

# 1. Introduction: American Children

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In the eponymous narrative concluding the collection of stories by Cuban American writer Achy Obejas, *We Came All the Way From Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?*, the narrator is an adult woman whose parents fled Cuba for the USA when she was a little child. The story is about her recollections of that flight, her coming of age, and the ensuing conflicts between her and her parents. It is one of the many recent narratives that deals with children of immigrants.<sup>1</sup>

The title is powerfully evocative of a scenario that in debates about children of immigrants is frequently made out to be universal. In the context of the USA, it may suggest parents who have, possibly at the risk of life or physical, economic or spiritual well-being, immigrated to the USA and who now find that their children, US-citizens and/or predominantly socialized and educated in the USA, diverge from what their parents consider proper (i.e. their own) behavior, norms and principles. It suggests a generational and cultural divide within the family that represents a presumably much broader generational and cultural divide within US-society between fully acculturated and more recent immigrants, majority and minority “cultures” respectively, and that has been the topic of debate and scrutiny for a long time.

As much as the sentence is evocative, it is also emblematic of a number of complex issues. Imagine for a moment that we were to replace “Cuba” with another place of origin and “dress” with another verb. From more humorous variants such as “we came all the way from Siberia so you could make a snowman like this” or “we came all the way from Germany so you could drink beer like this” to more somber variants such as “we came all the way from Cambodia so you could flunk school like this” or “we came all the way from Mexico so you could disown us like this,” there appear to be innumerable possible substitutions.

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**1** | Here and throughout, “children” is not used as a category of age but of relation. Many of the characters in the narratives that are going to be discussed are adults.

The fact that we can so easily replace the key terms of the sentence to render such radically different – and equally evocative – variants suggests caution and a closer look. Just how much do the variants proposed above have in common? Given their vagueness, do they not almost inevitably invite cliché? After all, immigrants from Cambodia constitute a drastically different set than those from Mexico, not to mention Germany; even within such a large set, there are considerable variations according to gender, age, socio-economic factors, education and numerous other faultlines. Maybe, then, we are left with the summary paraphrase of the famous anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn's theory of culture suggested by John Monaghan and Peter Just: everyone is at one and the same time "like some other people, like all other people, and like no other person" (Monaghan and Just 40). This, in turn, seems to leave us with precious little. However, as will become clear, one could do worse than to take it seriously.

Children of immigrants have become an increasingly important new research interest in a number of disciplines<sup>2</sup> – such as sociology, anthropology, ethnology, history, literary and cultural studies – and in popular and political debates in a number of countries with a significant immigrant population in addition to the USA – such as Great Britain, France or Germany –, often under the label "2<sup>nd</sup> generation." This label, which I have intentionally avoided for the title of this book, already provides some clues to the problems involved; problems also indicated by the thought experiment.

Actually, the label is a misnomer. It suggests that the children of immigrants, many of whom are US-citizens, are really still immigrants themselves in some

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**2** | Among the first to seriously investigate the so-called 2<sup>nd</sup> generation were the sociologists Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut. They conducted quantitative longitudinal studies of children of immigrants in number of locations and from a number of ethnic groups in order to find out more about processes of acculturation and, along the way, discrimination, language use, and generational conflict (Portes and Rumbaut 1996; 2001a; 2001b; Portes 1996; Rumbaut 1999; 2002). The topic has also been investigated by a number of other sociologists (Foner 2003; 2005; Levitt and Waters 2002; Perlman 2002), anthropologists (Foner 2003; Karakayali 2005; Fourn and Glick Schiller 2002), ethnologists (Min 2002; Purkayastha 2005; Farley and Alba 2002; Stepick and Stepick 2003) and historians (Nakano 1990; Lee 1992; Kessler 1994; Tamura 1994; Gabaccia 1998; Dinnerstein 1996; 2009; Daniels 2002; 2004; Kibria 2003; most of the early studies focus on the specific generational framework of Asian/Japanese Americans), increasingly within a framework of synchronic and diachronic comparative studies. During the last decade, literary and cultural studies have also developed a research interest for children of immigrants (Arrowsmith 2000; Narayan 2002; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2002; Hart 2003); unfortunately, inter- and transdisciplinary exchange is rare (Brettell and Hollifield 2000; Daniels 2001; Gabaccia 2002; Foner 2005; Ueda 2006).

significant way other than citizenship, which in turn suggests that belonging and integration exceed legal and political categories and invokes a mostly undefined cultural sphere and identity, echoing the conflict between descent and consent that Werner Sollors refers to in the subtitle of his famous *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986). As indicated above, the label also implies a narrow and broad conflict of generational and cultural identity.

