Dislocalism
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CHAPTER 2

(Im)migration and the New Nationalist Literatures

I. NATIONALIST PARADIGMS

Dislocalism in literary studies is a strategy that critics employ to produce a larger transnational context for various categories such as American literature or British literature—categories whose partial displacement is advocated only so as to solidify the nationalist category per se. In this chapter I will analyze dislocalism in American immigrant/ethnic literary studies. I have chosen to focus on this field because each of its defining terms has come under pressure and serves to emphasize the difficulty of engaging with theories of globalization from within the field itself. The term American presents particular problems partly because globalization can often be perceived to be synonymous with Americanization—a problem of which the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have provided a vivid manifestation. In such a context it has become more urgent than ever for American literature and American studies to disassociate itself from nationalist paradigms of critique. The term immigration too has come under pressure because the mobility of people through and to the U.S. is too varied and occurs in too great a variety of directions to be contained any longer by the idea of a definitive passage from one nation into another. A result of this has also been to bring into question U.S.-localized ethnic identity categories such as Latino/a, Asian-American, African-American, and the like. This more complex form of mobility also affects the notion of a multicultural politics based on categories of race, ethnicity, and gender, disrupting American nationalist narratives in a domestic context. And the term literature itself can present problems insofar as it is equated with fictional and imaginative genres of writing
whose ability to convey the urgency of global realities is often placed in doubt.

My goal here is to analyze how the field of immigrant literary studies, under institutional as well as internal pressure, attempts to displace all of the above concepts, whether of Americanness, immigration, ethnic identity, or the literary-as-fiction, but only so as, in the end, to reconsolidate them and keep the field as a whole from suffering a total displacement. So, for instance, while the figure of the immigrant has long helped the U.S. to produce a national imaginary, that figure must now be dislocalized in order to serve the same purpose in globalization's new era. To demonstrate this I concentrate in what follows on scholarship generated on two specific works of fiction that are frequently categorized as immigrant/ethnic texts: Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*. The former work has now become canonical within American ethnic literary studies, and the latter is steadily acquiring a similar status, especially as the field looks to expand into the area of Arab-American writing.

I will focus in what follows on how dislocalist practices in immigrant/ethnic literary studies show the contradiction of the contemporary moment, a moment in which globalizing the field becomes imperative but in which it must be saved from the complete displacement threatened by globalization by consolidating its concepts of analysis. I argue that the curricular locus of texts such as Alvarez’s *The García Girls* and Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* as immigrant/ethnic fiction helps critics to reproduce a dislocalized nationalist imaginary within domestic paradigms of race and gender. I have chosen to focus on the scholarship centering on these women writers for several reasons. It is representative of the ways in which the field has produced a canon of immigrant/ethnic literatures with a heavy concentration of women writers—partially because women writers and their female protagonists allow for conversations about issues relating to construction of race and feminism to occur simultaneously. It is also common to see the appropriation of these aspects of the texts in readings that work, consciously or not, to consolidate American paradigms of immigrant/ethnic literature. And yet at the same time the novels themselves function as portraits of certain aspects of the contemporary conditions of (im)migration, for example, by following the transnational trajectories of low-waged and temporary labor or the flight into exile due in no small part to conditions created by the U.S. itself. That is, the texts allow us to see how they are themselves in conversation with the recent history of globalization and serve to complicate issues of local-
ized American immigrant identities. But let me begin with the question of “America” in American literature.

**American Literature**

How should critics respond to the imperative to globalize the field of American literature? Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell’s edited volume *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* is one example of how this is being attempted. It begins by taking up a by now familiar question: what is American literature in a global context? The editors suggest delinking the word American from its denotation of national and geographical boundaries. Such delinking has become particularly urgent in a context of increasing U.S. military and economic aggression. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin states in her 2004 American Studies Presidential address: “The goal of American studies scholarship is not exporting and championing an arrogant, pro-American nationalism but understanding the multiple meanings of America and American culture in all their complexity” (20). This understanding, she says, “requires looking beyond the nation’s borders, and understanding how the nation is seen from vantage points beyond its borders” (20). But this is a difficult task indeed for a field with the name American in it. A number of Americanist projects have attempted to displace and de-center the field in specific and highly conscious ways, and in the process they helped to reinvigorate it. However, such a body of work also shows the particular difficulties in de-centering the field. *Shades of the Planet* points to such issues. In their introduction, Dimock and Buell suggest treating American literature as a subset of, and a “taxonomically useful entity” within, the field of global literature (4). This invocation of the planetary allows them to “modularize the world into smaller entities able to stand provisionally and do analytical work, but not self-contained, not sovereign” (4). That is, the entity of American literature is not displaced entirely but is repositioned within the space of the “planet”—although Dimock and Buell are careful to argue that this “should not lure us into thinking that this entity is natural” (4).

Each of the essays contained in the volume proposes its own particular way of de-centering American Literature, ranging from the inclusion of literatures written in languages other than English to reimagining the spatial coordinates of America as existing beyond national boundaries. But I want to take a brief look at Jonathan Arac’s essay “Global and Babel:
Language and Planet,” since it serves as an especially good example of the difficulties encountered by scholars of American literature as they attempt to deal with issues of globalization.\(^3\) The essay proposes a dyad: the “global,” defined as “a movement of expansion that one imagines may homogenize the world,” and “Babel,” defined as a “movement of influx that diversifies our land, as in multiculturalism” (24). A major part of the essay deals with the reading of literary texts in a manner that delinks them from nationalist paradigms. Some of the authors whose work exemplifies the “global Babel” here are Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Henry Roth, and Ralph Ellison. Consider Arac’s reading of Thoreau’s *Walden*, from which he quotes as follows: “observe the forms which thawing sand and clay assume in flowing down the sides of a steep cut on the railroad” (25–26). Here Thoreau, says Arac, “feels as if he is in the ‘laboratory of the Artist who made the world,’ and is ‘nearer to the vitals of the global,’” the global as that which “‘continually transcends and translates itself and becomes winged in its orbit’” (Arac’s citations from *Walden*, 26). Arac interprets this for us, stating that “Thoreau’s globalism at home provides the most morally reassuring babble” (26), and finds in Thoreau a guide for American literary critics to think globally. But here the focus is largely on the language and terminology of globalization and not on the socio-historical conditions that might help us better understand the global context of Thoreau’s work. Arac reads Ellison’s *Invisible Man* in a similar way, citing the famous passage in which the narrator, looking at yams for sale on the streets of Harlem, proclaims: “I Yam what I am.” Arac’s essay presents this as an example of heteroglossia—that is, of “Babel”—as it “sets against each other radically different social registers of language,” observing further that the “root and its name aren’t simply southern [that, is, American,] but also African” (27). Such connections can indeed lead to a broader interpretation of the text. And Arac is careful to note what he calls the imperialist *thinking* of the authors in question. For example, while invoking the global dimension of Whitman, he also draws upon Edward Said, whose work, he says, “enables us to think openly, rather than defensively, about the imperialism that inescapably grids the planetary reach of Whitman’s democratic idealism” (27). Arac cites Whitman’s poem *A Broadway Pageant* as an example of this: “‘Comrade Americanos!, to us then at last the Orient comes . . . Lithe and Silent the Hindoo appears, the Asiatic continent itself appears the past, the dead’” (27). The problematic aspect of this language, from the standpoint of “Global and Babel” is the imperialism of Whitman’s vision. However, globalization here remains primarily an issue of language, a linguistic globalism, as practiced by authors who already have a secure place
in the American literary canon. In arguing for this kind of globalism, Arac thus allows the history of the U.S. imperialist economic and military policies to slide out of consideration.

No doubt the works of Thoreau, Melville, Emerson, and Whitman remain essential ones for students of globalization today. But it is notable here that despite the inclusion of Ralph Ellison, whose notion of America is often positioned against that of Thoreau or Whitman, the centrality of a traditional canon is left intact. In the very attempt to de-center American literature—here via interpretations that discover a language of the global within the national—there is a simultaneous move to shore up the canon to which such de-centered works belong. In this respect “Global and Babel” has much in common with other moves in literary and cultural studies to globalize the field while leaving the older curricular paradigms to continue essentially unaffected and unthreatened. I argue that this is a rhetorical strategy that critics employ to produce a larger transnational context for categories such as American literature—categories whose partial displacement is advocated only so as to resolidify the nationalist basis of the category per se. I would also insist on distinguishing between this rhetorical strategy and the historical processes of globalization themselves, processes that cannot be reduced to the former.

In Arac’s case this rhetorical strategy is to de-center nationalist paradigms and American literature itself by linking the established writer’s work on the level of language and style directly to the “global,” doing so in ways that leave the centrality of the already established writers in the canon (Thoreau, Melville, etc.) intact. Other critics—notably but not exclusively those working in the field of immigrant/ethnic literary studies—have attempted, in what may appear to be a diametrically opposed move here, to de-center American literature by displacing canonical works themselves, thereby making room for other, less sanctioned writers within American literature. But how different, in the end, are these two approaches to globalizing the field? I will examine how, in fact, the concepts of immigration and immigrant literatures—in ways subtly analogous to the rhetorical strategy described above—also assist American literary studies in reconstructing a nationalist paradigm even while attempting to globalize or update disciplinary practices.

But in order to do so it becomes important to look first at the concepts of immigration and ethnic identity themselves in relationship to globalization. These concepts have played a central role in the de-centering of American literature, not only through furnishing a standpoint from which to produce destabilizing readings of canonical literature (as in the above case of Arac’s essay), but also by grounding the field of American
immigrant/ethnic studies per se. Yet the very field that has helped to raise the questions of race/ethnic/gender identity as multiple sites of oppositionality and that has become a vehicle of interrogation indispensable to the broader discipline is now itself in need of displacement if it is to avoid becoming obsolete in a global context.

II. IMMIGRATION AS A DISLOCALIZING CONCEPT

The rhetoric of America as open to immigration and subsequent happy settlement has long inhabited the American imagination and has come to take on the status of a cliché. William H. A. Williams suggests in “Immigration as a Pattern in American Culture” that immigration has become such an integral part of the definition of the U.S. that it comes to define America in ways that affects nonimmigrants as well. As he says, the “impact of immigration is the quintessential American experience, establishing a pattern that is replicated in almost every aspect of American life” (19). “Whatever it is that sets us moving,” he continues, “many of us, like immigrants, experience at some level the sense of loss of the old and the familiar, and varying kinds of “culture shock” still await even those of us who have been born here, as we move from one part of America to another” (22). Williams elasticizes the concept of immigration to describe the everyday experiences of people within the U.S. But despite Williams’s claims that most Americans experience dislocations similar to those experienced by immigrants, and that immigration is a central aspect of being an American, the term immigrant and the condition of immigration are also exclusive to those on the outside or on the fringes of what can be called the dominant American experience. This notion of immigration as essential to American identity is inseparable from the idea that the immigrant is always an outsider, and is implicit in the very production of the U.S. as both a local and a global place.

That is, along with its centrality, there has been and remains something fundamentally marginal about the figure of the immigrant. It becomes evident that in discussions on various issues regarding immigration—questions of economic benefit, for instance, or of the nature of assimilation—attempts are being made, via this figure of marginality, to delineate American identity itself. This delineation has been especially crucial since the rhetoric associated with questions of American identity has been preoccupied with preservation of “old” ways that seem threatened with each major wave of immigration. The worry over American identity is reflected in concerns about whether various groups will be able to shed their “old
world” identities and assimilate into existing structures within the United States. Thus, for example, writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including Benjamin Franklin and Ralph Waldo Emerson, consciously took on the task of defining the American as the self-reliant and self-sufficient. But these writings simultaneously drew upon the notion of the “foreign” to define Americanness and thus positioned the United States as a unique nation—an idea employed even today in chronicling the accomplishments of immigrants. Ronald Takaki has shown that the policy of bringing immigrants to the U.S. to produce a glut of labor and thus keep wages low has from the first been an indispensable part of nation building. More importantly, the image of immigrants coming to the U.S. with nothing and working from the ground up in order to make a living has remained a powerful one for the way that it suggests the rebirth of the immigrant upon reaching the U.S. and the repositioning of the “foreignness” of the immigrants within the domestic borders. This repositioning then provides the immigrants with their particular identities in relationship to the United States. In turn, each major wave of immigration has renewed conversations about the nature of American society and about who counts as an American and in what capacity. The 1968 immigration act served as one such an occasion by legally prohibiting discrimination based on race, gender, or place of birth and rescinding the remaining bans on immigration from parts of Asia. As Michael Lind has pointed out in The Next American Nation, “Mexicans and Cubans join Hispanic America; Chinese, Indians, and Filipinos join Asian and Pacific Islander America, and so on” (98). Moreover, each race, in addition to preserving its cultural unity and distinctness, is expected to “act as a monolithic political bloc” (ibid). In effect, immigrants become localized ethnics in the United States.

Theories of globalization, meanwhile, have responded to such stable and localized ethnic identities, positioned as either insider or outsider, by calling this move itself into question. In fact the very idea of immigration as movement from one nation and “into” another has itself come under critical scrutiny. For example, in “Change and Convergence?” Thomas Heller considers whether immigration can still serve as a defining idea for the United States, given that immigration has now become an integral part of the definition of the European Union as well. This is only one example of the many ways in which new forms of (im)mobility across the globe exert pressure on the United States to reassess its foundational concept(s) of immigration. Furthermore, in “Patriotism and its Futures,” Arjun Appadurai suggests that the U.S. is not so much a nation of nations or of immigrants but “one node in a postnational network of diasporas”
The United States, writes Appadurai, is “no longer a closed space for the melting pot to work its magic, but yet another diasporic switching point, to which people come to seek their fortunes but are no longer content to leave their homelands behind” (424). He goes on to say that “no existing concept of American-ness can contain this large variety of transnations” (ibid). In this context the “hyphenated American might have to be twice hyphenated” such as “Asian-American-Japanese, or Native-American-Seneca” as “diasporic identities retain their mobility and grow more protean. Or perhaps the sides of the hyphen will have to be reversed, and we can become a “federation of diasporas” (ibid).

These sorts of observations speak to the real complexity of the movement of peoples across the globe. Yet while the adequacy of immigration itself as a term for describing this movement comes increasingly under question, the rhetoric of immigration is clearly alive and well and has become much more inflammatory, especially, since 9/11, as not only the U.S. but other nations have rushed to militarize their borders as part of the strategy of the “war on terror.” While people move across the world in unprecedented numbers, this movement itself reflects growing social inequality. For the global upper class mobility means holiday or business travel without the need to change national affiliation. (This phenomenon will be addressed in detail in the following two chapters.) Meanwhile for the vast majority of mobilized humanity for whom mobility is, in effect, forced and the means to a necessary end, immigration papers come to signify a means of obtaining a much-needed stability even if that stability itself becomes more illusory than ever. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the immigration debate has raged, instigated by controversies surrounding the construction of the U.S.-Mexico border wall, rallies against tougher immigration bills, and by a general atmosphere of heightened suspicion of the foreign other. For example, recent conversations about immigrations often conjure up images of people arriving to the U.S. without documentation. The term “illegality” becomes the central focus in these arguments.6

No doubt the ratcheting up of the political rhetoric is itself another symptom of a complexity that makes it increasingly hard to define the concept of immigrant in a globalized reality. This same complexity can be read in the proliferation of alternative terminologies: see here, inter alia, James Clifford’s conscious introduction of terms such as “pilgrimage” and “tourism” to make distinctions that “immigration” alone cannot make. While Appadurai may have been a bit too quick in claiming that “immigration” has been supplanted by “migration,” his terminological innovations suggest just how complex the positioning of (im)migrants as
outside of the American dominant experience has become. Appadurai’s “federation of diasporas,” implicitly skeptical of the idea of a definitive passage to the U.S., speaks, rather, to Saskia Sassen’s contention that the forces of globalization do not produce movement toward other nations so much as toward cities. In The Mobility of Labor and Capital, for example, Sassen theorizes that people moving both from within various parts of the U.S. as well as from other nations to, say, New York are part of the same complex global system that produces migration toward cities, regardless, to a certain degree, of their national location. The forced movement of people from countryside to urban areas and the production of mega-slums across the world are well documented in Mike Davis’s Planet of Slums. The very distinction between inter- and intranational forms of movement becomes less clear.

