

# Picturing America

*Photography and the Sense of Place*

*Edited by*

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# Gogol + Nikhil = Nikon? Power, Place, and Photography in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

*Michael Wutz*

## Abstract

This essay offers a media-technological reading of photography in Lahiri's work, centering broadly on *The Namesake* (2003). (1) Through the lens of photography, Lahiri re-exposes the power differential between men and women. If trigger-happy males zoom in on female bodies, or any other subject, from behind the viewfinder, they not only assert their traditional agency through a technology of representation; they also reduce women to passive statu(e)s and the object of the male gaze, thus re-inscribing an age-old power dichotomy and bringing it up to date. Similarly, as Lahiri's Indian immigrants record, with camera in hand, their newfound life in the West, they also return to their country of origin as tourists, where snapshots of oddly-estranged environments give them a sense of (nostalgic) cultural grounding. (2) While ancestral portraits have served numerous cultures as a placeholder for the deceased, the Hindu practice of burning the body, and the subsequent dispersal of the ash, invests photographic verisimilitude with greater significance than in the West. Yet, if photography can be commemorative in a visual sense, words occupy a different value on the spectrum of recall and representation, often filling the gap where images and photographs fail.

“The illiteracy of the future,” someone has said, “will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography.” But shouldn't a photographer who cannot read his own pictures be no less accounted an illiterate? Won't inscription become the most important part of the photograph?

WALTER BENJAMIN, “Little History of Photography” (527)

## 1 Through the Looking Glass

The days of thinking literature in niches is gone. Pigeonholes, boxes, slots and labels have done their work, but have—fortunately for writers and readers alike—been relegated to the junk heap of cubbyholes, the hollow fossils

of nation-based partitions and demarcations. Rachel Adams has recently introduced the notion of “American literary globalism” to describe this emergent shift in contemporary American letters, a shift which succeeds a more narrowly defined postmodernism and which is understood as a generalized perception of social simultaneity across national borders, boundaries, and oceans. The writers bathing in such global waters are “relatively unburdened by the legacies of Euro-American modernism or the politics of the Cold War” and are reacting “against the aesthetic sensibilities of high postmodernism while providing American literature with a new set of genealogical, geographic, and temporal referents” (251). Min Hyuong Song has similarly noted that the work of such—in the best sense of the word—de-racinated writers enacts what she calls “a tireless, ongoing search for another order of connectivity that might respond to globalization as a geo-social-economic-political fact without merely imitating, and being complicit with globalization’s forms” (566).<sup>1</sup>

Jhumpa Lahiri’s work fits that description particularly well. In her case, as in the case of her likeminded contemporaries, this search for resistant connection is particularly visible in the global peregrinations of her characters, who refuse to pledge allegiance to the narrow imperatives of nation-states and often hover in a space of transnational citizenship.<sup>2</sup> It comes into similar relief in the way her work engages the range of contemporary media technologies that have made the world a global village far exceeding Marshall McLuhan’s snappy soundbite from half a century ago.<sup>3</sup> From *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) to her most recent novel, *The Lowland* (2013), Lahiri is highly attuned not only to the postcolonial realignments that have wrapped, and trapped, the globe

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1 Song writes about Sonya Chung’s debut novel *Long for this World* (2010), but includes many of her peers as well, such as Lahiri. Bakirathi Mani, in fact, argues precisely that *The Namesake* “generates a transnational story of belonging” (76).

2 That tenuous foothold is of course close to what Homi Bhabha has defined as the Third Space, a conceptual hybrid of in-between that serves as an unheard-of site of enunciation: “[t]he productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory ... may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity .... It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the ‘people’” (38). Lahiri’s extended sojourn in Italy, and her corresponding memoir on language—written in Italian, and carrying a suitably playful title, *In Other Words*—might be said to be her way of inhabiting that Third Space not just geographically, but linguistically as well.

3 McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, passim. McLuhan’s vision, while looking forward to the global digital network of today, also gestures back to such benevolently colonial notions as, say, E. M. Forster’s “only connect” as the epigraph of *Howard’s End*.

in a meshwork of travel routes and destinations. She also foregrounds forms of mass mediation that have bound the world into one global circuit, and she does so not by emphasizing their, sometimes estranging, otherness, but rather by seeing them as an integral part of the registry of contemporary culture—in both the West and the East—in which everything is subject to being photographed, gazed at, filmed, or otherwise recorded, and being uploaded onto (what goes by the innocuous word) “servers” of the worldwide web. For most of her global denizens, being media-savvy has become a cultural norm.

For that very reason, and more so than the work of most of her contemporaries, Lahiri’s is saturated with the spectrum of media technologies both past and present and engages the entire media ecology of (post)print culture. One sustained inquiry, for example, looks at the very way the master narratives of Hollywood and Bollywood are supplementing, if not displacing altogether, more traditional cultural narratives, such as folk tales, fairy tales, and epics in both the East and the West. For Lahiri, the global avalanche of schlock amounts to a transformation of the collective imaginary, whereby Mickey Mouse and Darth Vader have—in a new generation of consumers—begun to occupy the cognitive space of, say, Pinocchio and Cinderella, or the cultural archetypes found in the Ramayana, Baghavadghita, or Mahabharata. And if those figures and narratives are still alive, it is through filmic renditions, however faintly, of these very tales, which in their first media makeover from orality to print are now re-mediated again, and thus twice removed from whatever oral originality they once were presumed to have possessed. The risk of erasing cultural difference in favor of mass-mediated sameness is a focal point in Lahiri’s meditation on media and print.

Paralleling the homogenization of narrative traditions into one Digital Archive—what Friedrich Kittler described as the recycling of “absolute knowledge” as an “endless loop” (*Gramophone 2*)—Lahiri also foregrounds the cultural dominance of film. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma’s brother Romi escapes patriarchal censure by retreating to New Zealand “working on the crew of a German documentary filmmaker” (6). Sudha’s brother Rahul shifts from science to English literature and film, much to the chagrin of his father who does not want his son to “watch French movies in a class room” (140). Pranab and Boudi’s repressed love is (doubly) mediated, when he plays “medley after medley of songs from the Hindi films of their youth” (65). And “cinema of a certain period was the one thing” Hema’s mother “loved wholeheartedly about the West,” able even to “recall, scene by scene, Audrey Hepburn’s outfits in any given movie” (231). In *The Lowland*, the Naxalites hide ammunitions in studios, with theaters themselves eventually becoming bombing targets. And in a particularly telling reflection about the labor and economics of film—about the

disproportion between effort and yield, expenditure and outcome—Subash and Udayan walk past Technicians' Studio, "where Satyajit Ray had shot *Pather Panchali*" and where they witness "the director and his crew taking and retaking a single scene, perfecting a handful of lines. A day's work, devoted to a moment's entertainment" (1.3., 11).

