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Time, Space, and National Belonging in *The Namesake*: Redrawing South Asian American Citizenship in the Shadow of 9/11

SUE BRENNAN

Mira Nair's 2005 film *The Namesake* opens with the promise of travel and adventure, following Ashoke Ganguli, a young Bengali graduate student, as he travels by train from Calcutta to Jamshedpur in the mid-1970s. The scene, however, quickly turns gruesome when his train derails in the middle of the night. Ashoke, portrayed by popular Bollywood actor Irrfan Khan, is ejected from his car, only to be discovered in the rubble days later clutching a page from "The Overcoat" by the Russian author Nikolai Gogol. The last conversation before his narrow escape from death, in which a fellow train passenger urges him to see the world, inspires Ashoke to travel to the US for further education. He returns to India to marry but promptly brings his new wife Ashima (also played by a Bollywood star, Tabu) back to New York with him, where together they raise their two children in the suburbs of Long Island. Grisly and brutal, the crash is a formative event in the film and in the 2003 novel version of *The Namesake* written by Jhumpa Lahiri, which serves as the source text for Nair's film.

However, the filmic representation of the train derailment alludes to another tragedy, far removed in time and space from mid-century Calcutta: Nair stages the iconography of 9/11 in the chaos and destruction produced by the crash. The first scene, for example, concludes with a shot of Ashoke flying through the air as he tries to avoid the rush of books, trinkets, and personal belongings unsettled by the impact. Mikita Brottman notes that a fascination exists in American society with the display of death and bodily destruction associated with the attacks on 9/11, and the representation of Ashoke's body in mid-soar certainly alludes to the image of bodies falling from the Twin Towers.[1] The camera pans over charred bodies and wreckage in a smoky, apocalyptic landscape; a mangled train car standing on one of its ends

evokes the iconic image of the wreckage at Ground Zero. Placing Ashoke at the center of this mimetic gesture, Nair identifies 9/11 as a formative event in the history of South Asian American citizenship. In this essay I argue that both the film and novel versions of *The Namesake* respond to a crisis around South Asian American citizenship instigated not only by 9/11 but also by the shifting racial logics that followed in its aftermath.[2]

The conflation of Arab or Middle Eastern-looking people with terrorists after the events of September 11, 2001, made many ethnic groups targets of an intense national gaze, including South Asian Americans. When not homogenized as "terrorists" and pitted against the American citizen, however, ethnic minorities like South Asian Americans were cornered after 9/11 by categories of national belonging into a type of apolitical, ahistorical, and racially ambiguous citizenship. Racialization after 9/11 effectively erased the specificity of South Asian American-ness, as both a historical formation and a cultural identity.[3] Once neatly bound by the category of "model minority," the terms of national belonging after 9/11 for South Asian Americans took shape through a vague and depoliticized discourse around ethnic identity—one in which the clichés of multiculturalism and melting-pot nationalism stood in for the specific socioeconomic and historical conditions that helped form the South Asian diaspora in the US.

In both versions of *The Namesake*, the Ganguli family forms long before the events of 9/11. The novel sets Ashoke and Ashima's immigration to the US in the 1960s; the film advances this timeframe by ten years, restaging Ashoke's accident and marriage to Ashima in the 1970s. The maturation of Gogol (portrayed by Kal Penn in the film), who is informally named after Nikolai Gogol, into a teenager and young man eventually dominates the plots of both the novel and the film. However, it is the story of his parents' immigration to the US that anticipates the reductive belonging of post-9/11 racial logics. Laying claim to a history hidden by the tropes of the "model minority," "multiculturalism," and "terrorist," the narrative of Ashoke and Ashima's journey offers a template on which Lahiri and Nair—both working in the decade after September 11th—challenge the erasure of South Asian American citizenship following 9/11.

Materializing South Asian American History in Time and Space

Both Nair and Lahiri turn to the past to recreate a history of South Asian American citizenship, mapping the production of immigrant citizen-subjects through the sociopolitical landscapes of Boston, New York, and Calcutta in the 1960s and 1970s. Consequently, both texts rely on spatiotemporal cues—often in the form of chronotopes—in order to dictate the gendered modes through which South Asian immigrants belong to, and are excluded from, the nation. A chronotope, developed by Mikhail Bakhtin as a literary term, is a textual union of time and space as it is manifested through objects, persons, or places. The chronotope also marries time

and space in a text through the spatial materialization of historically specific temporality; Robert Stam describes the chronotope as "the means of understanding the ways in which spatiotemporal structures in the novel evoke the existence of a life-world independent of the text and its representations."[4] As a result, chronotopes determine the social and political world through which the events of the text transpire, as well as shape options for narrative and character expression.

The formal organization of time and space in each version of *The Namesake*, for example, determines its engagement with a historically specific "life-world" in which the events of the text transpire. The novel begins in 1967 and ends in 2000, while the film begins in 1977 and ends in 2004. This shift in time relocates the historical and social contexts in which the story of Gogol's parents, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, unfold. In the novel Gogol's birth takes place in 1968, an iconic year in American history that locates the growth of Ashoke and Ashima's family in the midst of institutional shifts in both immigration policy and civil rights in the US; by advancing the timeframe of the narrative, Nair effectively disrupts that relationship, displacing the primacy of the nation in the representation of the film's cultural and social milieu. The novel and film also take place in two different spaces, shifting from Cambridge to suburban New York City. In Cambridge, Ashoke and Ashima's early life in the US revolves around the city's extensive university system and the production of an assimilated immigrant identity associated with the trope of the model minority; the shift to the iconic setting of New York, however, reroutes the focus of the text to the development and growth of immigrant communities in the city's outlying boroughs.

