AQUATIC BORDERS AND UNCERTAIN BELONGING IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *UNACCUSTOMED EARTH* AND *IN OTHER WORDS*

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Abstract: *The paper links the recurrence of aquatic symbols in "Hema and Kaushik" with the same motif employed by Lahiri's in her latest (autobiographical) work,* In Other Words. *The discussion considers the fascination for water manifested by Kaushik's mother, Parul, that is transferred to Kaushik after her premature death. Deeply affected by the loss of his mother, Kaushik attempts to escape this painful experience by removing himself from the setting of its unfolding. The character's perpetual relocation starts as a trip along the American East Coast, whose austere, harsh landscape seems to strangely comfort him. His decision to explore this maritime locale appears paradoxical, given that Kaushik is afraid of water. His eventual drowning marks the end of Kaushik's struggle against the patterns of attachment that he considers inherently painful. At the same time, Lahiri's deployment of water symbolism in her own struggle for cultural redefinition serves as a tool that might clarify Kaushik's ambivalent relation with the maritime world. The present argument correlates the protagonists' transnational mobility and their attempts at transcultural negotiation with the fluid symbolism of aquatic borders. This analogy is meant to foreground their suspension between strategies of displacement and patterns of attachment.*

Keywords*: borders, crossings, displacement, sea, swimming, transmigrant, transnational*

Introduction

The present paper aims to decode the valences of the rich aquatic symbolism that surfaces in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Hema and Kaushik" and *In Other Words*. The analysis interprets the dynamics of transmigrant identity in relation to the characters' wavering between attraction and reluctance to establish contact with maritime spaces. In other words, the present discussion aims to formulate a hypothesis regarding the transmigrants' ambivalent appeal to water and their transnational regime of belonging maintained through nomadic mobility. I offered a detailed account of the ambivalent implications of Kaushik's transmigrant resettlement in a previous paper (Stoican, "Traumatic Effects of Transnational Relocation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*"). There, I highlighted the character's struggle to reconcile his need for freeing mobility with the impulse to become grounded. The present paper is meant as a continuation of that analysis, as it reinterprets Kaushik's dilemma of rootedness/uprootedness through the grid provided by water symbolism. In another study dedicated to Kaushik's mother (Stoican, "Transcultural and Traditional (Trans)migrant Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Hema and Kaushik*"), I discussed her atypical condition for a first-generation Bengali immigrant, underscoring her strong transcultural profile in relation to her transnational itinerary. In this analysis, I would like to correlate Parul's enlarged cultural perspective with her passion for swimming. At the same time, the paper aims to provide a comparative discussion of Kaushik and Parul, linking their rejection/attraction to water with

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their different outlooks on belonging, rootedness and (de)territorialisation. In order to have a deeper understanding of Lahiri's transmigrant characters, this argument also considers the swimming metaphor of cultural reinvention employed at the beginning of *In Other Words*. The present analysis relies on a theoretical background that establishes connections between transcultural transcendence, transnational belonging and nomadic identities, as discussed in the following section.

Theoretical background

A central principle promoted by the notion of transculture is that cultures are not self-sufficient entities. Therefore, they need to transgress their own boundaries in order to achieve a sense of completion:

> Transculture is a way to transcend our "given" culture and to apply culture's transformative forces to culture itself […] By transcending the limits of these "natural," or "first order" cultures, the transcultural dimension opens the next level of human liberation, now from these symbolic dependencies, ideological addictions, patriotic infatuations that belong to us as members of a certain cultural group. […] Transculture can be defined as an open system of symbolic alternatives to existing cultures and their established sign systems.
>
> (Epstein 24)

The transcultural outlook suggests the possibility of enriching one's cultural potential by acknowledging its bounded character and opening oneself to complementary cultural dimensions. Along similar lines, Hannerz discusses the scenario of "creative confrontations" (61) relying on a conception of cultural diversity defined as a "transnational common" within the global ecumene:

