition situates the British language at the center of cultural production, directly marginalizing the family's Bengali heritage. Samad learns of this definition in the contact zone, the "[s]ocial spaces where 'disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination-like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today" (Ashcroft 62). This definition reveals negative British sentiments toward Mangal Pande and those involved in the uprising of 1857. It also gets the very spelling of the dissenter's name wrong, replacing the proper ending with -y. For Samad, the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of *Pandy* and his son Magid's re-naming reveal the tension of cultural negotiation endured by communities of diaspora, and how these negotiations are inextricably linked to the symbolic power of names. In addition, this section of the novel demonstrates the discursive power that revolves around belonging, demonstrating the hegemonic discourse that marginalizes Iqbal family heritage on the basis of "otherness."

The negotiation between two cultures and the symbolic power of names is also reflected in the naming tradition of Abdul-Mickey's family. Abdul-Mickey is the

owner of O'Connell's pub, Samad and Archie's regular hangout, and his many siblings and children share the same first name of Abdul. This is part of a family tradition designed to maintain an egalitarian nuclear family and to impress upon the Abdul clan that no one person holds a higher status over another. However, this message is thwarted, as "children are creative, and all the many Abduls added an English name as a kind of buffer to the first" (Smith 156). The Anglo names serve as a pragmatic device to distinguish one Abdul from another. But the Anglo names, as the narrator suggests, are a kind of buffer to potential isolation and marginalization the Abduls might endure as Muslims in Britain. Here, Smith lays bare the simultaneous and oftentimes competing ideology that informs migrant experience and life within the contact zone, that metaphorical borderland in which various identities and histories mix and clash.

Smith suggests that a common assumption about immigrants is that they are constantly on the move and thus adaptable. But she exposes the inherent complexity and danger of succumbing to this myth:

Because we often imagine that immigrants are constantly on the move, footloose, able to change course at any moment, able to employ their legendary resourcefulness at almost at every turn. We have been told of the resourcefulness of Mr. Schmutters, or the footloosity of Mr. Banajii, who sail into Ellis Island or Dover or Calais and step into their foreign lands as *blank people*, free of any kind of baggage, happy and willing to leave their difference at the docks and take their chances in this new place, merging with the oneness of this greenandpleasantlibertarianlandofthefree... Because this is the other thing about immigrants... They cannot escape their history anymore than you yourself can lose your shadow. (Smith 384-5)

Smith exposes the expectation of effortless and uncomplicated assimilation often projected onto immigrant communities, launching an effective argument for recognition of plural identities. By revealing the complexity of identity formation among communities of diaspora, she complicates any simplistic reading of her characters. Therefore, Abdul-Mickey does not entirely obscure his originary identity, and by maintaining the Abdul name, he and his family members preserve an originary identity. That he hyphenates his name underscores that he is neither one nor the other; he is simultaneously both/and. The hyphenated name underscores hybridity and the joining together of two seemingly disparate identities. Like the name Irie Ambrosia Jones, it is a kind of patois, symbolic of cultural mixing. Thus, this example of re-naming channels two cultural ideologies in the formation of identity, producing new meaning, roles and values that are resonant of identity formation and cultural negotiations that characterize diasporic experience.

The Abdul clan engages in personal acts of re-naming to distinguish themselves from one another, signaling a blended or hybridized identity. Other characters in the text engage in personal re-naming to separate themselves from the past, and to align with a particular ideological cause. Smith's fictitious organization Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation (KEVIN) is founded by Brother Ibrahim ad-Din Shukrallah, whose original given name is Monty Clyde Benjamin (Smith 388). Hailing from Barbados, the leader of the fundamentalist organization changes his name to better align personal identity with conservative religious beliefs. He adopts the first name Ibrahim, derived from Abraham, prophet and

apostle, and an Islamic surname that connotes religious devotion. Much like the name Salman, his new name grants ad-Din Shukrallah access to a community that identifies with conservative beliefs. The founding premise of the organization is that it formed to provide a critique of cultural ideology that marginalizes Muslim identity in Britain. Millat Iqbal and Mohammed Hussein-Ishmael the butcher join KEVIN; for them, the appeal of belonging to the organization is that it acknowledges "there was a war going on" between two cultures (Smith 392). The organization critiques and resists the suppression of migrant identity by dominant Anglo British culture. Ironically, ad-Din Shukrallah recognizes that they "have an acronym problem" (Smith 245); the acronym KEVIN is problematic because it is an Anglicized name, emblematic of the very xenophobia they critique.

