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**Proceedings of the conference:
(Part II)**

**DIALOGUE AND EXCHANGE:
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE IN THE
HUMANITIES**

24-26 OCTOBER 2020

CAIRO/ EGYPT



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The Undecidable 'Foreign-Founder' Refugee in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

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Abstract: As foreigners who inevitably change the communities they enter, refugees, who typically materialize swiftly and in large, noticeable numbers, are often blamed for disturbing the stable American lifestyle and identity and regarded as a burden to the communities and nations they join. Aside from the initial shock and panic at the sheer volume of refugees, the process of resettlement, which relies heavily on both local sponsorship and federal social welfare programs, is often prolonged and aggravated by seemingly insurmountable cultural differences. Thus, the aim of this paper is to focus on the issues surrounding refugee resettlement and assimilation in Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (1989). Accordingly, I contend that refugees can identify themselves against the refugee condition and can also explore and call attention to their 'undecidedness'. The main question of the paper is how far Mukherjee's *Jasmine* as a novel deals directly with "the cultural organization of foreignness," and traces, as pinpointed by Bonnie Honig, both the foreigner as founder in the character of Jane and the foreigner as asylum seeker in the character of Du, the Vietnamese refugee. Exploring these layered models of hospitality, community, and kinship, this paper exhibits the refugee character's pivotal role within the fields of refugee studies and contemporary American literature by drawing on the refugee's liminal and ambiguous position as both a complete foreigner and a permanent guest, a victim and a survivor, a collective and an individual.

Keywords: Bharati Mukherjee, Bonnie Honig, 'Foreign-Founder', 'Supercitizen', 'Undecidedness'.

Introduction:

From its early history of English Puritan immigrants to its current resettlement of thousands of refugees, the United States of America has long characterized itself as a nation of refuge. In its literature, too, America has often been presented as a nation full of new opportunities and second chances at life. John Winthrop's sermon "A Model of Christian Charity," Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*--all speak to America's historical potential for nurturing and transforming its inhabitants. Nevertheless, there are numerous historical instances and works of fiction that complicate America's relationship with new and, at times, unwanted immigrants. These stories paint a less favorable image of America, an image that highlights exclusionary practices and the exploitation of human vulnerability. As part of this history and literary legacy, refugees and refugee narratives present a familiar but also uncharted field.

Refugees not only pose a global "problem," but also become a national and local matter after they are resettled into a community. Once inside the nation, refugees can easily be placed under the broad category of immigrant, a label that, in the U.S., has its own complicated history and assumptions. In the xenophobic narrative, immigrants can represent a "menace," seemingly

taking away American jobs, refusing to learn English, and, if completely undocumented, playing no official part in shaping society. Besides, in the most positive model, immigrants demonstrate the democratic power of America, a nation in which foreigners are given shelter and are able to start anew and work hard to earn a brighter future. While the refugee's status does come with specific privileges, s/he is an immigrant and, as such, becomes part of U.S. immigration history and politics. Refugees, particularly those who are visibly foreign, inadvertently enter into a fraught discourse about assimilation, race, and asylum. However, as this paper tries to show in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, the refugee's unique qualities do create another division within the immigrant category and, thus, puts even more pressure on the relationship between the "native" and the foreigner.

Thus, this paper shows how large scale displacement does not chain refugees and they can act as both grateful victims and self-empowered survivors. Accordingly, I contend that refugees can identify themselves against the refugee condition and can also explore and call attention to their 'undecidedness'. The main question of the paper is how far Mukherjee's *Jasmine* as a novel deals directly with "the cultural organization of foreignness," and traces, as pinpointed by Bonnie Honig, both the foreigner as founder in the character of Jane¹ and the foreigner as asylum seeker in the character of Du, the Vietnamese refugee.

Bonnie Honig's Foreign-Founder and America's Immigrants

In *Democracy and the Foreigner*, Honig examines how foreignness is often viewed as a complement and a threat to democratic regimes, a phenomenon she roots in the figure of the "foreign-founder." Honig's notion of the foreign-founder is integral to understanding the competing characteristics of the foreigner and the larger conversation about America's ambiguous treatment of immigrants. As she explains:

The texts that I read . . . all suggest in one way or another, that democratic citizens . . . are often threatened and supported by dreams of a foreigner who might one day come to save us and enable us finally to abdicate or perhaps reassume the abundant responsibilities of democracy. (14)

The foreigner, then, is both welcomed as someone who can rejuvenate and reconstitute a community and its founding values and also treated cautiously as someone who is a complete outsider and can usurp the town.

To illustrate her point, Honig examines such characters as Moses and Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*, who represents liberation for the helpless Munchkins, but danger to the Wicked Witch of the West. Also pointing to "classic texts of Western political culture" in which "the curious figure of the foreign-founder recurs with some frequency," Honig notes that these stories of "established regimes, people, or towns that fall prey to corruption are restored or refounded . . . by the agency of a foreigner or a stranger" (3). For Honig, the function of this foreign-founder is not simply limited to such stories, but is part of an enduring idea in which outsiders either provide some renewing purpose *or* pose a threat. However, to better understand the competing

¹ Jane is the name Jasmine has got once she visited Iowa, and it is the name that will be used throughout the paper.

functions of the foreign-founder, it is crucial to further distinguish this figure's various roles and effects on the community.

Moreover, reading Jean Jacques Rousseau and Sigmund Freud alongside each other, Honig outlines the foreign-founder in terms of law, order, and fear. In Rousseau, Honig argues, the foreigner is a lawgiver, someone whose "foreignness secures for him the distance and impartiality needed to animate and guarantee a General Will that can neither animate nor guarantee itself" (21). Since the people cannot be trusted to rule themselves without (re)creating a coercive rule, they need a foreigner, who has no stake in the community, to temporarily step in and enact law and order. In this model, the founder must be a foreigner, for his or her impartiality is crucial to building or re-inscribing democratic rule. However, once this initial deed is done, the foreign-founder, who is so cherished and much-needed in a time of (re)founding, must depart. For Rousseau, this departure is a necessity because democratic rule must be left to the citizens, but, for Freud, foreign-founders must leave because they pose a danger to stabilized communities. As Honig notes,

Rousseau never confronts the problems that might be posed by the lawgiver's foreignness and its undecidability . . . he never asks about the effects the founder's foreignness might have on a regime even long after the founder's departure. (25)

To enrich the figure of the foreign-founder Honig relies on Freud, who views this generative character as a manipulator and an enduring authoritarian force. In Freud's reading of what Honig has called foreign-founder texts, the stranger enters a community with the specific goal of founding a new nation that will satisfy his or her desires.