> What I have in mind is the notion that cultural diversity within the global ecumene can be used as a kind of reserve of improvements and alternatives to what is at any one time immediately available in one's own culture, and of solutions to its problems. One curious thing about the economics of culture, of course, is that this reserve, this particular kind of transnational common, does not risk becoming depleted merely because people borrow heavily from it, as people can keep giving meanings and their expressions away to others without losing them for themselves.
>
> (Hannerz 62)

Ulf Hannerz suggests that this variegated cultural repertoire is to be conceived as alternative to particular cultural traditions, in the sense that individuals can draw resources from it in order to complete their otherwise finite cultural potential. Therefore, Epstein's notion of transculture resembles Hannerz's idea of a transnational cultural repertoire that can offer alternatives to insular cultural systems.

Within the domain of cultural studies, transnationalism refers to the study of global diasporas, being interpreted as a special type of consciousness generated by individuals' multiple identifications, de-centered attachments, simultaneous being here and there (Vertovec 5, 6). The transnational approach to migration highlights the role of migration networks, stressing the relationships between the sending and the receiving countries in the form of interactions across national borders (Gustafson 68). In this context, immigrants are

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redefined as transmigrants, i.e. immigrants who build social fields that cross geographic, cultural and political borders by their engagement in networks of relationships that connect them simultaneously to two or more nation states (Basch, Glick, Szanton 7). The characters analysed qualify as transmigrants, since their intense mobility generates their contact with more than one nation-state. As we shall see, the South Asian protagonists examined in this paper share patterns of travel across various borders, as they move between India and America/Europe, also reaching other continents (Kaushik).

In order to analyse the characters' different regimes of (non)belonging, I will also rely on Deleuze and Guattari's conception of nomadism, a paradigm that celebrates mobility as a freeing condition that dismantles fixed identity coordinates. Nomadism has been glorified as a new paradigm for thinking subjectivity with a focus on deterritorialisation/becoming, heterogeneity and connectivity (O'Sullivan 85). The symbol of this desirable condition is the rhizome, a special type of pedicle. According to biological research, the rhizome is "a horizontal plant stem with shoots above and roots below serving as a reproductive structure; a type of storage organ in plants which situates itself in a horizontal fashion underground (*Biology Online Dictionary*). The French philosophers have taken over this notion in order to convey principles of "transformational multiplicities" (Deleuze, Guattari 11), "connection and heterogeneity" (7), regeneration along lines of flight and deteritorialisation (9). Rhizomatic structures are also associated with "antigenealogy," an equivalent of short-term memory or antimemory (21). Thus, rhizomatic patterns defy the linear order of centered system and hierarchical lineages, promoting a philosophy of multiplicity and transformation: "unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature" (21).

In this context, nomadology becomes an epistemological condition of mobility that enables the crumbling of conceptual foundations (Deleuze and Guattari 25), "promoting a logic of the AND" (25), illustrating "all manner of 'becomings'" (21). Moreover, nomadism is associated with a rhizomatic manifestation of travel that involves an inherent rejection/dismantling of fixed structures: "proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going rather than starting and finishing" (25). According to this vision, perpetual mobility is valued as a condition for individual development along a freeing dimension, i.e. transgressing traditions, established hierarchies and rigid belonging. By creating Bengali characters involved in transnational relocation, Lahiri seems strongly attracted by the conception of rhizomatic travel. Her own strategy of personal reinvention is correlated with her transplantation into a new cultural space (Italy). As illustrated by *In Other Words*, total immersion into an unfamiliar culture is the necessary step for full metamorphosis.

Interestingly, the fluid connotations of rhizomatic patterns generate Deleuze and Guattari's association of the "nomad science" (361) with a "hydraulic model" (361) that unfolds into a smooth space. More specifically, the nomadic outlook is conceived as a paradigm that focuses on flows, becoming and heterogeneity, hosted by the smooth dimension that affords fluid transformations: "an open space throughout which things-flows are distributed, rather than plotting out a closed space for linear and solid things" (361). Last but not least, the sea is envisaged as a quintessential embodiment of the smooth space, as it represents a fluid dimension of perpetual motion and change: "it is at sea that the problem of the *fleet in being* is posed (363, original emphasis), "but there is also a rhythm without measure, which relates to the upswell of a flow, in other words, to the manner in which a fluid occupies a smooth space" (364). Thus, the sea becomes emblematic for the nomadic condition experienced by displaced individuals, given its connotations of endless motion, identity in flux, transitory patterns and defiance of fixed configurations.