Whether “immigration” retains anything of its former, “simpler” meaning, what is certain is that this underlying complexity has significant implications for immigrant/ethnic literatures as objects of scholarship. Thus, for example, while a significant number of earlier narratives portrayed immigrants as negotiating their ethnicity and their status within the bounded space of the U.S., more contemporary narratives represent immigrants to the U.S. as conducting the same negotiation in a world much more interconnected. There can, in any case, be little doubt of the decisive importance to the field of the literature of (im)migration of the contemporary conditions in which people move across the globe: 1) that immigrants themselves live a life that is often divided between their homelands and the U.S.; 2) that in some sense people need not physically immigrate in order to experience the conditions of immigration, because they are in contact with those who have immigrated and are living in a world where movement has become so much a part of normal life that those unable to move are nevertheless formed by this experience; and 3) that the nations sending the largest numbers of immigrants into the U.S. are themselves, as nations, conditioned by, if not the products of, the history of American influence on and intervention in these locales. If nothing else, these realities bring to light the problem with conceptualizing immigration as a neat movement from another nation into the U.S. and in turn, the assimilation of immigrants into localized ethnic identity groups.

III. THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY

As part of the wider culture wars for canon expansion that ensued in the wake of the Civil Rights era, ethnic studies programs made their case for
inclusion of texts and authors based on previous exclusion and marginalization. But in taking up the figure of the excluded, literary studies not only seek to criticize the marginalizing of certain groups of people, but also appropriate that very same figure and transform it into something positive, something manifesting a desire to remain outside the dominant. This particular critical move has also come to be associated with approaches to contemporary American ethnic and immigrant literatures and has provided a way to critique dominant cultural practices as well as to challenge more traditional, parochial approaches. Such arguments and approaches clearly drew upon the rhetoric not only of the U.S. Civil Rights movement but also of national and social liberation movements around the world. While many including Michael Denning have been, no doubt, right to point out the fallacy of characterizing the liberation movements of the 1960s as restricted to identity politics, identity as such comes to be a crucial term in what was to count as politics within both the broader public sphere as well as the university and the field of literary/cultural studies. The topics and arguments loosely organized under the category of identity politics have, to be sure, resulted in a significant body of scholarship and criticism that has both examined discrimination based on identity categories and done much to challenge such discrimination. However, identity politics has for some time now become the subject of considerable critique. In “The Politics of Recognition,” for example, Sonia Kruks proposes the gist of identity politics to be: “what is demanded is respect for oneself as fundamentally different” (123). “Questions about ‘What is to be done,’” she continues, “are frequently displaced on the Left today by questions about who ‘we’ are” (122). Kruks goes on to suggest that “what makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier forms of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which it has previously been denied: it is qua woman, qua black, qua lesbian or gay—and not qua incarnation of universal human qualities—that recognition is demanded and moral superiority sometimes asserted” (123). In this way, what was previously the basis for marginalization becomes the source of self-identification.

But if, when working with ethnic identity categories, identity politics typically positions the latter as necessarily outside of and in critical opposition to dominant cultural groups, analysis of identity need not remain within this framework. A wide range of scholars, among them Anthony Appiah, Linda Alcoff, and E. San Juan, Jr., have weighed in on the essentializing and liberal tendencies of identity politics and multiculturalism. Still others have noted a significant shift in what counts as politics both in and out of the university. As Michael Denning explains in *Culture in
the Age of Three Worlds, the movements of the 1960s targeted the “welfare, warfare and interventionist state demanding the right of women to divorce, sexual freedom, the civil rights of racial minorities” (43). However, a new era of politics since the 1990s targeting IMF, World Bank, and WTO represents a shift away from the nationalist liberation movements (35). Multiculturalism presupposes a politics of representation and recognition within a national frame—a politics that overlooks and even obscures the supranational power relations represented by international organizations such as the World Bank and the WTO. Furthermore, as analytical frameworks that consider identity in its socio-historical context are able to show, race, ethnicity, and gender identity paradigms are themselves part of the structural makeup of a historically specific form of society. Critics such as Jon Cruz, Paul Smith, Avery Gordon, Wahneema Lubiano, and Lisa Lowe have provided models for a scholarship that analyzes the production and appropriation of identity categories by and within relations of capital. Lowe’s argument in Immigrant Acts is that the production of multiculturalism with a fetishized focus on identity as a positive force “‘forgets’ history, and in this forgetting, exacerbates a contradiction between the concentration of capital within a dominant class group, and the unattended conditions of a working class increasingly made up of heterogeneous immigrant, racial and ethnic groups.”

In addition, as Jodi Melamed has written: “Race continues to permeate capitalism’s economic and social processes, organizing the hyper-extraction of surplus value from racialized bodies and naturalizing a system of capital accumulation that grossly favors the global North over the global South. Yet multiculturalism portrays neoliberal policy as the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity” (1). In support of the latter claim, Melamed refers to the fact that, since the 1990s, “multiculturalism has become a policy rubric for business, government and education.” For instance, reading the 2002 Bush administration National Security Strategy, she notes its reference to the “opening” of “world markets” as a “multicultural imperative . . . opening societies to the diversity of the world” (16). In another example, Melamed reminds us that Bush has consistently used the language of multiculturalism to justify the indefinite incarceration of Arab and Muslim prisoners at Guantanamo. His much-publicized policy of supplying prisoners with Korans and time to pray is supposed to work as a marker of racial sensitivity. This new racism uses the language of multiculturalism so as to give the appearance of having overthrown older racial binaries such as Arab vs. white/American/European and thus works to obscure the fact of their continuation (16). That is, questions of racial identity become, if anything, even more salient in
the global context as outlined by Melamed. Clearly, an analysis of identity that examines the uneven cooptation of groups of people in a globally structured economy must be distinguished from identity as a politics of recognition and representation.

The questioning of U.S. multicultural identity as a critical and oppositional term then simultaneously tends to shift the target of critique from the nation-state to the international agencies of capitalist globalization—however closely aligned these are with the United States. And even though there is disagreement in critical circles about whether the nation-state is meeting its demise, there is a pervasive sense that politics and scholarship based on what are by some accounts the parochial domestic paradigms of multiculturalism and identity as a politics of recognition are inadequate or even out of date. A new theoretical emphasis on the critique of political economy—especially concerns regarding labor and commodification—seems in some estimations to threaten the very paradigms of ethnic/immigrant studies, not to mention the field of literary studies, as so aptly invoked in Bruce Robbins’s anecdote of the businessman with the gun. How, then, in the face of this historical and theoretical change, is a field such as immigrant/ethnic literature, given its reliance on paradigms of ethnic identity and marginality, able to reproduce its own identity qua field when the very categories on which it is founded are, apparently, rapidly shifting?

In keeping with the general trend toward dislocalism, the answer here, I will argue, is that the very pressure to move beyond previously accepted paradigms within immigrant/ethnic literary studies, results in a countervailing pressure within the field to find new ways to consolidate the older paradigms. And since immigration signifies moving from one nation into another—meaning that, these paradigms are themselves predicated on the nation—we encounter in this process a new way of consolidating the nation and nationalist paradigms as well. Again, I want to emphasize that not all attempts to rearticulate the relevance of literary studies in a global context can be reduced to dislocalism. In the contemporary, globalized context, critics turn to immigrant/ethnic literatures as cultural texts able to mediate current discussions on globalization because such literature has historically produced an imaginary of dislocation and allowed a connection between the U.S. and the rest of the world. Yet to a large extent this broadening of literary scholarship continues, under new conditions, the work that has always defined the field of what has been considered American marginal literatures. The figure of the marginal—here in the guise of the immigrant—is itself dislocalized. For the latter figure is taken up in literary studies not simply out of an ethical opposition to the mar-
ginalizing of certain groups of people, but also so as to valorize this figure itself—to valorize it not only for being outside the dominant but also for the less obvious way in which it leaves what is inside the dominant intact. The figure of the immigrant comes to occupy the position of an “outsider” that helps make the “inside” seem more secure. Critics find ways to reposition the figure of the immigrant within their own project of universality, in such a way that this project remains, fundamentally, a nationalist one.

But before I proceed to analyze this instance of dislocalism in detail, there is still at least one other formal, categorical factor to be considered here. For the project of rescuing nationalist paradigms in literary studies of whatever sort cannot be adequately grasped without a consideration of questions relating to form and genre, specifically of how literary forms conventionally thought of as fictional or imaginary position themselves critically in a global context. At one level, it is important to consider the question of fiction if for no other reason because fictional works tend to be generally labeled as such in relation to their national points of origin, hence to nationalist paradigms. Immigrant literary fiction, then, will afford us an especially apt point of view from which to consider the global politics of national borders.

IV. THE LITERARY, THE FICTIONAL, AND THE REAL

As Bruce Robbins’s anecdote about the businessman and the gun to the head (see chapter 1) reminds us, narratives of the impending obsolescence of literature and of literary studies have been circulating within the humanities for at least a generation now. One could argue that such narratives were effectively institutionalized when the field began the process of “culturalizing” itself in response to the advent of cultural studies. And, despite the fact that it has now become difficult if not impossible to separate the cultural from the literary, these same narratives of obsolescence now reappear, albeit for different reasons, as the field attempts to negotiate the implicit demand that it globalize.

The resulting dislocalism takes various forms. One of the more parochial is the search for ways to redescribe literature and the literary-critical status quo ante as global while leaving everything else more or less intact. Such parochial dislocalism has a particularly good representative in the literary scholar Marjorie Perloff, who has made a case for a return to aesthetics, single-author studies, and the “merely literary.” In her 2006 MLA Presidential Address, for example, she brushes off the call to globalize
but also attributes to certain prominent literary figures the condition, as
one might put it, of being “always already” global. She cites the work of
Samuel Beckett and the fact that it is read and celebrated the world over
as proof, if one were needed, that Beckett is “global.”

But the same perceived opposition between the literary and the global
that elicits a parochial reaction from Perloff is evoked in a variety of
different, less defensive registers as well. For example, Masao Miyoshi
in his essay “Turn to the Planet” notes how, along with changes in the
notion of the literary itself, the interest and investment of the literary-
critical discipline in literature has fundamentally altered. “Gone” he says,
“is the argument concerning the relationships among nation-states and
national literatures”—noting the decline of the idea of nation-state in
intellectual discourse as a whole (287). Moreover, he argues, along with
the declining importance accorded to the idea of national literatures, the
“grammatical/formal analysis of literary products seems to interest very
few scholars . . .” (ibid.). However, the connection that Miyoshi traces
between the decline of the “literariness” of literary studies and the latter’s
growing interest in questions of the global does not prompt any effort
to rescue the former by resemanticizing the latter, as it does in the case
of Perloff. Instead he quite aptly argues for a renewed inquiry, under the
sign of the “planet” rather than the nation-state, into the connection of
literary objects to their social, cultural, and economic conditions. Other
scholars in literary studies—Frederic Jameson, Pascale Casanova, Franco
Moretti, Lisa Lowe, and Frederick Buell, to mention only a few—have
also taken the rise of the global as an invitation to rethink the limits and
the dimensions of the literary.

But note here as well how, in almost all current metanarratives of the
erosion of literary studies, whether of parochial or nonparochial bent,
the rise of globalization is posited as occurring in inverse relation to the
viability of the literariness in literary studies. The global and the literary
appear to compete as claimants to intellectual and scholarly attention,
nearly always to the advantage of the former as seemingly more attuned
to contemporary secular realities. The globalizing of literary studies has
in fact, emphasized a form of interdisciplinarity in which the most imme-
diate and urgent questions of global existence—political oppression,
declining living conditions, and the proliferation of new regimes of vio-
ience—impinge directly on the study of the literary or cultural object.
Even in cultural studies this can be confirmed in a tendency to cede what
had been the privileged position accorded to anthropological theories of
culture in preference for theories and theorists directly concerned with
questions of political economy, labor, urbanization, and finance. As the
discipline has sought to address more global issues, the theories of critics such as Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, and Renato Rosaldo seem, in relative terms at least, to be of less concern than do those of, say, Harvey, Arrighi, Sassen, and Robert Brenner.¹³

My interest here, however, is less the question of the literary per se than it is the way in which the opposition between the global and the literary also tacitly takes the form of an opposition between the fictional or the imaginative, seen as falling within the purview of the literary studies, and the real, perceived as the spontaneous correlate of the global. Within the terms of this binary, the literary is threatened with obsolescence in the face of globalization not only because of its genealogical tie to the nation but because the global has somehow become synonymous with a form of reality so urgent and exigent that even the fictive and the imaginary suddenly appear to have become luxuries, of concern only to the intellectually effete.¹⁴

This specific form of binary opposition between the global, read as reality, and the literary, read as the fictional, has the potential of generating a no less specific form of dislocalism—and it is the latter that I will attempt to map and critique in what follows. I stress here that I am not the least bit interested in rescuing the literary by proving its continued viability in a global context, as Perloff attempts to do. Nor do I want to join Miyoshi and others in the project of reconnecting the literary or the fictional to the newly globalized questions of the social, the historical, and the cultural, although I readily align myself with such a project. Rather, in what follows, I want to show how transposing the fictional vs. the real onto the literary vs. the global opposition can all too readily become another (dislocalizing) way of evading the real, objective, historical processes of globalization.

I will analyze this latent tendency within literary studies by focusing on scholarship in the area of immigrant literature. But before turning to that, I want first to consider further what this specific form of dislocalism entails as a broader phenomenon. More specifically, I want to argue that the fictional vs. real binary opposition works dislocally so as to extricate itself from a full engagement with global, historical reality by putting a simulacrum in place of the latter—a simulacrum that comes to function as what, in Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, is designated as the “real.” This latter notion has of course been the subject of an enormous amount of analysis and dispute on the part of Lacanian theorists, but I want in what follows to develop my analysis of the question of the real in immigrant/ethnic literary studies through an extrapolation from Slavoj Žižek’s widely read Welcome to the Desert of the Real, written initially as a theo-
retical reflection on the social and psychic landscape that emerged in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

Žižek begins this work by observing that those who live in the global North/West typically find themselves in the grip of the paranoid fantasy that they inhabit a fake world. The role of the media is crucial to the perpetuation of this fantasy. Žižek illustrates this at one point by reference to the popular 1998 film *The Truman Show*, in which the main character discovers that he has unwittingly been living his entire life as the hero of a long-running reality TV show. According to Žižek, the deeper point of the film is that life in the postmodern metropolis, in its very “hyperreality,” is in its way simultaneously “unreal, substanceless, deprived of material inertia” (13). The real, he notes, even becomes the “ultimate ‘effect’ sought after from digitalized special effects” themselves (12). But, he argues, it is not only Hollywood that produces the semblance of such a “weightless” real life. In “late capitalist consumerist society ‘real social life’ itself somehow acquires the features of a staged fake, with our neighbors behaving in ‘real’ life as stage actors and extras” (12–13). Žižek further speculates that the feeling of living in a more and more artificially constructed universe gives rise to “an irresistible urge to ‘return to the Real,’ to regain firm ground in some ‘real reality’” (19). Thus “the real which returns,” he argues, “has the status of an(other) semblance: precisely because it is real it has a traumatic character and we are unable to integrate it into our everyday lives and [thus] experience it as a nightmare” (ibid). “What do well-to-do Americans immobilized in their well-being dream about?” he asks, rhetorically. The answer follows: “About a global catastrophe that would shatter their lives” (17). Žižek grounds his explanation of how such a nightmare could become part of the American psyche in a fairly strict version of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, but I am much more interested here in how, according to *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, the desire/passion for the real “culminates in its apparent opposite, in a theatrical spectacle” and more significantly in how this spectacle works to uphold middle- and upper-class American ideological presuppositions (9), that is, in how the fiction vs. reality binary, as Žižek rethinks it here via the dialectic of semblance and the real, has come to underlie popularized notions of American nationalism and the ideology of Americanism itself.