If the discourse of film (including television) is loud and in full view, radio in Lahiri's work plays only in a minor frequency. Hindi film songs emanating from radio shops form part of her cultural soundscape, and in *Unaccustomed Earth*, the "African doorman" in Boston, Raymond, listens "to a radio tuned to the news in French," to intimate the linguistic aftershocks of colonialism and the polyglot surround-sound of contemporary American culture (212). Multiple frequencies play a more significant role in *The Lowland*, when Subash and Udayan cobble together a shortwave radio from leftover spare parts and start receiving "[s]nippets from thousands of miles away, emerging from great thickets of interference that tossed like an ocean, that wavered like a wind" (1.3., 17). The novel positions radio not only as having an immediate and global reach that transcends any print-based information; it also serves as an alternative and, as it often does in *The Lowland*, underground medium correcting and complicating (or falsifying) government-controlled news—much like any serious work of literature could or would. The blind spots of one medium may serve as the niche for the value of another.

What is more, radio also elevates *The Lowland*—and Lahiri's more recent fiction, generally—to an inquiry into the ratio between signal and noise: the modern preoccupation with communication and the sending and receiving of signals. In a novel in which Guglielmo Marconi and Jagadish Chandra Bose—two of the pioneers of radio (the one acknowledged, the other often not)—make guest appearances, the question of what defines a signal and what noise becomes paramount. The novel conceives of character and their behavior in terms of emitting and receiving signals. Around her daughter Bela, Gauri "transmitted her unhappiness that was steady, an ambient signal that was fixed" (VI.4., 268); and Bela, for her part, is guided home to her father by "pilot whales" to give birth to her own daughter—a de facto homing signal to return to the fold of family (IV.4., 270). More importantly, the very silence about the Naxalist uprising in the American media, which Subhash encounters time and again, goes to the heart of the ratio between signal and noise: what is worthy of being reported and what is not? What counts as negligible background noise and what is meaningful sound?<sup>4</sup> When Gauri, on her laptop, data mines "the

4 Upon his return to India, for example, Subhash is quickly filled in on events he "had not come across in any newspaper in Rhode Island, or heard on the AM radio in his car" (III.1., 87).

new sea that has come to dominate the earth's surface" in hopes of learning about her deceased husband, she concludes that there is "too much information, and yet, in her case, not enough. In a world of diminishing mystery, the unknown persists" (VII.1., 276–277); and it is, significantly, up to the sign system novel—with its own codes and protocols—to create the possible trajectory of an, however imagined, political activist who seems to have fallen through, or been excised from, the Digital Record. Lahiri no doubt locates literary narrative within these competing messaging systems and positions it as a pertinent form of meaningful noise in danger of being muffled by an increasingly large field of non-sense and data surplus.<sup>5</sup>

It is against this background of sign and signals, words and wavelengths, that I would like to offer a reading of the one media technology that is, perhaps, most (in)visible in the body of Lahiri's work: photography—invisible because it is so common as to run the risk of falling below the threshold of perception, even as it, perhaps paradoxically, makes the putatively common visible in the first place.<sup>6</sup> I center my analysis on only one novel, *The Namesake* (2003), with appropriate gestures to other of Lahiri's texts, to make the topic manageable, and offer two interrelated rhizomes of thought. Through the lens of photography, so to speak, Lahiri re-exposes the power differential between men and women. If trigger-happy males typically zoom in on female bodies, or any other subject, from behind the viewfinder, they not only assert their traditional agency through a technology of representation; they also reduce women to passive statu(e)s and the object of the male gaze, thus in effect re-inscribing an age-old power dichotomy and bringing it up to date. Often this gendering is mediated through a protocol of documentation. If Lahiri's Indian immigrants record, with camera in hand, their newfound life in the consumerist West, they also return to their country of origin as tourists, where snapshots of oddly-estranged environments give them a sense of (nostalgic) cultural grounding. Archivists of the postcolonial, Lahiri's picture

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Back in the United States and watching "Walter Cronkite," he notes: "It was always the news of America, of America's concern and activities .... There was nothing about Calcutta" (IV.1., 130).

- 5 As William R. Paulson put it, "[I]f literature is to deviate from the utilitarian task of communication, it must be an imperfect process of communication ... in which what is received is not exactly what was sent. Rather than attempting to reduce noise to a minimum, literary communication *assumes* its noise as a constitutive factor of itself" (83).
- 6 Indicative of this over-visible blind spot, perhaps, the first media-oriented readings of *The Namesake* center on photographs outside the text—and Mira Nair's filmic namesake of *The Namesake*—rather than the dozens of photographs inside the novel. See, for example, Bakirathi Mani's "Novel/Cinema/Photo: Intertextual Readings of *The Namesake*."

takers loosely parallel the imperial gaze of Victorian cartographers that sought to endow new vistas with an exotic sheen of otherness.

In a second rhizome, Lahiri offers quasi-philosophical observations about photography and commemoration, which of necessity triangulates with the function of words in a culture of images. While ancestral portraits—through tokens, paintings, and, more recently, photographs—have served numerous cultures as a placeholder for the deceased since time immemorial, the Hindu practice of burning the body, and the subsequent dispersal of the ash, appears to invest the verisimilitude of the photograph with greater significance than in the West.<sup>7</sup> For the Hindus in Lahiri's work, ancestral photographs suggest something like a substitute spiritual presence, which Western culture, with its elaborate burial rituals and tombstones, may be less in need of. At the same time, while photography can be fully commemorative in a visual sense, words occupy a different value on the spectrum of recall and representation, often filling the gap where images and photographs fail. Lahiri inserts her narratives into that gap by redefining the niche of the novel within the contemporary mediascape and by reflecting on the epistemological status of the photograph, or what its very absence—and the concomitant presence of print narrative—does to memory and experience.<sup>8</sup> In its entirety, Lahiri's work engages photography in a complex dialogue that highlights the medium's blind spots, while assigning fiction a meaningful space in the spheres of connectivity making up our present moment.

## 2 Lords of the Lens

One of the most foundational, generic and gendered, binaries of the West marks men as gear-driven geeks conquering space, while women are confined

7 In her analysis of the death scenes in Lahiri's oeuvre, Mridula Chakraborty notes that Lahiri elaborates on "what happens to a people when it cannot produce earthly proof of its presence on the landscape of American life, namely, in the shape of markers like graves and reliquary legacies to commemorate names" (815). She does, however, not engage Lahiri's sustained focus on the memorialization of death and immigrant placement.

