American Spaces in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri

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They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

Robert Frost

In Edward Hopper's painting *Nighthawks*, three people sit at the counter of a diner, neither speaking nor looking at each other. The waiter busies himself behind the counter. It is a "clean, well-lighted place," but not a space that keeps out the loneliness and nothingness of the outside world. The four people in the painting have brought that world of isolation in with them and made it a part of their own emotional space. What the painting suggests about the anonymity, loneliness, and emptiness of American interiors, physical and emotional, is a theme that runs through twentieth-century American literature as obviously and undeniably as the Mississippi runs through the middle of America. The names of the writers, from the beginning of the century to its close, are like ports along the way: Sherwood Anderson, Thomas Wolfe, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, Raymond Carver, Marilynne Robinson. In the works of all these writers, characters look for ways out of the rooms and houses that enclose their loneliness: Elizabeth Willard waiting for death to take her out of

ESC 31.1 (March 2005): 50–68

the inherited hotel that has become her prison; the unnamed narrator of "Cathedral" exclaiming with confused joy at a moment of transcendence that he no longer felt enclosed within anything; Emily Grierson looking out the windows of a decaying mansion that has literally become a tomb. Bachelard has written, "If asked to name the benefit of a house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6). But to American writers, the walls that surround the inner spaces of houses are more often a metaphor for confinement within one's own ego, or confinement within a set of conventions that deny intimacy and individuality.

For the characters who live in these spaces, life is outside, not within, as in Bachelard. Doors shut out the world, and the protagonist in American fiction must step outside that door to understand himself and make meaningful contact with others. To be shut in does not mean to be safe but to be trapped. This metaphor may originate, as Hemingway said all American fiction did, with Huck Finn, who runs away from his abusive father and the conventional household of the Widow Douglas and into a violent and dangerous world which at least allows him some independence. It may begin with Poe's House of Usher and the Gothic tradition. It certainly pervades the fiction of Faulkner, with his claustrophobic and decaying southern mansions, as William Ruzicka notes. We also see this metaphor in such contemporary classics as Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, in which Ruth and Sylvie burn down the house that has become a symbol of the stifling conventions of small town life, conventions which interfere with individual autonomy without providing kindness, understanding, or help. And it appears again and again in the mid-life crisis novels of Percy, Malamud, Price, and Bellow. Walls form a prison, and those caught within those walls are in a kind of solitary confinement; the only answer is escape. The solution to one's loneliness is outside.

D. H. Lawrence once wrote of the original settlers in America:

> They came largely to get away—that most simple of motives. To get away. Away from what? Away from everything. That's why most people have come to America, and still do. To get away from everything they are and have been. "Henceforth be masterless." Which is all very well, but it isn't freedom. Rather the reverse—a hopeless sort of constraint. It is never freedom until you find something you positively want to be. (9)

To the extent to which this is true, it isn't surprising that many of the protagonists of American fiction should keep on running, running away from houses that are both empty of meaning and stifling in their constraints.

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Now, these empty American inner spaces are at the centre of the work of Jhumpa Lahiri, the young Indian-American writer whose collection of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 2000. Lahiri imagines an American world not just through American eyes but through eyes that have seen other cultures and a mind that has understood other ways of thought. Because of this, perhaps, she can offer fresh insights into the causes of the malaise of contemporary American culture, new metaphors for how we experience the world, reworkings of old themes, and subversions of old clichés.

In her short stories, Lahiri uses the architecture of old American houses as an emblem of the emotional spaces between the people who live in those houses, of the interior walls within the mind, of the stairs that connect the levels of experience, of the doors that shut others in or out, of the exterior walls that would normally delineate public from private space but which, again and again, do not. And yet she does not treat these American inner spaces in exactly the same way as her American-born predecessors. Sometimes the distances, physical and emotional, connect her characters, as they do in "The Third and Final Continent." Sometimes the spaces echo with the emotional emptiness of the characters, as they do in "Nobody's Business," and the echo blends with the melancholy isolation of diners in *Nighthawks*.

"The Third and Final Continent" and the more complex and sophisticated "Nobody's Business" take place in old Boston houses whose age and sturdiness suggest a continuity and stability that their newer residents may seek. The new residents, however, are not owners but transients, who rent rooms in houses originally designed to separate the families that owned and lived in them from strangers like themselves. These converted spaces, these houses turned into something that is neither precisely public nor private space, become a part of who the characters are.

This is most clear in "The Third and Final Continent." As the story opens in Boston in 1969, the unnamed Bengali narrator is an extremely isolated man, not just the usual alienated hero of American fiction but a literal alien, utterly alone, trying to understand the conventions of the society to which he has come. His parents are both dead, and after his father's death his mother went insane—a terrible memory which remains part of his inner landscape through much of the story. He has just come to the United States and has just married, but it is an arranged marriage and he has no feelings for his wife, Mala, other than a sense of duty. She has remained in India while he gets established in his new surroundings. He rents a room in the upstairs of a house owned by the 103-year-old Mrs

Croft, a fiercely independent widow who raised her children by giving piano lessons and who insists on living alone except for a series of boarders, many of whom she throws out after a week if she doesn't approve of their habits and manners. Her daughter, who lives just a few miles away, comes to check on her a couple of times a week but tells the narrator it "would kill" her mother if anyone tried to do anything to help her (188).