But to see how this ideological mechanism works, we must delve a bit further into Žižek’s theoretical analysis. The most prominent example of the real as “today’s fundamental terror” would of course appear to be “terror” and “terrorism” themselves, experienced by most people as televised spectacle—with the 9/11 images as the archetypal instance. Terror-
as-spectacle, according to this notion, is designed to “awaken us, Western citizens, from our numbness, from immersion in our everyday ideological universe” (9). But Žižek suggests that we should invert our standard way of thinking, in which the destruction of the World Trade Center towers is read as an “intrusion of the Real that shattered our illusory sphere” (16). “It is not that reality entered our image,” he argues, but rather that “the image entered and shattered our reality” (ibid). Before 9/11 we lived in a particular form of our reality, “perceiving third world horrors as something . . . not [a] part” of it (ibid.). After 9/11 these “third world horrors” do enter first world, metropolitan reality, but precisely as simulacrum, as a new form of semblance that obeys the logic of the Lacanian real. The desire or “passion” for the real as opposed to semblance is thus, according to Žižek, precisely what helps us to maintain, in the face of new threats to close it, the distance between the first and the third world. Thus he points out that, in clear contrast to first world reporting on third world catastrophes, where the whole point is to produce a “scoop of gruesome detail”—say, “Somalis dying of hunger,” or “raped Bosnian women”—reporting on the 9/11 attacks showed “little of the actual carnage . . . no dismembered bodies, no blood” (13). This spectacular real then helps to “separate Us from Them” shoring up the sense that “the real horror happens there not here” (ibid). Žižek even draws the connection between fictional digitalized images and 9/11. He recalls here the 1999 film The Matrix, in which the hero Neo awakens from the slumber of simulated reality into a “real reality”—a “desolate landscape littered with burnt out ruins—what remains of Chicago after a global war”—and receives the ironic greeting—“welcome to the desert of the real”—from the resistance leader Morpheus, from which Žižek takes the title of his book (15). Žižek’s point here is that Americans experienced the 9/11 disaster as a spectacle reminiscent of the “most breathtaking scenes in big catastrophe [movie] productions,” not out of some robotic incapacity to see reality at all, but rather according to the logic of a defense mechanism, a digital sanitizing of the space of the U.S. designed to keep it from becoming the “desert of the real” (15). It is also important to recall here, as Žižek also reminds us, that, post-9/11, Hollywood postponed release of previously produced films that contained images similar to the ones we saw on the television screens when the planes hit the towers. Perceiving the real scenes of 9/11 not as fiction per se but as irresistibly paralleled by, even preceded by their fictional equivalents here, according to Žižek, works to uphold the ideology of American exceptionalism, and, under the new mapping of semblance and reality the 9/11 events ushered in, to relegate once more the real suffering (that must not be represented or
experienced) to a “desert of the real” locatable somewhere in the global South.

In this ideological climate, then, immigrants, generally depicted in the U.S. media as interlopers from the global South who, if not potential terrorists, have at the very least come to take away American jobs, must also be resituated within the “desert of the real” in the American collective imaginary. Consider here, as one such example of how the media constructs immigrants as the real, Lou Dobbs’s “Broken Borders” commentaries on his (now canceled) CNN show “Lou Dobbs Tonight”—especially during the surge of anti-immigrant demagogy that followed the public controversies over the (failed) “Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act” (also known as the Sensenbrenner Bill) of 2005. Speaking on a segment on the U.S./Mexico border fence aired in January 2007, for example, Dobbs, who has continually given voice to the most aggressive right-wing nationalist and populist sentiment in the U.S., openly refers to immigrants as “those that would cross the border with an intent to harm us” and praises the fence as a “principal mainstay against illegal immigration and unlawful entry into this country whether by terrorists or illegal immigrants.”

The elision, achieved via regular juxtaposition, between “terrorists” and “illegal immigrants” already gives some idea of the pathological need to redraw the symbolic U.S. border so as to keep immigrants, no matter which side of it they are actually on, quarantined in the “desert of the real.” But to get an even more vivid sense of this, consider the media controversy that erupted in May of 2007, after the CBS show “Sixty Minutes” aired an interview segment with Dobbs in which the interviewer, Leslie Stahl, brought to his attention that in 2005 a correspondent on his show reported that there had been a sudden increase in leprosy (purportedly 7,000 new cases in the three years leading up to 2005) and attributed this partly to “illegal immigration.” Stahl challenged these statistics, and similar charges were soon to come from various other sources. Dobbs went back to his show and insisted the original reports were accurate. He reiterated that the upsurge in leprosy was at least partly due to “unscreened illegal immigrants coming into this country.” This claim was subsequently proven in decisive terms to be false. However, Dobbs continued his backlash against those who had challenged him, indicating the degree to which the mass, psychopathological dimensions of the leprosy narrative had made the facts of the case irrelevant to Dobbs’s large, hardcore audience. Note how, in this narrative, the spurious linkage between leprosy and immigration goes beyond the idea that immigrants “harm us” because they take away jobs or are potential terrorists and maps the real onto their very
bodies, seen as *ipso facto* infectious. No matter who they are or what they do, or whether they are “legal” or “illegal,” immigrants are already projected as those who would carry the ills of the desert of the real into the United States. Even liberal challengers of Dobbs such as Stahl, who essentially sought to reassure the “Sixty Minutes” audience that, in fact, diseases such as leprosy are not crossing the border into the U.S. and remain safely quarantined *outside*, reveal how invested they are in this notion as well. Either way, infection and pandemic inhabit the desert of the real. No one expresses much concern over the possibility of increased cases of leprosy, say, in Mexico or diseases like dengue fever in India or Bolivia. In these renditions, immigrants have already *become* the real, having no connection to history and leaving the U.S. free to go on imagining itself, digitally if need be, as a symbolically sanitized space.

Virtually without exception, current work in immigrant/ethnic literary studies expresses a much-needed diametrical opposition to the idea of immigrants as job stealers, terrorists, or disease carriers. The field consistently strives to represent immigrant/ethnic groups as complex, humanized subjects and serves as one of the relatively few established counterweights to the reductionist and pathologizing metanarratives surrounding immigration, whether on the right or in mainstream liberal circles. One of the major contributions of the field has been to challenge as parochial all American nationalist metanarratives that exclude immigrants and (most) ethnics *per definitionem*. Immigrant/ethnic literary studies, I argue, enacts a dislocalized strategy for a more inclusive remapping of the frontiers between immigrant and citizen—but largely within a domestic-national space/paradigm. This it does via its own version of a binary of semblance—the fictional vs. the real (the global) in which the fictional functions simultaneously as a genre and as something opposite to fact, and the real situated as closer to the global and nonfictional reality. By evoking a notion of fiction as, at one and the same time, both literary genre and something opposite to factual truth, immigrant/ethnic literary criticism also constructs a particular version of the real as global.

Let me begin by noting that even though fiction as genre does not entail the factual in the same way as do, say, nonfictional genres such as documentary, the *non-fictional*—and with it, potentially, the specter of the real—has become a key part of the way that immigrant/ethnic *fiction* is circulated and promoted in publishing and reading circles. Fictional works labeled as immigrant or ethnic are, for example, often marketed on the basis of how well they introduce the reader to a “different” culture not their own, one the reader is invited to experience, as *factually real*, through the fiction itself. Of course, any fictional narrative is liable to
be read for its “local color” or as a kind of supplement to nonfictional accounts, but this effectively becomes the rule in the case of immigrant and ethnic fictional narratives, one that stipulates that they be read as uncomplicated reflections of geographic settings outside or cultural practices of immigrant groups within the United States. The field of immigrant/ethnic studies has routinely made critical arguments against reading immigrant/ethnic fiction as a window onto culture. However, by virtue of what has become the field’s structural positioning over and against the study of literature considered mainstream, it has come to see its own task as infusing the traditional literary canon with a dose of reality, jolting it out of its insularity. Thus, even while challenging the systematic exclusion of immigrant/ethnic texts from traditional canons, immigrant/ethnic literary studies bases this on a paradoxical capacity of immigrant fictions for conveying a more “real” reality.

Reading immigrant/ethnic literary narratives as vehicles for the “real” situates them within a peculiar generic space, the best term for which is probably “testimonio.” “Testimonio,” Spanish for testimony, was first used in Latin American literary circles in the late 1960s and early 1970s to describe nonfictional narratives that told the often-unknown stories of socially marginalized, oppressed individuals and groups. The Cuban anthropologist Miguel Barnet’s Autobiography of a Runaway Slave, an edited and reconstructed version of interviews the author conducted with the former slave Esteban Montejo in the 1960s, was probably the first narrative to be classified in this way. The term was then used in the 1970s by Mexican author Elena Poniatowska to characterize what she called “testimonial novels,” among them her Hasta no verte, Jesús mío (1969). The latter mixed fictional and nonfictional content in new ways. “Testimonio” first enters North American critical discourse in the early 1980s, propelled by the notoriety of Rigoberta Menchú’s autobiographical narrative I, Rigoberta Menchú (written with the anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos). Critics such as John Beverley, George Yúdice, Doris Sommer, and Barbara Harlow were among the leading critics arguing for testimonio’s significance for literary and cultural theory as a whole. One of the principal aspects of the ensuing intellectual conversation over testimonio has been to position it as a generic marker for both fictional and nonfictional narratives and emphasize its apparent ability to elide this difference. By enabling this slippage between the fictional and the nonfictional, testimonio becomes a way for fields such as immigrant literary studies to introduce the notion of the global-as-the-real into the genre of fiction itself. Testimonio, in this context, becomes the perfect dislocating device: displacing the fictional with an infusion of the real, but only in
order to consolidate the fictional itself as a vehicle for directly conveying the real.

This is especially evident in the work of the U.S. critical theorist most associated with work on testimonio, John Beverley. Focusing almost exclusively on *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, Beverley initially characterizes the testimonio as an eyewitness account, taking its name and many of its formal properties as a genre from the conventions of legal testimony. But he also defines testimonio as a new kind of narrative that, because of the extreme, often traumatic circumstances that produce it as well as its “non-traditional author-function” raises the question of whether literary fiction itself, at least as a mode of portraying such circumstances, has become obsolete. Testimonio becomes, for Beverley’s work and for other theoretical writings on the concept authored for the most part by critics in the U.S., a kind of catalyst for destabilizing traditional notions of literature and inserting a new kind of “reality-claim” into the discourse and protocols of work that had conceived fiction primarily as a genre of imaginative writing.

But Beverley’s theory of testimonio as a form of, so to speak, “post-literature,” offering direct, unmediated access to the real came under severe pressure after the veracity of key sections of Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonio was challenged by the U.S. anthropologist David Stoll. However accurate or not Stoll’s charges may have been, their effect was to force Beverley (and other champions of testimonio and Menchú such as Arturo Arias) to mount a defense of his earlier theoretical moves and to emphasize the more fictional aspects of the genre such as point of view, intentional gaps in narrative continuity, and, in the general, the mediated, constructed property of all forms of textuality. If only so as to immunize it from the effects of Stoll’s exposé, the claim that testimonio was a genre conveying the immediate truth of the oppressed/subaltern was revised, at least to the degree that fiction-like devices were now seen as no less important to this end. Yet even here there persists the seemingly *a priori* imperative for preserving a qualitative distinction between fictional texts and the unique capacity of testimonio for delivering a dose of the real. In the second chapter (“Second Thoughts on Testimonio”) of a 2004 book-length compilation and updating of his key essays on the genre, *Testimonio: The Politics of Truth*, Beverley writes that “testimonios in a sense are made for people like us in that they allow us to participate as academics and yuppies, without leaving our studies and our classrooms, in the concreteness and relativity of actual social struggles” (47). In a quintessentially dislocalist move Beverley both invokes a real/imaginary duality between actual struggle and academia, and then also dispenses
with it by saying that university classrooms are also places of struggle. He argues that, via testimonios, students, indeed all readers “can be interpelated in a relation of solidarity with liberation movements and human rights struggles” both in the United States and abroad (ibid.). Testimonios can accomplish this because they are texts “whose discourses are still warm from the struggle,” and yet the testimonios are “still just texts” and “not actual warm or in the case of the victims of death squads, not so warm bodies” (ibid).

The “warmth” of the testimonio is thus effectively admitted here by Beverley to emanate from the desert of the real. Beverley himself acknowledges that “what we encounter in testimonial is not the Real as such, in Jacques Lacan’s sense of ‘that which resists symbolization absolutely’” but an effect of the real “created by the peculiar mechanisms and conventions of the text, which includes a simulacrum of direct address” (2). Yet it is hard to avoid the conclusion here that testimonios are “just texts”—simulacra of the real—when their truth-claims are challenged, and yet quickly revert to their privileged role as direct embodiments of the real as soon as they become emissaries of the third world in first world universities. In this roundabout, seemingly self-ironizing way, Beverley’s arguments would seem to be as invested in keeping a safe distance between the U.S. and the desert of the real as is any current within mainstream Americanism. Promoting a big picture of ethical solidarity with liberation struggles while deemphasizing any issues having to do with the verifiability of the facts in testimonial narratives, he is able both to disavow traditional, aesthetic notions of the literary as the province of (in a phrase he adopts from Jameson) an “overripe subjectivity” and yet at the same time to invoke quasi-literary “conventions of the text” in order to rescue the testimonio genre from charges of falsification. Whether directly referenced in specific works or not, Beverley’s arguments have had a significant impact on critical scholarship on many levels, where testimonio—now routinely used to describe a variety of forms of writing such as novels, memoirs, and personal essays—has come to be broadly understood as a genre able to convey experiences of social and ethical urgency in ways that traditional literary forms cannot. And Beverley has recently argued that reading and debating testimonio remains relevant in the global context of a “world dominated by U.S. military and geopolitical hegemony” (x, Preface, Testimonio). In other words, according to Beverley, the testimonio has the ability to deliver us the “real” not just of a third but of a globalized world.

Unsurprisingly, testimonio, as both genre and theoretical topos, has also entered the lexicon of scholarship on immigrant/ethnic literature,
where it is used to uncomplicate, so to speak, references to the fictionalized experiences of oppression and trauma depicted in immigrant texts as, fiction notwithstanding, instances of a more “real” reality. Here, as in Beverley’s defense of Menchú’s testimonio as though endowed with an almost metaphysical truth in relation to its author’s experiences (outside the U.S.) and yet as “just a text” in relation to readers who do not share in these experiences (as would be the case for most readers inside the U.S.), the invocation of testimonio facilitates the transfer of the preimmigration experiences of immigrants to the U.S. into a version of the real. But to see more concretely how that is so I will now turn to a critique of some of the testimonio-oriented scholarship two such immigrant texts have generated, and will offer some analysis of the texts themselves.