Eugenides charts a similar example of re-naming in *Middlesex* in constructing the character of Jimmy Zizmo. Originally Zisimopolous, his name was truncated when he arrived in America by way of Ellis Island, where it was commonplace for names of those immigrating to America to be shortened (Eugenides 86). After supposedly perishing in an automobile accident, Jimmy Zizmo returns as Fard, leader of Detroit's Nation of Islam movement. Like Monty Clyde Benjamin, Zizmo re-names himself to penetrate a community, and his new name serves as a tool of manipulation for personal gain and power. Zizmo's character is based upon the true life of Wallace Fard Muhammed, founding leader of Detroit's Nation of Islam movement and, according to the FBI files, "an enterprising, racketeering fake" (Federal Bureau of Investigation 10). Despite the real and fictional Fard's corruption, it is nevertheless important to look at examples of re-naming among

members of African diaspora in the context of 1970s Detroit. Re-naming, or self-naming was a symbolic and declarative act of agency for African Americans who were historically marginalized and dispossessed through slavery. One notable example is Cassius Clay's re-naming to Muhammed Ali. Not only did this re-naming distance him "from the history of slavery which his birth name denoted, [but also] embrace[d] the identity of the Muslim faith in a particular form, the Nation of Islam" (Finch 713). Ali's re-naming counters the oppression and legacy of slavery passed down through the Clay family name. Similarly, Zizmo/Fard's main follower Brother Karriem, the former Elijah Poole becomes "Elijah Mohammed, Supreme Minister of the Nation of Islam" (Eugenides 162). Re-naming among members of the Nation of Islam demonstrates the ability of names to convey symbolic meaning about ethnic and religious identity (Finch 713), and re-naming becomes a specific performance of identity that marks a transition from an originary identity to a newly transformed identity. According to Holley, "[o]ne is not just speaking in the performative, creating sound waves or conveying a perfunctory message, but accomplishing acts that have changing effects upon other elements" (173). Although Fard as a leader is a wholly corrupt character, the rise of re-naming among African diaspora in America serves as an important example of self-determinism and agency that enables the historically marginalized to take control of linguistic identity. Re-naming among members of the Nation of Islam critically respond to entrenched, systemic inequity. Examining re-naming in this context reveals the inscriptions of power that are based upon false assumptions of alterity.

The political implications of re-naming are an important consideration to for this study, and a more personal example of re-naming appears in *Middlesex*. The narrative begins with the journey of Desdamona and Lefty Stephanides and tracks their escape from Greece during the Turkish occupation of 1922. Over the course of their transatlantic journey to America, Lefty and Desdamona—brother and sister who fell in love in their small, hometown village of Bithynios—become married. The marriage is made possible because Desdamona carries her mother’s passport that “bore her mother’s maiden name, Aristos, instead of Stephanides” (Eugenides 64). Desdamona adopts her mother’s name to obscure her identity to fellow travellers; it is a personal performance of identity that permits courtship between brother and sister over the course of their journey to America. Desdamona must become Aristos before she can be fully constituted as a Stephanides in her marriage to Lefty. As she re-names herself, both Desdamona and Lefty rewrite their family history, engaging in a creative construction of ancestral lineage, spending their time “making up past histories for themselves” (Eugenides 67). The anonymity afforded during transnational movement makes Desdamona’s re-naming and their relationship plausible and the ship, *Jean Bart* and the Atlantic Ocean over which they travel, represent a liminal space in which the conception of a new identity is possible.