To use Honig's analogy, whereas Rousseau's foreign-founder is like the good father whose main concern is his children and their needs, which he is always trying to assist, Freud's foreign-founder is like the bad father who uses his children to satisfy his own needs. Thus, Freud's foreign-founder is entirely self-serving and, rather than helping a community, actually takes advantage of its vulnerability. It follows, then, that this foreign-founder, unlike Rousseau's, does not leave peacefully or willingly and, as such, becomes a threat that must be removed. If Rousseau's "good father" is able to recognize when his children have reached maturity and leaves them to live adult lives, Freud's "bad father" "never withdraws voluntarily; we always have to take [paternal authority] rather than wait for it to be handed over" (Honig 29). Ultimately, Honig argues, "[Rousseau and Freud] teach us that the supplement of foreignness is undecidable: it both shores up (Rousseau) and unsettles (Freud) the people or the law being founded" (32). Foreign-founder myths, then, rely on a character who is intricately a savior and a threat, whose "foreignness is undecidable."

Identifying the foreign-founder as 'undecidable', Honig makes a connection between this ambiguous character and the necessity of refounding a community, which then implicates the foreigner's role in immigrant America. Honig argues that the foreign-founder's undecidability creates in motion a politics of "(re)founding", which encompasses the plural efforts by post-founding generations in order to (re)define their collective identity. This will be done by retelling their origin stories or by inventing new ones. Because foreign-founders both secure and weaken a community, their initial founding must be re-founded by similar characters and stories. Many of these refoundings emerge in the form of the retelling of foreign-founder myths, but, in modern

democracies like America, Honig argues, immigrants often bear the burden of renewing and reenacting founding missions.

Although her examples of foreign-founder texts come from biblical narratives – Ruth, Moses – and early political theory – Plato, Rousseau –, Honig traces this ambivalent figure to a modern and American understanding of foreign founders immigrants. She claims that in the U.S., there are two overriding and continuing responses to immigrants:

Either immigrants are valued for what 'they' bring to 'us' – diversity, energy, talents, industry, innovative cuisines, and new recipes, plus a renewed appreciation of our own regime whose virtues are so great that they draw immigrants to join us – or they are feared for what they will do to us: consume our welfare benefits, dilute our common heritage, fragment our politics, undermine our democratic culture. (Honig 46)

In the American context, the immigrant as foreign-founder is, at his or her best, the cause for celebrating the nation's continuing immigrant history, its multicultural abundance and acceptance, its status as exceptional. At his or her worst, the immigrant as foreign-founder is the catalyst for a vanishing American identity and economy, a scapegoat and rallying point for a vanishing way of life or a struggling town like Baden, Iowa, the setting of Mukherjee's *Jasmine*.

Jasmine/Jane as Foreign-Founder

As soon as Jasmine enters the seemingly normal and safe Iowan pig-farming community, her foreignness, though recognizable, is not immediately identified as a threat. She is whisked away by Mother Ripplemeyer, whose son, Bud, owns a bank and "is always looking for smart, reliable tellers" (Mukherjee 35). It is through a series of encounters that she takes on the name "Jane," a joke that is grounded in one of the most iconic meetings between two foreigners. As the narrator of her own story, Jane recounts, "Bud calls me Jane. Me Bud, you Jane. I didn't get it at first. He kids" (26). What Jane does not initially get is Bud's reference to the early Tarzan films in which the strong ape-man, already a foreigner in his own right, flatters a new stranger, Jane, the initially confused heroine. In the W.S. Van Dyke classic *Tarzan the Ape Man*, Tarzan drags a screaming Jane out of his tree house before she suddenly recognizes him as human and teaches him how to properly identify her and himself. Although in this scene it is the man doing the naming, the heroine's foreignness is still key to the man's and the community's transformation. Bud's renaming of Jane indelibly captures her multiple levels of foreignness and her unexpected but welcome appearance in his world.

As Jane settles into her new name, she sees that her foreignness does not entirely fade, but that it seems to give her an air of mysterious wisdom, a wisdom that the town, especially the men, seem to notice and desire. Upon her arrival in Iowa, Jane is often viewed as a source of knowledge and regeneration, which parallels Honig's Rousseauian characterization of the foreign-founder. To the farmers in Baden, who are facing the difficulty of a drought, her ability to read another language implies an "alien knowledge" that "means intelligence" (33). Beyond her alien knowledge, Jane comes to represent a way out of a struggling town like Baden, which depends on a farming culture and system that Amy Levin in "Familiar Terrain" argues "traps and oppresses many Midwesterners" (39). This image of Jane as a savior is especially true for her neighbor Darrel Lutz, who desperately wants to sell his father's pig farm and later reveals that his

larger plans include taking Jane with him. Darrel may want Jane to act as his personal rescuer, yet Bud discourages him from selling his farm because Jane is, for him, the new blood and body he has been looking for to restart his life.

A born and bred Midwesterner, Bud Ripplemeyer already has a wife, an inherited banking business, a large home, and two grown children when Jane is brought into his bank. Still, as Honig points out, immigrants as foreign-founders can often act "as the saviors of traditional patriarchal family arrangements that have been variously attenuated by capitalist mobility and materialism, liberal individualism and feminism" (74). The modern changes within the family structure and the pressure of obtaining the American Dream can strain the cohesion of a community, and so "New World American families depend upon Old World masculinities and femininities – family values – that need to be imported periodically from elsewhere" (Honig 74). The young and beautiful Jane is the perfect stranger to renew Bud's faith in romantic love and marriage. He recalls the energy he felt that first day she walked into his bank and how she was "glamour, something unattainable" (199).