Mrs Croft sits on a piano bench just inside the heavily locked door with her telephone and her newspapers at her side. The locks are very important to her. The first thing she says to the narrator is "Lock up," and she insists that he check the locks every time he comes in (178). She locks out a world that she no longer understands, and these locks make her feel secure. She apparently never leaves the house, but she is certainly not a prisoner there. Rather, she controls her contact with the outside world by letting in boarders she approves of and by reading and listening to the radio. She controls both her boarders and her borders. The walls of her house are the walls of the self, but it is an integrated and contained self that takes in what it needs from the outside world—her daughter, news, her boarders. She is a soul who has selected "her own society—then shut the door." It is telling to realize that Emily Dickinson would have written those lines within the fictional Mrs Croft's lifetime; they embody a self-reliant and self-examining attitude toward the world which is part of what Mrs Croft is enclosing within her walls and protecting from the twentieth century.

For, while she admires the idea of progress, there is much about modern America that Mrs Croft wants to shut out. Some of the news she allows into her house astounds her. She marvels at the fact that there is now an American flag on the moon. Every day, until a kind gesture from him changes the tone of their relationship, she insists on telling her boarder this information and having him repeat to her that this is "Splendid." What she finds considerably less "splendid" is the fact that her daughter, a woman in her sixties, wears skirts "too high above the ankle" (186)—she claims that if she saw a woman in a miniskirt, she would have her arrested—and most of the other changes in customs that occurred between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries.

Nevertheless, hers is a way of seeing the world that the narrator can admire, and, through Mrs Croft, he is able to make an imaginative connection with America—not modern America, but Mrs Croft's world. Her world provides privacy, a space for dreaming, a space for the narrator to imagine a place where he can belong. The interior barriers—emotionally, the conventions of behaviour that separate and connect them, and physically, the walls and stairs between them—make connection possible.

Paradoxically, it is the distances, the conventions, the closed doors and impassable stairs that make connection possible.

Connection is also possible because the narrator realizes that, despite all their differences, he and Mrs Croft are equally distant from the societies in which they grew up, he from modern-day India, she from nineteenth-century America. The narrator comes to like and respect Mrs Croft, and she, in turn, tells her daughter that the narrator is "a gentleman" and "very kind," although the relationship between them is always formal. In part, this sense of mutual understanding occurs because their manners—her abrupt plain-spokenness, his traditional Indian sense of the deference due to age and position—give them rules for interacting that they both understand. And physically, distance is imposed by the very architecture of the house. She can't climb the stairs. He can go into his room, shut the door, and be alone to imagine an American world where he can belong, to create a romanticized space removed from his own personal past, a space in which he can imagine women in hoopskirts and men in frockcoats and "chaste conversation in the parlor" (189), an interior of possibility. Paradoxically, it is the distances, the conventions, the closed doors, and impassable stairs that make connection possible.

The narrator lives behind locked doors of his own, walls within his mind that shut out an inner world of death and insanity. This world that he is unsuccessfully running away from is represented by the ancestral home to which he takes his new wife Mala and in which he cannot love her. In his family home in India, the bedroom in which he spends his wedding night is right next to the bedroom in which his mother died. Her death and her madness are so close to him that the paragraph that begins with a description of how he came to marry Mala ends with a horrific recollection of his mother's insanity, of how she played with her excrement, and of how he used a hairpin to remove it from under the fingernails of her dead body (182). He keeps the door to this private hell shut by being polite and dutiful and unemotional, lighting his mother's funeral pyre when his older brother can't bear to do so, marrying without question or objection the woman his brother has chosen, having no close friends, and paying his rent on time. This does serve to keep the room shut, but he still hears the sounds from it. Literally, he recalls the actual ravings he heard through the wall; he still hears them through the wall even on another continent, when he remembers his marriage, or when he learns that Mrs Croft is a widow who, unlike his mother, found the strength of will to overcome her grief and despair, raised her children, and maintained not just her sanity but her independence. He also carefully keeps the outer world outside through his bland and formal politeness; in the only dialogue quoted, he sounds like an Edwardian butler. The outer world through which he

moves is almost as desolate of meaningful human contact as the moon on which the astronauts planted the American flag. Yet it is better than the alternative, and Mrs Croft has given him an inner world of imagined America to escape into, a motherland of his own making, and an imaginary mother in herself.