But, just as Smith suggests that the migrant cannot escape their history anymore that one can escape their shadow, Desdamona and Lefty are never really rid of the residue of the past. During their wedding ceremony, brother and sister are married in a circle, which Cal the narrator suggests is “to impress upon ourselves the essential matrimonial facts: that to be happy you have to find variety in

repetition; that to go forward you have to come back to where you began” (Eugenides 69). Just as diasporic communities negotiate between an originary culture and the culture of a new geographic location, so too must Desdama and Lefty negotiate between the past and the future. Indeed, Cal attributes his very existence in their family’s history and limited gene pool of the small village of Bithynios. They are never fully rid of the residue of the past, and like Cal who truncates his name to relinquish the past, the residue of an originary identity is still present.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Stephanides family naming lends itself readily to understanding how these notable authors are constructing character identity in the 21st century. For example, the protagonist’s given name is Calliope Helen, conveying the presumed biological sex and gender of the child. Calliope’s name changes midway through the narrative, suggesting that identity is not fixed, rather, it is fluid and changeable. As narrator, Cal refers to himself as Tiresas, the ancient Greek mythological character who was “first one thing, and then another” (Eugenides 3). Cal fully embodies Tiresas, performing the role in a high school drama class; he is also referred to as Tiresas in his relationship with The Obscure Object. The Tiresas myth alludes to the gender identity change Cal will undergo in his teenage years, a transition marked by Calliope’s name changing into Cal. This re-naming, a truncated version of his given name indicates a symbolic passage of identity that illuminates the performativity of gender. According to Judith Butler, “[g]ender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and

enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 2002:120). One does not innately possess the qualities of a particular gender, rather, one learns to “do” gender through socialization and cultural instruction. The notion that gender is a performance is bolstered by Calliope’s performance as girl in her childhood and early teenage years. She effectively passes as a young woman both to her family and to Dr. Luce, engaging in acts that substantiate the identity of a young woman. In one instance, she fakes menses, feigning headaches and discarding unused Tampax each month (Eugenides 361); she “does” femininity for Dr. Luce, writing sometimes like a “bad George Eliot,” and fictionalizes accounts of teenage crushes, pretending “to be the all-American daughter my parents wanted me to be” (Eugenides 418).

Dr. Luce suggests that Callie is a girl who has a little too much male hormone. He wants to “correct” that, suggesting to Tessie and Milton that “[a] single surgery and some injections would end the nightmare and give my parents back their daughter, their Calliope, intact” (Eugenides 429). According to Dr. Luce, this would enable Calliope to “marry and pass as a normal woman in society” (Eugenides 437). The medical community aims to “correct” Cal’s intersexed body, suggesting that Cal must conform to a single gender identity that fits neatly into a binary, hetero-normative framework. To the medical community, Cal’s body exists in space of alterity and marginalization, underscored by the observant doctors’ discussion of Cal’s “condition,” *hypospadias*. In looking up the definition in the New York Public Library, readers come to realize Cal’s body as a colonized subject. He traces definitions of synonyms for the term, the last of which is *hermaphrodite*. The

authoritative medical dictionary instructs him to “see synonyms at MONSTER” (Eugenides 430). To Cal, “[t]here it was, *monster*, in black and white, in a tattered dictionary in a great city library” (Eugenides 431). Just as Samad learns the British definition of *Pandy* from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Cal reads from a seemingly respected, well-read and tattered medical dictionary in the cultural center of the New York Public Library. Both Cal and Samad are subjected to judgment projected onto them by these dictionaries, the linguistic products of a dominant culture.

New York City serves as the initial site of Cal’s personal transformation. It is the physical site of dialogic hybridization: the protagonist is referred to as “Cal” by his father Milton and “Callie” by his mother Tessie, embodying both identities Cal will inhabit over the course of his life. Cal aligns himself with his father, adopting the truncated name. When he runs away, Cal swaps the feminine suitcase he arrived with in New York City in favor of Milton’s masculine luggage. He stops at a barbershop to cut off the long hair that obscured his face in adolescence, and to a secondhand store, buying a suit. He consciously changes his appearance and gait, engaging in a deliberate performance of masculinity (Eugenides 441).

