

The United States has long prided itself on being a nation of immigrants, and certainly immigrants or their immediate descendants have long made valuable contributions to the nation's literature. Wave after wave of immigrants from many nations—at first mainly from Europe, but then (more recently), mostly from other continents or regions—have added both to the population and to the culture of the country. Immigrant writers and their children have brought with them both memories and dreams, both experiences and aspirations. Sometimes they have found their status as immigrants exciting; sometimes they have found it exasperating; usually their attitudes have been mixed. In the process of sharing their thoughts and experiences with readers of fiction, they have often enriched both American literature and the English language.

In her introductory essay to this volume, Natalie Friedman offers helpful reminders of the history of the often close relations between immigrants and short fiction. She suggests that short stories—because of their simultaneous brevity and possibilities for complexity—have frequently been ideal forms for immigrant writers. Stories can often be written more quickly and read more widely than novels, and many have appeared first in periodicals especially designed for immigrant readers. Friedman discusses the early twentieth-century Jewish writer Abraham Cahan as a good example of larger trends. In so doing, she also provides valuable background information about the roots of American immigrant short fiction in the writings of immigrants who often came from Europe.

A similar emphasis on an earlier writer from Europe appears in Solveig Zempel's illuminating essay on the short fiction of the Norwegian American writer O. E. Rølvaag. As Zempel notes, writers and their works “do not exist in isolation; instead, they are embedded in a wide variety of historical situations. Discussing those

situations in broadly general terms can be useful, but even more useful, in some respects, is an examination of a particular author in light of contexts both specific and broad.” Many of the aspects of Rølvaag’s life and career that she explores will seem quite similar to the experiences of numerous other immigrant writers, both of the distant and the very recent past. Moreover, Zempel’s essay nicely exemplifies *how* a writer’s life and works can be related to their historical contexts. The kinds of topics Zempel discusses, and the kinds of methods she uses, are relevant to every other writer discussed in this book.

In two additional “contextual” essays, Robert C. Evans first offers an overview of sources relevant to the critical reception of recent immigrant short fiction, and then he shows how one kind of critical approach (formalism) can be used to explicate such fiction. In the first of the two essays, Evans surveys some of the numerous works (especially reference works and scholarly essays and monographs) that can help readers make sense of the ever-expanding number of short stories by recent immigrant writers. In the second essay, he suggests that formalist approaches, which involve the very careful “close reading” of literary texts *as* literary texts, can be among the most fruitful ways of treating immigrant writing as complex literature rather than simply as evidence for historical or sociological generalizations. In this essay, Evans focuses on the relatively neglected genre of “flash fiction,” in which individual word choices matter even more obviously than they do in longer forms of short fiction.

Finally, in the last of the four opening “contextual” essays, Anupama Arora compares and contrasts the works of two of the most important of contemporary immigrant writers of short fiction—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (originally from Nigeria) and Jhumpa Lahiri (born to parents from India). Both, she notes, have won “major awards—the Pulitzer and the Guggenheim for Lahiri and the Orange Broadband and the MacArthur for Adichie—and have published novels and short fiction that have been on best-seller lists.” Both writers also illustrate a trend that will be obvious in the rest of the book: the fact that many of the best recent immigrant

authors of short stories come from regions outside Europe, which for centuries had been the source of most freely chosen immigration to America. Many slaves, of course, were brought forcibly from Africa, but Adichie is one of a growing number of Africans who have recently resettled voluntarily on this continent. Arora shows how much the writings of an African and a “South Asian” writer have in common, especially in terms of the themes about which they write.

The next major section of the book consists of a variety of “Critical Readings” of numerous works by a real cross-section of recent immigrant authors. John Paul Russo, for instance, offers insightful readings of two short stories (“The Angel Esmeralda” and “Baader-Meinhof”) by Don DeLillo, an author of Italian American heritage who is better known for his novels than his short fiction. Although born in the US himself, DeLillo grew up in a neighborhood full of immigrants and remembers speaking a mixture of Italian and English at home. He symbolizes, in a sense, the receding influence of immigrants from Europe on recent American short fiction.

