HERE IN NEW JERSEY:

PLACE IN THE FICTION OF PHILIP ROTH, RICHARD FORD, AND JUNOT DÍAZ

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ABSTRACT

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Place in the Fiction of Philip Roth, Richard Ford, and Junot Díaz

D.Litt. Dissertation by

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This dissertation argues that three Pulitzer Prize-winning writers, Philip Roth, Richard Ford, and Junot Díaz—a native, a transplant, and a migrant to New Jersey—convey the impact of place on their characters in an immediate and compelling way. The New Jersey neighborhoods they evoke—a Jewish enclave, a largely white suburb, and an immigrant ghetto—crucially affect their characters' destinies. The introduction defines some narrative elements of "place," presents examples of its use in literary fiction set in New Jersey, and lays the groundwork for close readings of the fiction of Roth, Ford, and Díaz. Each chapter applies to the author's fiction some of the narrative elements defined in the introduction. The chapter on Roth examines the ambience of his Newark neighborhood and its consequences upon his narrators' identities, their feelings of belonging or of alienation, and their ambivalence about whether to stay or leave. While Roth returns to Newark repeatedly in his stories, some of the narrators abandon the place precisely because of its effect on them. The chapter on Ford examines the influence of place on the destiny of his narrator, Frank Bascombe. Frank, a Southern transplant to New Jersey, claims at first that "place means nothing"; he concludes that New Jersey

“gives him something” and is where he belongs and wants to stay. The chapter on Díaz investigates the effect of dual places, the Dominican Republic and New Jersey, on the identity and destiny of Yunior, the narrator. The main ramification of place on Yunior’s writing is his determination to bear witness to immigrants’ voices that have gone unheard, “to sing my community out of silence.” The conclusion shows that, despite the differences among the authors in terms of temperament, background, style, and theme, their reactions to place—the narrators’ degrees of ambivalence and alienation and concerns about assimilation—have much in common and contribute to the understanding of the primary role of place in fiction and its repercussions upon characters’ identities. In sum, place is character is destiny.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER ONE: PHILIP ROTH 17

CHAPTER TWO: RICHARD FORD 70

CHAPTER THREE: JUNOT DÍAZ 122

CONCLUSION 175

WORKS CITED 182

WORKS CONSULTED 202

INTRODUCTION

"Fiction depends for its life on place."—Eudora Welty.

This dissertation argues that, whatever their origin, three Pulitzer Prize-winning writers, Philip Roth, Richard Ford, and Junot Díaz—a native, a transplant, and a migrant to New Jersey—convey the impact, both positive and negative, of place on their characters in an idiosyncratic yet immediate and compelling way. It demonstrates that the individual New Jersey neighborhoods they evoke—a Jewish enclave, a largely white suburb, and an immigrant ghetto—crucially affect their characters' destinies, their feelings of belonging or alienation, and whether they stay in their place or leave it. As Elizabeth Bowen writes, "Locality is the root of character . . . locality can be more, it can be destiny" (Weston 18).

This introduction defines some narrative elements of "place," presents examples of its use and meaning in literary fiction set in New Jersey over two centuries, and lays the groundwork for close readings of the fiction of Philip Roth, Richard Ford, and Junot Díaz. These short examples from New Jersey fiction, evoking themes relevant to the work of the three writers, indicate the impact of place on the characters' feelings of belonging to or alienation from their communities.

The literal meaning of the word "place," like setting or location, is where a story happens; "place" as an element in narrative art is integral to conveying the way it shapes a character's identity and his destiny. Some critics consider place, a literary component like character, plot, and theme, the least understood in the craft of fiction: "ubiquitous but usually underdefined" (Bone vii); "one of the most elusive elements" (Tindall vii);

"relatively neglected" (Gelley 186); and "so intrinsic as to be invisible" (Franklin 5). Despite the perceived difficulty in defining place, a distinguished and growing body of work exists on the subject. One of the purposes of this investigation is to distill the narrative elements of place suggested by the critical literature and apply them as definitions to the texts under scrutiny. These definitions, providing a theoretical framework for analyzing the fundamental relationship between place and character in the work of the three authors, follow.

When conveyed convincingly, place creates the impression of "hereness" by generating physical and emotional presence, identity, and immediacy. Place equals point of view, perspective, and voice: it evokes where the author stands and what he believes. Place is the environment, a geographical setting, and a political and social ambience. Place is sensory: what the author sees, hears, smells, touches, and tastes makes the reader feel "here." Place is exact, detailed, and precise, not generic, vague or abstract; in its particularity it encompasses the meaning of human experience. Place represents the local landscape, houses and their interiors, streets, neighborhoods, libraries, schools, and customs. Place stems from the author's imagination and memory. Place is language and literature. Place is metaphor. Place is change, adjustment to loss or gain. Place is dual, both homeland and exile; place is a journey, a beginning and an end, a destination.

New Jersey has attracted writers because of its proximity to Manhattan, its legendary setting on the Atlantic seaboard, its pastoral landscape, its industrial environment, its suburban expanse, its immigrant experience, and its historical prominence. The state has also attracted criticism and satirical treatment. Aspects of the popular culture, like television and film, often embrace a pejorative view of New Jersey.

A film review of a movie set in New Jersey is titled, "New Jersey Is Just So Embarrassing" (Dargis). A *The New Yorker* cartoon portrays two cows in a field gossiping about another cow: "She is so Jersey." Guy Davenport reports gratuitously that farmers in the southwest collect arrowheads and sell them to "people from New Jersey" (367), while Wallace Stegner states, out of the blue, "Try writing *The Big Sky* about New Jersey" (*Where* 139). The media's caricatures of the state obscure the fact that New Jersey has provided a meaningful setting for fiction since 1799, when Charles Brockden Brown, born in Pennsylvania, published his Gothic romance *Ormond: The Secret Witness*, featuring a dramatic scene in Perth Amboy. New Jersey is not a state known specifically for its fiction, the way regions like the South or New England are; touring New Jersey with an interviewer, Richard Ford says, "I feel so lucky. I don't know why someone else didn't write about all this before I got here" (McGrath). Only three novels set in New Jersey have won the Pulitzer Prize—Roth's *American Pastoral*, Ford's *Independence Day*, and Díaz's *The Brief, Wondrous World of Oscar Wao*.

Readers who are unfamiliar with older literary fiction about New Jersey associate the authors with other settings. James Fenimore Cooper (Burlington) received his critical recognition for the five *Leatherstocking Tales*, set near Otsego Lake, New York. *Life in the Iron Mills,* set in Lynchburg, Virginia, made the reputation of Rebecca Harding Davis (Manasquan). The fiction of Stephen Crane (Newark) was unknown until the publication of *The Red Badge of Courage*, located in Chancellorsville, Virginia, and *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets*, in the slums of New York. Bret Harte (New York) was famous for stories about California pioneers, like "The Luck of Roaring Camp." Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (Massachusetts) reached her heights with collections like *The New England Nun and*

Other Stories; when she moved to Metuchen, her novels based there were less famous. Other famous literary figures, natives of New Jersey like Paul Auster and Allen Ginsberg (Newark), Norman Mailer (Long Branch), Dorothy Parker (West End), and Edmund Wilson (Red Bank), became known for writing about other venues.

Critics debate whether rootedness in his place is requisite for a fiction writer. William Faulkner and Mark Twain exemplify authors who, inspired by their native soil, evoked their communities and cultures in their own vernacular. In contrast, Ernest Hemingway thought the place where writers are born was not so meaningful as what they find inside themselves about place (*Nick Adams* 239). Writers who are natives of New Jersey, those who spend short periods in it, and those with no ties to the state, have written authentically about it, as have a few foreigners, like Kinglsey Amis and Stephen Fry, both in novels about Princeton. Whatever the writer's origin, the interplay between place and character is interwoven and interconnected; settings are "impregnated with the feelings and experiences of the characters" (Gelley 187).

This selection of brief samples from stories about New Jersey illustrates the "affective bond between people and place" (Tuan, *Topophilia* 4) and the impact of place on characters' lives. The stories about the Jersey Shore as a setting display different social classes. Traveling south as a tourist on the Shore in *The American Scene* (1907), Henry James sees a "chain of big villas" that resembles "monstrous pearls" (7) and is shocked by the "crudity of wealth" (8) he witnesses. The vulgarity of the houses he observes is apparent in Joseph Hergesheimer's "The Happy End" (1919). The snobbish August Turnbull arrives by train from New York at the terminal in Cape May (Pennsylvania, died in Sea Isle). As his driver takes him home, Turnbull scorns poor

people in “dingy” (194) lodgings and approves of well-kept lawns and socially acceptable women, all reflecting his superficial taste. His exclusive setting suits his status; he has no interest in knowing his fellow man or in belonging to his neighborhood.

Another showy house on the Shore, a villa emblematic of the owner’s wealth, is on display in James Fenimore Cooper’s historical romance *The Water Witch* (1830). Cooper (Burlington) depicts the Navesink Highlands in the early 1700s and Sandy Hook, which lay within the United Provinces of Holland. After describing the backdrop, the bay, and “a modest growth of pines and oaks,” the author turns his attention to “an abrupt and high acclivity, which rises to the elevation of a mountain” (66). Here stands a villa, based on the old Woodward’s Hotel built in 1796, which belongs to a wealthy alderman, whose interest lies not in his community but in the potential marriage of his daughter to the Patroon of Kinderhook, whose acreage of fertile farming land, a rural Eden, stretches to the Massachusetts border. This pastoral landscape will undergo in the coming years an unforeseen evolution and transformation.

A select number of families has always lived in Manasquan, according to Rebecca Harding Davis’s novel *Dallas Galbraith* (1868). Like a local-color painter, she depicts her hometown setting, accoutered with boat, marshes, and pinewoods as background, and then reveals the social setting. After the protagonist, a victim of an unjust prison sentence, is exonerated, none of the rich people will recognize him; his neighborhood of fishermen, his community, welcomes him back warmly.

The Jersey Shore possesses a seedy side of society. Stephen Crane is unsympathetic to Asbury Park and portrays it realistically as an empty showplace. Crane, a native of Newark, writes in one of his sketches, “On the New Jersey Coast” (1892),

"Asbury Park creates nothing. It does not make; it merely amuses." He sees the resort as one of "wealth and leisure, of women and considerable wine." In the throng, he spies "summer gowns, lace parasols, tennis trousers, straw hats, and indifferent smiles . . . men, bronzed, slope-shouldered, uncouth, and begrimed with dust" (66). Crane finds in the crowd at the Shore a mixture of tawdriness and meaninglessness, not the place of beauty Fitzgerald views with a "mighty pæan of emotion" in *This Side of Paradise* (83).

In the country landscape near the Delaware River, the Edenic rural life is passing. In the sketch "Delaware River—Days and Nights" (1879), Walt Whitman (born in New York; a Camden resident for two decades), is still optimistic about his place, an alive and active community. He exults over the ferry: "What exhilaration, change, people, business, by day. What soothing, silent wondrous hours at night" (124). He enthuses about the prosperity in the air: "Sparkling eyes, human faces, magnetism, well-dress'd women, ambulating to and fro—with lots of fine things in the windows—are they not about the same, the civilized world over?" (129). His optimism for this exuberant community life is undimmed.

Whitman's cheerful landscape and its serenity and productivity are in danger, as intimated in "The Right-Angled Creek" (1967) by Christina's Stead (a New Zealander who spent a year in Lambertville). A couple drives out to luxuriate in the landscape, "scouring the low Jersey hills." What they find is, "lost farms where the cattle and farmers watered at an outdoor trough . . . a big barn sometimes broken. A shaky hovel surrounded by children, pits, dogs . . . the wind blew dry, strong, the air was full of dust, pollen, and mites" (134). They find not paradise but a lonely, sad setting, evidence of what Leo Marx calls "the machine in the garden." Pastoral life in New Jersey is coming

to a close. Marx illustrates his point with a reproduction of "The Lackawanna Valley," by the Montclair painter George Inness, in which a train traveling through the rural landscape belches smoke from its stack (220), desecrating the environment.

Scenes depicting the effects of industrialization on the landscape and community life occur in poverty-stricken settings. Environmental degradation and its effects on communities appear in William Carlos Williams's "Life Along the Passaic River" (1938). Williams (Rutherford), shows a small boy floating unwittingly on the poisonous Passaic River in a canoe. Williams' description of the "brown water" of the stream is menacing: "There's a sound of work going . . . a jet of water spouts from a pipe at the foundation level below the factory into the river's narrow bank." The river has made "a channel . . . into the brown water of the two hundred foot wide stream . . . " (3). Place demonstrates neighborliness in Williams's stories about a country doctor making house calls day and night on poor immigrant patients in "Old Doc Rivers" (*Doctor*). The unspoiled pastoral landscape seems forever lost, but the concept of community, neighborhood, and family holds on.

Place affects immigrants whose lives become increasingly alienated and desperate. John Updike's description of Paterson in *The Terrorist* (2006), a "slumping" factory town near Passaic called, ironically, "New Prospect," evokes the slow death of a city. He writes, "This is early April; again green sneaks, seed by seed, into the drab city's earthy crevices." Ahmad, a young Muslim student and son of immigrants, attends a high school that used to hang above the city "like a castle." It is now "rich in scars and crumbling asbestos, its leaded paint hard and shiny and its windows caged, [and] sits on

the edge of a wide lake of rubble that was once part of a downtown veined with trolley-car tracks" (11).

Writing about the grim and punishing lives of immigrants in Jersey City and Hoboken in "Rub-a-Dub-Dub" (1920), Theodore Dreiser (Indiana) portrays a narrator searching for truth and justice, living in one of the "the shabbiest, most forlorn neighborhoods. About me dwells principally Poles and Hungarians . . . around me there is little more than dull and to a certain extent aggrieved drudgery." New Jersey stories move into places where characters are poor and disadvantaged.