The narrative and formal relationship between time and space help shape representations of history through the particular chronotopic motifs taken up by a text. The spatiotemporal context through which Nair materializes South Asian American citizenship significantly departs from the novel, which attempts to reclaim citizenship by specifying citizenship in the representations of what Lisa Lowe calls the "temporality of assimilation": the subsumation of ethnic difference by the cultural, economic, and social rhythms of the nation.[5] Edited, marketed, and consumed in a milieu still reeling from the effects of 9/11, the novel makes claims on South Asian American identity at the height of the nation's xenophobic, racist backlash against visible minorities from South Asia and the Middle East. Lahiri's novel, foregrounding the nation itself in producing racialized citizenship, works from familiar models of national belonging and assimilation as a way to challenge the nation's discourses of exclusion. She turns to the role of the nation in forming gendered subject positions for immigrant bodies, underscoring the ways in which time is written on and through the various disciplinary mechanisms of American institutions. The novel's attention to institutionalized time emphasizes the continuity and control of the state in determining the contours of citizenship, foregrounding the ways in which subjects emerge through technologies of the state.

While the novel version of *The Namesake* emerged on the heels of widespread racial profiling, detention, and deportation of South Asians, Arabs, and Muslims living in the US, the year of *The Namesake*'s cinematic release—2005—witnessed the continued institutionalization of xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment by the state. Nair, as a result, creates a narrative world in which filmic space materializes many, and often competing, histories. She relies on chronotopic motifs that unify multiple temporalities and histories through the representations of space, such as the city or the train. Faced with a national environment skeptical of both immigrants and the government, Nair sidesteps the novel's emphasis on assimilation, offering a point of view suspicious of the sense of security and upward mobility promised by integration into the nation. I argue that the cinematic adaptation of *The Namesake* generates a new spatiotemporal state of affairs, one in which the iconography of 9/11 both challenges post-9/11 racial logics and disrupts the singular, progressive, and institutionalized temporality through which Lahiri writes South Asian American immigrants back into nation.

The Temporal Politics of "Model" Behavior: Defining South Asian American Identity

Prior to 9/11, the dominant narrative of racialization for South Asian Americans revolved around the mythology of the "model minority." Model minority–hood is most commonly understood in the US as the successful economic and social assimilation of certain ethnic minority groups into mainstream American culture. Kamala Visweswaran notes that the successful integration of model minorities into the nation is often attributed to their "essential cultural traits" and "ethnic characteristics of thrift and hard work," contributing to the image of model minorities as disciplined and industrious individuals determined to reach the middle class through education and diligence.[6] Accordingly, the popular narrative of South Asian immigration to the US has emphasized the assimilation of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent into America after the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, legislation that repealed national origins quotas in US immigration law. Primarily young, educated, middle-class men seeking employment and education, the wave of South Asian immigrants after 1965 is often understood as exempt from exclusionary practices or overt racialization, "unmarked except as stereotypically quiet academics and professionals."[7] Visweswaran, however, emphasizes the role of class in negotiating the racialization of South Asian Americans, arguing that the "colonial history of class formation in the subcontinent"—and the particular role of the middle class in South Asia as mediator between British power structures and the less affluent indigenous classes—shaped postcolonial migration to the US, as well as the strategies through which South Asian immigrants have accessed and organized capital.[8]

For Visweswaran, South Asian American migration is not a mythology but "histories of capital" actively negotiated by the state and by immigrants themselves

(11). Lahiri, in the novel version of *The Namesake*, attempts to fill in the broad strokes of South Asian American history, creating immigrant subjects in and through the linear and progressive unfolding of historical time. The novel opens on a definitive moment in US history—the year 1968, which doubles as the year of Gogol's birth. Many of the year's notable events revolve around the nation's changing milieu, particularly the ways its institutions struggle to accommodate changing definitions of the nation. 1968 saw the beginning of the women's movement, the effective dissolution of a cohesive civil rights movement, and massive public protests against the war in Vietnam, as well as the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy. The year's events serve as a kind of collective national response to institutional shifts made in the decade before, including the implementation of the Civil Rights Act, the creation of a pink collar service sector, and the escalation of US military presence in Vietnam.[9]

Lahiri effectively generates a chronotopic motif that relies on a "watershed" year in US history to frame the actions of the novel's two central characters. Her strategic use of 1968 in the novel serves as a means of materializing time in and through American institutions, highlighting their role in mediating terms of identity and belonging within the nation. This watershed chronotope dictates legal and social modes of belonging for Ashoke and Ashima: 1968 marked the year in which the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 became law. Because the passage of the Act enabled non-Western-educated, middle-class professional men to pursue education and employment in the US, this drastic shift in immigration law helped to produce the category of "model minority"—a classification, Visweswaran emphasizes, that reflects the "racialization of capital" in the US during the last half of the twentieth century.[10]

In the year of Gogol's birth, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 completes its journey in the legal system, a definitive shift in how the nation must envision citizenship, race, and wealth in relation to this new wave of immigrants. The creation of *The Namesake*'s life-world in the shadow of this newly ratified legislation allows Lahiri to craft the history of South Asian American citizenship around the development of model minority–hood. Within this arrangement, she poses Ashoke and Ashima as model citizens and subjects of the nation-state. For example, the political upheaval of 1968 itself remains far removed from the daily lives of the couple. It is only while Ashima is in the midst of labor with Gogol and Ashoke picks up a discarded *Boston Globe* in the waiting room that the tumultuous national environment comes into view. Already a month old, it chronicles the "riots that took place during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago."[11] The particular character of time materialized in space—arbitrated by the media, almost a month late—speaks to the contemporary understanding of the assimilated "model minority" as politically inactive, and necessarily absent from the rights movements and civil unrest of the late twentieth century in the US.[12]

Institutionalized Time and the Temporality of Assimilation

In creating a spatiotemporal context for the articulation of model minority–hood, Lahiri does specify gendered modes of subjectification through which Ashima and Ashoke are assimilated into the nation. The opening chapter of the novel, for example, begins with Ashima in labor with Gogol. Labor is not only significant as a measurement of time, but as a temporal event that leads Ashima out of her home and into the institutionalized space of the hospital. Before Gogol's birth the newly married (and emigrated) Ashima is frustrated and bored in her husband's small Cambridge apartment, faced with days that "dragged."[13] Literally wasting time, she spends "hours in the apartment, napping, sulking, rereading her same five Bengali novels on the bed" in order to protest her isolation and boredom (35). Lahiri expresses Ashima's dissatisfaction in temporal terms; her inability (and unwillingness) to make time meaningful is a response to her exclusion from the institutions that give her husband's life meaning, and her distance from the people with whom she is most familiar. Pregnancy and the possibility of motherhood, however, force Ashima to treat time as a productive form of measurement. In fact, when Ashima begins to track the months of separation from her family in Calcutta though her growing body, the temporal and spatial dimensions of pregnancy together serve as a barometer of her loneliness—"unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved" (6).

