

At Home in Babel: The Language of Hyperreality in the Immigrant Narrative

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Complicated by issues of identity, the immigrant experience is fraught with trauma. As such, authors engage with this theme by manipulating time and setting. These themes reimagine ghosts in hyperreal forms distorted by memories and perceptions. This article investigates hyperreality in the context of immigrant literature, this paper will introduce its audience to the ghosts haunting our muddled realities.



(Sharp)

An artifice of the hyperreal

The Statue of Liberty has served as the iconic representation of the American ideal of freedom since its transportation from France to America in 1886. Positioned a few miles from the auspicious shores of Ellis Island, the statue is the country's symbolic guiding light, ushering immigrants through uncharted waters towards the unknown of their new land. As such, Lady Liberty has been the conventional muse of American romanticism and patriotic nostalgia. Fittingly, The U.S. Postal Service spotlighted the statue as the signature symbol on one of its stamps. Yet this image was not of the actual statue. Instead, the design depicted an imitative replica from the New York City hotel and casino on the Las Vegas strip (Sharp). Reproduced, replicated, and resold, the archetypal representation of the immigrant's dream became an artifice of the hyperreal.

Hyperreality is the existence in which the real and its symbol have become indistinguishable from each other. It is also a significant prism through which to explore current cultural constructions of immigration and polyethnicity in America. Within American discourse, metaphors such as "the belonging," "the roots," and "journey" are used commonly to describe the immigrant experience. Yet these comparisons are generalized and oversimplified, symbolizing an American immigrant experience based on a false reality. These metaphors distort the truth by reframing it, shaping the actual experiences of the foreign-born and the nonwhite. Without truth, immigrants must cling to a hyperreal alternative, filled by ghostly hauntings and sorrowful specters of their unique cultural past.

In particular, ethnic literature serves as a compelling medium to witness the effects of the hyperreal on the immigrant story. While most of these texts are written by and deal with immigrants, they address hyperreality by two simultaneous yet divergent approaches: acceptance and resistance of hyperreal symbolism. In this self-reflexive process, ethnic American artists such as Junot Díaz, Chang-Rae Lee, and Alex Rivera reconstruct reality and reimagine identity, while emphasizing the power of language to shape our consciousness.

A real without origin or reality

Published in 1981, *Simulacra and Simulation* is a philosophical treatise by Jean Baudrillard seeking to disentangle the relationships among reality, symbols, and society. According to the text, these associations have been distorted by the condition of postmodernity. Reality has been exchanged for meaning for symbols and signs, since "[w]e live in a world where there is more and more symbol and less and less meaning" (79). Through a progression of repeated replication, chimerical perceptions give way to create a proliferation of symbolic simulacra, or copies without true original sources. Our society facilitates this destructive process. Society is an authentic fake as it pursues reality in the artificial.

To demonstrate his claim, Baudrillard offers the paradigm of the map, the world, and the society. Geography itself has begun merely to imitate the map, which now determines the organization of the real world, while "[t]he territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory" (121). Meaning and symbol become inverted, obliterating reality and authenticating the fake. Hyperreality plays a similar role in our conception of history. In a hyperreal world, the present day is an imitation of history. Yet, the cyclic nature of history is an artifice. Specters of our past pervade our current moment, clouding our ability to distinguish the real from its simulation.

Yet, postmodern culture is not merely artificial since the notion of artificiality requires

some sense of reality against which to recognize the artifice. Postmodernity is void of any semblance of the real. For Baudrillard, postmodernity “is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” (3). This shallowness typifies a world in which the distinctions between signified and signifier have all but disappeared through successive reproductions of previous reproductions of reality.

In the hyperreal, there is no longer any distinction between reality and its representation; there is only simulation. In the hyperreal world, our consciousness struggles to define differences between the past and the present, recreating memory in the form of ghosts and hauntings.

Baudrillard identifies a number of cultural phenomena to explain the postmodern conflation of reality with hyperreality. For one, contemporary media including television, film, and the Internet blur the line between reality and fiction. For example, in war films, the media shapes reality in its own image when “[t]he war became film, the film becomes war, the two are joined by their common hemorrhage into technology” (60). Our consciousness mimics this hyperreal process of imitation, allowing pretend ghosts to linger in real life. Similarly, the consumerism of postmodernity forges an alternate and imitated realm of reality. Consumer culture confounds the products that are needed to sustain life with the products for which a need is created by commercial images. With these distinctions muddled, society is detached from the basic ontological inherency necessary to decipher what is needed and what is wanted. Reality is thus destroyed, as consumerism acts as “a kind of genetic code that directs the mutation of the real into the hyperreal” (33). Further, the pervasiveness of the media and consumer culture imposes and reinforces hyperreality in the consciousness of society.