V. GLOBALIZING AMERICANISM

Julia Alvarez’s How the García Girls Lost Their Accents

Alvarez’s novel tells the story of the flight of the García family—father Carlos, wife Laura, and their four daughters, Yolanda, Sandi, Sophia, and Carla—from the Dominican Republic to the United States. In Santo Domingo the Garcías had been a wealthy and prominent family employing maids and servants. Carlos’s father has a post in the United Nations. But this is not enough to protect them when Carlos is implicated in a failed CIA plot to kill the dictator Trujillo, and they must flee or face certain and violent retribution. The narrative itself begins in the 1980s, chronicling the life of the family as the García girls grow up in New York City, making frequent visits to the Dominican Republic, the actual circumstances leading to the family’s emigration from Santo Domingo not being related until the end of the novel, in a flashback to the 1950s. It is important to note at the outset, however, that life in Santo Domingo in the 1950s, as portrayed in the novel, already betrays the fact of widespread Americanizing influences on the island, and that even after their emigration to New York—and the death of Trujillo in 1961—the family returns frequently to the Dominican Republic.

The García Girls is a widely taught text in courses on American ethnic and immigrant as well as women’s literature and has become an almost permanent fixture in these categories. Critical scholarship on the work has highlighted issues of cultural conflict and Latina identity in the U.S. But the novel has also begun to make regular appearances in conversations about globalization—an indication of a certain pressure for a shift in the
framing of such texts as simply U.S. ethnic. However, such a shift is by no means tantamount to an unambiguous desire on the part of literary studies to replace the U.S. nationalist framework with a more global one—or at least not in the case of *The García Girls*. One of the reasons *The García Girls* has been so readily accepted into the canon of American literary studies surely has to do with the assimilation narrative it contains. This, together with the need perhaps to keep up with the demand from both publishers and readers for coming-to-the-U.S. (and finding liberation) narratives has also disposed scholarship to emphasize identity-based readings. And, to be sure, one could read certain aspects of the novel as reproducing dominant, assimilationist ideologies. My critique of how the novel is read by current American scholarship is thus mindful of the complex locations of both the text and its critics. I will first trace dislocalist tendencies in the critical writings about the novel and then indicate aspects of the novel that simultaneously resist such tendencies.

My analysis will focus primarily on three critical readings of *The García Girls*: Lucía M. Suárez’s “Julia Alvarez and the Anxiety of Latina Representation,” Pauline Newton’s “Portable Homelands in Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, ¡Yo!, and Something to Declare,*” and Maribel Ortiz-Márquez’s “From Third World Politics to First World Practices.” These essays are broadly representative of work on Alvarez that has attempted to reframe her work in keeping with the overall drive to globalize American ethnic and immigrant literary studies.

Even more to the point, all of the essays position the fictional text as a testimonio, explicitly so in the case of Newton and Suárez even if on a more implicit level in Ortiz-Márquez. Consider for example the claim made by Newton. She draws upon Beverley to say that, read as testimonios, Alvarez’s works and her fictional characters put on the agenda problems of “poverty and oppression” that are normally not visible in the dominant forms of representation for “Dominican and US American readers and citizens” (52). It is, Newton notes, repercussions from the indelibly real traumas of the Trujillo dictatorship that have resulted in the emigration both of Alvarez herself and of her characters and that trigger the formation of the “multicultural states” explored in *The García Girls*, in her novel ¡Yo! and in Alvarez’s memoir, *Something to Declare*. (51). Alvarez’s fictions, that is, are claimed to function as testimony not only to the brutality of Trujillo but also to the problems that arise in the formation of her characters in their relationship to racism and cultural difference in the United States. This point is underscored by Suárez, who writes that the novel can be studied as a testimony to the complexity of
memory. In her words it “foregrounds the deep psychological problems that manifest themselves through memory, or lack of it, for those who are both challenged by bicultural and bilingual experiences and haunted by a silenced, and escaped, past of state repression” (117).

Reading the novel as testimonio allows a number of moves to take place simultaneously. First, it destabilizes certain accepted categories of analysis stemming from nationalist paradigms—categories such as immigration and ethnic identity themselves, both of which appear to be the result of simply moving from one nation to another and adapting to a new living situation. The movement from the Dominican Republic to the U.S. becomes, in the interpretive space of testimonio, more complex than simple ex- or repatriation. Moreover, both essays reason that reading The García Girls as testimony has become a necessity in a world where stories of real brutality, subsequent escape from it, and the resulting pain of readjustment transcend questions of fictional versus nonfictional portrayal. Although less directly, this overriding emphasis on the urgent flight from terror and the almost therapeutic need to tell its story is also present in Newton’s reading of the novel. Indeed, to varying degrees all three essays make some attempt to link the emigration of the García family directly to American intervention in the Antilles and to the historical particularities of the Trujillo dictatorship. The implied thinking here is that the forms of mobility resulting from a global politics cannot be entirely contained by the notion of immigration. The new urgency of flight transcends national boundaries—a reality that is then to be conveyed, analogously, by positioning Alvarez’s novel beyond the formal boundaries the novel itself—as testimonio.

But what is really at stake in positioning these works as testimonios? Consider, again, Newton’s claim: that the works of Alvarez “put on the agenda oppression that is not normally visible in the dominant forms of representation” (51). Although Newton is referring to Alvarez’s personal essays here as well as to her fictions, such a statement begs the question of why a fictional form—such as the novel—should be unable to put such oppression “on the agenda.” What exactly then is the advantage of reading The García Girls as a testimonio? Recall Beverley’s suggestion that testimonios are still “warm” from struggles in the real world. The notion here is that testimonio is formally necessary in order to convey an urgent reality beyond the limits of fictional representation or indeed of any form of mediated textuality. Nevertheless, as I have noted above in reference to testimonio theory in the wake of the Rigoberta Menchú controversy, testimonio is promptly rescued from charges of factual inaccuracy by invoking the fictional and what is generally the cultural and
textual mediacy of truth-claims, thus allowing the critics to, in effect, dislocalize the fictional, to position themselves as if beyond its mediacy, but still able to fall back on it when necessary. This is possible precisely because the notion of testimonio is itself already positioned in such a way as to blur the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. Newton, for example, argues outright that we need to get beyond asking whether Alvarez’s narrative is autobiography or fiction. Suárez explains, in turn, that, after reading Alvarez’s autobiographical essays, she “cannot help but make the connection between [the] reminiscence of her past and her fiction.” The “essays,” she states, “have led me down [a] slippery path” in which the distinction between memoir and novel itself disappears. (143). And Ortiz-Márquez claims that the blurring of boundaries between fiction and autobiography is crucial to understanding the “social reality” that “lies at the margins of the text—namely the escape from Trujillo dictatorship” (236).

At one level, it makes a certain sense to read testimonios as these critics do. Nonfiction and fiction alike are, as forms, necessarily mediated. And there can be no question that fiction as form has the capacity to explore and explain factual and historical truth about oppression, poverty, and so on, and that the nonfictional is just as “constructed” as the fictional. Lisa Lowe has, for one, pointed out in “Work, Immigration, Gender,” that reading testimonios should not become a pretext for ceasing to attend to formally “aesthetic” genres such as the novel, or for ignoring the question of why testimonios emerge at particular political and historical moments. However, most of the conversations centering on testimonio have, as in the instance discussed here, been able only to gesture toward the kind of broad and contextualized reading advocated by Lowe. If anything, reading fiction as testimonio in cases such as the above has led, as I will show in what follows, to a particular kind of traditional disciplinary consolidation. At the same time it is important to note how these reading strategies have emerged within a larger global, political context in which literary critics are chastised for occupying themselves with the “imagined” world of fictional texts purportedly far removed from the realities of globalization. In this atmosphere, the dislocalizing possibilities of testimonio are readily mobilized to blur the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction and, in a moment of globality that champions the “real,” to increase the reality quotient of the latter.

However, such attempts to blur the boundaries between different forms of writing also lead toward a blurring of another kind of boundary: that between fiction and fact. While we certainly get a certain quantum of historical information in these readings of The García Girls, this does
not translate into helping us better understand either Alvarez’s fictional texts or her memoirs in relation to the specific historical circumstances and conditions reflected in the novel itself. The scholarship here advocates what is, rather, a deliberate ambiguity in relationship to history, reducing historical information to the real where the reading of the novel remains disconnected from history itself. Both Suárez and Newton, for example, argue that testimonios (fictional and nonfictional) give voice to the silences and the unknown aspects of the Trujillo regime. As Suárez puts it: “I would argue that Alvarez not only renders justice to the visible and obvious universe, but that she also makes way for an array of invisible elements in a less clearly definable globalized world, where memory is tainted by amnesia, fear, pain, and trauma” (120). However, nowhere is there an attempt to theorize the historical specificities in relationship to trauma. Nor do we learn here about the historical specificities that produce amnesia or that give content to trauma. Terms such as amnesia, trauma, and invisibility remain abstract and unconnected to the history invoked elsewhere in the criticism itself. The American occupation of the Dominican Republic and the murderous brutality it produced and left behind after placing Trujillo in power, invoked here, seems to obfuscate memory and history rather than sharpen it. Such history comes to function, in effect, as the real, and part of the reason is that the trauma and terror experienced under Trujillo is assumed here to have been left behind when the immigrant crosses into the United States. This crossing, I would argue, is already implied here when the past becomes a memory that is “tainted by amnesia.” Remembering, according to Newton and others, is given shape only in stories that blur the formal and generic boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, that is, in testimonio. According to all of the essays being discussed here—and this is anything but atypical of current scholarship in ethnic and immigrant literary studies—telling such stories is important not because the memories they contain are produced by the realities of history but because of the larger work they do in service of fighting racism and sexism in the United States. There can be no gainsaying such work; of course, I would add here that the additional benefit of emphasizing memory and trauma and their testimonial medium as if somehow prior to their historical truth is to contain terror and trauma within the space of the real—the Dominican Republic in this case. The focus on amnesia furthers this process of containment. These are, in effect, the only aspects of history to be invoked, because it has already been assumed, however unconsciously, that once immigration into the U.S. has taken place, personal trauma and terror can safely be worked through in therapeutic, “testimonio” fashion. Terror is relegated to the
past as a result of a spatial displacement along an axis of decontextualized culture and identity, rather than through historical transformation.

But there is still another dimension to the process of reducing the details of the preimmigration past to the real. Throughout the criticism under analysis here, both the Trujillo dictatorship and the history of U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic and the larger Caribbean are coded as exceptional rather than continuous with a “normal,” postimmigration life in America. In place of the larger, global historical context, chronology—for example, particular dates such as the 1965 U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic—becomes the focal point when referring to preimmigration reality in *The García Girls*. Suárez for instance is careful to cite 1965 and the wave of emigration from the Dominican Republic that followed during the postinvasion period (123). These are crucial realities, of course, but with focus on them as “events,” they are rendered as exceptional and outside the global, imperial context that generated them. Constant references by critics such as Suárez, Newton, and Ortiz-Márquez to the Trujillo dictatorship as a “regime of terror,” while true enough, nevertheless tend to fetishize it as event, and thus to further reinforce its banishment to the desert of the real and its effective removal from history. The terror indubitably unleashed by such events, to the extent that it is rendered as exceptional, is reduced to little more than the motive for flight, something to leave behind—as after which a return to normalcy is declared, or assumed, even if attained in an uneven manner.

In this way, moreover, the representational space of the U.S. is also kept free from the exceptional terrors of the real. Dominican immigrants, like others, must of course face the realities of racism and sexism in the U.S., as critics such as Ortiz-Márquez, Newton, and Suárez are right to emphasize. But the accompanying implication here is that immigrants are nevertheless free to reinvent themselves as Americans, even when struggling with the pain of adaptation. Terror *within* U.S. borders is seen as something dream-like, nightmarish, amnesiac—purely psychological and thus removed from the material. In this context, then, the “testimonial” blurring of the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction works not only to displace ideas of aesthetic mediation but to seal off the space of the U.S. itself as one in which writing—all writing—can be inventive, creative, and playful. Indeed, the possibility of testimonio itself as a form of writing that transcends boundaries would appear to presuppose a freedom to pursue personal recovery and reinvention that only the space within the boundaries of the U.S., where the terrors of the real are safely psychologized and dehistoricized, can provide. The question of identity itself becomes separated off from geopolitics, economics, and culture. To
be sure, both Alvarez and her characters are portrayed by their critics here as global and transcultural subjects, but precisely *because* such characteristics are acquired through immigration to the United States. The question “who am I?” becomes possible primarily for those whose immigrant status is assured and who are learning to adapt and become Americans, however incompletely and against the odds—but seemingly not in the case of those for whom immigration itself has yet to take place . . . or never will. So, for example, Newton’s reference to “portable homelands” assumes a space—as preexisting “homeland”—in which cultural identity is individually “portable,” a matter of personal choice (51). The echoes of the “melting-pot” and quasi-official multiculturalism are distinctly audible here, in what has effectively become a gesture of rethinking, via immigration narrative and testimonio, a literary canon already assumed to be *American*. The identity of immigrant subjects comes into sharp focus not so much because these particular subjects have spent a part of their lives outside the U.S., but because such identity has become a unique staging site for that synthesis of the local and the global now required to reproduce the dominant imaginary of the U.S. itself as an “identity.”

**(Im)migration and Gender**

At no point does any of the scholarship I am examining here, it must be emphasized, espouse much less attribute an overtly assimilationist stance to Alvarez’s novel itself. If the García girls lose their accents, the new identity they acquire as a result is never explicitly claimed in these readings to be—much less celebrated—as “American.” In keeping with the dislocalist strategy of displacing fiction onto the real through the invocation of the genre (or nongenre) of testimonio, the national question raised in this is displaced here as well—onto questions of gender. Consider for example how Ortiz-Márquez’s essay lays out this dislocalist strategy. “Belonging” she writes, “is the privileged feeling” in Alvarez’s narrative. “Belonging expresses the need to be somewhere where the boundaries of ‘here’ and ‘there,’ can be easily defined, where the sense of estrangement can be easily defined” (233). Ortiz-Márquez cautions against any easy acceptance of a “defined” identity as such, preferring instead to cast the “negotiation” of belongingness in *The García Girls* in terms of gendered identities, concentrating on how the novel’s female protagonists struggle to find their place in the U.S. through their bodies. But if such gendered identities turn out to be vexed—requiring “negotiation”—this, then, is so precisely because of issues of assimilation to and from within the United States.
Thus, Ortiz-Márquez goes on to observe, “differences between male and female reproductive organs . . . translate . . . into differences in the way boys and girls are to behave once they enter puberty. The meaning of those differences is tied, in the novel, to Yolanda’s understanding of language and language acquisition in the United States” (233). Note what is, in fact, the double displacement here: the Americanizing assimilation of immigrants becomes a question of language acquisition (“losing accents”), but this question in turn is claimed as, a priori, something related to the configuration of sexual and gender identities” (233)—that is, girls “losing their accents.” Gender questions would appear then to act as a screen for a more assimilationist reading of the novel.

The boundaries between the Old and New World are themselves, in fact, “negotiated” through notions of gender. This becomes clear if we consider how Ortiz-Márquez reads the novel’s inaugural scene. The first chapter of the novel, the first of a series that covers (in reverse order) the time period stretching from 1989 back to 1972, opens with Yolanda returning to the island on one of her regular trips from the United States. Here is the description of Yolanda’s arrival, narrated from her own vantage point:

The old aunts lounge in the white wicker armchairs, flipping open their fans, snapping them shut . . . [T]he aunts seem little changed since five years ago when Yolanda was last on the Island. Sitting amongst the aunts in less comfortable dining chairs, the cousins are flashes of color in turquoise jumpsuits and tight jersey dresses . . . Before anyone has turned to greet her in the entryway, Yolanda sees herself as they will, shabby in a black cotton skirt and jersey top, sandals on her feet, her wild black hair held back with a hairband. Like a missionary, her cousins will say, like one of those Peace Corps girls who have let themselves go so as to do dubious good in the world. (3–4)

Ortiz-Márquez does not cite this passage directly, but she refers to it, observing that “from the beginning of the novel we are introduced to a conflicting relations between the two locations . . . ] The opening scene [in the novel] is marked by Yolanda’s subtle struggle to reject the norms established by her maternal family as proper ‘woman’s behavior’ and her ‘foreign’ approach to issues such as clothes, makeup, traveling, and friends” (236). Although recognizing the implicit challenge to gender politics in the Dominican Republic embodied in Yolanda’s protagonism in scenes such as this, Ortiz-Márquez is also careful to note an ambiguity here, acknowledging that “the relative freedom [Yolanda] enjoys in the
U.S. is clearly intertwined with the comfort she experiences in the familiarity of the surroundings in the Dominican Republic” (ibid.). Reading this “intertwining” as still another instance in which the boundaries of immigrant life tend to be blurred, the effect of this interpretive move here is to reproduce a perfectly clear and distinct opposition between the familiar, comfortable, but, in matters of gender politics, less than ideal Dominican Republic against the unfamiliar, uncomfortable, but relatively more free and gender-enlightened United States.