The problems underlying this label, then, are conceptual and methodological:

- (1) they are conceptual, because the notion of cultural identity is, as I will show, often overburdened and underdefined. The concept of generation, while powerfully suggestive, is similarly vague and broad. It implies the homogeneity of one generation that does not exist, and it implies a prognostic generational dynamic (owed to the early contributions on this topic by Hansen, Mannheim and Mead) that has to be handled with caution.<sup>3</sup>
- (2) They are methodological, because the topic itself invites a transnational or transcultural framework,<sup>4</sup> a diasporic one,<sup>5</sup> a postcolonial one,<sup>6</sup> a “glocal” one,<sup>7</sup> a migrational one, an ethnic and racial and multicultural one, a generational one, etc. For all intents and purposes, any exclusive framework seems bound to be too narrow.

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**3** | For an introductory discussion of the problems of generational frameworks, see Kilian and Komfort-Hein 1999.

**4** | It is transnational because the family’s background is at least bi-national and/or bi-cultural, potentially fostering economic, social, communicative, imaginary or other ties between country of origin and country of residence. In many discussions, “transnational” and “transcultural” are used interchangeably, even though “national” and “cultural” are not necessarily identical; this vagueness has not gone uncriticized (e.g. Levitt and Waters). “Transnational” can be used to denote migratory, economic, social and/or communicative processes across two nations, while “transcultural” may serve as another term for cultural syncretism, i.e. the blending of two or more sets of cultural affiliations (see Schulze-Engler and Helff for a longer discussion). In this understanding of the term, Randolph Bourne’s famous use of “transnational” is “transcultural.”

**5** | For similar reasons as the transnational one; indeed, all of them are often combined.

**6** | Children of immigrants, routinely described as situated “between two cultures,” seem particularly amenable to discussions under the auspices of the postcolonial concept of hybridity. I will discuss below why this is problematic.

**7** | Because they seem to combine regional and national specificity with a membership in the global flow of transnational migration.

Given the vague but evocative and loaded concepts involved, it is no wonder that many contributions about children of immigrants specifically, and about cultural identity in general are, to put it mildly, over- and underdefined and, in their discussion of literary texts, often imbalanced, monofocal, inconsistent and unproductive. An example: many of the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's narratives are children of immigrants, usually to Indian parents. Many of them do struggle with who they are and what they want out of life, with their parents, their friends and partners, and on occasion with certain inherited traditions and norms, all of which might lead to the ascription of a certain cultural identity to the characters as a difference juxtaposed to the identity of a dominant culture. However, for the understanding of many of the conflicts and faultlines in the narratives, for the understanding of the character construction and the construction of the particular fictional world, the concept of a cultural identity is insufficient. Gogol, the protagonist of *The Namesake*, certainly struggles with who he is, but not primarily because of the country of origin of his parents and the purported cultural identity this imparts on him, but rather because of the strange first name his father has given him. In most respects, the novel is a fairly straightforward coming of age narrative; it should not surprise one that identity plays a role, as in fact it does in most sufficiently complex fictional narratives.

Similarly, Lahiri's other stories depict fictional worlds in which the characters make all kinds of difficult or fulfilling or otherwise significant experiences regarding their love lives and relationships, families, health, work, addictions, or simply cooking, gardening, and changing places. For many of these experiences and interactions, the personal and communal "cultural identity" of the characters plays only one role among others. There certainly are differences in cultural practices and principles, such as the preparation and consumption of food, the public display of affection, and not least, the fact that some marriages are arranged. Furthermore, it is important to note, in order to fully appreciate the complexities, conflicts and humor of the narratives, that some of the families maintain transnational ties to their homeland; that they are part of a large wave of immigration after a change in legislation in 1965, namely the Immigration and Naturalization Services Act, also called Hart-Celler Act; and that they may experience themselves, subtly and mostly ephemerally, as part of some kind of diaspora and imagined community. Also, many of the characters bear a name that indicates an Indian background.