Language controls the frame of reality by giving structure to perception. For Baudrillard, metaphors, images, and other rhetorical devices are the focus of language’s power, as “metaphor is a ‘game’ played with truth” (122). In the depthless postmodern condition, language’s exploitative nature is realized in its contribution to hyperreality since “[t]here is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality: of secondhand truth, objectivity, and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of lived experience, a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared” (96). By masking truth and hiding meaning, language instigates a distortive hyperreality hard to resist.

Baudrillard’s language-driven hyperreality emphasizes the proliferation of symbolism in the postmodern condition. This excess of images and metaphors dulls our ability to discern the real from the artificial. For Dr. Eugene Arva, this hyperreal process of desensitization causes a tangible shift in the way we communicate since, as Baudrillard writes, “caught in the web of a myriad of images, people no longer tell or listen to stories—the traditional carriers of meaning—nor seem to distinguish between reliable and unreliable media” (6). As simulation and simulacra dominate our collective societal consciousness, modes of personal expression and storytelling change. For fiction writer Lorraine López, this hyperreality “spells death to the imagination by shrinking all possibilities to one. These generalizations encourage us to stop considering what can be” (2). These transformative changes to language and its representation also cause shifts in our consciousness, inviting the ghosts of our past to our present reality.

Hyperreality and the immigrant narrative

The effects of a language-driven hyperreality on imagination and storytelling become particularly potent in the context of the immigrant narrative and ethnic literature. Immi-

gration and ethnic otherness has been metaphorized and signified for so long, rendering these experiences susceptible to the distortive agents of hyperreal metaphors and simulated symbolism. Struggling to express an authentic reality in lieu of distortive symbolism, modern ethnic American writers must spin hyperrealism on its head to show truth.

Alex Rivera, Junot Díaz, and Chang-Rae Lee recognize the depthlessness of the postmodern condition, and allow hyperreality to mold the milieus of their immigrant protagonists. Media, technology, and consumerism are the contextual forces by which hyperreality is embedded in the immigrant milieu. As such, oversimplified and overgeneralized terms, such as the “belonging,” “the roots,” and “the journey,” serve as metaphors to frame the ethnic American experience. These terms distort the truth and strip immigrants of their ability to express themselves. To resist this coercive power and give meaning to their protagonists’ experiences, Rivera and Díaz dismantle these symbols and criticize hyperreality.

In Rivera’s film *Sleep Dealer*, Baudrillard’s hyperbolized map paradigm becomes a reality. The film surveys the complicated identities of the immigrant self in a hyperreal and global society. The protagonist, Memo, is held back behind the border separating Mexico and California. Operating futuristic technology, Memo uses his mind to maneuver machinery across the fence on the border and into the United States. Although physically impermeable, the border is porous to psychological forces. In this setting, Memo’s body becomes a ghost, haunting his working mind.

Purposefully, to demonstrate the artificiality of borders and their limits, Rivera exposes his audience to his creation of hyperreality. The disingenuous dispositions of Rivera’s hyperreality are given a mouthpiece in the form of the media. Memo’s world exists as a series of technological symbols and industrial signifiers, mimicking and distorting the semblances of the protagonist’s realities. The media proves to be the chief method of propagation of these technological symbols and virtual signs. For example, the TruNode reality trade platform allows consumers to inhabit representations of worlds that are not their own. Advertised relentlessly on television, members of this society are encouraged to claim someone else’s reality for their own. In the *Sleep Dealer*’s hyperreality, the truth is disguised in television commercials, or tangled between the wires and heavy machinery hookups.

The media-obsessed and technologically-driven hyperreality problematizes the sense of “belonging” in the immigrant narrative. Creating a hyperreal system for pseudo-immigration, the Nodes enable workers to live in Mexico while working in the United States. For Memo, “belonging” becomes a complicated social construct since he lives and works in two different countries. He cannot belong to one country or one identity, as the border divides his nationhood and personhood. Without a basis in reality, “belonging” becomes a hyperreal term, obligating Memo to form arbitrary and rigid distinctions of his existence here and there.