In the case of gender too, that is, the logic of dislocalism plays itself out: the initial gesture that affirms the blurring of the boundaries only makes it possible to preserve them all the better in the end. And it is this simultaneous “intertwining” and recuperation of boundaries that is read most pointedly here through women’s practices. Take, for example, Ortiz-Márquez’s claims that Yolanda’s subjectivity is “torn between a corpus that was not quite inscribed in Spanish nor English” (233). For this the following textual evidence is adduced: “For the hundredth time [says Yolanda] I cursed my immigrant origins. If only I too had been born in Connecticut or Virginia, I too would understand the jokes everyone was making on the number 69 and I would say things like ‘no shit’ without feeling like I was imitating someone else”’ (ibid.). The cursing of immigrant roots is very often depicted as a generational battle in immigrant narratives, and The García Girls is no exception here. The parents represent the old world and the girls the new, though as if caught between the new and the old. A similar line of interpretation is pursued by Newton as well, whose reading of Alvarez correctly observes the way in which gender norms from the Dominican Republic make their way into the U.S., altering the space of the latter. She cites passages from The García Girls in which, Carlos, the girls’ father, is portrayed as too obstinate in his ways, imposing, in Newton’s words, “inhibiting island rules that run counter to the ways of a contemporary U.S. society,” mandating that his daughters “not interact with men in any questionable manner” (57). Like Ortiz-Márquez, Newton emphasizes the intertwining of gender practices and norms, the positioning of the girls in the liminal space between the patriarchal order that has traveled to the mainland from the island and the seemingly less restrictive relationships they have with their “monolingual husbands” in the U.S.—husbands who, however, do not understand the complexity of their identities (59). But despite the inevitability of this intertwining, the old, patriarchal world with its bad gender politics here continues to function as a foil from which to set the U.S. apart from its others, providing the critics themselves with a standpoint from which to affirm the U.S. as always already a place of better gender politics.
Here as well, then, *The García Girls* is read primarily within the terms of domestic race- and gender identity-negotiations, and made to bear the burden of representation that comes with such discussions. Although she wants to question what she calls the “ethnic reading” of the text and even suggests that a “Latino” ethnicity is imposed on Alvarez’s characters as a result of immigration, Ortiz-Márquez nevertheless produces readings of the novels that are in keeping with the standard U.S. rhetoric of identity as something to be negotiated by the individual. She suggests that Alvarez’s characters have taken on a fractured identity through mobility—but this in turn suggests that those not required to be “mobile” can somehow have unfractured identities. Though the essay acknowledges the struggle that Latina women in particular must wage in support of their own independent identities in both the U.S. and in their homelands, in the case of the García girls this struggle is also precisely what gives them their identity. This ironic valorization of prolonged identity “negotiation” as a kind of end in itself is also explicit in Newton’s reading of the novel, which reassures us that, after first having trouble defining themselves in the U.S, the García girls ultimately “learn to cross cultures with greater ease” or become “transcultural” even if they fumble along the way (53). Implied in the latter concept here too is the logic according to which the struggle over identity must be prolonged indefinitely if one is not to risk losing that identity itself. In fact, this metanarrative in which displacement occurs alongside and continuously accompanies “struggle” is not necessarily a story of dispossession and can just as well be understood as a narrative of cosmopolitanism in which the characters are represented as possessing a desirable perspective that *could come only* from being displaced. Displacement in this sense is removed from the material realities of the lives of immigrants and becomes a kind of ethical privilege. In effect, identity- and gender-centered readings of *The García Girls* such as those under discussion here have already compensated for its categorization as a “marginal literature” counterposed to dominant literary categories by restricting it to the domestic and “resistant” category of a United States–Latina ethnicity.24

Of course, as mentioned earlier, certain aspects of the novel could be interpreted as reproducing the very same dominant ideologies that are tacitly left unchallenged in these readings. So for example, growing up in the U.S., the girls come to rebel against what they see as their old world parents, whom they experience as overbearing and overprotective. In an effort to preserve their Dominican cultural heritage, the parents send the girls to the Dominican Republic in the summers during
their teenage years, something the girls themselves resist, resulting in constant domestic conflicts. The latter are described in the novel as follows: “It was a regular revolution: constant skirmishes. Until the time we took open aim and won, and our summers—if not our lives—became our own” (111). The fact that their skirmishes are described as a “revolution” does indeed resonate with the title of Ortiz-Márquez’s essay, “From Third World Politics to First World Practices.” It may seem a minor point of semantics here, but the slippage is worth considering: “revolution” in the Dominican Republic concerns the political circumstances that had implicated Carlos García (and by extension his family) in a failed insurrectionary plot to assassinate Trujillo, resulting in the Garcías’ flight to the U.S. The “revolution” in the U.S. is fought over whether the girls are to be allowed to stay out late at night, go to school dances, and spend the summers in the United States. It is precisely these teenage “skirmishes,” narrated within the context of the old/new world divide as the García girls try to figure out their places in their new “first world” environment, that become the focus of the literary scholarship under scrutiny here, centered on the questions of women’s identity formation and their struggle for liberation, both from the machista culture of old world patriarchy and from new world sexism. And yet it is also via these scenes of adolescent rebellion that the urgency of cultural preservation—and the unspoken law requiring women to be bearers of this preservation—is staged. Of course, one could also read such an episode, conveyed tongue in cheek, as a commentary on a U.S., metropolitan form of life in which the right to stay out could be even thought of as a “revolution.” And it is possible to read the novel as merely representing this contradiction. But the elision of this difference between the two “revolutions” in the critical discourse then helps on the one hand to advocate for the preservation of Latino culture and yet on the other to argue for women’s need to find a place outside it. The attempted revolution against Trujillo in the Dominican Republic turns into the revolution, either of keeping one’s cultural identity or of escaping traditional gender norms in New York. And it is the concept of immigration itself here that foregrounds the critical positioning of the novel in such a way as to leave behind old world politics just as immigrants, according to the standard Americanizing mythology, supposedly leave behind their homelands—and with them the dangers of the real—in their search of a better life in the United States. Yet once in the U.S. these same immigrants are also to be accorded the freedom to preserve old world cultural practices.25
Some Notes toward a Historical Reading

Dislocalizing readings of *The García Girls*, typified in the scholarship on the novel examined above, essentially appropriate the narrative’s global frame of reference in order to make more credible and politically acceptable a localized situating of the novel as “U.S./American.” Through still another move of displacement and consolidation, this is secured by reading the novel exclusively within the overarching framework of domestic multicultural and gender-identity issues. The resulting tendency is to preclude other, non-identity-based readings, including those that might connect immigration as well as domestic issues of racism/sexism to broader global socio-historical conditions. Such dislocalizing readings remain limited in exploring the potential capacity of the novel itself, in conversation with the (im)migration experience, to resist easy categorization within accepted U.S. literary paradigms of localized ethnic identity. I will analyze some of these potential aspects of the novel below. I stress that I do not wish to produce a comprehensive reading here but merely to point out ways of glimpsing this resistant aspect of Álvarez’s narrative.

*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* elides any immediate localization of ethnic identity at one level simply because its characters move back and forth so readily between Santo Domingo and the U.S. mainland. Their lives unfold in continuous contact with the lives of Dominicans on the island itself, revealing a complicated network of socio-historical relations between two national loci whose multiple intersections, framed by global historical developments, makes it harder, if not impossible to draw ideological lines between an ominous Dominican desert of the real and a U.S. oasis of freedom and security. Moreover, the novel complicates any move to posit the local or a localized ethnicity as a site of critical opposition not only because the characters themselves cannot be physically or spatially localized in this way, but also because the local itself varies in different contexts.

For a better sense of this, let us revisit the beginning of the novel. On the surface, Yolanda’s visit to the Dominican Republic is the opportunity for various characters to stress the “localism” of Santo Domingo in relationship to the global U.S. Her aunts greet her by saying “welcome to your little island.” The cousins join in a chorus for her, singing: “here she comes Miss America.” Yolanda, by the mere fact that she has been living in the U.S., represents the States to her cousins. Her family encourages her to speak in Spanish, which she describes as her “native” tongue, thus choosing at least for the moment to assume an uncomplicated connection between herself, the Spanish language, and the Dominican Republic. But
beneath the surface these easy connections and the sense of an uncomplicated locality rapidly disintegrate. Recall the opening scene again:

The old aunts lounge in the white wicker armchairs, flipping open their fans, snapping them shut . . . [T]he aunts seem little changed since five years ago when Yolanda was last on the Island. Sitting amongst the aunts in less comfortable dining chairs, the cousins are flashes of color in turquoise jumpsuits and tight jersey dresses . . . Before anyone has turned to greet her in the entryway, Yolanda sees herself as they will, shabby in a black cotton skirt and jersey top, sandals on her feet, her wild black hair held back with a hairband. Like a missionary, her cousins will say, like one of those Peace Corps girls who have let themselves go so as to do dubious good in the world. (3–4)

Here the novel clearly throws into relief the gap that has opened up, in terms of behavior norms and even personal appearance, between the immigrant Yolanda and her nonimmigrating family members on the island—something discussed by Ortiz-Márquez in her essay. But, this passage also casts an oblique light on the terms that are often mobilized by the field of immigrant and ethnic literary studies in response to the pressure to globalize. The passage, for one thing, emphasizes that the precise context in which the U.S. is seen as “global” is the socio-economic and historical conjuncture that has produced U.S. intervention and domination of the Caribbean, in all its various forms. One of these is the Peace Corps. The reference here to the latter’s “dubious good,” even if embedded within the indirect discourse through which Yolanda imagines how her more “localized” and gender-conservative aunts and cousins are likely to judge her appearance, should not be overlooked. Created along with Alliance for Progress in the early 1960s, the Peace Corps obeyed the same Cold War logic that led, in the Caribbean, to even more “dubious” ventures such as the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba and the 1965 armed intervention in Santo Domingo to overthrow the popular and progressive Juan Bosch government. The old aunts and the flashily dressed cousins inclined to view Yolanda’s “Peace Corp”—like (North Americanized) appearance as “dubious” in this context is something not emphasized in readings of The García Girls that understand the global within the limits of cultural and gender-based identity politics of recognition.

Note here as well that, while those in the Dominican Republic come, for the moment, to occupy the local position (the aunts who “seem little changed”) and the immigrant Yolanda the global, when she is in the States, Yolanda is perceived as part of a different kind of local iden-
tity, that of a Hispanic woman or Latina. In addition, if in one context the local represents accumulated cultural practices in the Dominican Republic, how then do we account for Americanizing influences on the island that cannot be reduced to support for the Trujillo dictatorship, to the 1965 invasion, or to the statistics representing the numbers of Dominican displaced as a result? The latter, as immigrants to the U.S., in some sense arrive having already been Americanized. By the same logic, if we designate the category of “Latina” in the U.S. to be the site of the local then how do we account for differences of class structure within this category, not to mention the differences of race/gender/language that assign people within these categories varied access to the dominant sphere? Since the U.S. can claim (localized) Latino/a cultural practices as, in one sense, located securely within its borders, it posits itself as both a local and a global nation containing diversity while at the same time banishing—or at least attempting to keep out—the “real” dangers posed by the foreign.

The point of view according to which localized cultural practices provide both a refuge from and a standpoint from which to oppose globalization becomes extremely complicated and problematic when we consider it in relationship to The García Girls—as, indeed, to immigrant literatures generally. This being so, the question persists here of how to read those aspects of the novel that complicate the equation, as interpreted by some identity-based readings, of the local with an ethnically marginal position? Aside from telling the story of how its main characters become Americanized subjects, complete with phases of teenage rebellion, The García Girls narrates the process of globalized immigration in a way that, if critically reconsidered, undermines as readily as it lends support to any straightforward separation of the local from the global. The local, as implicitly constructed in Alvarez’s novel, is too ambiguous to rely on when it comes to representing ethnic or identity-based critical resistance to dominant cultures—or to keeping the U.S. safe from the real.

For, to return once again to the point made above, Dominican immigrants to the U.S, like those from many other parts of the world, have in most cases already had encounters with America, Americans, and Americanization well before physically immigrating. Consider again, in this light, the specific circumstances that force the Garcías to flee their country for the U.S.: the fact that Carlos García falls under suspicion for his part in what had initially been a U.S.-backed plot to kill Trujillo. Here the novel reflects quite closely the actual record of historical events surrounding the attempted assassination—and, presumably, the actual experiences of some in the Dominican Republic in the early 1960s. Although invoked in some of the scholarship I have analyzed above in a nominal way, the historical
backdrop generally comes into play only when discussing the novel’s autobiographical aspects, with generally no or only minimal references made to the U.S. role in events themselves—and more significantly, to how the novel itself is shaped by this specific historical conjuncture. In the novel, we learn that Carlos is being investigated through the point of view of the girls. Yolanda, for example, is described seeing her father hide in a closet from the SIM (Servicio Inteligencia Militar) agents who have come to question him. Her mother and the servant Cucha manage to distract them and prevent Carlos’s arrest, but the impact of this experience on the girls persists and reflects the dreadful memories of the “trujillato” reported by many Dominicans who lived through it. The girls, in fact, have been told that the SIM is everywhere, watching to catch them if do anything wrong (195–98). Moreover, the novel makes very clear the Garcías’ forced emigration and U.S. involvement in the failed assassination. In fact it is an official U.S. agent that literally makes the secret travel arrangements for them. Carlos, we learn, has been working all along with the U.S. State Department presence in the Dominican Republic in his organizing efforts against Trujillo. It is Victor Hubbard, officially the U.S. consul in Santo Domingo, but in actuality a C.I.A. agent and Carlos’s American contact, who saves the family from certain, violent retribution. Known as “Tio Vic” to the girls, Hubbard has instructed them to call him at the first sign of trouble, and to use the (appropriately American-sounding) code phrase “tennis shoes.” Hubbard is presented in the novel as an honest middleman, good on his word to help the Dominicans recruited by the C.I.A. to escape in case the plot should go awry. “It wasn’t his fault,” the novel informs us, “that the State Department chickened out of the plot they had him organize” (202). His “orders changed midstream from organize the underground and get that SOB out to hold your horses, let’s take a second look around and see what’s best for us” (211).