Cal makes his way across the country, arriving in San Francisco. The city becomes the location in which the narrator comes of age and learns to fully inhabit the newly re-named identity as Cal. He finds work at Bob Presto’s Octopussy’s Garden, a pornographic show in which Cal’s intersexed body is objectified and fetishized. Despite Presto’s exploitation, Cal finds community that embraces hybridized identity. Cal’s colleague at Presto’s Garden and mentor, Zora, is writing a

book entitled *The Sacred Hermaphrodite* that blends together science and mythology, “genetics, cellular biology, and Hindu mysticism” (Eugenides 490). From Zora’s manuscript Cal becomes acquainted with cultures that celebrate the intersexed body, and he reads scholarship by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs whose writings discuss a third, hybridized gender (Eugenides 495). Cal’s relationship with Zora and her research and manuscript supplant memories of Dr. Luce and the medical dictionary in the New York Public Library. In San Francisco, he is presented with new information that informs a personal acceptance of hybridized identity, and the effects are therapeutic, effectively rewriting the trauma of Cal’s experiences with the western medical community.

Cal’s re-naming marks an important transition of identity, although he does not completely shed his originary identity. Just as diasporic identities presented in texts by Rushdie and Smith negotiate between multiple cultures, Cal negotiates between two gender identities. Occasionally, Callie’s gestures—a hair flip or the way he checks his fingernails—surface like a childhood speech impediment (Eugenides 41). Calliope’s gestures disrupt Cal’s performance of masculine identity, underscoring the notion that gender is a performance. While Cal’s character embodies hybrid identity, his society demands conformity to either a feminine or masculine identity. Cal’s character, therefore, effectively exposes the normative ideology that informs a hetero-normative, binary system of gender construction. According to Rachel Carroll,

Cal’s condition enables Eugenides to construct a narrative in which intersexed identity is experienced within a temporal and teleological structure:

as having a “before” and “after,” as departing from an origin to arrive at a given destination, as crossing a border upheld by a binary logic. (Carroll 192)

In the text, Cal is constructed as muse and artist, protagonist and narrator, and female and male. By occupying either side of these seemingly dualistic categories, Cal's character draws attention to the rigidity of gender expression imposed by a binary framework. This underscores the political complexity of Cal's personal re-naming, demonstrating the entrenched ideology that belonging is predicated upon the choice between one of two modes of gender expression. Cal's story underscores the complexity of identity formation in the contact zone, and Eugenides engages readers in a dialogic examination of systemic inequity and the marginalization of non-normative identities.

CHAPTER 3

Liminality and the Space Between: Creating a 3rd Space for Hybrid Identities in Contemporary Transnational Literature

The three texts at the center of this study depict stories of diaspora and the experience of life in a physical or psychological borderland. Each narrative demonstrates how the complex negotiations between an originary culture and the culture of a new geographic location inform and influence how authors Rushdie, Eugenides and Smith are representing identity in the 21st century. Physical and psychological transnational movement becomes a subject in each narrative, a thematic element that underscores the complex negotiations communities of diaspora undergo in establishing a collective self-representation (Pérez Fernández 157). By demonstrating the plurality of personal experience, these texts call for more flexible understandings race, gender and cultural identities. In doing so, these authors write against singular stories of what it means to be British, American and male and female. As Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie points out, the danger of a single story is that it creates stereotypes. She reveals that the consequence of the single story is that it “robs people of their dignity. It makes our recognition of an equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar” (2009). Rushdie, Eugenides and Smith’s characters emerge from the literal and metaphorical borderlands of our contemporary migratory society, and as a result, the authors present multifaceted and multivocal perspectives on belonging. Rafael Pérez-Torres suggests that “this cultural production represents a new means of engagement and understanding, one that

suggests the formation of new and more fluid epistemologies” (3). By presenting stories of diasporic and hybrid experience, the authors effectively write against the single story, opening up new possibilities of what it means to belong in an increasingly globalized world.