Jane knows that it is her foreignness that Bud finds reinvigorating, explaining, "Bud courts me because I am alien ... The East plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom. I rejuvenate him simply by being who I am" (200). Her foreignness "make[s] him feel what he's never felt, do what he's never done" (200). She is the one who has awakened the "shape changing, risk-taking pirate rattling the cage of his heavy flesh" (200). Where Bud's ex-wife Karin made him complacent, heavy-fleshed, Jane and her foreignness make him alive and young, pushing him to "do what he's never done." As Bud tells Jane, "Baden was death until you came . . . you brought me back from the dead" (200). However, Jane is both a form of renewal and a fierce threat; while she reinvigorates Bud, she poses a danger to Bud's previous other half, Karin.

From Karin's perspective, Jane is more emblematic of the Freudian half of the foreign-founder, the half who unsettles the community in order to take what she wants. Like Bud, Karin is a true Midwesterner who has married well and raised two sons who live in neighboring counties with their own families. In her complete world there is no room for immigrants like Jane who only come in to take her husband of twenty-eight years and change her wholesome family. For Karin, Jane is an outsider "gold digger" who only pretends to love for the sake of personal gain (195) and should have no rights, especially to what Karin sees as hers.

Coming across Jane at a Mennonite Relief Fund fair, a freshly deserted Karin links Jane's foreignness to what she perceives as Jane's cruel actions: "You travel around the world, swoop down in a small town and take the best man for yourself and don't even think of the pain you've left behind" (204). Karin resentfully accuses Jane of determinedly entering into Baden to steal away the "best man." For Karin, it cannot be mere coincidence that Jane would so simply pick the perfect town, the perfect time, *and* the perfect man. These are moves that only someone with clear intentions could make, much like Freud's foreign-founder. In his model, the foreigner does not passively come upon a town in crisis but actively seeks one out in order to further unsettle and exploit it. As the person who has been unsettled, Karin is clearly threatened by Jane, declaring that she is "going to L.A. where [Jane] can't hurt [her] anymore" (205). Although Jane claims she had no active part in ending Karin's marriage, her interactions with the bitter Karin do make her feel uneasy about her place as an outsider. With Bud, Jane's foreignness is attractive and powerful, but, with Karin, it is threatening and a weakness.

Moreover, compared to Karin, who probably makes apple pie from scratch and who goes on to volunteer at a suicide hot line aimed at helping depressed and desperate farmers, Jane has no history with or deep understanding of Baden and its citizens. At the same time that Karin feels threatened by this outsider, Jane also feels vulnerable as someone who seemingly has no claims to this community, aside from her connection with Bud, which is still predicated by her outsider status. Jane's helplessness echoes the myth of immigrant America, as Ali Behdad terms it, which relies heavily on the disavowal, the active forgetting of "nativist" policies that define "citizenship and national identity in ways that are both exclusionary and normalizing" (xiii). In essence, it erases the new immigrant's confidence to become part of the host nation and forgets the many ways in which the U.S. government and social agencies attempt to mold and judge newcomers.

Unsure about her role as a foreigner, especially as one who has disturbed the town, Jane does not fully understand her ambiguous role as an immigrant until she connects her own fate with that of refugees who are indirectly involved as the Mennonite fair is "raising money for camps full of starving Ethiopians" (201). Right away, with the Mennonite women "smil[ing] encouragingly at [her]," Jane imagines a connection with the Ethiopians, remarking that "every quilt auctioned, every jar of apple butter licked clean had helped somebody like me" (202). As Karin begins to confess her hate, Jane looks over the toys and trinkets of an older, "simpler America" that she has helped to change (202). Walking by the displays, she notes that "the toys [aren't] unusual or valuable; they [are] shabby, an ordinary family's cared-for memorabilia. Bud's generic past..." and begins to feel "too exotic, too alien" (202). She is so fixed on this feeling that she imagines the old Hasnapur astrologer saying to her, "foolish and wicked girl, did I not tell you you'd end up among aliens?" (203). Still an outsider, Jane cannot and does not connect with any of the Western objects around her, nor does she see fully understand how her foreignness can become an integral part of the American tapestry.

Jane's attraction to the only foreign piece at the fair is telling of her desire to remain a foreigner, to deny the role of either giver or taker simultaneously thrust on her, and also foreshadows the significance of refugees in her final transformation. Continuously walking away from Karin's conflicting pleas for forgiveness and declarations of hate, Jane is pulled towards a sewn piece that catches her eye:

I walked away toward a quilt that seemed not exotic but different, among the traditional Mennonite pieces. This one – smoky blue whorls swirling seamlessly on a sky of slate gray – intrigued me because of the invisibility of its quilting stitches. I read the card stapled to it: The Lutheran (Hmong) Church of Dalton. The Hmong, too, had fled. In Dalton, where fast-talking developers were planning their buyout of Darrel, Hmong women, animists and Lutheran, were quilting in church basements. (204)

Drawn to its "difference" from the other "traditional" pieces, Jane clearly does not to judge this unusual quilt as "exotic." To call it exotic would be to imply its value is solely based on its alienness. As a foreigner and someone who is judged based on her exoticism, Jane is not able to use that term without repeating and reifying that model of assessing otherness. When she does read the tag, she finds that it is indeed foreign, sewn by the newly settled Hmong refugees. With the mystery of the quilt's uniqueness now revealed as alien, Jane begins to claim a position among the forcibly displaced. Like her, "the Hmong, too, had fled," which meant that they had

not simply moved but had, too, been made to leave, to flee. But, even as Jane tries to maintain her otherness through this connection with the Hmong quilt, she begins to see how this foreignness plays a part in the construction of the town's values and unity.

