

The Archaeology of the Colonial — Un-earthing Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*

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We need to stop assuming a one-to-one correspondence between the geographic origins of a text and its evolving radius of literary action. We need to stop thinking of national literatures as the linguistic equivalents of territorial maps.

Wai Chee Dimock, "Literature for the Planet"¹

Since the publication of her Pulitzer prize-winning debut collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Jhumpa Lahiri has come to be seen as a preeminent interpreter of the postcolonial condition of the Indian diaspora. By chronicling the lives of, mostly, privileged Bengalis transitioning into the West, she has mapped the anxieties of a population caught in the dual allegiance of transcontinental citizenship. At the same time, critics have ascribed the appeal of her work, in the United States and abroad, to her skillful portrayal of dislocation and generational crises, which has been judged to carry the universalizing qualities of serious, ambitious fiction. As the editors of *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri* observe, Lahiri's work "sheds light on *both* universal dimensions of human experience *and* more specific Bengali, postcolonial, Indian diasporic, South Asian American, and Asian American politics."²

Exceeding this concentric reach, Lahiri has also been grouped with a cadre of contemporary writers that has slid out of—or rather, beyond—the loose mesh of the postmodern vocabulary. Rachel Adams has recently identified Lahiri as an avatar of a newly emergent "American literary globalism," which she understands as a general-

ized feeling of social simultaneity across national borders, boundaries, and oceans, and which succeeds the more narrowly-Western aesthetic imperatives of the postmodern: “Relatively unburdened by the legacies of Euro-American modernism or the politics of the Cold War, their fiction reacts against the aesthetic sensibilities of high postmodernism while providing American literature with a new set of genealogical, geographic, and temporal referents.”³

This configuration of referents—from genealogy and geography to time, especially the vast temporalities of geologic time—is indeed fully evident in Lahiri’s work and provides the framework for a sustained eco-critical reading of Lahiri’s collection of stories and novellas, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). While Adams is primarily interested in mapping a global sensibility in American fiction that is operative in the present, I want to extend those terms, both historically and geologically, into the past and future by combining them with the thematic foci Lahiri’s work has, so far almost exclusively, been identified with: postcoloniality and immigration. Those twin themes provide the narrative spark for the stories in *Maladies*, but don’t extend into historical or temporal reflection. The intergenerational vector of *The Namesake* (2003), Lahiri’s first novel, is driven by time and change, but historical or geological ruptures are largely absent from its texture. *The Lowland* (2013), Lahiri’s most recent novel, is rich with a colonial and ecological sensibility that suggests centuries of human intervention and biological niche-building, but doesn’t explore them against planetary and geological time. Only with *Unaccustomed Earth* does Lahiri locate the story of migration and resettlement within the immensities of a transhistorical scale;⁴ and only *Unaccustomed Earth*—as its earth-bound title already suggests—carries the imprint of a deeply felt environmental and ecological sensibility in its texture. The presence of natural history within a typically more narrow human history; an awareness of the agency of natural or nonhuman forces; a sense of human accountability for its impact on the earth; and an understanding of the dynamic processes of the natural world—Lawrence Buell’s criteria for the identification of literary texts as being properly imbued with environmental and ecological concerns are all fully realized in Lahiri’s collection.⁵

It is against this geological, geographical, and ecological background that I want to offer a reading of *Unaccustomed Earth* that revolves around the figurative axis of its title: the earth. I submit that Lahiri articulates a multi-leveled theory of postcoloniality through the trope of the earth itself, the terrific and terrifying terrain having offered humans habitation for millenia. As a layering of tensional plate tectonics, the imbricated strata of the earth’s crust become a figure for the dynamic forces of history pressing from

their subterranean torque to the surface. Such a dynamic is often invisible but inscribed only as an aftereffect in the human fossil record, the palpable repercussions deriving from cryptic human politics and policies (what Victorians called “the testimony of the rocks”).⁶ Geological upheaval, in that sense, encodes the geopolitical upheaval that has divided global populations—at any point in their history—into dominators and dominated, colonizers and colonized; and it encodes the coming and going of civilizations, their waxing and waning, in concert with historical and terrestrial forces. Put differently, Lahiri seems to say, the unceasing energies of geo-historical change have made colonization, migration, and transplantation into the human condition per se—a kind of historical norm(alcy) that has pressured humanity into becoming a perennially transitional species.

Exceeding such a geological understanding of the always already postcolonial, (with its suitably Foucauldian inflections of unearthing muted histories), the terranean trope also grounds Lahiri's understanding of writing in literary traditions that see human life, and indeed species behavior, in terms of migration and a re-grounding in the earth as a primal source of space, nutrition, and nourishment. If *Unaccustomed Earth* resonates with structural allusions ranging from Homer and Hawthorne to Native American tales, it does so because Lahiri articulates her own location within a long and varied literary tradition that is mindful of the synergy between human settlements and their environment. The resulting layering yields an archaeology of narrative that, while connecting to Homeric bedrock, condenses toward Lahiri's historically recent contemporaries in the American Renaissance, who ground her own interest in the myth of the American pastoral now enlarged to a global scale. Centered on the author's own literary-cultural origins, yet reaching back to the oral traditions in the West and beyond, *Unaccustomed Earth* embodies Wai Chee Dimock's vision of American literature as part of a planetary rhizome, to be seen “against the history and habitat of the human species, against the ‘deep time’ of the planet Earth.”⁷

In a final, outermost, yet most centrally ecological, layer of my argument, the complex trope of geological rupture in *Unaccustomed Earth* also intimates a radical change in agency with regard to the evolutionary ecology of humans and their global habitat. Nomadic tribes have for millennia flourished on the earth because of an essentially ecological synergy between soil and need. The earth has been able to get accustomed to them because their impact has been largely negligible. Yet beginning with the Industrial Revolution—when humans switched from wood and other renewable fuels to coal-powered steam technology—humanity for the first time in the history of the earth has evolved into a collective force with a veritable planetary impact so vast in scale that geologists

have coined the term “Anthropocene” to mark this most recent moment in human-earth relations.⁸ The contemporaneous geothermal upheavals and eruptions in *Unaccustomed Earth* might suggest the recuperative agency of a planet reacting to the destructive agency of humanity—the damage done to its surface space and subterranean resources—and such a reading is certainly within the spirit of sustainability that undergirds *Unaccustomed Earth*. Lahiri, however, works on a much larger (appropriately, geological) scale than puny human concerns of species survival, ecological responsibility, or adaptability. More concerned with cosmic rhythms and natural forces than human purpose or teleology, Lahiri suggests that the seismic energies in *Unaccustomed Earth* signify a planet with the capacity for perpetual reconstitution, that a humanity unaccustomed (or unaccustomable) to symbiotic thinking may, indeed, be a transitional sojourner on the diasporic space that is the earth, and that change is the one large bio-geological constant in the age-old game of migration and transplantation.

Thus, this essay seeks to locate Lahiri’s oft-cited interest in generational migration and postcolonial thinking within a larger geological and ecocritical framework that has, so far, escaped critical attention. It seeks to unearth a literary genealogy that grounds *Unaccustomed Earth* in a, predominantly (but not only), American tradition with the pastoral; and it advances a reading of *Unaccustomed Earth* along the lines of a renewed interest in materialism in American culture, not only by acknowledging, as does Lahiri, the agency of the earth as an active and reactive biological entity, but also by being cognizant of the way “seemingly insignificant daily activities work synergistically to produce effects that devastate the global environment.”⁹

Geological Upheaval, Geopolitical Upheaval

It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and necessity.

Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*¹⁰

Unaccustomed Earth introduces the subterranean energies of the earth, in both the past and the present, as its very framing condition. The collection’s title story takes place in Washington State, home to the dormant volcanic range of the Cascades; Ruma has a spectacular view onto “the Olympic Mountains, whose snowy peaks seemed hewn from the same billowy white of the clouds drifting above them.”¹¹ In the volume’s concluding story, Kaushik retraces his travels through Central and South America, which are located on the same tectonic fault lines that connect the Northern and Southern hemispheres in

deep, geological terms. His beginnings as a photojournalist explicitly link geology to geopolitics. In El Salvador, he first takes “pictures of the volcano that loomed west of the capital, buildings pocked by bullets and cracked in half by an earthquake earlier that year” (303). Shortly thereafter, while eating lunch with a Dutch photo journalist, “the table [begins] to shake, dark stew spilling from bowls. By then he had grown used to occasional tremors, the earth’s violence yielding a moment’s pause” (304).¹² In the instant following, he takes his first picture of political violence—of a young man bleeding to death—thus capturing the civil unrest and revolutionary ferment of a country that is intimated in the subterranean trembles and the overflowing stew-qua-magna.

What is more, both framing narratives connect to Italy and the Mediterranean generally as one of the cradles of Western civilization with a long history of geological activity, conquest, and colonialism. The Olympic Mountains derive their name from Mount Olympus in Greece, and Ruma’s father has just recently returned from Italy, equipped not only with the clichéd knick-knacks of a global consumer economy, but also sporting a baseball hat with the imprint of POMPEII (11), thus providing a first glimpse into Italy’s violent volcanic and historical past. “Going Ashore” extends this history into the vanished culture of the Etruscans, a mysterious civilization who, as Hema puts it, “had possibly wandered from Asia minor to central Italy and flourished for four centuries, who had ruled Rome for one hundred years before turning obsolete” (300).¹³ During Hema and Kaushik’s visit to Volterra, a town founded by the Etruscans, they note its precarious position “perched on a cliff high above the open countryside,” and when they peer “over the walls at the Balze, a precipice beneath which the earth had fallen away,” they observe the remnants of a church below and an actively morphing landscape “always threatening to take more” (318–19).

Significantly, Volterra (following a violent takeover by the succeeding culture) was a Roman stronghold through the Second Punic War (205 BC) and actively involved in the Roman civil wars (81–80 BC), before taking the Latin name of *Volaterrae*, which roughly translates, as the narrative itself suggests, as “an island surrounded by land,” and which is indeed within view of the Ligurian Sea (318). Thus, as with the current geothermal rumbles in El Salvador, but now removed in geographical space and historical time, political and geological instability coalesce into a statement about the fickleness of human civilizations against the backdrop of geological forces. Whether in the case of Italy’s *Volterra* or El Salvador’s *terra nostra* (to speak with Carlos Fuentes), *terra infirma*—the unruly earth following its own internal laws—may, indeed, be the critical historical determinant and the name of the global human game of migration and mortality.¹⁴

The punctual references to current political events embedded in the surface narrative of *Unaccustomed Earth*, in that sense, are legible as the aftershocks of the text's deeper narrative, which recounts the long-term effects of global imperial politics. More than simple orienting markers to endow the collection with a contemporary flush, they condense into a narrative of colonial violence that has repercussions for and into the historical present.¹⁵ When Amit returns to New Delhi "the year of Indira Gandhi's assassination," in 1984, "the riots that subsequently raged there, the curfews and the constant vigilance with which his parents had to live," effectively put him under house arrest, and he experiences a fractured country in the condition of a police state, whose historical origins harken back to British colonial rule (96). Similarly, when his boarding school hosts its annual Thanksgiving dinner, gathered around the table are young expats from "Santiago, Tehran, and other troubled parts of the world," who were unable to return to their home countries because of internal strife and political instability, thus gesturing to Chile and Iran's histories of imperial domination and fights for independence (98). The political aftershocks of the Middle East and South America resurface in *Unaccustomed Earth* once more when Hema and Kaushik's parents speak "about Reagan winning the election, all the ways that Carter had failed," and when Hema, shortly thereafter, explains to a newly-returned Kaushik the significance of "yellow ribbons" in the context of the Iran-Contra crisis (233, 235). Pranab and Usha's father discuss "Kissinger and Watergate" to intimate the Indo-Chinese theater and the covert and overt U.S. interventions in South America (67), and, in the collection's concluding story, Kaushik's professional life reads like a summary of migration and political violence the world over, as if to suggest that—coincident with the terminal layer of the narrative—the archaeology of the effects of imperial politics is up to date.

Starting out as a photographer in El Salvador and then Mexico and Argentina, Kaushik amasses pictorial evidence so ghastly that he "could no longer remember all the corpses he had photographed" (305). He works in Israel, part of the war-torn Mediterranean cradle of civilization, covering the "bombing of a hotel banquet hall," and, once stationed in Rome, photographs "Senegalese immigrants in Italy" and "the nineteen caskets containing the soldiers in Iraq being carried past the Colosseum"—the ancient arena of deadly combat accentuating contemporary warfare (302).¹⁶ Eventually posted in the Middle East, he covers the "Second Intifada" (307) and "Arafat's funeral" in Ramallah, where thousands of mourners had been "scaling walls and tearing down barbed wire for a glimpse of the coffin." A "detailed map of the West Bank" and "an international news channel," turned to silent, help him trace moment-by-moment developments in the

region (315–316), and even his scheduled relocation to Hong Kong figures as a symbolic site of cultural and economic diffusion, with a long and recent history of conquest and territorial transfer.

Thus, in their entirety, these scattered escarpments of violence in countries with a recent colonial past suggest a reading of the shards of an historical archaeology aggregated into the deep structure of *Unaccustomed Earth*. Precisely because these scarrings are below the surface of the narrative, they point to the subterranean energies that have moved the collection's players to their destinations, in both local and economic terms. The global mobility of the diaspora—including the paradigmatic little Neel, who descends from Indian-born grandparents, a mother born in Britain but reared in the United States before returning to the seat of the former Empire, there to meet her Indian-born English husband and give birth to their postcolonial son—are effects of imperial power that, to this day, trigger and orchestrate migrant fluidities, boundary dissolutions, capital flows, and, of course, numerous civil wars and the emergence of new countries and ethnic identities. *Unaccustomed Earth* illuminates this power through such moments of (e)rupture, when brief historical probes break through the narrative surface to lay bare the larger, and often buried, forces of historical agency. Mediated through the trope of deep geological activity and layering, with its irruptive vectors upward and outward and its often complex agency, *Unaccustomed Earth* exemplifies a form of what Fredric Jameson has called “the political unconscious,” which denotes the fact that texts contain irrepressible political energies pushing from the subtextual deep. For Jameson, that value lies primarily in “detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative”—of class struggle and displacement—for historical modernity, and in “restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history.”¹⁷ Lahiri, working with a larger aperture, extends that history to the immemorial beginnings of human civilizations: that is, to geologic time.

Narrative Archaeologies and the Contingency of the Postcolonial

Given the history of the United States, all American fiction could be classified as immigrant fiction. . . . From the beginnings of literature, poets and writers have based their narratives on crossing borders, on wandering, on exile, on encounters beyond the familiar.