Eugenides engages in discussion of global migration, and *Middlesex* charts the multi-generational arc of the Stephanides family. The story begins in the small village of Bithynios, Greece, the geographic location Lefty and Desdamona are forced out of for lack of financial options to sustain their livelihood, and for even fewer options for finding a suitable spouse. They travel to the United States by way of Smyrna, the historic port city characterized by cultural mixing and heterogeneity, where they narrowly escape the threat of death and the city’s burning during World War I. The family settles in Detroit, a site that encompasses many noteworthy facets of American history: the American auto industry, the birth of the Nation of Islam movement, and site of the 1960s race riots (Eugenides 236). In this text, Eugenides explores what it means to belong to the Greek diaspora in America, simultaneously investigating important issues of race, gender and nationality as they relate to identity construction.

Set in the British, multicultural neighborhood of Willesden, *White Teeth* explores negotiations communities of diaspora undergo between an originary identity and the culture of a new geographic location. Smith constructs multigenerational narratives of the Bowden and Iqbal families, sketching experiences of Jamaican and Bengali diaspora in Britain. Smith normalizes diasporic

experience and hybrid identities, and, like Eugenides, she writes into the world a more fluid understanding of identity and belonging. I will continue my discussion of cultural hybridity in *White Teeth* later in this chapter.

In *Joseph Anton*, Salman Rushdie recounts the story of his migration to London as a young man to attend boarding school. Originally born in Mumbai, he becomes a British citizen, remaining in Britain into his adult life. For a time, this is by personal choice, however, the *fatwa* serves as a sentence of exile, whereby he is dis-allowed to return to his originary home of India. This represents a period of dislocation and trauma for Rushdie, during which he questions his personal authenticity: if he cannot return to his originary homeland, a great love and source of inspiration for his creative work, who is he? He exists in a liminal space and possesses a hybrid identity, a condition that, he purports, defies belonging. He illustrates this point by writing about one of Mauritius' leading Hindi language poets (who remains unnamed in the text). Mauritius is an island notable for its cultural mixing and for the convergence of many languages, although the author writes for an audience of Hindi language readers, performing a cultural identity that does not necessarily align with his Mauritian identity and language. The poet tells Rushdie about a public reading in which he made a deliberate decision to read his poetry in a way that was normal to him. He presented an authentic, hybridized self, reflecting the multivocality of Mauritian experience. In doing so, the audience and critics decried his work, and he is deemed an outsider. Writing in the dominant language makes his work accessible to many, but by deploying the popular language, his authentic, hybrid identity becomes marginalized. Rushdie writes, "for all his

mastery of India's largest language, he could not truly belong" (Rushdie 98). This story serves as a symbolic representation of tension that exists between authenticity and assimilation, and for Rushdie, what it means to belong. This memory serves as a jumping off point from which Rushdie explores what it means to be validated and to have a place in one's society: "[b]elonging was a big, uneasy subject for them both. They had to answer questions that immobile one-place one-language one-culture writers did not, and they had to satisfy themselves that their answers were true" (98). Not only do communities of diaspora engage in cultural negotiations between originary and dominant cultures, but they are also forced to authenticate personal experience and creative work for themselves. This reflects the complexity of postcolonial identity construction, and, in the cases of Rushdie and the Mauritian poet, the linguistic barriers they encounter as a consequence of their hybrid identities. Just as names reflect the personhood of an individual, language allows the self to be fully constituted in the world. In the case of the Mauritian poet, if the patois tongue cannot be fully represented within the realm of language, how can he be a legitimate and authentic member of society? The authors must persist and continue to write into the world more fluid epistemologies of what it means to be and to belong.

Rushdie questions what it means to possess an authentic identity. He recounts the formation of Moraes Zogoiby, protagonist of *The Moor's Last Sigh*. In doing so, Rushdie challenges assumptions about authenticity and singularity of cultural and religious and national identity:

The Zogoibys would be a family of spice traders. Half-Christian, half-Jewish... the Moor would be almost a minority of one. But the book would try to show that the entire Indian reality could be grown out of that tiny peppercorn. 'Authenticity' did not belong to the majority alone. (294-95)

Rushdie constructs a complex character in a way that normalizes negotiations between multiple ideologies that are embodied within diasporic experience. The Zogoiby family defies the myth of the single story, representing the complexity that makes them plausible.