Carl Sandburg (Illinois) and Martha Gellhorn (Missouri) comment on the horrors of child labor and poverty in two neighborhoods of dead-end desperation. In "Millville" (1904), a sketch on the glassmaking factories, Sandburg delineates the "carryin-in" boys, who work "nine and ten hours and get two dollars and a half and three dollars a week." They are "grimy, wiry, scrawny, stunted specimens," who have mastered all the "cuss-words and salacious talk" of the grown men. Their eyes remind the poet of "shriveled pansies," which have no soil to grow in. They are rootless and alienated from the sense of community. In the sketch, "Camden" (1935), Gellhorn writes that the unemployed are "as despairing a crew" as she has seen in the Depression. The poor no longer have confidence in the president; they have lost their personal faith as well. Housing is terrible; household equipment, nonexistent; health problems, particularly TB and mental diseases, increasing. Women are taking to "amateur" prostitution; young people are apathetic and bitter. With "no resources within or without, they are waiting for nothing" (33-35). This alienated community can only fall apart.

Places of influence, like great universities, perpetuate inequalities among individuals and neighborhoods. Stories about Princeton University highlight economic and social disparities. The protagonist in *This Side of Paradise* (1920), by F. Scott Fitzgerald (Minnesota), senses that Princeton for him is Eden: "From the first, he loved Princeton—its lazy beauty, its half-grasped significance, the wild moonlight revel of the rushes, the handsome, prosperous big-game crowds, and under it all the air of struggle that pervades his class" (47). As he walks around the campus, he "noticed the wealth of sunshine creeping across the long, green swards, dancing on the leaded window panes, and swimming around the tops of spires and towers and battlemented walls" (41). The milieu of these privileged young people, described by Fitzgerald as the "prosperous" crowds and the "wealth of sunshine," demonstrates the social inequities of the landscape.

Princeton University as a place is not only prestigious, but it constitutes an addiction, a desire within its student body never to leave the place. According to a character in *A Long Day's Dying* (1950) by Frederick Buechner (New York, Princeton graduate), the lure of the university is "the lovely, giddy, green disease of this place, this sweet and dangerous hospital that nobody wants to leave—ever" (54). In "The Structure and Meaning of Dormitory and Food Services" (1987), Madison Smartt Bell (Tennessee, Princeton graduate) satirically accuses the Commons, where "underprivileged" freshmen and sophomores take their meals, of discriminatory practices. Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift* (1975) is a roman à clef about the poet Delmore Schwartz, who, while poet-in-residence at Princeton, lived in Baptistown on the Pennsylvania border, which the narrator, his biographer, calls "Nowhere, New Jersey." He says, "It was all pauperized. The very bushes might have been on welfare" (24). The narrator satirically sums up

Princeton: "Between noisy Newark and squalid Trenton it was a sanctuary, a zoo, a spa, with its own choochoo and elms and lovely green cages" (133). Bellow (Massachusetts, once a creative writing fellow at Princeton) satirizes the trope of Princeton as a refuge.

As more people move to New Jersey to commute to their employment in Manhattan, the village—the place—becomes suburbia. Characters that do not live where they work do not identify with their neighborhoods. In *The Butterfly House* (1912), by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (Massachusetts, moved to Metuchen), rich men who travel to the city each day live in places like Fairbridge, which has "charms that allured, that people chose it for suburban residences, that the small, ornate, new houses with their perky little towers and aesthetic diamond-paned windows, multiplied" (4). The most coveted are houses with views, especially "in the green flush of spring, and the red glow of autumn over the softly swelling New Jersey landscape with its warm red soil to the distant rise of low blue hills" (3). Banbridge village also boasts its "own particular little suburban note" (*Doc. Gordon* 1). In writing, "The social status of everyone in Banbridge was defined quite clearly" (12), she corroborates the idea that characters define their identities through their properties.

Again, the houses define the residents in the suburb in *The Bobby-Soxer* (1985), by Hortense Calisher (New York). The narrator grows up in the 1950s "just off the rim of commuting New York" in a house "farther from New Jersey's farm lands than from the city" (1). At one end of Cobble Row, the factory workers—"carpets, furniture, nothing untidy"—lived; her family's house, at the other end and considered "well set back," possesses ample yard space. Protesters post signs at the station reading "Keep Out

Urban Sprawl" (32) and "Don't Be a Bedroom Suburb" (32). The tacit lesson is provincialism: stay out.

Some immigrants who rise on the social ladder assume the snobbishness of those who have previously mistreated them. In *The Build-up* (1952), by William Carlos Williams (Rutherford), the characters are immigrants who enhance their social status by moving from Hackensack to the more affluent suburb of Riverdale. Even a cabdriver is snobbish, complaining, "all these newcomers . . . it's getting too congested" (60). The school classes are divided into desirable and "less desirable" to accommodate "the better element" (104). These newcomers assimilate into the ways of the community.

Carson McCullers (Georgia) presents a nightmarish aspect of the suburbs in "A Domestic Dilemma" (1951). In the protagonist's daily commute, his bus from mid-town Manhattan crosses the George Washington Bridge and heads up 4-West. Out the window, he sees the "barren fields and lonely lights of passing townships" (148). The cottage is "modern, almost too white and new on the narrow plot of yard" (148). In the winter the year was "bleak" and the cottage "naked" (149). He is stranded in suburbia, where he neither belongs nor participates in his neighborhood. Places are breaking down.

Racial tension, discrimination, and inequality have divided populations in the state and stimulate riots and protests. The tipping point is the disastrous riots in Newark in 1967. Amiri Baraka (Newark), the late activist and writer LeRoi Jones, was actively involved in the protests. In "From War Stories" (1982), set in the mid-1960s, the narrator jogs regularly around Wake-wake Park ("named after Indians who'd been bested in a land deal") in Noah (Newark); he thinks of this exercise as "running free" (58). He

remembers the “tremors of his early years . . . . The hunger and thirsts . . . . One stretch, I actually thought I was carrying the slave ship around in my head” (61).

In *To Reach a Dream* (1972), by Nathan C. Heard (Newark), the protagonist’s neighborhood is, officially, a ghetto; “to him it was paradise.” He writes, “He saw so much happen in those streets until eventually he saw nothing at all. It just was. He, like so many others, became immunized to the things that seemed designed to snatch or squeeze the very will to live from him” (18). He is another black victim of the breakdown of the community. In *Clockers* (1992), Richard Price (New York), explores the gritty, dead-end, drug-selling lives of young black men in “Dempsey” (Kearny). In *Freedomland* (1998), a character moves from his neighborhood into a white area: “Whenever he crossed the line, Lorenzo was struck by the abrupt change of scenery, a single stoplight taking him instantly from abandoned storefronts and end-of-the-road public housing into a land of aluminum siding and block after block of functional shopping” (155). These novels emphasize the disparities between black and white neighborhoods and underlying inequalities.

The Lakestown Rebellion (1978), by Kristin Hunter Lattany (Magnolia), describes racial relations, not in the city but in the countryside, in 1965. Lakestown’s west end, Stony Mill, is pastoral and perfect; the east end, Edgehill, is a “hideous reality created by men’s machines and their greed” (1). The Dorsettown Swim Club, which is in plain sight of black residents, is for whites only. The segregated town is based on Lawnside (originally called New Freedom), which was once the largest all-black community in America, created by Abolitionists in 1840 for freed and escaped slaves.

Violence in New Jersey fiction is by no means unknown before these riots. During the American Revolution, New Jersey plays a definitive role. New Jersey militias, many made up of farmer-soldiers, turn the tide over a three-year period to win the war against the British. *Thankful Blossom* (1875), by Bret Harte (New York, spent three years in Morristown), takes place near Morristown during the Revolution. At the end of the cruel, freezing winter of 1779-1780, during which Washington's soldiers encamped at Wick Farm in Jockey Hollow, the effect of the change of seasons mirrors the residents' relief: the sun "poured its direct rays upon the gaunt and haggard profile of the New Jersey hills. The chilled soil responded but feebly to that kiss; perhaps a few of the willows that yellowed the riverbanks took on a deeper color. But the country folk were certain that spring had come at last" (52).

The preceding panorama of New Jersey literary fiction suggests some of the human concerns about belonging and alienation that emerge in the works of Philip Roth, Richard Ford, and Junot Díaz. These three writers do not seem at first blush to have much in common: they were born in diverse locations; they belong to different generations; and they possess dissimilar styles. Roth is venerable, intellectually complex, darkly comic, and absorbed with matters of sexuality and Jewishness; Ford is contemporary, highly literate, personal, ironic, and ruminative; and Díaz is a youthful, exuberant talent, writing a fluent mixture of English, Spanish, hip-hop, science fiction, and vernacular. Each of these authors contemplates the impact of place on their narrators' destinies from an idiosyncratic perspective; each believes that "the surrounding landscape . . . inhabits characters and hangs its shadows over destiny" (Hardwick xiii). The reversal of the expected formulation, that landscape inhabits characters as well as

characters inhabiting landscape, is inspiring and instructive. These authors exemplify Welty's dictum, "Place, by confining character, defines it" (118).

Philip Roth, now in his eighties, was born in Weequahic, the Jewish neighborhood in the southern section of Newark near the boundary shared with the town of Irvington. He lived in Newark until he left home to attend university and returns to it repeatedly in his work. Through the guise of various alter egos, characters like Neil Klugman, Alexander Portnoy, and Nathan Zuckerman, he revisits Newark and its environs in his stories, all but one in the first person, evoking the influence and meaning of his immigrant ancestry, his Jewish upbringing, and his childhood lived in the shadow of the Depression and the Second World War. Some of his best-known novels, relating to Newark and drawn from a large and distinguished oeuvre, include *Goodbye, Columbus* (National Book Award, 1960); *Portnoy's Complaint*; *Zuckerman Unbound*; *American Pastoral*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1998; *I Married a Communist*; *The Human Stain*, which won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction in 2001; *The Plot Against America*; and *Nemesis*. Voicing support for the "hereness" theory, Alexander Portnoy says about New Jersey, "I cannot imagine myself living out my life any place but here" (243).

Richard Ford, now in his sixties, was born in Mississippi and set his first novel, *A Piece of My Heart*, there and in Arkansas. He shrugged off his southern roots to move to other locales, including Princeton, where he taught creative writing, and Montana, the setting for his stories, *Wild Life* and *Rock Springs*. In midlife, he began to write what emerged over a long period as a trilogy set in New Jersey: *The Sportswriter*; *Independence Day*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, both in 1996; and *The Lay of the Land*. The first-person, present-tense

narrator for the three stories, Frank Bascombe, is a middle-aged man from Mississippi. The first two novels focus on "Haddam," a largely white, affluent suburb combining qualities of Princeton, Pennington, and Hopewell; in the last novel of the trilogy, Bascombe moves to "Sea-Clift," a composite of Seaside Heights, Seaside Park, and Ortley Beach on the Jersey Shore. Throughout the trilogy, he views life in the suburbs through the lens of a real estate broker, contemplating the meaning of home, "place," and existence. Bascombe says about New Jersey, also evoking the "hereness" theme, "I could live here forever" (*SW* 48).

Junot Díaz, now in his forties, was born in the Dominican Republic after the tragedy of the Trujillo regime, was uprooted from his first home, and came with his illegal-immigrant parents to America at the age of six, speaking no English. Raised by his mother after his father's disappearance, he grew up in Parlin near a landfill and went to Rutgers. Díaz is the author of two collections of short stories, *Drown* and *This is How You Lose Her*, and a novel, *The Brief Wondrous World of Oscar Wao*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award, both in 2007. Díaz's first-person, present-tense narrator is Yunior de las Casas, who describes, from his literate and precocious viewpoint, the life of Dominican immigrants near Perth Amboy struggling to survive in New Jersey while still connected to their other home. As Yunior grows up, memories of his new home solidify his sense of belonging. On the "hereness" theme, Yunior, looking around his neighborhood, says, "Here's where I kissed my first girl" (*Drown* 58).

What these authors share is their interest in the ethos and effect of their different New Jersey neighborhoods; where they differ lies in the way their characters respond to

their place: "Place functions as the detailed and continuous environment in which character is formed and to which character reacts" (Lutwack 17). The interplay between place and character and its effect on characters' identities and destinies are at the heart of the matter in the following three chapters.

CHAPTER ONE: PHILIP ROTH

"Nothing would ever get me to leave here."

This chapter examines Philip Roth's place—the ambience of his Newark neighborhood—and its intense impact upon his characters' identities, their feelings of belonging or of alienation, and their decisions to stay in or leave the place. This analysis demonstrates that, while Roth treasures Newark and returns to it rapturously and relentlessly in his stories, some of the narrators, as well as the author himself, abandon the place precisely because of its effect on them. Ten narrative elements of place identified in the introduction provide a framework for analyzing the function and meaning of Roth's place: point of view; hereness; particularity; neighborhood; house; geography; imagination and memory; language; change; and journey.

For Roth's fiction, the local landscape, the family, the house and its interior, the street, the neighborhood, the school, the library, the playground, and the customs are the crucial, individual components of Weequahic, the Jewish enclave in Newark where Philip Roth grew up and which he revisits continuously in his Newark-related novels. The idea of a larger landscape, which is America, is always present and aspirational. About America, Roth says, it "allows me the greatest possible freedom to practice my vocation. America is the place I know best in the world. It's the *only* place I know in the world" (Finkielkraut 130). When Roth first acknowledges the importance of place in the lives of his fictional characters, he states, "Ever since *Goodbye Columbus*, I've been drawn to depicting the impact of place on American lives" (Gray). He says, "American lives," although he soon grasps that he will write about human experience in New Jersey. Roth describes his dramatic discovery about New Jersey as a place and the role it would play

in his writing: "I had thrown Newark away, really, in *Goodbye, Columbus*. I simply didn't appreciate what it was I had there. But ten years later these real places I had known so well as a boy—the city, the high school, the neighborhood—struck me suddenly as a gift bestowed by the muse" (Davidson 102). Recalling the early days of the American Revolution while sitting in Washington Park, Neil Klugman deeply appreciates his place: "Sitting there in the park, I felt a deep knowledge of Newark, an attachment so rooted that it could not help but branch out into affection" (*Goodbye, Columbus* [*GC*] 31).