None of this, however, warrants the ascription of a personal and communal cultural identity to the characters that overrides all other identifications and differences, or the reduction of the narratives to narratives only about differences

in cultural practices and beliefs.<sup>8</sup> In *The Namesake*, for example, the parents of one of Gogol's girlfriends seem to be set off sharply against his own parents in their apparent cultural identity as WASPs. At a closer look, the difference is much more significantly one of socioeconomic identification and the resulting habitus. In the short story "Once in a Lifetime" in the collection *Unaccustomed Earth*, two families of the same diasporic "imagined community" are quite conspicuously set apart not from their "white" neighbors but from each other due to socioeconomic differences. One would expect the complexity of Lahiri's narratives and many of the other fictional worlds that contain children of immigrants to preclude such reductions and simplifications. Yet, much criticism and reception of narratives about children of immigrants – despite abundant complex theorizing – focuses primarily on their alleged cultural identity and the differences in cultural practices and principles as the be-all and end-all when the complexity of the narrative world and the characters at a closer look should make clear that no such reduction is to be had and thus, where forced, leads to blunt simplifications, exaggerations, and occasionally caricatures.

The short story opening Nam Le's recent collection *The Boat* is an ironic exemplification of this kind of reduction. An author struggling with a writing assignment and writer's block is given the advice to exploit his (respectively his father's) Vietnamese background and write "hot" ethnic literature. The title of the story, "Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice," pits this marketing truism against Faulkner's advice to write about grand and universal themes rather than "special interest" issues, which in this case would be ethnicity and multiculturalism. Fittingly, the protagonist decides to write a story about his father's involvement in the Vietnam War that never gets read except by his father, who then destroys it. While the story in the story is never published, the story with the above title evidently *was* published, turning it into a succinct exemplification of the paradoxes and problems implicit both in labels such as ethnic or multicultural literature on the one hand and in ideas about universal human themes on the other; most of the remaining stories in the collection are about exactly the varied themes the author in the opening story really wants to write about, but is discouraged from writing with reference to his rich biographical "source material." To boost, in a rush to claim the

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**8** | In fact, roughly eight out of ten critical essays on the fiction of Lahiri are concerned with cultural affiliation, alienation, migration, hybridity, displacement and the like. Very few discuss the formal complications of her narratives (present tense narrative, abrupt shifts in perspective) or the numerous other topics such as alcoholism, illness, romantic disaffection, friendship, etc. This pattern repeats itself for most of the narratives I have chosen as examples, and for many more with a similar theme, such as *Migrant Souls*, *Monkey Bridge*, *Gasa-Gasa Girl*, *Last of the Menu Girls*, etc.

successful young author with a Vietnamese-Australian background, who has no other claim to being an US-American writer either by birth or deliberation than having attended the Iowa Writer's Workshop, he was hailed in various reviews of US publishing organs as a promising young American writer, his stories appearing in collections such as *Best New American Voices*. It is not the point here to deny Le the privilege of being labeled an US-American writer, whatever the benefits of such classification. One should, however, notice the irony of such labeling, especially in light of the stories Le writes.<sup>9</sup>

For example, in a recent *New York Times* review of Jhumpa Lahiri's latest book, the aforementioned collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, the author writes that the underlying theme of all stories is "the fact that America is still a place where the rest of the world comes to reinvent itself" and that "the place to which you feel the strongest attachment isn't necessarily the country you're tied to by blood or birth: it's the place that allows you to become yourself. This place ... may not lie on any map" (Schillinger 2008). This assessment is accompanied by a reference to the biography of Lahiri, who was born in London to Bengali immigrants and raised in Rhode Island, and would thus qualify as an example of the children of immigrants frequently portrayed in her stories. The biographical reference appears to authenticate the author's privileged access to the experience of children of immigrants. In Schillinger's conclusive statements, she argues that "except for their names," many of the protagonists of these stories "could evoke any American's '70s childhood," that the "generational conflicts . . . cut across national lines," could "occur between Smiths and Taylors in any suburban town," and that this "tussle . . . has gone on ever since men and women lived in caves." Appropriately, the review is entitled "American Children."

Apart from equating "American" with "U.S.," the review rehashes the familiar ideology that the United States is "a place where the rest of the world comes to reinvent itself" and where one can shed one's past, and that U.S. culture is based on consent rather than descent. The precondition of this rhetorical move is a highlighting of children of immigrants as children of *immigrants* rather than U.S.-Americans either by culture or nationality, and their literary productions as ethnic literature. Even if we assume that the review follows the idea of the United States as a nation of immigrants, and would therefore characterize children of immigrants as prototypical Americans, the comparison to the Smiths and Taylors opens up a distinctly Anglo-Saxon, white middle class horizon. Not only is the United States portrayed as quite homogeneous and classless in its amenability to allow for the incorporation

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**9** | It is an additional historical irony that in her "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian," Edith Maud Eaton already comments on people advising her to trade upon her nationality (Eaton 1995c, 230).

and transformation from immigrant to American, echoing the trope of the “universal exceptionalism;” paradoxically, the move that makes it possible for Schillinger to claim that these protagonists are “American children” and that their childhood *could* be any U.S.-American’s, is premised on the assumption that they are really *not* true U.S.-Americans by the grammatical mood of subjunctive.