8 Lahiri's work has in that sense come to terms with fiction's marginal status in the present mediasphere. This is different from "realist" and "naturalist" fiction, when photography was the new kid on the block and seen as a medial rival (or, conversely, seen worthy of "visual" or "cinematic" imitation). As Jennifer Green-Lewis notes, unlike in most novels of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, in nineteenth-century fiction photographers are routinely "affirmed and controlled by their relegation to the fringes of novelistic action" (7). See her chapter, "Fiction's Photographers and Their Works," for a fuller discussion of the narrative treatment of photography (65-94).

to the largely domestic sphere keeping the fire at home. Men tend to wield most forms of technology—from rocks to ratchets, mallets to machines—in the outside world, while women do nimble work with thread and needle, spoon and broom, inside house and home. It is almost always males securing and controlling living space with whatever engines and instruments are available at a particular (pre)historical moment, while women are generally positioned inside and assume the subservient role of powerless subject and object. Facility with larger technological apparatus goes virtually always hand in hand with male muscle; women, by contrast, are chiefly identified with utensils commensurate with male-defined fragility and daintiness.<sup>9</sup>

Painfully clichéd as that dichotomy sounds to contemporary ears—it has, fortunately, long been deconstructed—Lahiri re-inscribes it into the photographic discourse of her work: it is, with few exceptions, males that stand behind the camera from where they de-limit the space they deem worthy of being “pictured.” By defining the scene through the viewfinder and pressing the button, they exercise not only their agency through a prosthetic extension; they are also lording their control over their surroundings by determining what goes, and goes not, into the shot. “Taking” a picture nicely connotes that essentially acquisitive gesture of any photographic act. And when the object of representation becomes a woman, as it often does, that woman is, by default, one might say, subject to a spec(tac)ular regime that can easily reduce her to a voiceless body. Without agency herself, she shrinks to some-thing to be reproduced, while the male photographer controls the very parameters of her flattened image—Lords of the Lens, indeed!

Consider Mr. Das in Lahiri’s signature story, “Interpreter of Maladies.” A science middle-school teacher of Indian descent on a trip to India, he is naturally interested—with all the blindness of an innocent abroad—to return with the snaps of a lifetime. When he and his family espy their first monkey on a road trip, he asks their driver, Mr. Kapasi, “to stop the car so that he could take a picture.” Not bothering to get out, he takes some shots of his first simians in the wild with his “telephoto,” before “replacing the lens cap.” He, similarly, asks the driver to stop a second time so that he can “get a shot of this guy”—an emaciated and turbaned farmer driving an oxcart pulled by a pair of bullocks (48–49). In both instances, Mr. Das sees India solely through the narrow viewfinder of

9 As Judy Wacjman has noted in *Feminism Confronts Technology*, a study historicizing the painful gender binaries of technological and scientific innovation, “The masculine culture of technology is fundamental to the way in which the gender division of labour is still being reproduced today. By securing control of key technologies, men are denying women the practical experience upon which inventiveness depends” (21).

his SLR, which in itself is an amulet of affluence that marks his otherness. His photographs, while vaguely connecting to his cultural origins and village life in Mother India, recycle the West's iconography of the East through clichés of poverty and untamed nature, which has its very origins in the images of its colonial past. An armchair photographer adept at capturing stereotypes, the crucial insights about his marital dynamics elude his frame of vision.

This disconnect comes into focus when Mr. Das, later in their journey, wants a shot of the entire family. This time it is Mrs. Das who refuses to step out of the car, while her husband threatens that she “won't be in the pictures.” Hopeful that he can capture an image of family romance—the illusion of parental and patriarchal unity and bliss—he offers to let another male take the defining shot: “we could use one of these pictures for our Christmas card this year. We didn't get one of all five of us at the Sun Temple. Mr Kapasi could take it” (61). Leaving aside the many fantasies of Mr. Kapasi (in a story that reads like a veritable mirror house of projections), as Mr. Das is willing to pass the scepter of photographic control from one man to the other, Mrs. Das is the one to see through the charade of the camera. Any photograph of the family would belie not only the paternity of Bobby and the estrangement of husband and wife—with the added irony that it would be a holiday card commemorating an immaculate conception—and furthermore allow Mr. Das to symbolically reclaim the agency he has long lost. An image with a maternal void at the center, she understands, is much more reflective of the status of the family, just as it allows her to assert her residual autonomy, if only in the form of a pictorial absence. The photograph operates as a site of contention over the control of (family) representation.

Attempts at male photographic control over women, again in the context of travel, is similarly evident in *Unaccustomed Earth*. In the collection's title story, Ruma's widowed father returns from Italy with clichéd souvenirs and shots precisely because his photographic sensibilities have been shaped by the flattened gaze of mass tourism. The secret postcard he intends to send to Mrs. Bagchi, his recent travel companion, from Seattle shows “a view of ferries on Elliott Bay,” which Ruma glosses with “the generic view her father had chosen to commemorate his visit” (50, 59). He is similarly “careful to keep Mrs. Bagchi out of the frame,” fearful that his daughter might get wind of the liaison. Yet, another male, part of the tour group, once again records footage of the companion, as Ruma's father stares, “horrified, at the television screen, where for a few seconds Mrs. Bagchi choppily appeared.” And even as he is careful to elide any visual traces of her in his videos, an enlarged screen on his daughter's TV shows that “there were traces throughout—there was Mrs. Bagchi's arm resting on the open window of the bus, there was her blue leather handbag on a bench” (39).

In the collection's concluding story, Kaushik is similarly at pains not to have Hema in the frame. A renowned professional photographer, he documents major world events but not the women in his life, but like Mrs. Bagchi, Hema presses in from the margins, as the uploads on Kaushik's website make clear: exclusively featuring Italian landscape shots, they still record Hema's "hair flapping in the wind, strands of it sometimes intruding in front of the lens" (327). In both instances, the intended erasure of women and their often concomitant reduction to body parts, emblemizes, among others, male hesitation, if not downright inability, to make a commitment; and the women, for their part, finally refuse to not be seen and claim their, albeit only marginal, presence in the lives of Dadu and Kaushik. The shots capture something like a return of the repressed: the denial, but ultimate resurfacing, of the female—in, significantly, only partially embodied form—in a visual narrative of male control.<sup>10</sup>

Such repression is less immediately visible in *The Namesake*, a combined narrative of intergenerational immigration and a Bildungsroman in the context of the postcolonial diaspora. Vaguely paralleling the work of colonial cartographers who mapped the Empire with the apparatus of measurement, the Gangulis take frequent snapshots of their surroundings to report on their new life in the West. But unlike these, largely Victorian, projects of naming and seizing (up) for purposes of imperial gain, the modest documentary footage of the Gangulis demonstrates, to their families back home, adherence to time-honored rituals, such as Gogol's *annaprasan* (39), or offers glimpses into a lifeworld full of wonder, plenty, and consumerist excess. When relatives in India look at photos of their home, they exclaim, "Carpets in the bathroom, ... imagine that" (83). Their purpose is to share family-based experiences in their new world, not moments of territorial acquisition.