Jane, recognizing a similar journey to her own in the Hmong's relocation to the Midwest, begins to realize how foreignness can be adapted to fit the needs and ideologies of the hosting community, how it can help repair a rift in a fading culture. Even among the disintegrating values of the farming community, where "fast-talking developers [are] planning their buyout of Darrel," these refugee women, who are traditionally "animists" and not "Lutheran," are helping to stabilize two of the town's structural principles: religious faith and global charity. Looking beyond their vastly different forms of religious practice, the Hmong women use their foreign skills to help support the local church's cause, which, oddly enough, is to help yet another foreign people in need. These women are emblematic of Rousseau's model of the foreign-founder; they help re-found the community in the same way that Jane revives Bud. Whether Jane accepts some blame for ruining Karin's life or not, in this moment of refugee recognition, she begins to make sense of how foreignness and immigrants work within Baden.

Although Bud may have been "the pillar of Baden," the man responsible for financing much of the town, he relies on Jane to revive him and give him a new life and home. Already characterized as Bud's second chance, Jane continues to act as the savior of a bodily ruined man, fulfilling her part as dedicated lover and regenerative mother. Her pregnancy not only signals her ability to usurp Karin's position but also cements her role as Bud's second chance. Through Jane, Bud is able to restore his version of America and fulfill its promise to immigrants. Jane's foreignness inspires both Bud's re(devotion) to family, albeit at the expense of a previous one, and to being a good American, which he defines through Lutheran charity and the perpetuation of democratic equality. Bud's reliance on the foreigner to reenact and renew his convictions parallels Honig's characterization of the "myth of an immigrant America," which "depicts the foreigner as . . . an agent of national re-enchantment that might rescue the regime from corruption and return it to its first principles" (74). Bud, "reenchanted" and saved by the foreign Jane, is able to reinstate and perform his "first principles" and not only takes in Jane but also adopts Du.

To justify Bud's adoption, Jane explains, "Asia had transformed him, made him reckless and emotional. He wanted to make up for fifty years of 'selfishness,' as he calls it. One night he saw a television special on boat people in Thai prisons, and he called the agency the next day" (14-15). The old Bud had been almost too afraid to help the malnourished and "dark" people he had seen on T.V., but the new Bud, "transformed," "reckless and emotional" and eager to redeem himself, is presented with similar images and now helps without even waiting to see if this new foreigner is beautiful. Later, Jane tells Karin that Bud's reasons came from "extravagant love. He thought he could atone for something . . . For being American, blessed, healthy, innocent, in love" (228). Feeling as though he has benefited from growing up in the land of opportunity and feeling guilty for having it all – health, innocence, love, wealth –, Bud wants to give the most desperate of all people, the refugee, the same chance at life. Even more than what he gives Jane, who refuses to legally marry him, Bud sponsors Du and gives him a formal place in his home and his family. He gives Du his last name, makes him his son, his heir to the new home/nation he has built with Jane's help.

Du's physical entrance into Jane and Bud's home, allows Jane to perform and renew Bud's America and also enables her to build a new community where foreignness is not seen as a threat and where all immigrants are treated as victimized asylum seekers. Within their new home, Jane simultaneously fulfills her re-founding mission by restoring Bud's faith in his American values and by creating a space in which both she and Du can be part of a new immigrant nation.² She describes their house as "low and squat, a series of addons," adapted several times to accommodate the new and varied people living in it (23). This "small and ugly" looking structure is home to the crippled but reinvigorated Bud Ripplemeyer, the pregnant and undocumented immigrant Jane, and the newly adopted Vietnamese refugee Du, a non-traditional house for a non-traditional family.

Looking at their unconventional house, Jane sees between the "rusting, abandoned machinery and the empty silo" – signs of a failed previous tenant – and describes her new home as warm and accepting: "the add-ons cozy me into thinking that all of us Ripplemeyers, even us new ones, belong" (13). Unlike Bud's previous home, which is "fancy" but rigid and imposing with its bricked three-stories and "columns in front" and which Karin, the threatened American, has kept, this space is a safe haven where even new Ripplemeyers belong. In Jane's mind, the modified house is home to transformed and revived Americans like Bud, who want to do their part in rescuing another country's orphans, to asylum seekers like Du, and to undocumented immigrants like herself, who can serve as devoted caretakers.

The Rejuvenation of the 'Supercitizen' Foreigner

Similarly, Jane uses Du's transformation to support her own model of a community that nurtures all of its immigrants. Jane sees in Du an immigrant who can fulfill traditional American expectations without threatening the community, making a larger case that foreignness can be overlooked and forgotten. As Deepika Bahri argues that Jane's project is to disrupt the "natural chain of primogeniture and conceptualize a novel nation peopled with adoptive children like ... Du who will create new nongenetic families" (152). Certainly, the adopted child is one who does not *naturally* fit in to a family, but one who is taken in and treated as family nonetheless, much like the refugee. In this sense, Jane's newly founded community must treat all immigrants as adopted children who must be given a welcoming and nurturing home in order to become full members of the family.

As Du's caretaker and a fellow immigrant survivor, Jane sees her and Bud's adopted son as the perfect newcomer, the non-threatening, 'assimilable' foreigner who adapts quickly and succeeds at achieving upward mobility. She writes:

Du is a Ripplemeyer. He was Du Thien. He was fourteen when we got him; now he's seventeen, a junior in high school. He does well, though he's sometimes contemptuous. He barely spoke English when he arrived; now he's fluent, but with a permanent accent. "Like Kissinger," he says. (13)

In her eyes, Du swiftly becomes American, a Ripplemeyer and no longer a Thien. In three years he has become fluent in English, a language he could hardly speak when he first arrived, he does

² Although I will later show how her actions are misguided, for the moment, Jane is satisfied that she has created a new home where all who enter it can belong.

well in school, and he has made clear plans for a successful future. She describes him later as going "from the streets of Saigon to Iowa State engineering school" (157). For Jane, Du's foreignness is simply a setback that he soon surmounts and, if anything, simply serves as a reminder of all that he has overcome. True, he has an accent, but Du reminds her that many great Americans, "like Kissinger," have had accents. His accented voice is just one among the many that have led and shaped America. Moreover, Jane is especially proud of Du's skills with American technology and mechanized objects and his ability to recombine and "transform the crude appliances that he touches" (154). In his room, Du gives everyday household machines dual functions, increasing their efficiencies as he sees fit. Through Du's multiple levels of success, Jane recognizes that foreignness in the immigrant, even if others fear it, does not have to be a hindrance or a threat and can be a mark of rebirth and rejuvenation, a mark of what Honig calls the "supercitizen."