Jhumpa Lahiri, “By the Book”¹⁸

Building on the geopolitical tectonics rumbling underneath *Unaccustomed Earth*, and indeed informing its migratory dynamic, Lahiri also striates her narrative with lit-

erary traditions that resonate with (pre)historical migration and concerns for the earth. More than a matter of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which contemporary authorship is imbued with "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer" and which assumes the historical timelessness of a "simultaneous order," Lahiri allows significant prior work to resonate in her own, without, as Eliot would ask, "the continual surrender of [her]self."¹⁹ On the contrary, Lahiri writes herself into various traditions that reflect her thematic affinities with migration and the earth, and in so doing breaks new ground on the transnational literary terrain.

Lahiri's nod to Homer, for example, figures as a feminist rewriting of one of the Western world's founding narratives of travel and migration, and gestures to the Olympic Mountains and vanished cultures of the collection's opening. But rather than straining for a sustained parallelism between *The Odyssey* and, say, *Ulysses*, as does Joyce in his modernist epic, Lahiri embeds textual shards into her own narrative that are more allusive than strictly allegorical, suggesting the limits of such male-driven master narratives for her own project. Much like the itinerant Odysseus, Rahul in "Only Goodness" is in search of unaccustomed earth, which he first finds in the ports of call of the Greek's peregrinations: he enrolls in Ithaca (Cornell), wooded and mountainous like Odysseus' home, from where he is expelled, and eventually settles in Syracuse (whose Greek namesake is within view of Mount Etna), where he lives with Elena, the woman bearing a suitably Greek name. Sudha looks up the town in "an atlas"—another, literal, echo of Greek path-finding—and clinches the circular travels of both voyages: "The town was north of Ithaca. . . . She never thought he'd want to return anywhere near the place where he had so spectacularly failed" (160). What is more, during his meanderings, Rahul also sends a letter from "Columbus, Ohio," thus figuratively extending his role as an arch-explorer to the putative discoverer of America, who was as much in search of India as Rahul is trying to get away from it (158).

More importantly, it is Sudha (whose Hindi name signifies "living water") who is cast in the role of a female Odysseus trying to navigate her way through a patriarchal world as yet unaccustomed to womanly strength and independence. When her brother announces his rash engagement, Sudha is temporarily thrown off course, aware that his life of preferential parental treatment has led to irresponsibility and sibling rivalry: "The room seemed to tilt; she pressed down on the table cloth as if a forceful wind were about to come and blow everything away" (154). Similarly, when she learns of her parents' narrative of almost-expulsion from a racist England as yet unaccustomed to its former subjects, she sees the story "like an episode out of a Greek myth or the Bible, rich with

blessing and portent, marking her family as survivors in strange intolerant seas" (135).²⁰ Like her mythological template, Sudha wears a "protective coating"—a diamond ring concealed on a chain beneath her sweater—to give her immunity (149), and when she returns to the country of her birth, she feels "an instinctive connection" and "a sense of belonging" (144). The immigration officer at Heathrow—much like Eumaeus in Odysseus' Ithaca—is the first who "welcomed her home" (144). Her *nostos*, already legitimized by her new British passport and much in contrast to the male narrative of failure, is brought to a close in educational and social terms through a Ph.D. and a family.

As variants of such allusive textures, fairy tales form part of the narrative bedrock of *Unaccustomed Earth* as well, and provide similar textual density along the lines of growth and cultivation. Fed on a steady diet of TV, little Akash may, in the title story, already have seen Disney's *Pinocchio* by the time his grandfather brings the puppet from Italy. The gift embodies the intergenerational relationship between the paternal Dadu and the filial grandson, and Akash's growing experiences under the tutelage of his Geppetto. Not only does Akash perform his first baby steps in Hindi during the grandfather's stay, thus fostering his re-grounding in the language and culture from which he is removed by two generations. Much like his wooden model, who plants gold coins in the "Field of Miracles," in the naïve belief that they will multiply, Akash sows his own field of miracles under the direction of this grandfather, thus linking the tale explicitly to the motifs of growth and sustenance at the heart of *Unaccustomed Earth* (44).

For that very reason, the intertextual tectonic Lahiri acknowledges uppermost is announced in the collection's title and elaborated in its epigraph. It is the deepest and most immediately grounded in *Unaccustomed Earth*, and it is, significantly, the most American, resonating as it does with transplantation and the ethos of a virgin continent. If the *Odyssey* and the Mediterranean provide the locale for cultures come and gone (even as immigrants from Senegal settle in present-day Italy), the land known as America provides new ground for growing cultures (even as it has already unsettled native populations). It derives from the beginning of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom-House," the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, when the narrator distances himself from his ancestors, whose infamous involvement in the Salem Witchcraft Trials makes any close association uneasy: "Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and re-planted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth."²¹ What is more, the narrator's figural use of a potato not only connects to a crop that has, for millennia, been domesticated by numerous cultures, but also explicitly associates agricultural with human transplantation and colonization.

The motifs of gardening and (trans)plantation form of course the narrative bedrock of *Unaccustomed Earth* and link Lahiri explicitly with the pastoral ideal in American literature, as it was first and most prominently articulated by Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx. The notion of an agricultural society became a “poetic idea” that defined “the promise of American life. The master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth.”²² Like Hawthorne, Lahiri significantly adds the severance of old and the knitting of new bonds, across generations and continents, to this master trope, and like Hawthorne, Lahiri suggests in numerous scenarios that a form of crop rotation is the template for agricultural vitality, growth, and rejuvenation, just as it is for human colonizing and migration.²³

Lahiri has been explicit about this recognition of kinship with a writer who, for decades, served as an anti-model of what she aspired to be. Upon re-reading Hawthorne while working on the collection, she was

both startled and unspeakably reassured. I felt that a writer who represents everything that I seemed not to be while growing up—an American, a New Englander, whose work is set in the very terrain in which I was raised and from which I felt always estranged—had articulated, almost two centuries ago, the journey and experience of my family, and had also expressed my project as a writer.²⁴

Sensing a deep rapport “across space and time” with her canonical predecessor, Lahiri identifies that connection as appropriately geological: “It was the crossing of a fault line.”²⁵

Lahiri’s corresponding gestures toward Emerson and Thoreau reaffirm her intellectual heritage and further combine notions of migration with those of cultivation. The Indian-born Pranab does an improvisational doggie paddle in Walden Pond and performs the quintessential American act of sink-or-swim, as have generations of newcomers before him trying to make it on the slippery slopes of an unaccustomed earth (66). Paul, the only European American narrator in the collection, spots two people “swimming in Walden Pond, their heads above the surface of the water,” even as he himself has a hard time staying afloat (200). And the Canadian-born Deirdre tells Paul that her Egyptian lover took her to Walden Pond “[f]or their first date” before sharing a meal (197). All pay homage to the baptismal font of American self-reliance, the trough of absolution, courage, and tenacity that has come to symbolize resolve and risk, watering and growth. And in what amounts to a refresher of his own reliance, Paul makes a pilgrimage to “Concord, to visit Emerson’s house,” to supplement his readings for his Ph.D. exam in English, the field trip ostensibly promising experience on the ground no amount of reading can offer

(200). With Hawthorne as a key archaeological link—whose model of crop rotation suggests a “proto-ecological” sensibility (the phrase is Karl Kroeber’s)—Lahiri locates her own genealogy in the tradition of nineteenth-century American writing about the land, which functions, as Lawrence Buell succinctly put it, “as a bridge, crude but serviceable, from anthropocentric to more specifically ecocentric concerns” (52).²⁶