The following discussion isolates and explores ten elements of "place" in Roth's narrative art. First, place represents a point of view, a perspective, and a voice for the writer: it is where he stands and what he perceives about his place. As Eudora Welty says about the writer, place "provides the base of reference; in his work, the point of view" (117). The point of view in Roth's novels is generally a first-person-singular narrator, whose persona conspicuously resembles Roth's. Critics choose assorted terms for these narrators; for example, Louis Menand uses "alter ego;" Derek Parker Royal, "counter-reality" (48); D. M. Thomas, "double;" and Martin Amis, "doppelgänger." Neil Klugman, twenty-three, an atypically third-person-singular narrator in *Goodbye, Columbus*, lives with his aunt and uncle in Newark and works in a low-level job at the Newark Public Library. In *Portnoy's Complaint* (*PC*), Alexander Portnoy moves at an early age from Jersey City with his family to grow up in Weequahic, attends Weequahic High School, and moves to Manhattan to work in city government. The narrator revealed late in *Nemesis* (*Nem*), Arnie Mesnikoff, is one of Bucky Cantor's physical education students during the polio epidemic in Newark in 1944, while Philip Roth, the narrator in

The Plot Against America (*Plot*), lives in Weequahic and is seven-to-nine years old during Charles A. Lindbergh's fictional presidency.

The ubiquitous narrator in the Newark-related novels is the writer Nathan Zuckerman, who is Roth's age, attended the same high school, and has a similar biography. In *I Married a Communist* (*IM*), *American Pastoral* (*AP*), and *The Human Stain (HS)*, Nathan is both the narrator and a character. He shares the narration of the story of another character's life, slowly immersing himself in that character, as he imagines that character's version of his story. He constructs the stories from fragments of memory linked to personal interactions: he is not a witness; he inhabits that character. Sometimes, he seems to disappear into the narrative and yet is actively present. In *I Married a Communist*, Nathan recounts some of the story of his friendship with his mentor, Ira Ringold, and turns over the narration to Ira's aging brother, Murray, Nathan's beloved English teacher at Weequahic High School. In *American Pastoral*, Nathan narrates the story, beginning with an homage to Seymour Levov, a Weequahic boy, and Nathan's childhood hero, and later relinquishing the narrative to Seymour, who longs for a life in the country as a gentile gentleman farmer. In *The Human Stain*, Nathan starts out researching the tale of his friend, Coleman Silk, fills in parts of the story, giving some of the role of narrator to Ernestine, sister of Coleman, a black man from East Orange who passes as a white Jewish academic at a New England college. Three other novels narrated by Nathan, in which he is a main character, *Counterlife* (*CL*), *The Ghost Writer* (*GW*), and *Zuckerman Unbound* (*ZU*), concern Nathan's own life and are written from his country retreat where he withdraws for a range of reasons, including the scandal surrounding the publication of *Carnovsky* [*Portnoy's Complaint*] and his health, while

reminiscing in his novels about his childhood in Newark. A mentor once told Nathan, "You must change your life" (*GW* 27). One way for Roth to change his life is to become a writer. In his writing, when he chronicles the life of another character he becomes that person; he changes his life by reimagining it in a fictional character.

Roth's nonfiction presents a separate set of problems regarding point of view. His autobiography is both accessible and baffling in narratives labeled "nonfiction," such as *The Facts: An Author's Autobiography* (*Facts*) and *Patrimony: A True Story* (*Pat*). *Reading Myself and Others* (*Read*), consisting of literary essays and lectures, belongs to another category of nonfiction. Roth writes *The Facts* and *Patrimony* in the first person as Philip Roth, but mixes them with fictional elements, such as asking his fictional character, Nathan Zuckerman, to critique his nonfiction autobiography. In interviews, he unhesitatingly reveals his views on the mélange of fact and fiction in his novels and his nonfiction, a distinction in Roth's oeuvre that absorbs the critics. Louis Menand refers to "an elaborate game of Find Philip." He continues, "Zuckerman is the Roth who is not Roth. He is Roth impersonating himself and making his readers guess which part is the fact and which part is the act." Wallace Stegner adds, "Consider Philip Roth's *The Facts*, which isn't facts at all. *The Facts* is as surely a novel posing as an autobiography as *Zuckerman Unbound* is an autobiography masquerading as a novel" (Root 102). David Remnick repeats a common question, "Are you the guy in your novels?" "No," answers Roth, "None of this seems like autobiography to me. It seems like fiction. Not to say that one doesn't draw on one's experiences but what counts is the use you make of it." Roth uses his experience, and that of other people, as part of the raw material of his invention. He readily accepts Stegner's use of the word "masquerade" for his alter egos.

In *Zuckerman Unbound*, Nathan discusses the difference between fiction and nonfiction with Alvie Pepler, an aspiring writer and intractable nuisance who forces Nathan to read the first paragraph of his article, which begins: "Fiction is not autobiography, yet all fiction, I am convinced, is in some sense rooted in autobiography" (150). In an exchange with Hermione Lee about his alter ego Nathan Zuckerman, Roth talks about his role as a novelist: "It's all the art of impersonation, isn't it? That's the fundamental novelistic gift." The work of a novelist is invention. "Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of my life *is* my life." Using Nathan as his foil, Roth's assumes the posture of a "masquerade": "To go around in disguise. To act a character. To pass oneself off as what one is not. To pretend. The sly and cunning masquerade." Roth easily and amiably confesses he is an "impersonator," a "liar," and a "con man" (Lee, "Philip Roth"). After Nathan reads *The Facts*, he is highly critical of Roth's rendering of his place; he urges him not to publish the book, complaining that he is skeptical of Roth's depiction of his neighborhood as more Edenic than it could possibly have been, that the author self-aggrandizes, and that he is certainly hiding something unpleasant about his childhood. The effect of this "masquerading" technique, this doubling phenomenon of the Roth/Zuckerman characters, calls for an alertness to any duplicity on Nathan's part and questions his reliability as a narrator. This discussion periodically raises questions like these, some of the ambiguity and ambivalence about Roth's feelings toward place, culminating toward the end of this chapter in an assessment of Roth's view of place and its impact on his characters.

Crucial to point of view and perspective on place is the writer's voice. In *The Ghost Writer*, the writer E. I. Lonoff tells the youthful, hero-worshipping, aspiring-writer Nathan that he has "the most compelling voice I have encountered in years . . . . I don't mean style . . . . I mean voice: something that begins at around the back of the knees and reaches well above the head" (93). Lonoff's description of voice emphasizes perspective, where the writer stands and who he is in relation to his place. Michael Kimmage describes this "voice" as "expressing the whole person and uniting [the writer] with the surrounding world" (132). Nathan's voice bespeaks the passion with which he views and conveys his place in New Jersey in relationship to the outer world. Early in his career, Roth discovers "narrative voice" in *Catcher in the Rye* and *Huckleberry Finn*—"not that I wanted to copy the writer[s], but I discovered what the power of voice was" (Sanoff 213). He learns from Salinger and Twain that voice reveals the ethos and essence of place. Leo Marx interprets the narrator's voice in *Huck Finn* as telling his story in his own language the way a river pilot must "memorize the landscape . . . to know the river" (320). Huck "belongs" to the terrain: "his native language is native to it" (333).

David Remnick writes that, after the general outrage over "Defender of the Faith," the so-called "Jewish story" in *Goodbye, Columbus*, Roth wrote two novels, *Letting Go* and *When She Was Good*, using a different, non-New Jersey, voice. He then returned to his native voice, which "came more from Newark than from the graduate school seminar rooms." In the essay "Goodbye Newark," Roth recalls that, after he tried to find a new manner of writing, he reverted to his original Newark idiom and topic. In that piece, Roth says he had never imagined, while reading the best English prose at college, that he could write about "the tiresome tension between parents and children in lower-middle-

class Jewish Newark" or that "arguments about shiksas and shrimp cocktail, about going to synagogue and being good" had anything to do with Shakespeare and real life. Roth had thought he would only be able to enter "a world of intellectual consequence" if he were to move "beyond the unsubtle locutions and coarse simplifications of the families still living where he's grown up, a tiny provincial enclosure where there was no longer room for the likes of him" (Remnick). He reiterates in *The Facts* his surprise that his writing could be "rooted in a parochial Jewish neighborhood having nothing to do with the enigma of time and space or good and evil or appearance and reality" (59). The apparent value and uniqueness of his native place, his neighborhood, he realizes, is what permits him to write about it.

Second, place means "hereness"; it creates for characters a physical and emotional presence, an identity, and an immediacy. Writes Welty**,** "Fiction is properly at work in the here and now, or the past made here and now; for in novels *we* have to be there" (117). Place is sensory: it conveys what the author sees, hears, smells, touches, and tastes; it is the way the writer makes the reader feel he is "here." Henry David Thoreau is an example of "hereness" in the creation of his work. About Walden Pond and its environs, Thoreau writes, "Here is where the engagement had to be made" (Turner 36). Thoreau adds in a journal entry, "Think of the consummate folly of attempting to go away from here! When the constant endeavor should be to get nearer and nearer here" (521). Thoreau devoted himself to his place, as does Roth. Roth echoes Thoreau's sentiments in *The Plot Against America*, when young Philip, the narrator, describes his own street, his own Summit Avenue, his own Walden, his here: "Tinged with the bright after-storm light, Summit Avenue was as agleam with life as a pet, my own silky,

pulsating pet, washed clean by sheets of falling water and now stretched its full length to bask in the bliss. Nothing would ever get me to leave here" (207). This cadence and this alliteration project a sensuous sensation: "pulsating pet;" "bask in the bliss."

Another example of "hereness" is Alexander Portnoy's joyful feeling about the game of baseball, the players, the ambience, the hereness: "I tell you, they [all the Jews with whom his father went to school in the old First Ward] are an endearing lot! I sit in the wooden stands alongside first base, inhaling that sour springtime bouquet in the pocket of my fielder's mitt—sweat, leather, Vaseline—and laughing my head off. I cannot imagine myself living out my life any place but here. Why leave, why go, when there is everything here that I will ever want?" (243). In addition to celebrating the place, this passage also makes the reader feel "here" in the supple use of the sense of smell—"inhaling" the "sour bouquet" of "sweat, leather, Vaseline."

During the agony of the Lindbergh presidency, Philip's father emphasizes that right "here" is where the horrifying events are affecting them, their families, their neighborhood: "What's history? History is everything that happens everywhere. Even *here* in Newark. Even *here* on Summit Avenue" (*Plot* 180). Roth tells in *Reading Myself and Others* about his mother's inviting his Hebrew teacher for dinner. In consternation, he asks his mother for confirmation: she has "invited his Hebrew teacher for dinner *here*?" She replies, "Of course here" (260). Philip is stunned that someone of the stature of the Hebrew teacher will deign to come here to the Roths' modest, precious home.

A reader who is trying to fathom the impossible idea of Lindbergh's being President of the United States in *The Plot Against America* might easily respond with the stock phrase, "But that's impossible—it can't happen *here*!" In the novel, Roth is

drawing on a tradition in American literature described by Paul Berman as "jeremiads about America's ability to transmute overnight into a fascist monstrosity." As examples, Berman cites three early novels: Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908), Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* (1934), and Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here* (1938). The title of Lewis's novel plays on the "hereness" refrain, but takes place in a bizarre shift of milieu: both Lewis's novel about fascism and West's are planted in the unlikely soil of progressive Vermont. Not surprisingly, the planks in the platform of the fascist leader in the former, Buzz Windrip, patently discriminate against "Jews and Negroes;" in the latter, Shagpoke Whipple is fighting "international Jewish bankers and Communists" (Micou, *Fiction Set in Vermont*, 148, 259). One of the scariest aspects of *The Plot Against America*, as Berman observes, is the insidious pro-Lindbergh rabbi who argues against America's entering what will become World War II.

A further use of "hereness" appears in *I Married a Communist* when Nathan visits Ira Ringold, his older mentor and friend who provides intellectual and literary guidance at a critical stage in Nathan's development. Ira often lives a pioneer's life in a shack in Zinc Town, a mining area in northwestern New Jersey. Nathan appreciates Ira's discipline and hard work; these attributes explain why he is so drawn to Ira and his ideas. At seventeen, this simple life makes Nathan feel he belongs: he is here. He does not mean he wants to be a Communist like Ira; he seeks his own path, but when a man who is "claimed by nothing but his idea . . . who understands almost mathematically what he needs to live an honorable life, then you think, as I did, *Here is where I belong*!" (235). Thus, in Ira's life, Nathan discovers his own "hereness." After Seymour Levov moves out of Newark and into his dream house in a gentile, Republican neighborhood west of Newark in

American Pastoral, he, too, is enamored of "hereness." One can be enthralled by hereness but also deceived; Seymour believes, mistakenly, "Everything that gave meaning to his accomplishments had been American. Everything he loved was here" (213). He seriously miscalculates what would bring him and his family happiness and a sense of belonging; instead, changing his place and his identity alienates him.

Nathan pays homage to "hereness" in this passage from *The Ghost Writer*, in which he salutes some of the meaningful crossroads in his life while driving by them; he recalls them as though they were present, immediate, and now:

> No lawn we passed, no driveway, no garage, no lamppost, no little brick stoop was without its power over me. Here I had practiced my sidearm curve, here on my sled I had broken a tooth, here I had copped my first feel, here for teasing a friend I had been slapped by my mother, here I had learned that my grandfather was dead. (*GW* 88)

For Nathan, life in the neighborhood is here. The "brick stoop," which includes both the little porch at the top of the stairs at the threshold to the house and the set of steps leading down to the street, constitutes the center of communications among Weequahic neighbors. It is where neighbors sit through hot summer evenings, while children play in the street; it is what housewives wash by hand. In *I Married a Communist*, Nathan sits companionably on the stoop and shares ice water with the Ringold brothers; this is what neighbors do.