Honig argues that the "supercitizen," the immigrant who embodies the best in the American dream of success escapes the ambiguity of the foreign-founder model. This immigrant, because of his outward success, is seen as "neither needy nor threatening" and is "the object of neither American hostility nor charity but of outright adoration" (Honig 77). In Du's case, at least in the way that Jane sees it, his ability to quickly and quietly incorporate himself into Bud's home and the town of Baden is remarkable. He does not seem to need much from either Bud or Jane, and yet he is able to accomplish so much in so little time. This boy, who survived on worms and lizards in refugee camps and whose "mother and brother [had been] hacked to death," is now busy inventing machines and watching monster trucks on television with his American friend (18). However, what makes the supercitizen both successful and non-threatening is that "he is an object of identification," someone who reflects America's greatness (Honig 78).

The supercitizen is "the screen onto which we project our idealized [American] selves" because "he works harder than we do, he values his family and community more actively than we do, and he also fulfills our liberal fantasy of membership by way of consent" (Honig 78). For Jane, Du represents all that she had wanted from America: a direct but hard-earned path to success. Du's past does not hinder him from becoming a new person, an American. His example changes Jane, reassuring her that she is right in continuously transforming herself and starting anew. Like Du, she too can allow herself to be rescued and to fully and gratefully embrace this new chance at life.

Both Yên Lê Espiritu and Viet Thanh Nguyen have noted how the Vietnamese subject in American refugee studies has been most visible when portrayed as the helpless victim whose rescue has also played a major role in America's recuperation of the Vietnam War. As Nguyen writes, "One of the most important representations of the Asian American body politic in the post-Vietnam War period is that of the victim" (27). Espiritu also echoes this popular representation, arguing that most of the work produced around the Vietnamese subject "cast[s] Vietnamese refugees as objects of rescue . . . as [persons] 'incapacitated by grief and therefore in need of care' – a care that is purportedly best provided in and by the United States" (410). That is to say, refugees like Du, who are broadcast on American television in a pathetic light, need and rely on people like Bud, the Mennonite church, and the U.S. government to come to their rescue.

In the case of Southeast Asian refugees, as well as others who have surfaced from U.S. related conflicts, their victimization enables America to emerge as the rescuer rather than the

instigator. However, as was the case with Bud, this desire to help is also fostered by a sense of obligation, as "the victim appeals to a lingering sense of American guilt" (Nguyen 29). In either case, the refugee is often portrayed as a victim whose only recourse to safety is through the intervention of countries like the U.S. Moreover, Espiritu argues that the representation of Vietnamese refugees as desperate victims has allowed the U.S. to become an emblem of democratic stability and opportunity, "whose magnanimity promises swift deliverance from a bleak life of 'no exit' to one of boundless possibilities" (412). Like Du, the refugee, then, must become a productive member of his new family, fulfilling if not exceeding the expectations of his savior. Grateful to be given a second chance, the "good refugee," to borrow Espiritu's term, must show his appreciation by burying his past and becoming a successful American (422).

With Du as her example of the grateful victim, Jane has a constant mirror in which her foreignness and the foreignness of others can be made less frightening and, more importantly, less visible. To Jane, Du seems to have detached himself just enough from his horrible past so that he can completely embrace the present and the future. His success lies in his ability to position himself as a survivor and not a victim, as someone who is unhindered by his foreignness. After all, the skills that made him "the brightest boy in the camps . . . [t]he boy who survived" should easily make him the brightest boy in Baden, the boy who really knows how to survive (155). Certainly his alien experiences have helped him become the supercitizen, but he rarely speaks about them, not even to Jane, and does not present them as an essential part of his current achievements. While the town may be happily surprised by Du's success, Jane, who has been in similar situations, seems to understand how his foreignness operates. She writes, "Du's doing well because he has always trained with live ammo, without a net, with no multiple choice. No guesswork: only certain knowledge or silence" (214). Raised in extremely poor conditions, Du "has always trained with live ammo" and has learned to make decisions that will keep him alive. There is no room for "guesswork" in his survival, whether in refugee camps or the relatively safe town of Baden. Indeed, for Jane, foreignness should not be a sign of impending trouble but a mark of survival, a mark that she roots in the refugee experience and then projects to all immigrants.

In her article "Relocation as Positive Act: The Immigrant Experience in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels," Carmen Wickramagamage writes, "Where others may see small, dark/yellow people speaking in their secretive languages and congregating in ethnic ghettos, what Mukherjee sees are survivors: America's 'new breed of pioneers'" (194). While Wickramagamage speaks more specifically about Asian immigrants in her essay, here, she gestures to a more generalized settler/survivor, referring to "America's 'new breed of pioneer.'" For Jane, the refugee represents two aspects of achieving supercitizen status: first, which I have already discussed, is the refugee's own demonstrated desire to survive and ability to adapt, and second is the refugee's claim to a new home and ready access to a system that supports and fosters successful incorporation. Du's adoption into a wealthy banker's family and into a democratic capitalist country ensures that he will be able to put his tragic past behind him and use his survival skills to thrive in his new home. As Jane develops a connection with Du, who can be characterized as the supercitizen, the grateful victim, and the ultimate survivor, she also begins to construct herself and all immigrants as refugees with equal claims to new homes.

