

**Race, Immigration, and
American Identity in the Fiction
of Salman Rushdie, Ralph
Ellison, and William Faulkner**

Randy Boyagoda

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To my parents, Ivor Boyagoda and June Boyagoda

Preface

We cannot study American literature and culture in the early twenty-first century without considering its global dimensions. These gained in consequence over the course of the prior century and resulted from unprecedented forms of migration and immigration, and from the muscular reach and pull of American culture and commerce. This situation has stimulated many writers to imagine the effects of new cultural and demographic mobility on conventional notions of national identity. This book attends to the efforts of three novelists along these lines. It argues that fiction by Salman Rushdie, Ralph Ellison, and William Faulkner register the destabilizing effect of immigrants on concepts of American identity in their imagined versions of the United States. The first chapter situates the book's interests in the wider contexts of contemporary American literary studies, globalization theory, and U.S. southern studies. This chapter proposes that Rushdie, Ellison, and Faulkner organize their representations of American-ness according to competing visions of national identity. Faulkner and Ellison each wrestle with an internal hybridity arising from ratios of native black and white. By contrast, Rushdie emphasizes an external hybridity premised upon unceasing global immigration. The book then analyzes the implications for imagined American identity as defined by an uprooted cosmopolitan's account of U.S. experience. Its second chapter argues that Salman Rushdie shifts the interests of his early fiction—postcolonial migrants to the Old World—to neocolonial immigrants to the New World whose possibilities for self-realization are preemptively defined by America's military, economics, and cultural presence in the Third World. This chapter establishes Rushdie's imagined America, a 1990s global metropolis, as the questionable and humorous fulfillment of Ellison's and Faulkner's worries about the nation's interests and composition if these were exclusively circumscribed by immigrant presences. The third chapter argues that Ralph Ellison juxtaposes the Great Migration with the

New Immigration to suggest troubling consequences of the nation's failure to recognize the a-priori American-ness of its black population. Seeking cultural integration between native blacks and whites, Ellison depicts the historical injustices, linguistic confusions, and political dangers posed by Eastern European immigrants who gain recognition as Americans before southern blacks in pre-WWII New York. The fourth chapter argues that William Faulkner regards the presence of Italian immigrants in the U.S. as undermining his efforts to imagine an America free to resolve persistent tensions between North and South, black and white, rural and urban. Alert to the 1920s nativist movement and to southern debates over the New Immigration, Faulkner imagines racially indeterminate, mobile Italian newcomers upsetting internal balances that were necessary for rectifying America's and the South's historical failings. The fifth chapter contends that American identity, whether imagined as black and white or as a series of migratory mixings, obscures a primordial hybridity represented by Native Americans. The study concludes by addressing the responsibilities of twenty-first-century scholars of American literature and culture to make sense of the field's global contours, and by considering the historical and intellectual advantages and disadvantages that foreign writers meet in trying to imagine their way into the American literary tradition.

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Chapter One

Imagining Nation and Imaginary Americans

The first thing you have to understand is that this is a strange country. There is no logic to it or to its ways. In fact, it's been half-crazy from the beginning and it's got so many crazy crooks and turns and blind alleys in it, that half the time a man can't tell where he is or who he is.

—Ralph Ellison, *Juneteenth*

For all his transcendent rhetoric, Emerson's ambitions for America were rather narrowly focused: "though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to [an American] but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till" (29). Both figuratively and literally, Emerson's judgment relies on a rich, organic image in this early moment from "Self-Reliance" (1841). The source of an American's abilities, and the source of his responsibilities, is the plot he tills in the ground beneath his feet. Such a foundation, which William Faulkner later characterized as his "postage stamp of native soil," is the local space from which the American artist springs and from which he receives the fullest inspiration. For Emerson, and for later writers such as Faulkner and Ralph Ellison, by connecting deeply to his local origins, the American artist accesses the universal good and connects that little parcel of land to the wider nation and to the wider world.