Still, even in such a reverse postcolonial registry, in which the male figures tend to harmonize with their spouses and siblings, Lahiri is careful to associate the camera with male arrogation and patriarchal privilege.<sup>11</sup> The very stages of

10 "Hell-Heaven" is among the stories most loaded with photographic gender-power in *Unaccustomed Earth*, but beyond the scope of this essay. Still, representative of the reciprocal complexity of male-female relationships—in this story about sexual repression and cultural norms—the citation below ought to be at least listed in something like a gender/photography registry of Lahiri's work: "There is only one photograph in which my [Usha's] mother appears; she is holding me as I sit straddling on her lap, her head tilted toward me, her hands pressed to my ears as if to prevent me from hearing something. In that picture, Pranab Kaku's shadow, his two arms raised at angles to hold the camera to his face, hovers in the corner of the frame, his darkened featureless shape superimposed on one side of my mother's body. It was always the three of us" (64).

11 As bell hooks observes, in an essay on the politics of African-American visual representation, her perspective on photography was "informed by the way the process was tied to

the Gangulis' acculturation into photography is a matter of handing down an apparatus from father to son; neither Ashima, Ashoke's wife and Gogol's mother, nor Sonja, Ashoke's daughter and Gogol's sister, ever work behind the camera. And as with the other gender narratives of photography, the first snapshot of their firstborn—the moment his symbolic name is registered—is taken, not by parents (let alone a woman), but by a fellow expatriate who has already upgraded to the possession of a camera (even if its full control escapes him as yet): "A first photograph, somewhat overexposed, is taken by Dr. Gupta that broiling hot, late summer's day: Gogol, an indistinct blanketed mass, reposing in his weary mother's arms" (29).

That acculturation continues with Ashoke taking his first photos of their son with an Instamatic. Unlike a more complex single-lens reflex camera, which requires adjustment of focal lens and shutter speed (and which Dr. Gupta may still be working out on his seemingly more technical camera), an Instamatic does not presuppose technical expertise or prior familiarity. On the contrary, it is quick and user-friendly—an equal-opportunity machine that could just as easily have been operated by Ashima, but she never does. Her job is in post-production, so to speak, which is to assemble photos into an album or for dispatch to Calcutta: "One day Ashoke arrives home with an Instamatic camera to take pictures of the baby, and when Gogol is napping she pastes the square, white-bordered prints behind plastic sheets in an album" (35).<sup>12</sup>

An "Instamatic camera" is also the gift Gogol receives from his parents on his fourteenth birthday (73). Sonja never receives such a gift, at any age, even though Instamatics were partly geared toward an emerging market of female consumers insisting on their own technological agency.<sup>13</sup> What is more, together with the un-wished-for camera, Gogol also receives the "new sketchbook, colored pencils and the mechanical pencil he asked for," which will, at the threshold of teenage self-discovery, lead to his blossoming artistic sensibility and, eventually, his professional trajectory (73). Time and again,

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patriarchy in our household. Our father was definitely the 'picture takin' man.' For a long time, cameras were both mysterious and off-limits for the rest of us. As the only one in the family who had access to the equipment, who could learn how to make the process work, he exerted control over our image. In charge of capturing our family history with the camera, he called and took the shots" (49).

12 The male narrator in the concluding story of *Interpreter of Maladies* similarly notes that they "bought an Instamatic camera ... and I took pictures of [Mala] in front of the Prudential building, so that we could send them to her parents" (196).

13 A large number of ads for Kodak's line of Instamatics, as well as related brands, were produced with women as a consumer demographic in mind. See, for example, *Click Americana – Memories and Memorabilia*, for gender-specific camera ads.

young Gogol will take photos or make sketches to hone his drawing and design skills—the basic equipment of his career as an architect.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, when Gogol is “thinking of declaring himself an architecture major,” he purchases “a paperback edition of Le Corbusier’s *Journey to the East*,” as if to suggest that—inversely paralleling the star architect’s formative eastbound trip—he too will document his own journey to the West in sketches, drawings, and hundreds of photographs, and has in fact already done so. Significantly as well, much like the binational background of the avant-garde modernist, who eventually changed his citizenship from Swiss to French and embodied an early form of transnationalism, Gogol’s sensibilities—both cultural and artistic—have been shaped by his Indo-American double exposure. And significantly, too, like the development of Le Corbusier’s craft before him—a man who would reinvent himself from Charles-Édouard Jeanneret into the moniker he is known by, again paralleling Gogol’s own re-naming—young Ganguli’s own artistic sensibilities are tied to his early exposure to photography, and usher into a profession that, to this day, and not coincidentally, is almost exclusively defined as male.<sup>15</sup>

Lahiri spotlights photographic inflections of gender further when the Gangulis upgrade to an SLR. Following Sonja’s birth, Gogol and his baby sister pose for family pictures in the living room, while “his father takes pictures with a new Nikon 35-millimeter camera. The shutter advances softly, repeatedly; the room is bathed in rich afternoon light” (62). Not only is it the male parent once more who appears, now, to have greater technical facility, including (in a *déjà vu* of Dr. Gupta) knowledge of photographic light conditions.<sup>16</sup> The fact that

14 Gogol partly follows in the footsteps of his maternal grandfather, who was a watercolor artist (147).

15 As Lahiri has observed numerous times, she—like Le Corbusier and Gogol—has different names and publishes under her pet name. Her other official names are Nilajana and Sudeshana (see Glassie 19). For Mani, such name-doubling “represents the ambivalence of immigrant identity” (78).

