

DEPICTIONS OF COMMUNITIES IN SHORT STORY CYCLES

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of  
Texas State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
Master of Arts  
with a Major in Literature  
December 2022

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2022

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their endless support and patience, I thank my parents, Patti and Charley. Thank you filling my life with stories and instilling in me a love of books.

For their input, influence, and expertise, I thank the members of my committee. Your insight was invaluable to the creation of this thesis, and I appreciate your patience as I muddled my way through. Dr. Blair, thank you for your keen eye for detail; Dr. Ellis-Lai, for truly years of support; and Dr. Zecena, for your curiosity and care.

Thank you to Dr. Sarah Ramírez for assigning *flesh to bone* and teaching it with such passion; little did you know how much of a role it would play in my degree. I also thank Chris Margrave for suggesting *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, which has permanently shaped my perspective of storytelling.

Thank you to my friends and coworkers who have supported me along the way. Whether commiserating about school or listening as I process my feelings aloud, you have helped me not feel alone.

Lastly, I acknowledge those who suffered countless hardships over the last several years. Through love and loss, I hope we can all find comfort in the pages of a book, the support of those who love us, and the communities that make us who we are.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The short story carries its definition in its name. Able to be read in one sitting and in possession of a plot, short stories have been told around campfires and in rocking chairs for centuries. With the advent of cheap printing practices in northern Europe in the eighteenth century and the popularity of periodicals in the nineteenth, publishers sought out short story writers to fill the pages of weekly magazines alongside advertisements and news articles (D'hoker and Mourant 2). These stories would be compiled into collections and sold, preserving these stories while the magazines disintegrated with age. With the decline of literary magazines in the mid-nineteen fifties, so too did the short story fall from popularity, and authors oriented towards the more commercially successful novel in its place. While some famous short stories and collections were published in the following fifty years, they were an exception to the rule as the genre floundered until the end of the century. Now, as short stories and their collections have been reinvigorated for the twenty-first century, readers and scholars can take note of their distinctive position and benefits in an increasingly globalized marketplace.

Many short stories involve a single event, protagonist, and theme. Instead of establishing a sprawling stage on which the story will play out, authors can focus on a specific moment and how it impacts the characters and their world. The brevity of a story should not be interpreted as lacking complexity; in fact, the limited length encourages authors to maximize the power of every word so the reader is gripped from start to finish. While a novel may have pages and pages dedicated to time, setting, and history, the short story must situate the readers before the first page is turned, allowing for an immediately absorbing reading experience.

Edgar Allen Poe wrote that short works, like poems or stories, should be readable in one sitting as to provide a unified experience for the reader. Works longer than that, he argued, allowed the real world to permeate the text, as work and other obligations butted their way between the pages (260). A short story collection, also called a cycle or sequence, straddles the line of Poe's dichotomy. The stories themselves are self-contained, but the book itself should be considered a single complete work as well. The individual stories should be strong enough to exist on their own, but, taken with harmony with the others, they become part of a larger narrative.

The short story cycle is a relatively new concept, even though collections of stories have been published and sold for over a century. Not all collections of short stories are necessarily cohesive works meant to comment on each other. Historically, short stories have been compiled, but there is no evidence that they were meant to be read as a unified work; rather, it was a convenient way for a publisher to sell more books. "Best Of" collections and critic's choice collections may reflect the editor's taste or the appetite of the marketplace, but the stories remain autonomous even when sharing a hard cover. The short story cycle, on the other hand, is inherently intertwined.

Take for instance Lulu Delacruz's 2017 collection, *Us, in Progress: Short Stories About Young Latinos*. Composed of twelve stories and inspired by real events, this collection explores the trials and triumphs of Latino children around the United States. Characters may explore new hobbies, attempt to learn Spanish, or face prejudice from other people, and they end their story with a little more experience and some new insights into their world. Some speak English or Spanish or both, some feel connected to their heritage and others do not, and some face more discrimination than others. While the

stories are interesting out of context, the amalgamation of the twelve demonstrates how people sharing a cultural identity does not mean their lives will be identical.

Short story authors have often leaned heavily on well-known locations to establish tone and setting. Rather than inventing a place from nothing, authors can build on audience expectations of familiar locales and time periods. Nathaniel Hawthorne famously set his stories in Puritan America to explore themes of human nature, the role of religion, and good and evil, knowing that his readers would be deeply familiar with that period of history. One of the most famous short story collections is James Joyce's *Dubliners*, a 1914 collection of stories depicting life in the city of Dublin. This collection, written during an era of Irish nationalism and a desire to establish Ireland as separate from Britain, explores different corners of the city and the rich lives of the inhabitants. Beyond its sometimes-inscrutable prose lies a deep affection for people of Dublin and the humble lives they lead.

Communities are often defined by a common trait, be it a hometown, ethnicity, belief, occupation, or otherwise. These groups then cultivate an identity that separates them from others and must adapt to challenges that arise from internal or external conflicts. Within communities there is potential for beauty, as people triumph over adversity and establish traditions and common values, and for tragedy, as the group is corrupted or negatively impacted by outside forces. Some communities seem defined completely by their tragedies, while others can negotiate between the good and the bad within. For solitary protagonists to experience every piece of a community, they would have to go through an onslaught of joyful victories and heart-wrenching tragedy at a breakneck pace just to cover the bases, let alone a plot.

Representation in fiction should exist in every genre, but the short story cycle is uniquely suited to avoid the hazards of other approaches and embrace the complexity of community depiction. For this thesis, I have selected three short story cycles from the last twenty-five years that demonstrate the potential for the genre. The three authors have vastly different approaches to prose, structure, and tone, but all three depict their communities with openness, affection, and honesty.

*Brownsville* by Oscar Casás was published in 2003 and depicts the Texan city of Brownsville, located on the border of the United States and Mexico. His naturalistic style and familiarity with his hometown endow his book with realism and empathy for his characters. ire'ne laura silva<sup>1</sup> wrote her 2014 collection *flesh to bone* to explore the ideas of transformation and myth in the Rio Grande Valley. silva retells ancient stories through modern protagonists to comment on cultural shifts and stagnation. Lastly, *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri reinvigorated the short story collection genre in 1999. Her exploration of the Indian identity both in the subcontinent and in the world at large attracted a wide audience that made her work a best seller and inspired authors in the coming years.

If I were analyzing the evolution of the genre, I would have arranged these texts in chronological order, but my focus is on how these texts depict their specific communities. Therefore, the order progresses from most specific community to the widest-reaching one. Every story in *Brownsville* is deeply involved with the city itself and takes place within its borders. The characters grapple with their identities in the context of changed to Brownsville itself and must negotiate a life balanced on the border

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<sup>1</sup> silva stylizes her name and that of her books in lower case letters.

between Mexico and the United States and between the past and the future. *flesh to bone* broadens the scope of the community to the entire Rio Grande region. silva's choice emphasizes the connection between people on either side of the river and their shared history. The region plays a part in their lives, but the specific country or city is much less important. Lahiri's community spans multiple continents as she explores both native and diasporic people of Indian descent. The physical location of her characters intersects with their relationship to their ethnic identity to demonstrate the complexity of belonging to a transnational group.

Attempting to depict a community is a noble pursuit, but it can be fraught with missteps and misrepresentations. Communities are as multifaceted as their members, and no one person's experience can accurately represent those of a whole group. Short story collections offer authors a unique opportunity to depict communities without depending on a single character, event, or time period. With the freedom of a collection, they can tackle a variety of topics without needing to weave them together or justify their intersection in one person's life. In short stories, problems do not need grand conclusions and characters can live without perfect story arcs. Topics can be touchstones, just enough to launch a story and pique the reader's interest.

In 1988, Sarah A Zagarell published her article, "Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre", to articulate the conventions of stories about communities. In response to the over-reliance of individualism in Western literature, Zagarell draws on historical and contemporary works that focus on the community to develop a genre dedicated to process rather than progress (503). While novels depict a character responding to conflicts and experiencing a narrative arc over the course of a book,

narratives of community show how a group of people live their lives informed by cultural histories, norms, and necessities. While these stories are not plotless, their goal is oriented to emphasize the dignity and legitimacy of a group's identity rather than overcoming obstacles or making significant changes to their identity. Readers have come to expect stories to be about the improvement or devolvement of an individual with an endpoint in mind; when stories failed to meet that expectation, readers assumed the story was incomplete or inferior (504-5). This cultivated market expectation has steered writers away from storytelling Zagarell describes as "collective, continuous, and undramatic," despite those being the exact hallmarks of everyday life (505). By placing communities at the heart of stories, she believes storytelling can rehumanize itself by connecting characters and readers to communities.

Zagarell advocates for including many perspectives that embrace the diversity of even the smallest area; if including only one voice, authors may fail to capture the nuance and complexity of a place. Narratives of community are different because they allow many voices to be heard on equal footing, affording those stories an honesty that may not exist outside of literature. Not only do narratives of community put speakers on an equal playing field, they also have the propensity to connect reader, writer, and character. She writes, "narratives of community represent the contrast between community life and modern work directly through participant/observer narrators, and those narrators typically seek to diminish the distance in the process of giving voice to it." (503) Zagarell believes that advocacy is built into community storytelling; the characters cannot help but reach out and impact the reader as they validate the small choices that make up everyday life.

Zagarell's article poses a few questions about communities which will guide my approach in this project. First, what makes this community unique? Whether occupying a specific place or sharing a belief, how a community sets itself apart and divides members and non-members helps outsiders understand how values were developed or history has unfolded. Second, what forces does it need to embrace or resist? Communities are constantly being confronted internally and externally with pressures to change. Some of these changes will encourage positive transformation, while others may suggest embracing negative impulses. Depending on the community, these pressures may be easier or harder to resist, so a community must navigate how they incorporate or reject pressures. Lastly, which people and entities need to be involved? This question involves the previous two; who is involved, and who gets a say? By defining which voices are critical and which elements cannot be excised from the community without shaking the foundation, Zagarell establishes the intrinsic qualities of the group. While these questions may not be answered explicitly for each collection, they will inform my approach to understanding the communities and their unique situations.

With Zagarell's questions and community focus in mind, I sought out a source pertinent to short story scholarship which embraced a diverse array of writers and the potential for the genre. Ailsa Cox edited and wrote for a collection of essays called *Teaching the Short Story* in 2011. The essays explore the variety of uses for both writing and reading short stories in an academic setting. The entire book will be useful for referencing the history and utility of the genre, but Cox's final essay "Postgraduate Research" will be especially useful for this project.

“Postgraduate Research” explores the impact of the short story in a collegiate setting, both in literary analysis and creative writing. Cox argues that creative expression is becoming increasingly necessary to perform research; to imagine new ideas and present them in a novel way, researchers must embrace more dynamic formats and approaches to differentiate themselves against the centuries of prior scholarship. Similarly, authors are embracing multi-modality, from live readings to interactive experiences, to connect with readers and generate new stories (167). Cox’s prediction of a more creative future holds true for the short story genre. Rather than narrowly defining the genre, it should be celebrated for its diverse presentations. Some of short stories feature rich prose and border on poetry, while others cleave to reality and directness. Regardless of an author’s approach, the short story can serve their purpose dynamically for the sake of the narrative.

The essay’s final call to action is for readers to situate texts in context, be it the lived context of the author or of the reader. To understand the impact of a work, one must consider the “formal and aesthetic repercussions” of its time and place (172). When utilizing Cox’s research in this project, I will consider the state of the genre at the time of publication; as Lahiri breathed life back into the genre, Silva was able to pick up the mantle. I will also note how these collections push at the boundaries of the genre and whether those boundaries remain relevant. Lastly, I will follow Cox’s advice and approach my texts with creativity and curiosity, not closing myself off from novel interpretations.

Individual short stories have plots, but collections may not possess an overarching narrative to the confusion of some readers expecting a cohesive, singular story. In order

to understand story structures which do not adhere to tradition, I will turn to Jane Alison's 2019 book, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*. A dynamic exploration of underused narrative forms, Alison's book draws examples from dozens of books to demonstrate how stories can, as the name suggests, meander, spiral, explode, and more. Alison argues that linear narratives have become unnecessarily universal and have come to dominate the way people think of stories. The set beginning, middle, and end with events falling in neat chronology might be appropriate for some stories but definitely not for others. Rather than moving in a straight line, time tends to bend over itself, weaving and tangling and repeating. As people take actions, consequences follow and complicate the past, present, and future. To assume that part of a life ever truly concludes is foolish; even if that time is over, its impact endures.

Understanding a community's past is valuable for making sense of the present and future; as problems repeat and lessons are re-learned, one can observe how a group has evolved or stayed the same. Likewise, actions in the present can alter perceptions of the past and future. In the selected short story cycles, there are no clear chronologies or time frames. Like Alison imagines, these events exist in orbits, radials, and networks, bouncing off and shaping each other. When using her text, I will analyze the ways the communities relate to their pasts and physical locations and how they impact their choices.

In the proceeding literature review, I will describe some other pieces of research that track the history of academic conversations and applications of short stories and their collection. Following that will be three chapters, each dedicated to one book. Communities have notable characteristics, and each book will focus on one category.

*Brownsville* depicts the unspoken rules which govern everyday life; *flesh to bone* explores how shared stories shape cultures; and *Interpreter of Maladies* shows how external influences impact people's relationship to their identity.

Before exiting the introduction, I need to introduce myself. Behind every research project is, of course, a researcher with a keen interest and investment in the topic, as well as countless people providing insight and support. Motivating me in pursuing this topic is my own experience with community and representation in media. I am a white cisgender woman from an upper middle-class family from the United States. In those aspects, my representation is extensive; my race and gender appear from television commercials to classic literature to reality dating shows. However, there are other parts of my identity which I less frequently see in media, and those representations can induce complex feelings. Depictions of queer people like me have become more popular and accepted in the past decade, and for that I am sincerely grateful. I did not grow up with queer people in media being portrayed in a positive light, if at all. I wish queerness had been normalized when I was younger so I could have accepted myself earlier in life. Positive and sensitive community depiction has incredible potential to transform public opinion and celebrate its members and their way of life.

Another aspect of my life is my history of mental illness. My reticence to give them names here reflects modern attitudes towards mental illness; while I wish to acknowledge their role in my life, I am aware of the potential consequences of sharing my medical history. While depictions of mental illness are becoming more prevalent and nuanced, I often bristle at the inaccuracies or the overplayed narratives that persist. Movie makers will go to great lengths to depict historical battles down to time-

appropriate buttons but will, for example, still show characters quitting medications and treatments with no withdrawal symptoms. This inattention to detail often alienates me from stories meant to reflect my own life experiences.

Throughout my life, I have struggled with belonging, in part due to my sexuality and mental illness. Community has piqued my curiosity as I have never felt like a member of one myself. Representation can play a major role in identifying or accepting oneself as a member of a group, and I believe this approach to storytelling can make representation better. I have not selected texts about groups of which I am a member; as a Texan, I have some familiarity with the Brownsville and Rio Grande Valley communities but very little with the Indian diasporic group. As an outsider, I plan to treat these groups and their cultures with the utmost respect and awareness of my own biases. I hope that you, as a reader, feel inspired by this project to pick up a short story collection, learn about a culture, or write something of your own. If this project plays a small part in a larger conversation, I would be truly grateful.

### **Literature Review**

Scholars and literary critics alike have written extensively about the short story genre. By analyzing author perspectives, cultural contexts, and popular themes, articles and books examine the lengthy history of a genre defined by its brevity. The following section will address the works I have read to form a chronology and common vocabulary of the genre beginning in the late nineteenth century to the present. The texts referenced here comprise only a fraction of the plethora of available texts, and I would encourage anyone interested in the subject to perform research of their own to evaluate texts not included here.

## **D'hoker and Mourant**

Elke D'hoker and Chris Mourant's 2021 book *The Modern Short Story and Magazine Culture, 1880-1950* is an invaluable resource for exploring the relationship between short stories, popular culture, and the evolving literature market. The burgeoning magazine market in Europe crossed the Atlantic in the late eighteenth century and took hold in the post-Civil War United States. While some magazines focused on informative content, such as sewing tips for housewives or economic predictions for financiers, many more were weekly sources for new literature. Once magazines secured a foothold in the U.S., readers' appetites were whetted and the demand for new material grew by the day. While established authors received top billing, their contributions would not be enough to fill a magazine week after week. Editors and publishers put out calls for new and exciting stories for cash, and authors submitted manuscripts in droves.

Publishing stories in a magazine allowed new and unknown writers to professionalize themselves; a proven track record of magazine sales allowed people to bypass the connections traditionally needed to enter the publishing sphere. Rather than the insular world of old money families and Ivy educated backers, magazine publishing was democratized, to a degree. The quality of one's story and suitability for the magazine's audience had a greater bearing than industry contacts.

This new democratization of publishing should not be mistaken for altruism. Magazine publishing became an incredibly lucrative business, and editors did not have time to wait for major authors to fill their pages. Female editors and contributors became more common not because their male counterparts overlooked sexist beliefs but because their female readers were more willing to buy magazines by and for women. Despite the

capitalistic compulsions for inclusion, women and writers from lower classes were able to establish themselves as professional writers and leverage their experience into meaningful publishing careers.

As magazine publishing became more mainstream, expectations for short stories became more specific per publication. Editors could identify and cater to their market with specific genres and styles of stories written by relevant authors to compel their readers to come back next week for the new edition. Some touted pure escapism; travelogues about the wonders of China and the beauty of Paris transported readers away from their dreary lives. Others were deeply related to current events, as stories by suffragettes energized the first feminist wave and patriotic feelings were stirred during the second World War.

World War II was a golden age for short stories and the magazines which housed them. Paper rationing and supply disruptions made publishing longer works untenable, and ever-changing political landscapes required a steady supply of relevant material. While many journals focused on promoting pro-war messages, others looked critically at the events which led to the war and encouraged readers to be on guard for signs of dangerous nationalism within their own borders. The end of the war ushered in a new cultural era marked by economic prosperity and a desire for domesticity and a “return to normal”. An increasingly suburban audience and rising prominence of longer published works led to the closure of many major literary magazines, and the publications who survived turned their focus to informative articles about homemaking and current events and away from creative works. By the end of the 1950s, the market for short stories had evaporated, and authors needed to pivot to novels to remain relevant. Once a powerhouse

in the literary marketplace, short story writers lost their platform, audience, and market share.