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While the nomadic model seems highly applicable to understanding the dynamics of migrant identities, it also appears to rely on inherent dichotomies (roots vs. rhizomes, striated vs. smooth space, being vs. becoming, long-term memory vs. short-term memory, etc.). Moreover, the promotion of nomadism as a transgressive, freeing outlook seems to idealise these attributes as antidotes against fixed, static models. Interestingly, the authors are aware of this paradoxical duality and they constantly seek to transcend it: "We employ a dualism of models only in order to arrive at a process that challenges all models. Each time, mental correctives are necessary to undo the dualisms we had no wish to construct but through which we pass" (20). Taking into account the authors' vigilance regarding the danger of binarism, my discussion of Lahiri's texts also attempts to establish whether her vision on nomadic transmigrant identities promotes a regime of multiple/fluid belonging that overlooks the relevance of rooted frameworks. The analysis focuses on Kaushik's and his mother's contrasting attraction to aquatic borders, comparing the characters' distinct capacity to form attachments to the spaces they cross.

Body of the paper

The primary corpus of this paper is represented by the second part of Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*. This section of the book contains three short stories ("Once in a Lifetime", "Year's End", and "Going Ashore") gathered under the title "Hema and Kaushik". Kaushik Choudhuri is the son of a rich Bengali family who moves back from the USA to India (Bombay) in 1974 and returns to the USA in 1981. Hema is the daughter of an immigrant Bengali couple, established in Massachusetts, friends of Kaushik's family, whom they shelter for a while after their return. "Once in a Lifetime" presents the Choudhuris' temporary residence at Hema's place, from Hema's perspective, narrated in the first person singular, as a message addressed to Kaushik. "Year's End" offers Kaushik's account of his family's evolution after they move to a house of their own. This new experience of resettlement is formulated as Kaushik's response to Hema's initial account, in the first person narrative voice. The last piece of the trilogy, "Going Ashore" presents Hema and Kaushik's accidental encounter in Rome, their impossible love-story and Kauhsik's tragic death by drowning. *In Other Words*, a book published in Italian, is Lahiri's first autobiographical work that describes her need for self-reinvention by relocation from America to Rome. This account presents the author's attempt to settle in Italy, highlighting the challenges to express herself as a writer in a newly acquired language. The present discussion focuses on the initial section of the book, "The Crossing," linking its aquatic metaphors with Parul's and Kaushik's transmigrant trajectories. The following part of the discussion highlights Parul's and her son's different degrees of transcultural redefinition and transnational belonging in connection with their maritime outlooks.

Parul is a holder of a transcultural profile that successfully blends her loyalty to certain Hindu traditions with an appreciation of Western art and consumerist practices (Stoican, "Transcultural and Traditional (Trans)migrant Identities" 309). At the same time, she manifests a particular attraction to water, which surfaces in different details of the narration. For example, in Bombay the family lives in an apartment overlooking "the Arabian Sea" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 233), and Parul regularly attends a swimming club (244). After the family's second relocation to America, Parul is keen on buying a house that has access to water: "'Water views, that's what we should look for' your mother said" (244). Given her longing for water, the family's search for a suitable house turns into a survey of "properties overlooking the ocean" (244), or "houses in the woods with views of private lakes" (245).