Third, place is exact, detailed, and particular, not abstract, vague, or generic. Henry James confirms the importance of detail in conveying place: "the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel" (*Art of Fiction*

173). In his Weequahic High School's forty-fifth reunion address, which Nathan writes but does not deliver, Nathan expatiates on the richness and variety of detail in his classmates' Weequahic youth. He stresses both the "immensity" of remembered detail and the sensation of the past's being here in the "vivid" present.

> Am I mistaken to think that even back then, in the vivid present, the fullness of life stirred our emotions to an extraordinary extent? Has anywhere since so engrossed you in its ocean of details? . . . the immensity of the detail, the force of the detail, the weight of the detail—the rich endlessness of detail surrounding you in your young life . . . (*AP* 42-43)

Roth's use of cumulative detail in his mesmerizing lists conveys the "hereness" of place to the reader. He glories in the details of the place's practical businesses, such as glove making in *American Pastoral*, taxidermy in *I Married a Communist*, and dairy farming in *The Human Stain*. The tannery, for Seymour Levov's father, the child of immigrants, represents both his high school and his college education. The prose is granular with detail; it intends, by its word choice, to repel the reader as Roth summons up the experience of a fourteen-year-old boy's submersion in Hell. Words like "brutish," "animal," "dark caves," and their weapons, "hooks and staves," evoke the prehistoric nature of the working conditions. Roth's incessant gerunds—"cooking," "dehairing," "pickling," "degreasing," "wringing," "hanging," "stinking," "dragging," "pushing," and "flooding"—are reminiscent of Robert Fagles's translation of *The Odyssey*, in which Homer creates a storm by piling gerunds one on top of another—"crashing, spinning, brawling, snapping, hurling, struggling, spewing, pouring, huddling, tossing, clutching, and flinging" (Book Five: 347-366). Roth's one-syllable nouns stun with their direct

Anglo-Saxon power: "grease," "skins," "hunks," "pits," "flesh," and "swill." The power of the mounting effect sucks the reader into the undertow:

> The tannery that stank of both the slaughterhouse and the chemical plant from the soaking of flesh and the cooking of flesh and the dehairing and pickling and degreasing of hides, where round the clock in the summertime the blowers drying the thousands and thousands of hanging skins raised the temperature in the low-ceilinged dry room to a hundred and twenty degrees, where the vast vat rooms were dark as caves and flooded with swill, where brutish workmen, heavily aproned, armed with hooks and staves, dragging and pushing overloaded wagons, wringing and hanging waterlogged skins were driven like animals through the laborious storm that was a twelve-hour shift—a filthy, stinking placed awash with water dyed red and black and blue and green, with hunks of skin all over the floor, everywhere pits of grease, hills of salt, barrels of solvent—this was Lou Levov's high school and college. (*AP* 12)

Seymour Levov, who has moved out of Newark and married a gentile woman, is in love with the countryside around Old Rimrock [Oldwick, New Jersey]. He owns a hundred acres of American local history, with a big old house, outbuildings, and a dairy farm. Seymour's depiction of the landscape is childish and naïve, filled with "puppy love," representing his puerile decisions for moving to the country. His vague details reveal that he does not realize where he is and what it means:

> . . . fences he loved, the rolling hay fields he loved, the corn fields, the turnip fields, the barns, the horses, the cows, the ponds, the streams, the

> springs, the falls, the watercress, the scouring rushes, the meadows, the acres and acres and acres of woods he loved with all of a new country dweller's puppy love of nature, until he reached the century-old maple trees he loved and the substantial old stone house he loved. (*AP* 318)

These fields, the barns, and the trees will not serve to satisfy Seymour's American dream. Nathan demonstrates that using a trite background, a piece of empty scenery without authentic detail, does not convey place compellingly. Roth's interest in and use of precise detail, "keeping the particular alive in a generalizing world" (Kelly), are what distinguish his descriptions of place with such vigor and individuality. In *I Married a Communist*, Nathan learns the distinction between politics and literature. One of his progressive mentors, Leo Glucksman, says, "Politics is the great generalizer . . . and literature the great particularizer." Leo continues the distinction between the simplification of ideas in politics and the importance of nuance to art. "Particularizing suffering: there is literature" (223).

On the utilization of detail, Roth states that what Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and he had in common was once the property of the "anecdotal local colorists [growing into] a fiction having entirely different intentions, but which remains grounded in the colorful specificity of the locale" (Finkielkraut 128). Kimmage also notes Roth's use of detail; he comments that Roth brings Newark history alive with his "precise, dense, significant detail—visual detail, architectural detail, sociological detail, and 'ethnic detail,' the details of race, ethnicity and religion around which this American city coheres" (5). The effect of particularity on Roth's prose is concentrated and immediate.

Fourth, place is a neighborhood, a critical feature in Roth's local landscape. The origin of Philip's devotion for his neighborhood is deeply embedded in nineteenth-century immigration. "In 1880, Newark was a city of approximately 100,000 people, most of them of British stock. And then, between 1880 and World War I, 250,000 immigrants came [to Newark], two and a half times the population" (Rothstein, Searles 275). Roth's ancestry is typical of Weequahic: his maternal grandparents were native Jewish-Americans; his father's grandparents were among the Jewish immigrants who began arriving in New Jersey in the 1880s. Little was known about them except that they were émigrés from Eastern Europe, orthodox, Yiddish-speaking, and traditional. His parents grew up in the tenements in the Third Ward and the Down Neck of Newark and, in the 1920s, moved into Clinton Hill or Weequahic, which was built on farm lots at the underdeveloped southwest edge of Newark just after World War I. These immigrants inevitably formed their own neighborhoods, which "were as insulated as gated communities—Weequahic the Jewish ghetto, the North Ward the Italian, and the Central Ward the black," writes Lawrence Schwarz ("Roth, Race"). His choice of words does not escape notice: the word "gated" suggests "segregated." Those in Weequahic were white, Jewish, and lived "in a city within a city, in a world of their own" (Rothstein, Searles 127). Michael Kimmage adds, "These neighborhoods became rivalrous, competing, somewhat xenophobic subcultures within the city" (31). The black residents, who filled the places the whites left, were exploited and discriminated against. After the black insurrection, July 14 and 15, 1967, the white flight was very large.

The Jewish immigrants' sons, fathers like Herman Roth, Lou Levov, and Victor Zuckerman, clung to strong values; Michiko Kakutani emphasizes their "absolutely

totalistic notions of what is good and what is right" ("Postwar"). All they wanted was to improve the life of their children, primarily through educational opportunities, as Americans. Nathan describes his Jewish father, "the responsible chiropodist," for whom life had been "a dogged climb up from the abyss of his immigrant father's poverty, and not merely so as to improve his personal lot but eventually to rescue everyone as the family messiah" (*CL* 37). About his father, Roth writes, "All the time I'm thinking that the real work, the invisible, huge job that he did all his life, that that whole generation of Jews did**,** was making themselves American. The *best* citizens" (*Pat* 125). Another sign of ambiguity treated in the assessment at the end of this discussion is Roth's emphasis on the influence of the original immigrants on the neighborhood. He salutes their patriotism and community loyalty as notable and estimable; some of the offspring may find their example suffocating, demanding, or emasculating.

As Nathan listens to E. I. Lonoff's reminiscences, they revive "feelings of kinship . . . for our own largely Americanized clan, moneyless immigrant shopkeepers to begin with, who'd carried on a shtetl life ten minutes' walk from the pillared banks and gargoyled insurance cathedral of downtown Newark" (*GW* 13). From age twelve to high school graduation, he describes himself as a good boy, a good student, influenced "by the social regulations of the self-conscious and orderly lower-middle-class neighborhood where I had been raised," with certain social constraints passed down to him "by the religious orthodoxy of my immigrant grandparents" (Mauro 81). The reader is aware of the frequency with which Roth mentions his origins, his "forces": "I am probably right now as devoted to my origins as I ever was . . ." (*Read* 9); and he feels "affinities" toward "the forces that first shaped me" (*Read* 9-10). The refrain about these early "forces," the

importance of place, his neighborhood, and its impact on Roth's life, feels unrelenting and persuasive. A skepticism or concern about overstatement becomes part of the assessment. Weighing Roth's passion and devotion to his neighborhood, the question arises whether his attitude toward his neighborhood is exaggerated and defensive because he perceives it as parochial and provincial.

Martin Amis comments on the extent of anti-Semitism in America in the 1930s, while Roth was growing up, which reached its "historic apogee in 1944." When news of the Holocaust emerged in May/June 1942 ("700,000 already dead"), the news media gave it little attention. After an angry, hate-filled reaction met Roth's first book, *Goodbye Columbus*, especially the story "A Defender of the Faith," Roth swore he "would never write about Jews again." With *Portnoy's Complaint*, he found his subject, "which is to say he had found himself" and his native-Newark voice. Anti-Semitism is an underlying concern in Roth's descriptions of his childhood, though his parents tried both to protect him and to inculcate him with pride in being a Jew. When Seymour Levov moves to the gentile community of Old Rimrock, he understands what he faces when his WASP neighbor, Jim Orcutt, boasts of his patrician ancestors and shows off the family graveyard. Seymour realizes what a long distance he has to climb to enter Orcutt's America; "this guy was *there*" (*AP* 306), and had been for years. Little by little, Seymour comprehends that Old Rimrock is "a world of gentile wealth where the buildings were covered with ivy and the people had money and dressed in a certain style. Didn't admit Jews, didn't know Jews, probably didn't like Jews all that much" (*AP* 307). Roth describes a few of his memories of anti-Semitism—his father's difficulty in climbing the corporate ladder, other kids yelling "Kikes!," and his segregated fraternity experience at

college (Pierpont 153). Bucky Cantor's grandfather learns his fearlessness from the Newark tenements, where aggressive anti-Semitism was flagrant, and encourages Bucky to "stand up for himself as a Jew" (*Nem* 25). The *Plot Against America* reveals anti-Semitism in America at its nadir.

Roth talks passionately about his neighborhood and its layers of "connectivity." He describes Newark in the 1930s and 1940 as the world of "'rings within rings . . . multiple allegiances' to his family, his Jewishness, to his street, and neighborhood and city, state, and country" (Darling 272). Much of what Roth learned about Newark came from his father, who was "like a city reporter in his knowledge of the place" (Sanoff 268). Roth's later stories are largely about "my family and father and his impact on my life. There's my neighborhood, and its impact on my life" **(**Rothstein, "From Philip" 226). Roth's first stories did not draw so much upon his own family as upon "the ethos of my highly self-conscious Jewish neighborhood" (*Facts* 72). Roth's frequent iterations about the "ethos" of his neighborhood are emblematic of his persistent effort to show the impact of the neighborhood upon the characters' identities; he is not exploiting his life and his family to write his stories so much as he is utilizing the place in which he lives. In the same way, he states in "Writing American Fiction," "The writer needs a valid sense of community in order to work . . . without a legitimate sense of community, the novelist faces a loss of subject that amounts to a loss of vocation" (Jones and Nance 130). Roth also understands Weequahic's "fantasy life" along with a "legitimate sense" of his neighborhood. As he says to Pierpont, "If you don't know the fantasy life of a country, it's hard to write fiction about it that isn't just a description of the décor, human and

otherwise" (150). The phrase "fantasy life" resurfaces in the final assessment in regard to Nathan's critique of Roth's depiction of his childhood.

In Nathan's high school reunion address, his encomia for his neighborhood flow for pages. He tries to recreate the atmosphere surrounding his childhood, at the time of the Depression and in the aftermath of World War II. He meditates upon the neighborhood, his parents, and their determination that their children should be, importantly, safe, but, above all, should be significant: "You must not come to nothing! *Make something of yourselves!*" (*AP* 41). The parents' fervent attempts to influence their children are moving and heroic. "Am I wrong to think that we delighted in living there?" Nathan asks rhetorically (*AP* 42). He is struck by the way they, as children, concentrated on things, on details. "Perhaps by definition a neighborhood is the place to which a child spontaneously gives undivided attention; that's the unfiltered way meaning comes to children, just glowing on the surface of things" (*AP* 42-43). His immersion in life has never been so complete "as it was in those streets, where every block, every backyard, every house, every *floor* of every house—the walls, ceilings, doors, and windows of every last friend's family apartment—came to be so absolutely individualized" (*AP* 43). In Roth's chronicling of the particularities of his place, his emotion is palpable.

Despite anti-Semitism and the effects of the Depression and World War II, Nathan highlights the optimism pervading his childhood: "ours was not a neighborhood steeped in darkness. The place was bright with industriousness. There was a big belief in life and we were steered relentlessly in the direction of success: a better existence was going to be ours. The goal was to *have* goals . . ." (*AP* 41). He stresses once again the families' encouragements for the children to succeed. No hint of tragedy or misfortune

colors his optimism. "It was this edict [to have goals] that made the neighborhood a cohesive place. A whole community perpetually imploring us not to be immoderate and screw up, imploring us to grasp opportunity, exploit our advantages, remember what matters" (*AP* 41). Inevitably, questions arise as to whether Roth, and his alter egos, protest too much about their childhood and their neighborhood. Nathan frequently accuses Roth of exaggerating the charms of the place. The high value the neighborhood parents place on their children's behaving well and becoming someone could be read as commending and supporting or as nagging and pressuring. In fact, the effect of all this wholehearted tutelage on the young people is strong and impressive.