### **Nathan Bryllion Fagin**

Looking back a few decades, Nathan Bryllion Fagin interrogated the connection between the short story and the marketplace in his 1923 book *Short Story-Writing: An Art or a Trade?* His career as a college dean and instructor of short story writing makes it unlikely he would decry the whole genre as a trade, but his book does not shy away from the financial realities that govern short stories and their writers. He begins the fifth chapter, “The field of the short story is first of all the field of the magazine,” a statement which D’hoker and Mourant would almost certainly affirm (67). As such, writers must tailor their stories to the rules of the editors and the taste of the readers. While this is true of any literary work, the difference lies in the editing process. If a publisher takes interest in the plot or concept of a longer text, multiple rounds of editing would occur before taking the book to market. Short stories were expected to be print-ready, as editors needed to produce weekly issues in short order. Rather than developing the story with an editor’s input, writers needed to internalize expectations and write accordingly.

Expectations for the American market changed depending on the political climate of the time, but some consistent elements were an optimistic tone, respect for religion and social status, happy endings, and perspectives that toed the line between fresh and familiar. There was little tolerance for stories involving sex or anti-American sentiments, though some magazines allowed for light criticism framed through improvement on and promise of the American Dream. A genre so governed by strict rules, he argues, could be considered closer to manufacturing than true creative expression. His tone is not

condemnatory towards writers who produce in this way; he understands the financial difficulties they face and the opportunities offered by publishing in magazines. Rather, he seeks to highlight the environment that has produced this type of writing and how the market affects creativity.

He ends the book with twenty tenets about writing to which he holds himself. He expresses a willingness to be truthful about his experiences, to refuse to shape his writing to the wants of the market, to embrace genuine emotion and expression whether negative or positive, and to foster originality in himself and his students. Compared to his description of the short story market, his beliefs differ sharply, demonstrating his desires for a publishing environment liberated from marketability. While subsequent writers are still mandated to adapt to audience expectations, publishers have acknowledged broader desires and unique niches which embrace challenging works. Fagin's book foreshadows the elements that have made modern short stories successful as they subvert expectations and remain truthful to their experiences and those of their communities.

### **Takeda**

In 1947, as the short story was sharply declining in relevance, Southern writer Eudora Welty was developing a new book. Having written a short story collection in 1941 and two novels in the proceeding years, Welty knew that a novel would be most successful in the new marketplace. In her 2016 article, Ikuko Takeda examined the letters between Welty and her literary agent Diarmuid Russel and the fraught development of what would become the 1949 collection, *The Golden Apples*.

Initially, Welty describes her new project as a novel, but quickly she expresses her discomfort with fitting her story into the format. She writes that "a novel isn't

necessary—that would be, at this point anyway, an artificial way for [her] to go ahead with this material”; in later letters, she insists that, should the publishers demand that it be a novel, she would refuse to sell the book. She expresses her desire to follow the characters where they lead her in a “book of inter-related stories.” (168) After being affirmed by her agent, Welty went on to publish her seven stories depicting the fictional town of Morgana, Mississippi. While positively received, many critics struggled to classify the book as either an experimental novel or a collection of stories. The stories were undoubtably related, overlapping characters and locations, but they were also autonomous and did not collectively pursue a narrative arc. While *The Golden Apples* was called by some critics on par with James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, it never reached mainstream success or canonization like some of her individual short stories.

Defending and defining the genre of the short story cycle come up repeatedly in my research and affect the interpretation of the form. The dominance of the novel has created an environment where other formats must be justified rather than accepted. Welty, according to her letters, felt the need to fight for her style rather than simply state her intention of writing inter-connected short stories. While her circumstances as a female writer in the American South contributed to some of the desire for external affirmation, she was also a well-liked and successful writer in her time. Had she not felt the pressure to write novels, what else might she have written? What more success might she have achieved?

### **McClave**

In this collection of essays from 1980, editor Heather McClave and her contributing authors analyze the contributions of female American short story writers during the

second feminist wave. McClave observed that many authors of the time began their careers in short fiction, but their early works rarely reached the acclaim of their later, longer texts. She also noticed the contributions of female authors to the modernist movement were often overlooked in favor of their male counterparts. The following essays focused on topics such as the impact of domesticity on women's writing, the tension between plot-driven and emotion-driven storytelling, and the role of brevity in the story's efficacy.

In the second wave of feminism in the United States, the unique benefits of femininity and the sanctity of gender became major talking points; what separated women from men, and what could they do better? The general consensus was that women were more empathic, sensitive, and detail-oriented than men, and so too was the literature produced by female writers. These conversations have been criticized as essentializing gender and upholding gender roles rather than deconstructing them. McClave wisely addresses these topics by encouraging her readers to avoid defining women's literature, even in a complimentary fashion. She writes, "[i]f women writers are to be viewed as exceptionally "sensitive" rather than as alarmingly "hysterical", there is still more left out than kept in." (3) While her book is about women writers, McClave does not define female writing; rather, she keeps her focus on highlighting the successes of her chosen authors and the strengths of their stories.

When writing about identity and literature, one would do well to follow in McClave's footsteps. While I will write about authors who connect their writing to their identities, their skills are the keys to success, not their identities. silva's stories are not good because she is a Latina woman; they are good because she approached her subject

with familiarity and executed her prose with deftness and discernment. Attributing a work's achievements to identity politics undermines the writer's talents and the storytelling's quality.

### **Dunn and Morris**

Written in 1995 by Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, "The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition" will play a complex role in supporting the message of this project; more specifically, my reading of this book suggests that our views on the genre are diametrically opposed.

Before discussing my critiques of this book, I must praise its many invaluable contributions. Dunn and Morris have compiled and synthesized centuries of fiction and scholarship into easily digestible chapters, lists, and chronologies. The surveys and annotations of their cited works has led me to texts I may have overlooked and provided quick reference to numerous authors and their collections. Lastly, I cannot forget the contributions they made to a male-dominated field and the struggles they may have faced while undertaking this project.

However, these positive traits must be understood in context with the various problems I have identified in their approach to the short story. My major concern with this work was foreshadowed in the title which rebrands the short story cycle as the "composite novel", a term with historical precedent that has been tweaked slightly for a new century. The tone used when discussing short story collections drips with disdain, a strange approach for a book about the genre. On only the fourth page, the genre is called a "half-breed" and later the term "short story cycle" is discussed as having been coined somewhat by default as no one cared to argue for a replacement (4).

The inclusion of the term “novel” in “composite novel” was no accident. Rather than establishing the strengths of the genre, Dunn and Morris exalt the novel as the generic superior and argue that only by connection to the novel does the short story collection deserve acclaim. They cite Malcolm Cowley’s review of short story cycles as situated between “the novel proper and the *mere* collection of stories.” (5) The insertion of not only the italics but the proud parenthetical solidified my concerns that Dunn and Morris would be putting the “novel” far above the “composite” and both miles away from the short story collections I hoped to laud.

This book approaches the short story cycle as a proto-novel rather than a genre in and of itself and is unfortunately part of a larger trend. Many scholars see the short story as practice for longer works, most suitable for classrooms and amateurs. This type of rhetoric I hope to avoid entirely. Short story collections can tell stories in manners inaccessible to other media; this should be celebrated as a unique contribution to storytelling, not as a sticking point in comparison to other genres.

### **Ferguson**

Suzanne Ferguson differentiates styles of story collections in her 2003 article “Sequences, Anti-Sequences, Cycles, and Composite Novels: The Short Story in Genre Criticism”. Incorporating significant academic texts on the subject by Forrest Ingram, Robert M. Luscher, and Susan Garland Mann as well as analyses of popular short story collections, Ferguson’s article explores how authorial intent and audience perception inform the genre and its defining characteristics.

The article emphasizes the importance of the author’s goal in shaping the collection. She argues that, without the writer’s explicit intention to craft a unified work,

a collection cannot be considered a short story cycle. Rather, she coins the term “anti-sequence” for books like Sherman Alexie’s *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* which actively resists unification despite sharing central themes.

Ferguson explores the tense relationship between authorial and reader perspectives. To a certain degree, interpretations of a work have much more to do with readers than writers. Even if an author intends to communicate one message, readers may agree on a totally separate one which becomes the mainstream perception of the book. The so called “death of the author” supports this method of approaching literature, and, while it has some benefits, it can have consequences that disempower the creator. Calling a collection of short stories a cycle without the author’s agreement can be just as damaging as calling it a novel; if the term is not accurate, scholars should not use it. She encourages scholars to focus on what precisely divides short story cycles from other genres and what motivates readers to seek unification even in separated works. These questions, she posits, are far more beneficial to scholarship than potentially mis-categorizing collections in the past.

### **Barchers and Neumann & McDonnell**

Suzanne I. Barchers and duo Bonnie H. Neumann and Helen M. McDonnell have edited two guidebooks for teachers to introduce students to short stories with a global perspective. *In Short: How to Teach the Young Adult Short Story* from 2005 and *Teaching the Short Story: A Guide to Using Stories from Around the World* from 1996, respectively, provide synopses, background information, and discussion questions for a wide variety of stories appropriate for school-aged children and teenagers. While these

books would be invaluable for teachers hoping to expose students to international literature, they reflect a troubling trend for short story usage in the classroom.

By including information about the author, their country of origin, and some relevant historical information, the editors situate the reader into a specific time and place before reading the story. Unlike the death of the author approach popularized by the New Criticism movement, information contemporary to the story is placed front and center. This method makes complete sense for a classroom as it encourages students to consider current events and their impact on literature. On their own, these books are perfectly fine; it is not their execution but their association I hope to put in question.

Just as short stories were used in magazines to keep people buying every week and just as they were viewed as a practice genre, short stories used in this way makes them an educational tool rather than a valuable entity on their own. The high school staple *The Scarlet Letter* is taught as a piece of literature first and an examination of puritan America second, whereas these books prioritize international education over the literary appeal. The trend of prioritizing the use of short stories over their intrinsic significance devalues the genre and, I believe, has contributed to its smaller presence in scholarship and the marketplace.

Together, these works have informed this project by providing historical context for current trends and perceptions of the genre. One may observe the diverse approaches to short story scholarship, but many common themes emerge. The financial circumstances around short stories have necessitated authors to tailor stories to the needs of the market to make them a viable product. Current social movements and political changes drove demand, leading to rising successes and sudden downfalls. The identity of

the author has varied in importance, from the democratization of the magazine era to its celebration in the mid-twentieth century. The books examined herein have built on this foundation to modernize the genre and expand on the potential tapped by generations of writers. Incorporating contemporary issues, personal experiences, and readers' appetite for new and engaging stories, Casás, Silva, and Lahiri achieve the promise of their predecessors and pave the way for future writers.

## II: OSCAR CASÁRES'S *BROWNSVILLE* AND UNSPOKEN RULES

The desires of a community are expressed through their values, and those values inform how people are expected to behave and approach problems. Casáres's stories repeatedly depict characters struggling with how to respond to events in their lives constructively and in alignment with their personal and cultural beliefs. This illustrates the tension between what characters feel is right and what they have been taught to believe. These internalized beliefs are expressed through unspoken rules, which will guide my analysis of *Brownsville*. These rules play a large part in characters' decisions, their cultural dissemination, and their part in defining the Brownsville community. Rules governing masculinity, humans' relationship to work, life after loss, and reactions to trauma have been transmitted generation to generation, and through characters' internal and external conflicts readers can understand how those rules are upheld or challenged for a new century.

Oscar Cásares was born in Brownsville, Texas and lived there until leaving for college in the state capital. According to a 2003 interview, he had little interest in reading or stories beyond enjoying those told by his uncles. He received his degree and got a job in advertising, eventually moving to Minneapolis. Discouraged from the lack of opportunities and longing for the comforts of home, Cásares began to share stories of Brownsville with his coworkers, and those stories would eventually become his first book, titled simply *Brownsville: Stories*.

The book was an enormous success for a first-time author, leading Texas Monthly to call him the "bard of the border." (Ballí 100) His pared down but passionate writing style had wide appeal, while the intensity and sharpness of his style attracted academic

readers. Brownsville is taught at the university level and has a home on countless bookshelves. Casáres has written several essays and two novels in the proceeding years, *Amigoland* in 2009 and *Where We Come From* in 2019, but Brownsville remains his best-known work.

Before delving into *Brownsville*'s relationship with unspoken expectations, one must understand the complex history of this border city and the context of Casáres's stories.

### **The History of Brownsville, Texas<sup>2</sup>**

Before the arrival of European colonizers, Coahuitecan tribes lived in the area now known as Brownsville for hundreds of years alongside Karankawas and Lipan Apaches to the east. Following the violent expulsion of the native people in the mid-1700s, the Spanish settled along the Rio Grande River; most notably, the city of Matamoros was established in 1784 and was a gateway to immigrants from Europe. Across from Matamoros and the Rio Grande was once called the Wild Horse Desert, now known as Brownsville.

Following the Mexican-American War, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo established the Rio Grande River as the Texas border, officially severing the Wild Horse Desert from Mexico. Once called Fort Brown after Major Jacob Brown, the name was changed to Brownsville in the late 1840s. Due to its proximity to Matamoros,

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<sup>2</sup> This section is based on information from the websites of the Texas Historical Commission and the Texas State Historical Association. Direct quotes can be attributed to Alicia A. Garza and Christopher Long of the Texas State Historical Association.

Brownsville had a large population of European immigrants living alongside native Mexicans. Despite being technically separated by a border, Brownsville retained a close association with Mexico and participated in overseas trade. The Texas State Historical Association wrote that “shipping goods to Brownsville and then smuggling them across the Rio Grande [allowed merchants] to avoid paying high Mexican duties” levied after the costly conflict. While the act of smuggling and avoiding dues is technically illegal, these acts were consistent with their way of life before a foreign war forced them to bear the increased cost. A treaty signed hundreds of miles away was hardly an honorable deal for the citizens it affected most heavily.

Brownsville and Matamoros were extremely valuable trade ports during the Civil War as the Confederacy depended on their cotton trade with Europe for financing. Control of Brownsville, Port Isabel, and the port at Bagdad were all hotly contested, and by the end of the war the ports required massive reconstruction. With the termination of legal chattel slavery came an influx of freed people and others of African descent who were unable or unwilling to go further north for opportunities. They faced heavy discrimination from white and Hispanic citizens, and, by the 1880s, less than one hundred Black civilians appeared in the Rio Grande Valley census data. Ten years after the end of the Civil War, Brownsville’s economy had barely recovered and sluggish population growth meant that it was an undesirable place for new industries.

The arrival of a railroad bridge, a citrus orchard, and other infrastructural advances in the early twentieth century eventually attracted white protestants from the northern United States. Rather than acclimating to their new home, the new residents separated themselves from their “‘racial inferiors’ ignorant of the American way of life,”

establishing tensions and hostility that endures to this day. These tensions came to a head in Brownsville's most notable historic event in the twentieth century, often called the "Brownsville Raid."<sup>3</sup>

After the Civil War, the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry was established to maintain martial law in the area along the Gulf of Mexico; they played a major role in the Spanish-American war and drove native Mexicans and indigenous people over the Mexico border. In the 1870s, a raid perpetrated by Black Buffalo soldiers in Brownsville soured relations between Black soldiers and the Mexican population, so news of an all-Black infantry arriving in Brownsville in 1906 was met with great hostility. Multiple accusations of violence and assault were made by white citizens against Black soldiers, and soldiers were harassed and denied service by citizens citing early Jim Crow Laws.

Following more unsubstantiated claims of assault against the infantry, between fifteen and twenty men took to the streets of Brownsville and began firing on businesses, homes, and citizens. Accusations against the Black regiment were made, despite a report that all 167 members were in their barracks that night. After rounds of interviewing, public pressure, and a lack of integrity on behalf of the leadership, all members of the 25<sup>th</sup> were dishonorably discharged by President Theodore Roosevelt. The reputation of the men was destroyed, and most spent the rest of their lives struggling to find work, lodgings, or acknowledgement of their service.

Over the last hundred years, Brownsville has experienced periods of explosive growth and devastating hardship. New industries have moved in with mixed results;

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<sup>3</sup> This section adapts parts of Ricardo Purnell Malbrew's 2007 thesis, "Brownsville revisited," accessible in the *Louisiana State University Digital Commons*.

while the Mexican middle class has grown, Anglo residents still own most of the city's wealth. This imbalance between the Anglo upper class and the Mexican-American majority resulted in a segregated environment of unequal opportunities. Despite these hardships, people retained their culture and passed it from generation to generation, not bowing to pressures to join the social majority.

In Brownsville, no one consulted the locals which country they should join; the river as a border was a convenience, nothing more. The establishment of the border cut properties in half, separated families, and stole national identities that had generations of history. Brownsville's history is muddled with colonization, war, class and race divide, and identity. While the events of Casáres's book take place long after the events described here, the arms of history have a long reach. By understanding the events of the past, readers can better situate themselves in the world of *Brownsville*.

### **“Big Jesse, Little Jesse” and Masculinity**

Gender roles are part of a web of social expectations dictating necessary responsibilities for a specific group. Rather than taking into account individuals' strengths and weaknesses, gender roles predetermine appropriate behaviors and enforce them accordingly. While many people find these roles comfortable and complimentary to their abilities, gendered expectations can be limiting and disruptive and can maintain social stratification (Miville 3-4). In this section, the focus will be on the influence of gender roles on men, though similar scholarship can be applied to the female characters in Casáres's work.

For a community like Brownsville, gender roles originate from different cultures sharing a border. While both cultures are patriarchal and prioritize men, their

expectations have distinct differences. Stereotypes of the idealized macho man of Mexico have roots in reality, but perceptions about machismo are more complicated than the classic image. Before the swagger and style, the concept of machismo began with the arrival of Hernán Cortéz and the Spanish fleets, according to scholar Américo Paredes. The rape of indigenous women by the Spanish produced *mestizo* children who envied their fathers and resented their mothers, laying the foundation for the macho of today (17). Like the children of colonizers and their victims, macho men are in constant competition with other men for power, respect, and recognition. Attitudes towards women vacillate between objectifying adoration and merciless disregard as their attention is craved but their attachment means weakness. While the term itself is relatively new, concepts of Mexican masculinity are old and are influenced by a long history of mistreatment, competition, and outside influence.