That is, caught in the turmoil of rapidly changing political environment, the Garcia family is sketched against a backdrop of a complex account in which the histories of the Dominican Republic and the United States are already deeply intertwined. But in much of the scholarship on the novel this history, if discussed, is effectively relegated to the realm of the real. Perhaps inadvertently, this reflects what is often the downplaying of such intervention in much of the historiography produced about the Trujillo period, which, in a reflection of the lurid figure of Trujillo himself as evil incarnate, has tended to represent the actions of the U.S. (which installed Trujillo himself in the 1930s) as exceptional, a necessary departure from the supposedly more benign parameters of the Good Neighbor Policy or the Alliance for Progress.26 It is true, of course, as already men-
tioned, that political events—especially the U.S. military invasion of the country in 1965 to overthrow the left-leaning Juan Bosch government and restore military rule—were the impetus for the first large waves of Dominican emigration to the U.S. But, although the phenomenon of (im)migration from the Dominican Republic and from the Caribbean in general cannot be adequately represented without an understanding of this kind of political chronology, the latter also runs the risk of obscuring the larger phenomenon of mobility in the context of the globalization of the region itself. I cannot adequately summarize here the breadth of the historical and economic research into the structural causes of the Dominican exodus to the U.S. But work by scholars such as James Ferguson, Eric Williams, Tom Barry, Peggy Levitt, Greg Grandin, Sherri Grasmuck, and Patricia Pessar allows us to see how the larger history of (im)migration from the island can be traced to the very socio-economic conditions that have themselves given rise to the history of U.S. occupation and intervention.27 A careful study of the history of what has been, since the end of the ironically more nationalist and protectionist regime under Trujillo, the ever more merciless yoking of Dominican society to the needs of international (largely U.S.) capital, whether via IMF austerity programs or the forced conversion of the Dominican Republic into a tourism-based economy that has left the better part of the local population with little choice except to emigrate, helps to correct the picture here. This is a picture of suffering and hardship that is the unexceptional equivalent of the “exceptional” torture and brutality inflicted by Trujillo and by U.S. neocolonial aggression—and that Dominicans must contend with whether they leave the island or not.

While in some ways limited, too, by a more dramatic, “political” understanding of the causes of Dominican emigration, Alvarez’s novel nevertheless allows us to see not only the political role of the U.S. in forcing the Garcías to flee the island, but also how their plight is symptomatic of the matrix of economic, political, and cultural factors that result in the too readily overgeneralized phenomenon of (im)migration to the U.S.—and how these factors also affect those who will, in fact, never (im)migrate. It is worth recalling again, in this context, that the relatively prominent and comfortable García family travels to and from New York at regular intervals. The girls’ grandparents, we recall, already live in New York thanks to the grandfather’s posting to the United Nations. But they also spend large amounts of time in the Dominican Republic, always arriving laden with gifts for their grandchildren. Thus, even before their own physical immigration, the girls have been well supplied with images and tokens of the purportedly glittering metropolis that lies across the horizon from
their island hometown. Even after the entire family emigrates to New York, they make regular return trips to the Dominican Republic. In this context, it may indeed seem only natural that the García family, given that it already has the money, the class status, and the family connections required to be quasi-“Americanized” before emigrating, will do the logical thing and emigrate.

However, even those who cannot and will never leave home are also formed by this same kind of experience. The American magazines and television programs available in the Dominican Republic translate into Americanized cultural practices not only for the members of the prominent García family, but also for the poorer Dominicans who work for them as servants. The latter, as the novel makes clear enough, must also negotiate their own identity in relationship to the U.S.—a relationship that, although it may display elements of critical resistance, is no less characterized by a desire to be part of the dominant. Carla, the oldest sister, retells, for example, a story told by her mother Laura about Gladys, one of their servants: “[she] was only a country girl who didn’t know any better than to sing popular tunes in the house and wear her kinky hair in rollers all week long, then comb it out for Sunday mass in hairdos copied from American magazines my mother had thrown out” (258). Gladys, according to the novel, also dreams, no less than her daughters, of going to New York someday: “I wonder where I’ll be in thirty-two-years,” Gladys mused. A glazed look came across her face; she smiled. ‘New York,’ she said dreamily and began to sing the refrain from the popular New York merengue that was on the radio night and day” (260). That is, Gladys is already practicing to be in New York before she gets there, and in some sense it does not really matter whether she ever gets there. Her desires, too, are formed by the particular environment of transnational migration.

In sum: the García family’s (im)migration, as portrayed by Alvarez, is clearly a byproduct both of U.S. political intervention in Santo Domingo and of the more general economic, social, and cultural impact of global capital on the Caribbean as well as across the global South. There is little in the novel, despite its currently predominant mode of interpretation, to support an unambiguous account of immigration as fleeing bad gender politics or poverty of the island to the shores of the United States. By effectively consigning such historical contingencies to the realm of the real and reading the novel—and immigration itself—largely in terms of the categories of a decontextualized, racialized, and gendered identity, scholarship places itself in the position of appearing, at least, to regard the material conditions determining the experience of (im)migration itself as secondary to a U.S. multiculturalist/identity-political framework.
As noted in the introduction to this chapter, what has become the more and more widely embraced project of delinking American literary studies from older nationalist paradigms has produced scholarship “centering,” so to speak, on figures of displacement and de-centering. Within this general move to shift the standpoint of Americanism as a disciplinary formation outside national frameworks of whatever kind, a variety of strategies have come into play. I would like to take up one of these in what follows, namely how questions of Islam and of Muslim, Arab, and Arab-American cultures have come to work within American studies as a fulcrum of displacement—a trend that has become especially marked in the progressive Americanist literary academy in the wake of 9/11. Notable examples of the latter in recent Americanist scholarship include Susan Stanford Friedman’s “Unthinking Manifest Destiny,” John Carlos Rowe’s “Reading Reading Lolita in Tehran in Idaho,” Brian Edwards’s Morocco Bound: Disorienting America’s Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakesh Express, and Melanie McAlister’s Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945. Such work has helped to undo some of the more parochially nationalist frameworks and also helped to move American studies in a more global direction. In addition to providing historical analysis of American policy, the Middle East, and questions of religion, this scholarship has provided interesting and useful models for American studies to displace itself and reposition itself as part of global discourse.

But this attempt at displacement has produced dislocalist practices as well that point to the problems as the field globalizes itself. Consider, for example, Wai Chee Dimock’s “Deep Time: American Literature and World History” that analyzes the influence of Islam on writers such as Emerson and is consistent with Dimock’s larger project of unfixing the category of American literature by reading it as a subset of world literature. In her book-length study, Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time, Dimock produces readings of, in addition to Emerson, writers such as Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Gary Snyder, and Leslie Silko by connecting them to and resituating them within the longer traditions of Africa, Egypt, and Mesopotamia—traditions that both predate but also transcend, on the categorical level, the existence of the U.S. as a nation-state. In this effort, the theory of “deep time” invokes the “hemispheric proportions” and “multilingual” and “multi-
jurisdictional” reach of Islam. About Emerson, in “Deep Time,” Dimock writes: “What impressed him about Islam (and world religions in general) was what would later impress Malcolm X: the scope, the long duration, the ability to bind people across space and time.” To an Emerson who, she claims, had found it impossible to accept Christianity as an absolute, Islamic poetry—written in this case in Persian, accessed by him only through German translations and “burdened by no undue piety toward the Koran”—would speak “as a poetry uniquely vital” (766). Situating Emerson within a larger, “deeper” global dimension, as Dimock does here via Islam, does indeed allow us to read him in a new light, but it also erases historical specificities of the interactions of the world’s geopolitical forces.

Reflecting, on one level, the same disciplinary as well as historical, cultural, and political pressures, Arab-American literature and culture have also become the subject of increasing interest and attention within Americanist frameworks. It is within the accepted intellectual paradigms—of immigrant/ethnic literature—that literary works labeled as Arab-American are being taught and studied. A substantial effort has been underway to shape Arab-American literature as a field in its own right comparable to African-American or Latino/a literature.

But the contradictions of the contemporary globalized context emerge in a somewhat different way in relationship to Arab-American literature and its particular curricular/scholarly locus. At one level, the focus on Arab-American cultural production is understood as crucial to the project of globalizing American literature, especially given its connection to Islam as well as the fact that it has until recently remained—and in some ways perhaps still remains—outside the nationally drawn boundaries of the field. Yet, in contrast to the projects of Dimock or Susan Stanford Friedman, which have attempted to forge an outward-looking, effectively transnational connection to the history of Islam and its cultural practices, critics working in immigrant/ethnic literary studies have tended to see it as their task to guarantee the inclusion of U.S. Arabs and Muslims as legitimately “American” and to ensure a stable presence of Arab/Muslim writing within the canon of American ethnic literature. At the center of this contradiction are some particularly fraught and potentially illuminating questions of immigrant/ethnic identity—questions I want to explore in what follows.

If we accept for the moment that Arab-American literature legitimately belongs within the category of immigrant/ethnic literature, this raises the question of why Arab-American literature cannot be taught under the aegis of other categories such as, say, African-American or Asian-Amer-
ican. Indeed, this question, if further pursued, would lead to the problematizing of all categories within ethnic literature and also the entire discipline. In *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, for example, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue against maintaining the existing separation between the various ethnically delimited areas of study in favor of a more interconnected methodology. And one also thinks here of warnings raised by many critics, among them Lisa Lowe, Shirley Goek-Lin Lim, and Amy Ling, regarding the arbitrariness of existing, institutionalized categories of immigrant/ethnic literature and, for instance, in the case of Asian-American literature, the risk of homogenizing the vast differences between the Asian national origins of Asian-American immigrants, not to mention the huge variety of languages spoken among them. Such categories are anything but culturally spontaneous or neutral, and reflect the colonial past and its carving up of the Asian continent into regions such as the Middle East, South and South East, and the Far East—divisions largely determined by global geopolitical economic and military interests, including those of the United States. As Lisa Majaj has noted, the differing national or cultural affiliations adopted by immigrants are in many ways historically overdetermined by the political and economic conditions that lead to the act of immigration itself. The common sense that pervades much of immigrant and ethnic literary studies, according to which the various immigrant groups line up as so many instances of ethnic identity, inverts and obscures what is, more fundamentally, a historically and politically conditioned difference to which the grid of the notion of difference is affixed, to a large extent, *a posteriori*.

This applies equally to the question of an Arab-American identity, and, in many ways, is more easily brought to light in this context. Although clearly a distortion and false generalization, any reference in today’s political and intellectual climate to Arab-Americans is spontaneously understood as a reference to Islam, as a term interchangeable with the term Muslim. Given the global political realities of the U.S.-led “war on terror” and its effective self-understanding as a “clash of civilizations” in which the “West” confronts an Islamic “other,” the category of Arab-American cannot, for better or worse, evade its own immediately political, global contextualizations. Thus, as part of the creating and shaping of an Arab/Muslim identity, the people assigned to that identity are already, in effect, denationalized.

In this political context, Arab-American literature has not been fully integrated as an object of sustained reading within U.S. nationalist disciplinary paradigms, at least in comparison to Asian-American or Latino/a literature. It remains a kind of liminal, less-defined area of ethnic literary
studies, lacking, as yet at least, its own stable canon. It is therefore in some ways easier to observe the globalization-driven dislocalizing of nationalist paradigms of ethnic identity at work in the scholarship devoted to Arab-American literature.

To see more concretely how this is so, I turn in what follows, to criticism focusing primarily on the fictional work of the Arab-American writer Diana Abu-Jaber. Abu-Jaber has written a number of works including *Arabian Jazz* (1993), *Crescent* (2003), *The Language of Baklava* (2005), and most recently the mystery-suspense novel *Origin* (2007). I limit my analysis here to *Crescent*, a novel that has been gaining attention from readers and critics for a variety of reasons. Featuring Iraqi main characters, it was published after 9/11—though completed before the WTC explosions according to the author herself. Abu-Jaber’s work also offers a look at the world of Arabs living in the U.S. quite different from what has become standard in popular media. And, as critics have observed, the very fact that her chosen medium is the novel also makes her somewhat different among Arab-American authors, for whom poetry has tended to be the genre of choice.

*Crescent* revolves around the stories of an Iraqi exile, Hanif (Han), and an Iraqi-American cook, Sirine. Han, a professor of American literature in Los Angeles, had left Iraq as a teenager to study in Egypt. Sirine, the U.S.-born child of an Iraqi father and an American mother, both of whom died when she was young, has been raised by and lives in LA with her uncle, also an Iraqi immigrant to the U.S. Through her relationship to Han as well as her job as a cook at a Lebanese café in the section of Los Angeles called Teherangeles, she is able to blend into the world of Arab émigrés and exiles. The novel tells the story of love between Sirine and Han that develops in Los Angeles. Han at one point decides to return to Iraq. There he is captured by Hussein’s men and as a result loses touch with Sirine. But by the end of novel, he has managed to escape and is on his way back to LA. The story prompts a reflection of the ways in which the characters of Sirine and Han are produced by the historical connections between the U.S. and the Middle East.

Scholarship on Abu-Jaber’s work, though not copious, has been growing in step with the general increase of interest in Arab-American writing, especially since 9/11. Much of it, as in the case of scholarship on Alvarez’s writings, focuses on questions of identity and the politics of representation. In the critical analysis to follow, I will take up recent work on Abu-Jaber and specifically that of Carol Fadda-Conrey because she has written one of the few analyses on *Crescent* and whose work is representative of the ways in which the critical reception of Abu-Jaber’s
work (and Arab-American writing in general) is following familiar trends in ethnic/immigrant literary studies as a whole. But before I analyze the dislocalist practices in the critical work, any critique must take into account the present conditions within and the outside of the United States for academics who work in areas of Middle East, Arab, or Muslim-related issues. To take just a few examples, Rashid Khalidi, Joseph Massad, and Norman Finkelstein, who regularly critique U.S. and Israeli policies, have been subject to harassment, investigated on various charges, taken out of consideration for jobs, and sometimes removed from their positions. Their scholarship and teaching have been dismissed as a “political agenda.” Such practices are indicative of a larger environment that has seen increased assault on academics, academic knowledge production, and any kind of critical dissenting voice in general. In this context, publication of Arab-American literature and its place in literary studies is particularly vexed. My critique is mindful of this context and attempts to contribute in a small way to an understanding of what appears to be the early stages of the development of Arab-American literary studies.

My approach here is similar to the one followed in relationship to Alvarez: I first identify and trace patterns of dislocalism in the critical scholarship on Arab-American writing and Abu-Jaber and then suggest ways in which the novel resists being categorized within nationalist paradigms.

Steven Salaita in “Sand Niggers, Small Shops, and Uncle Sam,” raises the issue already broached above, namely, how, assuming it to be possible at all, to define the category of Arab-American literature when the “ethnicity” of the literature itself often cannot be inferred from that of its authors. “A good amount of work written and received as Arab-American,” Salaita notes, is in fact, “produced by authors with no Arab background” (424). As an example, he cites Joanna Kadi’s anthology Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists, a volume that includes selections from many non-Arabs, among them the Armenian writers “Zabelle” and Martha Ani Boudakian, the Iranian writer Bookda Gheisar, and the Jewish writer Lilith Finkler. Moreover, he goes on to point out, “many non-Arab authors—including American Lisa Gizzi, editor of the Arab-American arts journal Mizna, and British poet Anna Reckin—produce work with Arab themes received in an Arab-American context” (425). This, according to Salaita, considerably complicates the claim, made by some, that “since Arab-American authors are descendants of peoples from the Arab world, the proper way to contextualize them is within the tradition of Arabic literature, which dates to the pre-Islamic era” (425). Even when identity is predi-
cated upon ethnic origin, further complexities arise: “some writers who have been counted as Arab-Americans have one Arab grandparent, while others who publish in Arab-American forums were born and live in the Middle East” (425). Language is also a complicating factor in this regard, since, as Salaita argues, “many authors write in English, sometimes out of necessity, and yet others write in Arabic in Arabic language publications in the United States” (ibid).