What is important here is that Lahiri combines the predominant theme of *human* with the notion of *literary* migration, grounded as it is in ancient Mediterranean culture or, more prominently, the writings of the American Renaissance. In so doing, she offers an expanded understanding of what it means to inhabit a colonized space. If the term “postcolonial” in contemporary discourse generally marks the political landscapes and transnational migration flows following World War II, Lahiri draws attention to the historical permanence—or, better, historical contingency—of postcoloniality per se by foregrounding various proto-postcolonial moments of American history. Beginning with Hawthorne’s mid-nineteenth-century America, when the former British colony was beginning to emerge as a major immigrant country, *Unaccustomed Earth* gestures toward the influx of today’s global diaspora into the United States, while locating the country’s precolonial past in the settlers’ first mythical encounter with the Native American other: Thanksgiving. (That is also the moment, as the narrator of “The Custom-House” puts it, “when India was a new region and only Salem knew the way thither,” an illusion of navigational centrality *Unaccustomed Earth* dispels on every page.)²⁷

If the narrative of Etruscan Italy grounds *Unaccustomed Earth* in the ancient history of a global diaspora, the collection’s first story focuses that diaspora within the American continent of today. Traveling from east to west, more than a century after the end of the Frontier, Ruma strikes her roots into unaccustomed soil (and thus repeats her parents’ relocation within one land mass). What is more, she does so in Washington, the state named after the first U.S. President, and in Seattle, the city named after the Native American chief, whose people—like virtually all Native American tribes—were pressured into relocation and land surrender (while living under the volcanic shadow of the Cascades). More importantly, it is Chief Seattle’s legendary speech in 1854 which—in the wake of modern environmentalism—has been unearthed as a major document embodying Native American ecological sensibilities in harmony with the present-day concerns about the nature world.²⁸ When Seattle notes that “Every part of this country is sacred to my people,” including “the rocks that seem to lie dumb as they swelter in the sun,” he acknowledges the age-old synergy between the earth and its inhabitants against the background of a geological time frame. When he observes that “Men come and go like

the waves of the sea. . . . Even the white man . . . is not exempt from the common destiny," he describes the coming and going of cultures, including the likely extinction of the current colonizer. And when he observes that the ancestors of his people "still love its verdant valleys, its murmuring rivers, its magnificent mountains, sequestered vales and verdant lined lakes and bays," he expresses an elemental appreciation for the environment that is nourishing beyond life into the spirit world.²⁹ As much a prophecy as it is a profoundly simple statement of humans and their embeddedness in the earth, it serves as a paradigmatic voicing of geo-ecological issues that, in its sentiments, predates any major white Anglo-Saxon statement about land use and environmental appreciation. Sensibilities such as these resonate in the symbolic surcharge of a city named after the chief of dispossessed Indians, and a city that is now repossessed, as it were, by second-generation Indian immigrants from South Asia. Such sensibilities furthermore map the territorial disputes—essentially about resources and land use—within the United States that the text otherwise intimates on a global scale, and that rarely lead to harmonious cultural encounters, Thanksgiving or otherwise.

Indeed, beginning with the second story, *Unaccustomed Earth* dispels Thanksgiving as the American founding myth of cross-cultural acceptance, and what should, in theory, be a meaningful dialogue among resident nations and new arrivals over a shared meal recognizing the bounty of the earth, becomes a hollow ritual leading to estrangement and distance. As guests at Deborah's, together with other Bengali families, Usha's parents do not celebrate the holiday, in the first place, because the American custom of "a large sit-down dinner and the foods one was supposed to eat was lost on them." Aghast at "the chaos of people" and "enormous dirtied bowls," Usha's mother refuses wine and makes offhand comments about the "tasteless and bland" food. The boy-girl formation at the table "made the Bengalis uncomfortable," and when the crowd goes for a walk on the beach, "[n]one of the Bengalis wanted to go, preferring to sit with their tea and cluster together, at last, at one end of the room, speaking freely after the forced chitchat with the Americans during the meal." Deborah's father, for his part, can't help but say a toast that is as crude as it is "historical" (while unwittingly gesturing back to the opening story): "Forgive me, but I never thought I'd have the opportunity to say this: Here's to Thanksgiving with the Indians" (77–79). "A Choice of Accommodations" then widens and reconfigures the holiday, when the headmaster's family of Langford hosts "boys who were from Santiago and Tehran and other troubled parts of the world, or were the sons of diplomats and journalists who moved around even more frequently than Amit's parents" (98). And the one Indian-Egyptian couple—yet another nod to the collection's

transnational sensibilities—has its first blowout “around Thanksgiving,” when Sang asks Farouk “why he didn’t invite her to his cousin’s house for Thanksgiving” (188–89).

By presenting these instances of Thanksgiving as iterations of one of America’s founding myths, Lahiri reconnects the country’s historical present to its colonial past, and she updates the primordial culinary encounter with a contemporary flush. She renders none of the scenarios as moments of intercultural communion over a shared meal, but rather as moments of resistance and reserve, habit and hollow ritual—from both sides of the table—oblivious to culinary traditions and the bounty of the American Garden. In so doing, she not only raises questions about the construction of any originary moment, but also grounds these encounters in a series of moments extending into the future. Just as past generations of migrants have—since time immemorial—broken bread with local populations, so will travelers of the future, be they nomads, refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers, or the like. Significantly, in terms of a head count, the Thanksgiving dinners in *Unaccustomed Earth* contain large numbers of non-white ethnicities, suggesting a profound shift in the center of gravity away from WASP to NRI, PIO, ABD, ABT, ABCD, and BME, and reflecting the rhizomatic space that is the United States.³⁰

Thus, Lahiri inscribes herself into various literary and oral traditions about land, migration, and cross-cultural encounters that date back thousands of years, or are alternately close to the writers of the American Renaissance. She has long maintained that “given the history of the United States, all American fiction could be classified as immigrant fiction,” further noting that “from the beginnings of literature, poets and writers have based their narratives on crossing borders, on wandering, on exile. . . . The tension between alienation and assimilation has always been a basic theme,” including in tales by Native Americans and the Homeric bard.³¹ While grafting her contemporary sensibilities onto a multiply-layered tradition, she not only writes herself into the American foundations of her literary heritage, but also acknowledges the transcultural origins of storytelling that is coterminous with language, land use, and migration. The result is something like a Hegelian synthesis that lays bare the cascade of narrative themes across cultures, continents, and time. *Unaccustomed Earth*, in that sense, embodies a vision of American literature Dimock has described as “a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures.”³² Such a vision of literature centers around “input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment—connective tissue binding America to the rest of the world,” and is measured outside the traditional framework of a historical, nation-based chronology.³³ Instead, Dimock proposes to rethink “the shape of literature against the

history and habitat of the human species, against the 'deep time' of the planet Earth, as described by two scientific disciplines, geology and astronomy."³⁴ *Unaccustomed Earth* takes such a long view, as is evident in its archaeologies of cultures and literary traditions and its understanding of humanity as "a species with a sedimented imprint"³⁵—the footprints of land settlement, migration, cultural flowerings, and demise.

Geology, Geopolitics, and the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene could be said to have started in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane. This date also happens to coincide with James Watt's design of the steam engine in 1784.

Paul J. Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind"³⁶

In the final part of this essay, I want to suggest how the geological trope in *Unaccustomed Earth* also interrogates the possible transitionality of the human species on the very site which it names—the earth—and how Lahiri subsumes concerns of species survival, sustainability, and teleology to the even larger—that is, appropriately geological—observations about cosmic rhythms and seismic shifts. Such a reading begins with the impeccably precise semantic range of the collection's title, which points to a reciprocal relationship between the earth and its inhabitants. In synch with its epigraph, *Unaccustomed Earth* suggests that humans may initially, indeed, be unaccustomed to the earth, but flourish in unpredictable ways in new soil over time. Conversely, the title also suggests that the earth—as an organic entity—may be equally unaccustomed to new or migrating populations, but gets used to them as they carve out living space for themselves. If its geography offers territory to expanding and migrating populations, so too are new inhabitants—transplants, one might say—elements in a complex ecology to which the earth can be reactive.