Paredes imagines North American masculinity as an extension of machismo but one that has been filtered through a different history. In his article, he depicts the frontiersmen of the eighteen hundreds as faint copies of the strong, masculine native people they attempted to destroy. As the century went on, the hyper-machismo frontiersman became a comical cliché, and the serious cowboy archetype emerged. Independent, strong-willed, and ungovernable, the cowboy was the ultimate symbol of Western masculinity (27). In the following centuries, this image of masculinity has evolved, but the lasting affection towards the timeless cowboy suggests an enduring allegiance to the solemn and selfless image of the past.

In Brownsville and along the Mexico-United States border, these two expectations collide, promoting similar but notably different attitudes in men. Performing

masculinity one way suggests a rejection of the other, creating internal conflict if people feel they are rejecting their own culture. When straddling the line between two cultures, the characters and real people of *Brownsville* must evaluate which values remain useful and appropriate and which should be discarded.

Appearing in the middle of the collection, “Big Jesse, Little Jesse” begins with (big) Jesse alone in his apartment, wishing his life had taken a different, better turn. The recent separation from his wife, Corina, and their co-parenting of their son, Little Jesse means that twenty three year old Jesse has experienced significant life changes in a short span of time. He accepts the reality of his circumstances but wishes they had not concluded with him in an empty apartment.

Jesse planned to join the military after high school and then go to college, but, when Corina told him she was pregnant, he proposed and started working in Brownsville. Corina’s wealthy family did not support the marriage but provided financial support for the young couple and their baby. Little Jesse walks with a limp; one leg is about an inch shorter than the other, and he wears a special shoe to even his gait. Corina has encouraged Little Jesse’s reading habit and is perhaps overprotective of him. When his father encourages him to play outside with other children, he prefers to stay inside with his mother and his books.

Jesse recalls a man named Pano who became blind as an adult but remained a successful mechanic. By listening to the engine and directing the young men working for him, Pano offered guaranteed service for half the price and developed a solid clientele. When he thinks of his son, he thinks of a boy who can “see, hear, speak...if his mother ever let him, he’d grow up just like every other kid.” (92) While Jesse does not expect his

son to become a prolific mechanic, he believes that his son is just as capable as anyone else, regardless of his leg.

Later, the three go to a carnival, and Jesse is determined to make it a fun experience for them as a family. They eat pizza and play overpriced carnival games before Little Jesse wants to go on the bumper cars. Corina is hesitant, but Jesse insists. While waiting in line, a father and son that Jesse nicknames Rata and Rata Jr. start bothering the Jesses, taking Little Jesse's cotton candy and provoking Jesse. Once inside the track, Rata Jr. targets Little Jesse, and Rata and Jesse continue trading barbs about their sons. As Little Jesse begins to cry, Corina hops the fence and pulls him out, and Rata jokes that he could not "even reach the pedals with his leg." (111) Enraged, Jesse launches himself at Rata, and their scuffle is abruptly ended by some passing police officers. Jesse is handcuffed and led through a jeering crowd, imagining how Corina would criticize him for acting like a teenager and not looking after their son. As he loses sight of Little Jesse and Corina in the throng, the sound of laughter is all he can hear.

There are other characters in *Brownsville* that fit the stereotypes of masculinity more neatly, whether the womanizer or the workaholic. It is Jesse's relationship with his masculinity that makes him so fascinating and, ultimately, tragic. The opening of the story shows him alone in his apartment, not even twenty-four, a father, and enroute to divorce. Casáres spends the middle of the story depicting a young man with realistic struggles and a genuine approach to parenting which clashes with that of his partner, far from a cartoon of machismo. We as the readers see his good intentions and understand where he may fall short. The ending is one of those times where he stumbles; his temper and immaturity lead to his downfall and spoil a potentially happy memory.

Jesse's impression of his son is colored by his own relationship to masculinity. His wife, Corina, is from a wealthy family and married Jesse after they unexpectedly became pregnant. Her siblings are professionals, two lawyers and a doctor, and her sister and her husband have plenty of money to spend on Little Jesse as they have no children. He feels out of place with Corina's family, sensing some disdain for the man who got their sister pregnant; he remarks to himself that he "wouldn't like a guy like himself, either, especially now." (97) Masculinity is often tied to the ability to provide financially, and Jesse is constantly reminded of others' successes relative to his failures. Married and with a child at a mere nineteen years old, Jesse gave up opportunities that might have led to greater financial security. This discomfort coupled with their experiences parenting have led Jesse and Corina to separate.

His desires for Little Jesse are never outlandish; he never wishes his son could be a star football player or a savant. What he wishes for his son is normalcy, and gradually the reader may find themselves won over to his side. While Little Jesse is a quiet child who likes being inside with his books, Jesse does not criticize this behavior—perhaps finds it a bit strange—but wishes that it was coupled with playing with other children. Corina might be overcompensating due to his physical disability and overly isolating him, and perhaps Jesse would underestimate it and push it too far.

The relationship between Corina and Jesse is so promising because Casáres's depictions of their interactions are so sparse. Often only dialogue, their conversations are terse and laced with unspoken misunderstandings. When offered the opening at the Catholic school, Corina sees this as an opportunity for Little Jesse to get a better education, while Jesse sees it as one more way for Little Jesse to be more connected to

Corina's wealthy family. Bringing in the lens of masculinity, Jesse may feel his connection with Little Jesse being threatened as he becomes more like his mother. Additionally, his role as a provider is being usurped as someone else would be paying his son's tuition. None of this is spoken, but the discomfort radiates from the page.

Jesse is not a depiction of the dangers of masculinity gone unchecked; his story is one of quiet but deep discomfort culminating in an action which separates him further from his loved ones. Masculinity is a complex structure meant to keep certain people in certain roles of providership and power, and rare is the person who can balance those roles without succumbing to their darker elements of aggression and control. By the end of the story, Jesse is a well-rounded and sympathetic character despite his faults—one of Casáres's many strengths as an author—so his choice at the end of the story feels heartbreaking rather than unexpected. His discomfort and internal conflict come to the surface, but these few actions do not have to define him.

### **“Domingo,” Work Ethic, and the American Dream**

Brownsville's history and population created a unique relationship with the concept of work ethic, especially in relation to the American Dream. After being separated from Mexico and eventually joining the United States, Brownsville and its citizens had to adjust to their new status at the bottom of the pecking order. Racism, xenophobia, and anti-Mexican sentiment among new white citizens spread, and those of Mexican ancestry paid the price. Payment was often inadequate to meet basic needs, and opportunities were restricted by race. Families were denied access to their land after the establishment of an arbitrary border, further setting Mexican people back socially and economically.

But, tantalizing as ever, was the American dream. Touted as a future available to everyone through hard work and determination, this promise rings hollow more than it rings true. Hard work, as academic study and common sense have shown, is not enough to find lasting success. In fact, the deck against someone can be stacked from the moment of birth. Researchers Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren aggregated and analyzed tax records over sixteen years to establish how people's childhoods home can impact the rest of their life. Depending on the area of origin, an individual's wages were lower and upward mobility was less accessible. The influence of one's birthplace is compounded if one's parents are also from a similar area; if your parents have greater mobility, they pass it on to you, and vice versa. Researchers from the New York University School of Medicine expanded on this concept in 2019 when they published an online article describing life expectancies differing by decades by neighborhood within the same city (Gourevitch and Walek). Multiple factors can affect life expectancies, including access to health care, line of work, clean water and dwellings, and prevalence of violent crime in one's area. Structural privilege and discrimination can impact all of these factors, leading to the differences by area even in the same city.

No neighborhoods or cities are inherently toxic, deadly, or inhibiting; the expectations and biases against them are. Brownsville was a well-positioned and valued Mexican port whose business was hampered by strict American rules and steep fees. The people of Brownsville were not othered until outsiders labeled them as such.

Regardless of philosophical musings about the inequity of the American Dream, the idea remained compelling, and hard work became the promised road to a better life. Not only did Mexican Americans have to work hard, but they had to work in worse

circumstances. Mistreatment from bosses, hazardous working conditions, and discriminatory payment practices all lead to a culture of too much for far too little. But people persevered, driven by the needs of their family and the promise of a better life.

Casáres incorporates themes of work and work ethic into several of his stories; some struggle with the loss of identity through unemployment, some resent their jobs, and others simply cash a paycheck. The character with the most compelling relationship with work ethic appears in several stories, including the appropriately named “Domingo”. Domingo’s life circumstances render him a tragic character, but Casáres injects into his story hope and acceptance.

Domingo is a lifetime laborer, experienced landscaper, and well-liked handyman. He appears in multiple stories in *Brownsville*, and other characters in the collection regard him with anything from affection to neutrality to pity. Years before the events of his story, Domingo and his wife suffered the loss of their daughter after a tragic accident. Their marriage never recovers, and his wife now lives in Mexico. Throughout the story, he blames himself for his daughter’s death and expresses longing for his former life in Mexico with his family. He works for out-of-touch white clientele, who pander to him with broken Spanish and Tejano music he does not particularly like. He is committed to doing his job well especially for someone in his seventies, as thankless and tiring as manual labor is. At night, he sleeps in the backroom of a tire shop for free, and the chemical smell of the rubber gives him a headache before he eventually falls asleep.

The night depicted in “Domingo” is preceded by a day like every other. After a long day of working, he returns to the backroom but cannot go to sleep. Unsettled by his thoughts of grief and regret, he seeks out a church late at night in search of comfort. Even

after his jobs are done, his work has not yet ended. He takes a bus downtown to find a church and is shocked to find their doors are all locked due to ongoing vandalism. He remembers news stories of a tree with the face of the Virgin Mary and ventures in that direction. He walks through the streets and finds the tree surrounded by throngs of people seeking divine intervention, but he finds no comfort in its presence. At the end of the story, he has found a tree to climb, on top of which he can see not only his beloved Mexico but the faces of his wife and daughter, “now a grown woman.” (87)

After toiling all night in the name of peace of mind, Domingo likely returned to work in the morning, his circumstances largely unchanged. He will wake up in the same corner of the tire shop, work for the same people, wait for his weekly hamburger from McDonald’s. His work will continue with no promise of wealth or relief. For a man like Domingo, no retirement is waiting, and he has no family to care for him. His work exists because it must keep him going; he keeps going for the sake of his work.

Work is deeply entrenched in the American mythos of success and meaning, but Domingo is uninterested in either. He will likely die a poor man, an unrested man. He will be remembered by the few who knew him and the fewer who knew him well. So why work seven days a week? His work is not in the pursuit of the American Dream nor is it solely an escape from his grief; rather, it has become his identity. The prospect of working hard for the entirety of his life with no promise of comfort at its end is simple reality to Domingo. His work ethic is not motivated extrinsically by a family or a promised future; it is a fact of survival. So, is Domingo’s life one of tragedy? Casáres ends the story with Domingo looking at skyline across the border, envisioning his wife and his now-adult daughter. We as readers know this is a fantasy, but is it a hopeful one?

Short stories are freer to end with such uncertainty than other forms of stories. Unlike a novel or play where the time invested is great, a short story can move from beginning to end in a matter of pages. The ambiguity of an unclear ending does not cheapen the story; rather, it expands it. Readers can interpret Domingo's story as a condemnation of overwork or a realistic tale of living with grief. Casáres spirals his story around these themes, distilling into a dynamic and tragic character.

### **“Chango” and Living with Grief**

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic response in 2020, psychologist Caitlin Stanaway wrote a short guide to experiencing and coping with grief.<sup>4</sup> The onset of the pandemic and the subsequent waves of casualties meant people around the globe were grappling with senseless deaths and their devastating consequences. She describes grief as accepting the unacceptable; as people's minds rebel against the idea of someone being here one day and gone the next, reality and the needs of life require that that loss is accepted. People generally respond with anger, sadness, and denial, but those feelings can manifest in different ways. One person's anger may show in constant irritability, while another may maintain a façade of composure before exploding at a minor inconvenience. This can be confusing to outside observers who may judge the veracity of other's grief by their internal metrics for “appropriate grieving”. But, in response to a senseless loss, people's reactions are often governed by emotions, not patterns or the expectations of others.

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<sup>4</sup> See her article, “The Stages of Grief: Accepting the Unacceptable.”

Additionally complicating our understanding of grief are the five stages of grief theorized by Elisabeth Kubler Ross in 1969.<sup>5</sup> These stages have been misattributed to those experiencing grief after loss when, in reality, the five stages were established after researching people who were diagnosed with terminal illness or in the active process of dying. The stages were not meant to rigidly predict a patient's behavior but rather to help them understand the maelstrom of feelings brought on by one's impending death. By applying this concept to people after a loss, professionals and laypeople alike may be fooled into believing that loss follows a linear path with definable stages, ending with a definitive conclusion of acceptance.

"Chango" does not start out as a story about grief. Protagonist Bony is introduced in his parents' front yard, beer in hand, inspecting the head of a dead monkey. His preoccupation with the head, which he names Chango, would be unusual at any age but is especially strange for a thirty-one year-old man. As he listlessly tidies the yard, he places the head on his chair to keep him company. People and cars pass, and he imagines what their lives are like and how unlike his is to theirs. Across the street, he looks at the now empty house of his friend Mando.

Mando, a friend of Bony's, had his whole life ahead of him. Out of the military and enrolled in college, Mando had a serious girlfriend, a baby on the way, and a job

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<sup>5</sup> While the original book, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families*, explains the theory well, the 2017 article "Cautioning Health-Care Professionals: Bereaved Persons Are Misguided Through the Stages of Grief" by Margaret Strobe, Henk Schut, and Kathrin Boerner provides an excellent critical perspective.

travelling across the border to Matamoros. On one fateful drive home, he was struck by a truck, and:

Mando died instantly, at least that's what the family hoped. Because if he wasn't, it meant he was still alive when someone stole his wallet, his gold chain with the cross, and his favorite pair of boots right off his feet. (46)

Only a few years have passed since Mando died, but the loss still plays major part in Bony's life. After his death, Bony lost his job and has made money installing car stereos ever since. He lives with his parents who criticize him for not having a real job and passes time by drinking and isolating himself. He does not appear to have any friends, close or otherwise, and has no desire to change his life.

In this loneliness, his friendship with Chango takes the place of human connection, and Bony begins to bond with it. He drives around with it, sleeps with it in his room, and even fantasizes about the freedom he could have if he were a monkey himself. His family wants the monkey head gone, believing it to be cursed. By the end of the story, he has fallen into a fantasy world with Chango, thinking that they could spend their lives together and do the things he never did with Mando. Late one night, he gets in his car with the head and travels to a bridge far from home. Wishing that people would stop criticizing his choices and accept that he is content as he is, he hesitantly drops the head into the rushing water below.

For just a few days, Bony no longer felt alone. Chango was his constant companion, and his lack of judgement or opinion drew him out of his normal routine. He was never unaware of his lackluster lifestyle; replacing stereos and living for a six-pack was never what he wanted. For now, Bony is doing what he can handle, but the people in

his life want him to conform to their expectations. Bony realizes from people's responses to the monkey how little anyone knows about what they should do. His father thinks he knows best, but he does not know his son's desires; his mother thinks he is crazy but allows herself to be manipulated by her neighbors about the supposed curse the monkey might bring; and, tragically, Mando did not know how little his future would actually hold.

The final image of the story, Chango's head being released into the water by a reluctant Bony, has many interpretations. Whether shedding a comforting delusion or accepting his friend's death, Bony's final act is simply the end of the story, not the end of his journey as a person. The grief and loss he experienced will always be a part of his life, but so too will be the connections he cultivated. In this instance, the story followed Chango as it entered and exited Bony's life. Short stories do not always end with a big emotional crescendo, but they can mark a chapter in a person's life. The events of the ending are less important than the emotional arc taken by Bony through Chango, so the metaphorical meaning can be left to the readers' interpretation.

Grief can be frustratingly paralyzing for both the mourner and those in their lives. The massive change can make any other change seem overwhelming, so it may be better to shut down. Bony comments before describing the sad end to Mando's life, "Mando had big plans and look what happened to him." (45-46) Perhaps his inability to move forward with his life is a response to his fear about dreaming too much. Mando was on the cusp of a full life, and yet Bony is the one who still lives. Communities profoundly affected by grief, perhaps from tragedies or events of violence, may lose the desire to

pursue improvements. Accepting that they live on the wrong side of the tracks or the bad part of town, their citizens may accept stagnation and fall deeper into harmful patterns.

The people in Bony's life repeatedly criticize his choices in an attempt to motivate him to change. These efforts have, so far, been in vain; rather than being encouraged to grow, Bony feels more isolated and judged and therefore digs in his heels. But Bony is not a bad person any more than Brownsville is a bad place. He loved his friend dearly and has been shaken by his loss. He is so desperate for understanding that he bonds with a piece of a corpse, demonstrating his capacity for connection. He is not the best version of himself, but he does not hurt other people. What Bony needs is what his community needs: acknowledgement of suffering and support to move forward.

There is no proper way to grieve or comfort one in a state of grief, but the critical first step is acknowledging the impact of the loss. Bony is trapped in stasis but has demonstrated the ability to connect with something, no matter how unusual. As he recalls his time with Mando, perhaps he is untangling his complex feelings and accepting that he must live without his friend. As will be discussed in later sections, Brownsville has undergone many changes, some with significantly negative impacts. But there have been concerted efforts to emphasize what is great about the city, demonstrating that growth can happen even after a period of difficulty. While the stages of processing grief and moving forward take different forms for people and communities, there is always hope for acceptance, adaptation, and a promising future.

### **Community Responses to Trauma, "RG," and "Yolanda"**

The community of Brownsville has weathered many storms in its history, but notably hurricanes have wreaked havoc on the gulf side city. Blown across the Atlantic Ocean,

hurricanes collide with the east coast of the United States every year to varying degrees of devastation; even in years with easier seasons, people still lose their homes and their lives to these massive storms.

While weather events do not discriminate when it comes to their victims, communities with less access to resources and weaker infrastructure are impacted far more than their better-equipped counterparts. From the most recent census data, the median household income of Brownsville is \$40,942 for an average of 3.4 people, and 27.5% live below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau) These figures are a marked improvement from 2013, where the 36% poverty rate earned Brownsville the distinction of the “poorest city in America.” (Hlavaty)

When Casáres wrote his collection, the most destructive weather event in recent memory was Hurricane Beulah in 1967. With windspeeds as high as 160 miles per hour and as much as 30 inches of rain in the span of a few weeks, Beulah caused devastation across multiple states. Fifty eight lives were lost, fifteen in Texas alone (National Weather Service). A few stories reference Beulah, but the second story “RG” puts the hurricane in perspective.