All this is possible because of the spirit in which both Mrs Croft and the narrator enact the conventions that connect them. The conventions are not empty formulas, but ways of acknowledging and respecting one another's humanity. The narrator establishes authentic contact with Mrs Croft when he puts the rent money directly into her hands rather than placing it on the ledge as she had asked. He understands that the eight-dollar rent is merely a gesture, an assertion that this is her territory, like the flag on the moon; she rents the room not for the money, but for the excuse it provides for human contact on her own terms. Giving her the money directly is an acknowledgement that he is paying her, another human being, for the right to live in her house, and it is a human contact, impersonal, but human. He also understands that anything more than this would be intrusive. Perhaps this is the reason that after he does this, she not only acknowledges that he has been "very kind," but stops insisting that he declare the American flag on the moon is "Splendid." She respects that he too is a separate human being who is capable of understanding without a direct word ever being said, not just an echo of what she wants to hear.

Nevertheless, the formality that connects them is still slightly painful because it doesn't fully acknowledge the emotions that lie beneath that formality. When he leaves, he remarks,

> I did not expect any display of emotion, but I was a bit disappointed all the same. I was only a boarder, a man who paid her a bit of money and passed in and out of her house for six weeks. (191)

To the outside world, they are only boarder and landlady, and yet they have become enough like mother and son that he has to remind himself, "I was not her son, and apart from those eight dollars, I owed her nothing" (189). That is the melancholy that haunts this space which has in other ways become a refuge and that haunts a relationship that has brought the narrator comfort. It is the pain of unrecognized connection. And yet this lesser pain of unrecognized connection with an imaginary mother helps to prepare him to accept the recognized and authentic connection of his life, his marriage. After six months, the narrator moves out of Mrs Croft's house but not her world. When Mala arrives, the narrator moves into an

apartment suitable for married couples, but he still treats her as a stranger. When the couple is living together in their impersonal rented apartment, they have neither intimacy nor privacy. Mala is too close physically for him to imagine her, romanticize, empathize with her, love her. He reacts to her intrusion by withdrawing from her emotionally, shutting her out metaphorically in a way he is too dutiful to do literally. Finally, he takes her to see Mrs Croft, the first time they have gone out together as a couple, and he learns that Mrs Croft has broken her hip and that her daughter is now staying with her to take care of her. When Mrs Croft tells him she called the police when she fell and broke her hip, he tells her this is "Splendid!" Mala laughs, the first time he has ever heard her laugh since she came to join him. Mrs Croft then turns her attention to Mala, inspects her, and declares her to be a "perfect lady" (195).

That is when the marriage begins. The narrator had to take her to see Mrs Croft, imagine her through Mrs Croft's eyes, and see her against the backdrop of his imagined American space before he could recognize her for the "perfect lady" she is. When she stands in front of Mrs Croft, he suddenly realizes that Mala, too, is a stranger in a country she doesn't understand and which doesn't understand her; this is the experience that unites them. Mrs Croft rearranges their internal spaces unknowingly, without understanding the full significance of what she is saying, simply by being who she is. To Mrs Croft, Mala is a "lady," because Mrs Croft looks beyond the differences between herself and Mala—the dark skin, the bangles, the sari, the henna-stained feet—to see the similarities, the long skirts that she (and her furniture) wear as a sign of their propriety and concealment, the understanding of the deference owed to age, the formal manners. Mrs Croft sees that Mala is a lady just as she has understood that the narrator is a gentleman. Her understanding is simple, but it leads him to an understanding that is far deeper. Mrs Croft, herself unchanged, is the catalyst. This can only happen in Mrs Croft's domain, the narrator's imagined America, a space of loneliness and self-reliance, a space that for the narrator is empty of memories but not empty of meaning. Mrs Croft connects the narrator to the new society in which he figuratively "finds himself" and to the stranger he has married. Mrs Croft, enclosed within the literal walls of her home, is the Vesta, the goddess of the hearth, the spirit of the place, and she is the crone of Jungian archetype, dispensing paradoxical blessings and wisdom.

The connections that occur in the story all take place within Mrs Croft's historic and romanticized American space. Mrs Croft paradoxically creates and destroys distances; she provides the interior walls that allow

imagining, and she breaks down the emotional barriers the narrator has constructed to protect himself from his memories of his mother and from this stranger, Mala. When Mala and the narrator enter Mrs Croft's house, her exterior walls shut out the world of 1969 America and her interior walls create new arrangements of distance and closeness, intimacy and privacy, rearrangements of external and emotional space that make love possible.

The scene in which this recognition occurs is subtle, and the dialogue and action reinforce the sense of the many over-lapping times and places that exist within the consciousnesses of the three characters. It is natural, strange, and strangely funny that the narrator cries out "Splendid!" when Mrs Croft tells him about calling the police when she fell, using just the same word and tone that Mrs Croft demanded that he use to describe the American flag on the moon. Her using the telephone to make a connection to the outer world of 1969 is a journey through time parallel to the astronauts' journey through space and it is her claiming of a place in the outer world of 1969. The world of 1866 has reached the world of 1969, men from the earth have reached the moon, and two Indians have reached America, all within Mrs Croft's interior space. It is indeed splendid.