By going a step further in concluding that this “tussle . . . has gone on ever since men and women lived in caves” and thus appealing to a common humanity, Schillinger also captures a pertinent universalizing moment in current debates around cultural identity in a host of disciplines, often accompanied by some prefix such as “trans-” or “post-.”<sup>10</sup> Lastly, it should be noted that the review pays little attention to the stories *as fictional narratives* but rather treats them as if they were slightly embellished social reports.

I do not think the review could be any better or less awkward working with the assumptions and concepts it does; much criticism does not fare better, as the detailed discussions in the following chapters will illustrate. Ethnic and other “culturalist” criticism in particular, apart from usually being divided along the lines of allegedly distinct ethnic or racial groups (also owed to institutional pressures such as unequivocal affiliation and budget; comparative studies are rare) and impossibly large umbrella groups (such as Asian American or Latina/o), is suffused with terms and concepts such as Chicana consciousness, dual cultural identity (each of which homogeneous), borderland identity, or racial authenticity that turn fictional texts into more or less “authentic” representations of that identity, into “coded” autobiographical representations of the author’s cultural identity, and, due to this, into inevitably subversive, resistant and rebellious acts. Where criticism does focus on the constructive side of narrative fiction, that construction is almost inevitably “transgressive,” “non-hegemonic” or “resistant.” Often enough, a unified identity is initially excoriated and then re-introduced through the backdoor via the positing of a

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**10** | This universalising trend can be seen in a variety of disciplines (sociology, literary studies, anthropology, history), fields (postcolonial studies, globalization studies) and meta-concepts (transnationalism, cosmopolitanism), some of which have this tendency built into them, such as postcolonial studies and transnationalism. Recent examples are Osterhammel’s magisterial world history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (2009; see also Conrad et al. 2007) numerous monographs, collections and essays on “transnational,” “world” or “universal” literature (general: Prendergast 2004; Pettersson 2006; Hogan 2010; in English: Eckstein 2007; Fluck, Brandt, and Thaler 2007; Boggs 2007; Elliott 2007), or various discussions of aspects of globalization and/or cosmopolitanism (Appadurai 2001; Pollock 2002; Thieme 2002; Friedman and Randeria 2004; Dimock and Buell 2007).

“third term”-identity (hybrid, bordered, transnational, holographic [sic; Liang 260]).<sup>11</sup>

It almost seems as if such concepts inevitably lead to simplistic oppositions, metaphorical cant, or to “theories” without methodology (which renders them effectually useless); concepts that imply a cultural identity, a “homogeneity of Difference” (Appiah 2005, xvi) that takes precedence over all other differences such as gender, sexual orientation, socio-economics, age, health, etc., and that gallantly conflate or reify the difference between factual and fictional texts in their assumption that all texts with such a theme are primarily either an expression and representation, or transgressive and non-hegemonic construction, of cultural identity and difference.<sup>12</sup> Ethnic and multicultural

**11** | Perhaps the most notorious example of this is Homi Bhabha’s use of hybridity. In the introduction to his *The Location of Culture*, he writes about the interstices of identity formation that emerge through overlap of “domains of difference” (2) and announces as his critical interest the formation of subjects “in-between” and “in excess of, the sum of the ‘parts’ of difference” (2). In the bulk of his ensuing discussion, this “hybrid identity” solidifies into a “privileged” and “resistant” identity concept just as stable and unified as the ones he denounces in his introduction (apart from the fact that “hybridity” is used in a number of different ways throughout the book). This has notably been observed by Graham Huggan (2001) and others (e.g. Monika Fludernik 1998; 2003). In a trenchant critique of hybridity and culture concepts, Floya Anthias describes the problem as follows:

Hybridity is tied to the idea of cultural syncretism, rather than the cultural difference solidified by multiculturalism, in terms of the interpenetration of elements. In some versions hybridity is depicted as transgressive, or as enabling a privileged access to knowledge (for example, Bhabha 1990, 1994; Rassool 1997). The argument about multiple belongings in the modern state rests largely on the dismantling of the notion of a unitary identity, partly through a critique of unitary notions of the self and partly through a critique of unitary notions of cultural identity. However, ironically, hybridity arguments need to stress the retention of part of a cultural heritage [...] if they are able to identify the cultural identity which is then merged with other aspects to form an organic whole. (Anthias 621)

Winfried Siemerling calls this process “happy dialectic sublation” (2).