More typical of the rest of the present volume is the essay that follows Russo’s. In that ensuing piece, King-Kok Cheung argues that “Yiyun Li’s ‘The Princess of Nebraska’ and ‘Gold Boy, Emerald Girl’ bring out the pressure on Chinese gays and lesbians to lead compromised lives so as to create the semblance of heterosexual families and to avoid the homophobic gaze of their larger societies. The suspense in reading these two stories lies in ferreting out the secrets and pains the characters try to hide from one another and even from themselves.” As is common in much recent literary scholarship, Cheung explores alienation that is often both sexual and ethnic. Fifty years ago, Asian American writers dealing with “gay” themes would have been highly unusual, both ethnically and in their willingness to tackle sexual issues that were once taboo. Today, both Asian American and gay writers are far more prominent than was once the case.

In another essay on a Chinese American writer, Te-hsing Shan discusses two short story collections by Ha Jin, an immigrant author whose rise to prominence has been nothing short of astonishing.

As Shan notes, Ha Jin has won a number of prestigious awards, including the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction (for *Under the Red Flag*, 1996), the PEN/Hemingway Award (for *Ocean of Words*, 1997), the National Book Award (for *Waiting*, 1999), the PEN/Faulkner Award (for *Waiting*, 2000, and *War Trash*, 2005), and the Asian American Literary Award (for *The Bridegroom*, 2001). His 2014 novel, *A Map of Betrayal*, was a *Christian Science Monitor* Best Book of the Year. In recognition of his literary achievements, he was elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2006) and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2014).

This list of achievement suggests that the US still welcomes and celebrates talented writers from abroad in ways and to degrees that might seem extremely unusual in other countries. Asian American writers have been among the most successful of all immigrant authors and perhaps none more so than Ha Jin.

Several subsequent essays focus, however, on another group of writers who have also made a huge impact on recent American fiction in general (and short fiction in particular). These are writers who are either from (or closely associated with) Spanish-speaking countries. Bridget Kevane, for instance, explores the themes of silence and language in stories by Ernesto Quiñonez. Quiñonez, she notes, was “born in 1969, of an Ecuadorian father and a Puerto Rican mother” and “is best known for his dynamic portraits of New York City’s Spanish Harlem, *el barrio*, in his two novels *Bodega Dreams* (2000) and *Chango’s Fire* (2004), as well as in his short stories. Quiñonez’s own childhood,” Kevane reports, “was spent in *el barrio* and all of his fiction is firmly rooted in this neighborhood’s gritty and yet vibrant streets.”

In another essay on another writer highly familiar with the Spanish language and Caribbean culture, David A. Colón discusses “Heroic Insecurity in Junot Díaz’s *Drown* and *This Is How You Lose Her*,” two collections of short fiction. Díaz, an immensely gifted writer who was born in the Dominican Republic, rose to prominence with his 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, for which he was awarded the 2008 Pulitzer Prize. Many critics regard

him as one of the most lively, inventive American authors writing today, and his rapid and sustained success suggests, once more, that the US remains a country open to, and invigorated by, influences from other cultures. The same argument might be made about the career of Edwidge Danticat, who was born in Haiti (a nation right next door to the Dominican Republic) and who has regularly been winning awards and receiving honorary degrees since at least 1994. Danticat's short fiction is discussed in Rebecca Fuchs's essay "Resignifying Wounds Through Silences in Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*." Once again, the US has done itself great credit by being so ready to honor a writer who reflects the nation's ongoing multinational, multicultural heritage. Finally, in another essay on another talented writer with close links to a Caribbean nation, Alli Carlisle explores "Experimentation and Reference in Ana Menéndez's *Adios, Happy Homeland!*" Menéndez, although born in the United States, is the daughter of Cuban immigrants and remains centrally concerned with her Cuban heritage.