In addition to the children's futures, the focus of interest in Roth's childhood neighborhood is baseball, the American craze. Children and adults alike spend hours at the Chancellor Avenue playground. Baseball is where "Jewishness and America converged" (Kimmage 35). Roth says, "His boyhood society cohered around the game of baseball" (*Facts* 32); he refers elsewhere to his "baseball-besotted youth" (*AP* 155). He apostrophizes, "Oh, to be a center fielder, a center fielder—and nothing more!" (*PC* 72). He wrote about baseball in *The Great American Novel* because it is one subject he is "grounded in" (*Read* 86) and to which he feels close. His phrase subtly suggests the baseball term, "a grounder." To illustrate how "great" the novel's aspirations are, his narrator is named Word Smith ("Call me Smitty"), with a nod to Melville. Tributes to the sport continue. Alex Portnoy tells his psychoanalyst, "you can't imagine how glorious the baseball field was." Alex is amazed that people exist who are as at ease in life as he is with playing baseball—he knew every gesture, every nuance "down to the smallest particular" (*PC* 72). In fact, Roth idolizes the game. "If ever I had been called upon to

express my love for my neighborhood in a single reverential act, I couldn't have done better than to get down on my hands and knees and kiss the ground behind home plate" (*Facts 29*). He worships the "ground" of the baseball field.

> Another essential feature in the local landscape is the library. For Roth, the public library is supreme: a place; a "kingdom;" a "haven" (Posnock 6). Roth's work is imbued with a literary sensibility and a reverence for literature. The Newark Public Library, Neil's employer, is for Roth a symbol of "a sense of community, a comradeship, a love of learning, a milieu of American success." He describes the actual building as a "place of grandeur; there was something overwhelming about . . . the open stacks, all those books, the knowledge" (Rothstein *NYT*). The library is a "milieu," an honored place.

Fifth, part of the local landscape of place is a special house, a home. An integral element of the American dream is to inhabit—perhaps to purchase—a house of one's own. Many of Roth's—or his alter egos'—memories about Newark evoke one of the houses in which he lived. Today, a plaque identifies the celebrated house at 81 Summit Avenue as "Historic site: Philip Roth Home." Long before the town consecrated his boyhood home, he commemorates the house and all that it symbolizes in his fiction. Roth, or his narrators, frequently refer to the refuge that his neighborhood and his house provide. That sense of safety is reflected in Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, which represents, in part, a paean to the importance of the childhood house. He selects descriptors such as a "shelter" for dreaming and imagining (viii), a "cradle, a warm bosom" (7), and "a nest in the world" (30). Also apposite in relation to Roth's writing

about his childhood is Bachelard's finding the house interesting "as a tool for analysis of the human soul" (xxxvii), as "the first cosmos for its young children" (4), and, most importantly, as the "localization of our memories" (8). All these points correspond to the way Roth recaptures the past and recreates it as present and immediate.

Roth's house, and that of his narrators, symbolizes a place of order and discipline, cleanliness and safety, love and play, and values and standards by which to live one's life. He recalls, "The houses were all two-and-a-half family houses . . . . In warm weather, people sat on their stoops and on beach chairs in the driveway" (Rothstein *NYT* 277). Throughout Roth's novels, the chorus, "the tree-lined street," sings out in his graphic memories of the houses' settings. Nathan reminisces, "There was no end to all I could remember happening to me on this street of one-family brick houses more or less like ours, owned by Jews more or less like us, to whom six rooms with a 'finished' basement and a screened-in porch on a street with shade trees was something never to be taken for granted, given the side of the city where they'd started out" (*GW* 88-89). Again, Roth commemorates the influence of the ancestors, the Jewish immigrants who began their American lives across town in an urban tenement. Distinctions in housing exist within ethnicities; Seymour Levov's successful father, after an effort to succeed that would kill most men, moves his family to Keer Avenue, "where the rich Jews lived in real houses, not the rented apartments in the two-, three-, and four-family dwellings with brick stoops" (*AP* 10)—brick, like Roth's, instead of the flagstone of the more affluent.

The theme of belonging underlies Roth's recurring references to "tree-lined streets" and words like "safe," "peaceful haven," and "friendly" to convey the way his family house makes him feel. "Our lower middle-class neighborhood of houses and

shops—a few square miles of tree-lined streets at the corner of the city bordering on residential Hillside and semi-industrialized Irvington—was as safe and peaceful a haven for me as his rural community would have been for an Indiana farm boy" (*Facts* 30). He describes next-door Irvington as a somehow threatening gentile town, across the city line from "the streets and houses of my safe and friendly Jewish quarter" (*PC* 143). His descriptions of Nathan and Philip's houses present twin images. Here is Nathan's house: "Until the spring of 1941, when the boys were eight and four and the Zuckermans moved into the one-family brick house on the tree-lined street up the hill from the park, they had lived at the less desirable end of their Jewish neighborhood, in a small apartment building at the corner of Lyons and Leslie" (*ZU* 219). And here is Philip's: "We lived in the second-floor flat of a small two-and-a-half-family house on a tree-lined street of frame wooden houses with red-brick steps, each stoop topped with a gable roof and fronted by a tiny yard boxed in with a low-cut hedge" (*Plot* 1-2). The assessment toward the end of the chapter questions whether the frequent repetition of phrases like "the tree-lined street" and "the brick houses" renders them clichéd and unable to continue to hold meaning.

Living in a house involves chores to be done. This passage exemplifies the rhythm of the stultifying, daily routine, over and over, like "the metronome of daily neighborhood life, the old American-city chain of being" (*IM* 17). The passage offers an expansive list of gerunds; it is a song, an anthem, to hard work.

> Taking down the screens, putting up the screens, clearing the snow, salting the ice, sweeping the sidewalk, clipping the hedge, washing the car, collecting and burning the leaves, twice daily from October through March descending to the cellar and tending the furnace that heated your

> flat—stoking the fire, banking the fire, shoveling the ashes, lugging ashes up the stairs in buckets and out to the garbage (*IM* 17).

More backbreaking chores accrue to the women's lot, as they reach out from their back windows in all temperatures to hang and peg wet items one at a time. In *Patrimony*, Roth again mentions the street, "our cozy, clannish street of two-and-a-half-family houses" (234-45). The modifiers "cozy, clannish" emphasize their neighborhood's safety, protection, and support because they constitute a family, a clan, a tribe, a community. Roth writes, "His whole clan was devout New Dealers" (*Read* 10). When Nathan first describes Seymour Levov, he acclaims his prowess as an athlete and his good looks and their pride at his belonging to their neighborhood, "the blue-eyed blonde born into our tribe" (*AP* 3). The safety and comfort of the community is a constant refrain.

Although Roth and his narrators live in a Jewish enclave, the theme of being both Jewish and American emerges early in their childhoods. It seems to him that growing up Jewish and growing up American were "indistinguishable" (*Facts* 121). Particularly after the war, Jews had "that wonderful feeling that one was entitled to no less than anyone else, that one could do anything and could be excluded from nothing, came from our belief in the boundlessness of the democracy in which we lived and to which we belonged" (*Facts* 123). In his exuberance about democracy, Roth burrows to the core of the argument that life in Weequahic is safe, peaceful, and protected because they as Jews belong to the place instead of feeling alienated. As important as feeling American was feeling a part of New Jersey. New Jersey is where he lives and celebrates his citizenship. He recalls, "I have never doubted this country was mine (and New Jersey and Newark as well)" (*Facts* 20). His generation was "exuberant, growing up Jewish *and* American in

the greatest country in the world" (*Facts* 123). In *Plot Against America*, Philip calls forth the intrinsic nature of the Jews in his neighborhood. They were neither proud nor ashamed of being Jews. "What they were was what they couldn't get rid of—what they couldn't even begin to want to get rid of. Their being Jews issued from their being themselves, as did their being American" (*Plot* 220). He extols his heritage.

Sixth, place is a geographical setting. Ernest Hemingway believed that in fiction "unless you have geography, background . . . you have nothing" (Baker 49). Young Philip, in *The Plot Against America*, claims to be in possession of a sixth sense, "the geographic sense, the sharp sense of where he lived and who and what surrounded him" (212). Roth has expressed that gift in the way he conveys the minutiae of his surroundings. Geographical setting is closely linked to social aspirations; the map of Newark and its western environs are emblematic of different identities and manners of life that attract Jewish residents. As soon as they are able, Jews leave Newark and move to the west (Bloom). These pioneers are not seeking gold, like California prospectors; they yearn for a new and freer way of life, one more assimilated and American, found in the western part of New Jersey. In the 1930s and 1940s, "the western edge of Weequahic's neighborhood took shape as Newark's Jewish frontier" (*Plot* 160). In *Goodbye, Columbus*, Neil explains this transformative phenomenon:

> The neighborhood had changed; the old Jews like my grandparents had struggled and died, and their offspring had struggled and prospered, and moved further and further west, toward the edge of Newark, then out of it, and up the slope of the Orange Mountains, until they had reached the crest

> and started down the other side, pouring into gentile territory as the Scotch-Irish had poured through the Cumberland Gap. (64)

Neil finds himself tempted by this same path westward, on a journey toward the metaphorical suburbs of Brenda Patimkin's home in Short Hills. He cannot but contrast his hellish, hot, tarry, and crowded neighborhood with the cooler "heaven" of Short Hills. After Neil has driven out of Newark, past Irvington, he finds that "the hundred and eighty feet that the suburbs rose in altitude above Newark brought one closer to heaven, for the sun itself became bigger, lower, and rounder" (*GC* 8). He passes houses where no one sits on stoops the way they do in his neighborhood. Not wanting to be early for his first evening with her parents, he drives up and down streets "whose names were those of eastern colleges, as though the township years ago, when things were named, had planned the destinies of the sons of its citizens" (*GC* 9). Neil sees that place affects the "destinies" of its inhabitants' children, who develop into conservative adults and stay in suburbs like Short Hills and Old Rimrock.

This observation foreshadows a conversation about colleges that he and Brenda conduct, in which she evinces her snobbery. Neil resents the way she says she goes to school in "Boston," instead of saying, "Radcliffe" (*GC* 11). She condescends to his living in Newark; cruelly, she says, "My mother still thinks we live in Newark" (*GC* 26). In contrast to the closely aligned houses in Neil's neighborhood, Brenda's family belongs to a country club and owns enough property in the country to accommodate a badminton court. In *I Married a Communist*, Nathan accompanies his older friend and mentor Ira Ringold to visit a friend of his in Maplewood, west of Newark and Irvington. They drive along "the quiet Maplewood streets, past all the pleasant one-family houses where live

the ex-Newark Jews who'd latterly acquired their first homes and their first lawns and their first country-club affiliations" (99). These Jews dearly seek after these accoutrements of a life well lived—an American life for a Jew living in New Jersey.

Seymour has a vision about moving west. When he is sixteen, riding with the baseball team to a game against Whippany, "as they drove along the narrow roads curving westward through the rural Jersey hills, he saw a large stone house with black shutters set on a rise back of some trees" (*AP* 189). After that moment, his one goal is to move to desirable, seductive west Jersey. When he grows up and chooses Morris County, his father counsels as an alternative his living in Newstead, the Jewish section of South Orange, but Seymour wants "a barn, a millpond . . . the remains of a gristmill that had supplied grain for Washington's troops" (*AP* 307). He equates Old Rimrock with America's pioneers, the Puritans, the founding fathers. He is "settling Revolutionary Jersey as if for the very first time" (Halio 154). In his Revolutionary-era house and property, Seymour sees himself as a "pioneer" and is fully cognizant of the contrast between his way of living and his father's. He wants to "get as far out west in New Jersey as he could" (*AP* 307). He will be the successful young president of the company, a daily commuter from his home "some thirty-odd miles west of Newark, out past the suburbs—a short range pioneer living on a hundred-acre farm on a back road on the sparsely habitated hills beyond Morristown in wealthy, rural Old Rimrock" (*AP* 14). This "thirty-odd miles" is a world away from the tannery floor where Lou Levov began life in America, "paring away from the true skin the rubbery flesh that had ghoulishly swelled to twice its thickness in the great lime vats" (*AP* 14). Seymour believes that changing his place will renew his life.

In *The Plot Against America*, Philip's interest in geography leads him to collect postage stamps with pictures of national parks on them; his mother persuades him to consult a map to learn the locations of Lindbergh's "Just Folks" program for Jewish families relocated to gentile families living in the Middle West. He does not have to travel so far as that to discern the differences among ethnic groups; he can pick out "The dark treeline of the Watchungs, a low-lying mountain range, fringed by great estates and affluent, sparsely populated, the extreme edge of the known world—and about eight miles from our house . . . . Union County, another New Jersey entirely" (2). Union, almost next door to the Roths, is a gentile area. Even in his beloved central New Jersey, there are those who belong and those who feel alienated.

Topography is kin to geography. As Elizabeth Bowen writes, "What gives fiction its verisimilitude is its topography" (*Pictures* 34). Natural landscapes—countryside, rural expanses—rarely appear in Roth's novels; even the scenes at the Shore are suburban, populated, and commercial. With the exception of Seymour Levov's pastoral idyll in Old Rimrock, the imagery associated with Roth's notion of landscape is gritty and urban. Young Philip glimpses a single intimation of a rural landscape from the back of St. Peter's, Newark's Roman Catholic church, where a truck farm, the kind that made New Jersey "the Garden State," sells produce from "Compact family vegetable farms [that] dotted the undeveloped rural reaches of the state" (*Plot* 161). Elizabeth Hardwick pictures Roth's landscapes as filled with people like the Levov family laboring to survive: "The marriages, the children, the business, the houses, are the landscape of toil and success" (272). Visiting in Israel, Nathan comments, "His landscape wasn't the Negev wilderness, or the Galilean hills . . . it was industrial, immigrant America—

Newark, where I had been raised" (*CL* 53). In Alex Portnoy's Newark neighborhood, no one knows the botanical names for what grows out of the pavement in front of the house. "What I see first in the landscape isn't the flora, believe me—it's the fauna, the human opposition, who is screwing and who is getting screwed" (*PC* 222). Place is ambience, both social and political. As the introduction demonstrates, the social landscape in New Jersey, its class distinctions—who belongs and who doesn't—are visible and apparent. Houses and their interiors—Hardwick refers to Roth's "elegiac memories of interiors" (276)—offer clues to social class. Nathan writes that even the children in the neighborhood knew "the microscopic surface of things close at hand . . . the minutest gradations of social position conveyed by linoleum and oilcloth, by yahrzeit candles and cooking smells, by Ronson table lighters and venetian blinds" (*AP* 43). The smallest details take on the greatest significance in terms of position and prestige.