Junot Díaz focuses on another aspect of the postmodern condition. In his novel *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, he examines Latino identities and narratives and the ways in which both are affected and informed by consumer culture. This consumerism is enacted through institutions like the state and the media, and by the very nature of the postmodern age. Set in the urban sprawl of New Jersey, the story of Oscar is dominated by simulation and a consumer-driven hyperreality. Indeed, the consumerism of Oscar’s world creates an alternate realm of reality, visible only among the “colors and shapes” of the mall and the industrial waste of New Jersey (19). Meaningless consumerism destroys reality and, instead, invites hyperreality in which race and consumer culture are inter-

changeable. Consumer culture has engaged Oscar with the hyperreal, conflating aspects of the material with identity.

Oscar himself is consumed by a world obsessed with media, technology, and commercial products. He lives in a replicated virtual world taken up with comic books and video games and excessively preoccupied with “role-playing games, comic books, and Japanese animation” (266). Oscar exists among the signs and symbols of the postmodern age. So intrinsic are these symbols and images to Oscar’s perception of the world around him that they become part of his identity. As such, Díaz constructs Oscar’s identity in the context of comic-book heroes, as he addresses the reader: “You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma Mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest” (17). Plagued by the hyperreality of “the Jersey malaise,” Oscar must negotiate the complexity of self-definition in a distortive contemporary age (191).

Bonding questions of identity and the emptiness of metaphors such as the “journey” and “roots,” Díaz shifts questions of the self from reality to the hyperreality. While Oscar struggles to decipher reality from fiction, his sister Lola is confronted with the “metaphor du jour” of ethnic experience: the journey. She gives into the symbolism, traveling to the Dominican Republic in search of her roots, determined to begin “her journey, a first step taken, the beginning of something big” (239). However, Lola’s comfort in these experiences is fleeting as she gets back to New Jersey, without a heightened self-awareness or answers. For Lola and Oscar, these metaphors are empty artifice, instigating a sense of a longing for something unreal.

Similarly, the formidable materialism in Chang-Rae Lee’s novel *A Gesture Life* suggests a cosmos entirely devoted to the worship of the material. The materialism of the novel’s hometown of Bedley Run is represented by the blatant affluence of the protagonist Doc Hata. A Korean immigrant, Hata is the owner of a successful local business, Sunny Medical Supply, earning notoriety and respect for his prosperity. Like a more subtle version of Gatsby, Hata builds an elaborate house, complete with an “impressive flower and herb garden, and a flagstone swimming pool, and leaded glass and wrought iron conservatory” (16). The details of his house captivate his field of perception and mediate his reality in a distortive way. Hata’s house is a chimerical and imitative symbol of his superficial identity.

Interestingly, Hata creates his own hyperreality through his “gestures,” as he defines himself through his polite motions to others. Yet these gestures are merely a hyperreal ruse, as Hata constantly performs these acts without any deeper meaning. Hata’s “gesture life,” a false reality, leads to an interesting discussion about belonging in the immigrant context. Eager to assimilate to Bedley Run and earn the town’s respect, Hata longs for a sense of belonging in America. These longings distort Hata’s reality and divert his attention from the more pressing issues of belonging within his family and the deterioration of his relationship with his daughter.

Hyperreality, trauma, and reconstruction

The immigrant narrative is subject to the forces of an exterior hyperreality. Acting through the simulated channels of media and consumer culture, the omnipresence of a language-driven hyperreality changes the truth and meaning for Rivera, Díaz, and Lee’s protagonists. Although these artists challenge the hyperreal of the current condition,

Rivera and Díaz also self-reflexively employ elements of the hyperreal to imaginatively reframe their protagonists' realities. Arva describes this new form of hyperreality as an exceedingly harsh experiment since "[p]ostmodernist fiction does not stop at only dismantling the signifiers, but also engages in Frankensteinian experiments of creating new ones" (63). Spinning hyperreality on its head, Rivera, Lee, and Díaz reconstruct meaning and reclaim agency in the aftermath of personal trauma and generational tragedy.

The immigrant experience is fraught with trauma; as Jolie Sheffer explains, at the heart of the immigrant trauma, the very relationship between trauma and the immigrant experience, lies the idea of "time rupture." She argues the immigrant reality is split into two: "before immigration" and "after immigration" (7). It is this rip in reality that is the critical cause of trauma.