The next several essays in the "critical readings" section of this book focus on writers associated with areas far to the east of the Caribbean. Randa Jarrar, for instance, is identified in various ways with such places as Palestine (where her father was born), Egypt and Greece (through her mother), and Kuwait and Egypt (where Jarrar herself has lived). Jarrar is an enormously talented writer, and an essay by Robert Evans tries to do justice to Jarrar's literary skills rather than being mainly concerned with the cultural or sociological implications of her work. In another essay dealing with writers from outside the Western Hemisphere, Maryse Jayasuriya explores two short stories similar in themes and methods: "the Indian-American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter' (1998) and the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 'The Thing Around Your Neck' (2009)." Both stories deal with epistolary topics and techniques, so that discussion of one work helps illuminate discussion of the other.

Finally, Brian Yothers discusses four different works by one of the most successful of all recent immigrant writers of short fiction, Jhumpa Lahiri, who was born in London to parents from India before

she immigrated to the United States. Lahiri's work is the subject of much recent writing about immigrant authors and their works. And, since the book that first brought her to prominence was a collection of short stories, she seems an appropriate figure with whom to end this wide-ranging collection of essays. One finishes the collection with a real sense of the strength of immigrants' contribution to American literature and culture and also with genuine pride in the nation's welcoming reception of these new and distinct voices.

# Divinity and Ekphrasis: DeLillo's Short Fiction, 1990 to 2015

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John Paul Russo

Don DeLillo has worked only sporadically in short fiction and, excepting pieces that he incorporated into his novels, has published only seventeen stories from 1960 to the present, or about one every three years. By contrast, Hemingway brought out *The First Forty-Nine Stories* in mid-career (he was 39). From 1990 to the present, DeLillo has published five stories—"The Angel Esmeralda," "Baader-Meinhof," "Midnight in Dostoevsky," "Hammer and Sickle," "The Starveling"—so few that when in 2011 he collected his stories in *The Angel Esmeralda*, he had to reach back to 1979 to make a book, no hefty volume at that (213 pp.). This is DeLillo's first collection of short fiction (he is 79). Further, his choice of the title story, "The Angel Esmeralda" (1994), is something of a genre pretender in that it had already been incorporated into a longer work, *Underworld*, in 1997. Still, in their bibliography, Gardner and Nel keep this story in the short fiction category because of the revisions that the author had made in its transition from stand-alone fiction to novel segment.

"The Angel Esmeralda" epitomizes many of the writer's central themes, from the media, spectacle, and consumer culture, to fear and violence, discipline, and redemption. The story is set among the ethnic neighborhoods of the Bronx, where DeLillo grew up and attended a Jesuit high school and Jesuit Fordham University. The elderly and fiercely idealistic Sister Edgar and the young, practical Sister Grace perform errands of mercy into the most run-down sections of the Bronx to deliver food and medicine. The nuns are a study in generational contrast: Sister Edgar insists on wearing the ancient habit, recites the Baltimore Catechism as litany, and detects signs of moral decay in bad grammar, misspelling, and dirt: a man with cancer wants to kiss her "latex hands" (A 84). (Sister Edgar has a touch of Christopher Durang's bossy Sister Mary Ignatius.)

Secular in dress, Sister Grace is almost as secular in outlook, less imaginative than her counterpart, though no less courageous. On their missions into the slums of the 1990s, a far cry from the vibrant heyday of these communities in the 1920s and 30s, the nuns encounter sickness of every kind, as well as drugs, hunger, AIDS, cocaine babies, and more. One sentence could be their Homeric epithet—for they are heroines—as they make their rounds: “They rode the elevators and walked down the long passageways.” They visit the diabetic amputee, the two blind women who share a seeing-eye dog, the five small children on a bed being minded by a ten-year-old, and many others who survive in flats without heat, lights, or water (A 83–85; U, 245).