In the history of migration from its beginnings to the European Renaissance, that ecology has been rather simple, as the earth has had the capacity to absorb the footprint of an emergent humanity due to its surface space and humans' correspondingly negligible impact on that space. Neither in terms of numbers nor technological possibility were humans able to bring about significant lasting changes to the earth's surface, biosphere, and (subterranean) resources. Beginning with the Industrial Revolution and the European colonial projects in the nineteenth century, however, that impact has become increasingly palpable: the despoliation of natural reserves, the scarring of surface area, the intoxication

of the atmosphere, the overfishing of waters, and, as a kind of global collateral damage, the deformation of local and regional identities under the aegis of global consumerism and the elevation of living standards for all. Technological innovation, combined with a global population explosion, has led to a seismic shift in mass and scale and thus fundamentally reconfigured the relationship of humans to their habitat.

About twenty years ago, practicing scientists coined the term the *Anthropocene* to designate this massive impact of humanity on its global environment, “at a time of dawning realization that human activity was indeed changing the Earth on a scale comparable with some of the major events of the ancient past. Some of these changes are now seen as permanent, even on a geological time-scale.”³⁷ The collective impact of humanity on their habitat is now seen as being equal to the gigantic disasters that have decimated their numbers in the past. Humans themselves are now endowed with a de facto geological agency which, in the not too distant past, had been the exclusive preserve of the natural world.

Framed in such anthropogenic terms, *Unaccustomed Earth* juxtaposes the deep time of global seismic activity with the aggregate of human energies on the level of a geological force, however recent in contemporary time that force might be. The earth and humanity are both endowed with geological agency or (re)activity to restore or adjust the ecological feedback loop between host and inhabitant. Earth's geothermal upheavals in *Unaccustomed Earth*, in that sense, might be legible as a way of assigning agency to a planet seeking retaliation for the damage done to it, of a (naively) anthropomorphized earth eager to slough off populations unmindful of the age-old ecological contract. Lahiri, however, works with an aperture that is much wider than the insignificant human need for survival or adaptability. Grounded in cosmic rhythms and natural forces that are divorced from human purpose or teleology, *Unaccustomed Earth* intimates a planet whose seismic cataclysms suggest a capacity for perpetual reconstitution conceivably without a human footprint in the future.³⁸

On the surface of it, the collection is devoid of loud political statements about climate change, population control, and resource exploration, preferring to let such issues emerge through the cracks of its narrative crust. As an updated refrain of the American pastoral myth, the reciprocity between planting and thriving, for example, is a prominent leitmotif that points, on a microcosmic scale, to the link between soil and survival traversing the collection. First moving into an apartment in Garden City in New Jersey, the Garden State, before eventually relocating to Pennsylvania, the lands of forests, Ruma's parents embody their flourishing immigrant experience through

repeated associations with the natural world. A metaphor for transplantation, Ruma's father "toiled in unfriendly soil" and "coax[ed] such things from the ground" as her mother liked to cook with—"bitter melon, chili peppers and delicate strains of spinach" (16). He plants a hydrangea in honor of his wife, noting that it "won't bloom much this year. The flowers will be pink or blue depending on the acidity of your soil" (51). And when he moves into an apartment, following his wife's sudden death, what he misses most is "working outside, the solid feeling of dirt under his knees, getting into his nails, the smell of it lingering on his skin even after he's scrubbed himself in the shower" (49). More generally, even, in a suggestive moment of miscommunication, he tells Ruma that a "nursery" is not just an educational setting but also a "place that sells plants," before taking his grandson on a plant-buying spree and converting her backyard into a nursery school of a different sort (42).

On a larger, macrocosmic scale, the links between global consumerism and eco-systemic pressure are intimated in the history of colonial violence mapped in *Unaccustomed Earth*. Corresponding to the geological figuration of the political unconscious, readers can follow the subterranean rhizome and piece together the history of exploitation and resource extraction that undergirds every colonial project from its very beginning. Whether it's the Iran-Contra crisis, the covert operations of the CIA and the FBI in Central and South America, the Watergate break-in at the height of the Vietnam War, or the sustained attention to the Middle East, allusions to U. S. foreign interference, in particular, accumulate to open up punctual windows into the history of political influence going back several centuries and involving numerous European countries. While typically done in the name of democracy or liberty, or, as in much of the nineteenth century, to imprint enlightened values on inferior ethnicities, the animating concerns underlying all colonial endeavor were, and still are, strategic gain, access to cheap labor, and perhaps most prominently these days, the oil reserves in the Middle East and South America and the mineral resources in Africa.

Similarly, *Unaccustomed Earth* points to a consumer economy that is global in its network and distribution patterns. Ruma's father returns from Italy with "a marionette of Pinocchio" for Akash, a "handpainted cruet that had the word 'olio' on its side" for Ruma, and a "marbled box" for Adam, "the sort of thing one might use for storing paper clips" (18). Meant to authenticate his experience, they in fact reproduce mass-marketed clichés of Italy that might equally have been plucked from the shelves at a neighborhood Walmart and been made in a factory in China, not a workshop in Italy. Rahul wants to bring back a little tea set for the daughter of his fiancée, "something really English," again

reproducing a stereotype that is, in this instance, connected to England's imperial history with India (164). And, in a further tightening of this postcolonial consumption loop, Sang returns from England with "tea from Harrods," thus in effect exporting further what are already Indian imports in one of the most high-end shops of the former Empire with a history of marketing merchandise from former colonial outposts (199).³⁹

What is more, migration itself, as with all first-generation Bengali (or Senegalese) immigrants in *Unaccustomed Earth*, is motivated by the wish for economic improvement, not political stability, and they periodically return to India with their families and, like their offspring, hopscotch throughout the globe for pleasure, profession, and economic gain. In the postcolonial world of today, airline traffic is such that, whenever Ruma's retired father is scheduled to fly, "she watched the news, to make sure there hadn't been a plane crash anywhere in the world" (3). Her husband Adam works for a "hedge fund"—a suitably loaded word in a book centered on growth and cultivation—and "had yet to spend two consecutive weeks at home" following their move (5). Helping to manage an international portfolio with a strategy of maximum capital appreciation, Adam works in the grey zone of regulatory restrictions and with private financiers investing large sums of money in often emerging markets. His non-denominational currency functions as a synecdoche for mobility and the migrant streams flowing through the world; his life, as is that of both disadvantaged and well-heeled immigrants alike, is as mobile as digital capital is fluid. And in what may be the best example of such fluidity, Amit's parents embody true transnational citizenship by making the world their global village, working (as his father does, as an eye surgeon with pop star status) for periods of time in New Delhi, Boston, Houston, Lausanne, and Riyadh, without settling anywhere or assuming responsibility for a child left abandoned in a boarding school.