Fourteen years after "Self-Reliance," Walt Whitman sought to take up this Emersonian challenge with *Leaves of Grass* (1855). His efforts disclose the variegated and cacophonous terrain of the idealized ground that Emerson evoked: the poet's vision takes in "Not only the free Utahan, Kansian, or Arkansian . . . not only the free Cuban . . . not merely the slave . . . not Mexican, native, or Flatfoot, or negro from Africa . . . Chinese with his transverse eyes. . . . Bedowee—or wandering nomad—. . . [but peoples] of this country and every country" (ll. 32, 35). In trying to

encompass the entirety of America, Whitman reveals its heterogeneity; he dedicates his poetry, as does Salman Rushdie his fiction some one hundred and fifty years later, to embodying it in its particularities. This is only one of countless lists from *Leaves of Grass*, in which we see a series of carefully balanced distinctions that together constitute the wholeness of the nation: between individuals internal to the United States and external; between newcomers to the country from across oceans and across the continent; between indigenous peoples rooted in the land for centuries and wanderers moving across it. The American artist trying to represent a nation so composed must, indeed, "contain multitudes" (l. 1316).

Between Whitman and Emerson, major influences upon America's cultural self-comprehension, we can discern a submerged tension between one's commitments to the ideal purity of a local setting and to the epic multiplicity of the nation's pluralist composition, between America defined by place and America defined by people. Both paths are intended to assist in determining what "America" means as a nation, a culture, and an identity. For Emerson, there is that single kernel of corn; brought to maturity in a well-tilled field, it provides nourishment enough for the proto-Gramscian artist and his community. For Whitman, it is a field of manifold growths; his artist and nation find vitality only through that variety. Writers seeking to till and sing of America in the twentieth century have had to negotiate between Emerson's proudly native recommendations and Whitman's explosively pluralist renderings. Such a challenge in turn provokes a series of questions: Do Americans define themselves according to geographic, historical, and blood continuities within a particular space—the farming community nation that Thomas Jefferson envisioned—or according to the disruption of such continuities through mobility across particular spaces—the so-called nation of immigrants that started with the Puritan arrivals? Given the heterogeneous composition of American space since the first encounter between Indian and European, how do we determine the nature of a U.S. national identity? Moreover, since Americans have been a migratory people from the nation's inception, how do we ascertain when the mobile outsider has become a rooted native? In a related vein, what constitutes assimilation, and how does it occur, given racial, historical, and geographic differences and parallels amongst past, present, and future Americans? Just how desirable or necessary is such an ambition, as a means of indicating that one is truly American? Finally, how have writers variously represented and understood the complex triangulation of national identity, geography, and movement, as these terms together have defined, questioned, and redefined "America" and "American"?

Reading a contemporary postcolonial writer alongside two modern, native-born figures, this study seeks to extend back to the turn of the twentieth century a radical awareness that the terms for defining “America” and “American” are under continuous revision as local American spaces and peoples become increasingly connected to the world at large. A primary contention is that the presence of unprecedented new immigrants—Italians in the U.S. South in, 1900s; Eastern Europeans and Caribbean islanders in New York in the 1930s and 1940s; and Third World migrants throughout America from the 1950s through the 1990s—forces and enables writers to complicate their representations of racial, historical, and economic components of American life. The three major writers under consideration, Salman Rushdie, Ralph Ellison, and William Faulkner, commit their work to imagining how under-recognized Americans come to be considered fully national citizens—or don’t—and also the means by which this process plays out. Attempted assertions of American-ness, however, often involve either the stigmatization or studied ignorance of another group competing for similar recognition. This dynamic often plays out along a line dividing minority natives from non-traditional immigrants, as these groups find themselves in unexpectedly close contact and competition with each other. Trying to solve the difficulties of national belonging and identity that arise in such encounters, these writers have sought to establish normative relationships between language and national identity while interrogating the term “American” as a historical and geographical signifier and, in fact, as a practice. Alongside these efforts, each writer seeks variously to defend, introduce, or reject forms of national identity that were either initially threatened by new waves of immigration or previously rejected due to racial and geographic prejudices.