Ashima's labor ushers her into a Boston hospital, an institution where both time and pain are carefully controlled. Cornerstones of the American healthcare system, hospitals also function as biopolitical spaces in which the management of life through technologies of reproduction, health, disease, and death function to produce subjects of the state.[14] As a result, the American hospital also serves as a site of cultural assimilation where individuals are subjected to disciplinary regimes aimed at producing "healthy" and self-sufficient citizens of the nation. In the novel version of *The Namesake*, the hospital provides a chronotopic motif focused on the creation of productive spaces through the division, classification, and arrangement of time. Accordingly, the novel's hospital is an institution marked by time: it has an "accelerated day," including scheduled meal times and a regular flow of doctors and nurses.[15] Ashima's entrance into the space of the hospital not only subjects her to these temporal regimes but actually forces her to participate in her own subjection when charged by the doctor with timing her contractions as her labor progresses. She tracks her contractions with a watch her parents gave her, a bon voyage gift "slipped over her wrist the last time she saw them, amid confusion and tears" (4). The watch not only makes time and herself useful, but its role in Ashima's transformation into a productive subject is part of a distinctly assimilative project—as "American seconds tick on top of [Ashima's] pulse point" (4). Here Ashima is subject to the temporality of assimilation as the social rhythm of the nation supersedes her own sense of time.

In the cinematic adaptation of *The Namesake*, Nair also opens the film with a single, key subject-making experience in an effort to specify the terms of South Asian American citizenship after 1965. She, however, displaces the primacy of historical time and assimilative identity in the opening scene. Many of the signs of immigrant life stabilized by institutions in Lahiri's text—migration, home, and nation—are fraught with unpredictability and violence at the beginning of the film. While the change in tone hints at Nair's skepticism over the assimilative emphasis of the novel, it also suggests that she replaces Lahiri's choice of one iconic date for another. Nair begins her version of *The Namesake* with the representations of Ashoke's traumatic train crash, one that references 9/11 both in its visual rendering and its lasting effect on the film. Unlike Lahiri, who seeks to legitimate South Asian American citizenship through the temporal requirements of assimilation, Nair draws from this temporal allusion in order to reinstate South Asian American citizenship at the site of its erasure. She replaces the progressive, singular, and linear representation of time that emerges from the space of the hospital with multiple and fractured temporalities that unfold in the chaos of the train crash. Nair, in signifying 9/11 through Ashoke's near-death experience in Bengal, challenges the temporal logics that facilitated the exclusion and othering of South Asian Americans that took place in its wake.

Formally, Nair's adaptation does not change the events that precede Ashoke and Ashima's life together in the US. It does modify the sequence in which they are told, adopting a chronological telling that begins with Ashoke's near-death experience. The film starts as Ashoke boards a train in the Howrah train station. As the trip proceeds, Ashoke and his seatmate Ghosh talk casually about travel. When Ashoke admits he has never considered traveling abroad, Ghosh encourages him to "pack a blanket and a suitcase and go see the world"—a proposition rendered ominous by dim lighting that casts deep shadows across his eyes and gives Ghosh an overall sinister appearance. Suddenly the scene turns chaotic as the sound of screeching metal fills the air. After a shot of possessions and people from the car flying through the air, the film abruptly cuts to the opening credits. This train journey, although brief, is a life-changing experience for Ashoke. Much like the staging of Ashima's pregnancy it provides him with an embodied link (a limp that lasts until his death) to the catalyst for his own migration to the US: Ghosh's last words.

The train crash is not an event unique to the film but is instead reinterpreted from the novel version of *The Namesake*. The film endows the crash with a disruptive force absent in the novel. Not only does the film begin with the crash but it actually stops and literally drives the film into a completely different spatial and temporal, not to mention narrative, context; at the close of the credits, the film opens again with a shot of Ashoke recuperating in bed, having survived the crash and returned to his family. The dislocation of time in the aftermath of the crash recalls the temporal disruption that followed in the wake of 9/11. The unprecedented scope and nature of

the attacks on 9/11 quickly led to the sentiment that the events of that day "changed everything." This rhetoric often deployed metaphors of time and space in order to describe 9/11 as a sui generis moment in American and world history. Mary Dudziak, for example, suggests that 9/11 serves as a site of periodization, creating a temporally distinct "before" and "after" through which historical narratives form.[16] Nair seems to acknowledge this relationship with her choice to mimic the temporal disruption of 9/11 through the representation of the derailed train and Ashoke's moment of transformation; the allusion to 9/11 as originary moment materializes a history that exceeds the temporal boundaries of the film's narrative and allows Ashoke's personal trauma to stand in for a national tragedy, despite their profoundly different spatiotemporal contexts.

Amy Kaplan also notes that "a narrative of historical exceptionalism" often serves as a discursive framework for public commentary about 9/11.[17] Through this discourse of exceptionalism, 9/11 transcends periodization altogether, an occurrence so profound and unique that it refuses comparison to time and history. This temporal metaphor of "exception" helped create space for the state's unprecedented response to the crisis, serving as part of its public justification for the detention, imprisonment, and deportation of immigrant men, illegal wiretapping, and the overt profiling of ethnic and religious minorities that took place in the aftermath of 9/11.