Ethnic literature also locates trauma in the pain of the chaotic disruption of immigration. Caught in the liminality of virtual immigration, Memo's health and consciousness deteriorates with each cybernetic journey to work on the other side of the border. He is forced to relive the traumatic rupture caused by immigration on a daily basis, losing touch with his family and the reality of his physical existence. Trauma operates in a different and more enduring form in *Oscar Wao*. It is Oscar's mother Beli who immigrates to New Jersey, splitting her reality into life in the Dominican Republic and survival in America. Beli's personal trauma sets off a multigenerational suffering, affecting Lola and Oscar. Díaz focuses on the transgenerational nature of the immigrant trauma as he writes, "There is within the family a silence that stands monument to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction" (571). Similarly, Doc Hata is plagued by the trauma of a distant war and expatriate migration, passing pain and sadness to his daughter Sunny. Unable to reconcile the gulf between his present and past experiences, Hata grows estranged from Sunny.

The experience of trauma brings about interesting effects on personal reality and the landscape of the imagination. Trauma is a dogging ghost, bringing to the surface raw recollections of a bruised history. For literary theorist Kathleen Brogan, contemporary concepts of haunting memories and relived nightmares within immigrant narratives serve as greater discourses about ethnicity, race, and identity in a postmodern America. She argues the hauntings are guised vestiges of a contentious historical past and manifest in literature as reoccurring memories of loss and desolation. In ethnic literature, she writes, "The hauntings that these texts deal with communal memory, cultural transmission, and group inheritance of a traumatic past" (12). Rivera's Memo must confront enduring and harsh social and economic circumstances. Similarly, Díaz's Lola is haunted by the traumas of her ancestry while Lee's Doc Hata is plagued by memories of a distant war. Revisiting memories of the past and communing with hauntings of the present, immigrants reconstruct reality in order to claim agency over their experiences and to resist the distortive symbolism of their new milieus. Arva believes that through the immigrant process of hyperreal reclamation, "traumatic imagination, traumatic memories are turned into narrative memory and alternate reality" (61). This new form of self-created hyperreality reinvents ethnic identity by imaginatively piecing together history and memory that in many cases have been fragmented, erased, or ignored.

Sleep Dealer and *A Gesture Life* subtly accept hyperreality to reform the existence of its protagonists in novel ways. For Rivera, the technological hyperreality introduces depthlessness into the pseudo-immigration experience of Memo. Although the film resists this hyperreality, it puts forth a new form of simulation. Utilizing the nodes to be intimate

with his girlfriend, Luz, Memo uses the hyperreal to gain meaning and authenticate interaction in the throes of trauma. Similarly, Lee critiques the materialist hyperreality perpetuating the falseness of Doc Hata's gestures. Yet, the structure of Hata's narrative abandons convention to express an experienced ontology instead of a literal reality. Weaving in and out of memory, reflection, and narration, Hata's story is a distorted simulation of reality, articulating the truth of the immigrant experience through the hyperreal.

Further, Junot Díaz rhetorically plays with hyperreality, forcing sign and signifier to coexist in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In his portrayal of Oscar's existent dystopia, Díaz acknowledges that both consumer-driven hyperrealities and archetypal metaphors contribute to falsification of the immigrant experience. Díaz's fukú curse is an example of a metaphor that plagues the protagonists of *Oscar Wao*. The curse is used to explain the misery of the colonial past, bleak present, and hopeless future of Dominican immigrants. To describe the curse, Díaz writes, "*Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially fukú—generally a cure or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World" (17). Fukú is an important example of "cultural hauntings," as it operates on a trans-generational and trans-continental scale. Literary critic Anne Mahler argues Fukú is the mythological and volatile representation of the specter of immigration. The curse is a lightning-bolt term, as it "attracts all the complicated and problematic meanings affecting the immigrant reality" (121). Fukú is about tragedy, rupture, and trauma.

Yet, Díaz teaches us that the curse can take on different meanings and different contexts. As such, fukú is also a reconstructive paradoxical, as it is both a cause of the hyperreal and the solution for trauma. Fukú gives symbol to an experienced reality, imposing a metaphorical narrative on the unarticulated immigrant narrative. The fukú is an imagined paradigm of the immigrant hyperreal, as it is constructed to both explain and cope with the realities of a painful existence. Cured by a cultural counter spell known as zafa, fukú is both the traumatic inheritance and recreated legacy of the American Dominican people. Díaz blurs the line between curse and counterspell, asking his readership: "Zafa or fukú? You tell me" (568). Lacking any roots in a true and definable reality, the fukú is the ultimate hyperreal force, restructuring our consciousness to cope with destructive circumstance.