The protagonist of the story, unnamed with the initials RG, keeps a brief but thorough record of his life in small notebooks. A stoic man, RG has been in silent conflict with his neighbor Bannert for four years over an unreturned hammer. His journal assures him the exact date he lent the hammer to Bannert, and yet years have passed without it being returned. He has considered asking for it back, but he seemingly prefers to let his feelings of resentment fester. The story ends with the hammer being returned, only after Bannert breaks RG’s backup hammer and generously offers “his own” in exchange.

The actual conflict of the story is less notable than the surrounding events and environment of the story. To begin, the Bannerts are one of the few Anglo families in RG's neighborhood. While RG asserts that he has treats people of every race the same, he notes that his wife has a particular preference for their white neighbors, saying that she is "quick to defend other people...especially if they have blue eyes" and that when they moved to a neighborhood with "a few Anglo families...she thought we were living in the country club." (27) Centuries of subjugation, colonization, and violence against indigenous Mexican and Central American groups have created a culture of internalized oppression, in which marginalized people seek to distance themselves from their heritage in favor of aligning themselves with the racial "majority".

While Bannert does not engage in explicitly prejudiced behavior in the story, his clumsy use of his limited Spanish vocabulary when speaking to his Hispanic neighbor is indicative of the passive "othering" perpetuated by ignorant assumptions. Following the hurricane, the Bannerts relocate to "a new subdivision on the north side of town", perhaps becoming a late adopter of white flight (34).

In a moment of direct threat to the community, namely the hurricane, citizens of Brownsville are seen working together, boarding up each other's houses and waiting patiently to purchase supplies as the storm approaches. When a threat is specific and imminent, solutions become the priority and people can work towards a similar goal. Rather than descending into chaos that must be addressed once the storm ends, people focus on the work to be done for themselves and their neighbors. It is far more difficult to face an ongoing, ambiguous threat that slowly but surely dismantles customs and behaviors. A hurricane will come and go, but structural changes move in permanently.

Addressing actions that traumatize a community and shape its identity take persistent change and acknowledgement, neither of which are strong suits for cities regardless of resources. These changes are particularly difficult in communities where people have little margin to enact change; working class people do not have the time and wealthier people are often content with their current circumstances.

Experiencing and healing from traumatic incidents do not follow a straightforward trajectory. The event may happen in an instant or over a set period of time, but the impacts follow their own itinerary. While efforts can be made for personal healing, setbacks can occur at any time as brain chemistry and circumstance can bring the event to the forefront. Even the event itself may not be bound by time; as a community shifts and peace is disruptive, it can be hard to imagine a time before or after the negative changes take place. Casáres mentions changes in the Brownsville community throughout his collection but does not explore specifics until the second to last story.

In the story “Chango,” protagonist Bony sits in his yard watching passing cars and comments on his neighborhood, saying, “[i]f you left anything in the yard overnight, it was as good as gone...Most of the neighbors who could afford them had steel bars installed...and even that didn’t always keep the cabrones out.” (50) In the following story, Domingo goes in search of a church open late at night, only to be told that the churches were locked after a series of break-ins (79).

Throughout the collection, Casáres paints Brownsville as a place with a rich history but an unfortunate association with crime and violence. While these can be seen in most cities, *Brownsville* seems to accept them as a fact of life to be responded to rather than rectified. In the penultimate story, “Yolanda”, the unnamed protagonist describes his

neighbors, specifically the titular Yolanda, from his preteen years. His description of his childhood city paints a picture of Brownsville that subtly shifts the readers' perception of the city:

“I remember it being a different neighborhood back then. Everybody knew everybody, and people left their doors unlocked at night. You didn't have to worry about people stealing shit you didn't lock up...I'm talking about before some drunk...drove his car straight into the Rivas front yard....That was before Pete Zuniga...saw a white dude who'd been knifed a couple dozen times and was floating in the green water of the resaca...When you didn't have to put an alarm *and* the Club on your car so it wouldn't end up in Reynosa. Before my father had to put iron bars on the windows...” (158-159)

The only clue to the protagonist's age is his Dallas Cowboys bedsheets. The team was founded in 1960, but the earliest bedsheets still available through vintage retailers were from the 1990s. All this to say, this book's publication in 2003 puts this boy's childhood within a few decades. The events he lists took place after his story-worthy twelfth year, so no more than thirty years before he tells the tale in the chapter. Of course, it should be noted that people view their childhoods through rose-colored glasses, as children are often unaware of the harsh realities of life. However, the specific details of the lack of personal home security and the subsequent changes towards violence and crime point to an actual societal shift rather than a change in perception. This phase of Brownsville, therefore, is recent and jarring to the community.

This description now casts the previous stories in a new light, dividing the citizens by age. If we imagine these events taking place in the seventies or eighties, those under

thirty, like Bony and Jesse, would have little to no memory of how Brownsville was before, whereas Domingo and Marcela have lived in both the city's past and its new present. When the older characters' reminisce about their younger lives, it feels more poignant than simply wishing for a return of their youth. Rather, they remember a safer, more united time in the city. Younger characters have no point of entry into that era of Brownsville other than old stories and have only known mistrust and self-reliance.

This is how trauma shapes communities. The one-off events become patterns, attitudes become behaviors, and fears become reality. Unlike acute traumas, this transcends living memory and becoming simply living. No one would choose to live in a community where whatever is not bolted down is stolen, but somehow it has become reality. The recency of this change indicates Casáres's message to his audience about this community. Whatever you have drawn from his work or the news is only a snapshot of Brownsville and its long history, and it should not be defined by its worst moments. Even as violence and fear take hold, ordinary people continue to move forward and participate in their community. *Brownsville* is a book about a place that can be misunderstood and deserves to be treated with curiosity and optimism. Rather than viewing it as a mistrustful or dangerous place, it should be viewed as a traumatized community that seeks to find a better identity for itself through the lives of its citizens.

### **Final Thoughts**

Short stories, by nature of their length, cannot provide extensive information about the characters' pasts or futures. In exchange, the present can be given great depth and detail, and the reader can speculate about what lies beyond the boundaries of the stories. Casáres uses the short story format to highlight the ordinary lives of the people of Brownsville,

but the brevity of his stories allow his characters to avoid a critical part of their lives. By looking briefly at a few more stories and at the stories previously discussed, one can see how Casáres liberates his characters from the cycles of the past.

In a few stories not previously discussed, characters find freedom in petty vengeance. In the first story of the collection, eleven-year-old Diego goes to work for Mr. Z at a firework stand. At first, he enjoys the job but then comes to resent his disrespectful and predatory boss. As his quiet revenge, he starts including free fireworks with people's orders, sometimes doubling the amount they purchased. At the end of the story, Diego tells his father he sold more fireworks than anyone, and his father is proud. The final story depicts Lola Perez, sixty eight year old Lola Perez is a competitive bowler whose prized bowling ball is stolen. When the police are unwilling to help, she thinks her ball is lost for good until she encounters the thieves at a convenience store. When they refuse to return the ball, she gets a spare bowling ball from her car, goes back inside, and takes aim at her targets. The story, and the collection, end with the word "Strike!" (189)

In both stories, characters take superficial revenge against people who have wronged them, but most of the stories in *Brownsville* are not about vengeance. However, in both stories the characters avoid the fallout from their actions. Diego is not exposed for his deception, and Lola is not accused of assault. Almost all the stories in *Brownsville* end before characters face the effects of their actions, for better or for worse. Fallout should be differentiated from consequences, as several of the characters do experience consequences. Notably, Jesse is arrested after his fight at the carnival, but the story does not depict him living with those consequences after the fact. Conversely, Domingo

experiences a moment of catharsis at the end of his long journey, but the reader does not know if it has provided any lasting comfort beyond that night.

This lack of fallout is a twisted version of the “happily ever after” endings so common in fairy tales. After all, is it not nice for a story to be wrapped up neatly with the heroes victorious? In these stories, the other shoe never drops, but, unlike young readers for fairy tales, the audience for *Brownsville* knows it will soon. Bony and Domingo will have to cope with their grief; Diego and Lola might be caught for their misdeeds; Jesse and his family will have to adjust after his arrest; and the people of Brownsville will need to confront changes in their community.

Casáres’s use of the short story enables his characters to subvert the events of the past. The history of Brownsville is marked by the actions of others and the consequences suffered by the city. The Wild Horse Desert was taken over by the Spaniards, Brownsville was separated from Mexico after the Treaty of Guadalupe, their ports were overused and damaged during the Civil War, and changing economic climates have weakened the area financially. All of these factors were external but deeply affected Brownsville. Now, in Casáres’s hands, Brownsville residents are the ones able to slip the knot and let the fallout remain forever in the rearview.

Is escaping the long-term consequences of an action good? While this course of action is not sustainable and mostly unrealistic, it does provide some respite for the community and its members. While characters like Jesse and Lola know their actions will have repercussions, the Jesse and Lola of the story will never have to face them. After centuries of bearing the burden of others’ decisions in a seemingly endless cycle, the people of Brownsville can exist only in the present and with their own choices.

The future of Brownsville is, like any future, uncertain. In the nearly two decades since the publication of *Brownsville*, the city is actively improving but still grappling with violent crime and a negative reputation. But Casáres remains hopeful about the future of his hometown. In his most recent book, *Where We Come From*, he returns to Brownsville to depict immigration and the unbreakable bonds between members of a community on either side of the border. He tackles the human cost of separation from home and loved ones, but he never sacrifices the beauty and potential of the city he once called home. The people of *Brownsville* demonstrate the ways in which every life is full of opportunities to define their community, their values, and their own identities.

### III: IRE'NE LAURA SILVA'S *FLESH TO BONE* AND SHARED STORIES

silva first entered the literary scene as a poet, appearing initially in magazines and later in solo published collections. Her work is deeply rooted in her identity and the complexities of self-identification. Her father considered himself Spanish and her mother considered herself indigenous or “Mexican from this [meaning the United States] side”. As for silva, she designated herself as “detrribalized native” on census questionnaires but aligns herself most securely with Texas. Hers is not a story of immigration or a journey to find her place; like an archaeologist bringing pieces of the past to light, silva and her writing uncover parts of her identity and how they are influenced by different cultural interactions and events. Her style is lyrical and metaphorical, requiring the reader to engage and puzzle over the meaning of her poems. She invokes folklore and current events but never abandons the interrogation of identity; who am I, and how do I connect with my world?

The influence of her poetry background is undeniable in her prose. Her sentences are windows into her characters' psyches, and ideas are repeated and reframed until she perfectly captures the nuances of the situation at hand. Casáres's naturalistic writing style lends itself well to pithy quotes and concise sentences; when quoting from this text, I acknowledge how much is lost. silva's style embeds emotion through repetition, so taking any phrase out of contexts robs it of its weight. While I recommend all the books discussed in this project, there is the most to be gained from experiencing silva's firsthand.

In an interview with Juan Luis Guzmán, silva discusses the importance of folktales and myths in her life and her writing. While this particular book is not

autobiographical, the book is inspired by the stories with which she was raised. Those mythical figures she imagined as part of her flesh and bones, passed down by her ancestors in defiance of threats to their culture. As the title suggests, silva imbues part of the body with meaning and makes them part of her myths. Flesh is how we interact with the world and how we are recognized, but it is the first part to rot and fall away. Bone, on the other hand, can calcify and survive long after death, waiting to be discovered and spark fascination. The intersection of the two calls on the beauty of the now and the depth of the past; according to silva, “we are all of them at once and our bones remember everything.” (Guzmán interview 2014)

In her collection, silva manipulates and reimagines the myths of her childhood and introduces some of her own invention. silva’s approach to myths invokes a recentering of indigeneity in scholarship and society at large. As Land Back movements and acknowledgements of colonial violence become more prevalent, so too does scholarship that explores the effects of imperialism around the globe. When Spanish conquistadores invaded Mesoamerica, they made concerted efforts to eradicate local cultures and religions in favor of European customs and Catholicism. As a consequence, most ancient myths were lost, though some survived long enough to be transcribed (Graulich 575). The better-known myths associated with Mexico originated after Spanish colonization and often aligned with their religious and societal values. These are the myths silva is reimagining, and by both bringing them into the twenty-first century and reconnecting them with pre-Spanish beliefs, silva breathes new life into these ancient stories for a new generation.

Before exploring silva's work further, we must, once again, understand the history of the region. Brownsville is a part of the Rio Grande Valley depicted in silva's stories, so the overlapping parts of their histories will not be repeated. Instead, this history will take a broader focus at the Valley and life on either side of the border.

### **The History of the Rio Grande Valley<sup>6</sup>**

The Texas Water Resources Institute would like for you to know one piece of information about the Rio Grande Valley; namely, it is not a valley. Home to a portion of the Rio Grande as it flows down to the Gulf of Mexico, this delta has been an invaluable source of water for thousands of years. Millions of people have called this region home beginning over eleven thousand years ago with tribes of hunters and gatherers who traded with native people from Mesoamerica. Spanish occupation began in 1519, turning the land into colonies fit for farming and cattle ranching. As discussed in the Brownsville section, this era has a tumultuous time in the nineteenth century, being a part of Mexico, independent Texas, the Confederacy, and the United State in short order. While the area north of the Rio Grande was technically part of the U.S., residents largely identified themselves as Mexicans, as the establishment of a legal border had not shaped their culture or self-identity over the last century.

Mexican-American residents were often rich in land but short on cash, a problematic combination which wealthy developers would exploit. Rising property tax rates, periods of drought, and significant competition meant many were forced to sell their land for pennies to pay taxes, due to and in spite of their high market value. After

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<sup>6</sup> This history is derived from Milo Kearney et. al.'s book *Studies in Rio Grande History* (2005) and Chantal Cough-Schulze's article "How the Rio Grande Came to Be." (2020)

the land was purchased, it was branded the “Magic Valley” in an attempt to draw new businesses, advertising bountiful rain and cheap labor from the recently landless residents of the area, only one of which was truly on offer.

While industries and, later, tourists would flock to the area, the counties along the northern side of the border are some of the poorest in the state. Factories called *maquiladoras* exploit labor laws along the border to pay below minimum wage, and trade laws between Mexico and the U.S. encourage businesses to cut costs and maximize growth. The Valley produces a wide variety of crops, including the iconic Texas grapefruit, but the region is continually a battleground for water rights, and regular droughts can wipe out a season’s worth of crops in a matter of days. Migrant field workers are used for cheap labor as their undocumented status leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and wage discrimination.

On the southern side of the border, the Valle del Río Grande extends into the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. While its economy also includes agriculture and tourism, the oil industry plays a major role in the market. Tamaulipas is home to the well-known city of Matamoros, previously described as Brownsville’s sister city. Though a couple of major cities in the state bring in tourist dollars, many citizens live in poverty, making the equivalent of two or three U.S. dollars a day for factory work. Valerie Gonzales wrote about her experience at an encampment where children were blistered from sleeping on dirt floors or exposed to the elements, one only two years old (Gonzales). On either side of the border, superficial gains in for the wealthy do little to impact low-income citizens.

In 2017, the Center for Public Policy Priorities, now called Every Texan, released a report titled “Child Well-Being in the Rio Grande Valley”, which detailed rates of

poverty, household income, and access to health care in comparison to the state at large. At the time of the report, over four hundred thousand children were living in the RGV, a small percentage of the over seven million children in Texas. Unlike the 18% of Texan children, 68% of children in this region were living in high-poverty neighborhoods. Thirty percent of children were food insecure, and new babies more often had low birth weights or premature deliveries. Children and other people living in colonias, undeveloped areas sold to low-income families without utilities like clean water or electricity, are victims of high disease rates and minimal opportunities for education or public services. While the region's rate of maternal mortality is going down and education rates are going up, the reality is that the RGV is in crisis. Lack of public investment, historical neglect for Americans of Mexican origin, and conflicts over the border have turned a once-plentiful delta into an area the United States would rather we forget.

Instead of turning away from the place she called home, silva shines a light on the region and places it in a genre she has coined “mythical realism.” (silva interviewed by Wieser, 2021) She takes the harsh realities of the Valley and injects them with supernaturalism, for better and for worse. Magic and myth do not solve her characters' problems but further expose them. In doing so, silva avoids generalizing indigeneity and myths as uncomplicated and solely positive; they are a force like any other, to be wielded for good or otherwise.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In each of the following stories, silva invokes a specific myth, and I will do my best to summarize the basic details. However, these myths have countless permutations and can differ significantly by region or family. Just like my historical synopses and descriptions

### **“cortando las nubes, or, death came on horses” and cycles of trauma<sup>8</sup>**

Communities deal with internal and external threats that challenge their stability and existence. The unique responses to those threats help characterize communities by putting their values into action. Pacifist communities may value avoiding problems over confronting them, whereas justice-oriented communities may focus their attention on restitution and recovery for the victims. However, addressing threats structurally is a luxury not afforded to all, and some seek the justice they have been denied directly without being able to dismantle the structures that perpetuate hardships and violence. In the second story of *flesh to bone*, a community faces centuries of violence, and the protective spirit who arises must bear the weight of its suffering and its judgement.

In “cortando las nubes”, silva depicts the horrific and generational traumas endured by border communities. The onslaught of pain and suffering is made newly visceral through the eyes of a child, a pregnant young woman, and a powerful spirit. silva fluidly changes narration between these three characters to illustrate the myriad perils inflicted on them and the extremely limited paths to justice available to them. Utilizing her evocative and melodic writing style, silva spins a tale that necessitates multiple readings in order to grasp the actual plot. Even if the story is intentionally obfuscated, the message is clear in its condemnation of the cruelty of others and the necessity of structural intervention.

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of cultures, there will be missing elements that some would find critical. I acknowledge that these oversights will occur, and I appreciate your understanding.

<sup>8</sup> The subheadings of silva’s sections will be in all lower case in reference to her preferred stylization.

“death came on horses” reimagines one of the most famous Mexican mythical figures, La Llorona, or the Weeping Woman. Traditionally told, La Llorona is a woman who drowned her children and now wanders near the waterfront, weeping for what she has lost. Some versions mention a husband’s infidelity or a fit of rage; most reference a white dress with a veil and a skeletal face. Having committed the unforgivable sin of filicide, La Llorona was expelled from her community and now serves as a warning against wickedness. While *silva* leaves breadcrumb clues through the story, the myth of La Llorona is never directly invoked. Three pages before the story’s end, she mentions that she was given a name “that barely contains the story”, and, by this point in the story, the reader perfectly understands why she was given and resents the name and the myth surrounding her (51).