**12** | Despite its blatant discursive complexity (sustained episodic reversal; alternating narrative perspectives ranging from first person singular to first person plural autodiegetic narration to – temporarily disguised – homodiegetic narration with multiple focalization), I have not been able to find a sustained narratological analysis of Julia Alvarez’s *How The García Girls Lost Their Accents*; almost all of the more than one dozen essays on Gus Lee’s *China Boy* focus on race, gender and cultural identity, while so far not a single one (as far as I was able to ascertain) discusses the issue of poverty, its drastic and graphic depiction throughout the entire text notwithstanding. The same kind of monofocus on

themes, and particularly children of immigrants, seem especially prone to be subjected to such “culturalist” approaches, whether the alleged cultural identity is “ethnic,” “multicultural,” “racial,” “immigrant” or “diasporic.”

Another example: in reviewing Jhumpa Lahiri’s first novel, *The Namesake* (2003) David Kipen writes that the protagonist’s true identity is “hung up somewhere between India and the United States” (2), that “[n]ames have always been contested territory in immigrant families” (2), and finally that “[i]n the world of literature, Lahiri writes like a native” (3). The first quotation appears to suggest that the protagonist, son of Indian immigrants, has a true cultural identity to which he might have access were it not in fact suspended in midair, in the form of a letter bearing his name that never arrives. The second indicates that names and naming are of importance for all immigrants, possibly more so than for ‘natives,’ while the final comment could imply that Lahiri is a literary immigrant to the country of good writers where she writes ‘like,’ but is not, a ‘native.’ Following suit, many reviews misrepresent aspects of the story by artificially opposing ordinary ‘native’ experience and extraordinary immigrant experience: Gogol, the main protagonist, is inaccurately described “as hyphenated an American as his parents” (Kipen 2); his “experiences with girls and sex are affecting, blissfully ordinary” (they are not) and his parents are “often stymied by low-level bureaucrats” (also not true) (Tilghman 10). Again, many crucial differences in the story other than cultural ones – which are often exaggerated – are obscured by the assumption of well-defined, clearly distinguishable cultural identities and the binary difference between two of them.

As I hope has become clear by now, argument and aim of this book are based on three fundamental, interconnected assumptions and axioms, which, if taken seriously, have far-reaching consequences for how we conceptualize, read, and contextualize literary texts about cultural practices and themes:

- (1) We do not do justice to literary texts whose thematic focus (often only one of several, and often not the most crucial one, despite critical assertion to the contrary) appears to be on cultural practices, principles and ideas, if we read them exclusively as literary texts about such practices, principles and ideas, taking them as indicative and representative of a more or less homogeneous cultural identity and difference, and ignore other – sometimes conflicting, often equally or sometimes even more crucial – kinds and dimensions of differences.

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issues of cultural identity (sometimes in the guise of race and/or ethnicity) and, at best, gender prevails in the critical reception of almost all texts that form the corpus of my analysis.

- (2) We can avoid this if we do not approach literary texts with conceptions that either explicitly or implicitly posit a homogeneity of cultural identity and difference and assume difference of cultural identity to take precedence not only over other kinds of identities and differences such as gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, religion, but also over identities and differences such as age, health, region, dialect, or education.

Even the many recent approaches to cultural identity that focus on hybridity, *créolization* or transculturation often still utilize ultimately homogenous concepts of cultural identity/identities, regularly juxtaposing a posited cultural hybridity over and against a posited cultural homogeneity, usually privileging the first and often homeostaticizing both in the process. If we take them seriously, the logical consequence of their argument obviates their premise of a coherent cultural identity, even if it is taken to be hybrid or something of the like, since their attention to transnational, hybrid, cosmopolitan and so-called transcultural affiliations along various different lines – e.g. space, food choices, communication – if anything reveals that it is difficult to talk about cultural identity as a coherent and unified identification.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, I argue that as literary and cultural studies scholars we should talk a lot less about cultural identity and difference and a lot more about other important factors of identification and differentiation such as the ones listed above; factors that all appear in narratives about children of immigrants, but are mostly ignored. As another consequence, we should be much more wary about using the attending literary labels such as “ethnic” or “multicultural” literature – with some rather far-reaching consequences for our further terminology and methodology. I will also suggest – using the idea of transdifference (Breinig 2002) and related concepts (e.g. Doyle 2009, Siemerling 2005, Lenz 2000) – another way of reading and approaching texts that contain a thematic focus on cultural practices, principles and ideas.