Salaita appropriately acknowledges and emphasizes the role of global patterns of mobility in complicating any attempt to ground the identity of an Arab-American literature, or indeed of any ethnically identified literature, on the author’s cultural origins. But at the same time he does not fully develop the theoretical importance of this complicating factor, arguing that critics of Arab-American literature are “squabbling over terminology and intellectual credibility, at the expense of the literature itself” (425). Yet while this criticism is very important, it does not consider that the debate over the meaning and even the possibility of the category of Arab-American literature are symptomatic and reflective of the way in which the literature itself is being read. Salaita attempts to solve this problem by making a generic distinction, arguing that although poetry may be said to be “linked to various Arabic traditions, the Arabic novel was, and in many ways continues to be, heavily influenced by Europe. Arab-American fiction [. . .] is ultimately a decidedly American enterprise” (426). It would require a stretch to “rationalize Arab-American letters as directly connected to Arabic literature” (426). “A more useful methodology,” according to Salaita, would “place Arab-American writing in its American context but locate Arab themes that distinguish it from other ethnic American literary movements” (426).

While aptly acknowledging the global dimensions of Arab-American literary production, Salaita nevertheless proceeds, at least in the case of this particular novel,32 to delink it from its global or international connections and resituate it within the boundaries of “other ethnic American literary movements.” Thus we are, it would appear, back in the familiar territory already mapped out above in the case of Alvarez and her critics: the cultural and historical complexities and specificities associated with the literary narratives of immigrant groups are bracketed off in favor of establishing an ethnic identity so as to facilitate their inclusion within an American literary canon and curriculum.33 Arab-American literature comes to serve, for some of its readers at least, as merely one of the remaining pieces of unfinished business for U.S. multiculturalism. And yet it is evident at the same time that the still relatively small amount of critical scholarship devoted to Arab-American literature also invests its
subject with an aura of alterity and an outsider status that set the latter apart from other immigrant/ethnic literatures. The immigrant status of this literature, as is the case with U.S. Latino literature and a text such as *The García Girls*, continues to supply its critics with a locus from which to critique dominant practices, outside as well as within ethnic literary studies. Nevertheless, the specific relationship to globalization of the Arab in Arab-American—especially when equated with Islam—adds to this locus an additional layer of complexity.

Such complexity becomes particularly visible if we consider the role the idea of testimonio plays here and how it differs, in subtle but important ways, from the one we have seen in operation in the case of Alvarez and her critics. Again, Salaita’s arguments are telling here. Abu-Jaber, he writes, “recoils at the idea that Arab-American writing should be limited to the political arena or immigrant testimony. . . .” And he cites a remark by the author on this point: “I’ve always had the sense that both poetry and belles lettres are somehow more accessible to Arab-American writers because of their ‘testimonial’ quality. It’s as if we’re somehow still at the stage where it’s ok to write from lived experience but there’s a perceived audaciousness about crafting or constructing a ‘story.’” (433). Both Salaita and Abu-Jaber herself thus allow that much Arab-American writing functions and can be read as testimonio, but they caution against reducing the Arab-American novel to its testimonial function. Unlike a direct and immediate “writing from lived experience,” the novel is, in this view, needed in order to give the Arab-American writer the fullest possible range of freedom to represent the complexity of Arab-American life—a complexity at constant risk of being reduced to stereotypical representation in post-9/11 America. The specific realities of globalization when it comes to the “global war on terror” and the rise of anti-Islamic demagogy make the conventional claims for testimonial immediacy, as exemplified above in the case of the readings of *The García Girls*, too potentially risky when it comes to depicting the lives of Arab-Americans—or so it is implied here. The realm of the real in the case of Arab-Americans cannot be safely quarantined outside U.S. borders, making a domestic testimonio as the genre best equipped, ironically, to keep the “real” at bay, a less viable option.

And yet at the same time the present political climate does not seem to permit that the Arab-American novel *not* be read as a testimonial. For one thing, even if the reduction of the Arab-American novel to its testimonial dimension is resisted, the implicit requirement that the authors of such novels themselves be Arab-Americans is not itself subject to any real question here. The urgency and authenticity of the ethnic/immigrant
experience, if not vested in the form or genre of writing, must still be vested in the writer. This becomes if anything even more of a necessity when, as in the case of Abu-Jaber, the author is not herself an immigrant. Moreover, the U.S.-born Abu-Jaber, child of a Jordanian father and an American mother, writes, in Crescent, about characters that are Lebanese and Iraqi. The fact that she spent a couple of years of her childhood living in Amman is often cited in discussions of her work, as if to compensate for what might seem—from a “testimonial” standpoint—the tenuousness of her own “lived and immediate” connection to what she writes about.

In her interview with Abu-Jaber, published in the winter 2006 special issue of MELUS devoted to Arab-American literature, Robin E. Field is especially careful to emphasize the author’s organic connection to the Arab world, asking her, for example, to compare her own experiences of food while growing up in an Arab-American household to the culinary world of the Iraqi and Lebanese immigrants depicted in Crescent.

An anecdote related by Abu-Jaber herself on her official website sheds an additional and even more penetrating light on this politically overdet ermined compulsion to testimonialize Arab-American writing. She had received an e-mail from a teacher in Texas informing her that Crescent had been banned in the state because of sexual content in four paragraphs of the novel and asking permission to teach the book with the offending passages blacked out. Abu-Jaber responded by leaving the decision up to the teacher but also informing her that if she chose to teach the novel with censorship, the students could access the author’s website and read the offending paragraphs on their own. But it is not the attempt to censor the novel’s sexual content that disturbs Abu-Jaber so much as its possible political and ethnic implications. Abu-Jaber writes on her website “that a friend, upon hearing about this debate, postulated that the real reason the students’ parents are upset is because the book gives a human face to Arab Muslim people.” “That,” she writes, “might be the part of this that unnerves me the most—and like so many forms of subtle discrimination and racism, we’ll never really know if that’s the case or not. The people who want the book banned may not even be entirely conscious of it themselves” (www.dianaabujaber.com).

That is, Abu-Jaber’s Texan would-be censors were, she speculates, testimonializing Crescent and—though this is my inference here, not necessarily hers—didn’t like what they found there when it didn’t confirm their preconceived notions about Arabs and Muslims and “why it is that they hate us so much.” Crescent had evidently frustrated certain readers by frustrating their own a priori desire to use it as a way to look into the mind of the “enemy.” But this in turn means that Abu-Jaber’s own charge
as a writer has, in a sense, already becomes, whether she likes it or not (and clearly she does not), to frustrate that desire. To this extent, the critical perspectives aligned with the a priori, political burden of representation placed on Crescent tend to frame the novel itself as testimonial despite simultaneous efforts to disavow such a framing. The very fact that the novel depicts the lives of Arab-Americans, no matter its fictional form, already casts it as a testimonio given its testimony to the humanity and complexity denied to Arab-Americans by the anti-Arab and anti-Islamic ideology and demagogy of the “war on terror.”

Although not as wary of the spontaneous testimonializing of Arab-American fiction as Salaita or Abu-Jaber herself, Carol Fadda-Conrey’s critical reading of Crescent in “Arab-American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland”—to which I now turn in some detail—is symptomatic of the tension I have been describing here between the drive to incorporate Arab-American writing into the canon of U.S. ethnic and immigrant literature and the political urgency of resisting the homogenization and reductive ethnicizing this incorporation also threatens to impose. This tension shows itself as a latent ambiguity in “Ethnic Borderland,” which both notes with appropriate alarm the fact that Arab-Americans have fallen “under an interrogative and suspicious light that conceals the complex makeup of this diverse group,” (190) but at the same time insists that “Arab Americans need to be acknowledged as important contributors to the nation’s racial, ethnic, and literary cartography” (187). The question as to whether such “acknowledgment” as full-fledged national subjects, given the ideological make-up of the nation in question here, does not come at the price of the very ethnic homogenization that feeds into the “why do they hate us so much” pathology cannot, it seems, be posed here, at least not consciously. The dislocalism that predominates in U.S. ethnic and immigrant literary studies—one which adjusts to globalization by carefully projecting “the real” beyond U.S. borders—sets the tone in “Ethnic Borderland” as it does in the case of the scholarship on Alvarez analyzed above. This translates into a reading of Crescent that, as with The García Girls, reduces it to its testimonial function at just those moments when the “real” threatens to disrupt the multicultural Americanization of the literary writing itself. Yet the specific political realities that overdetermine this dislocalizing imperative in the case of Arab-Americans post-9/11 cannot be conjured away in the same way that, say, the U.S. connection to the Trujillo dictatorship is lost to view simply by being read into The García Girls as domesticated “trauma.” Here the “real” must be managed in a different way.

This is accomplished in Fadda-Conrey’s study of Crescent, I argue,
through recourse to a concept and figure that effectively does the work of testimonio here, that of—as indicated in the title of the essay itself—the “ethnic borderland.” Arab-American ethnicity can, it seems, both preserve its cultural identity and yet remain complex by resituating itself within such a “borderland,” one in which “interethnic gaps” can be “bridged” (193). The latter metaphor automatically evokes the name of Gloria Anzaldúa, whose work, from which Fadda-Conrey explicitly adopts her own critical paradigms, is, not coincidentally, often invoked in intellectual celebrations of testimonial narratives.

Thus, for example, Fadda-Conrey cites This Bridge Called My Back, the widely known volume edited by Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga: “We do this bridging by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in our own words” (193). Such stories told in “our own words” then become, in the context of Fadda-Conrey’s approach to Crescent and to Arab-American narratives generally, testimonies to the cultural vitality and resistance of Arab-Americans within a generally suspicious and hostile U.S. society. Drawing upon Anzaldúa again, Fadda-Conrey positions Crescent’s protagonist, Sirine, as a “Nepantlera” or the living incarnation of an “Unnatural Bridge” able to overcome “the gulf between realities, perspectives, ethnic communities, and racial categorizations”—a process of which the novel itself, in Fadda-Conrey’s reading of it, becomes a kind of testimonial allegory (198). But this is achieved at what interpretive costs to the specificities of the text and of history itself? The essay appropriately includes some broad historical information about Arab immigration into the U.S. and can be helpful in providing a corrective to the negatives images of Arab-Americans. However, this history is subordinated to the task of dislocating nationalist paradigms and does not inform the reading of the novel itself.

Take the example of food, a prominent theme in the novel. Fadda-Conrey casts Sirine and the Middle Eastern food she cooks at Nadia’s Café, the LA restaurant where she works, as “bridges” facilitating the boundary-traversing of characters from many different Arab countries who gather there (196). At Nadia’s “Arab regulars open up to her how painful it is to be an immigrant and she becomes a bridge between lost or abandoned cultures on the one hand and adopted cultures on the other” (ibid.). The love affair between Sirine and Han, the novel’s two main characters, is also, it is noted, negotiated through food. Their relationship, argues Fadda-Conrey, functions as a bridge to a different kind of life, one in which Sirine embodies “the place [Hanif] wants to be . . . the opposite of exile” (198). In Los Angeles which for him is such a place of exile, Sirine functions, we are told, as Hanif’s “Nepantlera,” helping, him to
imagine a different world in which being an Iraqi does not automatically invite suspicions of terrorism and fanaticism.

There is nothing, prima facie, untrue in this reading. As a food narrative—about which, in relation to Abu-Jaber more below and more generally in relation to food narratives, in chapter 4—*Crescent* certainly does, like many earlier immigrant texts, utilize the relative universality and neutrality of cooking and eating to stage its border-crossing. However, the analysis here does not go far enough in showing how the space of Los Angeles is reconfigured by the experiences of immigrants that have taken place and continue to take place outside the spatial boundaries of the United States. The concept-metaphor of bridges or borderlands, even as it sets in relief the legitimate need on the part of immigrants for refashioning and reconnecting their lives, simultaneously becomes a rhetorical mechanism through which the essay in fact reaffirms the national space of the U.S. as set off from and situated in opposition to the space of other nations—particularly those in the “desert of the real.”

Consider that the ability of Sirine as well as that of the other characters to cross “borders” is here largely based on their ethnicity. Fadda-Conrey states that it is Sirine’s “potential space on the hyphen” [Iraqi father, American mother], her straddling of the space between Arab and American, that “propels her into a constant state of border-crossing” (198). However, border-crossing as a way of negotiating one’s identity in relation to the world is not a process requiring one to be an immigrant or someone with immigrant parents. As we shall see below, the novel itself shows how Hanif, as a little boy in Iraq, is compelled to transform his identity well before he leaves his home country. Moreover, when Hanif does embark on a crossing of the Iraqi border, he does so at considerable danger to himself. Fadda-Conrey only alludes to this by citing Hanif’s exile in juxtaposition to the voluntary immigration of Sirine’s uncle and father, something which, in her essay, is meant to serve as an example of diversity among the Iraqi characters in the novel. She posits border-crossing as entirely positive, an enabling experience for immigrants desirous of telling stories in their “own words,” a telling taking place only once they are in the U.S. In effect, the circumstantial fact that Sirine should come to represent the opposite of exile to Hanif is made to serve as an instance of life in the “ethnic borderlands” here without a theory or narrative of what produces that exile in the first place. By furnishing such a “borderland,” Los Angeles (and, by extension, the U.S.) is transformed from a place of exile to a place where exiles can find refuge. No doubt some exiles do find such places of refuge, but there is nothing privileged about LA or the U.S. in
this respect, nor must such a refuge necessarily be found in an interethnic “borderland.” (Think of Sweden, for example, home to many Iraqis exiled by the U.S. invasion and resulting war.) Not to mention the fact that, in Fadda-Conrey’s reading of *Crescent*, at least, nothing is said about the role of U.S. policies in creating these exilic conditions. Los Angeles and the U.S. become one more version of that dislocalizing, “global yet local” place, mapped by a cosmopolitan narrative emphasizing mobility’s positive attributes as opposed to those of uprooting and dispossession. In this framework, LA might indeed persist as a painful place for immigrants, but with the implicit understanding that more painful still is what the immigrants have left behind in their “homelands.”

Such dislocalism becomes especially clear in Fadda-Conrey’s reading of the following episode of *Crescent*: at one point Han decides to return from LA to Iraq to see his family, but at what he assumes will be great danger to himself, thinking it likely he will be killed there—this is pre-2003—by Saddam Hussein’s agents. Although he eventually manages to escape and come back safely, Sirine, who has never been outside of the U.S., finds it hard to imagine the world that Han has left behind and is consumed with worry about what will happen to him. She considers talking to Cristóbal, one of her co-workers in the kitchen at Nadia’s Café, and a refugee who escaped from his native El Salvador after losing his entire family in a death-squad firebombing, thinking that he would somehow be more likely to know what might happen to Han (196). The essay presents this as a further example of Sirine’s role as “bridge,” and of how Abu-Jaber’s novel, by “blurring” the ethnic distinctions between Cristóbal and Han, also “changes the internal makeup of the ethnic borderland by bridging boundaries between different ethnicities residing within it” (ibid.). Here the essay distinctly contrasts places like Iraq and El Salvador with the U.S. as a place in which immigrants are potentially free to change their lives. According to this view, though life in the U.S. may be an unhappy one in which immigrants must face ethnic stereotyping, once they cross its borders and begin telling their stories, giving testimony to the horrors they have left behind, the U.S., as “ethnic borderland,” becomes the place of healing.

This move is clearly intended to counter monolithic representations in which immigrants, especially Arabs and Muslims, are all seen as religious fundamentalists and potential terrorists or political extremists. And although the essay contains some historical facts about Arab immigration, the effect here is to de-emphasize, if not render invisible, the role of the U.S. in supporting and carrying out terror in places likes Iraq and El
Salvador. Rather than explore the connection made in the novel between the Middle East and Central America in historical terms, this reading not only overlooks history, but, as in the case of the above-examined readings of *The García Girls*, cultivates a deliberate ambiguity regarding history. Fadda-Conrey cites Anzaldúa in this context, according to whom “bridges become thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness” (192). But such “bridges” here seem to be lifted out of their material-historical conditions, reducing history itself to the real (190). The threat of being killed by military death squads in El Salvador or by Saddam Hussein’s agents is securely situated outside U.S. borders, leaving the space within it free to become one in which the bridging and blurring of ethnic boundaries can occur at will, a local but global place, existentially “other” to an Iraq or El Salvador. The figure of the immigrant here, while delivered from the “desert of the real” in which it is situated by mainstream media and political discourse in the U.S, trades this deliverance for a less obvious configuration in which it is history itself that is delegated to the real, on the global peripheries of the U.S. Life in the “ethnic borderlands” is still a life lived in- and outside historical and political borders, even if the emphasis on ethnicity and cultural identity and hybridity has made them less visible.