The narrator and her two brothers cling to their mother whose wail bounces off mountains and shakes the very earth on which they stand. They walk a winding and endless path through refugee camps and forgotten towns and farming outposts, where their names have been forgotten but the land remembers their footsteps. The older and angrier Tomás is strong, wielding a machete and carrying the toddling *Icecauhtli* for his mother from time to time. The narrator helps her mother tend to the dead, covering their bodies and adorning them with marigolds. She tries to wail like her mother, but her mother’s cries come from the day “It Broke”, when the rain came and brought death with it. From the death that comes on horses they run, carrying rage and grief and hunger.

Sometimes, Mami leaves her children and runs alone. As they follow her, the narrator describes her flurry of activity:

Tonight she's breaking lights along the river, deepening the shadows, distracting the men in white vans, with rustling sounds that seem to come from everywhere and nowhere. Afterwards, she'll take her sharp machete and gut train cars, leading the suffocated to a safe clearing...She'll swim along the rivers and pull the ones returning to the land of their ancestors away from the strong currents and the lights and the traps. She'll lead the Rangers' horses into falling over the cliff's edge rather than letting them carry death to the Indio villages...Running alone, she'll cover miles and miles, decades and centuries before dawn. (39)

silva's writing style sweeps the reader along the path of the mother as she races endlessly against time. The threats she faces are ever-present and unbound by time, and she only barely intervenes before disaster strikes. She is endlessly reactive, part of the burden she bears. Throughout the story, the narrator speaks of her tireless commitment to those she protects. But silva's writing communicates the exhaustion inherent in this work and the physical price it has exacted on the mother and her children.

Tomás is too thin and smells like blood, and, as he lurches towards the narrator, then referred to as Cempasuchil, his arm falls from his body in a sickening spray of blood. Cempasuchil's face is stained with black blood and one eye has been burst, and she hugs the naked and beaten body of her brother. But the mother is the most alarming to behold. Her eyes are translucent and wild, and her muscular body appears to be carved from stone or wood. She turns around, calling for her children, but she cannot hear or see them calling for her attention.

At the end of the story, the perspective shifts to the wandering woman who tells the stories of the countless deaths of her and her children. The deaths are graphic and

diverse as they are beaten, slashed, violated, and always, always killed. The first time they were attacked is described in detail; after men on horses with hunting dogs attacked Tomás, lit her village ablaze, and burned her daughter to nothing but bones, the pregnant mother ran from the ashes left of her former life, and the men gave chase. With each stride, she is transformed into the entity she is now, wild and powerful and alien. No matter how fast she runs, she and her children can never outrun the death that pursues them, and they cycle repeats endlessly. She rushes into the night, searching for her children, whole and beautiful, but their cries are drowned out by her wailing that has become as ubiquitous and constant as the wind.

While the abilities of the mother allow her to save lives and reunite families, she has become alien to her children and is unable to recognize them. They must endlessly pursue her, calling her name and begging for her love, as she tries to respond to the calls of all who suffer. A community besieged by threats of hatred and violence cannot avoid being shaped by those forces. This story demonstrates the difficulties of endlessly reacting and the psychological toll of witnessing and experiencing persecution. The mother is not able to take active steps to prevent these atrocities, just as she is unable to embrace the children who are never out of her reach. While La Llorona is helping people in the moment, she cannot free them from the structures that oppress them.

In both silva's retelling and the original fable, the act of killing permanently alters the Weeping Woman, and she walks the world weighed down by her grief. silva asks the audience to consider the toll taken by a child's death for any reason. Even if the original story was never altered, how has La Llorona suffered after losing her husband to his

neglect and her children by her own rage? silva elevates her to a folk hero status, but she is condemned to a life of alienation and violence.

The event which dictated her reputation as the child-killer demonstrates the demonization of imperiled people faced with impossible choices. Tomás, still human and alone by a dry riverbed, is discovered by a group of men with hunting dogs. The men direct their dogs to attack the boy, and they laugh as he is torn limb from limb. After they leave him to die, his mother finds her mutilated son, soaked in blood, and the origin of the myth becomes clear:

...not knowing she would never speak another word that was not wailing, she said his name. His single eye stared up at her with an odd calmness and pleaded, begged...She made herself go into the river and lift one of the heavy water-polished rocks. She made herself come out of the river and then she made herself dash it against his head. (52)

She makes a choice no parent, no person should ever have to make. No healing could have saved him or eased his suffering, so she ended it all and sealed her fate. All her good deeds are overlooked due to this act of violent mercy; when she whispers his name, she surrenders her humanity in the eyes of others. While she technically ended his life, it was already over when the men and their dogs came across her little boy. Their actions set the event in motion, but she bears the cost.

Communities are also painted with the same, simplifying brush. Reputations take a moment to destroy and decades to rebuild, so some communities are unable to make progress and are revictimized by their pasts. The Rio Grande Valley is home to centuries of rich history and folklore, but its reputation is associated with crime, poverty, and

tensions over the border. The death of La Llorona's child is part of her story but should not be her defining characteristic. Conversely, the perpetrators should be held accountable for their terrible actions. By not accounting for the needs of the people of the Valley or addressing their concerns or honoring their agreements, those in power communicated how little they cared for the fate of the area and its citizens. Death follows the men on horses, the border patrol agents, the conquistadors, and the rest of the perpetrators, but the burden is placed on the shoulders of the members of the community.

### **“la huesera, or, flesh to bone” and Ciudad Juárez**

silva considered several titles for her collection and chose *flesh to bone* as both an attractant and a warning; like the colorful skin of a poisonous frog, the short title encourages further examination but not without risk. “la huesera” is one of the shorter stories in the cycle but wields incredible emotional weight. The story is a close look at a violent tragedy and, while the myth of La Huesera offers a modicum of relief, does not shy away from a bleak ending reflective of current affairs plaguing Ciudad Juárez.

The actual plot of silva's story is relatively short, and the richness of the prose can hardly be communicated in summary. Taking turns with narration are La Huesera, translated as the Bone Woman, and Maite Hernandez Ayala, a sixteen year old girl who recently moved to Juárez with her sister. Traditionally, La Huesera is a spirit of the desert, and she coaxes the bones of the dead back to life in servitude. She is said to roam the wasteland, the jangling bones of her companions warning those nearby to give her a wide berth, lest they join her grim entourage. In this story, she breathes her own spirit into those she revives, and she carries their wounds and pain with her. Instead of binding them to her service, she liberates their spirits from the suffering they endured in life. She

is four-legged and clawed, but with a gentle muzzle and soft fur she attempts to comfort the spirits of the broken and discarded bodies she finds. While the traditional myth takes place in a desert, silva's character refers to the city of Juárez as a desert: a desolate place where few can survive.

Maite and her sister Raquel arrive in Juárez after living with a series of relatives. Their mother is severely ill, and they need to earn money to send home for her. They work long hours in a maquiladora, but the money comes too late and they cannot even afford to go home for her funeral. Raquel accuses Maite of being unaffected by their mother's death when, in reality, she is depleted from her late hours of work. In her exhausted state, Maite is abducted by a group of men, brutalized, assaulted, and ultimately killed. She speaks to the reader at and after her final moments [italics silva's]:

*I died screaming. They cut out my tongue and still I kept on screaming. They cut my throat and then the screaming ended. The screaming that could be heard. I went to the desert and died. It didn't matter that it was a desert of concrete and neon palm trees, a desert of factory lines and whirring machinery, a desert of fumes and smog. It was a desert and I died. (135)*

The story ends with La Huesera galloping to Maite's crumpled body and called her spirit back to her lifeless form. As she calls the soul to the bones, the Bone Woman has begun again the long process of creating and healing herself. At the bottom of the final page, silva includes a dedication: "for the women of Juárez, for women everywhere." (136)

By the time the Bone Woman comes to her side, Maite is already gone. Any freedom from suffering she offers cannot undo the horrors she endured. The figure in

“death came on horses” rushed to people’s aids, often barely intervening before tragedy could occur, but inherent in La Huesera’s power is being just too late.

The detail with which silva describes the violence inflicted on Maite is enough to turn her readers’ stomachs but never passes into exploitation. Her pain is not beautiful or sensational, just brutal and senseless. Telling this story in a longer format would be agonizing, and silva would have needed to choose between dedicating too much time to her death or shortening it to be palatable and potentially minimizing the impact. As a short piece, this story maximizes every word as readers build to the gut-wrenching finale. Alternating between Maite and La Huesera encourages the reader to hope that the Bone Woman will arrive just in time and rescue Maite, but she can only ever resurrect the bones left behind.

Both La Huesera and La Llorona are roaming female spirits meant to scare children into their warm beds at night. Like silva’s Weeping Woman, her Bone Woman acts for others, even if she is too late to spare them their fates. Unlike the traditional story where those she revives must serve her, La Huesera gives spirits their freedom after the cruel ending of their lives. Hers is a tragic power, as she must assume the suffering of others for them to be free. Her animalistic form but human nature contrasts with the perpetrators who appear human but are vicious towards others. Unlike the rough hands of the victimizers, her soft fur and wet nose can comfort and soothe.

silva intentionally placed this story in Juárez and is the only story in the collection to have a specified home. The Paso del Norte, located around Juárez and El Paso, was home to the Manso and Suma tribes prior to the sixteenth century. The fertile land and ample access to water made the region a hub for the semi-nomadic native people. With

the arrival of Spanish conquistadors, the area was colonized and held by the Spanish for 300 years until it was claimed by the now-independent Mexico. Juárez and El Paso were valuable land holdings due to their locations at the north bank of the Rio Grande, making them excellent ports for international trade and shipping. The two cities were divided at the end of the Mexican-American War when the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo used the river as the de facto border in 1848. Now the largest city on the U.S.-Mexico border, Ciudad Juárez has experienced waves of economic depression, prosperity, peace, and violence.<sup>9</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, border cities were the keys to international trade during times of political instability. Wars in the United States and Mexico required significant rebuilding in the previous century, which resulted in greater focus on infrastructure and stabilizing trade even in times of upheaval. Businesses flocked to El Paso and Juárez, bringing workers and their families with them. While this influx was good for the local economy, the city was not equipped to deal with the swelling population. As an additional complication, the passage of Prohibition in the United States in 1920 drove Americans across the border where alcohol was still legal. In 1921, American consul John W. Dye wrote that Juárez had become “the most immoral, degenerate, and utterly wicked place [he had] ever seen or heard of,” and he was hardly alone in that opinion (Martínez 60). Gambling, gang activity, and narcotic trafficking reigned supreme, and rampant corruption stymied legal intervention.

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<sup>9</sup> This section is based on Oscar Martínez’s book, *Ciudad Juárez: Saga of a Legendary Border City*.

After Prohibition was repealed in 1933, Juárez was no longer a tourist destination for Americans and the city entered a long period of economic depression. World War II prompted recovery, and the following several decades were marked with stable growth. A boom near the end of the century caused the population to double from 1980 to 2000 as maquiladora owners took advantage of low wages to grow the industry sixfold (Martínez 184). Just as before, the city was unprepared for this sudden growth, and a new form of criminal activity gripped the city.

Femicide, defined as violence, assault, and killings that target women, and other murders have garnered Juárez notoriety as one of the most dangerous places in the world. In 2010, it held the record for most homicides in the city's history, 3,622; in comparison, 2007's total was approximately 300 (Driver 39 and Valencia). While most victims are male, the treatment of female victims is disturbing, often involving abduction and violent rape and ending with murder. Bodies have been found without teeth, dismembered, or beheaded. Protest marches often feature women carrying signs with a simple message: "Vivas nos queremos" ("We want to stay alive.") (Driver 42)

The nature of the crimes against women indicates a calculated selection of victim. Often young maquiladora workers, these women are particularly vulnerable after spending long hours outside of the home and leaving work late at night. Their attackers see them as easy prey, and kidnapping rings protect perpetrators and enable trafficking. The abductees' families often lack the resources to launch a search or live too far away to intervene at all. Even if the victim is found, police are motivated to close cases quickly to minimize bad press, and families are left with few paths to pursue justice further.

The source of the new wave of murders and crimes is widely debated; a broad consensus places the blame on the flourishing drug trade and violent cartels. Some Juárez residents believe that foreigners have perpetuated brutality and damaged the reputation of the city. Many women's groups point the finger at government and policing bodies as both enablers and perpetrators of violence. Ultimately, all these factors together have produced an environment where these actions are permissible; without adequate protections or consequences, perpetrators can easily shake the foundations of the community with impunity.

Zagarell's article focuses on how communities can define themselves against outside forces. Juárez is a centuries old city, home to cathedrals, parks, markets, and restaurants. While concerted efforts have been made to crack down on crime and promote the positive self-image of the city, reputations are hard to shake. Unfortunately, part of Juárez's identity is its violent past. By trying to minimize it, the city might appear flippant about the countless victims of governmental negligence and a culture of violence.

Attempting to cleave from the past denies its influences on the present. While time is experienced in a straight line, emotions, personal histories, and recovery repeat and meander., affirming Alison's vision of non-linear storytelling. The scars on the city were layered from the early days of colonization to the crime wave in the early twentieth century to the depression to modern day. Restoring the city by placing those events firmly in the past is impossible because they will inevitably affect the present and future. Rather, actions need to be taken to fix the prevent the past from being repeated.

La Huesera, for all her magical capabilities, cannot turn back the clock and undo what has been done. She takes the remains and transforms them, reuniting bones and soul, so that the sufferer can find peace. Her work is bitter and arduous, and she carries the pain of the victims with her. She has an impulse to search out the aggressors and “make them know pain”, but she resists and focuses on those in need (135). Intertwining her story and that of Juárez sends an undeniable message about necessary transformation and the work it will require. The shared story of Juárez is of a place running out of time; too many people have lost their lives and those of their loved ones for there ever to be justice. Many have the “solution” to corruption and violence, be it martial law, governmental overthrow, or mass incarceration. In reality, there is no easy solution, but it certainly is not more violence or a new unchecked power in charge. Activists in Juárez are working to make the city better, but they need visibility, protection, and support. Acknowledging the pain and real damage done to the city is only the first step; the next will be a painful and messy transformation. After that transformation, there will arise new problems and different challenges, but hopefully the city will be prepared to face them and define a new future for their community.

### **“tecolotl” and the consequences of belief**

While many of her stories illustrate the positive potential of Mexican folkloric figures, Silva does not paint a solely positive picture of indigenous beliefs. Like any belief system, it can be used to manipulate others. Those beliefs inform the values of a group, which dictate insiders and outsiders for arbitrary and sometimes harmful reasons. She explores themes of betrayal and sacrifice in “tecolotl,” the Nahuatl word for owl.

Nahuatl is named for the Nahua people, but records from Spanish historians note its broad use across Mesoamerica.<sup>10</sup> Texts from fourth century CE show “Nahuatl loans in the Maya glyphic records,” meaning that the language was culturally relevant in other societies and has existed for well over a thousand years (11). The Aztec people spoke Nahuatl as noted in the sixteenth century, and it was the language of poetry, music, commerce, and leadership. So widely was it spoken that Spanish colonists and officials were encouraged to learn the language for better communication with the local people, better negotiations of trade, and more effective transmission of Catholicism. The language still exists today in isolated pockets, but linguists and community members are working to preserve and document the language as much as possible before the elderly speakers pass away. Silva uses native words in her work only occasionally, so to title a story only with a Nahua word suggests this story’s connection to her ancestral heritage. In “tecolotl,” Silva plays with the expectation of her audience and complicates the narrative of healing through cultural reconnection.

The unnamed narrator starts her story as a young girl whose best friend was her mother’s sister who she calls Tía. Tía encourages her to play, learn about plants and animals, and pretend she can fly like an owl. She swears to her aunt to “always love her best, always want to take her with me,” though she cautions not to make promises she cannot keep (78). The narrator’s mother does not get along with her sister, and one day Tía disappears without saying goodbye.

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<sup>10</sup> See *Loans in Colonial and Modern Nahuatl* by Agnieszka Brylak, Julia Madajczak, Justyna Olko, and John Sullivan.)

Now an adult, the protagonist falls desperately in love a man she has known for years, and the story shifts to the second person as she addresses him directly. He calls her his “palomita de canela” and marvels at her dark skin that is so like his (81). In the throes of passion, she imagines herself with wings like her aunt would describe, but her friend Illiana thinks her love has made her crazy. The narrator discovers that she is pregnant, like wings are fluttering in her stomach, but her love grows distant and unrecognizable. After she painfully miscarries, she searches for him, only to find him in Illiana’s arms.

In her hurt, she wanders into the wilderness and takes refuge in a tree where she hears a voice like her long-lost aunt’s calling to her. She begs for her aunt to help her escape from her hurt, and Tía obliges. Tía claws at her back and from her back erupt two powerful wings, and she takes to the sky, transformed.

She awakens in a dark cave and is horrified to feel her wings being cut out of her back. Her aunt systematically plucks each feather and crushes the bones, pushing them back inside of her. Tía cautions her niece that she would need to control her new form, lest it overtake her. Now, she explains, the narrator will have control and can access the freedom on her own terms. The reader is potentially stricken with guilt for not trusting the wisdom of the character with the greatest connection to supernatural forces.

Her aunt reveals that many women in their family have this power, including the narrator’s mother. While Tía embraced it, her sister rejected it and did not want her daughter to be aware of her abilities. When the narrator asks if her abilities were connected to the loss of her pregnancy, the aunt inquires about her childhood promise. She then reveals that, out of anger and heartbreak, she poisoned the narrator and caused

the fetus's death. Her aunt promises that the baby would be returned if she kills and consumes her love, so the narrator takes to the skies to find him.

She finds him and Iliana, but her owl's song alerted him, and he fires a rifle at her. She sustains one shot but continues to pursue him. He begs for his and Iliana's lives, invoking the love they once had for each other, but she swallows him whole. As Iliana attacks her, the narrator erases every memory of their shared love and takes flight.