For Rushdie, the intellectual product of literature serves as the symbolic space in which he works out ideas about diasporic identity. Eugenides and Smith explore similar themes in their own literature, and the family homes of the Stephanides and Bowden families serve as the primary site in which cultural blending may be observed. The privacy of the family home provides a safe space in which characters recount and remember family histories. But the home is also a political space in which selective aspects of the new culture are incorporated and appropriated. Lefty Stephanides establishes the Zebra Room, a basement speakeasy that welcomes blue-collar workers of Detroit's Greek diaspora. The Zebra Room is a public extension of the Stephanides family home, a public gathering space tucked away in the basement. The bar is decorated with scavenged tiles reflecting many backgrounds: Neapolitan, heraldic, Pewabic. Patrons are served liquors from many origins including English gin, Madeira wines and scotch and bourbon as they "descended out of the America of factory work and tyrannical foremen into an Arcadian grotto of forgetfulness" (Eugenides 132). Lefty's customers find refuge in a hybridized space that bridges an originary Greek identity with American

multiculturalism. The resulting environment is representative of the many influences and cultural signifiers that embody first-generation Greek-American diasporic identity.

In the same vein as his father, Milton decorates Hercules Hot Dogs with figurines that blend together icons of historic and popular culture. On display are little statues of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox, Mickey Mouse, Zeus and Felix the Cat (Eugenides 203), resulting in a heterogenous display of many influences.

Hercules Hot Dogs serves as a theater in which Milton works out ideas of what it means to belong to an American and capitalist society. Hercules Hot Dogs, once a local family-owned business in Detroit, becomes a national franchise with roadside locations throughout the east coast and Midwest. By expanding the family business, Milton “does” culture, subscribing to a capitalist bootstrap ethos, a main tenant of the American Dream. Milton and Tessie’s bedroom on Middlesex is

furnished entirely of early American reproductions, it offers them connection (at discount prices) with the country’s founding myths. Notice, for instance, the veneer headboard of the bed, made from ‘pure cherrywood’ as Milton likes to say, just like the little tree George Washington chopped down. (Eugenides 235)

In the most personal and intimate of spaces of their family home, Milton and Tessie are surrounded by vintage reproductions that remind them of the legends of America’s founding. They blend together Greek and American mythology, adopting those attributes that most closely resonate with their values and aspirations. By appropriating American mythology Milton and Tessie “intervene more readily into the dominant discourse, to interpolate their own cultural realities” (Ashcroft 19). In

this way, the domestic sphere of the Stephanides home and the public sphere of Hercules Hot Dogs encompass multiple cultural edges from which new meaning emerges. The physical space of the house on Middlesex and Hercules Hot Dogs illuminate the cultural hybridity that parallels Cal's hybrid body and gender identity. Milton and Tessie negotiate between Greek and American identity, appropriating elements of capitalism and America's founding myths that resonate with their Greek family values and traditions. Similarly, Cal negotiates between feminine and masculine gender identities, "doing" and performing in a way that makes his gender identity legible in a society that demands conformity to binary categorization. Although Cal identifies as a heterosexual man, gestures and speech patterns of the old Calliope sometime emerge, he tells readers, like a childhood speech impediment. Despite his hybridized body, society demands conformity to a single gender identity, and Cal's categorization of his old identity as an impediment is problematic and misogynistic. But that Cal rejects the surgery that Dr. Luce proposes to "correct" Cal's hybridized body is significant, and I suggest that, like experiences of diaspora, he cannot completely erase an originary identity. Like cultural hybridity, Cal's gender identity depicts a range of experience, upending assumptions that purport an essential truth of binary sex and gender.