At home in Babel

In Judeo-Christian mythology, the Tower of Babel is the quintessential paradigm of the hyperreal. According to the story, a united community attempted to construct a tower to reach the heavens. To punish the greedy, God confuses people's languages, so that they would not be able to return to each other. In a world full of excess language, and thus symbols, God's people lost their means to communicate. Baudrillard's hyperreality operates under the same premise. In the symbolic postmodern condition we have lost the ability to decipher meaning and express truth. Like Babel, America, a land of immigrants, is a transnational environment. Shaped by the threatening forces of postmodernity, the language-driven hyperreality promotes the proliferation of metaphor, specifically emphasizing the belonging, roots, and the journey of the immigrant experience. In this symbolic age, cultural ghosts and individuals' memories haunt the experiences of immigrants. To authenticate the immigrant stories of their protagonists, ethnic American writers both resist and manipulate hyperreality. Rivera, Lee, and Díaz challenge the function of meaning in a distorted reality to reframe the truth of immigration and to confront the ghosts of the past; meaning is a creation and reality is a fake.

The creative process

In thinking about hyperreality in the immigrant narrative, the significance of language to its employment becomes increasingly evident. Language is an intrinsic trope, linking the immigrant experience to the signs and symbols of its milieu. As such, the content and form of this project are preoccupied with language and its effects. In its form my project uses different types of language—analysis and creative writing—to discuss reality in multiple dimensions.

The following is a short story, chronicling the beginnings of an immigrant narrative. The narrative's intention is not to create a synthetic plot for the purposes of modeling hyperreality—for that would be too symbolic in and hyperreal in and of itself. Instead, the narrative presents the immigrant experience in its nakedness. Inspired by Díaz and his tendency to integrate narration and dialogue, the story confounds its storytelling perspective and speaking voice. The text offers more at the beginning than at the end, ironically emphasizing the brevity of the journey rather than the long-term aftermath. Ultimately, through the medium of narrative, this story hopes to show the larger question of this project: How do words and symbols mediate our lived realities?

Return to source

Who am I?

Where am I from?

The airplane crumbled into pieces, a winded mountain peak spilling its pebbles, a broken vase scattering its contents. One woman, Layla Al-Awsat, fell like flecks of spices from a broken used tea bag. Above, behind, and below her in the in between suspended in-flight amenities, stereo headphones, overhead storage bins, cabin lights, fresh passports, trademarked paper cups and blankets, duty-free chocolate, hazard-yellow life vests, and exhausted personal television sets. She hung in the ironic tangle of her seatbelt and oxygen mask, struggling to find air in the clarity of the atmosphere.

There were other immigrants aboard Flight 237 from Rabat. These people dangled an intangible distance from Layla—coalescing with the falling remnants of the plane, unevenly disjointed, unevenly bizarre. In the mix of broken machine and broken people was suspended the debris of the self, fragmented memories, threadbare ghosts, split mother tongues, violated spaces, untranslatable idioms, smothered secrets, ephemeral loves, deceased futures, and the disregarded meanings of empty, vacant, words, *roots, belonging, journey*.

Cushioned by the clouds, Layla plummeted gradually like a heavy suitcase dropped down stairs. After hours of stumbling downward steadily, she tightened her muscles to prepare to hit the water below her. Green and even, the expansive chasm of the Atlantic Ocean opened smoothly to uncover the slippery depths of her rebirth.

Which side of the Atlantic is this? she wondered.

I'm so sorry about that, ma'am. Turbulence. Can I get you anything else? she asked. The flight attendant widened her eyes to smile, as she patted the paper on Layla's tray with a napkin.

No, she said.

Still very much in the throes of a proverbial nightmare, Layla couldn't find the words in English, and her voice sounded waterlogged and brackish. Layla listened to the clicking wheels of the refreshment cart traverse down the cabin, as the echo of the toilet

flushing reverberated from the nearby bathroom while she traced the jagged lines of her the wet mark on her letter. She had written poetry on the plane, chronicling her forward journey for the people of her past.