As she flies, she feels the effects of the bullet wound and begins to fall, but her aunt catches her before she transforms back to her human shape. As the story ends, her vision goes black, and she imagines flying like a bird forever.

silva has skillfully crafted her collection to include stories about the power of connecting with indigeneity, and this story is no different. It is a reminder by silva that power is not empowerment, that belief is not indicative of goodness. The narrator's mother rejected her abilities while her aunt embraced them; these and their subsequent choices related to their temperaments and desires rather than innate goodness. The narrator finds freedom in flight after an earthshaking heartbreak. Nestled early in this collection, this story encourages readers to avoid simplicity in their readings and recognize each character as a fully realized person.

To compare this story to a fairy tale, the aunt begins as a Cinderella character, laboring for her ungrateful sister, who demeans her, for the sake of her niece, who adores her. She transforms into a fairy godmother, freeing her niece's wings—albeit violently—and enabling her to escape her mental anguish. She then further twists the knife by describing the suffering she underwent both when living with her sister's family and after she left. In the former, she was humiliated and belittled; in the later, she was forgotten

and unloved. The subsequent capture and brutal treatment of her niece complicates her character, but the explanation of the dangers of transformation convinces the audience that she can be trusted. The reveal of her ultimate betrayal is the anvil on the house of cards; silva is not writing a fairy tale, and her characters do not live in them either.

The betrayal of both her lover and Iliana delves into themes of jealousy and colorism. The narrator describes her Iliana as her “best friend” and that she was caught “looking at [them] wistfully.” (44) She explained away her look as disbelief at their connection, but the seed is planted for Iliana’s jealousy. When the narrator discovers the two in an intimate moment, she notices “the dark of [his] hands embracing the pale of her flesh,” and how, “Your eyes passed over me. You didn’t see me. You didn’t hear my soundless cry.” (45) Only two pages prior, her lover had “marveled at finding a woman with such dark skin, the same brown as yours” in the narrator; now, he embraced the light-skinned Iliana (43).

Colorism is a type of prejudice that privileges people with lighter skin among those in the same racial groups. Colorism, racism, and indigeneity all interact in Central and South America due Spanish colonization and the introduction of African slavery. Christina A. Sue has studied colorism in Mexico through a sociological lens, and her essay on colorism in Veracruz, Mexico is especially relevant to this story. Through surveys and interviews she collected examples of the everyday colorism expressed by ordinary people and how the desire to “limpiar or mejorar la raza” (to clean or better the race) has contributed to a culture that devalues those with dark skin.

Spanish colonizers brought European practices and prejudices from across the Atlantic, and discriminating based on skin color was advantageous to light-skinned

Spaniards. Spain's proximity to Northern Africa resulted in significant populations of those with parents from either side of the continental divide, but royal and aristocratic families tended to marry only other Spaniards. The prejudices towards dark-skinned Spaniards set the precedent for similar judgement in South and Central America.

Although mixed-race children had half Spanish genes, they were looked down on for their indigenous roots. As centuries passed and the Spanish governance was ended, the practices of "racial cleaning" remained.

Sue references people in Veracruz's desire to marry someone with lighter skin in order to "cleanse" themselves of indigenous or African features such as large noses or dark skin. One respondent spoke of her fears of a child with her skin color being called "blackie" at a childcare center and thus hoped to find a paler partner with whom to have children. The casual nature people discussed colorism reflected the approach Silva took in mentioning her characters' skin tones. Initially, the narrator's skin is referenced with loving reverence by someone with similar coloration. Skin color is not mentioned again until Silva points out Iliana's pale features, a stark contrast to the darkness of the narrator's skin and eyes.

Her lover has replaced her, not only with her friend but with a light-skinned woman. According to Sue's research, Iliana is seen as a more valuable mate, especially when having children. This twists the knife of her recent miscarriage; would he have even been happy to raise a child with his own skin color?

The lover repeatedly calls her "palomita", a bird known best for its soft call and pure white feathers. From the short time spent with the narrator, the reader may furrow an eyebrow at this nickname; her rough-and-tumble childhood of leaping from balconies

with handmade wings seems more suitable for a bird of prey rather than a demure dove. As with the aunt, Silva has clued the reader into an inconsistency but, by not calling attention to it, not an implausible one so it is forgotten. In her final confrontation with the lover, the narrator is told that he feared her true nature, calling her “Tecolotl, lechusa, bruja...” (50) Upon seeing her real self, he pulled away, but he continues to refer to her as paloma; the diminutive suffix is removed but the affectionate name remains. Even after beholding her transformation multiple times and being confronted by her power, he continues to misidentify her and applies his misinterpretation to her life's experience. The pet name is indicative of his desire for her rather than his respect.

In this story, people are not seen for who they truly are. At the start, the narrator's mother steers her daughter away from her sister not out of petty dislike but out of fear. Illiana seems like a true friend but betrays the narrator. The aunt acts enlightened but causes harm over trivial matters. The protagonist carries the weight of others' expectations and betrayals but stays true to her desires and loves. Her hatred for her lover is born out of care; her rage towards Illiana from her affection; her woundedness towards her aunt from her lifetime of admiration. She exhibits a great deal of strength even after being brutalized and shot, and, as she goes unconscious, she is still hopeful about taking to the skies once again.

### **“the ocean's tongue” and living with myths**

People's relationships to folk stories and parables can be complicated. Even if they no longer hold that specific belief, there may still be fear that they are tempting fate or inviting misfortune by not heeding its warnings. Even childhood superstitions linger for adults; behaviors like flipping over pennies or avoiding broken mirrors are spurred

not from a logical impulse but from an emotional one. The final story in the collection, “ocean’s tongue”, closes the book with a dream-like melancholy as a woman grapples with changes in her life and the trauma she carries, all while contemplating a newly-relevant piece of folk advice from her mother.

Yet another unnamed narrator tastes salt on her tongue and imagines the sea calling her name. She has left her home, her friends, and her husband to go to her father’s bedside after he was sent to the Intensive Care Unit. She feels conflicted and depleted by her decision, as she is facing internal turmoil over her past and her future. In the past, her father has been abusive and violent, but she feels responsible to care for him in the present. Her nights are sleepless, so she goes to the oceanside. Her thoughts are tangled and interwoven in *silva*’s signature style, and the story is a web of her delirious musings interspersed with reality.

As her father’s caretaker, she is subjected to his confessions. It is unclear whether he is attempting to absolve himself or simply twisting the knife; she is his captive audience as he dies, and no apology is ever mentioned. His admission of fathering a “pale-skinned, green-eyed child” as his wife sickened and died touches on the subject of colorism previously discussed (169). His hatred and abuse towards his family arose from feelings of entitlement and resentment. When her father mentions his oldest son, the one he shaped in his own image, the narrator thinks to herself, “murderer and thief; rapist and child abuser.” (170) Whether applying to her brother or father or both, the man she must care for has brought immense pain and suffering to many, and yet she is expected to care for him. During another nighttime walk, she lays down in the sand and imagines the waves crashing over her, washing her pain away.

All the while, she hides a secret: a pregnancy, not even mentioned to her husband, Daniel. The story is told as stream-of-consciousness but peppered throughout are sentences addressed to “you”, the unborn child. Pages will go by as she narrates her life, then she slips back into her mind addressing the potential baby. She remembers the cautionary tale she was told: “Pregnant women should not walk within sight of the ocean. She is a mother gone mad.” (167) Still, the narrator goes to the oceanside and imagines throwing herself into the sea, breathing in the saltwater and freeing herself from her fear. She tastes the salt in her tears and returns to her father.

Her younger brother is still in their hometown and assists with their father’s care. The narrator knows how he was abused and molested by their father and about the nightmares that still fill his dreams. He nurtures the family’s garden to connect with their deceased mother, but there is rage growing inside of him. Neither sibling truly believes their father can die; he has perpetuated so much evil and escaped so many consequences, so how could he be so fallible as to die?

The narrator imagines killing her father even as she massages his legs with lotion and remembers the love she had for him as a child. Later on, she experiences a miscarriage, silent and alone. She knows it was not the time to have a child, but she still cradles her empty stomach and imagines the child now in the embrace of the ocean, asking if she will “mother him as [she] could not.” (171) Her father passes soon after, and she still regrets that she did not end him herself and spare others the suffering he inflicted. Her father dead and her pregnancy over, she returns home. Finally, she can sleep, but she tastes the ocean in her tears.

The myth of the titular oceans tongue appears to be one of silva's family's own creation. While there are many pieces of folk wisdom about pregnancy, none are related to the dangers of the ocean or other bodies of water. A similar myth predicted that a solar eclipse during pregnancy or childbirth can cause the baby to be born with a cleft palate (Castro 330). This folk story is believed to have originated in the Aztec civilization in Central America and persists in Mexico. The theft of one's shadow, or "la pérdida de la sombra", chills the body and soul, disrupting the balance needed for a healthy baby. While this belief is different, it speaks to the connection between the incomprehensible nature of the world and its potential impacts on a new life.

It is unclear whether the narrator believes in the power of the myth, but she feels a deep connection to the ocean. She is not ready to be a mother, and the ocean is hungry to be one herself. She imagines the child she carries is born of the ocean, torn from its mother and placed inside of her. Perhaps she returns to the ocean to return the child home, begging fate to reunite it with its real family. The pain she suffered as a child make her distrustful of the world and hesitant to bring a child into it. She speculates on the fear that would seize her, causing her to pray so ardently that her knees would be "bloody praying on stone floors." (171) The negative example that was set to her by her father's actions have made her terrified to care for child or even bring one into the world.

In the last thirty years, birth rates have fluctuated in the Unites States; the highest year was 2008 with over 70 million live births, and 2020 marked the lowest of a CDC survey with approximately 56 million live births. While there was a nominal increase in the last two years, the overall birthrate is trending down. A variety of factors can influence people's desire to have children, from economic instability to family support.

Societal pressure to have children still exists, but more people are electing child-free lifestyles due to personal preference and express their support to others making the same choice.

The narrator is torn between a desire and a fear of connection from a child. She does not seem to want to be a mother or have a baby, but she appears to take comfort from the perceived company of her pregnancy. As she drove to her father's side, she addresses it with "I brought only you with me." (160) She reflects on her grandmother's death in childbirth and her anger at is awash with anger mother for staying with her violent father and raising children with him to abuse. Like she noted with her younger brother, she feels filled with rage, fear, and uncertainty, and she wonders if anything but those feelings could ever grow inside of her. The narrator feels responsibility for her family and is capable enough to care for her infirm father. The dreamlike state she occupies seems unusual for someone with those traits, so silva clues her readers into the unstable state of her character's mind.

One character silva pays little attention to is the husband, Daniel. He is described once and in a confusing manner;

He was a laughing boy...and I loved him for it. He's never known grief or loss, had no comprehension of pain. He hadn't ever really loved, didn't know it would hurt me when he left. That is what [the baby is] made of, laughter and freedom.

(160)

While silva mentions him leaving, the narrator refers to him as her husband, so perhaps him leaving refers to something else. Notably, she never goes to Daniel for comfort or advice during this difficult time; she learns of the pregnancy and loses it all in secret.

The story of the “ocean’s tongue” speaks to shared anxieties about motherhood and the surrender of control. Avoiding the ocean is meant as a helpful guideline to protect a pregnancy, but the narrator treats it as an escape from what feels inevitable. She endows the ocean with desire for a child and an angry love for being separated from it; it is as though she wishes for them to be reunited.

Human beings are not defined by characteristics or morals or stories. Their decisions are contradictory, self-serving, and self-destructive, sometimes all at once. The protagonist is weighed down by her past, her obligations, and the looming future of potential motherhood. She expresses both care and hatred for her father; she wishes to protect and abandon her pregnancy. The war within herself has caused her delirium and isolates her within her mind. While the miscarriage is tragic, it gives her a measure of freedom, and another is provided after the death of her father. The Rio Grande Valley similarly needs to be released from the bonds of its past, but those losses might be painful or frightening. Perhaps the story is saying that the way out can be through connecting with myth and letting fate intervene, but Silva grounds her story in the character’s agency. The protagonist chooses to go to the sea and chooses to stay with her father; she shapes her destiny, and so can her community.

### **Final Thoughts**

The volume of shared stories in the Rio Grande Valley is vast and builds on centuries of history and storytelling. While many stories are shared with other regions and cultures, this specific collection speaks to the experience of life in the Valley according to Silva. The perspective of a single person will always be limited, but Silva connects her voice to those of countless others from across time.

Despite reading *flesh to bone* on repeat for this project, silva's stories never become repetitive or overly emotionally taxing. Though they are of her own creation, she never exploits her characters for their suffering, even if she somewhat causes it. She treads the grounds of these stories with great respect which allows to her update and manipulate them without appearing dismissive or irreverent. Other mythic imagery she includes are the spirits of the dead, El Cucuy, and bones carved with ancestral stories. With all these examples, she demonstrates how they can be placed in a new context but maintain the power of their histories.

This collection contained very few, if any, happy endings. While Casáres also avoided neat conclusions, his were often preceded by a moment of catharsis or a key turning point that informed the characters' futures. silva places her characters in situations where the future is beyond prediction or tragically certain, and their stories end once silva has communicated the *emotion* of the story, rather than the plot. Some of the folktales she invokes are not valued for their narrative contributions but for their emotional impacts; La Llorona and La Huesera are not meant to tell the audience members not to drown their children or reanimate the bones of the dead but to frighten them into obedience. silva wants her audience's emotional involvement rather than their plot comprehension.

After reading this collection, the Rio Grande Valley does not necessarily appear any more beautiful or inviting; the stories depict loneliness and betrayal and violence with little respite. silva has not taken this approach to tarnish further her chosen community's reputation. Communities do not need to be beautiful or pure in order to be recognized and protected. For all its faults and history and stories, the Valley is,

ultimately, the home of hundreds of thousands of people who deserve dignity, respect,  
and a safe place to call home.

#### **IV: JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES* AND TRANSNATIONALITY**

Many authors dream of critical acclaim, but few achieve it as early in their careers as Jhumpa Lahiri. Her short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, was published in 1999 and was enthusiastically received by popular audiences and critics alike. Her book sparked the revival of the short story collection in the twenty first century and, while she has written essays and novels in the interceding years, her short stories remain her signature. Born in London but immigrating to the United States at age three, Lahiri writes about her community and identity as an Indian-American, drawing on real experiences through the lens of fiction.

Any attempt to synopsise the history of the Indian subcontinent in a few hundred words is doomed to fail. Even one topic like the interactions between ethnic groups, development of a national identity, complications caused by British colonization, or the country's role in the modern international economy could easily fill a library worth of books. While every culture is complex, the sheer volume of history and culture in India presents a particular challenge. In the interest of time and paper conservation, I will explore one particular topic: the Indian diaspora from the nineteenth hundreds to the present.

A diaspora is a group of people which lives in a different place than their ancestral or established home. The concept of a diasporic group has become more challenging to uphold as cultures increasingly mix and the world becomes more globalized. In Lahiri's case, her characters have direct ties to India, whether they or their direct relatives live or were born there. To understand the Indian diasporic population,

one must be familiar with the historical waves of immigration from the Indian subcontinent.

Scholars Chandrashekhar Bhat and T.L.S. Bhaskar divide Indian expatriates into two groups, the old and new diaspora, and those groups into four total streams. The first stream of emigrants from India were either enslaved or forced into indentured servitude during the colonial period, more than five generations ago. People from all castes were taken from their homes and became "jahaji bhai", or "ship brothers", as social classes and cultural norms gave way as they struggled to survive (91). Living on plantations in settlements far from home, members of the first stream were unable to connect with their families and culture, and many lost their native languages.

The second stream consisted of skilled workers who travelled to developed Western countries starting in the mid-nineteen hundreds. They brought with them their traditions and rules which they were able to uphold and are considered the beginning of the new diaspora. They moved to large, cosmopolitan cities, spoke English, and took advantage of transport technology to return to India periodically.

Spurred on by the growing oil market, the third stream left India for countries in the Gulf and western Asia in search of work. They were called "Non-Resident Indians" and were not granted citizenship in their new home countries. Technically, this disqualifies them from being a formally diasporic group as they retained citizenship in India, but functionally they left India and made a home elsewhere. Their proximity to India made it easier to visit, but low wages and long hours made the return more difficult than the second wave.

Finally, the "IT wave" were warmly received around the globe as engineers and technology experts moved to the U.S., Europe, and other developed areas in the fourth and more recent wave of diaspora. Sometimes invited to live in several different countries, this wave occupies a uniquely "transnational space." (92)

Depending on when people's ancestors arrived in another country, their relationship to India will vary. For some, they were well-equipped and enthusiastic to leave India and pursue a new life, setting up their descendants with generational wealth and access to education. For others, the move was out of economic desperation, and their connection to home decayed much to their dismay. The characters in Lahiri's book rarely talk about their predecessors, but understanding the various and perhaps fraught relationships with their Indian identity will be valuable.

There is a matrix occupied by these four streams; on the X-axis is the willingness to live in a specific place outside of India. On the Y-axis is the need to adapt to the new home. For the first stream, the willingness was low but the need to adapt was high, purely out of survival. In contrast, second stream immigrants were eager to move but did not feel the need to abandon their cultural practices. Assuming that everyone is perfectly content where they are or has an uncomplicated relationship with their identity is overly simplistic and ignores the historical realities of the diaspora. Beyond the transnational group, those still living in India are not immune to those feelings of disconnection or desire to leave.

While Lahiri's book focuses on people living in India and the United States, it should be noted that 18 million people of Indian origin live outside of the subcontinent. The United Arab Emirates is home to 3.5 million, then the U.S. with 2.7 million,

followed by Saudi Arabia with 2.5 million, and more living in countries like Australia, Pakistan, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Asian Americans have been considered a "model minority" for several decades, following harsh anti-Asian immigration laws being repealed in the early nineteenth hundreds and changing public perception after the second World War. Their level of success measured by education and average income suggested that Asian immigrants were well-suited to the American Dream and should be the standard for all groups of immigrants, specifically immigrants of color. Some have suggested that cultural attitudes towards success and some intangible racial work ethic combine to make Asian immigrants ideal for the United States.

These ideas are, at best, ignorant and, at worst, false. Putting a group on a pedestal ignores the many complicating factors that have led to the over-simplistic "model minority" myth. The trip from India to the United States is expensive, especially for a family, so those who are able to consider the move must have significant wealth. In order to justify the move, one needs to find a job quickly or be recruited, so they must have relevant skills. To navigate the visa and resident alien application process and subsequent red tape, one must have proficiency in English to understand legal jargon and technicalities. Even with all of those factors in one's favor, the process is still fraught with loopholes, technicalities, and human error that can delay progression indefinitely. Immigration into the U.S. is incredibly difficult, but the path is easier for people with money, college educations, English proficiency, and desirable skills for the workforce. For all of these reasons, people emigrating from India may have an easier time adjusting to life in the U.S. and may appear more successful.