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Finally, they settle for an elegant house with a pool that satisfies Parul's tastes. Even during her convalescence, Parul takes "windy walks along the beach" (274) in Kaushik's company. I suggest that Parul's fascination for water is an indicator of her heterogeneous becoming along rhizomatic lines. More specifically, she upholds a fluid cultural outlook that fuses Bengali elements with an attraction to Western practices:

> Parul preserves several traditional elements such as the Hindu custom of incineration, an attachment to the private sphere and an enduring fondness for India […]. At the same time, these markers of Indian identity are paralleled by her adoption of Western looks (wearing trousers and short hair) and consumerist practices (preferring Western luxury brands).
>
> (Stoican, "Transcultural and Traditional (Trans)migrant Identities" 309)

In this context, I consider that Parul's funeral ceremony clearly illustrates the link between water fascination and her simultaneous belonging to the American and Indian spaces. At some point, Kaushik remembers that his mother's funeral was performed according to her wish: "her ashes were tossed from a boat off the Gloucester coast […] but her gold went back to Calcutta, distributed to poor women who had worked for my extended family as ayahs or cooks or maids" (*Unaccustomed Earth* 257). Bran considers that Parul's decision to die in America along with her funeral specifications break Kaushik's "ties with India," leaving him "homeless (literally and metaphorically)" (279). I partially agree with this claim, in the sense that Kaushik can be considered a homeless, itinerant being. At the same time, I argue that it is Parul's death rather than her funeral that generates Kaushik's nomadic resettlement. I consider that Parul's funeral ceremony illustrates her choice of adapting a customary Hindu rite to a new cultural context. In the Hindu tradition, rivers are considered sacred entities, symbolising the purifying powers of moving waters (Kinsley 189). Hindus consider that the immersion of the deceased's ashes into the Ganges guarantees the soul's attainment of *mokhsha,* i.e. liberation from the earthly cycle of transmigration by the cleansing of all sins (Kinsley 191; "Pure, Good, Divine" 7; Wilkins 460). The Ganges' transcendent nature renders it "a liquid link between worlds" that enables the "transition between worlds of men and gods" (Kinsley 192). Interestingly, sacred waters in Hinduism are considered places "for crossing over from one place to another," endowed with the potential to connect the human and the divine spheres (Kinsley 192). By replacing the sacred river with the Atlantic Ocean, Parul's funeral may be read as a metaphor for her ability to adapt her native cultural outlook to the context of her transplantation. At some point, Kaushik reflects upon his mother's special ability to strike roots into different spaces: "His mother had set up households again and again in her life. It didn't matter where she was in the world, or whether or not she was dying" (*Unaccustomed Earth* 309). Coupling the transcendent potential of waters promoted by Hinduism with Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the sea as a smooth space, I argue that Parul's attraction to water is a manifold symbol of her transmigrant multiple belonging. First, her need for aquatic surroundings expresses the transcultural urge to transgress fixed cultural loyalties. At the same time, it also reveals an enduring attachment to her native cultural background, as implied by her allegiance to Hindu rites. In other words, Parul's transmigrant profile reveals her simultaneous embrace of roots/ being/ settlement and rhizomes/ becoming/ movement as valid coordinates of identity. The next part of the paper discusses Kaushik's ambivalent attitude to water in relation to his convoluted manner of establishing enduring bonds.

Kaushik is deeply affected by the loss of his mother and he has a hard time accepting his father's second marriage to an Indian woman, Chitra, whom he considers provincial and backward. During a Christmas visit to his father, Kaushik finds his stepsisters going through a

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box with photographs of his mother. Shocked by what he regards as an intrusive gesture, Kaushik offends the little girls, telling them that he considers Chitra inferior to Parul, "just a servant to wash my father's clothes and cook his meals" (*Unaccustomed Earth* 286-7). After his violent outburst, he leaves Rupa and Piu unattended in the house and gets away from his father's place. Looking for a quick escape, Kaushik starts driving aimlessly along the Atlantic Coast, initiating an enigmatic journey of self-understanding. The character plunges into a wild, almost deserted landscape in an attempt to heal himself by distancing from mournful contexts:

> Now and again I saw the water, little islands and striped lighthouses and tiny spits of land [...]. It was like no other place I'd seen, nothing like the North Shore of Massachusetts. The sky was different, without color, taut and unforgiving. But the water was the most *unforgiving* thing, nearly black at times, cold enough, I knew, *to kill me*, violent enough to break me apart. The waves were immense, battering rocky beaches without sand. The farther I went, the more *desolate* it became, more than any place I'd been, but for this very reason the landscape drew me, claimed me as nothing had in a long time.
>
> (*Unaccustomed Earth* 289-290, my emphasis)

Kaushik's unplanned itinerary along the waterline seems paradoxical as implied by his urge for immersion into an unhospitable setting. His perceptions of the coastal scenery reveal impressions of hostility and harshness, suggested by the frightening presence of water. The central element of this unsettling aquatic view is the ocean, an unrelenting, almost threatening force, whose impenetrable grandeur strangely attracts Kaushik. I interpret the character's fascination for this disturbing yet impressive scenery as an expression of his ambivalent relation to aquatic settings. His wavering between attraction to water and fear of its menacing strength is to be correlated with Kaushik's struggle to reconcile structures of attachment with his deracination. More specifically, Kaushik's gravitation near the turbulent waters of the Atlantic Ocean may convey his need to retrieve Parul's presence. In Hindu mythology, waters (especially rivers) are associated with the presence of a "sustaining mother" (Kinsley 194). The prototypical river Ganges is regarded as "the mother who both bestows prosperity [...] and secures salvation" (Zimmer 110). At the same time, the element of earth is also worshipped as a goddess, Mahadevi. This belief has also shaped the conception of India as a female, maternal presence, illustrated by "the modern cult of Bharat Mata (Mother India), in which all Indians are called sons or children of India" (Kinsley 181). Therefore, Kaushik's wandering along the Atlantic Coast foregrounds his longing for the lost maternal protection, which may also hint at his need for rootedness and (national) belonging. At the same time, if we consider the idea of the sea as a smooth space, Kaushik's inclination to explore the North Shore of Massachusetts entails his adoption of a deterritorialised, nomadic perspective. His subsequent career in photojournalism involves a chain of repeated relocations across the world: Latin America, Africa and Europe. As suggested in a previous study (Stoican, "Traumatic Effects of Transnational Relocation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*"), in full adulthood, Kaushik upholds a nomadic life-style, embracing incessant mobility as a solution against establishing enduring (therefore potentially) painful bonds. In this paper, I argue that it is during this solitary trip along the Atlantic Coast that Kaushik envisages nomadism as an empowering mechanism:

> I had never traveled alone before and I discovered that I liked it. No one in the world knew where I was, no one had the ability to reach me. It was like being dead, my

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> escape allowing me to taste that *tremendous power* my mother possessed forever [...]. I was certain that if my mother had lived to visit that part of the world, she would have persuaded my father to buy her one of the hundreds of homes I passed, overlooking the *open sea*.
>
> (*Unaccustomed Earth* 290, my emphasis)

In the proximity of hostile waters, Kaushik realises that loneliness and mobility can function as defensive strategies. The characters' impressions suggest that he has come to equate death with a condition of supreme detachment that affords the ultimate freedom to transcend binding patterns of belonging. In this context, the image of the "open sea" associated with his mother's longing for water views clearly illustrates the emergence of his nomadic inclinations. More specifically, the water's connotations of fluidity and restlessness foreground the transcendent effects of a nomadic existence that affords perpetual crossing of borders. Thus, Kaushik does not care about the houses he lives in, and is unwilling to be tied down to a geographical place or emotionally attached to the walls of a building. Discussing Kaushik's nomadic inclinations, Bran considers that "rootedness equals death in his mind" (290). However, as the next section demonstrates, I consider that his deteritorialised condition is also a search for grounding circumstances.