Layla closed her eyes once more, navigating through landing blind. Circling the runway at a slow altitude, the plane veered from the trajectory of her balance and forced her arms against the seat. In a series of loud bangs, she was reborn in the New York, arriving feet first—an improper orientation for entering the world. Beneath her, the cosmos has collided, making one of earth and machine. The friction sparks blazed in the aftermath of exertion. Reality imploded, and the distance between what was and what is collapsed.

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to John F. Kennedy Airport. Local time is 5:36 pm, and the temperature is 45 degrees. For your safety and comfort, we ask that you please remain seated with your seat belt fastened until the captain turns off the “Fasten Seat Belt” sign. This will indicate that we have parked at the gate and that it is safe for you to move about.

Belonging

In the absence of movement, Layla grabbed her belongings from the overhead space and walked towards the exit. In the drab and drafty jet bridge, she took her first steps on American soil, on future’s path. Armed with two worn bags, Layla hastened through security towards the exit of the airport.

She had grown accustomed to the stifling of pressurized air and fluorescent lighting. Upon escaping the liminality of the JFK airport, she reclaimed her perceptions. On the side of the New York City highway, she was immediately bombarded with a myriad of sounds, sights, and smells. As she waited, the odor of gas infected her street corner, shifting Layla’s senses from a rural existence to an urban reality. Climbing into the back of a cab, Layla noticed the slickness of the city streets. The roads of her past were paved with cobble and brine, saturated with generations of history.

Hello. 92 Amsterdam Avenue, please, she said. The English words twirled around in her mouth before they escaped. It was if her speech was dancing in a linguistic game of musical chairs, pirouetting between the harshness of an infant English and the simplicity of a dutiful Arabic. She knew the lilt in her voice had betrayed her.

‘Min Aynah Anti?’ asked the taxi driver.

Stunned to hear Arabic so far from home, Layla paused.

Marrakesh, she said.

For the duration of the twenty-minute drive, Layla and the taxi driver conversed in a familiar and unfamiliar dialect—a merger of his Egyptian Arabic and her Berber colloquialism.

A language neither could claim agency over nor cast off wholeheartedly. It was the hybridized linguistics of rupture, of loss.

The cabdriver refused to take her fare, as if taking her money was to be a betrayal of their fabricated collective experience.

Thank you, she whispered and closed the door behind her.

Turning attention to her worn walkup apartment, she stood outside to observe its city aesthetics. A cigarette butt, a faded flyer, and a soda can littered the steps to her door. She grabbed the key from under the mat—an arrangement she made with the super through a misinterpreted e-mail correspondence. She dropped her bags to stare properly at her new abode.

Exhaling the staleness of the past, she inhaled the new air of her new home. After throwing her body on her new sofa, she sifted through her bags to find her passport, wallet, and the letters. Tomorrow I’ll mail the letter *home*.

Roots

In the following week, Layla pieced together the beginnings of a new future, while clinging to the vestiges of a broken past. One morning, she journeyed uptown to the university, staring wild-eyed at the city people—the actors in her rebirth.

Layla Al-Awsat

There it stood in a sea of forms and papers. Her name stretched enigmatically across the generics of the mundane. Signing her name on the class rosters, she grabbed her books and started off homeward.

On the subway, Layla studied her new milieu; the sea of colorful faces—ranging from the whitest of whites to the blackest of blacks, the buzz of different languages—forming a new and collective buzz.

¿Qué hora es? asked the man sitting next to her. Short and dark, he smelled of sweat and rubber.

I'm Moroccan, she said. Layla buried her eyes in her hands, studying their color for answers. Retreating out of the confines of his seat, the man peered over her shoulder at her watch. Keeping her eyes on the door, Layla tepidly stood up at her stop. On her walk home, Layla thumbed the inside of her jacket, humming the tune of a television jingle of which she couldn't remember any of the related lyrics.

Layla arrived at her stoop, brushed the mist droplets off the mail, and let herself in. Sorting through the mail, she noticed the familiar icon of the Statue of Liberty. Six stamps of Lady Liberty lined the outer rim of a water-stained letter. She stared hard at the green of the statue's face, remembering that green from her plummet to the Atlantic Ocean. Distinguishing the stamps and the curvature of her Arabic penmanship, Layla recognized the letter as her own. It hadn't made its way homeward after all.

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