Lahiri's characters relate to their homelands in different ways. While some are content with their situation, others long to live elsewhere, whether back with their families or in a strange new country. Some have fond memories of India before they left whereas others have only the stories told by their parents. This community is transnational, spanning continents and countries but retaining a common identity.

The prefix "trans" in transitional suggests transition, movement, or evolution. The stages of diaspora are consistent with this definition; this group is constantly negotiating its identity against the current demands and expectations of the rest of the world. In addition to those in diaspora, those remaining on the subcontinent must also define their identity with their history and cultural changes.

Lahiri's work is united by her protagonists' ethnicity but otherwise resists unification. Taken as a whole, her stories do not provide an overarching message about her chosen community. By taking this approach, she embraces a diversity of experiences and fleshes out the ways transnationalism influences community members. The following five stories discussed herein examine different aspects of the transnational experience, including alienation from culture, conflict arising from similarity, attitudes towards care, and changing relationship dynamics.

### **"A Temporary Matter" and Alienation**

In comparison to the concentrated communities of Casares and Silva, Lahiri's community is spread across the globe. To understand a group as decentralized as this, I look to Alison's theory of narrative networks. While many narrative structures follow a single trajectory in a novel format, networks require a zoomed-out approach to appreciate many pieces tessellated together. She writes that networked stories,

...don't give you a line to follow, however loopy or coiling. They don't give you a hot core around which to circle, either. Instead, you gaze upon many segments, or a web. Instead of following a line of a story, your brain *draws* the lines, makes connections. (188)

In my previous section, I wrote about scholars looking at the story through the frame of culture clash. For them, the line their brains drew was to cultural differences while mine connected the internal conflicts that fueled the plot. Lahiri's book is rich in interpretations because of her grounded approach and varied protagonists. The vignettes into their lives give just enough information to hint at what lies beyond without spelling out the characters' futures. This is exemplified in the first story of Lahiri's book, in which she consciously withholds information from readers and characters alike, allowing the network to form organically from the start.

In "A Temporary Matter", married couple Shoba and Shukumar are notified of upcoming power outages that week; from eight to nine in the evening, electric lines damaged by a snowstorm would be repaired. The couple dispassionately discuss the temporary matter and their upcoming schedules, and the audience is immediately keyed into the emotional ocean dividing this couple. Their talk of dentist appointments and work projects is interspersed with Shoba's thoughts, as he reminisces on how life used to be earlier in their marriage.

Months ago, Shukumar left for a conference in Baltimore, leaving behind a heavily pregnant Shoba. Unknown to him at the time, this was a final goodbye to a chapter of their lives. Complications with the placenta led to an unplanned cesarean section, and the child was born dead. By the time Shukumar returned to Boston the baby

was gone, and Shoba sunk into a deep depression. The two became “experts at avoiding each other” and silence descended over their once-hopeful house (7).

Over a quiet, candle-lit dinner on their porch on the first night of the outages, the two recall memories from their time in India, and Shoba suggests that they share something unknown to the other person. She tells him how she looked herself up in his address book early in their relationship to see if he had written down her name; even though he had not, she kept pursuing him. After some hesitation, Shukumar recalls forgetting to tip the waiter on their first date and driving back the next day to give him cash. After Shoba asks why he forgot, he admits that he was distracted with thoughts of marrying her.

The next night, Shukumar is excited when Shoba returns from work early and suggests eating outside again. An elderly couple walks past and invites them to come to a local bookstore to browse, but they decline in unison. In the darkness, Shoba admits to lying about working late and getting a drink with Gillian, the coworker who drove her to the hospital. Shukumar comes clean about cheating on an exam fifteen years ago with great relief. As Shoba touches his hand and leans toward him, the lights return and she pulls away.

The following nights more secrets are shared, one with a kiss and one with the two making love for the first time in months. On the fifth day, Shukumar is dismayed at a notice from the electric company; the repairs have been finished early, so no outage would be necessary that evening. Shoba proposes they eat outside with candles once more, but the meal is eaten in silence. After eating, she offers a final secret; she has found an apartment and signed a lease. In his hurt, Shukumar admits that he did not arrive too

late from Baltimore. Rather than going to his wife's side, he was offered by the doctor to hold the body of the child before it was cremated. He reveals that the baby was a boy, breaking the promise he made to himself never to tell Shoba. The story ends with the heartbreaking sentence, "They wept together, for the things they now knew." (22)

Beginning a book with the story "A Temporary Matter" is a bold choice. The tone is deeply melancholic, the characters alternate between emotional paralysis and release, and the ending is more bitter than sweet. When I first encountered this story in a college classroom, my fellow students focused on the sadness of the ending, as a once-happy couple failed to overcome their struggles through communication. While I understand this analysis, I see their communication as mostly successful and has freed them from their burdens before their eventual parting.

Shoba and Shukumar confront their adversary—the silence that has descended over their home—with openness and reconnection. When Shoba confesses her new living arrangement, she says that it's "nobody's fault... They'd been through enough. She needed some time alone." (20) While this may be lip service to soften the blow, she chose not to take the opportunity to attack in a moment of vulnerability. Shukumar's choice to reveal his secret, however, is intended to hurt and sever their connection permanently.

While this story is about marriage and secrets, it also demonstrates the effects of interpersonal and cultural isolation. The emotional ocean between Shoba and Shukumar is at odds with the presumption of connection in married life. Marriage is exalted as an accomplishment and treated as a universal goal in many cultures, promising stability and a lifelong partner. In the United States, married couples cannot even be compelled to testify against each other because of the cultural sanctity of marriage. The exchanging of

rings or vows make tangible an intangible vow of indefinite support and connection. To be isolated in a marriage leaves that promise unfulfilled. In the months since the loss of their child, Shukumar and Shoba have retreated into themselves rather than finding comfort in each other.

Before the first sharing of secrets, Shoba recalls attending a similarly candle-lit rice ceremony in India. Also called Annaprashan, the ceremony happens in the first year of a baby's life when they are given their first bites of solid food. Shoba was excited about the rice ceremony, having already made the guest list over six months in advance, which now would never take place. While the couple eat Indian food throughout the story, they rarely talk about their time spent in India or their families. Shoba's enthusiasm suggests an interest in reconnecting with their roots that goes unfulfilled. Cultural connection is not the complete answer to their problems—think back to the consequences of “tecolot!”—but it illuminates another aspect of their isolation.

Cultural congruity is the perceived level of integration of one's own culture with the surrounding population.<sup>11</sup> Congruity plays a major role in the wellbeing of migrants; the alienation and unfamiliarity inherent in emigrating to a new place can be mitigated though contact with people of a familiar culture. This is not to say that other communities cannot be welcoming or comforting, as shared values or traditions shared across cultures can be similarly beneficial. The absence of congruity can be damaging at any stage of the migration process. Going from a socio-centric society to an egocentric one can intensify feelings of isolation and intensify feelings of mental instability, including the turmoil

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<sup>11</sup> For further information, see *Migration and Mental Health* edited by Dinesh Bhugra and Susham Gupta in 2011.

following grief. The suffering experienced by Shukumar and Shoba have not been mitigated by the safety of marriage nor by the strength of their community; in the absence of both, their isolation grows.

Lahiri utilizes the short story format expertly to guide the audience to the emotional climax of this couple's story. The straightforward premise primes the audience for five rounds of the secrets game, each night increasing in intensity as the couple seemingly grows closer. When the final night is disrupted, the reader's hopes for a happy ending falter, rightly so. Just as the pregnancy ended unexpectedly for the worse, so too does the story. Had this been a longer story about the slow death of a relationship, the impact of Shoba and Shukumar's final confessions would have been significantly disempowered. An overabundance of details or endless lines of dialogue would have done nothing but dilute the story; from her first entry, Lahiri demonstrates her mastery over the genre, despite this being her first publication.

By expressing the effects of cultural isolation in an intense, interpersonal setting, Lahiri ushers her readers into the world of *Interpreter of Maladies* and the potential for beauty and heartbreak for transnational people. Shoba and Shukumar have gone through so much and, ultimately, they go their separate ways. But, for a time, they were truly happy, expecting a beautiful baby and a new stage in their lives. While being part of a multi-continental community can be painful, the happiness can be so rich, and perhaps there should be comfort in that.

### **“Interpreter of Maladies” and Conflict from Similarity**

The titular story of a collection often receives special attention as the author has explicitly noted the relevance of a story. Like “flesh to bone”, “Interpreter of Maladies” contains

many of the central themes of the book without acting as a summary or synthesis. This story has been studied extensively as a commentary on international culture clash, so I am interested in how the story demonstrates the characters' relationship to their own culture and how cross-cultural communication can succeed and fail depending on the goals of the speaker.

Before being introduced to the protagonist, the reader is introduced to Mrs. Das's legs. Described as "shaved, largely bare," her legs carry her from the backseat of Mr. Kapasi's car to the restroom, her daughter Tina following close behind but notably not holding her mother's hand. Kapasi is a tour guide in India part time in addition to his job as a medical translator. The Dases are an American family of Indian descent who have come to India with their three children to teach them more about their history. All the Dases were born in the U.S., and Kapasi notices, despite being ethnically Indian, how distinctly American they appear in dress and behavior. Acting more like brother and sister, the adult Dases Mina and Raj bicker and undermine each other on the long car rides between destinations. Much of the story takes place through Kapasi's eyes as he stares at and studies the family and the dynamics he considers unusual.

Kapasi is particularly fixated on Mina, describing her clothing and style in great detail. Even her eyes are subject to his study: "pale, a bit small, their gaze fixed but drowsy." (50) No other character receives the level of detailed description she does, including Kapasi himself. So, it is no surprise that he responds so strongly to her compliments about his "romantic" line of work, despite his personal disdain for his job (53). When they stop for lunch and Mina invites him to sit at their table, he is thrilled, especially when she requests his address to send him copies of the pictures they have

taken. Writing it on a scrap of paper, Kapasi imagines the two of them exchanging letters, perhaps discussing each other's unhappy marriages. Filling him with the same excitement as his early work as a translator, the prospect of developing a relationship with her through writing buoys him for the rest of their journey.

Arriving at the Konarak Sun Temple, the family and Kapasi roam the grounds, viewing the art and statues remaining among the rubble of the decaying temple. As Kapasi studies a statue of a topless woman, he considers how he has never seen his wife fully naked despite their years of marriage and how he has admired the bare skin of the American women on his tours. Estimating how long it would take to receive a letter from Mrs. Das, Kapasi becomes anxious to spend as much time with her as possible before the tour ends.

The final stop of the tour is the hills of Udayagiri and Khandagiri, an area Kapasi does not normally visit with tours but one which he believes will be an opportunity to prolong his time with Mina. Despite the lush greenery and group of monkeys chattering in the trees, Mrs. Das does not want to leave the car, complaining that her feet hurt. After warning the rest of the Dases not to taunt the monkeys with food, Kapasi joins her in the car, where she quickly admits that Raj is not the father of her son, Bobby. Kapasi is surprised but says that he does not judge her, so she continues.

Having married Raj and having a child at a young age, she withdrew from her friendships and became lonely. When a friend of her husband's came to visit, they slept together and, unbeknownst to him, conceived a child. She tells Kapasi that he is the only person she has ever told because of his "talents", which confuses him (64). Believing that his experience in medicine and interpretation will lead him to say the right thing, Mina

presses him to alleviate the pain caused by years of dishonestly. Depressed by her confession and annoyed at her for comparing herself to his patients, he asks a damning question: “Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?” (65) Unable to speak, Mrs. Das leaves the car, and pieces of puffed rice fall from her bag as she rejoins her family.

Kapasi follows her and watches as the parents realize that Bobby is missing. A loud scream leads them to Bobby, who is surrounded by monkeys feasting on the puffed rice. Kapasi shoos away the animals, but Bobby is left crying and covered in welts from the monkeys’ rough hands. The family wants to go back to the hotel, and, in her first show of maternal affection, Mrs. Das gives Bobby a bandage and comforts him. As they walk to the car, the scrap of paper with Kapasi’s address falls from Mina’s bag. Without a word, Kapasi commits one final image of the family in memory and follows them to the car.

This story is rich with themes to explore; the male gaze, family structures, and objectification all come to mind and have been explored by other scholars. The ways in which the characters interact with their own and other’s cultures indicates the negotiation that must take place in a transnational community. While all the characters in this story are Indian, the culture in which they were raised are have instilled in them different values. However, the lines between the cultures become blurred in the interaction between Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi.

Indian society is classified as collectivistic, emphasizing the interconnected nature of people and prioritizing the group over the individual. From familial responsibilities to career paths, the collective nature can influence all parts of life. In their guide for culturally sensitive therapy for Indian patients, psychologists Rakesh K. Chadda and

Koushik Sinha Deb advise practitioners to be conscious of their clients' potential discomfort with seeking individual help. Often, issues are addressed at the family or community level, so pursuing help alone may be foreign. Even the notion of privacy can be seen as isolating; a patient wanting family or friends to join a session is culturally consistent for an interdependent society. The benefits of a collectivist culture include a strong sense of belonging, community-oriented work, and societal support. Some of the downsides can be lack of independence, over-reliance on community approval, and harsh consequences for not adhering to societal standards.

On the other end of the spectrum, American culture values independence and individualism. Rather than defining oneself by others, people are encouraged to create their own identities and pursue their own self-actualization. These ideals have been underpinned by the ever-present American Dream, previously discussed through Domingo in *Brownsville*. The notion that anyone can be anything with hard work and determination depends on people self-promoting and working in their own self-interest. The drawbacks of an individualistic society may include alienation from culture, working at the cost of others, and difficulties finding support. However, the benefits are independence, self-development, and more. Whether individualistic or collectivist, societies always have struggles to overcome and unique strengths with which to confront problems.

Mr. Kapasi has a well-paying job, is in a long-lasting marriage, and is connected with his culture through deep knowledge of its history. However, he is unhappy with his life and wishes the work he did made more of an impact. He dreamed of interpreting on an international level and has no real fondness for the work he does. Belonging to an

interconnected culture does not mean he has no dreams for himself, but perhaps his culture has encouraged him to be content with his life as is.

Mother and wife Mrs. Das has, on a surface level, a full life, but she appears to bears little affection for her husband or children. The betrayal of her marriage resulting in Bobby's birth weighs on her heavily, perhaps explaining her discomfort within her family. As an individual, she is unfulfilled, like Kapasi. She confides in him in pursuit of comfort which he does not provide. They both seek what the other is unwilling to provide: him, an escape from his life, and her, an escape from her guilt.

Dealing with conflicts across cultures depends on four features, as listed by communications professor Tom Grothe.<sup>12</sup> First is mindful listening; Mina and Mr. Kapasi both misinterpret each other's words and project their own feelings onto the conversation. Second is mindful reframing, where one's own interpretations are evaluated and alternates are considered. When Kapasi asks her about guilt, Mina is blindsided, meaning she did not anticipate a potentially upsetting response. Considering that the conversation ended abruptly, the final two features never come into play. Collaborative dialog and culture-based conflict resolution never take place, so the two never examine their cultural differences or work through hurt feelings.

Many scholars have written about this story in term of culture clash, but I would argue that this single instance says very little about conflict between individuals. Rather, it speaks to the internal conflicts occurring for Mrs. Das and Kapasi. Mrs. Das does not know where to seek comfort or how to bring her secret to light without hurting her

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<sup>12</sup> For a complete list of the features of cultural conflict, see "8.2: Intercultural Conflict Management." in *Exploring Intercultural Communication*, published 17 May 2022.

family. She has an individualistic motive to console herself but a collective one to preserve her family. Kapasi wishes he had taken a more fulfilling path and only sees the promise of self-fulfillment in Mina. While on the surface only their ethnic background is shared, their similarities internally propel their conflict.

For members of a transnational community, different cultural values can shape interactions and values. However, it is worthwhile to consider how similarities can lead to misunderstandings and further disagreements. A collectivist society is still made of individuals, and individualistic ones are made of groups. Desires for self-preservation, personal fulfillment, and belonging exist around the world regardless of societal structure. By approaching problems from different perspectives, cultures guide their members to appropriate solutions consistent with their beliefs. Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi do not act consistently with their cultures; by respectively seeking out external approval and pursuing personal desires at the expense of another, they attempt to solve their problems from another angle. Their failure is not due to the action but the execution. By not exercising mindful cross-cultural communication, the two leave the situation having gained nothing but more pain.

### **Boori Ma, Bibi Haldar, and Community Care**

While all three collections touch on recurring themes like violence, work, and marriage, the authors generally avoid repeating specific scenarios. In this pair of stories, however, Lahiri portrays two characters in need of care from their communities and the various ways that care is imparted or denied. Both stories feature female protagonists living in India, but their ages and specific struggles differ. By juxtaposing these two stories,

readers can explore how attitudes towards care affect the afflicted and inform the identity of their community.

In the story, “The Real Durwan,” no one knows if Boori Ma tells the truth. While she claims to have grown up with tremendous wealth and land, she currently lives in squalor, owning so few items that she can carry them under one arm. She sleeps in the stairwell of an apartment building and has taken on the duties of a durwan, a kind of doorkeeper. She keeps the stairways swept with an ancient broom, keeps vandals away, and summons rickshaws for the residents. At age sixty-four, she struggles to climb the stairs and must wash with cistern water, as this story takes place before running water was common in the area. She is treated kindly by the residents who give her tea and listen to her stories. One resident, Mrs. Dalal, promises to buy Boori Ma medicine and new bedding after she complains of bug bites and soreness.

When the Dalals install a sink in the hallway for all to share, the neighbors become jealous and seek to improve their apartment further. In the hubbub, Boori Ma spends more time on the roof and in the adjoining streets. While shopping for fruits and gifts for her residents, Boori Ma’s keys and money are stolen. Upon her return to the apartment, she faces a crowd of angry residents. The sink has been stolen, and they accuse her of encouraging robbers to enter the building. When she insists that she did no such thing, they point to her history of false stories and insist they need a real durwan to keep them and their valuables safe. They throw her and her belongings on the street as she insists on her innocence. She takes only her broom and shakes the end of her shabby, unadorned sari, and silence takes the place of the jingling of jewelry.