The nuns are assisted by Ismael Muñoz, a muralist, and the street kids whom he organizes for car-spotting (abandoned cars can be sold for scrap to buy groceries) and graffiti-writing. One of DeLillo’s many surrogate artists (Kavaldo 153), Ismael spray-paints a memorial angel on a tenement wall every time a child dies in the neighborhood; “angels in blue and pink covered roughly half the high slab,” with the name and cause of death beneath: “TB, AIDS, beatings, drive-by shootings, blood disorders, measles, general neglect and abandonment at birth, left in dumpster, forgot in car, left in Glad bag Xmas eve” (A 76; U 235). The nuns inquire after a twelve-year-old homeless child, Esmeralda Lopez, who eludes their every effort to find her. In the second half of the story, the nuns learn that Esmeralda was raped and thrown from a roof, probably where she had been sleeping (this half of the story figures prominently in the climax of *Underworld*). The savage brutality of the crime stuns even this hard-bitten neighborhood.

Soon after Ismael paints the newest angel on the wall, word spreads about a strange apparition in the “bottommost” Bronx, a point of ultimacy, amid “industrial desolation that breaks your heart with its fretful Depression beauty” (A 94). There, a billboard advertising Minute Maid Orange juice is unevenly lighted owing to broken or unreplaced bulbs. The ad features “a vast cascade of orange juice pouring diagonally from top right into a goblet”—not a glass, a goblet—“that was handheld at lower left” by a “perfectly

formed” female hand (A 96). Each night, at eight minute intervals, the headlights of a commuter train sweep across the “dimmiest” part of the billboard so that, for a split second in flashing light, the face of the murdered girl, appears above a misty lake, probably the effect of an undersheet from a previous ad showing through. Esmeralda’s apparition overwhelms a dozen women who “whooped and sobbed, a spirit, a godsbreath passing through the crowd” (A 98). Standing among the Charismatics, and beneath the Minute Maid’s “rainbow of bounteous juice,” Sister Edgar experiences its “verifying force,” its “animating spirit” (A 99; U 819). With each passing night the frenzied crowds grow larger, like the cult scene in Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita* (a possible influence). While Sister Grace deplores such “tabloid superstition” and refuses to participate in a “spectacle of bad taste,” Sister Edgar sternly admonishes her with Pope Gregory I’s “Don’t pray to pictures, pray to saints” (A 96; U 819). She believes in the possibility of a miracle and defends the billboard picture with its “flowing,” “pouring” juice, which is a sign of God’s sanctifying grace (A 96, 98, 100; U 820). She joins in universal prayer: “Pour forth we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy grace” (A 102; U 816). The billboard ad is eventually changed and the media circus ends. In *Underworld*, the media reports may be dialed up on a new website: *miraculum.com*.

The story is among the strongest expressions of DeLillo’s immanentist frame of mind, Italian American Catholicism combines the concept of a single transcendent deity with the belief in the local presence or immanence of the divine, often through intermediaries, within everyday life. Although God is the *mysterium tremendum*, he reveals himself in the sacraments, ritual, and the Church, the saints and holy people, works of mercy, prayer, festa, food, nature at large, and the “quotidian” (U 542). This blend of transcendence and immanence may be contrasted with strict Calvinist Protestantism, which holds that God “participates in the universe he created and controls it but is in no way incorporated in it” (Swanson 2). Immanence with its affinities to Greco-Roman and Old Italic paganism assigns enormous authority to the artistic image. For the southern Italian (DeLillo’s family had emigrated from Molise), the divine expresses

itself in and through the object; devotional pictures, statues of local saints (some not officially recognized), rosaries, ex-votos, yard and roadside shrines (*edicole*), crèches, frescoes, colorful processions, all attest to the fact that “Italian Catholics are drawn to activities with a strong emphasis upon the concrete and the visible” (Carroll 69); “the invisible is known through the visible” (Praz 414). The physical and moral universe is crisscrossed by innumerable correspondences, linking God as the Absolute to the God of pantheistic participation. One of the lessons of immanentism, one that substantiates DeLillo’s Aquinian outlook, is that “everything is connected” (*U* 131, 289, 408, 776, 825, 826). If you cannot fathom the meaning, think hard and wait and think harder because “everything connects in the end” (*U* 465). In such analogical thinking, any one thing in the natural world may potentially illuminate some other thing, and the object participates to varying degrees “in the vast hierarchy of being which reaches to God” (Ross 290).