Nair, however, challenges this post-9/11 mythology, and the justification it provides for the othering of racialized subjects, through the opening scene's chronotopic motif. While the novel deploys the chronotope of the hospital in order to convey a sense of temporal rigidity and structure associated with American institutionalism, the film draws from the history of the train in order to create a chronotopic motif, underscoring patterns of violence in multiple temporalities, and linking 9/11 to a global history. Paula Massood, in her work on representations of African American urban history in Spike Lee's film *Clockers*, suggests that the train chronotope is an important feature in representing specific historical patterns of migration and mobility. Concerned with the film's representation of African American communities in Brooklyn, she argues that the train in particular signals multiple temporal characteristics, from the history of Pullman porters to the development of African American middle-class neighborhoods in the boroughs of New York City. A type of "spatiotemporal unity," the train "fuses the history of migration, growth of the black city, and the ghettoization of the black city all into one sign."[18]

Much in same way, the representation of the train in the opening scene of *The Namesake* provides a spatial and temporal bridge between migratory flows. However, the dark tone of the scene and its inevitable result also unify multiple spatiotemporal contexts in which transit serves as a site of violence. The train chronotope evokes the history of train violence in South Asia, including rail violence during the migration of Hindu and Muslim groups in the 1947 partition of India, the Godhra train burning in 2002, and the 2003 bus and train bomb blasts that took place in Mumbai—as well as a more recent history of train bombings in 2005, 2006, and

2007.[19] The representation of the train also recalls train violence outside the province of South Asia, such as rail bombings in London, Paris, and Madrid, and the role of the German rail system in the engineering of the Holocaust. Fused together through the image of the train, the train chronotope works to dismantle the discourse of exception that frames the events of 9/11 by insisting that it shares a historical context with similar events in India and Europe.

The mounting tension in the scene during Ghosh's speech allows the ensuing chaos during the train's derailment to function as a critique, an allegory for violent and destructive global conflict that includes 9/11. Read in a contemporary context, the film's skepticism toward Ghosh's wanderlust might suggest that migration as a rite of passage was corrupted, in part, through the image of hijackers posing as students and tourists, as well as immigrant students and citizens detained, arrested, and killed in the US in the months after 9/11. At the very least, the train chronotope provides a temporal and spatial unity that secures the crash to 9/11. The film's emphasis on the spatiotemporal connection between violence and travel reverses the gendered focus of the novel's original opening scene; instead of Ashima's labor toward producing a child and a subject position, it revolves around a scene of loss and trauma, forging a direct link to the masculinist discourses of loss and trauma circulating after 9/11.[20]

From Cambridge to Queens:
Mapping South Asian American Citizenship in Time and Space

Nair's changes to the story of Ashoke and Ashima's migration to the US also include a shift in setting; originally set in and around Boston, the cinematic adaptation takes place in metropolitan New York. While Boston and New York are geographically similar, their distinct histories and sociocultural landscapes materialize two distinct life-worlds in which the unfolding of each text's events take place. Consequently, location helps shape Lahiri's and Nair's distinct approaches to specifying the terms of South Asian American citizenship and its erasure in the wake of 9/11. The novel's setting in Boston, for example, lends itself to a preoccupation with institutionalized citizenship and assimilation through the city's extensive university system, including academic multiculturalism. The visual focus of the film on New York, on the other hand, emphasizes the cosmopolitanism of the city, highlighting the often unspoken role of immigrant groups in sustaining the vitality of the city—and nation. Both Nair and Lahiri, however, are more than aware of the ways in which strategies for mobility within these particular life-worlds are always gendered, a difference they express in and through the writing of time in geographic, historical, and filmic space.

In the novel, suburban Boston provides the context for Ashoke and Ashima's "model minority" existence. Ashoke attends MIT, bringing Ashima to Cambridge after they marry in Calcutta. They eventually settle in a suburb where, despite being "the only Bengali residents," they develop a network of Bengali friends across

metropolitan Boston.[21] Notably, Boston is a city full of colleges and universities. In this setting, educational institutions mediate the terms of the Ganguli's life-world, providing a temporal focus for integration and assimilation. Chronotopically, they mark time as Ashoke completes his education at MIT and joins the faculty of another university. Time spent within the university offers the promise of upward mobility, opportunity, and authority for Ashoke. This particular passing of time thus is written through the romance of the university, a convention of the chronotope expressed through Ashoke's pleasure at hearing "the melody of bells chiming from the campus clock tower" from his office (49).

His relationship to education reflects the larger role of American educational institutions in the process of assimilation for Indian immigrants in the last half of the twentieth century. In the 1960s and 1970s, American universities not only offered educational and employment advantages for middle-class students willing to travel to the US, but also a space for the development of immigrant networks; South Asian students in particular sought opportunity, community, and legitimacy within the educational system.[22] Furthermore, the university literally "schools" students in the social, corporeal, and intellectual practices required for inclusion within the nation (and thus a primary site for the production of the model minority). A fine-tuned combination of opportunity, community, and social control, the American university is a key site of assimilation for immigrants posed to take up the myth of the model minority, ultimately offering a set of social, economic, and political strategies for navigating the changing contours of citizenship, and thus an ideal setting for exploring the intricacies of South Asian American history.

For Ashima, however, the university chronotope is not an effective means of marking time or of assimilation into a national life-world. If the university chronotope materializes the history of assimilation for South Asian immigrants in the 1960s and 1970s, it also relegates women to its margins as figures of reproductive labor and bearers of cultural norms. Lahiri's attention to Ashima's role within this space serves as an attempt to specify the gendered limitations of the modes of citizenship offered by the mythology of the model minority—an argument echoed in Ashima's relationship to the city in Nair's adaptation.

Miserable and lost in her new home, Ashima struggles to manage her time upon arriving in Cambridge. After the birth of her son, she eventually learns to structure her day around the public spaces of the city's various universities, taking Gogol "out, wandering up and down the streets . . . to sit in Harvard Yard, sometimes meeting up with Ashoke on the bench on the MIT campus."[23] Later in the novel, after she and her young family have moved to a small university town where Ashoke works, the public spaces of the university structure the arc of Ashima's days:

> Her forays out of the apartment, while her husband is at work, are limited to the university within which they live, and to the historic district that flanks the campus on one edge.