16 Careful about historical accuracy—and with the important exception of Kaushik in *Unaccustomed Earth*—Lahiri writes about photography that is (almost) exclusively analog, and the social mediations of texting and tweeting are not yet part of her characters’ patterns of communication. (The one exception: Dipkar Biswas in *The Lowland*, who shows Gauri photos of his wife and children on his iPhone [278].) They may look at digital maps, listen to CDs, trawl through data on their laptops, or, as in the case of Hema, see Kaushik’s digital uploads on his webpage, but mp3s and mp4s, as well as Androids and iPads are not yet part of her own text. And yet, the recurring Instamatic, as its name implies, processes snapshots immediately into retrievable and material photographs and features an all-in-one photochemical process that unfolds almost instantaneously in front of the observer’s eyes without the detour to a photo lab or chain-store pharmacy. For characters often unfamiliar with western technologies, yet eager to share memories in a pre-digital world,

Lahiri momentarily endows her young protagonist with the ability to register the workings of the shutter, as well as his own awareness of the luminescent texture of the session, suggests that his very perceptual apparatus is framed by the camera itself—what amounts to a photographic point of view.

A similar instance occurs when the Gangulis return to India as tourists and, in a postcolonial iteration of visual consumption, visit the Taj Mahal: “They admire its perfect symmetry and pose for photographs beneath the minarets from which tourists used to leap to their deaths.” As they circle around the massive plinth, Ashima says to Ashoke, “I want a picture here, just the two of us,” acknowledging the clichéd surcharge of the shrine to immortal love through the request for a singular photograph; and Ashoke, in turn, for perhaps the first time, steps from behind the camera and “teaches Gogol how to use the Nikon, how to focus and advance the film.” In an extension of the Instamatic and “under the blinding Agra sun” (Lahiri’s attention to light is telling), the father passes on the baton of technical finesse, not to his daughter but the son, who is by now well on his way to manipulate photographic space (85).<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, at the end of *The Namesake*, when the widowed Ashima decides to return to India, she can’t but ask her adult son to take some parting shots. Nikhil gets “his father’s Nikon, still sitting on the top shelf of Ashoke’s closet,” and while the emptiness in the room upsets him, finds that “the weight of the camera is solid, reassuring in his hands.” A familiar and familial reminder of his father’s presence, the camera lends substance to his memories and the final assignment he is on. He “takes the camera into his room to load a fresh battery, a new roll of film,” fully prepared to close the technological feedback loop between father, camera, and son (287).

But while the negotiations of gender and photography within the Ganguli household are largely paternal and patriarchal—a cultural leftover from their Indian origins—they are also largely benevolent and benign. At no time do Ashoke or Gogol see their control of the camera as a conscious act of power

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the simple and no-nonsense mechanics of the analog version of a digital point-and-shoot become of the essence.

- 17 In a later iteration of this pattern (which could easily make a separate essay), Kaushik in *Unaccustomed Earth* develops into a professional photographer in part because of the transmission of SLR from father to son. Hema remembers Kaushik returning from his first outing with “your father’s costly camera slung around your back,” which turns out to be “his father’s old Yashica” (237, 280). For Bidisha Banerjee, Kaushik’s lifelong commitment to taking pictures expresses his, forever failing, desire to recoup the lost homeland in the global diaspora. Instead of “providing him with roots and access to the past that would give him a secure sense of diasporic identity, photographs and photography simply exacerbate Kaushik’s sense of phantom loss and diasporic mourning” (446).

or domination over mother and sister/daughter. That dynamic shifts rather noticeably when Gogol enters into his relationship with Moushumi, a second-generation American-Indian, like him, who eventually becomes his wife. Instead of the portrayal of harmonious Kodak moments, the few photographs of Moushumi in *The Namesake* suggest her resistance to photographic control and a power imbalance in their relationship—even in instances when Gogol is wielding the camera. Rare moments, when they forgo the subdued glamor of “black-and-white-photographs” (219) for their parents’ more grandiose plans for their wedding, hint at a balance in decision making, but key scenes in Gogol and Moushumi’s life are framed within the lexicon of the lens and foreshadow the power differential, and differential agencies, in their relationship.

Philosophers of photography have drawn attention to the shot’s singular quality of temporal isolation. An image once burned onto an inscription surface lifts a moment out of the irreversible stream of time. As Walter Benjamin famously put it, when defining his much-discussed notion of aura: “A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be” (518). Lahiri suggests as much in *The Namesake* when Gogol hunts for old birthday images to verify Moushumi’s nebulous presence in his early life. Finding one, in an album assembled by his mother, “He tries to peel the image from the sticky yellow backing, to show [Moushumi] next time he sees her, but it clings stubbornly, refusing to detach cleanly from the past” (207). An almost philosophical reflection on the unrepeatability of existential presence and time, the photo also guards against projecting into a common future based on singular (and forced) moments of togetherness. The photograph, in fact, foreshadows the later couple’s eventual divorce, as when Gogol “stares straight at the lens,” while the young girl, curiously disengaged, is gazing beyond the frame and “looking away” (207).

An old passport photo of Moushumi on Gogol’s work desk, “her heavy-lidded eyes slightly lowered, looking to one side,” similarly suggests her subdued resistance to forms of control, photographic or otherwise (270). Taken as an official shot for purposes of travel, Moushumi symbolically averts her face from the apparatus of camera and state regulating her transit, just as it negates the image of a family idyll adjacent to it: “a photograph of [Gogol’s] mother and Sonia and himself at Fatehpur Sikri, salvaged from the father’s refrigerator door in Cleveland” (270). Unbeknownst to Gogol, but not the reader, he looks at it while Moushumi continues her affair with Dimitri at a conference in Florida, whom she first met years ago at the very place where the photo was taken: Paris.

It is presumably for that very reason that Moushumi’s greatest *piece de résistance* against pictorial control takes place in the City of Light—and the birthplace, not to say, dark room, of photography. When the couple travels

there as part of a conference Moushumi has been invited to attend, Gogol sees Paris precisely through the lenses of a tourist: bumbling insecurely through a culture whose language he doesn't speak, he takes numerous photographs and is attentive to the changing conditions of light. Moushumi, by contrast, wants to be identified as anything other than a tourist in the city she calls home, and equates photographs with clichéd inauthenticity, a second-order of experience.<sup>18</sup> Thus, when, on their last day in a café, "She looks beautiful to him, tired, the concentrated light of the dying day on her face, infusing it with an amber-pink glow," Gogol "wants to remember this moment, the two of them together, here," as if to compensate for the insecurities as a hubby in tow. But when he focuses his camera, Moushumi "shields her face with the back of her hand" and "refuses to indulge him, moving her chair out of view with a scrape on the pavement; she doesn't want to be mistaken for a tourist in this city, she says" (234). Leaving aside this renewed preview of their eventual separation and Moushumi's relocation to Paris, this passage most powerfully demonstrates her refusal to be controlled by a male gaze (even as, or precisely because, men stare at her constantly on the streets). She refuses to be catalogued as an objectified subject into the clichéd monuments of Paris, and lend credence to the male narrative of romantic bliss.