The summer in Boston becomes a honeymoon, with the couple exploring the city together and making it feel their own. A few months later, when the narrator reads of Mrs Croft's death, it moves him deeply. The story ends with a flash forward to the 1990s, with the narrator and Mala American citizens, owners of their own home a few miles away, and the parents of an American-born son who is now a student at Harvard. The encounter with Mrs Croft becomes a metaphor for their experience of America, and she and her house become an emblem of America itself. Mrs Croft and her house are America, a romanticized America which is able to connect her past with her present in a way that the unromanticized America seldom can, a crankishly tolerant America which accepts them with all their differentness, and an America which causes them to understand what they have in common with one another and with an idealized spirit of the place to which they have come—independence, self-reliance, responsibility, the virtues of nineteenth-century America. The spirit of America is a dusty and threadbare old house locked against the world, a lonely and independent consciousness with the power to change itself and transform others.

The spirit of America is a dusty and threadbare old house locked against the world.

Lahiri's images, metaphors, themes, and ideas run both with and counter to the American grain. Mrs Croft's house is an introverted emblem that runs against an American literary tradition which more frequently identi-

fies the spirit of the place with exterior spaces. All the places in Frederick Turner's *Spirit of Place: The Making of An American Literary Landscape* are outdoor places: Thoreau's Massachusetts and Maine woods, Twain's Mississippi, William Carlos Williams's Patterson. If in much mainstream American fiction the house is the prison of self from which one must escape to discover the spirit of America, in Lahiri the house is where the spirit of America resides. The knowledge of the self is part of the spirit of America that did not expand westward but burrowed inward, a countermovement, against the stream, but part of America all the same. In addition, Lahiri moves beyond the metaphor that identifies growth with leaving what is known and shows that it is also rearranging what is known, as Mrs Croft helps the narrator do with his perceptions of Mala and himself—and that it is accepting what is unknown, as all three characters do. The solution to isolation is not outside, but within, in the re-vision of the self and the interior places of the spirit and in an imaginative sense of spiritual connection to the place in which one lives.

In "Nobody's Business," the same themes and metaphors form a different pattern of meaning. People occupy one another's physical and emotional space without any formally recognized relationship; they rent rooms in other people's lives. They hear what they do not want to hear through walls; they shut themselves into their own space and intrude upon other people's space. Telephones and staircases connect them to worlds of which they are not a part. Lonely isolated people both seek connection and deliberately avoid it. But in this story, the exterior walls do not shut out what is threatening in the outside world, nor do interior walls protect the independence and integrity of the self. No magical rearrangement of interiors leads to understanding, intimacy, or growth.

The house in which most of the action takes places seems very much like Mrs Croft's, but instead of her anchoring presence on the first floor, this house only contains two anonymous owners who play no role in the story. In the hallway of the ground floor there is no Mrs Croft on her piano bench but a beautiful spiral stairway that seems to promise connection to a world of the past but in fact leads only to the shabby rented rooms occupied by three housemates and their sometime lovers. The lodgers form a kind of false family, separated from one another not just by the walls of their rooms but by conflicting sets of assumptions and conventions. They know the intimate details of one another's lives because of their shared physical spaces, but the connection among them is no more affectionate or committed than that between casual social acquaintances. They usually treat one another with a kind of informal sociability, as if

they were friends. However, since the relationships are all temporary and involve no recognized commitment, they can also pretend that they are total strangers to one another. Either set of conventions can apply, as the doors open and shut, controlled not by any social force, but by the most forceful personality.

The protagonist, Paul, a graduate student, shares a kitchen, a living room, and a telephone with two young women, Heather, a minor character, and Sang, a pretty, intelligent, poised young Bengali-American woman to whom he is attracted. As the story opens, Paul is as isolated as the narrator of the first story and far more unsure of himself. His parents are dead; he has no friends, and his only lover ended their relationship a few years earlier for reasons he doesn't fully understand, if there were more than superficial reasons. He is studying for his PhD orals (in English literature), which he had failed the previous year, not because he was unprepared, but because he was so nervous that his mind went blank. He seems numb, both mentally and emotionally, and yet he is vulnerable because of confusion. He seems an embodiment of unusable potential, full of ideas and knowledge that he can't articulate and a capacity for caring that has no object. His abilities to think and to love are locked away in closed rooms.

Perhaps because Paul has so little personal life to keep private, he seeks semi-private places, studying in the living room, the kitchen, or, later, the library. But even his room is a semi-public space, into which other people's voices enter, into which other people (Sang, for instance) can enter. His life, essentially, is semi-public, providing neither privacy nor emotional intimacy, just like his room. Nevertheless, he has the habits of a lonely but restrained person, seeking the presence of others but usually careful not to impose himself. He seeks connection to Sang, trying to impress her with his knowledge of literature (in which she doesn't have much interest) and picking up the thread of conversations of a few hours past, only to have Sang comment on how peculiar it is that he should do this. By dismissing his interest in their conversations, she has shut a door, making it clear that the guidelines they are to follow are those defining acquaintances, not potential intimates.