> She wanders around with Gogol, letting him run across the quadrangle, or sitting with him on rainy days to watch television in the student lounge. Once a week she makes thirty samosas to sell at the international coffeehouse, for twenty-five cents each, next to the linzer squares baked by Mrs. Etzold, and baklava by Mrs. Cassolis. On Fridays she takes Gogol to the public library for children's story hour. (50)

Here the passing of time marks Ashima's exclusion. She is a visitor, roaming public areas and open buildings. She has no access to the amenities and privileges of the institution that her husband revels in; she and Gogol sit in the student union and visit the community library instead of the university library. Ashima's status as a permanent guest is only exacerbated by her college education in Calcutta, cut short by marriage. The university in the US instead serves as a site of reproductive labor for Ashima, as she prepares samosas and babysits her son. Lahiri's Eurocentric version of "international" cuisine clearly resonates with irony, and the tongue-in-cheek juxtaposition of the three food items refuses to subsume racial difference through nationalist discourses of multiculturalism and pluralism. Furthermore, the arrangement of snacks conflates multiple spatial and temporal contexts by erasing the specific historical and geographic origins of the culinary traditions they represent. The distinctly European spread at the "international" café—samosas, German cookies, and a popular (and Americanized) Turkish dessert—serves as an allusion to the ways in which the multicultural rhetoric in higher education "levels the important differences and contradictions within and among racial and ethnic minority groups according to the discourse of pluralism, which asserts that American culture is a democratic terrain in which every variety of constituency has equal access and in which all are represented."[24] Beyond the university, these discourses of pluralism move to ensure that the history of the nation's immigrants foreground European ethnic groups, erasing the "important differences" generated by factors like race, geography, class, and gender.

Lahiri's allusion to multiculturalism within the academy speaks to the erasure of the specific structural and historical conditions enabling South Asian immigration in popular understandings of model minority mythology. It also, however, cites the pervasiveness of multiculturalist rhetoric in American public space after 9/11. The reformulation of citizenship and belonging after 9/11 relied upon multiculturalist discourses to create categories of exclusion and national belonging. For example, the idiom of the melting pot—that national identity subsumes racial or ethnic difference through the identification of all citizens as simply "American"—helped to sustain a divisive "us" vs. "them" mentality that effectively pitted "Americans" against "the putative terrorist who 'looks Middle Eastern.'"[25] For ethnic minorities already subject to racial profiling and scrutiny, inclusion within the national body became contingent upon taking up the ahistorical, universalizing gestures of the multicultural nation—or

face exclusion and even violence as a potential alien "terrorist." Significantly, it is Ashima's story that levels this critique of multiculturalism's exclusionary aim. Her marginalization within the university chronotope, read here as a critical revision to masculinist histories of South Asian American assimilation and citizenship, exposes the gendered and racialized imbalances of power that American institutions like the university simultaneously reinforce and conceal. Lahiri's ironic allusion to the Eurocentricism of the "international" bake sale highlights the ineffectiveness, and danger, of multiculturalism as both an academic discourse and a mode of national belonging for South Asian Americans.

Queens, NY, and the Cinematic Translation of Time through Space

While Lahiri redraws the masculinist history of South Asian American citizenship and national assimilation through the chronotope of the institution, Nair challenges these discourses through the representation of urban life. The relocation of Ashoke and Ashima to Queens instead of Boston also engenders a chronotopic schema that highlights modes of community and transnational exchange in the forging of immigrant identity; if Boston's association with elite institutions of higher learning situate materialized immigrant history through gendered strategies of assimilation in the university, then it is New York's reputation as a locus for immigrant communities that guides the cinematic translation of time through space. Much like the novel, however, Ashoke and Ashima's relationship to the nation emerges through the writing of time in space, especially Ashima's ambivalence to her new surroundings. In addition, the film's shift in setting reterritorializes the life-world of the text in order to bring the filmic world into the same space as the 9/11 catastrophe. Much like Nair's revision to the opening of *The Namesake*, the filmic life-world that frames Ashima and Ashoke's early days in the US comments on the post-9/11 erasure of South Asian American citizenship from the site of its erasure, defying the temporal and spatial logics that perpetuate racial othering.

Unlike the novel's focus on individual assimilation as a path towards citizenship, the life-world of the film emphasizes the role of ethnic communities in defining the nation. Boston does have a significant South Asian American population, reflected in Ashoke and Ashima's extensive network of Bengali friends and relatives present in the novel. Metropolitan New York, however, is home to the largest and one of the oldest South Asian diasporas in the nation. As one of the most diverse counties in the US, Queens itself hosted a substantial population of post-1965 South Asian immigrants and still serves as an important center of South Asian American cultural and social life.[26] The film's change in location thus does more than just modify the demographic makeup of the setting; the shift from Boston to New York reconfigures the history that "materializes" through the text. Nair's deliberate delivery of Ashoke and Ashima to New York anchors their story in a larger community narrative around migration, home, and the development of one of the most

extensive immigrant networks in the nation. Retold from within the center of the South Asian diaspora in the eastern US, *The Namesake*'s immigrant narrative attends to the material, social, and emotional economies developed within immigrant communities through the process of forging ties between host countries and homelands. The film's focus on the transnational character of immigrant groups and communities not only departs from Lahiri's emphasis on assimilation and national belonging but also works against the assimilative push toward the melting-pot Americanization of immigrant-citizens after 9/11.

In the film, the bridge becomes a powerful symbol of the economic, social, and emotional ties between Calcutta and New York. The film draws a parallel between the role of the Howrah Bridge in Calcutta—linking the cites of Calcutta and Howrah, it is one of the busiest bridges in the world—and the bridges leading in and out of the island of Manhattan. The reoccurring images of the bridges become a reminder of the ways in which the modes of travel, migration, and movement used to forge such ties are always inflected with the gendered regimes of family and nation. Nair also calls upon these iconic bridges—particularly the Queensboro Bridge—in order to dismantle the temporal logic of racial othering that excluded South Asian subjects from the nation after 9/11. Linking midtown Manhattan to Queens, the presence of the Queensboro Bridge is made more significant by its place in the film's version of the Manhattan skyline. It serves as an alternative urban motif, replacing the iconic image of the lower Manhattan skyline—made famous by the lofty presence of the Twin Towers—with a literal and figurative reminder of the role immigrant communities living in Queens have played in the development of New York City.