Like the Zebra Room and Hercules Hot Dogs, Hortense Bowden's Willesden home serves as a physical site of cultural mixing in Smith's *White Teeth*. When Irie visits her grandmother, she observes an amalgamation of Jamaican family heirlooms, religious iconography and pop culture cartoon idols that adorn the home. The house is "decorated with hundreds of secular figurines ('Cinderella on Her Way

to the Ball,' 'Mrs. Tiddlytum Shows Little Squirrels the Way to the Picnic'), all balanced on their separate doilies and laughing gaily among themselves, amused that anyone would pay a hundred and fifty pounds in fifteen installments for such inferior pieces of china and glass as they" (Smith 316). Hortense is a collector of ready-made iconography of the dominant culture, and this passage suggests that Hortense was somehow hoodwinked into paying far more than appropriate for the diminutive figurines. But for Hortense, the value is more than monetary; the statuettes symbolically convey her belonging and British identity. These trinkets are situated alongside images of blonde and blue-eyed anointed Jehovah's Witnesses, and these religious relics and icons of pop culture are infused with family photos, newspaper clippings and mementos from Jamaica. Juxtaposing these seemingly disparate items, Smith demonstrates the complexity of post-colonial identity construction. The private space of the Bowden family home is inherently political, demonstrating how "culture is less about expressing pre-given identity and more about the activity of negotiating, regulating and authorizing competing, often conflicting demands for collective self-representation" (Bhabha qtd. in Pérez Fernández 1999: 37-39).

These negotiations and cultural mixing are further reflected in the surrounding family-owned businesses of Willesden. While pregnant with twins Magid and Millat, Alsana explores her new neighborhood. She reads the business names of storefronts as she walks by, "MALI'S KEBABS, MR. CHEUNGS, RAJ'S, MALKOVICH BAKERIES," names which symbolically reflect the many ethnic communities that call the area home. Noting that this is a suitable neighborhood in

which to raise her family, Alsana offers a poignant reflection to readers about the qualities of diasporic experience in Britain. In this neighborhood, she concludes, “[n]o one was more liberal than anyone else anywhere anyway. It was only that here, in Willesden, there was just not enough of any one thing to gang up against any other thing[...] ‘Survival is what it is about!’” (Smith 53). Residents of the neighborhood get along because of a common, shared persistence against dominant ideology that privileges Anglo identity. Like the Abdul family discussed in the previous chapter on re-naming, the inhabitants of Willesden idealize equitable social relations. For Alsana and Samad, this is how life should be.

Smith likens the great migration of the 20th century to a tremendous social experiment, one that blends together seemingly disparate identities. The hybridity depicted in *White Teeth* contributes to a sense of British identity that is “heterogeneous, diverse and in an ongoing process of redefinition” (Pérez Frenández 154) and Smith normalizes these hybridized identities. In the Willesden neighborhood, one might find,

Isaac Leung by the fishpond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball and Irie Jones humming a tune. They are “[c]hildren with first and last names on the direct collision course. Names that secrete within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical check ups. (Smith 272)

For Smith, names are an external marker of hybridity and she relays the confusion and psychological pain that may emerge as a result of hybrid experience. For Smith's narrator, the hybridized name becomes an external symptom of internal struggle for cohesive self-representation.

Eugenides offers a corresponding observation, writing about the legibility of cultural identity in today's increasingly globalized world. As narrator, Cal suggests that, "[y]ou used to be able to tell a person's nationality by the face. Immigration ended that. Next you discerned nationality via footwear. Globalization ended that" (40). For Eugenides, ordinary identity is obscured by the stylization of the body. International movement, media and commerce have homogenized the appearance of people the world over. In Britain, the Iqbal family's Bengali heritage is diluted, as reflected in the stylization and behavior of second-generation Magid and Millat. To their parents Alsana and Samad, the twins' genotype is hidden by phenotype (Smith 272). Similarly, Cal's hybridized body is stylized into "girl" in his early life and "man" in late adolescence and into his adulthood. The stylization obscures genetic identity, upending assumptions that biology produces an essential identity of female or male, Bengali or British. Therefore, the bodies of Cal Stephanides and Magid and Millat Iqbal demonstrate the fluidity and flexibility with which cultural and gendered identities may be expressed, underscoring that the source of authenticity is inherently multivocal and plural.

Friction surfaces when the Iqbal parents assume their children will behave in accordance with values they assume to be innately carried by their family genes. However, the external and communal influences of culture are undeniable, and a tension arises which Smith describes as "the most irrational and natural feeling in the world" (272). Butler demonstrates that the body "is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities," rather than a

fixed product of genetics (Butler 2002:122). For both Smith and Eugenides, genetics are an important factor in the origin stories of several characters.