Although it seems that Lahiri promotes transmigrant nomadism as a practice associated with a beneficial transplantation into unaccustomed earth, the water–earth symbolism reveals a balanced approach that foregrounds the equal importance of grounded references and rhizomatic development. From a young age, Kaushik has been attracted by the Christian burial ritual. After the family's second relocation from India to America, traumatic[1] for Kaushik, the teenager feels partially reconnected with America when he discovers several tombstones close to Hema's garden:

> They belonged to people named Simonds, a family of six. "They're all here together" you said. "Mother, father, four children. [...] It makes me wish we weren't Hindu so that my mother could be buried somewhere. But she's made us promise we'll scatter her ashes into the Atlantic."
>
> (*Unaccustomed Earth* 249)

Kaushik's acknowledged preference for Christian burial over Hindu incineration, highlights his commitment to family continuity, as suggested by the precise reference provided by a family tomb. Moreover, his longing for stable references is associated with a demand for territorialisation as suggested by his desire to identify family history with a specific, fixed location. Years later, after his mother's death, Kaushik actually performs a peculiar inhumation, as he buries his mother's photographs on the Atlantic Coast. Interestingly, his impulse to perform this belated funeral is manifested during his solitary trip in the proximity of aquatic spaces:

> One day close to the Canadian border, walking along cliffs overlooking the Bay of Fundy, I found a spot that was particularly striking. A sign told me I was in the easternmost state park in the country. [....] For a long time I watched the approach and retreat of the *waves*, their thick caps crashing apart against the rocks, that eternally *restless motion* having an inversely calming effect on me. The following day I

[1] The second generation's inability to undo the traumatic effects of their transnational resettlement are detailed in Stoican, "Traumatic Effects of Transnational Relocation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*."

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> returned to the same spot, this time bringing with me the shoebox of my mother's photographs [...] A slight lessening in the pressure of my fingertips and the ones I was holding would have blown away into that wild sea, scattering down to where my mother's ashes already resided. [...] I only had a stick and a sharp-edged rock to work with and the hole was not impressive, but it was deep enough to conceal the box. I covered it with dirt and stones.
>
> (*Unaccustomed Earth* 292, my emphasis)

On the one hand, Kaushik's need to deposit his mother's photographs expresses his desire to create a sense of continuity in America. This gesture is meant as a demand for groundedness that attempts to locate Parul's memory in the soil where Kaushik was unwillingly transplanted as a teenager. This fact suggests that Lahiri associates burial with the axis of continuity/sameness/being that Kaushik claims in order to retrieve a sensation of wholeness. At the same time, the fact that he is also attracted by the spasmodic force of the ocean illustrates the character's irrevocable attraction to nomadic fluidity and discontinuity. However, Kahushik's nomadic itinerary proves to be a failed attempt to fill in a void, a tortuous strategy of undoing his uprooted condition by rhizomatic travel. Interestingly, the above quotation also brings together the idea of boundary (the American-Canadian frontier) and the aquatic dimension of the ocean. I argue that Lahiri employs this juxtaposition in order to underscore the intersection between vectors of deterritorialised, fluid nomadism and the territorialising effects maintained by national borders. At some point, Kaushik contrasts his mother's passion for aquatic spaces with his preference for swimming in pools. Apparently, his reluctance to dive into unpredictable waters has been caused by a previous occurrence that almost killed Kaushik:

> There had been an occasion off the coast of Venezuela, many years ago, when an undertow caused him a genuine struggle [...] since then he had not swum in the ocean, *no longer trusting it*, knowing that his mother, who loved water so much that she would have swum in a pool of algae, would have scoffed.
>
> (*Unaccustomed Earth* 325, my emphasis)

Relying on the assumption that the smooth space of waters/oceans connotes the possibility of fluid identity and unfixed belonging, Kaushik's apprehension betrays his incapacity to process the complexity of his transmigrant condition. Despite his unreserved embrace of nomadism, Kaushik cannot cope with his utter deracination that seems aggravated by the loss of his mother. In this case, the character illustrates a possible scenario for the second generation South Asian Americans, whose accelerated transnational mobility generates confused, rather than coherent identities: "But Kaushik never fully trusted the places he'd lived, never turned to them for refuge" (*Unaccustomed Earth* 309). At the same time, Parul illustrates a special case of a first-generation Bengali wife that turns her transnational condition into a celebration of cultural plurality. By relying on these characters' entangled relationships with water, Lahiri conveys different degrees of transmigrant acceptance of (up)rootedness and (de)territorialisation. While Kaushik cannot heal the wound of deracination, his mother can adapt her Bengali inheritance to the American space.