The midtown urban motif ultimately speaks back to the exclusionary practices of 9/11's aftermath—including the whitening of the national body against the specter of the racialized terrorist. Juan A. Suarez argues that the towers themselves represented the "spectacle of modernity," a phallocentric symbol of Western economic and cultural power.[27] Suarez notes that the Twin Towers epitomized a society (and urban landscape) informed by modernist logics, including rationality and objectivity and, of course, linear temporality (101). Embedded in that logic, however, is an ethnocentric regime of control in which "modernity's others" are abjected from the organization of urban space. For Suarez, the collapse of the World Trade Center marks the violent return of those abjected identities to "haunt a center that had at once created them and turned them into its absolute others" (101). By exchanging the image (or lack thereof) of the Twin Towers for the Queensboro Bridge, the film attempts to reverse the exclusionary logic that created categories of abjection symbolized by the World Trade Center through the disruption of its presumed link to a modernist linear temporality. Nair does not recreate lower Manhattan with older images or digitally enhanced images (a popular choice among films set in a pre-9/11 world like *Munich*, *Angels in America*, and *Rent*). Her choice to feature an alternative skyline avoids replaying a past in which the World Trade Center remains standing and

instead hints at what remains absent in the present. In referring to the present in order to chart the past, Nair articulates a type of doubled time in the representation of the Queensboro Bridge. This gesture ruptures the continuity of the film's narrative life-world and materializes a type of alternative temporality that disregards the primacy of linear time in the arrangement of urban space, and thus the modernist organization of knowledge deployed in the othering of racialized bodies from this space.

Nair avoids recreating both the racist spectacle of modernity and its demise by featuring the Queensboro Bridge within the iconic space of the Manhattan skyline as a site of mutual exchange. The bridge claims the history of South Asian migration to New York through the steady traffic to and from Queens, hinting at the ways in which diasporic immigrant groups traditionally located in the boroughs contribute to the vibrancy—and various rhythms—of Manhattan. Rerouting the symbolic value of the Manhattan skyline through the Queensboro Bridge demands that viewers envision the city not as a space of absolute and fixed categories, of white phallocentric stasis and abjected others, but instead as a site of transition, exchange, and flow between spaces and people. The sustained exchange between groups like South Asian immigrants and the city space symbolized by the Queensboro Bridge challenges the post-9/11 racial logics that seek to erase those contributions.

Similar to the novel, where the space of university plays out the drama of the "American dream," the city itself literally represents a masculinist fantasy of upward mobility and opportunity. The illustration of time and space in the film's articulation of the urban chronotope, however, ultimately serves as a site of ambivalence, particularly for Ashima. Much like Lahiri, Nair's depiction of Ashima's containment and isolation in her new home also expresses a critical view toward that mobility and belonging promised by the nation. Cinematically, the urban chronotope often functions to demystify American mythologies of progress. Vivian Sobchack argues that the urban chronotope of film noir—the seedy, dimly lit streets and dark interiors—signifies anxiety and alienation over the reorganization of political, social, and economic roles in the US after World War II. The city emerges as ambivalent space, where the "insecurity and unsettledness" of the landscape help to shape the action and response of characters.[28] Writing about the representation of urban African American history by black filmmakers, Paula Massood also recognizes this ambivalence, arguing that while the city stands for "freedom and mobility on a personal, political, and economic level," they are promises that often fail its racialized populations.[29] As a result, black filmmakers deploy urban chronotopes in order to explore "mobility, progress, and stasis" in African American urban communities. Much like Massood notes, the gendered expression of ambivalence in *The Namesake* works to debunk the mythology of the model minority, directed at the role the city plays in recruiting capital from immigrants. The film draws from the urban chronotope in order to examine the ways in which the strategies for mobility and freedom indispensible to the newly emigrated Ashoke depend upon the conversion

of the immigrant body into capital useful to the nation. A formation that necessarily excludes Ashima, this gendered contrast is realized through the charting of two spatiotemporal contexts onto the same filmic space.

A brief scene depicting Ashoke as he leaves work underscores the ways in which the gendered contours of citizenship offer mobility within the space of the city. The scene begins with a series of shots that write the city's allure of upward mobility and the mythology of the "American dream" onto the urban landscape. A long shot captures a sloping residential street's row of houses and parallel-parked cars in Queens. Already at the top of the hill, this perspective signifies the promise of amenities like a home, as both a material possession and a state of mind. A clearly marked Dodge Intrepid in the foreground, however, again betrays the film's historical continuity. An anachronism that nods to the modern-day urgency of narrativizing the history of New York's immigrant and ethnic communities, the out-of-place car draws viewers back into the present crisis over South Asian American citizenship, while at the same time challenging the progressive, linear narrative of assimilation articulated through Lahiri's version of *The Namesake*. An image of a snow-covered tree, the corner of a slanted roof, and a television antenna composes the next shot, again pointing to the promise of growth both technological and organic. Interestingly these two opening shots are static, despite their allusion to growth. The juxtaposition of stasis and progress suggests that the city's promises of home, advancement, and stability are a simple façade. Much like the stasis of the opening shots, urban space fails to offer true growth or belonging, but instead it operates as artificial incentive for new immigrants to participate in the nation's cultural and capitalist regimes.

As new residents, Ashoke and Ashima have yet to experience the failed promises of their new urban home. They live, significantly, below the street depicted in the opening shot. Ashoke must leave Ashima in their apartment in order to depart for work. Subway brakes screech in the distance as he ascends a large flight of stairs to the stop above. For Ashoke, the stairs represent the promise of his upward mobility. The scheduled stops of the transit system and the progression of time through labor (in the form of walking up the stairs) ensure that he literally ascends to even greater forms of mobility (the subway), an upward spiral of freedom and opportunity within the space of the city.