In winter, as a teenager, Alex ice skates on the lake in Irvington Park. At thirteen, on the frozen lake of a city park, he learns "the meaning of the word 'longing'" (*PC* 147). He realizes that these beautiful little gentile girls, ice skating on the lake, go home to "the grammatical fathers and the composed mothers and the self-assured brothers who all live with them in harmony and bliss behind their goyische curtains, and I start back to Newark to my palpitating life with my family, lived now behind the aluminum 'Venetians' for which my mother has been saving out of her table-money for years" (147). The subtle difference between "curtains" and "Venetian blinds" represents different worlds to Jewish children. Social distinctions exist within Jewish classes. Though both are Jewish, Neil is considered lower-middle-class and Brenda upper-middle-class, a world away. He cannot rid himself of Brenda's disdainful comment about her mother, the "she-still-

thinks-we-live-in-Newark remark" (*GC* 26). The rise in altitude from Newark to Short Hills is a geographical metaphor for their differing social stations.

These social differences are significant; political differences are apparent as well. Unlike the residents of Short Hills or Old Rimrock, Roth's family members are Democrats and New Dealers. They revere President Roosevelt and listen to his speeches on the radio, as important an artifact of cultural and historical interest as the stoop. The identity of the reigning political party is obvious in Roth's novels—the House Un-American Activities Committee's disgraceful behavior in *I Married a Communist*, the Clinton scandal in *The Human Stain*, and Nixon and his cronies in *Our Gang*. His father does not want Nathan to go to the Wallace rally; Nathan's politicization by Ira Ringold is an important part of his growing up. World War II and the patriotism stirred by propaganda—his generation was "willingly and successfully propagandized" (*Read* 180)—solidified his love for America and for being a Jew in America. "World War II confirmed his sense of place" (Shostak 148), proving to him how lucky he was to be a Jew living in America. He evokes a certain pathos as well as patriotism in his descriptions of the fiercely anticipated weekly radio shows; the dependence on President Roosevelt; the ritual of the ration cards; the small, patriotic chores lovingly accomplished; and the admonitions about the children starving in Europe, "whom we had heard so much about when we were children eating in New Jersey" (*GW* 54).

Escape for Weequahic Jews means a change of scene at the Jersey Shore. For them, the Shore represents a respite from daily drudgery and from the stifling heat of the summers. For those who can afford it, fathers like Herman Roth, for example, or Victor Zuckerman, take their families to a rented cottage in Bradley Beach. Like the

neighborhoods in Newark, the shore is ethnically divided. In Bradley Beach, the families sleep four to a room in a rooming house. They are not always safe. One summer, Roth reports, tough kids from Neptune come to Bradley Beach and beat up the Jews (*Facts* 26). Alex describes his father's remaining in the city while the other three in the family stay in a rented room at Bradley Beach; he remembers his father's arriving from "stifling inland New Jersey," wading into the ocean to "float with his arms outstretched" (*PC* 30).

In the passages from Roth's novels about the Shore, the perception is not so much the social or the ethnic divisions that emerge as it is the euphoria his characters feel at being back at the ocean. Nathan remembers "rapturously" the simple cottage at Bradley Beach and the "bungalow two blocks up from the boardwalk with the faucet at the side to wash the sand off your feet" (*CL* 46). Use of the word "rapturously" emphasizes key words in Roth's and Nathan's lexicons, "rapturous" and "rapturously," which are expressive of their passion for and engagement in their place (for example, *AL* 282; *IM* 74, 222; and *PC* 27). In similar fashion, the word "bliss" recurs frequently (*AP* 232; *IM* 92; *PC* 147; and *Plot* 48) to express their happiness about their existence in this place, not exclusively the Shore but their neighborhood as well.

"Beyond the Last Rope," Roth's reminiscence about Bradley Beach, is a history of his maturity, like pencil marks on a wall designating a child's annual height change. Every year Philip receives more authority and more freedom from the familiar and anxious cries of his parents to be careful and not to venture out too far. Arriving is always wonderful and always the same, with a familiar sense of smell and of touch. "We were always greeted and farewelled by that same seashore smell, not so much musty as it was cementy and cool . . . . Sand crackled everywhere—under foot when you walked in

the living room, between your sheets when you tossed." Returning to Bradley Beach every summer is such an important growing-up routine that it is defined by Philip's age when his father buys the beach badge and when Philip is old enough to buy it. Every year he gains self-confidence and ventures out a little farther into the ocean. Finally he reaches the last rope. His parents plead with him not to grow up. Stay as you are! They repeat the same warnings that have cascaded over him his entire childhood. One summer he swims out, opens his eyes, and sees "the floor of the Atlantic Ocean." Philip Roth grows up during the Bradley Beach summers, slowly becoming more capable one day of leaving his childhood, his parents, and his neighborhood.

With a string of one-syllable nouns, Roth can craft the description of a rented summer cottage on the Shore into a classical ode. The drama of this passage rests in the symbolism of each item: "The house. The porch. The screens. The icebox. The tub. The linoleum. The broom. The screens. The pantry. The ants. The sofa. The radio. The garage. The outside shower with the slatted wooden floor" (*Sabbath's Theater* 30). Readers can identify with those objects—simple, particular, and filled with domestic, summer-holiday significance. In *The Counterlife*, Henry Zuckerman, Nathan's brother and counter-reality, weeps as he thinks of summers at the Jersey Shore—"The fresh rolls perfuming the basement grocery in the Lorraine Hotel, the beach where they sold the bluefish off the morning boats . . . memories of no real consequence rapturously recalled" (8), with the repetition of Roth's favorite word "rapturously." Henry continues, "The guess-your-weight stall in the arcade at Asbury Park . . . . Waiting at dusk for the bus home from the Saturday afternoon movie" (8). So intense is the memory for Henry that

he repeats one phrase: the cottage at the Jersey Shore "with the faucet at the side to wash the sand off your feet" (8, 51).

Seventh, place grows out of the author's imagination and is inextricably linked to his memory of the past. Roth explains that "memories of the past are not memories of the facts but memories of your imagining the facts" (*Facts* 8). He believes, "the past is perpetually with one in the present, and the longer it grows and further it recedes the stronger its presence seems to become" (Lee "Audience"). Roth confirms the hereness principle that the past is insistently present in the here and now. Memory and imagination are each attached to place and are so intimately linked with one another that it is often difficult to distinguish between them. In her essay on sense of place, Martha Lacy Hall quotes from *Midsummer Night's Dream*'s tribute to imagination, which "gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name" (70). Roth's imagination and memory shape his house, his neighborhood, and his childhood into "a local habitation and a name." In an interview given in 2014, after Roth has retired from novel-writing, he says of the novelist, "The novel, then, is in *itself* his mental world. A novelist is not a tiny cog in the great wheel of human thought. He is a tiny cog in the great wheel of imaginative literature" (Sandstrom).

Roth's memories of his narrators' pasts are not expressed so much as regret—"Oh, why can't it be my childhood *now*?" as in the sentiment, "Oh, how wonderful, how rapturous it is *now* in my memory!" This idea is evident in Alex Portnoy's exclamation to his psychiatrist. He is struggling with his competing feelings, hatred and love, about his childhood and his mother, saying, **"**I haven't even begun to mention everything I remember with pleasure—I mean with a rapturous biting sense of loss!" He is amazed at

how present and immediate his memories are. "All those memories that seem somehow to be bound up with the weather and the time of day, and that flash into mind with such poignancy that . . . momentarily I am . . . *with them*. Memories of practically nothing—and yet they seem moments of history as crucial to my being as the moment of my conception" (27). He remembers, for example, walks with his father in Weequahic Park. "I can't go to the country and find an acorn on the ground without thinking of him" (95). Nathan and Ira stretch out back "on rickety beach chairs, surrounded by citronella candles to repel the gnats and mosquitoes—the lemony fragrance of citronella oil would forever after recall Zinc Town to me . . ." (*IM* 188). The significance for Roth's narrators of these past joys is that memories of their childhoods are what make life bearable and meaningful here and now—the values, the hard work, the aspirations, and the selflessness. Theirs was a culture of dignity, devotion, high standards, responsibility, and patriotism. This physical place, this praiseworthy way of life, may disappear; the metaphorical place remains.

Returning to his high school reunion at sixty-two after cancer surgery affects Nathan more than he could have guessed, as the passage in which he doffs his hat to Proust demonstrates: "Instead of recapturing time past, I'd been captured by it in the present, so that passing seemingly out of the world of time I was, in fact, rocketing through to its secret core" (*AP* 45). In remembering his past, he is catapulted into the present: he demonstrates the impact of "hereness" on human experience once again. The "secret core" suggests Roth's roots. His penetrating perception of his Newark roots affects his narrators. Neil Klugman, for example, mentions feeling deeply rooted in Newark. For Roth, writing fiction stems from his memory and his imagination, the latter

of which he describes in a speech as “that butcher, ” which “wastes no time with niceties: it clubs the fact over the head, quickly slits its throat, and then with its bare hands it pulls forth the guts . . .” (Finney). His rootedness in Newark frees Roth to write in his own vernacular. Some critics and writers believe, like Welty, that “place is where [the writer] has his roots” (117). In his essay about Poe, William Carlos Williams returns frequently to the concept of “the ground,” or the American soil, writing that Poe has “a legitimate sense of solidity that goes back to the ground, a conviction that he can judge within himself” (*In the American* 216). Faulkner also feels the tug of the land, referring to “his own little postage stamp of native soil” (Desai 102). D. H. Lawrence exults about American literature, “The soil! The great ideal of the soil” (111). Roth’s remarks evoke images of soil, ground, and terrain, the physical composition of place. He says, for example, “I like to have solid ground under my feet when I write” (Sanoff 212). By “solid ground,” he means that he wants to get the details right. He pursues the “grounded” image: “It was in the vast discrepancy between the two Jewish conditions that I found the terrain for my first stories and later for *Portnoy’s Complaint*” (Finkielkraut 128). He mentions “the germinating incident” for one of his stories (Lee, “Philip Roth”).

Eighth, place is language. Roth says, “My consciousness and my language were shaped by America” (Finkielkraut 130). He had not realized that New Jersey vernacular and topics were permissible until “it dawned on him that it was ‘my stuff’” (Pierpont 31). His misconception that his family and his neighborhood were too “coarse” and “unsubtle” to be considered “literature” is the key to his choice of language and subject. Roth says his experience with language, growing up in Newark, was about “aggression . .

. that verbal robustness, people talking, being terrifically funny, playing ball, competing, the energy flowing out . . .” (Remnick). Roth discovers he is free to write in his own idiom, using slang and curse words, as well as literary allusion, as he writes about his own place in his own segment of New Jersey. Roth does not give up on Newark as a subject but finds that he can turn into satiric social comedy what had “not long before been the undifferentiated everydayness of Jewish life along the route of Newark’s Number 14 Clinton Place bus” (“Goodbye Newark”). Thus, he becomes a writer who is able to portray the “ambivalence” of his characters, who are continuously on a journey, torn between the desire to leave and the desire to stay, “to repudiate and . . . to cling” (“Goodbye Newark”). He is writing about belonging and alienation brought on by place: some narrators decide to stay in Newark; some leave. The motivation for these decisions becomes both increasingly clear and also more complex and “ambivalent.”

Roth’s language in *Portnoy’s Complaint* consists of typographical flourishes like all-uppercase letters, exclamation points, italics, and newspaper-headline font. His chapter headings are set in type that resembles graffiti. To communicate his sexual needs, he possesses as tools only wildly comic and obscene language. The figure of his overprotective mother so overwhelms him with emotion and anger that he has no recourse but to rant. His language is a “raw response to a way of life that was specific to his American place during his childhood” (Gray) in New Jersey. When he visits a gentile girlfriend, he discovers to his shock and surprise that the English language is actually a form of communication, not “just crossfire where you shoot and get shot at” (*PC* 221). Her family members politely say things like, “Good morning” and “How did you sleep?” The contrast between that genteel discourse and the language that makes up his Newark-

family-life conversation astounds him. "Within the literary establishment, Roth is most widely acclaimed . . . for his mastery of vernacular language" (Jones and Nance 162). His faculty for everyday speech and dialogue communicates what he wants to express: "The connection between language and meaning remains absolute" for Roth (163). Though Roth was a secular Jew, Jewishness was "the source of a distinct cultural style: of satiric wit, contentiousness, and irreverence" (Posnock 7). Nathan remarks that he doesn't fancy the "semantic range of classical Hebrew but the jumpy beat of American English" (*CL* 53).

In *I Married a Communist*, Nathan finds in a Norman Corwin radio play a combination of spoken language and literary language that he wants to appropriate in his own style, a "poeticized vernacular that . . . combined the rhythms of ordinary speech with faint literary stiltedness to make a tone that struck me . . . as democratic in spirit and heroic in scope" (38). He particularly admires the American patriotism in Corwin's language. In *The Plot Against America*, Philip praises the Jews in his neighborhood who did not need a "profession of faith or doctrinal creed" to be Jews, nor did they need another language: "they had one, their native tongue, whose vernacular expressiveness they wielded effortlessly and . . . with the easygoing command of the indigenous population" (220). The "indigenous" speech springs from and represents a particular place—his Newark neighborhood. Roth attributes his use of and his affection for the vernacular to his father. He is in awe of his father's speech, despite his father's lack of education and his sometimes being slightly embarrassing to his son. When Roth sees him vulnerable, however, "particularly as a target of anti-Semitic discrimination," he feels an affectionate allegiance with his father and a great hatred for those who criticize him. He

explains that his father taught him the vernacular: "He *was* the vernacular, unpoetic and expressive and pointblank, with all the vernacular's glaring limitations and all its durable force" (*Pat* 181). Place is the vernacular, authentic and grounded.