Understood in its historical context, each writer’s work reveals a crisis of national identity to which he responds by seeking to determine—in form, language, and style—who is an American and who is not. Each effort involves a back, formation of traditional American identity that emphasizes the primacy of one group’s claim of American-ness against others, whether U.S. southerners against Italian immigrants; native black migrants against European and Caribbean immigrants; or Third World immigrants against native citizens. Faulkner and Ellison are each invested in a binary of black/white power relations that in turn structure their respective senses of place, past, language, and citizenship; their imagined versions of America depend upon internal oppositions that inevitably resist new immigrant presences. Rushdie reveals an alternative form of investment, if one that seeks nonetheless to be firmly situated within American experience. His sense of American place, past, language, and citizenship is structured around the assumption

that the U.S., in a historical context, defines itself according to perpetual immigration and attendant racial and cultural mixtures. Opposition in Rushdie's *American* arises when immigrants' successes have damaging effects upon their Third World places of origin. Attending to representations of American national identity complicated by the presence of immigrants, we perceive why and how such efforts create surprising continuities between America and the wider world, particularly within a globally southern context, and why these efforts also provoke sectarian divisions that are often established through linguistic distinctions and strategic assertions of ethnic identity.

Samira Kawash defines ethnicity as "a group's holding something in common, whether language, religion, geographic origin, common history, some physical characteristic, genetic similarity, or some other attribute" (175). Yet ethnicity as a concept at play in the modern nation, while suggestive of certain fixed absolutes, "is constantly being contested and reinvented. It is not the sign of the timeless origin of a people; rather, it is the always already newly created expression of an experience of the present" (176). Kawash persuasively argues for the instrumental status of ethnicity in situations where a local community must respond to an outside presence. Often, she further observes, there occurs "an imaginary splitting between good ethnic community and bad ethnic alien," which in turn occasions "violence and repression . . . against the threat of the alien other who appears outside the community" and seeks entry (179). This insider/outsider dynamic, which characterizes local responses to immigrants in Faulkner's *South* and Ellison's *New York*, relates in part to these writers' ambivalent responses to their nation's increasing involvement in a global network of migration and cultural exchange. Each writer reveals his awareness of this development by imagining, often with negative connotations, immigrant entries into particularized American settings. Faulkner and Ellison then delineate, with differing commitments and strategies, the subsequent "splitting" that Kawash identifies as a feature of older forms of community encountering new peoples. These encounters can in turn be understood as features of globalization. Indeed, elements of globalization theory offer a promising set of terms and approaches to begin understanding literary responses to the historical phenomenon of local American communities gaining internal coherence at moments when the world at large exerts its alien presence upon them. As Tony Judt has observed in a crisp distillation of the active agents of this phenomenon, "[g]lobalization is about the disappearance of boundaries—cultural and economic boundaries, physical boundaries, linguistic boundaries—and the challenge of organizing our world in their absence" (41). As we shall see, it is precisely in the loss of cultural, economic,

physical, and linguistic boundaries that Rushdie, Ellison, and Faulkner find imperatives for their imaginative efforts to understand and represent an America thus irremediably situated in the uncertainties and fluctuations of global experience.

I: GLOBALIZATION, MIGRATION, AND THE NATIONAL IMAGINARY

Peter Berger provides a bracing explanation for the initial problem of involving the phenomenon of globalization in, as is the present case, a scholarly treatise on immigrants, literature, and American national identity:

The term "globalization" has become somewhat of a cliché. It serves to explain everything from the woes of the German coal industry to the sexual habits of Japanese teenagers. Most clichés have a degree of factual validity; so does this one. There can be no doubt about the fact of an ever more interconnected global economy, with vast social and political implications. . . . It has also been noted that there is a cultural dimension, the obvious result of an immense increase in worldwide communication. If there is economic globalization, there is also cultural globalization. To say this, however, is only to raise the question of what such a phenomenon amounts to. (419)

Berger indicates the dangerous ease with which scholars today can ascribe any form of cultural and economic complication or unanticipated mixture to the fashionable phenomenon of globalization and he laments the consequent weakening of the term. He also identifies the two primary forms of globalization (economic and cultural), however, and encourages us to make sense of how these relate to each other and in turn inform the very term itself, which too often is merely invoked as a catch-all in contemporary cultural discourse.¹

Given the vast array of current writing on globalization, any one attempt to understand it inevitably seems limited, if not potted, in comparison to other approaches.² The goal, therefore, is to limit and articulate precisely what features of globalization are at play in a given study. For the interests of this particular work, globalization's importance relates to the challenges that the increased mobility of peoples and cultures have posed to writers seeking to describe the composition of locally imagined communities increasingly affected by outside presences. Though globalization has been considered an especially contemporary phenomenon, Arjun Appadurai has argued that it