Significantly, it is these third-world emigrés turned first-world nouveaux rich that seem best to imitate their former colonizers not only in their drinking habits, but also in their patterns of consumption. When her father shares their impending relocation from Cambridge to New Delhi in a seafood restaurant, Amit remembers that the table had been "heaped with the bright red claws and shells from which his father had effortlessly extracted the meat for all of them" (95). Signifying abundance and removal, the leftover debris suggests the ongoing exploitation of resources perpetrated by superpowers and former colonizers—often in the name of resource management—but now with the tables turned. In effect relishing the benefits of whatever their current host country is, before leaving behind an empty shell, Amit's father practices a consume-and-spit-out model of economics that, in a postcolonial world, is no longer reserved for traditional colonizers

but the domain of countries—typically rich in human, intellectual, and natural capital—emerging into global economic players of their own. If the empire has been writing back for a while, Lahiri seems to say, it now mines back as well.⁴⁰

On the other side of the eco-sensitive spectrum, Sudha's professional trajectory in "Only Goodness" suggests an awareness of the more constructive impact of capitalist practices on a global economy. Sudha double majors in "economics and math" and, after a "first master's in international relations" from the University of Pennsylvania, pursues a second master's degree from the London School of Economics (129). She explains that "LSE had one of the best programs in developmental economics, that she was thinking of doing NGO work" (133), and after she completes a dissertation on deregulation indeed works "as a project manager for an organization in London that promoted micro loans in poor countries" (150–151). Often given to women and other economically disenfranchised groups—and much in keeping with LSE's founding principles of the Fabian Society—micro loans foster local and sustainable business practices free from the pressures of a competitive international market that tends to be profit-driven and shareholder-based. Sudha thus becomes an active player in promoting ecological awareness and in nourishing a climate of responsible stewardship over local resources. In terms of the larger architecture that carefully governs much of *Unaccustomed Earth*, Sudha's activism counterbalances the models of corporate expansion embodied by the fathers in the same story. As an employee of Raytheon, her father serves the interests of the military-industrial complex (135), just as the father of her husband Roger "had worked overseas for Singer sewing machines," including in India, presumably to help establish an emerging sweat shop culture (146). The spirit of Sudha's community-based NGO work goes in the opposite direction.

What emerges from this discussion is Lahiri's understanding of humanity as one eco-economic entity, and an understanding that intersects with more theoretical calls for an enlarged investigation into the relation of humans and their habitat. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for example, has coined the notion of "planetarity" as a way of "inscribing collective responsibility" and of philosophizing about global ecological concerns.⁴¹ Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer note that developing "a world-wide accepted strategy leading to sustainability of eco-systems against human-induced stresses will be one of the great future tasks of humankind."⁴² E. O. Wilson has famously noted that "Humanity has so far played the role of planetary killer concerned only with its own short-term survival. We have cut the heart out of much of biodiversity."⁴³ And Dipesh Chakrabarty, echoing current anthropogenic thinking, notes that we live "in an age when the forces of globalization intersect with those of global warming," and argues that "the idea of the human needs to be stretched beyond where postcolonial thought advanced it."⁴⁴ Further

observing that humans now “act as a geological force on the planet, changing its climate for millennia to come,” Chakrabarty makes a strong case that progressive postcolonial thinking—like progressive scientific thinking—must be cognizant of humans as being constitutively one: “a species, a collectivity whose commitment to fossil-fuel based, energy-consuming civilization is now a threat to that civilization itself.”⁴⁵ *Unaccustomed Earth* is endowed with just such a sensibility and intimates that living is a matter of social responsibility toward others and of an ecological responsibility toward an earth whose capacities for supporting life are grounded in sustainable stewardship.

Precisely because of this radically enlarged aperture, which subsumes human history within a much larger natural history, does *Unaccustomed Earth* also portray an earth that follows larger cosmic rhythms and geological forces divorced from human concerns and sustainability. If the collection's major players are in search of grounding and contact with the earth, they also have an affinity for the element of their evolutionary origin: water. Juxtaposed to the ground precisely because it removes any solid footing, water in *Unaccustomed Earth* becomes the primordial source of being in which nourishment and destruction, fertility and fatality, emulsion and extinction, are ceaselessly washing against one another. The ground in *Unaccustomed Earth* is shaky not only because of geothermal energy working from below, but also because two thirds of the globe's surface space is literally inundated, making an illusion out of the seeming solidity of the earth. In terms of the planet's deep time, *terra infirma* is the rule of the game, not the other way round.

Negotiating the slippery fluidity of ground and the instinctive orientation toward water is a major motif in the collection. When Amit and Megan travel to Puerto Rico, they move from a hotel room “on the ground floor” to a suite “overlooking the mesmerizing blue-green ocean and the contrasting blue of sky.” They leave the curtains open and make love sideways, the effect being “as if the whole room, and the bed, and they themselves, were somehow afloat on the sea.” They had a similar experience in Venice—an ancient floating, and sinking, city in itself, on the Mediterranean—when they relocate from a wall-facing room to one “by a canal, where a small barge docked each morning selling fruits and vegetables” (87).⁴⁶ During one of their trans-Pacific stopovers, Ruma and her family want to visit, but never do, Bangkok's “Floating Market” (8), and she explains to her father in Seattle that the bridges spanning Lake Washington “floated on pontoons at their centers because the water was too deep” (14).

Significantly, as if to compensate for this suggestion of suspension in mid-water, the father falls back into his habit of measuring physical space. “It appeared,” Ruma notes, “as her father walked from one end of the living room to another, that he was inwardly measuring its dimensions.” Ruma remembers him doing so on numerous occasions, and

she now imagines him “on his tours, in public squares, walking from one end to another, pacing down a nave, and counting the number of steps one had to ascend in order to get to the library or the museum” (14). Like many characters in the collection who use maps to get their bearings—from road atlases and MapQuest to high-resolution detail charts—the father seeks to control space by quantifying it, however simply, precisely because water is not measurable in the same way. Its dimensions especially on an oceanic scale are elusive and not amenable to the coordinates of cartography when compared to the putative stability of land. The numerous maps in *Unaccustomed Earth*, in that sense, are more than props to find one’s way, but forms of grounding one’s being, ways of countering the uncontainable and unpredictable fluidity of water.⁴⁷

That this sense of being awash is, for all its uncertainty, primordial is evident in the characters’ affinity for inundation. It isn’t just Pranab and others who consecrate their migrant status by keeping their head above water in Walden Pond. Amit and Megan, too, desire to go swimming in the Berkshire lakes, and when they fail to do so, enjoy the caress of “an undramatic drizzle” and vicariously observe a man swimming in the “dark gray water, quite far out” (89, 121). Akash, among several children, takes swimming lessons (with a “floatation device” strapped to his back); he practices in an “inflatable kiddie pool” and is comfortable splashing in the lake bordering his parents’ house (38, 32). Usha’s little son Neel is naturally unperturbed in the chest-high water of the bathtub, while his sitter-uncle has passed out on the floor (170). And in the most sustained association of elemental buoyancy with the rhythms of life, Kaushik’s parents buy a house in Boston with a pool so his mother can enjoy her daily rejuvenation, recreational, and ablutionary swim. This association underlies the surcharged configuration of water as a vast geothermal entity beyond probing, and orchestrates the core dynamic of much of Part Two of the narrative of *Unaccustomed Earth*.

In a concentric arrangement of scenes that function as micro- and macrocosmic representations of one another, water is associated with the maternal element that is all-enveloping and all-exposing, life-giving and life-taking. Kaushik, toward the end of “Year’s End,” doesn’t “bother getting a map,” but drives along the New England coastline and is carried along not by seeing the sea but by “detect[ing] its salty smell” (287). He finds the water “violent enough to break me apart” and the inhospitable coastline irresistibly attractive: “the landscape drew me, claimed me as nothing had in a long time” (289). Reaching his terminal point, “he watches the approach and retreat of the waves . . . that eternally restless motion having an inversely calming effect on me,” before burying the pictures of his mother on a rock, not yet ready to let them blow into the Atlantic where his mother’s ashes have already been strewn (292).