Significantly, it is in the language of optics and the pictorial history of Paris that Lahiri closes the shutter on Moushumi's marriage. While waiting for her lover to return, Moushumi takes an "oversized volume of photographs of Paris, by Atget" from Dimitri's bookshelves (267)—the photographer who "looked for what was unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift," and whose shots of Paris "work against the exotic, romantically sonorous names of the cities; they suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship" (Benjamin 2: 518). In a photographic overlay of images, as "the sun is directly behind her, and the shadow of her head spreads across the thick, silken pages," she drifts into a reverie, the solar close-up highlighting "a few strands of her hair strangely magnified, quivering, as if viewed through a microscope." When she awakens a moment later, the sun has shriveled to a "lone sliver," "like the gradual closing of a curtain," causing "the stark white pages" of Atget's photographs to "turn gray." The clean

18 Gogol's attention to light is a *déjà vu* of his family's visit to the Taj Mahal. However, unlike with the younger Moushumi, who feels at home in Paris, the Gangulis return to their country of origin as tourists and have no problem with the clichéd reputation of the Taj, and hence have their picture taken there. As Laxmi in Lahiri's story "Sexy" puts it, not without irony: the Taj is "the most romantic spot on earth . . . An everlasting monument to love" (*Interpreter* 92). Significantly, in view of this essay's second focus on death and photography, the Taj Mahal is a tomb and—next to the Egyptian pyramids—one of the most photographed burial sites on Earth.

sound of Dimitri's key entering the lock and "slicing sharply into the apartment" (267) may unlock new possibilities, but the language of light speaks resoundingly what would otherwise be left unsaid: the closing aperture of one chapter in Moushumi's, and Gogol's, life.

The foregrounding of the work of light and shadow in this paragraph suggests not only once more the formal centrality of optics and visual composition; it also demonstrates that Lahiri performs verbally and literarily what photography enacts chemically: an almost literal form of writing with light.<sup>19</sup> Unlike the female subjects-turned-objects in *The Namesake* and much of her work, Lahiri herself has the final say about verbal-visual representation. While reproducing the traditional structure of the photographic gaze that puts men behind and women's behinds in front of the camera, she ultimately subsumes that spectacular regime under her own point of view. Controlling the final shutter and aperture herself, she exposes the phallic fallacies of a photographic apparatus in need of re-vision and -calibration.

### 3 Total Recall Reloaded

The cultures of Europe and the West were, at the beginning of the twentieth century, generally habituated to the use of photographic image processing. If its status as art or craft was still widely debated—beginning, most prominently, with Charles Baudelaire's essay on "The Salon of 1859"—photographers like Nadar, Eugène Atget, and August Sander, among many others, had made a name for themselves and produced documentary work of aesthetic value. If cameras were not, as yet, everyday household items across the social spectrum—for reasons of cost and technical skill—their widespread use had percolated into the middle class and helped facilitate the (pre)modernist boom in portrait photography.

In colonial India, by contrast, private and commercial studios by native Indians were rarities in late-nineteenth century middle-class life, even though daguerreotype cameras were advertised in Calcutta a year after their invention in France and the first photographic societies, in such cities as Bombay and Madras, including the first exhibitions, emerged as early as the 1850s. Mostly, it was Victorian photographers such as Thomas Briggs, Samuel Bourne, Alexander Cunningham, and Dr. John Murray, who catalogued major architectural

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19 The foundational book in the history of photography, Henry Fox Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature* (1844), already suggests in its very title that photo/graphy is a form of writing with the rays of the sun.

sites and landscapes in the service of the Queen and the East India Company (“Photography in India”). Raja Deen Dayal, the Public Works surveyor turned court photographer from the 1880s on, was arguably the first Indian artist to achieve wide commercial success—with commissions from both Indian and English clients—and produced roughly 30,000 images in his lifetime, and when the sixth Nizam of Hyderabad recognized him with the honorific, “Bold Warrior of Photography,” he would help establish an emergent native tradition of documentary and portrait photography (Silverman).<sup>20</sup>

The point is that, while the technology transfer from West to East was surprisingly fast, portrait photography was, even well into the twentieth century, out of reach, both geographically and economically, for most Indians not part of the affluent and urban upper castes. Similarly, sittings and postproduction coloring were rarely done by amateur lens men (not women), but professional photographers, often in their own studios. That explains, in part, why Lahiri goes to great lengths to offer glimpses into the culture of ancestral photographs going back to pre- and post-Partition, and why her characters—educated and upwardly mobile—appreciate the rare photographic record. When Ashoke presents Gogol with a copy of *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol* on the eve of his fourteenth birthday, he “wonders how closely Gogol resembles himself at this age. But there are no photographs to document Ashoke’s childhood; not until his passport, not until his life in America, does visual documentation exist” (77). Similarly, when Subhash in *The Lowland* returns to India to honor his brother, Udayan’s “death portrait” had been cut out from a photo that “had been taken nearly ten years ago by a relative who owned a camera, one of the only pictures of the brothers that existed” (91).

The singular shot of Udayan (leaving aside the erasure of Subhash) points to the commemorative value of photography in Hindu culture and its suggestion of spiritual (and, at times, spiritistic) presence in the face of death. In a tradition that burns the body of the deceased, and eventually scatters the remains in the sacred Ganges, photographs of the departed suggest something like a virtual manifestation especially in the absence of tombstones or other

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20 Dayal’s work has also been described “as a site of subaltern agency.” While Dayal located himself within “the dominant power structures of the period”—wealthy British and Indian patrons whose position his work “served to glorify and reinforce”—his photographs also complicate colonial narratives of Indian history by, quite literally, shedding light on Indian culture through the gaze of the subaltern (*Dayal* 25). See Allana and Depelchin, *Unveiling India 1850-1910*, for the pioneering work of “the early lensmen” working in India, and Shilpi Goswami, Deepak Bharathan and Jennifer Chowdhury’s essay, “Photographers, Studios, Processes and Formats” in Citron & Allana, *Allegory & Illusion*, for a list of early photographers and their work in India (70-95).

memorializing markers. When Gogol cleans out the apartment of his suddenly deceased father in Ohio, his mother tells him, “Don’t bring anything back .... It’s not our way,” which he abides by except for the retrieval of some photographs (175–176). In *Unaccustomed Earth*, on the day of Kaushik’s mother’s death, his father “took every single photograph of her, in frames and in albums, and put them in a shoebox.” While allowing Kaushik to pick some for himself, he sealed the box with tape and “wasted no time giving away her clothes, her handbags, her boxes of cosmetics and colognes” (256). And when Kaushik himself tells Hema about his mother’s cancer while taking her to a hidden tomb (with camera slung around his neck), he notes: “It makes me wish we weren’t Hindu, so that my mother could be buried somewhere. But she made us promise we’ll scatter her ashes into the Atlantic” (249).