"is itself a deeply historical, uneven, and even *localizing* process" (17). In Appadurai's sense, "localizing" describes the degree to which globalization's impact upon the local actually structures forms of knowledge and self-definition, as opposed to solely igniting resistance to new cultures and peoples. While it is comparatively easy (if in places problematic) to locate Rushdie in the context of globalization, my present intention is to place both Faulkner's and Ellison's representations of national identity and immigrants within the context of globalization as well. This proposal is based precisely upon their respective structurings of the local. Barbara Ladd makes a persuasive case for such an approach, specifically within the context of literary studies of the American South, by arguing that "The local has become the crossroads—contemporary work wants to bridge the local and the global, laying claim to relevance in and beyond the nation-state" (1636). The following chapters attend to globalization's effects on Faulkner, and Ellison's writing, as they imagined unexpectedly globalized zones, such as 1930s Harlem and 1920s Mississippi. The following chapters argue that the presence of immigrants constitutes a prime factor in the globalizing of Ellison's and Faulkner's local spaces. As a preamble to understanding the nature of their responses, what follows is a consideration of imagined national communities alert to the way global developments pose challenges to their continued, self-determined identities.

Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations?" remains a tendentious text in contemporary discourse about global cross-cultural understanding, particularly in regard to the relationship between the Islamic world and the West after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In the more provocative *Foreign Affairs* article that preceded the eponymous book-length study, Huntington describes the potential conflicts that would arise in an age of increased mobility and potentially multiple affiliations, where traditional conceptions of cultural identity were under threat. He explains that one response to this phenomenon is for groups to re-emphasize firm divisions based upon "language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and . . . the subjective self-identification of people" (4). Through these primordial divisions, communities (which Huntington groups according to the broader rubric of civilizations) seek to maintain intact, self-regulating identities, set firmly against the challenge of outsiders who differ according to any combination of the above elements.

One unfortunate result of such sectarian commitments is that "interactions among peoples of different civilizations enhance the civilization-consciousness of people which, in turn, invigorates differences and animosities stretching or thought to stretch back deep into history" (6). But just as these

divisions set in, or perhaps due to the technologies that enable and intensify interactions across the boundaries of civilizations, a complication arises: "People can and do redefine their identities and, as a result, the composition and boundaries of civilization change" (5). This rather neutral statement ostensibly reflects an inevitable development of peoples moving across geographical borders; yet a great deal of anxiety often attaches to such moments of redefinition, as emphasized in the contexts the following chapters provide for readings of Faulkner, Ellison, and Rushdie. American nativism of the 1920s; political and ethnic conflicts in 1930s New York; postmodern intellectual cosmopolitanism; and native-immigrant divisions in historical and contemporary southern communities: each of these provokes writers to represent the complexities of individual, communal, and national redefinition that have resulted from America's traditional openness to immigration.

The movement of peoples across geographic borders is of course one of the primary means by which these globally influenced, local changes occur; it is also, according to Arjun Appadurai, one of the constitutive elements of globalization. In *Modernity at Large* (1996), Appadurai proposes that the double and interrelated effects of mass migration and world-spanning media define globalization.³ These two elements particularly account for the ruptures between past and present that he identifies as the preeminent sign of modernity and which in turn have posed unprecedented problems for the modern nation-state. One consequence of far-reaching media and far-traveling peoples is the production of locality "in new, globalized ways" that call into question traditional presumptions about the locally circumscribed composition of national community and the nature of national belonging (9). The traditional belief that national identity requires individuals living continuously in a rooted way alongside identifiably similar counterparts in particular(ized) places is primarily under interrogation in a globalized moment. Responding to this premise, Appadurai encourages understandings of "locality itself [as] a historical product" and calls for the accompanying recognition "that the histories through which localities emerge are eventually subject to the dynamics of the global" (18).