Ashima, whose own day is marked by the slow dripping of melting ice outside the apartment window, is barred from entering into the city and participating in its meaningful arrangement of time. When Ashoke turns around and waves toward his home, the shot cuts to Ashima, who stands at the window waving back with uncertainty. The windowpane next to Ashima, along with the fire escape next door, forms a series of horizontal bands that separate her from the urban landscape. These lines intersect with Ashima's profile in the right corner of the shot, where she is clearly contained by the maze-like layers of metal bars. Much like Lahiri, Nair challenges Ashoke's belief in the meritocratic mythology of upward mobility and

freedom through Ashima. The same world that offers Ashoke freedom traps Ashima, pointing to the ways in which the city's promise of sovereignty is contingent upon gendered strategies of mobility that exclude women.

Living and Breathing in Two Different Spheres

Ashima and Ashoke eventually leave Queens, raising Gogol and his sister in a nameless Long Island suburb. As a young adult, however, Gogol returns to the city, living and working in Manhattan. Gogol's experience in New York, however, is significantly different than that of his parents; for Gogol Manhattan is an urban playground, full of swank bars, galleries, and gentrified townhomes. New York also provides the background for his short marriage to Moshumi Mazoomdar, another second-generation Bengali American. Together, they embody a type of cultural capital and social mobility that the film explicitly links to urban space, a subtle reminder that the cosmopolitan chic Gogol and Moshumi both seem to embrace stems directly from the economic, social, and cultural networks forged by immigrant communities living in the city generations before. Nair locates the specificity of South Asian American citizenship in the spatial configuration of these networks, using geographic and filmic space in order to detail the historical, political, and economic conditions that facilitate the gendered terms of citizenship. Unlike Lahiri, who contextualizes Ashoke and Ashima's migration to the US in terms of its temporal significance, Nair relies on chronotopic cues embedded in the urban landscape that situate their migration as part of a growing South Asian diaspora in the US. Competing spatial and temporal terms through which Ashoke and Ashima interact with this landscape allow Nair to identify the socioeconomic terms through which they access citizenship: much like Visweswaran notes, it is the specific combination of class status, education, and labor—a veritable "history of capital"—that simultaneously offers Ashoke mobility and contains Ashima.[30] For Nair, however, the urban chronotope also allows her to embed the narrative of *The Namesake* into the fabric of metropolitan New York, weaving South Asian American identity into the space of the city long before the events of 9/11.

Gogol and Moshumi's marriage is short-lived: dissatisfied with the expectations placed upon the young Bengali American couple, his wife betrays Gogol and their union dissolves. At the end of the novel and the film, Gogol is alone, having neither fully replicated nor abandoned the expectations of his own family. Ashima, after Ashoke's death, decides to return to India, and both texts close with her return to her family in Calcutta and Gogol's rediscovery of his father's favorite author, Nikolai Gogol. The spatiotemporal and narrative shifts between texts, however, resonate throughout the narrative, and the film and the novel ultimately tell different versions of the same story. This is a sentiment echoed by the artists themselves; negating the primacy of fidelity in the cinematic adaptation, Lahiri herself (the rightful "owner" of the narrative) describes *The Namesake* in the companion book to

the film as a story that "lives and breathes in two different spheres."[31] What they do share, as evidenced by their texts, is a mutual understanding of South Asian American identity as one in crisis after 9/11, and the urgency of articulating a claim to citizenship based on the specific historical, social, and economic terms of South Asian migration to the US.

Nair and Lahiri approach the problem of citizenship through distinctive modes of spatiotemporality, subjectification, and authorship; Lahiri ultimately affirms citizenship and authorship from within the nation, while Nair maintains her signature filmmaking style as an interstitial author.[32] Despite their differences, Nair does takes up Lahiri's description of gendered exclusions inherent in the mythology of the model minority. As a result, in both novel and film Ashima emerges as an ambivalent figure**,** designating migration, travel, labor, and marriage as gendered experiences of subject-making. Read together, however, the texts address a shift in the ways in which nationalism and racialized citizenship have been taken up in American consciousness in the years following 9/11. Lahiri, writing from a place in which the wounds of 9/11 were still fresh, focuses on reinscription into the nation as a strategy for articulating South Asian American identity. Nair, on the other hand, expresses a more explicit understanding—and critique—of the events on 9/11, as well as the ways in which the rhythms of the nation that integrate immigrant subjects will abject them in times of national crisis.

The two versions of *The Namesake* depart one more time in their narrations of Ashoke and Ashima's journey: the representation of Ashoke's untimely death from a heart attack takes on two distinct narrative arcs, particularly in relationship to the retelling of his traumatic accident as a young man. In the novel, the detailed recollection of the event is contained within the first thirty pages of the book, and Ashoke reveals his accident to his son while Gogol is still in college, several years before he passes away. The film splits the narration of the collision into two parts: the opening scene of the film portrays Ashoke's departure on the train and alludes to a cataclysmic crash, while Ashoke recalls the rest of accident and the aftermath (shown in flashback) to his son in the scene before his death. While this narrative device works to secure Ashoke's trauma as a young man to his journey toward citizenship, its allusion to 9/11 also allows Nair to disrupt the naturalistic narrative of Lahiri's novel by suggesting that racialization after 9/11 eliminated the temporal terms through which immigrants enter into the nation.

The film strings the two events together by linking the carnage at the crash, via flashback, to Ashoke's untimely death. The film's temporal, spatial, and narrative shifts all converge at Ashoke's death, which then serve as a proxy for the events on 9/11. Although he actually dies away from home in Cleveland, Ashoke's family mourns his death in New York—in LaGuardia Airport, no less—bearing the effects of his passing in the same space as the events, and victims, of 9/11. Recreating the story of loss, mourning, and recovery with South Asian American identity at its center, the film version of *The Namesake* attempts to make its claim on South Asian American

citizenship not through assimilation but by the collective experience of loss experienced by the nation in the wake of 9/11.