When faced with the town's shock at Du's progress, Jane consistently draws comparisons between her and Du's fate and their place in America, and begins to develop a collective idea of immigrants as refugees. To her, it is no surprise that someone like Du is doing well because he has sharpened his survival skills, has "trained . . . without a net" (214). In this instinct to thrive under any circumstances, to remake one's self, Jane feels a connection with Du, writing, "Once upon a time, like me, he was someone else. We've been many selves. We've survived hideous times" (214). The two have endured "many selves" and "hideous times," but what is important is that they have survived and continue to survive. Although she may not have entered America as a formal refugee, her story of survival is reason enough to mark her as an asylum seeker and someone who has the right to be in the U.S. She imagines that, like Du, she and the other immigrants she has encountered have come to a new nation in order continue living, at whatever cost.

Jane recounts her arduous journey to America. Here, it is important to note that the novel begins with Jane already living in Iowa, so, when she retells her flight and her previous lives, Jane has known Du for at least three years. Her narration of the journey to America occurs in the midst of her growing identification with Du, allowing her to reshape it in whichever way suits her best. Recapturing her journey to the U.S., she describes her experiences in the "shadow world of aircraft permanently aloft" as a collective one, with liberal use of the term "we" (100). She recalls, "we are refugees and mercenaries and guest workers," presenting each figure as an equal part of a larger mass of travelers that does not fit into the category of "tourists" or "businessmen" (100). "We are the outcasts and deportees," she goes on, "We are dressed in shreds of national costumes. . . . We ask only one thing: to be allowed to land; to pass through; to continue" (101). The collective in which Jane includes herself spans from displaced persons to hired hands to temporary help and is clearly defined by a desire to be let in and "to continue."

Though each voyage may differ, there is only one request, only one goal that binds these individuals together and that is to survive. The "Filipina nurse," the "Tamil auto mechanic," the "hollow-eyed Muslim men," and the grieving Indian widow must all take the same journey (102). All together, they are caught in the "loop of desperation," flying secretly and, thus, invisibly toward an unknown future. Desperation has driven them to take this journey and also reduces them all to the same identity of asylum seeker. Nevertheless, this is a solidarity that Jane only truly discovers while in Iowa, which, I argue, is a direct result of seeing Du transform into her idea of a successfully assimilated immigrant.

However, in Baden, Jane is quickly thrust into the role of foreign-founder where her foreignness both saves and rebuilds Bud's life *and* unsettles Karin's world. There, Jane attempts to make her foreignness less threatening by turning to the refugee, specifically the refugee as supercitizen, who is not only invited to stay but also given the tools to succeed. Jane's situation in Iowa leads her to gain a new appreciation for the refugee's double claim to the American dream, and she works to include herself into this new model. As she sees it, Du's foreign past simultaneously entitles him to becoming Bud's and America's heir and ensures that he has the skills to more than fulfill this promise. Thinking that she has established a connection with Du, Jane is able to retell her flight story as part of a collective immigrant narrative that emphasizes the need for asylum. Although it is clear from her past actions that she feels no real connection with other immigrants, her ambivalent experiences in Baden and her encounter with Du forces

her to deal with the threat of foreignness and to identify with the refugee narrative. Through Du's figuration of the good refugee, Jane is able to re-insert herself into a collective immigrant identity that honors the foreigner's request without unsettling the host nation's values. In fact, the refugee as grateful victim and supercitizen *re-founds* America's faith in itself as a capitalist democracy and as a nation built on immigrants. However commendable Jane's vision of a (re)founded community might be, it ultimately fails when she recognizes her inability and unwillingness to fully commit to Baden and understand Du.

The Imaginary Settlement of America's 'Supercitizens'

In many ways, this rewriting of transnational displacement is appropriate since many immigrants who fall under the legal definition of refugee are sometimes denied that status due to biased processing. Many scholars, such as Edward Newman, have argued that displacement should fall under the larger category of human security. He writes:

Human security therefore regards human displacement as a pressing issue ... because individuals and people collectively have rights that must be upheld even when they do not fit squarely with the 'high politics' agenda of conventional international security. (Newman 8)

It is not simply about securing national borders and international alliances, but about securing the rights of "individuals and people collectively." While Jane does attempt to secure such a view towards immigrants, she never actually succeeds at doing so because she never fully recognizes Du's refugee identity. Instead of dealing with his foreignness and understanding his refugee experience, Jane dismisses Du's differences by seeing him as someone akin to the supercitizen and disregarding his own ambiguous position as victim and survivor. She may believe that she has connected with Du, but, in the end, this relationship is unfounded and she is actually threatened by Du's foreignness. It is this realization that helps push Jane to begin anew with a previous family, a family who is still non-genetic but whose foreignness is invisible.

Even before Jane fully recognizes Du's foreignness and their one-sided relationship, there are early signs that she only views him as a survivor and that she imagines a much deeper connection between Du and herself than actually exists. Seeing the pock-marked terrain of a monster truck rally on television, Jane is reminded of "a bomb crater" and wonders if "Du even think[s] such things?" (18). Instead of asking him directly, she simply replies to herself, "I don't know what he thinks" (18). Although Jane may not know what Du is thinking, she does not recognize this as a flaw in her relationship with him, but views his inaccessibility as a sign of him always being in control. She explains, "he is a real Yogi, always in control. I've told him my stories of India, the years between India and Iowa, hoping he'd share something with me. When they're over he usually says, 'That's wild. Can I go now?'" (18). For Jane, Du's unwillingness to confide in her or commiserate is merely a show of his control over his past and what makes him foreign. Although Jane interprets Du's disengagement with her as his ability to move forward and detach himself from his foreignness, it actually signals the disconnect he feels towards her. His secret past is one that she cannot understand, one that connects him only to those who have shared his specific refugee experience, those who have been victimized in the same way. While she may act as the rejuvenator of Baden and be the mother to Bud's genetic child, Jane does not actually become Du's family, the people who actually raised him in the refugee camps.