In a parallel sort of homecoming years later, toward the end of "Going Ashore," that cycle then completes itself, when an anxious Kaushik, now on a beach in Thailand, gingerly enters the element of his attraction-repulsion. He has a vision of his swimming mother, "her body still vital, a brief blur that passed as effortlessly as the iridescent fish darting from time to time beneath the boat," and he eventually steps into the water, wanting "to show his mother that he was not afraid." As he lowers himself, "the sea was as warm and welcoming as a bath. His feet touched the bottom, and so he let go" (330).

Meeting in the liminal space of the shoreline, and gaining ground as the smothering wave is coming ashore, Kaushik's submersion in water has all the trappings of an oedipal conflict finally resolving itself, and Kaushik certainly has a profound fixation on his mother that, among other blockages, complicates his relationship with his father and prevents him from forming enduring relationships. Reducing this configuration of scenes to a Freudian template, however, ignores the complexity of Lahiri's thought (even if psychoanalytic structures are already anchored in the evolutionary imprints of humanity's deep time). While Kaushik is, on one level, no doubt returning to the womb, Lahiri submerges this singular oedipal drama within the larger catastrophe of geothermal upheaval. Tens of thousands of innocent victims along the low-lying coastline of India, Thailand, and Indonesia are absorbed back into the source of their primordial being, a no-longer-pacific Pacific that transforms into a gigantic whirlpool catapulting untold masses of humans back into the void of their originary plentitude. If the seas (may) have eroded ancient Etruscan culture, among others, now contemporary cultures with exposure to the oceans are flushed off the earth in a kind of global cleansing. Restoring a form of tabula rasa back to earth's surface, the planet, Lahiri suggests, is a celestial body on which humans may never be able to be fully at home, after all.⁴⁸ The cosmic rhythms of earth's deep time, in the final analysis, prevent humanity from getting accustomed to it long-term.⁴⁹

Significantly, Lahiri punctuates the hiatus before and after the oceanic surge with a Gingko leaf (331). Imprinted on the collection's inside cover, and demarcating Kaushik's last moments from Hema's epilogue, the leaf functions as an organic framing device and suggests biological endurance following a global catastrophe; it literally fills the lacuna of that catastrophe whose rendition Lahiri carefully omits. If Hema's pregnancy gingerly intimates such endurance on a human and generational level—and furthermore gestures toward the protective and fertilizing agency of the amniotic fluid—the Gingko embodies survival in the dimensions of earth's deep time, and perhaps the delicate beginnings of a new pastoral. Framing both the beginning and the end of *Unaccustomed Earth*, it is one of few plant species classified as a "living fossil," having survived countless major

extinction events and falling within the vast temporalities of geologic time, with recognizable ancestral fossils going back several hundred million years. Individual specimen have been estimated to be 2,500 years old and older, their longevity partly a result of their capacity for adaptive reproduction in periods of dryness and soil erosion.⁵⁰ More in tune with the biological rhythms of the earth than acts of human colonization and territorial usurpation, the Ginkgo represents a plant-based model of ecological synergy that embodies survivability and sustainable co-habitation with its host. Indeed, if oceanic surges periodically wash away human life, they not only destroy and reshape but also water and reseed shorelines, which in turn allows for the redistribution of trees and other plants, provided they enter into the large measures of their ground of nourishment.⁵¹

These cycles return this essay to the large feedback loops between migration and geology, colonization and geopolitics, and anthropology and the Anthropocene that undergird *Unaccustomed Earth*. Its narratives, I have been arguing, expose the various archaeologies driving their dynamic and orchestrate their interconnectedness through the governing trope of geothermal agency. Geopolitical upheaval and historical force, colonization and migration, and the sequence of pastoral in literary traditions are all mediated through a model of archaeological tension and stratification that compresses into reflections of what it means to settle and colonize space. As a global biological motor, water fundamentally expresses the subterranean energies shaping the earth and its conditions for habitation, and as such marks the unceasing energies literally shifting the ground under the feet of humanity. Geothermal ruptures similarly encrypt the human history of emergence and growth, conflict and domination, but also of erasure and disappearance. If the earth provides grounding for civilizations to prosper, it also periodically removes that ground by allowing cultures to fall into the abyss of silence. Literature, too, offers a foothold for cultural understanding, as in Lahiri's self-conscious complication of the American pastoral into the realm of a global ecology. *Unaccustomed Earth* urges that human life on earth—including its migration flows and literary and other artifacts—ought to be seen through the aperture of geologic time, the deep time of the cosmic processes of coming and going, waxing and waning. Doing so re-perforates traditional notions of nationhood and nation-states, whose boundaries have always been permeable, and suggests that humans have been inhabiting a space that has, fundamentally, always been “post” colonial, or indeed planetary. From their very beginnings until the contemporary historical moment, human beings have been on the move, have been living in largely imagined communities on the unstable quicksand that is the earth.

Notes

I dedicate this essay to Priti and Raj Kumar, and thank the anonymous readers for *Studies in American Fiction* for their supportive and insightful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

1. Wai Chee Dimock, "Literature for the Planet," *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 175.
2. Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung, eds., *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), xxii.
3. Rachel Adams, "The Ends of Postmodernism," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 53, no. 3 (2007): 251.
4. In "Neoliberal Family Matters," *American Literary History* 25, no. 2 (2013), Susan Koshy similarly notes that "the shift from small-scale diachrony . . . in *Interpreter of Maladies* to larger-scale diachrony in *Unaccustomed Earth* recasts character and action against the background of generational time" (354).
5. Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1995), 7–8.
6. The term derives from amateur geologist Hugh Miller's widely-known book *The Testimony of the Rocks* (Edinburgh: Shepherd & Elliot, 1857), and, as a suggestive phrase, quickly entered the Victorian imagination.
7. Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), 6.
8. As Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer famously put it in "The Anthropocene," *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (2000), "Considering . . . [the] major and still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales, it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term 'anthropocene' for the current geological epoch" (17). For similar references, see Crutzen's slightly longer essay, "Geology of Mankind," in the journal *Nature* 415 (January 3, 2002): 23, and Will Steffen, Crutzen, and John R. McNeill's landmark essay, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?," *Ambio* 36, no. 8 (2007): 614–621.
9. Diane Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2010), 16.
10. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), 20.
11. Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 14. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
12. This moment is so formative for Kaushik that he remembers it decades later, on the last day of his life, on the beach in Thailand, when he hears of the "small earthquake" that has already triggered the tsunami (329).
13. This history of migration is also inscribed in the Etruscans' sarcophagi-like urns that were "covered with carvings showing so many migrations across land and departures in covered wagons to the underworld" (319). For a nuanced reading of the links between death, immigration, and memory