This underlying structure of analysis and reading—a kind of ethnic/politico-historical economy—repeatedly foregrounds the cultural similarities and differences subsisting among the various characters in the novel. Fadda-Conrey points, for example, to the fact that the Arab students in the novel, from places as different as Egypt and Kuwait, “manage to negotiate the barriers” by “partaking in the kitschy Arab culture provided at the café, and through television in the medley of ‘news from Qatar . . . endless Egyptian movies, Bedouin soap operas in Arabic and American soap operas with Arabic subtitles’” (195). But note here again how the space of the U.S. has already been posited as one in which the Arabs and Muslim who gather at Nadia’s can negotiate their differences and partake in a global media culture. Moreover, the mixing and melding of popular cultures here becomes like the mixing and melding of ingredients in food preparation—the latter being, as already observed, a key and, so to speak, neutralizing metaphor in Fadda-Conrey’s reading for the mixing of ethnic and cultural differences without loss of diversity. One particularly good example of this is her reading of the “Arabic Thanksgiving” scene in the novel, in which Sirine invites everyone to her home for a Thanksgiving meal. Fadda-Conrey suggests that the dinner scene highlights both the differences among the various guests but also the fact that these can be overcome by using food as a “major tool of communica-
During the meal, Gharab, a student from Egypt, says that his background dictates that men and women eat separately. This statement in the novel is met with a variety of reactions. Um-Nadia says that in her native Beirut it’s boy–girl while the Iraqis in the group explain that in their experience men and women are separated only at large functions. For Fadda-Conrey, such a “mixing together of interethnic ingredients and identities ultimately sets the stage for new identities to emerge,” making possible “new grounds for communication between different minorities” (202). The reading of food and dinner table conversation on Thanksgiving as a recipe for increased intercultural, even inter-Arabic awareness becomes a way of celebrating this scenario made possible in an American setting. This allegorizing reading of the scene sacrifices awareness of the novel’s own very specifically cosmopolitan-Los Angeles setting, becoming, by default, its celebration. Nor does the essay problematize the politics and the sheer availability of food in metropolitan Southern California for those who can afford it. Such specificities can, it seems, disappear so long as food narratives stand in for stories of ethnic and national antagonism and the setting is a historyless “borderland.”

Some Notes toward a Historical Reading

Meanwhile, Abu-Jaber’s novel itself, while it certainly focuses a certain amount of attention on issues of immigrant/ethnic identity, cannot be so easily situated within the categories of U.S. multiculturalism and identity politics. The very least that can be said is that it furnishes us with the opportunity to think more specifically about American involvement in the Middle East and the interconnections between the U.S. and other parts of the world that propel global migration. As we have seen already, it also helps to shed a critical light on categories of analysis such as borderlands and border-crossing—categories that have become a kind of common sense in thinking about immigrant/ethnic fiction. As in the case of Alvarez and The García Girls, it is not my intention here to provide a comprehensive reading of Crescent but only to point out some aspects of the novel that run counter to the dislocalizing project of what is in effect a domestic nationalizing of Arab-American literature.

From the outset, the novel frames itself against a complex and shifting network of geopolitical and economic interests connecting the nations in the Middle East and the United States. The novel begins with a vivid description of a night in Baghdad, lit up by exploding rockets. But this is the 1970s, not the 1990s or the 2000s, and the rockets are not (yet)
directly launched from U.S. planes or warships but “from the other side of an invisible border, from another ancient country called Iran” (13). This is experienced through the eyes of Han, a young man at the time of the Iran-Iraq war, seeing his “sister’s face glow like yellow blossoms” in the light of the explosions and already dreaming of escape to some place where “his mouth will not taste like iron” (14). As the story unfolds we learn how, as a teenage boy in the early 1970s, Han had been hanging around the Eastern Hotel in Baghdad and had met Janet, the wife of an American diplomat. Janet asks Han to teach her Arabic, and they have a brief affair. But at one point she finds her way to Han’s house in the city and convinces his family to send him out of the country, having become privy to the knowledge that Saddam Hussein would soon openly seize power. Janet offers to pay for Han’s education, and his family decides to send him to school in Cairo for a few years. When he returns to Baghdad he gets involved in anti-government politics and writes diatribes against Hussein under a pseudonym. Ironically, it is his brother who is accused of writing them and is arrested under charges of being a CIA informant, while Han, under the protection of his family, is able to escape detection. After remaining in hiding for a time, Han is able to make a difficult escape from Iraq and go to England. There he eventually earns a PhD in literature from Cambridge, and, after a post-doc at Yale, he ends up as a university professor in Los Angeles.

In mapping out this personal trajectory, the novel draws us into a complex history, not of an “ethnic borderlands,” but one involving a variety of nation-states such as Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Syria, the United States, and the United Kingdom—a political history of crisis and instability that has resulted, among other things, in an increased flow of (im)migrants both out of and into the Middle East. *Crescent*, that is, leaves the reader in no doubt that Han’s flight from Iraq is directly connected to the U.S. involvement in the region. Abu-Jaber’s depiction makes a clear connection not only between regional warfare as an impetus for the forced movement of peoples across and out of the Middle East but between both of these and the economic control sought by ruling local and imperial interests. The border-crossing narrative in the novel is not merely a story of Americanization but of movement along and across many regional and national dividing lines. The social and cultural realities normally associated with the life on the borderlands are depicted here in a narrative context of aggressive, directly economic, and political forces.

And the individualized details of Han’s journey only serve to concretize this complex, global narrative context even further. Han, for example,
tells the story of his own education as one of cooptation into a liberal form of Americanized consciousness. “I left when I was too young,” he tells Sirine. “When I grew older, some of my school friends started saying that America was the great traitor, consuming goods and resources and never giving anything back but baubles, cheap entertainment . . . I began to understand” (292). But he acknowledges that his Americanization is, in many ways, not something that can be reversed: “America,” he continues, “had also sent me to my new life and I couldn’t imagine turning back from that. I wanted to be a writer, like Hemingway” (292). As a university student, Han has specialized in American literature—American transcendentalism, in particular—and has translated Whitman, Poe, Dickinson, and Hemingway into Arabic (30). (Han’s departure from Iraq for Cairo, long a center of American intellectual and academic influence in the Middle East, and his eventual decision to study American literature could—though Abu-Jaber does not explicitly discuss this in Crescent—not unreasonably be inferred as something directly linked to American foreign policy, given the U.S. State Department’s long history of funding American studies programs around the world and supplying these programs with publications that frame American literature as one great espousing of universal values.) Han’s character serves as a particularly good example of the various ways in which the U.S. has produced consent and alignment with its policies, not least via the cultural exports (music, film, and television) that have played so powerful a role in advertising the American way of life. Only retrospectively does Han become aware of the degree of American influence and penetration of Iraq. He tells Sirine that “even after [she] spent so much money on me, I’d never learnt Janet’s last name or what she and her husband were doing in my country. But she knew that Saddam Hussein was coming to power” (293). In these ways, the novel explores the contradictory conditions that have become part of his intellectual training and produced his thinking as a whole. Han eventually comes to understand how even the fact that he has been unable to contact his family back in Iraq, as well as the killing of his brother and ultimately his sister Leila are a part of this same history, inseparable from the same American influence over Iraq that has shaped his own life in seemingly more innocent and beneficial ways. Such aspects of Crescent ask us to tread with caution in thinking about borders and border-crossings as experiences whose impact and meaning are by nature progressive or emancipatory. Han’s border-crossing has been brought about by the same kinds of policies and politics that have killed his family as well as resulted in the voluntary immigration of Sirine’s father and uncle.

But just as significant here is Crescent’s ability to make us see how
the experiences of Arab characters can have a profound, if hidden, effect within the domestic space of the U.S. itself, regardless of whether such characters make their way across its borders or not. The interconnections between the Middle East and the history of U.S. intervention in the region seem here to permeate the very space of Los Angeles, where most of the story takes place. *Crescent*’s other main character, Sirine, for example has never known anyplace outside of LA. But, even though she is part Iraqi herself, she seems at times susceptible to U.S. mainstream media narratives about Arabs and Muslims. This already adds a degree of ambiguity and tension to the experience of LA as an interethnic, Arab-American borderland. Sirine is initially suspicious of Han, not just out of conventionally jealous inhibitions when it comes to trusting a new lover but, as can be discerned, due to a preexisting climate of suspicion in the U.S surrounding Arabs and Muslims. This is abetted and complicated by the fact that Sirine’s private, affective and associative links to the Arab world are second-generation and familial, and tend to make her feel inadequate next to Han and his Saudi student Rana, or even to the U.S.-born Nathan, who has been to Iraq and who seems to have a much better comprehension than does Sirine of the politics of the Middle East. Sirine anxiously imagines that Han would be more attracted to a foreign-born sophisticate like Rana and even worries that he might have a woman back home in Iraq. Her jealousies are spurred by an unknown woman’s photo in Han’s apartment (whom she later finds out is his sister) and further fueled by Um-Nadia’s story of her own husband who had secretly kept another family back in Lebanon. But a good deal of this mistrust simply comes from the fact that, although she is Iraqi-American, she knows little about life in Iraq itself. And Hollywood, meanwhile, has done its share hereto in dissemination of an image of Arab and Muslim men as universally regressive when it comes to gender politics. Even though with each conversation with Han, Sirine’s suspicions are proven wrong, it is still difficult for her to shed these doubts. On one foggy LA evening, while walking down the street, she thinks that she sees Han walking a few blocks in front of her with a woman, perhaps Rana. She hurries to his apartment expecting to confirm her suspicions by not finding him there, but she does, and he denies being the man she thinks she has seen. But clearly one could read the atmospheric fog here as itself akin to symbolic haze over LA, one in which the historical and political realities of the Arab world outside the U.S. loom in and out of sight.

Considered from this angle, the moments in the novel cited by Fadda-Conrey as examples of Sirine as “Nepantlera” facilitating the boundary-crossings of other characters take on a different dimension. Consider
again the part of the novel in which Sirine thinks that she might consult her Salvadorean co-worker Victor, hoping his own experiences of resistance and repression might help her cope with her anxieties about the dangers she imagines Han must be facing during his return to Iraq. Sirine’s thoughts, presented casually in the novel, invoke a history in which U.S. imperial aims connect up regions as geographically distant as Central America and the Middle East in a dangerous politics of guns and oil. (Think only here of the Iran-Contra scandal of the Reagan years.) While Sirine herself does not make these connections explicit, *Crescent* itself certainly gestures at this, and her development as a character coincides in part with her effort to penetrate the ideological and mainstream media “fog” that obscures the deeper reality of empire. At the very least she begins to understand how few reliable sources there are to help her to make sense of the world that flashes before her eyes on television. Thus the connection between El Salvador and Iraq casually invoked via Sirine’s uncertainties seems less a sign of the novel’s concern with borders or the blurring of interethnic differences than it is an attempt to map out the narrative and subjective contours of an underlying, border-crossing global system of oppression and exploitation. As much as it complicates an essentializing system of separable ethnic identities, *Crescent* can be read as moving both its protagonists and its readers away from an exclusively event-based history in which lurid figures such as Saddam Hussein and indeed entire sections of the world are rendered as the real. It is in the context of this alternative historical insight that the deeper realities behind migration into the U.S.—also indirectly but vividly disclosed to us in Abu-Jaber’s novel—themselves escape the ideological “passion for the real,” revealing how national and historical borders in fact persist, even after the American border itself has been crossed.

Experiences of food in the novel, while accorded a definite prominence, are similarly recalcitrant to readings such as Fadda-Conrey’s, in which the mixing of cuisines becomes tantamount to an interethnic bridge. Such mixing is not presented entirely affirmatively or without question in *Crescent*. Sirine, it is true, finds a certain satisfaction in making Arabic food since she feels that it brings her closer to a sense of Arab identity that has never been entirely accessible to her. But there is a politics to food here as well, namely the question of where the ingredients themselves come from, and to whom they are available in the first place. Consider once more the Arabic Thanksgiving scene in *Crescent*, read by Fadda-Conrey as a kind of culinary allegory of ethnic border-crossing. For this meal, Sirine, set on preparing the kind of meal Han would have eaten as a child, has researched Iraqi recipes. She has no problem finding the ingredients at
the Arabic shops in LA, but this is contrasted in the novel with the scenes in which Han thinks back to the way people in his village produced and sorted food. For example, Han recalls how the “women in his village were constantly at work clearing rice, threshing wheat, sweeping the floors” (218). And after age twelve the boys in the village were expected to work in the olive orchards, and Han would have had to do the same had he not been tutoring Janet. This juxtaposition of the work of growing, harvesting, and refining food alongside images of Sirine’s experiences in her kitchen is instructive. Sirine “winds the bread dough in and out of itself, spins cabbage leaves, fat and silky, around rice and currents. She puts new ingredients in a salad, a frill of nuts, fresh herbs, dried fruit. Um-Nadia samples her salad, which tastes of ocean and beach grass, and she seems startled. “It’s good,’ she murmurs” (131). Yet, as opposed to the women in the Iraqi village of Han’s childhood, Sirine can play the privileged role of the tastemaker here, selecting her ingredients from the markets of a metropolitan cornucopia and experimenting with her own combinations of tastes and textures. Consider as well here the way in which, against the grain of a “culinary borderlands” reading of it, the dinner table scene here references the extreme conditions that effectively enforce the separation of the production and consumption of food. Gharab speaks about the growth of starvation in Iraq along with crime and prostitution, while Nathan elaborates, saying that “Iraq is suffering prefamine conditions and is still being regularly bombed by America” (219). Hearing this, “all get quiet and stare at their plates” (ibid.) “The real irony of today,” he continues, “is that this kind of all-American feasting and gorging is going on when back home they’re starving” (197). Here the consumption of food in the U.S. is directly linked to the starvation of others. Nathan’s comment in the novel can be read as an implicit criticism of the view that celebrating food as a medium for bridge-building and forging hybrid identities presupposes the seemingly limitless availability of food in the U.S. (and elsewhere) for those who can afford it. The availability of food to some is linked in our economy to its unavailability to others, especially to those who work to produce it.

Even the romantic moments that Sirine and Han mediate with food are not immune from this critical awareness. A scene in which they share the same cup of Lipton tea prompts Han to observe the tea bag’s colonial history: “a brown tea bag upon which great white empires are built” (79). Apart from drawing attention to the colonial networks through which food is produced and sold, this moment in the novel is also calling attention to the ways in which colonialism has brought the two of them together in Los Angeles. Projecting onto the latter the colors of a “bor-
In sum: celebrating the border-crossings in *Crescent* under the sign of a seemingly transnational, ethnic borderlands threatens to obscure a historical consideration of what is more often than not the fact that border-crossings are coerced. Representing the U.S. as a cosmopolitan and diverse place where ethnicities shed their distinct boundaries underplays the marginality and the extreme exploitation characterizing the really existing political and historical “borderlands” of this world, as places that exclude, repel, and decimate as many if not far more people than they bring together. And, as Abu-Jaber’s novel itself, if read carefully, can tell us, even the most innocent portrayal of the U.S. as a “borderland” risks making invisible those who have crossed borders, and experienced the more sinister side of America, long before physically reaching the U.S. itself—if they ever do.