Although Jane sees herself forging an immigrant collective with Du, in the end, it becomes clear that she has only created a limited and particular enclave for herself. Du's sudden unsettling of the home Jane has built for all new and old Ripplemeyers not only pushes her to recognize Du's differences but also the importance of maintaining strong ties to the past. Indeed, Jane slowly comes to understand that Du has never been a Ripplemeyer, and, just as she has refused to become one through marriage, Du has also always rejected this non-genetic family. Jane is shocked to find that "Du and another boy or man are on the living-room sofa talking in earnest Vietnamese" (219). Right away Jane is suspicious, recognizing that Du "doesn't look as though he's just come back from soccer practice" and accusing him of looking "secretive, conspiratorial, excited" (219). However, Jane's suspicions are not only triggered by Du's behavior and mannerisms, but also by the other man's alienness, which she characterizes in infantilizing, effeminate, and foreign terms. She cannot tell if he is "a boy or a man" and describes him as having "an ageless, tight-pored face round as a dinner plate and just about as shiny" and wearing clothes "you can't buy in any mall around Baden" (219). His shirt is worn loose and "seems planned, expensive, a style statement from a different time and continent, a different sense of style and manliness" (219). Jane's description of this man as an emasculated, boy/man, and unidentifiable outsider indicates a need to reinsert her own authority and a fear of his foreignness, which she later confirms by worrying that he is a "drug pusher" (220).

Surprised that Du, who she has never heard speak Vietnamese and who "treats [the Hmong kids] with contempt, has invited this Vietnamese stranger into her home, Jane can only assume that he is there to do harm (220). For Jane, who views Du as totally assimilated, as the eager survivor who succeeds by losing his former identity, it is unfathomable that Du may have his own Vietnamese network and a connection to his past lives. Once she ascertains that this stranger, whom Du introduces as "John," is helping Du re-connect with his biological family, she finally begins to see how she has completely misread him and how wrong she has been about their connection. Although, earlier, Jane had been able to place her and Du's displacement within the same general category of asylum seeker, the appearance of John as well as Du's intentions to reunite with his sister in California reveal the specificities in the refugee experience that Jane has overlooked. Barely responding to Jane's anxious questions about John's visit, Du tells her, "'What do you want to know? I've known him longer than I've known you. I knew him in the camps'" (221). While Jane had assumed that she and Du were alike because she also understood how to survive, she never fully considered how camp life had established a strong community and identity for Du.

For Du, the people he knew in the camps are closer and, in many ways, more valuable to him than Jane, who has no experience with refugee camps. It is not simply a matter of knowing John longer, but of knowing him while living in the camps. This is a specific history that Du has kept to himself, a history that continues to tie him to John and his sister whom he intends to find. Du does not allow Jane to take part in this aspect of his past, refusing to recount it to her. Even the few pieces of knowledge that Jane has gained about Du previously she seems to forget during this scene. When Du asks her if he can have money to travel to California and see his sister, Jane asks, "'What sister?'" (221). Jane had been so convinced that she was Du's family, that he was her son, that she had forgotten about Du's only remaining sister. Soon, though, Jane recognizes her mistake, thinking, "The stories of the detention camp flood me. This is the married sister who fed

him live worms and lizards and crabs so he wouldn't starve to death" (221). For Du, the experience of survival in the camps takes precedence over a loyalty to Bud and Jane, as do biological attachments and a lived sense of collectivity.

Accepting that Du is leaving to be with the people who helped him survive the camps, Jane still has trouble seeing how Du can have a deeper connection with his previous life than with his promising future in Iowa. To Jane, Du was "her silent ally against the bright lights, the rounded, genial landscape of Iowa," and she cannot see why Du does not see her in the same light, why he is not sorry to leave her. Instead of recognizing that he has previous and more meaningful commitments to his particular refugee community, Jane portrays Du as nearly heartless. Told that Du's sister will now look after him and that he is thankful for "everything [Bud has] done," Jane thinks to herself, "Abandonment, guilt, betrayal: the boy in front of me would consider them banal dilemmas" (221). All this time that Jane had believed Du was living and succeeding for her and Bud, he was also doing it for a community he had never abandoned or betrayed. Without Jane or Bud knowing, Du had saved his money and searched for his sister while also playing the part of a new Ripplemeyer. As Jane comes to realize that "Du has practiced without a net; he knows his real friends," she begins to see her part in obscuring his refugee-ness in order to believe in her own fixed idea of total assimilation (221).

In trying to rewrite her displacement alongside Du's and to erase the threat of his foreignness, Jane only manages to distance herself from his actual past and his real transformation. Thrust into the role of the ambiguous immigrant, whose foreignness elicits both desire and fear, Jane constructs Du as the supercitizen immigrant, who escapes any undecidability because he is so American. However, in doing so, Jane has no idea that Du "had made a life for himself among the Vietnamese in Baden" (222). She explains that she and Bud "were so full of wonder at how fast he became American," they did not see he was "a hybrid, like the fantasy appliances he wants to build" (222). Despite Jane's belief that Du had become all-American, he had actually maintained a tie to his past lives while adapting to his new one. Although she feels that she "should have known about his friends, his sister, his community," she admits that she "was afraid to test the delicate thread of his hyphenization" (225). Because Jane wants to believe that her transformation has been "genetic," taking over her completely and changing her entirely, she is afraid to discover the ways in which Du has held on to his other half. Indeed, she initially denies even the possibility of a hyphenation so that she can maintain her claim on his transformation and the new home she has built.