- in Lahiri's work, see Mridula Chakraborty, "Leaving No Remains: Death among the Bengalis in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 4 (2011): 813–829.
14. Given Lahiri's professional and personal interest in Italy—her Ph.D. is in Renaissance Studies and she has been living in Italy for several years now—she may have drawn from Fernand Braudel's landmark study, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II* (1949, 2 vol, trans. Siân Reynolds; repr. New York: Harper & Row, 1972), in which he argues for the centrality of natural rhythms as a determinant of human history.
 15. Rajini Srikanth offers a non-political reading of Lahiri's work, arguing that her wide popular appeal and easy digestibility in the United States are grounded in her portrayal of "ornamental Indians" who conform to a comforting "model of successful citizenship"; see Srikanth, "What Lies Beneath: Lahiri's Brand of Desirable Difference in *Unaccustomed Earth*," in Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung, eds., *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri*, 59. While I would agree that her immigrants are nowhere near being political agitators or militant activists threatening a Western, democratic status quo, I am in fact arguing for a vast political subtext grounding Lahiri's work.
 16. On the recent influx of Senegalese immigrants into Italy, see Joseph Winter, "Italy's 'little Senegal,'" *BBC News*, accessed March 16, 2015, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3622953.stm>.
 17. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 20.
 18. "Jhumpa Lahiri: By The Book," *The New York Times*, September 5, 2013, accessed September 5, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/08/books/review/jhumpa-lahiri-by-the-book.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.
 19. T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Essays, 1917–1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1932), 4–6.
 20. Kaushik couches his mother's story of departure and return in similar mythological terms. A twice-lost daughter, whose marriage put her parents into mourning, before her eventual death, returned to them, "first from Boston and then Bombay, like Persephone in the myth, temporarily filling up and brightening their rooms" (253). Likewise, Paul in "Nobody's Business" associates Sang with Penelope who, attempting to keep her suitors at bay, kept weaving and unweaving a shroud (176).
 21. See Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, ed. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, and Seymour Gross (New York: Norton, 2nd Ed., 1978), 13.
 22. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950), 123.
 23. In "Neoliberal Matters," Koshy reads the often haphazard and hesitant trajectory of Lahiri's characters as an ironic foil to the seeming intentionality behind Hawthorne's generational statement (356). While I agree that Lahiri reflects on the limited agency of her twenty-first century subjects, I would submit that Hawthorne, too, is aware of the multiply circumstantial nature of regeneration. His narrator notes that it is only "so far as [his children's] fortunes may be within my control," that he may exercise limited agency over generational rejuvenation (*The Scarlet Letter*, 13).
 24. "Jhumpa Lahiri on *Unaccustomed Earth*—Guardian Book Club," *The Guardian*, August 30, 2013, accessed September 28, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/aug/31/unaccustomed-earth-lahiri-book-club>.

25. *Ibid.* As a further indication of her thinking along geo- and genea-logical lines, Lahiri notes in the same article that *Unaccustomed Earth* is traversed with “the fault lines between parents and children.”
26. Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 52. In *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*, Kroeber designates the term “proto-ecologist” for the British Romantics and their contemporaries, which would certainly include Hawthorne as well (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1994).
27. Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 26.
28. I quote from the so-called “Original Smith Text” (one among several apocryphal and contested versions) commonly recognized as the most authentic rendition of Seattle’s 1854 oration and first published in the *Seattle Sunday Star*, October 29, 1887: 3.
29. *Ibid.*
30. NRI (Non-Resident Indian) and PIO (Person of Indian Origin) are rubrics of classification created by the Indian government to encourage esp. wealthy members of the new diaspora in the West and Middle East to reconnect with their home country (see Koshy, “Neoliberal Family Matters,” 376). ABC and ABT are acronyms for “American-born Chinese” and “American-born Taiwanese” within the Chinese diaspora, and ABCD (American-Born Confused Desi) refers to South Asian Americans born in the United States, in contrast to those born overseas and immigrating later. BME stands for “Black and White Minority Ethnic.” If *Unaccustomed Earth* doesn’t explicitly question the nation-state as a political structure, it certainly suggests that such forms have always been, in the memorable phrase of Benedict Anderson, “imagined communities” held together more my phantasmagoric projections than “deep, horizontal comradeship.” See *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983, rev. ed. London: Verso, 2006), esp. 5–7.
31. “Jhumpa Lahiri: By The Book.”
32. Dimock, *Through Other Continents*, 6.
33. *Ibid.*, 3.
34. *Ibid.*, 6.
35. *Ibid.*, 6.
36. Crutzen, *Nature* 415 (January 3, 2002): 23.
37. Jan Zalasiewicz, et. al., “The New World of the Anthropocene,” *Environmental Science & Technology* 44 (2010): 2228. Ulf von Rauchhaupt discusses the various models determining the beginnings of the Anthropocene in “Wie kommen wir nur ins Anthropozän?,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22, May 31, 2015: 59.
38. This configuration of themes, including a concentrated political subtext, emerges full blown in Lahiri’s most recent novel, *The Lowland* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).
39. As the narrator of Abraham Verghese’s *Cutting for Stone* notes more directly: “I am convinced that one can buy in Harrods of London a kit that allows an enterprising Englishman to create a British school anywhere in the third world. It comes with black robes, preprinted report cards for Michaelmas, Lent, and Easter terms, as well as hymnals, Prefect Badges, and a syllabus. *Assembly required*” (Abraham Verghese, *Cutting for Stone* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009, 233]).

40. My reference is of course to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's postcolonial classic, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (London: Routledge, 1989). Lahiri, in a kind of literary-critical recursive loop, may well have that book in mind when a school friend invites Hema to watch the newly-released *The Empire Strikes Back* (240).
41. Spivack, "Planetarity," in *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003), 101–102.
42. Crutzen and Stoermer, "The Anthropocene," *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (2000): 18.
43. Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 102.
44. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," *New Literary History* 43, no. 1 (2012): 13.
45. *Ibid.*, 2.
46. One of the ancient ports of the spice trade, Venice's grocery boats also intimate the history of imported food consumption. See, for example, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), 13.
47. The collection interrogates quantifying geographic space into maps as a primary act of colonization and occupation. For Benedict Anderson and Anthony Giddens, such attempts to bring unruly nature under human control are one of the hallmarks of modernity and the rise of the nation-state. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983, rev. ed. London: Verso, 2006), esp. 28–32, and Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990), esp. 17–21.
48. It may be worth noting that the evolution of agriculture was largely the result of the waning of the last Ice Age brought about by the so-called "Milankovich phenomena: the orbital and tilt relationships between the Earth and the Sun." See Lawrence Guy Straus, "The World at the End of the Last Ice Age," in *Humans at the End of the Ice Age: The Archaeology of the Pleistocene-Holocene Transition*, ed. Lawrence Guy Straus et. al. (New York: Springer, 1996), 5.
49. This fundamentally nonhuman or naturalistic vision is close to the writer Lahiri has named as her favorite novelist: "Thomas Hardy. Ever since I first read him in high school, I've felt a kinship with his characters, his sense of place, his pitiless vision of humanity" ("By The Book").
50. See, for example, Dana L. Royer, Leo J. Hickey and Scott L. Wing, "Ecological conservatism in the 'living fossil' *Ginkgo*," *Paleobiology* 29, no. 1 (2003): 84–104. Within the context of anthropogenic extinction events, the adaptability of the *Ginkgo* is evident in Hiroshima, Japan. Among the few life forms surviving within about a mile of the nuclear ground zero in August of 1945 were six *Ginkgo* trees. While virtually all other plant forms were killed, the trees were charred but soon fully recuperated. See "A-bombed *Ginkgo* Trees in Hiroshima, Japan," *The Ginkgo Pages*, accessed July 30, 2013, <http://kwanten.home.xs4all.nl/hiroshima.htm>.
51. Michel Serres offers a more detailed analysis along similar eco-scientific lines of Jules Michelet's *La Mer* (1861), which also resonates with the geological reading of *Uncaccustomed Earth* I develop in the first part of this essay. To engage the chain of global energetic exchange, notes Serres, Michelet posits two "circles of fire," "a circle of active or extinct volcanoes border[ing] the Atlantic and a comparable ring surround[ing] the Pacific." See Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed. Josué V. Harari and David F. Bell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982), 29–31.