While Parul’s remains will, indeed, be sown into the Atlantic—her wish a mix of Western acculturation and Hindu spiritual practice—Kaushik also buries (but doesn’t burn) the more permanent photographic leftovers of his mother in a more enduring way. Protective of the image, images, and imago of his mother, he extricates the box of photographs from his step sisters, and, short of scattering them into the sea, in the easternmost state park of the United States, ends up not letting go but sinks them into the ground:

A slight lessening in the pressure of my fingertips and the ones I was holding would have blown away into that wild sea, scattering down to where my mother’s ashes already reside. But I could not bear that either, and so I put them back in the box and began to break the hardened ground. I only had a stick and a sharp-edged rock to work with and the hole was not impressive, but it was deep enough to conceal the box. I covered it with dirt and stones. (292)<sup>21</sup>

If Kaushik’s conflicted gesture encapsulates a profound oedipal fixation, and points to the bicultural sensibilities of mother and son, it also points to the significance of photography for postmortem commemoration in (perhaps not only) Hindu culture: entombing a box of photographs of the deceased into the earth, coffin-like, rather than letting it be dissolved by the salty bite of brine, suggests a more enduring presence and physical safe-keeping, with the

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21 While centering her essay on photography and Kaushik’s desire to mourn and recoup the lost homeland in the diaspora, Banerjee also observes that Kaushik’s burial of Parul’s photos suggests “the suppressive force in Kaushik’s largely unprocessed grief over his mother’s death,” just as it suggests “the possibility of returning to unearth the photographs (and all that they represent) at a later date” (451).

possibility of a repeat site visit, compared to its dissolution in Atlantic waters.<sup>22</sup> Kaushik himself says as much, as he ruminates on the, ultimately, commemorative or retentive qualities of his chosen profession: “And he knew that in his own way, with his camera, he was dependent on the material world, stealing from it, hoarding it, unwilling to let go” (309).<sup>23</sup>

In “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” André Bazin famously noted that the historical spectrum of the plastic arts—from Egyptian tombs to twentieth-century photography and film—is informed by a “mummy complex,” the longstanding cultural preoccupation with “the practice of embalming the dead” (9). And Rosalind Morris has noted that when colonial subjects were first photographed as anthropological curiosities, they often perceived “the camera as a parasitical technology whose capacity to produce vivacious imagery relied, precisely, on the evacuation of life from the living” (7). Having your picture taken—often in lengthy poses approximating *rigor mortis*—lifted the sitter instantaneously from the stream of time through a machine that froze temporality into a pictorial standstill.<sup>24</sup> Conversely, she has also noted, pace Roland Barthes, that nineteenth-century “anthropological” photography in particular (but extendable to photography of any color) was possessed of an

22 In a variant of Kaushik’s gesture, taking photographs of the dead prior to their cremation appears to be a not uncommon practice in contemporary India. See Michael Zhang’s documentary, “The Death Photographers,” and Shailaja Tripathi’s recent, corresponding article, “Life in Death,” in *The Hindu*. Paralleling the economics of photography a century earlier, these photographers cater to mostly rural populations unable to afford a camera but interested in having final photos taken of their loved ones. Interestingly, in *The Namesake*, when Gogol’s art class makes a field trip to the cemetery, his mother is aghast at the “American” desacralization of burial sites (which seems to have spilled over into India), but also visualizes the cremation of her parents in a quasi-photographic way: “In Calcutta, the burnings ghats are the most forbidden of places . . . and though she tries her best not to, though she was here, not there, both times it happened, she sees her parents’ bodies, swallowed by flames” (70).

23 The fundamentally life-affirming qualities of the camera are inverted in Kaushik and his mother’s association of photographic processing with chemical decomposition. When Kaushik returns to his darkroom setup in their basement, he recalls that “we would breathe in the chemical smells, their corrosiveness, from which my hands were protected by rubber gloves, nothing compared to what was taking place inside her body.” Parul, for her part, associates the darkroom with a tomb: “It must be something like this,” she observes, sitting in “that perfectly dark, silent, sealed-up space.” “This is how I want to think of it.” And yet, when she instructs Kaushik in the developing process, and times and supervises it (in a motif of the Fates that runs through *Unaccustomed Earth*), the mother also seems to be training the filial agent in her own photographic memorization (278).

24 As John Berger famously put it, “photography, because it stops the flow of life, is always flirting with death” (122).

allegorical imperative, whereby “people start to comport themselves in terms of the ideal images of cultural types and class profiles” (5) which is to say, the sitting subject and the photographer both strove for something like an essentialized portrayal of transcendent value. Photographic instantaneity and emblematic longevity are both vectors almost inextricably built into the photographic apparatus.

Pictorial violence and media-theoretical reflections of that sort are not Lahiri’s concern, much as she is committed to acknowledging and complicating cultural stereotypes, but it helps explain the close-knit feedback loop between the camera and death, and memory and mortality, in her work. While snapshots on the fridge celebrate the occasional moment, numerous photographs of relatives or ancestors are often unusually large, as if compensating for the absence of the deceased through pictorial magnification. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the supersized photograph of Parul in her parents’ Calcutta living room signifies a twice-lost daughter, who effectively died for them the first time when emigrating to the U.S., before eventually succumbing to cancer. Moreover, the re-animating power of the photograph appears to be so strong that the parents expect their dead daughter to walk in—“this in spite of the fact that a photograph of my mother, larger than life and draped with a tuberose garland, hung on their living-room wall” (253). Shortly before giving birth to Gogol, Ashima in *The Namesake* pictures “[a]n enormous black-and-white photograph of her deceased paternal grandfather” in her parents’ sitting room, as if seeking his spiritual blessing (5), and, years later, on the eve of their return to the United States after a long visit to India, Gogol “watches his parents standing in front of framed pictures of his dead grandparents on the walls, heads bowed, weeping like children” (86).