Given his religious and cultural grounding, DeLillo works in the incarnationist (spirit made flesh) mode, which, to a greater or lesser degree, informs one segment of his fictional world. The smallest details in “The Angel Esmeralda” are integrated within the overall web of correspondences. The train’s headlight is a secularized version of divine *lumen*. As in St. Bonaventure’s mystical theology, DeLillo treats light as both a physical and metaphysical entity, the “original metaphor for spiritual realities” (Eco 46, 50). In the advertisement, the “goblet” continuously filling with or pouring out bright orange (golden?) juice is the Cup or Grail, which is the plenitude of grace or “food-supplying talisman” originally associated with the female and “reproductive energy” (West 73–74). Painted high up, “angel” Esmeralda ascends the kind of wall from which she had been thrown. She is now the “Minute Maid,” the intercessor quick to the rescue of lost souls because she was a runner, a “running fool” (*A* 92), like Erasmus’s Christ the Fool. She now wears the finest footwear, “a pair of white Air Jordans,” which recall Christ baptized in the waters of the River Jordan (she was painted in pink and “aqua” pants: “water”). The innocent child is linked to the purity of heavenly “air” reinforced by the “white” color, and the name of a champion,

Michael Jordan, who jumped so high it seemed he could fly (like an airline, Air Jordan). Ismael employs an old hand-powered hoist to dangle an assistant, who can paint the epitaph: “PETECTED IN HEAVEN” as she was unprotected on earth, abandoned by her mother, an “addict” (A 82). It is, comments Ismael, “without a letter misspell” (*sic*) (A 93)—not quite, much to Sister Edgar’s dismay—and in the style of “the great gone era of wildstyle graffiti” (A 92, 93). Ismael’s assistant is “Juano,” *Johnny*, John the Baptist, the “voice of one crying in the wilderness” (John 1:23). The newborn “left in Glad bag Xmas eve” (A 76: U 235), possibly exposed to die, is another image of the Christ Child, whose traces of gladness have been x’d out in a darkening world. A common consumer item, the Glad bag of Santa Claus will not bring good tidings this Christmas. In his poem “The Bag,” George Herbert likens Christ’s spear wound to a post-bag carried on the side in which one puts letters to God.

Spanish for emerald, the Hispanic Esmeralda is possessed of a jewel of great price, her ever-living soul. In medieval symbology, the color green signifies both nature and hope (cf., the “green cloth at Verona,” Dante, *Inf.* XV: 122). “Emerald” appears as an English word only once in the story and in the sections of *Underworld* where the revised story appears. There, it symbolizes the resolution of chance and design within an evolutionary perspective. The “spurt of blank matter chances to make an emerald planet” or a “dying star,” life or death, amid the inscrutable “serenity of immense design” (A 93; U 817): spirit, nature, hope.

When DeLillo revised “The Angel Esmeralda” for *Underworld*, he expanded upon his notion of the sacred by adding a sentence: “Among the hardest cases in the tenement corridors, Sister Grace believed the proof of God’s creativity eddied from the fact that you could not surmise the life, even remotely, of his humblest shut-in” (U 246). The abject tenement dwellers challenge Grace’s imaginative empathy under extreme conditions (“hardest,” “humblest”), so that she intimates the plenitude of the sacred. God bestows “grace” upon the nun, true to her name, in her effortful attempts to “surmise,” to make the imaginative leap and narrow the distance between herself and the abject. An eddy is a contrary, disruptive motion within a

current: the whirling of the spirit against its resistance, the non-spirit, Coleridge's "eddy of her [Nature's] living soul" ("Ode: To Dejection"). The contraries of analogy are near/remote, humble/exalted, shut-in/boundless, death/creation. "Something in me comes alive when I come into this area," said Sister Marty, a South Bronx aid worker interviewed by Robert Orsi, "I feel God's presence more strongly here than anywhere else" (1). The divine analogue for this spiritual action traces to the book of Matthew. The Lord addresses the righteous at the Last Judgment: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me." When the righteous do not recollect seeing the Lord in their works of charity, He replies, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me" (24:35–40).