Appadurai focuses especially on the imaginative dimension of how local spaces respond to their unprecedented encounters with global presences, both in terms of culture and migration. While admitting that the politics of representation in such a context is a longstanding feature of immigration dynamics, he identifies new concerns that are produced specifically by globalization:

What is new is that this is a world in which both points of departure and points of arrival are in cultural flux, and thus the search for steady points

of reference . . . can be very difficult. It is in this atmosphere that the invention of tradition (and of ethnicity, kinship, and other identity markers) can become slippery, as the search for certainties is frustrated by the fluidities of transnational communication . . . [Traditional collective cultures therefore] become . . . an arena for conscious choice, justification, and *representation*, the latter often to multiple and spatially dislocated audiences. (44, emphasis mine)

Appadurai gestures towards the aesthetic work's role in articulating resistance to new threats to a local community's self-conception. The array of cultural components available to the writer's imagination becomes an "arena for conscious choice" in which selected emphases highlight alien differences and thus re-emphasize the community's internal unity against outsiders. This phenomenon arises in response not to simple migration, but to the rapidity with which it occurs in a globalized world, from the vantage of previously isolated, internally homogenous locales. The vexed response of native southerners to Italian immigrant arrivals in their region, which Faulkner depicts, is equally a response to the increased mobility to, from, and within a once-static space now faced with new racial and economic threats to its precarious stability. When dealing with immigrants, Faulkner's fiction both attends to and describes the difficulty of maintaining continuous self-conceptions of group identity in light of such destabilizing arrivals and departures. One response, according to Appadurai, is the studied (re)invention of a coherent, static communal identity, a reaching back to past-based versions that gain new currency as bulwarks against present-day and future change, a formulation that recalls Homi Bhabha's concept of the "time-lag" (141).⁴

The consequence, which Appadurai discerns in the workings of the local imaginary, and which I in turn locate in its literary representations, is an understanding of "culture as the process of naturalizing a subset of differences that have been mobilized to articulate group identity" (15). Culture's significance as an instrument of local identity emerges precisely when its producers realize that "groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous" (48). Distressed by the rupturing of traditional connections between soil and blood and by forms of identity not originating in these conjoined components, Faulkner and Ellison after him dedicated their writing to the re-entrenchment of American identity within the parameters of U.S. southern, regionalist community. This study contends that they depict immigrants as responsible for, in Walter D. Mignolo's observation regarding globalization and national

identity, the “uncoupling of the ‘natural’ link between languages and nations, languages and national memories, languages and national literature” (42).

Faulkner and Ellison, while tacitly recognizing the artificiality of claims that traditional national identity is pure and natural, commit their writing to imaginative interrogations of that identity in hopes of re-inscribing its indigenous value. These efforts were undertaken in support of their respective wider ambitions. For Faulkner, these involved achieving reconciliation between the American South’s racially divided populations; between the South and the wider nation; and between the South’s historically agrarian way of life and encroaching industrialization. Ellison’s wider ambitions were concerned with forging reconciliation between native black Americans and their white, historically dominant counterparts; between black claims to American identity and the nation’s historical denial of them; and between indigenous black cultural expression and the nation’s overall cultural self-understanding. Meanwhile, Rushdie seeks to reconcile his career-long interests in post-national, migrant identity with archetypal American immigrant identity; his presumption of the basic fragmentation of the Third World immigrant’s life in a First World metropolis with the absurd superfluity of peoples and cultures to be found in contemporary New York; and his presentation of stereotypical American immigrant ambitions with his critique of modern American economic and cultural power.

In committing his writing to such goals, Rushdie would seem to represent the other side of globalization, the outside forces transforming the local spaces of the United States, a phenomenon he depicts in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999). But because *Ground* seeks so aggressively to establish a post-national alternative to the rooted forms of American identity that Faulkner’s and Ellison’s writings seek to affirm, the many American and southern particularities of *Ground*’s wildly hybrid terrain are potholed with problematic instances of studied racial blindness and ignorance-as-irony in relation to American history. Compared with Faulkner’s and Ellison’s historically defined, indigenous concerns, Rushdie’s interest in American experience seems purposefully committed to a superficial rendering, with the intention of revealing such superficiality to be in fact a constituent element of American-ness that results from the nation’s longstanding openness to immigration. Yet Rushdie seeks to avoid the consequent, problematic implications of what Jürgen Habermas calls “place polygamy”—the multiple and partial belongings that post-national, migrant types exhibit and often celebrate as the nature of their geographic commitments in a globalized age—by establishing *Ground* as an updated version of a traditional American immigrant narrative (quoted by Barlow 70). In fact, the narrative energy of Rushdie’s