Sang seems to be quite the opposite of Paul. She is besieged by calls from potential suitors, set on her by her parents and the Bengali grapevine. However, she refuses to see them because she has a boyfriend, an Egyptian professor named Farouk, whom she plans to marry. He has never directly asked her to marry him, but he makes vague references to a future together. They have been having an affair for three years, and he doesn't contradict her when she mentions their future marriage. Sometimes Paul overhears

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her talking on the phone to him, and they seem to be fighting. Another time, walking by her room, he overhears her shouting and hears Farouk commanding her to lower her voice so that her housemates can't hear. Sang's space extends outward from her room, as her intimate problems radiate outward from her personal turmoil. She repaints her room green and "mole," and leaves her "mole" handprint on the phone (80-81); this is her "flag," a claiming of a territory which is not hers. "Mole" suggests both the burrowing animal and the undercover spy; however, her cover, her pleasant poised social surface, is inadequate to conceal the details of her life, which show above the surface like the raised traces of the animal's tunnels. Her music, her voice on the phone, her quarrels with Farouk—all reach beyond her rented space. With her housemates, however, she maintains the same bland friendliness, as if nothing troubling is going on in her life, and Paul pretends that he has surmised nothing. It is not, after all, his business. Up to this point, he is respecting her closed door, the limits of the relationship.

And yet, this space is too small to contain him. He is lonely and curious, and since there is no one to observe or criticize what he does he decides to do what he wants. When the other housemates are gone, he physically expands into the rest of the house, leaving his belongings in the common areas and, later, entering Sang's room while she is away in London visiting her sister. A package has come for her, and at first, when he leans the package against her door and it opens, he closes it firmly. Then he changes his mind and, most oddly, knocks on the door even though he knows she is in London. He senses that he should stay within his boundaries, but he cannot resist the temptation. Without a larger society of unspoken rules, anyone can do whatever he wants, a space of possibility that is both liberating and corrupting. He lies down on her bed and considers imaginary sex with Sang, "But suddenly the desire left him, absent from his body just as she was absent from the room" (85). On some level, he knows that imaginary sex would be a violation. Perhaps Paul seeks genuine intimacy, but his world is so bounded that emotional intimacy can occur only in his imagination. His space is too small to accommodate the real presence of another person.

After he falls asleep in her bed, he is awakened by a phone call from a drunken woman asking for Sang. Her name is Deirdre, she says. Paul obediently takes down her name and phone number and tries to forget about it. But she calls repeatedly and asks Paul questions about himself and about Sang. Who is Sang? Is it true that she is Farouk's cousin? He answers cautiously, politely, not wanting to be directly rude. But he does

tell her that Sang is not Farouk's cousin, but his fiancée. At this, the woman begins crying and tells Paul that she is Farouk's lover, tells him how they met, what his habits are, and the course of their love affair. She claims, in fact, that Farouk has just made love to her on the staircase of her house. He hears a dog, which Deirdre has told him Farouk hates, barking in the background. Paul isn't sure whether to believe her or not. Perhaps she is some former girlfriend of Farouk's wanting to make trouble. Not sure what to tell Sang about what he has heard, he decides to mention only that the woman called and asked for her.

These two juxtaposed scenes are significant on several levels. First, Paul intrudes on Sang's physical space, which he senses as a violation but does anyway, and then Sang's inner emotional life intrudes into his life. He has opened a door into her life and cannot find a way of closing it. Moreover, as soon as he becomes involved in her life through Deirdre's call, he finds he has no right way of acting. As an acquaintance, he shouldn't know what he knows, and yet he does. The polite response, as an acquaintance, seems to be to pretend not to know. Perhaps a friend should tell her the complete truth, and yet he is not her friend, as she has made clear, and perhaps not even a friend can reveal this kind of unwanted knowledge. And finally, there is the image of the staircase on which Deirdre claims Farouk made love to her, a mirror image of the staircase in the house in which Sang and Paul live. The image is so vivid that Paul mentally pictures Farouk and Deirdre having sex on their stairs every time he walks up them to his room. The staircases merge into one; the entangled lives merge; the outside is not kept out. What promises connection—the staircase, the telephone—merely ensnares. It seems as if there is no way of negotiating through this tangle of lies, lives, and bodies.