Notes

[1] See Mikita Brottman, "The Fascination of the Abomination: The Censored Images of 9/11," in *Film and Television After 9/11*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 163–77.

[2] Here I draw from Nadine Naber, who uses the phrase "racial logics" to describe the processes and structures at play in the crisis over citizenship in the US after 9/11. Not only did the events of this day precipitate changes in who qualified as an "American," but changes in the nation's social, legal, and institutional structures that followed in the aftermath of 9/11, including the revision of immigration policy, the rise of the "war on terror," and the military invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, also affected modes of belonging to and exclusion from the nation. Racial logics are the assumptions and ideologies that justified these shifts, often drawing upon racial tropes embedded in the national imaginary long before the events of 9/11. See Nadine Naber, "'Look, Mohammed the Terrorist Is Coming!' Cultural Racism, Nation-Based Racism, and the Intersectionality of Oppressions after 9/11," in *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11*, ed. Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 279.

[3] See Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma, introduction to *New Cosmopolitanisms: South Asians in the US* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 27.

[4] Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 11.

[5] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 6.

[6] Kamala Visweswaran, "Diaspora by Design: Flexible Citizenship and South Asians in U.S. Racial Formations," *Diaspora* 6, no. 1 (1997): 14, 22.

[7] Gita Rajan, "Ethical Responsibility in Intersubjective Spaces: Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and 'A Temporary Matter,'" in *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits*, ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 127. The erasure of South Asian American identity after 9/11 often revolves around the disruption of this model minority status; during a forum in 2003 held by the US Commission on Civil Rights, Gautam Dutta, the Vice President of the South Asian Bar Association at the time, argued that despite episodes of racial prejudice and violence before 9/11, the overtly racist tone and open hostility sanctioned by the attacks ultimately disturb the status of South Asian Americans as assimilated model minorities. See "Chapter 6: Fears and Concerns of Affected, At-Risk Communities," in *Civil Rights Concerns in the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Area in the Aftermath of the September 11,*

2001, Tragedies, District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia Advisory Committees to the US Commission on Civil Rights, June 2003, http://www.usccr.gov/pubs/sac/dc0603/ch6.htm.

[8] Visweswaran, "Diaspora by Design," 9.

[9] For an in-depth discussion on the historical significance of 1968 in American political history, see Jules Witcover's book, *The Year the Dream Died: Revisiting 1968 in America* (New York: Warner Books, 1998); and Imelda Whelehan's discussion of American politics and the feminist movement in *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

[10] Visweswaran, "Diaspora by Design," 22.

[11] Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 11.

[12] In addition to arguments around the racialization of South Asian Americans as a model minority, I draw from Sunaina Maira's argument that South Asian identity was not popularly linked to the civil rights movement but instead to identity politics of the 1990s. See Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva, introduction to *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality*, ed. Deepkia Bahri and Mary Vasudeva (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 1–16; and Sunaina Marr Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 19. In addition, the legal push to reformulate South Asian American identity as "Asian" and not "Caucasian" took effect in 1977 (Visweswaran, "Diaspora by Design," 18).

[13] Lahiri, *Namesake*, 35.

[14] For an examination of the hospital as a biopolitical space, see Michel Foucault, "The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century," in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984: Power*, vol. 3, ed. James D. Faubion (London: Penguin, 2001), 90–105.

[15] Lahiri, *Namesake*, 5.

[16] Mary L. Dudziak, introduction to *September 11 in History: A Watershed Moment?* ed. Mary L. Dudziak (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

[17] Amy Kaplan, "Homeland Insecurities: Transformations of Language and Space," in Dudziak, *September 11*, 56.

[18] Paula J. Massood, "Which Way to the Promised Land? *Clockers* and the Legacy of the African American City," *African American Review* 35, no. 2 (2001): 273.

[19] See Somni Sengupta, "Series of Blasts Leave 56 Dead in India," *New York Times*, May 14, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/14/world/asia/14india.html; and Amy Waldman, "50 Dead in Bombay After Twin Blasts in Crowded Areas," *New York Times*, August 26, 2003, http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/26/world/50-dead-in-bombay-after-twin-blasts-in-crowded-areas.html.

[20] Elaine Tyler May notes that both the heroes and perpetrators of 9/11 are always depicted as men in media coverage, despite women's roles as officers, rescue workers, and political leaders. Consequently, representations of loss after 9/11 emerged as a distinctly masculinist discourse, from crises over masculinity on the television show *Rescue Me* to the revenge narrative of *Collateral Damage*. See Elaine Tyler May, "Echoes of the Cold War: The Aftermath of September 11 at Home," in Dudziak, *September 11*, 49.

[21] Lahiri, *Namesake*, 41.

[22] Bahri and Vasudeva, *Between the Lines*, 5.

[23] Lahiri, *Namesake*, 35.

[24] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 86.

[25] Leti Volpp, "The Citizen and the Terrorist," in Dudziak, *September 11*, 151.

[26] Madhulika S. Khandelwal, "Indian Immigrants in Queens, New York City: Patterns of Spatial Concentration and Distribution, 1965–1990," in *Nation and Migration: The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. Peter Van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 178.

[27] Juan A. Suarez, "City Films, Modern Spatiality, and the End of the World Trade Center," in Dixon, *Film and Television After 9/11*, 101.

[28] Vivian Sobchack, "Lounge Time: Postwar Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1998), 147.

[29] Paula J. Massood, "City Spaces and City Times: Bakhtin's Chronotope and Recent African-American Film," in *Screening the City*, ed. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (London: Verso, 2003), 204.

[30] Visweswaran, "Diaspora by Design," 14.

[31] Jhumpa Lahiri and Mira Nair, *The Namesake: A Portrait of the Film* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2006), 9.

[32] Nair participates in what Hamid Naficy calls an interstitial authorship, fluctuating between multiple localities, identifications, and representational techniques in order to forge specifically transnational strategies for cultural production. See Hamid Naficy, "Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics: Independent Transnational Film Genre," in *Global/Local: Cultural Productions and the Transnational Imaginary*, ed. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 119.

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