Photographic *memento mori* also enter *The Namesake*’s visual frame at ritual moments of commemoration. Unlike with the emblematic portraits of his grandparents in India, the fleeting image culture of the United States makes essentialized photographs redundant. Thus, when Gogol “is asked to sit in front of a picture of his father, as a priest chants verses in Sanskrit,” eleven days after Ashoke’s death, the family spends an entire day looking for a picture to frame. “But there are almost no pictures of his father alone, his father who was forever behind the lens.” Eventually, they decide “to crop one, of him and Ashima standing together years ago in front of the sea. He is dressed like a New Englander, in a parka and a scarf. Sonja takes it to CVS to have it enlarged” (181). It is a makeshift death portrait, in effect, without the posed qualities of anthropologized truths, yet the camera’s shutter slices Ashoke out of the heartbeat of life, commemorating as it does Ashoke’s metamorphosis from Indian patriarch to acclimated East Coast American, at least by outer appearances.

Ashoke's death portrait furthermore functions as a multiple marker with the commemorative power of a de facto grave. When Gogol returns from Yale on weekends, he returns "to the house in which his father's photograph, the one used during the funeral, hangs in a frame on a wall in the upstairs hallway" (188). Following Hindu tradition, both on the anniversary of Ashoke's death, and on his birthday (which they never celebrated when he was alive), "they stand together in front of the photograph and drape a garland of rose petals around the frame and anoint his father's forehead with sandalwood paste through the glass" (189). Gogol concludes that it "is the photograph more than anything that draws [him] back to the house again and again, and one day, stepping out of the bathroom on his way to bed and glancing at his father's smiling face, he realizes that this is the closest thing his father has to a grave" (189). A homing device and magnetic attractor with the sacred properties of a burial site, the photograph becomes a placeholder for the departed whose remains have long dematerialized.<sup>25</sup>

And yet, while emphasizing the spiritual and recollective power of the photograph, Lahiri also affirms the need for memory without the aid of the camera and, concomitantly, the power of literary narrative to communicate such memorization. It is, significantly, at crucial moments in *The Namesake* that Gogol has to commit threshold experiences, not to a light-sensitive plate, but to the memory folds of the human brain. One day during his childhood, and over the protestations of his mother that he is too little, Ashoke and Gogol venture out onto the northernmost tip of Cape Cod, the figural frontier for two generations of immigrants. Arduously wading through the sand, he hears his father cry out that they left the camera with his mother, "All this way, and no picture," observing further that, "We'll have to remember it then." When Gogol asks, "How long do I have to remember it?," his father retorts by appealing to the experiential power of the moment—and perhaps in the very light of the missing camera: "Try to remember it always .... Remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go" (186-187). Historical moments both large and small may be declared as such not through visual aids, but through acts of cognitive recall commensurate with lived significance.

The single most self-identical moment—the name change—similarly takes place without photographic documentation. Following a cagey debate with his

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25 Similar arcs of association are evident at Gogol's wedding, where "[o]fferings are made to pictures of their grandparents and his father" (222), and in the year 2000, when Ashima has sold the house and is about to move to India: "The walls now remind her of the house when they'd first moved in, bare except for the photograph of her husband, which will be the last thing she will remove" (278).

parents about the (de)merits of his “good,” though un-Indian, first name, Gogol eventually gets their reluctant approval for a change of name to Nikhil. No one, however, accompanies Gogol on this “legal rite of passage,” and when he steps out of the courtroom, “no one is waiting to commemorate the moment with flowers and Polaroid snapshots and balloons” (102). As with the hike to the lighthouse, Gogol’s singular act remains without photographic witness, and its momentousness is belied by the lack of pictures except its etching in his memory. Not every significant moment, Lahiri seems to say, is made significant by visual documentation. Memory itself, the ability of humans to think in temporal and recollective terms—however mysterious its synaptic and cognitive processes—serves as another, primal, filter, whose evolutionary fine-tuning translates lived experience into traces to be stored and filed away. Both are part of an entire machinery of recollection, through the body and its prosthetic extensions, humans have evolved to ensure their survival.

Hesitant about making any grandiose claims for the value of narrative for the survival of the species, Lahiri is yet careful to position her own medium of choice in relation to photography. Not only does she describe the most critical moments of memory formation in *The Namesake* in non-photographic terms, thus already suggesting the privileging of human memory and its literary representation in the novel. As part of “the archive of literature as the race’s high-level genome,” the novel is also part of humanity’s scriptive culture, and hence part of the memory function—albeit of rather recent origin—of any form of inscription (Powers, qtd. in Neilson). Gogol is despite his ostensible transformation haunted on almost every page by the written traces of his former name and the early memories people have of him. Written and cognitive storage, whether large or small, by far outweigh any photographic documentation of his life. Symptomatically, and symptomatic of the tension between competing media forms, Gogol upon seeing his name in *Short Story Classics* reacts: “The sight of it printed in capital letters on the crinkly page upsets him viscerally. It’s as though the name were a particularly unflattering snapshot of himself that makes him want to say in defense, “That’s not really me” (89).

What is more, while Lahiri at time coopts the strategies of photography to enact a form of writing with light, she also probes the formal blind spots of the medium. Shuttling back and forth between the past and the present tense, and eventually an imaginary future, *The Namesake* orchestrates the capacity of literary narrative to negotiate between the one-time immediacy of a photograph and the more durational, retrospective and futuristic, texturedness of the novel. The novel significantly concludes with an act of reading and recollection over the act of taking pictures. Asked by Ashima to take some Christmas shots before her return to India on the eve of the millennium—a threshold moment

for both mother and son—Gogol finally re-discovers, after about two decades, the dusty copy of his father's gift: *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*. He abandons his assignment, and rather than reaching for his father's Nikon sitting on the shelf plunges into the world of print. As the novel's last line states, with a further gesture toward the novel's temporal resilience: "For now, he starts to read." *Gogol*, it turns out, is an even stronger identifier than the Nikon, for both father and son, or, to put it differently: print, at least for the time being, has the upper hand in the game of naming and commemoration. If the Nikon is finally unable to capture Gogol's transition to Nikhil—a photographic namesake—a life-saving text, in the final analysis, ascertains that his good, and literary, namesake will overshadow any photographic representation of himself: From Gogol to Nikhil and back to Gogol, indeed.<sup>26</sup>

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26 Such photographic or resonant associations are quite common in Lahiri's work. In *Uncustomed Earth*, Kaushik's name echoes Yashica, the brand name of his father's camera, with which he starts his career as a photographer. And the alter ego of the innocent Subhash in *The Lowland* has its partially inverted namesake, if you will, in Holly's young son, Joshua (65).

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