Greenfield writes appreciatively of how "hip" Roth is and how acute his comic sense. "On one level, since few writers are as hip as Roth to the nuances of middle-class neuroses or as tuned in with such a show-biz sense of mimicry to the diction of the American Jewish milieu, Portnoy's past comes off as a kind of universal pop boyhood of the forties, with a Jewish accent and comic twist." His guilt is "screaming, strident, hysterical, hyperbolic, hyperthyroid." These superlatives suggest the range of Roth's perfect ear for the sound of place to convey its sense to the reader. In contrast to the vernacular of comics and neurotics, the language of the character of Murray Ringold in *I Married a Communist*, based on Bob Lowenstein, Roth's homeroom teacher in high school, commemorates "education, tutelage, mentorship, in particular the education of an eager earnest and impressionable adolescent in how to become . . . a bold and honorable and effective man." Roth sends him the final draft of *I Married a Communist* to read in manuscript because, "there was lots in the book about early twentieth century Newark, and I wanted to make sure I'd got everything right." In his tribute, "In Memory of a Friend," Roth says he can still hear the authentic way Lowenstein spoke: "The tang of the real permeated his talk." The intimation of "tongue" in the word "tang," the inner rhyme with the word "language," and its pungency make "tang" authentic because the word springs from the speech of the place.

Ninth, place is change, adjustment to loss and gain. Change is one way to express the impact of place on the narrator's lives. The changes that occur—the transformation,

the transmogrification—are both to place itself and also to characters' identities, their feelings of belonging or alienation. For Coleman Silk's sister, Ernestine, change means the end of the black community in East Orange. She describes what East Orange High School used to entail—classics classes, for example, and giving out copies of the Constitution to high school graduates—until urban renewal destroyed the neighborhood. When the parkway cut into "the colored community" and eliminated it, the nice houses disappeared, as did the good stores after the frightened merchants departed. "All of life was there in East Orange," she laments, "and it will never be the same again, not in East Orange or anywhere else in America" (*HS* 332). The lyrics to Roth's refrain about change are, "The place will never be the same."

For Nathan, tumultuous social change and racial conflict transform his old neighborhood into a squalid and neglected place. The two-story apartment building where he first lived had a canopy, which has disappeared. The building's front door is also gone, torn from its hinges, and, to either side of the missing door, the large windows looking to the foyer have lost their glass and are boarded over. "There was exposed wiring where once there had been two lamps to light your way in, and the entryway itself was unswept and littered with trash. The building has become a slum" (*ZU* 222). He sees other changes everywhere in the place. The corner storefront, once a grocery, is now owned and occupied by the Calvary Evangelistic Assembly, Inc. Nathan sees some black women waiting for a bus. In his early childhood, these women at the bus stop would have been maids working for Jewish women in the neighborhood. Now they live in the neighborhood and travel to the suburbs to clean the houses of Jewish women. "Except for the elderly trapped in nearby housing projects, the Jews had all vanished . . . their

little thoroughfare of shops and shopkeepers was dead" (*ZU* 223). The change in demographics has made his old neighborhood unrecognizable. When Nathan denigrates his former building by calling it a "slum," he reveals an aspect of his nature criticized by Lawrence Schwartz as "one of many liberal white Jews who turned their backs on the mess that is the destroyed city of Newark."

For Neil, change is Brenda's father's business, Patimkin Kitchen and Bathroom Sinks, which sits in the heart of the Negro section of Newark and had been the Jewish section years earlier, at the time of the 1880s immigration. He says, "you could see the little fish stores, the kosher delicatessens, the Turkish baths, where my grandparents had shopped and bathed at the beginning of the century." These stories about his ancestors' lives are still fresh and authentic to him, as are the lingering, homely smells, so emblematic of sense of place, like "whitefish, corned beef, sour tomatoes." Their domestic essence has become an industrial stench, "the grander, greasier smell of auto wrecking shops, the sour stink of a brewery, the burning odor from a leather factory; and on the streets, instead of Yiddish, one hear the shouts of Negro children playing at Willie Mays with a broom handle and half a rubber ball" (*GC* 90).

For Seymour's factory, change is the racial riots in Newark and its burning, glass-shattering, looting destruction. He reflects the sentiment of other characters, that nothing in the place will ever be the same. Seymour's references to the Holocaust are unmistakable in phrases like, "the fire next time," and "so gruesome so monstrous." This time, the adverb "here" is not a passionate avowal of being present, but a tragic acknowledgement of reality, of the end of something. "Yes, here it is," says Seymour,

> let it come, yes, the magnificent opportunity, one of human history's rare transmogrifying moments: the old ways of suffering are burning blessedly away in the flames, never again to be resurrected, instead to be superseded, within only hours, by suffering that will be so gruesome, so monstrous, so unrelenting and abundant, that its abatement will take the next five hundred years. The fire this time—and next? After the fire? Nothing. Nothing in Newark ever again. (*AP* 268)

Wise old Lou Levov has the final word on the change in the neighborhood, the end of community feeling and belonging, and events "beyond conception" that have transformed the place. "I sometimes think that more has changed since 1945 than in all the years of history there have ever been. I don't know what to make of the end of so many things. The lack of feeling for . . . places like what is going on in Newark—how did this happen?" He acknowledges that people are not obliged to revere their family or their country or where they live, "but you have to know you *have* them, you have to know you are *part* of them. Because if you don't, you are just out there on your own and I feel for you." (*AP* 365). If people do not belong, they are alienated. He maintains his compassion for others despite the destruction of the place he holds dearest.

About Roth's narrators' childhoods, Menand observes, "His repertoire has never been large: family, family, family, Newark, Newark, Newark, Jew, Jew, Jew." He suggests that *American Pastoral* can be read many ways—as "a story of American bliss into which the serpent inexorably creeps, as an American Book of Job . . . as a political allegory . . . victory over fascism destroyed by Vietnam and Watergate . . . but it is about . . . the aspirations, the pride, the accomplishment . . . of the vanished world of

Weequahic, the Jewish Atlantis." For Menand, the change is catastrophic. Weequahic, that lost and beautiful world, has vanished. In Roth's descriptions of the childhood of Jewish children in Weequahic, he represents it as a kind of Eden. He stresses the safety, peace, protection, and haven of the neighborhood, the place. Elizabeth Hardwick refers to Newark as the long ago "little Jewish Eden of Roth's youth" (Hardwick 276). The loss of Eden is not a new theme in Roth's fiction: he evokes it in *American Pastoral* (with its title reminiscent of a time of innocence and its chapters called "Paradise Remembered," "Paradise Lost," and "The Fall") and again in *Nemesis* and *The Plot Against America*. When the nightmare of Lindbergh is finally over, so is Philip's "incomparable American childhood." He would never be able to "revive that unfazed sense of security first fostered in a little child by a big, protective republic and his ferociously responsible parents" (301). Only through his novels can Roth revisit the haven, the refuge, the Eden of his childhood. Skepticism returns concerning the adulation Roth dispenses on his "incomparable" childhood; in the assessment toward the end of this chapter, some critics suggest that his childhood was more complex than he admits.

While Nathan is researching Seymour's story, he drives west to Old Rimrock, where he finds "the big stone house up on Arcady Hill Road where the Seymour Levovs had once lived as a happy young family" (*AP* 75) and named their property Arcady Breeders, after their beef-cattle farm. The name of Seymour's road and farm, Arcady, stems from Arcadia, a place of mythical pastoral innocence and contentment in ancient Greece. The word, which sounds Edenic and innocent, summons up the Latin phrase "Et in Arcadia ego" ["Here I am in Arcadia"]. Waugh uses phrase, for example, as the title of the first chapter of *Brideshead Revisited*, suggesting the prospect of joy in Charles

Ryder's first year at Oxford and his imminent love for Sebastian Flyte. Kimmage properly translates the phrase, "I, death, am also in Arcadia" (105); the speaker could be a dead person speaking, or Death himself. The ambiguity stems from a Poussin painting of shepherds who come upon a tomb inscribed with this quotation. Seymour has no idea of the symbolic meaning of the name of his pastoral-sounding road. The allusion to Arcadia recurs on the final page of *The Human Stain*, when Nathan is retreating from the presence of a "brute and a killer," sitting on a bucket, fishing through the ice, on a lake "atop an arcadian mountain in America" (361). Death, the killing of Coleman Silk, sullies and stains the Edenic mountaintop.

Tenth, place is a journey. One way for a character to change his identity is to move, to leave his place. Through leaving Newark—by changing their places—some of the characters try to reinvent their lives. A light-hearted reference to this syndrome is David Lodge's campus novel, *Changing Places* (1975), which acts out the fantasy that a character can change places—switch locales and jobs—with another character and fare better in the new life. When Roth's narrators leave Newark, as some do, they reinvent themselves, change their identities, and don masks to play their new roles. Roth, the author and the native, leaves Newark to write in a country retreat but journeys back in his stories. As Howard Frank Mosher says about the vanishing northeast kingdom of Vermont, "The only way to preserve a place is to write about it" (Micou, *American* 203).

Who stays in Newark and who leaves is the measure of the impact of place on the characters' feelings of belonging or alienation, their destinies. Those who stay include Neil Klugman, in *Goodbye, Columbus*, who defects for one summer to Short Hills but returns to Newark a sadder and a wiser man. Tempted, while visiting Cambridge with

Brenda, to throw a rock through the glass wall of the Lamont Library, he abandons his anger at social class distinctions and devotes himself to literature and social justice, if his attempts to help the little black boy in the library are any indication. Alex Portnoy tries changing places temporarily, traveling to Vermont with his mistress. He hopes this sojourn in mythical, mystical Vermont will bring a new sensuality and tenderness to their relationship. "Was it only the colorful leaves, do you think, the fire burning in the dining room of the inn at Woodstock, that softened up the two of us?" Was it the typical tourist waxing nostalgic for "the good and simple life?" (*PC* 186). They look at "the valleys, the mountains, the light on the fields" (*PC* 187). The experiment is not successful. Alex Portnoy does move nominally from Newark to Manhattan but is unable to free himself, tied by his mother's apron strings to Newark, which he visits monthly. He has a responsible job with the City of New York, yet his father wants him to live in "beautiful Newark" (*PC* 110). At the time, his boyhood was "*not* this thing I feel so estranged from and resentful of now." Alex loves his childhood memories—he seems to have "sweeping and unqualified love" (*PC* 27) for them. He wonders whether he really detested his childhood and his parents as much as he now claims. Alex experiences the ambivalence of Roth's alter egos, torn between staying in the place or leaving it.

Murray Ringold, the narrator with Nathan Zuckerman in *I Married a Communist*, stays in Newark after the riots because he refuses to abandon his black students, though his choice to remain there results in the death of his wife. Murray's beliefs are local, engaged in the community, not out in the world, like his brother Ira's. Young Philip, in *The Plot Against America*, stays in Newark, although the government threatens his family with expulsion and resettlement. At one point during this nightmarish experience, Philip

does formulate an intense desire to run away and be “an orphan” (233). Lindbergh’s “Just Folks” program in *The Plot Against America* is about Jews moving, about leaving home, about being forced to change places to become inculcated with gentile ways. Characters in Roth’s books reinvent themselves or hide themselves by moving from one place to another, but they are no safer in the new place. It is not a safe world any more, unlike his Newark childhood.

The novel *Nemesis* brings a similar threat to Newark—not fascism but polio, the killing or crippling disease that in the 1940s fills every American parent with dread, fear, and guilt. Bucky Cantor, as head of the playground in Weequahic, is responsible for the children’s health and safety. He decides to leave his place—to go to the countryside—to escape the disease; he contracts polio in the Poconos. This situation recalls John O’Hara’s *Appointment in Samara,* whose title is based on a tale told by W. Somerset Maugham. The master’s servant sees Death make a threatening gesture at him in the Baghdad marketplace. The servant rides off to Samarra to hide from Death. The master also sees Death in the marketplace and asks why he frightened his servant. “That wasn’t a threat,” says Death. “I was surprised to see him in Baghdad because I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.” Bucky’s crippling disease is a result of the way he reacts to his place, which shapes his destiny. The events in *Nemesis* also recall Albert Camus’s *The Plague*, published in 1944, the same year *Nemesis* occurs, in which Dr. Rieux institutes a quarantine in Oran because of the plague, the metaphorical German occupation of Paris: the responsible, engaged characters follow his orders to stay in the place to help fight the disease; the opportunistic, selfish ones try to leave the place to save

themselves. Other critics, including Heller McAlpin and J. M. Coetzee, have commented on this similarity.

Four characters choose to leave Newark: two of them include Ira Ringold in *I Married a Communist* and Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*; the other two are Seymour Levov in *American Pastoral* and Nathan Zuckerman in all four novels. Of the first two characters, ambition and political motivation persuade Ira to give up his working-class roots to live a high life in Manhattan. He chooses a place where he can hide his progressive tendencies behind his Abraham Lincoln mask; he is an actor and impersonator. Coleman, whose grandparents were freed slaves who had lived south of Cape May since 1855, changes his name, his identity, and his ethnicity through racism and self-hatred; he chooses a place in New England that, he believes, eradicates his black roots. He thinks he must "murder," allegorically, his mother to become free, leaving his sister to take the brunt of the Newark riots' aftermath (*HS* 138).