Although DeLillo did not employ the incarnationist mode directly in the other stories of *The Angel Esmeralda*, it remained a resource to which he could repair as the occasion demanded. One of the most impressive of the late stories, sharing the use of ekphrasis (literary description of a work of art) with "The Angel Esmeralda," is "Baader-Meinhof." The title refers to Gerhard Richter's cycle of fifteen paintings, *October 18, 1977* (1988), which are based on newspaper and police photographs of members of the Baader-Meinhof gang or Red Army Faction (RAF). This left-wing group had terrorized Germany beginning in the 1970s and had provoked a national crisis of conscience, similar to what happened in Italy during the same period with the *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades). DeLillo could have seen the Baader-Meinhof cycle in 1990, when it was on tour in the United States; or in 1995, when MoMA purchased the cycle for a reported \$3 million dollars; or, most likely, in 2000–2001 when the museum held its *Open Ends* millennial exhibition. "Baader-Meinhof" appeared in the *New Yorker* on April 1, 2002, in the midst of a fourth exhibition, MoMA's major retrospective of Richter's works. In the wake of 9/11, his cycle had gathered new resonance and reawakened intense controversy; by the time DeLillo's story appeared, Richter's series was being hailed as one of the masterpieces of Western art since 1945.

# Works of Contemporary Immigrant Short Fiction

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The following is a chronological listing of recent stories and short story collections by and/or about:

## Arab Americans

Geha, Joseph. *Through and Through: Toledo Stories*. 1990.

Noble, Frances Khirallah. *The Situe Stories*. 2000.

Serageldin, Samia. *Love Is Like Water and Other Stories*. 2009.

Orfalea, Gregory. *The Man Who Guarded the Bomb: Stories*. 2010.

## Armenian Americans

Antreassian, Antranig & Ardavast (Jack) Antreassian. *The Cup of Bitterness and Other Stories*. 1979.

Bedrosian, Margaret & Leo Hamalian, eds. *Crossroads: Short Fiction by Armenian American Writers*. 1992.

## Chinese Americans

Chin, Frank. *The Chinaman Pacific and Frisco R.R. Co.: Short Stories*. 1988.

Ping, Wang. *American Visa: Short Stories*. 1994.

Chang, Lan Samantha. *Hunger: A Novella and Stories*. 1998.

Jen, Gish. *Who's Irish?: Stories*. 1999.

Li, Yiyun. *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers: Stories*. 2005.

Ping, Wang. *The Last Communist Virgin: Stories*. 2007.

## Cuban Americans

Milanés, Cecilia Rodríguez. *Oye, What I'm Gonna Tell You: Stories*. 2015.

## Czech Americans

Slouka, Mark. *Lost Lake: Stories*. 2012.

**Robert C. Evans** is I. B. Young Professor of English at Auburn University at Montgomery, where he has taught since 1982. In 1984, he received his PhD from Princeton University, where he held Weaver and Whiting fellowships as well as a university fellowship. In later years, his research was supported by fellowships from the Newberry Library, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Mellon Foundation, the Huntington Library, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Philosophical Society, and the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

In 1982, he was awarded the G. E. Bentley Prize and in 1989 was selected Professor of the Year for Alabama by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. At AUM, he has received the Faculty Excellence Award and has been named Distinguished Research Professor, Distinguished Teaching Professor, and University Alumni Professor. Most recently he was named Professor of the Year by the South Atlantic Association of Departments of English.

He is one of three editors of the *Ben Jonson Journal* and is a contributing editor to the John Donne *Variorum Edition*, the author or editor of over thirty books (on such topics as Ben Jonson, Martha Moulsworth, Kate Chopin, John Donne, Frank O'Connor, Brian Friel, Ambrose Bierce, Amy Tan, early modern women writers, pluralist literary theory, literary criticism, twentieth-century American writers, American novelists, Shakespeare, Renaissance poetry, and seventeenth-century English literature), as well as the author of roughly three hundred published or forthcoming essays or notes (in print and online) on a variety of topics, especially dealing with Renaissance literature, critical theory, women writers, short fiction, and literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.