When Sang returns, she is mildly puzzled by this call from an unknown woman, but decides to ignore it. However, Deirdre calls back, talks to Sang, and questions her about Farouk without saying anything about her own relationship with him. This leads Sang to ask Paul about the original call, and, after some reluctance, he tells her the woman was crying. At this point, Sang enters his space, not as the lover as imagined but as an intruder who will both misinterpret his behaviour and exploit his feelings. Sitting across from Sang while they are discussing Deirdre's call in the tête-à-tête dinner he had imagined very differently, "He regretted that Sang and not another person had moved into the room, into his house, into his life" (90). In this scene, Sang attacks Paul for not telling her all he knew about Deirdre, just as she later explodes at him for telling her what she wants to think is false information about Deirdre. He is involved in a

relationship with no clear boundaries, no clear loyalties, no rules. Unlike the spaces in "The Third and Final Continent," the house that Paul and Sang inhabit allows no place for dreaming, either by providing for the distance that allows for love or by protecting the integrity of the self, because the people within it have little respect for other people's spaces and few inner boundaries to restrain their actions. The strongest person, or the one who is least vulnerable emotionally, is the person who defines the borders of the relationship.

The next day, she talks to Farouk and receives his false version of events, which she prefers to believe despite its improbability because it enables her to continue to believe that her relationship with Farouk is exclusive, or that it at least shuts out people like Deirdre. Armed with her false belief, she goes into Paul's room and angrily accuses him of making up the whole story about Deirdre's crying in order to break up her relationship with Farouk and to try to get her for himself. Paul does feel attracted to Sang, but he also feels some human concern and protectiveness toward her. She reduces his motives to their lowest elements and presents them to him as the truth. She has also switched the terms of their relationship. The day before, he was supposed to act like a loyal friend and tell her all he knows, and now he is wrong to have done so. The day before, his attraction to her was something that they both ignored. He never mentioned it, and she never had to directly confront it, which made living in the same house easier for both of them. Now the walls have shifted. He is understandably angry and feels her presence as a violation:

> For her sake, he'd told her about the crying. That night in the kitchen, watching her make the salad, he'd felt the walls collapsing around her. He'd wanted to warn her somehow. Now he wanted to push her from the door frame where she stood. (90–91)

The architectural metaphors are deliberately chosen here. A house is not a place of safety but a place where walls can collapse, a place where the self collapses, as Sang's does. The door frame of his room is not a barrier, is no protection from false accusations, misinterpretations, unfairness, anger. The house keeps out nothing, keeps in nothing, provides no refuge. It is another false promise, like the staircase that promises connection and leads to loneliness.

Stung by Sang's false accusations, the usually passive Paul takes action. He buys an extension to connect to the same phone, asks Sang to listen while he calls and talks to Deirdre (who is unaware that Sang is listening), and gets her to admit the truth of what has happened. To some degree, at

least, he is vindicated, but, more importantly, he seems to have gained a degree of self-confidence and control by having to respond to Sang and her world entering his life, however unpleasant this may be.

Sang then wants Paul to take her over to Farouk's and he agrees. Farouk inhabits a deliberately impersonal space, "an ugly high rise, bereft of charm yet clearly exclusive" (93), like Farouk's inner self. From this ugly but exclusive place, Sang has been regularly ejected (he won't let her sleep over, instead, sending her home in a taxi after they have had sex) and is about to be ejected again. Farouk will not have his physical space slept in or his psychic space disturbed; in this, as well as in his complex relationship with Sang, he is a mirror image of Paul.

Farouk's ugly, exclusive physical space has been violated, both by Sang and by the police.

When Sang raps on the door, Farouk hesitates at first even to let her in, and then, conceding to her, he turns on Paul, telling him to leave and trying to push him out of the doorway. In the ensuing scuffle, Paul wrestles Farouk to the floor:

> For a moment, Paul lay on top of him fully, subduing him like a lover.… He looked at the man beneath, a man he barely knew, a man he hated.
>
> "All she wants is for you to admit it," Paul said. "I think you owe her that." (93)

At this point, Farouk spits at Paul, Paul recoils, and Sang and Farouk go into the apartment while Paul waits outside. However, the walls do not contain this scene either. He can hear shouting and weeping, and so do the neighbours, who call the police. Sang has thrown an hysterical scene, breaking a vase, clawing at her own face until she is covered with scratches, and finally hiding in a closet. Eventually Paul takes the weeping Sang back to her apartment with her clinging to his hand the whole way.

The scene contains a series of violations and manipulations, in which what is true to the outside world is in direct contrast to the complex emotional truth lived by the people involved. Paul is violated by being spat upon after he has won the wrestling match, thus making his supposed victory inconsequential. He is also obliged to admit the fact that he is "no one" to Sang when neighbours misconstrue his statement that he "lives with the woman inside" (94) to mean that he is her husband and he has to clarify their relationship. Farouk's ugly, exclusive physical space has been violated, both by Sang and by the police. But Sang is obliged to admit that she is officially "no one" to Farouk, just as Paul is "no one" to her. When the police ask her if she lives there, she can only stammer, "I painted the walls" (93). (And she has, the same green and mole that she painted her own room, out of the same impulse to claim a space as her own). Farouk

himself seems to remain intact, perhaps because he can retreat further into himself than Paul or Sang can touch, perhaps because there is no self to be touched. Sang, who has been emotionally violated by being lied to and exploited, is pried out of the closet in which she has taken refuge, as she has in the relationship. Neither are a refuge but are another person's space into which she was once invited but is now unwelcome. Officially, however, Sang, the person trespassed against, is the trespasser. The truth of the outside world, the truth that the walls of the house should have kept outside, is the version of events that all those involved have to accommodate, if not accept. The outside world is not evil in itself, but it is morally removed from the personal ethics that ideally govern human emotional relationships. It is a space in which people can deceive and exploit each other as long as they commit no crimes, a space in which the inner truth has no reality.