Considering the nuanced valences of water symbolism, Kaushik's death by drowning may be interpreted as a strong metaphor for the transmigrants' necessity to balance the rhythms of nomadic deracination/uprooting with the stabilising effects of groundedness. Before settling in Hong Kong, where he has received an office job, Kaushik stops for a short

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holiday in Thailand where he dies in the dreadful 2004 tsunami. During his boat trip in the Andaman Sea, Kaushik is strangely haunted by the image of his mother:

> for a moment, Kaushik saw his mother [...] swimming, saw her body still vital, a brief blur that passed as effortlessly as the iridescent fish darting from time to time beneath the boat [...] He wanted to swim to the cove [...] to show his mother that he was not afraid. [...] The sea was as warm and welcoming as a bath. His feet touched the bottom, and so he let go.
>
> (*Unaccustomed Earth* 330-331)

Once again, the author relies on aquatic imagery (sea, swimming) in order to create a contrasting image of Kaushik's and Parul's different strategies of managing their regimes of multiple belonging. Parul's relaxed manner of crossing aquatic borders points to her easy adaptation to different cultural contexts, illustrated by her transcultural profile. By contrast, Kaushik's swimming initiative aims to emulate his mother's skill, but he needs the solidity of earth in order to find the courage to plunge into the water. The fact that he can reach the bottom of the sea encourages Kaushik to get off the boat. This detail illustrates the character's profound need to anchor his being into rooting configurations. Kaushik's death prior to his settling in Hong Kong suggests that the only way in which he can find a home is by crossing the ultimate boundary (death) that separates him from his mother's embrace. At the same time, Parul's haunting presence may also hint at Kaushik's need to reunite himself with a specific nation, i.e. Mother India. In this context, Kaushik's drowning alludes to his cultural roots, as implied by the practice of water immersion, an important element of Hindu funeral rites. At the same time, Kaushik's final plunge into water illustrates his eventual acceptance of his uprooted condition, once he becomes united with the smooth space of the sea. Thus, death marks the end of Kaushik's incessant transmigrations, affording reterritorialisation through this final crossing. In this sense, I agree with Bran's statement that "in death, Kaushik lets go of childhood traumas of dislocation and loss" (293). In this way, Lahiri ends *Unaccustomed Earth* with the powerful message that territorialisation/roots/being/sameness and deterritorialisation/rhizome/becoming/differences are overlapping threads of transmigrant identities.

Given the multifaceted nature of Lahiri's water symbolism, I think it is not a coincidence that she chooses to describe her cultural reinvention in Italy by starting with the metaphor of crossing a lake. She initially talks about her fear to pass over to the other shore, despite her good swimming abilities. Like her fictional character Kaushik, the author is reluctant to traverse the lake because she needs a sense of "support" (Lahiri, *In Other Words* 3), especially in the middle, where "you can no longer see the bottom" (3). I interpret her fear of deep waters as an expression of the author's need for groundedness, a sense of belonging that would provide the courage to explore remote spaces. In order to avoid the danger of groundlessness/uprootedness/suspension, suggested by the impossibility to reach the bottom, the author chooses a safer strategy, swimming around rather than across the lake: "This is a more significant distance – the circumference compared to the diameter. It takes me more than half an hour to make this circle. Yet I'm always close to the shore" (*In Other Words* 5). The act of crossing rather than that of surrounding is conceived as an analogy to cultural discovery, an act of direct confrontation, meant to yield deeper interactions. Aware of her superficial attempts, the author decides to cross the lake in the company of some friends and she is happy to overcome her fear. After her successful "la traversata,"[2] the author feels more

[2] Italian for "nautical crossing."