The care she was promised by the Dalals is never delivered in the story; after installing the sink, they left for a ten day trip, promising to bring Boori Ma “a sheep’s-hair blanket made in the mountains.” (79) Upon their return, readers can only speculate on their feelings after the sink is stolen and Boori Ma is gone. The affection she once received from the residents evaporates in an instant, and they ask, “Where was she when she was supposed to guard the gate?” despite her never being asked specifically to do anything of that nature (81). They assume the worst of her and do not listen to her pleas. Their care for her expired the moment she ceased to be useful, so they disposed of her accordingly.

What she needed was never a sheep’s-hair blanket or even a sink; as a frail, old woman, she needed safety and rest, free from the expectations of others. The lavish promises of the Dalals and the shallow affection from the other residents meant little by the end of the story. Judging by the comments of the angry throng, no one ever believed her stories or thought fondly of her beyond her utility. At the end of the story, no one has lost more than Boori Ma. While the sink was valuable, the Dalals are clearly wealthy and would only be inconvenienced. The residents perhaps felt unsafe, but nothing was stolen from them and no one was hurt. Boori Mah was expelled from her home and her belongings were treated like trash. Now possessed only of a broom and feelings of rejection, she must begin again, now a little older and still without a soft place to lay her head.

In the penultimate story, Lahiri depicts the turbulent life of Bibi Haldir, a sickly twenty nine year old under the care of her cousin and his family. While her specific illness is unstated, the mentions of persistent seizures and uncontrollable fits are

consistent with epilepsy. The story provides an ever-growing list of treatments she has received, but none of them have produced a cure. Her cousin owns and operates a cosmetics shop, and Bibi does inventory in exchange for room and board in his home. He and his wife treat her with disdain and mistrust, and those in the community speculate about her future in their family. Bibi becomes obsessed with marriage, asking members of the household and town about their weddings and dreaming of her own. While many believe she will never marry due to her condition and lack of social skills, others embrace the idea and theorize that marriage, and the physical aspects therein, might cure her. Her friends take her on walks and try to help her attract suitors, but their efforts are in vain. When people ask her cousin why he would not desire marriage for her, as it would result in her being someone else's responsibility, he insists on his financial motivation. He despises the idea of paying for her dowry or wedding and places the following advertisement in the paper after much pestering: "GIRL, UNSTABLE, HEIGHT 152 CENTIMETERS, SEEKS HUSBAND." (165) Months pass with no proposals, but Bibi does not give up hope.

When her cousin and his wife learn they are expecting, Bibi is exiled from their house and forced to live on the roof. She becomes increasingly isolated and, when the delivery of the child is difficult, Bibi is blamed. The baby is taken with fever, and upon its recovery the family sells the beauty shops and moves to a new city. They leave a few hundred rupees for their cousin and are never seen again. Efforts are made to make the roof habitable for Bibi, and after months of silence from her, concerned people come to the roof and find that she is pregnant. She either cannot remember or will not divulge the

name of the father, and she delivers a healthy baby boy. With the money she was given and the remaining inventory, she reopens the beauty shop and is, by all accounts, cured.

Epilepsy treatment is complex and unpredictable even now, let alone in 1999 when the book was written or in the unspecified timeframe of the story. Gone untreated, people with epilepsy will likely experience more frequent and severe seizures, increased vulnerability to impairing brain injury, and an overall decline in quality of life (Sperling 99-100). Not only is Bibi's condition untreated, but it is also belittled by her own family. Her mother died in childbirth, but her recently deceased father was attentive and monitored her condition closely. The Haldar cousins, on the other hand, saw only her in terms of utility and cost. Once the perceived cost of her care was too great, they abandoned her.

Unlike any other story discussed, the narrating voice of this story represents multiple people. Throughout "Treatment," the speakers refer to themselves as "we", "us", and "our." (158, 160, 161, etc.) Contextually, these are her friends and possibly employees of other families, suggested by their mention of making purchases and consulting with the Haldars' scullery maids. It is these people who look after Bibi, even if their care is sometimes condescending. In response to their approach to Bibi, the cousins' shop is rejected by the community, contributing in part to its closure. They are far from perfect, but they engage with Bibi as a person and entertain her obsessions. When the delivery of her child seemingly resolve their affliction, they happily support her at her business and in her personal life.

The community's attitude towards Bibi is concerned but slightly exploitative. She is like a soap opera, a source of drama and intrigue. They swarm her with cures and

openly discuss her maladies, all the while expressing their gratitude at not being responsible for her care.

Both protagonists are provided superficial care by their communities but are mostly gawked at. Whereas Boori Ma's story ended with her expulsion from her home, Bibi Haldar's concluded at last with a home and family who embraced her. While the theme of this section is transnational communities, it is important to remember the variation that can occur within a single community. When even the people in the same town have differing approaches, it stands to reason that no community shares a truly unified belief. In their own way, all the conflicting attitudes tie back to valuing the collective over the individual. The apartment residents wanted to preserve their collective image and sense of safety, and Boori Ma felt obligated to protect the building and those who had cared for her. The Haldars wanted to protect their family, especially their new baby, at the price of another in need. The townspeople viewed Bibi as part of their community and tried to support her while rejecting the family who abandoned her.

Care is often governed by hierarchies. When so many are suffering, how can people evaluate who is worthy of one's care and attention? Boori Ma easily fell to the bottom of the list due to her age, fragility, and lack of real connection to the residents. Bibi was totally dependent on others and her condition was inconvenient and hard to understand. Both were deemed unworthy of care by those best suited to care for them, and they suffered the consequences. While Boori Ma's story ended with her abandonment, Bibi's continued into the next stage of her life, one where she was self-sufficient but still supported by her community.

Sustaining a community is complicated. Groups uphold values and threaten to expel those who do not adhere to them. Those in need of care often cannot meet societal standards and can be punished accordingly. Rather than valuing people based on contributions and utility, groups can use their collective strengths to uplift those in need and provide appropriate care.

### **“The Third and Final Continent” and Cross-Cultural Relationship Dynamics**

As the world becomes increasingly globalized and demands for high-skilled labor increase, people are willing and able to relocate across the world. When looking to move to Europe or the United States, people from India have a long journey ahead, crossing oceans and continents to reach their final destination. Depending on the situation, family members may be left behind awaiting a visa while the recruited member lives alone in a foreign country. The internet has made logistical planning easier, but for decades people made do with phone calls, telegrams, physical mail, and plenty of luck. Upon arrival, adaptation is crucial and can be eased by a welcoming community. Through the relationships developed by the main character upon his arrival in the U.S., Lahiri explores how openness to others can enrich people’s experiences in a new place.

Lahiri ends her book with the story “The Third and Final Continent,” which depicts two relationships during the nineteen sixties spanning three continents. The unnamed narrator has recently moved from London, England to Cambridge, Massachusetts after growing up in Calcutta, India. His journey to London took three weeks in 1964, but by 1969 he was making enough money to take an airplane back to Calcutta for his wedding then onto Boston the next week. He starts his job at the Dewey Library at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and searches for a temporary

apartment while staying at the YMCA. He finds a house with a room to rent by an elderly woman named Mrs. Croft who only rents to people working for Harvard or MIT. Her abrupt and commanding way of speaking puts him off-kilter, but the low cost and quiet atmosphere give him reason to stay.

Mrs. Croft and her new tenant settle into a routine; she sits at the piano bench, invites him to sit with her, tells him about the moon landing, says “Splendid!”, and prompts him to repeat after her. He feels initially uncomfortable and a little insulted, but he eventually he acquiesces. Upon meeting her daughter, Helen, he learned that she was a piano teacher for over forty years and is now over one hundred years old. The narrator is astonished that she is able to live alone with a little assistance, in sharp contrast to his own mother whose health and mental wellbeing deteriorated after her husband’s death. He imagines the breadth of her life’s experiences, but he does not engage with her beyond their established script. He thinks to himself, “There was nothing I could do for her beyond these simple gestures. I was not her son, and apart from those eight dollars, I owed her nothing.” (189) When his wife sends him a telegram that she will be departing India shortly after her visa was approved, the narrator gives his notice to Mrs. Croft, who bids him a courteous but bland farewell. He imagines that his few weeks with her represented a miniscule fraction of her life but still feels disappointed in the unceremonious send-off.

The narrator has only spent five nights with his new wife, Mala, with whom he has bonded very little. She has cried herself to sleep from missing her parents most nights and she hesitates to speak to or even look at him. After having been separated for several weeks, the narrator can barely picture her face. That being said, he does express his desire

to care for her and ease her adjustment to life in another country, but those feelings are not paired with genuine affection. She struggles to adjust to his routine, and they spend most of their time together in silence. When he invites her to join him for a walk, she dresses nicely and does her hair, despite the narrator only intending on taking her for a walk.

They two pass the house of Mrs. Croft, and he decides to pay her a visit. Since he moved out, Mrs. Croft suffered a bad fall and broke her hip, leaving her bedbound. They fall back into their familiar conversation, and Mala laughs for the first time in front of her husband. When Mrs. Croft directs her to stand, Mala looks uncomfortable, and the narrator recognizes the unease from his own times in a new culture. After studying Mala, Mrs. Croft proclaims, “She is a perfect lady!” (196) In that moment, Mala and her husband share a glance, and the emotional distance between them begins to fall away.

Time passes quickly, and Mala and the narrator have fallen in love, had a child, and moved outside of Cambridge into a home of their own. When the narrator reads Mrs. Croft’s obituary in the newspaper, he sits in stunned silence as he grieves “the first life [he] had admired; she had left this world at last, ancient and alone, never to return.” (196) As he reflects on his life, he marvels at the long journey he has taken and how, while his story may not be uncommon, it is no less extraordinary to behold.

The narrator and Mala’s relationship is fraught with discomfort, suggesting a far unhappier ending. Their wedding is barely a footnote, and their early interactions are stilted and awkward. Not until their visit with Mrs. Croft do the two have a breakthrough. Lahiri has laid the groundwork for failing marriages across the whole book. Many of the stories discussed here and several others feature unhappy couples who end the story

either separated or stagnated in their discontent. Savvy readers have likely noticed the poor track record of Lahiri's couples and expect the pattern to repeat. To end her first collection with an emotional catharsis is unexpected but not unwelcome.

In her 2009 book about subversive storytelling, Michelle Pacht argues that short stories are permitted to be subversive in a way other stories cannot. Since the book's publication, media norms have changed significantly, often prioritizing and uplifting stories which are unpredictable. In spite of this, I believe Pacht's thesis remains true in its own way. Short stories can take unexpected turns or end unsatisfyingly while still respecting their readers. For long-form media, there is an unspoken understanding that the investment on behalf of the audience will be worthwhile, resulting in a narratively satisfying and cohesive manner. If the journey is long, the destination should be worth the trip. While audiences will still expect satisfaction from shorter media, there is more flexibility in its conveyance. A sudden or shocking ending can feel in line with a shorter story with more heightened emotion. Conversely, an understated ending can force readers to confront their expectations. While subversive has a negative connotation, Lahiri's subversive story takes a turn for the positive. Stories about immigrants do not have to be dramatic or fraught or tragic; she allows this story to be understated and rooted in human connection.

### **Final Thoughts**

Lahiri's collection is about people from India and members of the Indian diaspora, but is it about a community? With members in different countries speaking different languages and sharing different values, this community is far more nebulous than the previous two discussed. A transnational community is perhaps an oxymoron, for how can a group be

spread so widely and still share unifying traits? To comment definitively on such a large and diverse group is almost impossible. By resisting the urge to do so, Lahiri makes a statement about transnationalism and its role in everyday life.

Lahiri does not unify her characters or their experiences. Beyond some shared themes and mentions of locations, her stories can exist completely independently of one another. At the beginning of this section, I mentioned Alison's theory of networks which forces the reader to form connections between discrete points. Any elements tethering the stories together exist only in the readers' minds as they rationalize the stories existing alongside each other. Like these stories, disconnected groups worldwide are connected because of people's perception rather than explicit or tangible bonds.

In these independent pockets scattered across the globe, Indian diaspora groups have generated new cultures in conversation with that of their new homes. They have reinterpreted and integrated their beliefs in their present situations, and those changes have been passed down through the generations. As more time passes, those changes become more concrete, rendering communities increasingly separated. Or, do they?

What binds these diasporic groups with each other and groups still on the continent is the fact of their shared identity. As immaterial or immutable or irrelevant as it may be to the individual, this group acknowledges their own. After centuries of history and conquest and migration, this community remains. By allowing these groups to exist separately across time and space, Lahiri honors the undeniability of her people and all they have had to endure. The transnational experience will never be unified, and it does not need to be in order to be recognized. Rather, it must be approached with curiosity,

cultural awareness, and respect for the lifetimes spent making the entire world into a home.

## V. CONCLUSION

Communities help people understand their identity in context. Whether upholding or defying expectations, individuals can use community values to reflect who they truly are. In that way, communities are like mirrors. If you understand what they reflect and how they manipulate your self-perception, you can better understand who you are within those influences. As pieces fall away or are added, you can decide what to preserve and what to discard. Even if the view it provided is distorted, is that reflection better than none at all?

The three communities analyzed in this project have similarly gone through phases of growth, change, and disruption. The arrival of Spanish settlers marked the end of the Wild Horse Desert and produced what would become Brownsville. Cultures intersected and melded, and the city's identity was challenged with the establishment of the border along the Rio Grande. Poverty and crime have risen, but so too have efforts to protect and uplift the city. Taken in discrete parts, the history of Brownsville has its darkness and its light determined by the efforts of its people. Communicated by Casáres and his book are not only the unspoken rules of the community; every story emphasizes the potential of the characters to shape not only their destinies but that of their community. While they may falter or fail, nothing can stop them from trying again.

The Rio Grande Valley has a turbulent history covering a significant area. The very river that gives the region its name is a point of contention; outside forces have competed and claimed it as their own, ignoring the needs of those who depend on it. The perceived lawlessness of the area derives from structural neglect and disregard for the needs of others. The stories Silva tells are reflections of the area, for better and for worse. They hold a mirror to their community and direct attention to the forsaken and forgotten.

In absence of the reflection, those in power can continue to dismiss the powerless, who may in turn lose touch with their own power. Common stories unite people across race, gender, and class; by retelling them, Silva emphasizes their enduring relevance and power in shaping a community's past, present, and future.

*Interpreter of Maladies* depicts a transnational community shaped by other cultures but never overwhelmed by their influence. The characters therein do not invoke their transnational identities, but the subtext is ever-present. Influences like culture or ethnicity can become so ubiquitous they are rendered invisible to the individual. By synthesizing many stories, this book brings those influences to light, as myriad and unique as they are. Trying to crowd every experience into a single narrative is impossible; by acknowledging separate pieces as part of a network, Lahiri's book celebrates the community instead of simplifying. A single mirror needed to capture the community cannot exist; rather, the reflection of the community can be found scattered around the globe, invisibly connected and ever-expanding.

I have written this thesis in a time of deep loneliness. I have always been fascinated by communities, but this period of isolation has highlighted their necessity in self-realization and acceptance. Humans are naturally communal, so there is great comfort in being surrounded by others. Living alone during the pandemic has meant the face I see most is my own, reflected in my phone screen or a Zoom call or the bathroom mirror. The more I see it, the less it looks like me. I wonder which has changed more, who I am, or who I am looking for in my reflection?

When I imagined myself as a child, my reflection was colored by my gender, family, and religion. I knew the roles I had to fulfill: considerate daughter, obedient child,

and godly vessel. The more I accepted those roles, the better I fit the image in the mirror. Cracks started to appear in the mirror as I questioned whether that was what I wanted and was stricken with guilt for doubting those who knew more. I began to distance myself from the church, and I found that that reflection had nothing to do with who I wanted to be.

Going to college affixed new pieces to the mirror. I entered college with three semesters of credit from high school, so I jumped into junior level classes and barely got by. I shaped myself into my most studious and serious self, sacrificing pieces of me that were fun or social. When I graduated a short five semesters later, I knew almost no one at my graduation ceremony. The image reflected back to me was accomplished but empty. The pieces I had attached had sharp edges, and when they fell away I let them shatter.

I worked as a café server after graduating and felt so embraced by my fellow servers and part of me wanted to cover the parts of my mirror that reflected my desire to live a bigger life. But, I felt keenly the loss of my academic self, and in the mirror appeared a more confident and social student, equipped to start a new chapter in a master's program. When I began work on my degree, I promised myself that I would put in the work to socialize and develop a supportive community of people with similar goals and passions. I had hoped that my reflection would be crowded with people and experiences and community, but the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns meant it was emptier even than before.

So many pieces of the mirror had fallen away; I was barely a student, I was unemployed, I had no close friends, and I had lost touch with who I was. Moving to a

new state meant packaging up the pieces, sharp edges and all. I would have to start over, but it is an opportunity to build something that reflects all of my experiences.

If I saw my life as one long story, I would see a person who descended deeper and deeper into isolation. Leaving a close but restrictive community to strike out on my own has left me lonely and lost, and sometimes I wonder if I made the right choice. Looking at this thesis as the culmination of this degree leaves me cold and questioning if this was a worthwhile endeavor. If my life has led to this one moment, why am I not happier?

However, if I change my perspective, the message of my life changes. If I isolate pieces of my life, I can see what kept me going. While much depended on my own abilities, I was buoyed by the strength and support of others. The years of isolation have taken their toll, and losing connection to any sort of community has played a major role. The most hopeless I have felt was when there was no mirror at all, leaving me ungrounded and alone. But this new chapter of my life is full of promise and new people and possibility, and I can learn from my stories that I can take advantage of what life has to offer.

By focusing on how I have been shaped by communities and how I have consciously defied or embraced their influence, I can better understand who I have been and who I can be. In segmenting my life, I can appreciate times of progress and contextualize periods of hardship. By acknowledging discrete periods of growth and struggle, people can see how they have moved in and out of communities, evolved their values, overcome past struggles. By approaching communities in this manner, Casáres, silva, and Lahiri are not obligated to generalize or narrativize decades or centuries of history. The mirror they hold to their communities can be whole or fragmented, polished

or murky. What matters is that the mirror is there; it is a point of view but not a definitive voice. In marrying the short story cycle format and attentive depictions of people and places, these works demonstrate the power of storytelling and the necessity of community.

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