The next morning, Paul hears the taxi door slam as she leaves, and he finds a note thanking him for last night and a cheque for her share of the month's rent. He never sees or talks to her again. When the next month's rent is due and he calls her in London, she refuses to speak to him but sends a friend over to take away her belongings so her room can be rented to someone else. She and Paul, too, are now living by exterior rules that say they were never more than fellow lodgers and that she owes him nothing but money. There is in this the same pain of unrecognized connection that the narrator of "The Third and Final Conflict" felt when he moved from Mrs Croft's house. American society provides no rituals of thanks and closure for temporary intimates, and inner emotional truths remain unacknowledged.

A few weeks later, Paul passes his orals, and his committee takes him out for drinks at an expensive hotel. He suddenly has a wish for "money … enough to march up to the front desk and request a room, a big white bed, silence" (95). It is sad but not surprising that what he longs for is not another person with whom to share his triumph, or even a house like the elegant buildings he walks among on his way home, but the money with which to rent an hotel room and the kind of utterly impersonal private space that can shut out the world while requiring nothing but money from him, a place without permanence, a place of temporary respite. He needs a space from which to imagine a different world, a space in which he can control the boundaries.

Walking home, he sees Farouk and a fashionably dressed but rather worn-looking woman sitting on a park bench. He sits across from them and stares at them, thinking that Farouk can't say anything to him with

this new woman with him. It doesn't occur to him that the woman is Deirdre, because she has told Paul that she lives in an old farmhouse out in the countryside, apparently lying about the details of the affair as a way of distancing herself from her own self-disclosure. But Farouk does speak to him, telling Paul that he is lucky that he isn't going to sue him for injuring him during their fight. Then he and the woman walk away, and Paul notices the woman has a dog. She is Deirdre, he realizes.

As in so many of Lahiri's stories, the plot is almost incidental to the story's meaning, which resides in the images, metaphors, interconnecting patterns, and emblematic moments. It is a meditation upon inner space and intimacy, as carefully composed and balanced as Hopper's painting. The relationships of the story are two overlapping triangles. Paul lives with two women but he is not emotionally or physically intimate with either of them. Farouk is sexually intimate with two women but lives with neither of them. Neither Paul nor Farouk have any friends. Paul hates Farouk, his alter ego, his shadow, yet grappling with him brings no enlightenment or closure as it would in a more conventional story. The two characters simply balance and contrast with one another within the story, and to the extent that Paul changes because of the events it seems to come out of his protectiveness toward Sang. This symmetry is echoed in the details of architecture and interiors. The circular staircase in the house where Paul lives, which draws all visitors with a promise of connection to a romantic Victorian world but leads only to shabby rented rooms, is a mirror image of the stairs on which Deirdre and Farouk have sex, a false promise of connection between the physical and the emotional. Paul invades Sang's private space physically when he enters her room and sleeps in her bed, and, immediately afterward, she enters his psychic space when Deirdre calls. All the images are balanced, but not related causally.

As well as reflecting the characters, the patterns of distance and connection also parallel the pattern of knowing and not knowing that permeates the story, and in this, too, the metaphors are original, complex, and paradoxical. The walls do not keep knowledge in; it comes through the walls, through the telephone, in overheard voices. Instead of knowledge being associated with intimacy and power, who is shut in or shut out (as in *The Golden Bowl*, for instance), the characters in this story who seem most intimate have the least knowledge of one another, and the character who seems to have the most knowledge, Paul, has the least power and is intimate with no one. Farouk's parting words in the story, spoken not to Paul but to Deirdre as if Paul were not even there, are, "He should know" (95). What Farouk wants Paul to know, it seems, is that the events of

which he has knowledge can be formed into an entirely different pattern, one in which Paul and not Farouk is the offender. Knowing means little without the power to articulate that knowledge or convince others of one's interpretation of events.

Significantly, this last scene is the only one which takes place out-of-doors, where there are no walls or barriers, where everything should be "out in the open." But it is not, because Farouk is safe behind his protective barrier of deception. Paul thinks that he is in control of the situation, that he is the knower, because he doesn't know that the woman with Farouk is Deirdre. In this last encounter, Farouk wins at least a minor victory because of Deirdre's earlier lie. He has the power of spin control, the only power that seems to matter in an outside world that does not acknowledge emotional truth.