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confident, equipped with the awareness that the courage to transcend borders enlarges one's (cultural) perspectives: "after a crossing, the known shore becomes the opposite side: here becomes there" (*In Other Words* 5). It is only at the end of this section, that the author mentions her actual crossing of "the Atlantic Ocean, to live in Italy" (5), establishing a connection between the aquatic metaphors employed and processes of cultural exploration and reinvention. Thus, swimming across may be interpreted as a metaphor for one's boldness to traverse cultural spaces, by transcending familiar boundaries and norms. Lahiri's own example of acquiring the Italian language in the absence of a prolonged contact with the Italian space is regarded as a halfway enterprise:

> For twenty years I studied Italian as if I were swimming along the edge of that lake. Always next to my dominant language, English. Always hugging that shore. [...] if you study a foreign language that way, you won't drown. The other language is always there to support you, to save you. But you can't float without the possibility of drowning, of sinking. To know a new language, to immerse yourself, you have to leave the shore. Without a life vest. Without depending on solid ground.
>
> (*In Other Words* 5)

The author's confessions reveal her strong appeal to a transgressive outlook on cultural metamorphosis. Her metaphors of fluidity point to a deterritorialised approach to cultural identity that requires the ability to transcend one's need for groundedness. In this context, drowning is equated with the supreme immersion into a different culture, the consequence of an adventurous approach to alterity, that involves swimming across deep waters, without the possibility of touching solid ground. Drowning becomes the ambivalent symbol of the ultimate border crossing, promoting transmigrant uprootedness as a necessary step to strike roots into unfamiliar shores.

If we revisit Parul's and Kaushik's itineraries through the lens provided by "The Crossing", we may argue that "Hema and Kaushik" promotes a balanced scenario that conceives groundedness and deracination as overlapping factors in the transmigrant's profiles. More specifically, Parul's passion for swimming illustrates her propensity for cultural navigation that generates her willingness to become grounded in multiple spaces, while retaining her attachment to Bengali traditions. By contrast, Kaushik's preference for pools suggests his reluctance to swim across, i.e. become fully immersed into different cultures. Ironically, his intense nomadic resettlement is paralleled by his need for the stability of shores, i.e. rootedness. I suggest that in his case drowning marks the only possibility to reconcile his simultaneous needs for detachment/uprootedness and belonging/groundedness. More specifically, Kaushik's drowning illustrates a radical scenario of going across (deterritorialisation) that marks his reconnection to his mother (rootedness), in a transcendent dimension.

Conclusions

The analysis has demonstrated that the water metaphors employed by Jhumpa Lahiri indicate particular regimes of transnational belonging diplayed by members of different generations within a South Asian American family. The author blends elements of transcultural becoming, nomadic travel and transnational relocation in order to paint a contradictory image regarding the possibility of transmigrant rooting. Parul provides a surprising example of a first generation transmigrant housewife endowed with the capacity to embrace different cultural

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traditions. Her appeal to cultural navigation is illustrated by the character's longing for water exposure, manifested as her strong attraction for waterviews and an enduring passion for swimming. Parul's ability to become attached to the sites of her relocation is paralleled by her son's impossibility to strike roots along his nomadic trajectory. Kaushik's need for anchors is constantly undermined by his incessant rhizomatic travel that prevents his adoption of a rooted stance. His ambivalent relation to aquatic spaces (attraction paralleled by fear) suggests his reluctance to transgress cultural borders and form bonds with the sites of his transplantation. Ironically, this member of the second generation seems paralysed by his transmigrant condition that leaves no room for the possibility of becoming territorialised. Kaushik's anxiety to belong is cured only by means of an ultimate crossing, (drowning) by which he finally becomes grounded. Paradoxically, Kaushik goes ashore as he transcends the compulsion to relocate by plunging into a fluid, yet anchoring dimension. These connections between the characters' attraction to water and their regime of belonging illustrate the interplay of deterritorialised parameters and grounding impulses inherent in the transmigrant condition.

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