Much of Jane's feelings of betrayal in Du's departure are rooted in what she sees as his abandonment of a mutual and reflective legitimization. When he leaves, he not only shatters her image of him as the transformed immigrant, but also destroys her dream of Baden as a place of refuge and new beginnings for all immigrants. As his adopted immigrant mother, Jane believed that Du's transformation belonged equally to her: "His education was my education. His wirings and circuits were as close to Vijh & Vijh as I would ever get" (223). Even as he leaves, she pushes him along the path she wants him to take, telling him in a "brusque, maternal" tone to "At least finish high school" (223). However, whether or not Du chooses to take her advice in the future, his leaving still represents Baden's inability to fully integrate Du and, equally important, the refugee's own ambivalence toward his adopted home. Trying to correct Baden's and Bud's shortcomings, Jane imagines that if "things [had] worked out differently ... Du would

have had the father of any boy's dream, a funny, generous, impulsive father, an American father from the heartland like the American lover I had for only a year" (224). If only Bud could have been a real American father, the one Jane had originally rejuvenated, Du could have become a real American and Jane could have had her America. However, the novel shows that there is no perfect America, that there is trouble in America's heartland, and that the immigrant supercitizen does not actually exist beyond the American imaginary.

In *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*, Nguyen writes, "the flexible strategies exhibited by Asian American authors and literary characters are testimony to the ways Asian Americans in general pick and choose their tactics of struggle, survival, and possible assimilation" (7). Du, as a refugee, is both a victim, who is in need of help and refuge, and a survivor, who has developed the skills to stay alive. This dual identity, much like the immigrant's role as savior and usurper, is seemingly contradictory, but I argue that the liminal refugee is both victim and survivor. In the case of Du, his status as victim grants him a place in America while his position as survivor attaches him to those who helped him stay alive in the camps. He is, in many ways, obligated to both groups and, ultimately, decides for himself that his allegiance is greater to his sister, someone who cared for him in his previous life and who also shares his genes. Yet, as he waits to hear news of her and prepares to find her, Du easily takes on the role of victim in order to receive help from Bud and Jane. Du's flexibility allows him to have an ambiguous relationship with Bud, Jane, and Baden, staying in the town and being part of their family when it benefits him and leaving when it no longer suits him.

Thus, it is not simply the host nation that is ambivalent about immigrants, but immigrants, themselves, who can be undecided about the host nation. Jane's own final escape reveals another attempt to identify with Du, specifically his ability to navigate between his past and present selves, between being a survivor and a victim. In deciding to head West to California with Taylor and Duff in the end, Jane largely follows Du's example of leaving behind the man who gave him refuge in order to join the family who had first saved him. During her time in Baden, Jane had attempted to leave behind all her previous identities and to fully become Bud's "Jane." In doing so, she tried to submerge Jasmine, Prakash's modern Indian wife; Kali, the woman/goddess who kills the rapist Half-Face; Jazzy, the awkward new immigrant whom Lillian saves; and Jase, the adventurous and hopeful day mummy. However, having witnessed Du successfully manage his multiple lives, Jane begins to see her own flexibility and takes full advantage of it when Taylor and Duff knock at her door.

Finally making up her mind, Jane groups herself once more with Du, arguing that, unlike Karin who stayed, "Du and [she] are different" and know when to leave in order to survive (240). As flexible immigrants, Jane and Du have "shrunk and [they have] swollen," shifted shapes to fit their new surroundings (240). For once, Jane seems to be in control of her life and to be the one who determines what shape she will take. Significantly, she reverts back to a previous identity and does so while keeping traces of her most recent form. Indeed, Jane is physically changed in that she is still carrying Bud's child even as she "scrambl[es] ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope" (241). Finally embracing her ambiguity, Jane simultaneously allows Taylor to save her and eagerly rushes forth to meet what lies Westward.

Conclusion

Honig writes, "The cultural organization of foreignness as threat and/or supplement is not exhausted by the types of foreignness ... To the foreigner as founder, immigrant, and citizen, one could add other categories – the foreigner as refugee, boundary crosser" (8). In this paper, I have read Mukherjee's *Jasmine* as a novel dealing directly with "the cultural organization of foreignness," tracing both the foreigner as founder in the character of Jane and the foreigner as asylum seeker in the character of Du. In the first case, Jane and her foreignness are seen as both regenerative and destructive to the town of Baden. In entering the community, Jane brings new life to Bud while also destroying Karin's. With Du, his claim to America as a refugee and his perceived survival skills poise him to become the supercitizen, although his character ultimately prefers to be the flexible immigrant. Focusing on Jane's relationship with Du, I have argued that Jane initially deconstructs Du's refugee status in order to shape an immigrant identity that is completely 'assimilable'. For Jane, Du exemplifies the ultimate survivor who quickly adapts and who is no longer victimized.

Jane thinks of foreignness in non-threatening and assimilable terms. In many ways, she sees Du as an immigrant who survives by adopting a new identity, by being detached from a history of victimization. However, only when Jane is made to recognize the power of ambiguity, does she acknowledge her inability to break with her past. In the end, the real similarity that Jane and Du share is the ability to be undecided about their host/savior community. They both choose to leave Baden and Bud in order to return to families that had supported each of them in the past, and are able to do so because each strategically uses his or her ambivalent position as victim *and* survivor to escape once more. In short, refugees have been understood and defined through large-scale displacement, intermediate care, flight, and resettlement.

However, thinking about refugees as characters rather than simply as tragic victims of circumstance, I have emphasized the possibilities of responding to the legal and humanitarian limitations placed on refugees. Throughout the paper, I argued that textual representation of refugee experiences can push against the dominant characterizations of forced displacement. That is rather than simply reflecting large scale displacement and silence, the static and dehumanizing structure of refugee detainment sites, the trauma of escape, and the easy assimilation of grateful refugees, Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* speaks to the possibility and importance of collective narration and reclaiming camp experiences, the complicated responsibility of recounting refugee flight, and the undecided role of the refugee as a new American immigrant. In this paper I have illustrated how large scale displacement does not silence refugees and how silence and indifference can sometimes play an equal part in the retelling of the flight narrative; and how displaced persons can act as both grateful victims and self-empowered survivors. Thus, I contend that it is within the textual representation that refugees can identify themselves against the refugee condition and can also explore and call attention to their undecidedness. Refugee narratives, then, are not simply about portraying the refugee condition, but about making the choices surrounding the portrayal visible and possible.

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