Taken together, "The Third and Final Continent" and "Nobody's Business" are highly suggestive of the meaning of place, of the spirit of place. An imaginative connection to a place means a commitment to the ideas it represents; the characters in "The Third and Final Continent" feel that connection and commitment, to the place, to the values it represents, to one another. Their commitments to one another are life-long and reciprocal—Helen and Mrs Croft, Mala and the narrator; even the connection between the narrator and Mrs Croft lasts until her death. In "The Third and Final Continent," a formal set of manners acknowledged by the narrator, Mrs Croft, and Mala provide the emotional distance that makes love possible; they live within the same structure metaphorically if not geographically, and this structure provides security, privacy, and the space for empathy. In "Nobody's Business," there are no rules, no mutually acknowledged set of expectations of how people should act, which makes it all the more difficult that they must live within the same physical structures. In "Nobody's Business," there are no connections or commitments to people, places, or values. The stories are two versions of the American spirit of place, one utopian, one dystopian; the materials of the two spaces are the same. The difference is in the imaginations of the characters or in their inability to find the space in which to imagine one another and construct a set of values for themselves that respects the humanity and the differentness of others.

To some degree, the characters of "Nobody's Business" are themselves responsible for the world they inhabit because they cannot re-imagine their place in the world. None of the characters in "Nobody's Business" has any emotional connection with the historic spaces through which he or she moves. They live surrounded by the landmarks of the American liter-

ary renaissance, the period that defined much of what was most admirable in the American spirit. It seems to mean nothing to them. They are all from somewhere else; the places have no personal or romanticized history. Deirdre and Farouk go swimming in Walden Pond, and, for them, it is no more than the place of their first date, with no resonance of the brilliant and eccentrically self-isolated spirit that once inhabited it. For them, it is the scenery of a foreign place, the backdrop for their love affair. Likewise, when Paul wants to relax before his orals, he visits Emerson's house, but it has no connection to his intellectual life. He is studying English literature, the literature of another place, unrelated to where he is, and he seems not to love even that, but to simply view it as a body of knowledge to be mastered. Although Sang is American-born, she seems as at home in London as she is in Boston, if not more so, since her sister is in London. America is just another of the temporary spaces she inhabits. And yet in this lack of connection, the characters are not unusual. To make such a connection requires the magic of Mrs Croft.

None of these characters are part of any American community, either by their own wish, like Farouk, or by circumstances, like Paul. They are not even part of an imagined community (unlike the narrator of "The Third and Final Continent," when he imaginatively enters Mrs Croft's world) which could also provide a connection to place. Their own location within American society provides no buffer between the self and the impersonal world, no larger circles of family or friends to validate the reality of the intimate relationships. The outside world is all there is beyond their own small world of self.

Their own location within American society provides no buffer between the self and the impersonal world, no larger circles of family or friends, to validate the reality of the intimate relationships.

Lahiri has taken the dominant motifs of twentieth-century American literature and created a series of complex patterns all her own, rearranging them to convey her clear-headed insights into both the possibilities and the malaise of modern American society. Her characters are often unusually lonely, isolated people, like Paul and the narrator of "The Third and Final Continent," the type of person often depicted in American fiction, yet their isolation is not romanticized. Her interiors are not the empty rooms or stifling houses that dominate American art and literature, the empty room of Anderson's Enoch Robinson, the loveless house Frankie Adams runs away from hoping to be a member of the wedding, the empty rooms and solitary figures in the paintings of Andrew Wyeth and Edward Hopper. Instead, Lahiri's rooms and houses are filled with people who must find the imaginary space that will enable them to live with one another, and whether or not they succeed in doing so depends on their abilities to create their own imaginary societies with their own rules. Even though her

characters are not usually Americans, they embody the American impulse to reinvent oneself, to escape, to ignore conventions and rules, to create one's own morality, the American spirit of place that D. H. Lawrence identified. And if the characters can find nothing positive to escape toward, if they are unable to re-create their own values in an impersonal and morally neutral outer world, their inner lives are empty and desperate.

The same "American virtues" that looked so attractive in "The Third and Final Continent" have vices buried within them, ready to corrupt the unreflecting and unlucky. It is out of these vices that the loneliness of twentieth-century American literature and society has grown. Independence can become purposelessness and rootlessness. Without something to restrain it, without some wall, some sense of what is owed to others, some attachment to place and community, some sense of the integrity of the self, the independence of Mrs Croft becomes the meaningless search for distraction and respite that dominates the lives of Sang, Farouk, and Deirdre, to whom their love affairs are the whole of their being. Individualism without self-examination and self-knowledge can turn into selfishness. The individualism that is harmless and interesting eccentricity and the self-reliance that is so admirable in Mrs Croft can become the unthinking exploitation of the characters of "Nobody's Business." The spirit of place can inspire or corrupt, according to the character of the dreamer and how the dreamer inhabits the surrounding space. Room and house are not places from which to escape; rather they are places to re-imagine. If this is not done, one is doomed to live in a room that is not empty, but filled with selfish strangers.

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