- (3) I suggest that we should take them seriously as fictional narratives, with all attending complications in perspective, time and order: rather than focusing either on the representational, factual, “authentic” and alleged autobiographical aspects of literary texts about cultural practices or on their

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**13** | I am, obviously, not the first to point to the problems of the notion of cultural identity. Isaac Berkson’s undeservedly forgotten book on *Theories of Americanization* is an early predecessor to recent complaints proposed quite strongly by Anthony Appiah, Zygmunt Bauman and others. However, although the rejection of wholesale cultural identity is occasionally made out to be critical consensus in theory, in practice it is mostly not. Despite initial lip service to this alleged consensus, many critical essays in their actual analysis of literary texts quickly forget their original theoretical investment.

participation in the construction of allegedly transgressive, resistant and non-hegemonic cultural identities – two critical responses which they seem particularly prone to elicit and which regularly end in fallacy or caricature – we should read them as composite possible worlds (Ryan 2006, Ronen 2004, Doležel 1998), with all the attending consequences.

The theme of children of immigrants in US-American literature (and the respective fictional texts:<sup>14</sup> Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, John Okada's *No-No Boy*, José Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho*, Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*) has accordingly been chosen primarily as an exemplary test case because I believe that it foregrounds what is insufficient and problematic about what I call culturalist approaches. This also means that it serves as a Wittgensteinian ladder in that my thematic focus, too, will ultimately have to be "left behind" in accordance with my own argument.<sup>15</sup>

Not to be misunderstood: I am *not* saying that differences in cultural practices, principles and ideas do not exist, or that they do not matter. After all, the *idea* of a cultural identity can be both an important choice and powerful offer in the life of a person or the concerted practices of a group of people. I am also not saying that positing a cultural identity cannot, per se, be a productive and legitimate heuristic device. In fact, for example, quantitative sociology or anthropology, just like civil rights movements, often need to work with such strategic constructs as large aggregate categories – a practice which Gayatri Spivak has called strategic essentialism, or Charles Altieri the necessary fealty alignment of cultural work – in order to analyze and draw attention to racism, discrimination, or problems of integration and acculturation, based on *assumed* cultural identity and difference.

What I *am* saying is that cultural identity is not the only kind of identity that matters, that often other kinds are more or equally important. I am furthermore saying that differences in cultural practices, principles and ideas do not amount to a clearly definable cultural identity (including a hybrid/diasporic/border one) and "homogeneity of Difference," and that for literary and cultural studies, conceptions that posit such an identity and difference are often unproductive and lead to simplistic and reductive results.<sup>16</sup> There are significant differences according to health, or political views, and yet few critics would talk about the health identity or the political identity of a character, much

**14** | Additional texts will be discussed in short synopses in chapter 3.6.

**15** | Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of the ladder at the end of his *Tractatus* (6.54) to resolve the tension of the consequence that according to his argument in the *Tractatus*, the *Tractatus* itself is rendered nonsensical.

**16** | Apart from the fact that many supposed differences are quite shallow (Appiah 2005, 116).

less allege a group identity of people so identified, mass medial tendencies to the contrary notwithstanding.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, rather than depriving literary texts of their importance and impact when we stress their composite, i.e. referential *and* non-referential character<sup>18</sup> rather than limiting them to either in an effort to validate their “authenticity,” I argue that it is exactly their composite character and their potential as storyworlds, as envisioning alternative worlds while still referring to the actual one, that may make them perennially relevant for our construction of sense and relevance, the conceptions with which we approach and interact with others, our access to and understanding of the actual world, and ultimately our actions.

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**17** | Where this *is* done, it leads to detrimental holistic and static identifications, as becomes visible in the cases in which people suffering from certain diseases like cancer or AIDS are almost exclusively identified with, and “reduced” to, that disease.

**18** | Labeling a narrative as fictional does not necessarily deprive it of importance, nor does it mean that it cannot contain a truth-statement about the actual world; this would imply that the Gilgamesh epic, for example, has nothing to tell us that is of relevance for our lives in the world we live in right now; inversely, knowing that a story lays claim to factuality does not necessarily lend it credence or importance. This will be explained in greater detail below. The division and hierarchy is, I believe, a remnant of positivism. One powerful and influential argument against it is made by Tim O’Brien in his short story “How To Tell a True War Story.”