In a post-human genome world, we've witnessed the rising popularity of private vendors promising to produce an accurate profile of geographic origin after analyzing DNA from a simple cheek swab. By engaging in the discourse of genetics, the literature of Smith and Eugenides lend valuable insight into how we understand identity in the 21st century. They raise important, relevant questions about the authenticity of identity. By normalizing experiences of hybridity among communities of diaspora, Smith and Eugenides open up the possibility for a third identity, one that is neither one culture nor the other; neither one gender nor the other; but both/and.

Rushdie engages in dialogue about authenticity and originary identity, suggesting that this line of inquiry needs to be reimagined for communities of diaspora. He concludes that the question of authenticity ought to be rephrased: "[t]he questions he knew how to answer were not about place our roots, but about love. *Who do you love? What can you leave behind, and what do you need to hold onto? Where does your heart feel full?*" (Rushdie 98). He stresses the importance of personal relationships and matters of the heart, effectively shifting the discourse about migrant experience. In presenting this alternate view of belonging, Rushdie becomes greater than the sum of the severed parts of his cultural and linguistic identity (Anzaldúa 80). He draws parallels between migrant and authorial identity, suggesting that an author inherently exists in a space between two worlds—the

tangible world of reality and the immaterial creative world. He declares, "[w]e writers are miners and jewelers... We are citizens of many countries: the finite and the frontiers country of observable reality and every day life, the united states of the mind, the celestial and infernal nations of desire, and the unfettered republic of the tongue" (419). It is this flexibility and hybridity that establishes Rushdie, Eugenides and Smith as adept cultural navigators, thusly enabling them to "contribute to modifying social spaces and the social meanings attached to them" (Pérez Fernández 158). By depicting the multivocality and complexity of diasporic experience, the authors re-imagine a more tolerant society, constituting "new options in social, sexual, spiritual, and aesthetic behavior" (Pérez-Torres 93).

CONCLUSION

Multivocality and Belonging: Re-Naming and Diasporic Experience

For Salman Rushdie, language and literature are undeniably important, and they have profound effects on what it means to belong. He suggests that literature be seen “as a lofty, transnational, transcultural force that could, in Bellow's great formulation, 'open the universe a little more'" (78). Confronted with censorship and the threat of assassination after declaration of the *fatwa*, he persists, explaining that his creative construction of multivocal stories is more necessary than ever before. According to Joanne P. Sharp, Rushdie's literature and, by extension, the work of Smith and Eugenides, offer “a world where the fluidities of hybridity and mobile spatial practices can play out” (126). In this way, the three authors are cartographers of the human experience. They make valuable contributions that challenge how we think about life in our contemporary society, and by extension, they shift the discourse on belonging. They imagine new, alternative identities that contribute to the modification of social spaces and the social meanings that are attached to them. This is significant, because “meanings are not immanent but are always constituted and affected by the representational spaces that articulate them” (Pérez Fernández 158). Their perspectives address important concerns about structural inequity and the forces that marginalize individuals on the basis of assumed difference. For these authors, hybridity is a common, universal thread that ties their stories together. This thread acknowledges that cultural and gendered identities are inherently and intrinsically intertwined.

This study could be expanded to examine other examples of re-naming in contemporary literature, lending insight into politics that inform historic and entrenched ideology. Because names and naming may be seen as an act “of primordial nomination, an act of possession” (Deane 1990:18), examining the contemporary re-naming of geographic locations, social groupings and cultures can expose dominant ideology that produces systemic inequity. Studying the political context of re-naming has the potential to dismantle and disrupt hegemony, opening up new possibilities for being and belonging in the world. In addition, the study could be expanded to examine issues related to communities of diaspora and hybrid identities as depicted in contemporary literature. As languages and cultures become increasingly interconnected across the globe, the study of hybrid identity will become even more relevant to our everyday lived experiences. By developing more a complex understanding of identity, we shift the discourse on what it means to belong.

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