Seymour Levov leaves Newark and moves to Old Rimrock because he yearns for a place to transform himself into a patrician gentleman farmer, a gentile, a conservative, and a WASP. Seymour's brother Jerry is the only person in the novel who understands Seymour's motivation. What happens to Seymour is not "history," "politics," "Biblical revenge," or the "vanishing of Weequahic," which are some of the possibilities Menand posits. The cause of his downfall, including his daughter's terrorism, is his jejeune obsession with the dream of being a gentile in a Revolutionary-era house with distinguished ancestors in the graveyard. As his brother Jerry puts it, what happens to Seymour is "that WASP bullshit," (*AP* 280). Jerry continues his tirade, "And you thought all that façade was going to come without cost" (280). Weequahic did not

vanish, just the part Seymour had liked. He moves away when he wants to become someone else. He is self-deluded from the beginning, ingratiating himself with people like his patrician neighbor, who retaliates by having an affair with Seymour's wife. He's not too "permissive," as Menand suggests, but too easily impressed by his new role, in which he almost immediately feels alien.

This discussion has explored ten narrative elements through which Roth conveys place and its impact on his characters. To summarize, Roth reveals place through the point of view of several narrators or alter egos, like Nathan Zuckerman, who are passionate about Weequahic. Place, which is immediate and present, evokes the refrain, "I never want to leave here." Place is "the immensity of detail," which identifies the particularity and individuality of the setting. Place is the neighborhood, brought alive as the vivid centerpiece of a Jewish way of life whose residents aspire to be American as well. Within the neighborhood, place is a home, a refuge, somewhere to belong. Place is geography, representing the social aspirations of Jewish residents to move to the west of Newark. Place is the link between imagination and memory, which Roth remembers as his past but experiences in the present. Place is language, expressed not in elevated English, but in Roth's local vernacular and customs, which he discovers are worthy of fiction. Place is the social and racial conflict that transforms his neighborhood. Place is change, not only to the physical setting but also for the characters who try to transform their identities by moving away from Newark. Place is the journey leaving home.

The following assessment looks at some of the questions and contradictions raised about Roth's perceptions of his childhood, as well as the ambivalence about leaving Newark displayed by some of the characters. Some of these issues concern "the

confusion between art and life" (Posnock 19) and Roth's construction of place. The adulation Roth displays toward his childhood and neighborhood prompts the question whether Roth's and his alter ego's childhoods and neighborhoods could have been so perfect as he claims. Roth's fictional Newark is part of a shaping invention, part of the "act" or "masquerade" through which he becomes his alter egos. Nathan, for one, finds Roth's description of his childhood neighborhood distinctly suspect. When Roth sends his nonfiction manuscript of *The Facts* to his fictional character Nathan for his critique, Nathan counsels Roth not to publish his autobiography. Nathan's complaint is that Roth has "begun to make where you come from look like a serene, desirable, pastoral haven, a home that was a cinch to master, when, I suspect, it was more like a detention house you were tunneling out of practically from the day you could pronounce your favorite word of all, 'away'" (*Facts* 173).

This suspicion of Nathan's—that Roth is sugar-coating his childhood, which was much more difficult than he lets on—is similar to Alvie's flaring up at Nathan about what the former judges to be the latter's unrealistic and inauthentic perspective on Newark:

> What do you know about Newark, Mama's Boy! I read that fucking book! To you it's Sunday chop suey downtown at the Chink's! To you it's being Leni-Lenape Indians at school in the play! To you it's Uncle Max in his undershirt, watering the radishes at night! And Nick Etten at first for the Bears! Moron! Newark is a nigger with a knife! Newark is a whore with the syph! . . . . Newark is ashes! Newark is rubble and filth!
>
> (*ZU* 155-156)

Alvie thinks Nathan is naïve and uninformed about Newark.

Some critics find Roth's positive statements about his childhood neighborhood overly persuasive. Finney makes some interesting observations about Roth's "bland, anodyne, and pretty unbelievable childhood" described in *The Facts*. He wonders what crucial information is missing in exactly the same way that Nathan alleges in his critique of Roth's book: "What's on the page is like a code for something missing" (*Facts* 162); in other words, both Nathan and Finney wonder what Roth is hiding, what his silence is concealing.

Another question that arises is whether Roth's descriptions of his place are fictional or real. The recurring refrains about, for example, the tree-lined street in Weequahic or the outdoor faucet at the Shore, are repetitive and familiar enough to become empty, stock phrases, portrayals so deeply embedded in fact that they could turn into clichés with overuse.

The strenuous exhortations to their children, from Nathan's parents and from other parents, to be good and to make something of themselves buttress reasons for the characters to leave Newark. Nathan remembers his parents' deepest desire was that he become someone of significance, surmount his background, and do better than they had. He recognizes and honors their continuing determination that their children succeed and surpass them. His whole upbringing is devoted to hearing others' telling him he must get out of Newark and make something of himself. These admonitions encourage escape.

Linked with this argument about growing up to be somebody is the "good boy" justification for leaving. In *The Facts,* Roth speaks several times of the nature of a being a "good boy" (167) and a "lovingly manipulative good boy" (180), and elsewhere, "being good" ("Goodbye"). In his critique of Roth, Nathan faults *The Facts* as a "nice-guy

memoir" (170). He also criticizes Roth's affectations about himself, which Nathan believes give a misleading impression: "Here I am, this innocent Jewish boy and patriot" (*Facts* 174). A constant refrain of "mommy's good little boy" floods *Portnoy's Complaint* (180); when he is a good boy, it seems to him his mother punishes him. As Posnock sees it, Roth and Nathan leave Newark to seek "freedom from being the good boy" (37), to escape.

Another possibility is that the characters leave precisely because of their idyllic and blissful, though disciplined and filled-with-imminent-tragedy, backgrounds. With this departure, they believe that, by throwing off the shackles and dominion of their ancestors, they will be free to assimilate and to become American. As Hardwick puts it, Seymour and his gentile wife, Dawn, are on the "highway of assimilation" (274) when they move to Old Rimrock. Characters' freeing themselves from family tradition, from inherited guilt, and from personal baggage is a "prime Rothian imperative" (Posnock 21). The characters must let go, like Gabe Wallach in *Letting Go*.

A further and related reason for characters' departures is to achieve the freedom to grow up. Nathan feels stifled in the insular atmosphere of Newark that is well defined in Roth's story about swimming beyond the rope—beyond his parents' reach. Roth refers to the "immediate parochialism of his neighborhood" (*Read* 108). When he is a beginning writer, he does not understand that he can make use of that insularity for the purposes of his writing: "Art could be rooted in a parochial Jewish neighborhood having nothing to do with the enigma of time and space or good and evil or appearance and reality" (*Facts* 59). Newark, he discovers, is a worthy topic; he grows up through writing about it.

Connected to Nathan's desire to grow up is his parents' ambivalence about whether they want him to leave or stay. In her review of *The Human Stain*, Kakutani sees Coleman's passing for white as a parallel to Nathan's departure, "who rebelled against his family and found himself exiled, 'unbound' as it were, from his roots" ("Confronting"). Alex's father and mother complain that he is not engaged to be married, that he is not "*putting down roots*" (*PC* 100). Roots play a key role in the lives of the characters that Nathan is chronicling: Seymour tries to transplant his roots; Coleman to obliterate his; Ira to mask his. The Patimkins have escaped to Short Hills, but the ancient refrigerator in the basement in their fancy house is an embarrassing reminder of the "Patimkin roots in New Jersey" (*GC* 43).

Another explanation for the characters' leaving Newark is that the idyllic Weequahic childhood never existed but was deceptive, a mirage, and that the promise of the American dream was a lie. Roth does use the term "fantasy life" to describe his childhood (Pierpont 50). "This sort of doubling is a repeated trope in Roth's universe: the underside, the hidden story, the changed mask or face, the trauma behind the exterior of the American dream house" (Kaplan 121). This statement fits with the idea that fictional Newark is a masquerade. Nathan suggests trauma when he refers to the "dark, or unruly, or untamed" side of Roth's childhood, which Nathan accuses Roth of concealing (*Facts* 169).

This last explanation about a hidden "trauma" is connected to a utopian argument: the paradisal childhood neighborhood, frequently described as an idyll and an Eden, never existed. Nathan's critique of *The Facts* continues: "You see your beginnings, up to and including Bucknell, as an idyll, a pastoral, allowing little if no room for inner

turmoil, the discovery in yourself of a dark, or unruly, or untamed side . . . . I don't buy it" (*Facts* 169). If this explanation is true, Roth's childhood neighborhood turns out to be a utopia in its original Greek meaning—no place. Andrew Gordon writes that Roth's title, *American Pastoral*, announces his novel will be a meditation "on utopian dreams" (Shostak 33); at the end, Seymour's life is destroyed. The tragedy reveals that utopia never existed; instead, "It is chaos" (*AP* 42). He says, "We are in the power of something demented" (*AP* 256).

Another argument postulates that Roth loves the place too much; ironically, he should leave because he is too attached to his place. Until *The Plot Against America*, Roth does not seem "attached to other characters" (Posnock 24). In this view, Roth's stories are so dark that nothing remains to make him happy but his childhood neighborhood, upon which he shines a light of purity, cohesion, and happiness; he does not discuss allegiances with people in his childhood so much as he describes his admiration for place. He seems more attached to place than to people.

Schwartz proposes another reason for Roth's departure. As alluded to earlier, he sums up Roth as one of many liberal white Jews who turned their backs on the mess that is the destroyed city of Newark. He criticizes Roth for his stereotypical view of Newark as a "crime-ridden, burnt-out city of blacks that is unlivable," especially contrasted to the good old days when Roth grew up there. His vision of his childhood was "Edenic," a "real neighborhood": now, for Roth, all has changed; nothing is left.

Another motive for the characters' leaving is that to change place is to reinvent one's identity, one's selfhood. Life cannot remain static; childhood is over. The influence, the aura, of the great writer E. I. Lonoff exhorts the youthful Nathan, "You

must change your life" (*GW* 27). One way to change his life is to become a writer. In his writing, when he chronicles the life of another character he becomes that person; he will revinvent himself; and he will change his life by reimagining it in a fictional character.

Nathan revisits his old home after the Newark riots and appears to say farewell to Newark. "'Over,' he thought. 'All his lyrical feeling for the neighborhood had gone into *Carnovsky*. It had to—there was no other place for it. 'Over. Over. Over. Over. Over. I've served my time.'" (*ZU* 223). This apparent despair sounds as though Nathan realizes he has expended in his last book all his emotion and creativity, everything he has to say about Newark, and this is his last attempt to describe it. He returns to it again and again, like a favorite bedtime story.

In "Goodbye, Newark," Roth, writing about himself in the third person singular, thinks, "where he has grown up, in this tiny provincial enclosure, there was no longer room for the likes of him." He discovers instead that there is room for the likes of him and, in his imagination, does not leave his place or his topic. And in this essay, he unlocks the door to his, and the reader's, understanding of place, its impact on the characters, and the conflict between staying and leaving:

> . . . without knowing it, he proceeded to make identical the acts of departure and return and to perpetuate those contradictory yearnings that can perplex the emotions of an ambitious embryo—*the desire to repudiate and the desire to cling, a sense of allegiance and a need to rebel, the alluring dream of escaping into the challenging unknown and the counterdream of holding fast to the familiar* [emphasis mine]. Altogether unwittingly, he had activated the ambivalence that was to stimulate his

> imagination for years to come and establish that necessary struggle from which his—no, my—fiction would spring.

Despite all the compelling reasons for Roth and Nathan to leave Newark, seductive reasons remained for them to return to their childhood neighborhood, however fleetingly, in their fiction. Roth's later books continue to manifest and invent the ethos of his childhood. Rediscovering his place and the "ambivalence" of his characters about that place and reimagining and transforming it into fiction make Roth the writer he becomes. Place is not a memory but a presence that continues to cast its light and its humanity, its sorrow and its pity in the here and now.

CHAPTER TWO: RICHARD FORD

"I could live here forever."

This chapter examines the impact of place, both positive and negative, on the destiny of Frank Bascombe, the narrator of Richard Ford's New Jersey trilogy. It reveals that while Frank, a Southern transplant to New Jersey, claims at first that "place means nothing," he concludes that New Jersey "gives him something" and is where he belongs and wants to stay. To demonstrate the way Ford conveys place, this chapter investigates nine of the narrative elements defined in the introduction: point of view; hereness; detail; neighborhood; geography; metaphor; language; change; and journey.

To illuminate Richard Ford's interpretation of place, this chapter begins with a discussion of Ford's background and his decision to incorporate into his writing New Jersey as a setting. Early in his career, Ford teaches at Princeton for one year; later, after selling his first novel, *A Piece of My Heart*, to the movies, he buys a house in Princeton, and lives there for six years (Bonetti 22). Before he starts *The Sportswriter*, the initial volume in his New Jersey trilogy, he says to himself, "How about if I wrote a redemptive novel about the suburbs, a paean to New Jersey and its suburban life?" (Hogan). Ford creates a narrator and constructs a place that he intends to appeal to the reader's sense of hope and possibility. In writing about New Jersey, he says his idea is "not to mouth the conventional line, but to have the reader think the way Frank does in the final novel in the trilogy, *The Lay of the Land*, when Ford has Frank say, 'I love this, this is great!'" He believes Frank's experience will "uncover a seam of approval, a seam of optimism, of acceptance that is, in fact, buried in us all" (Hogan).

New Jersey receives more than its share of satirical treatment, based largely on caricatures in the public media; Ford plans to extol New Jersey as a place to live and to discredit the criticism. After he decides to target New Jersey as a setting, he says, "the hard part was finding the right language for the attraction he felt" for New Jersey. He tries to find "a feasible language of affirmation, and the idea of doing something improbable like that [writing about New Jersey] is faintly risible." Ford continues, "People always think of New Jersey as something like the back of an old radio, but I thought, oh no, it isn't—it's quite wonderful" (McGrath). Ford decides, "The only way you can [write about New Jersey] is to take the conventional wisdom about New Jersey, that it's kind of an unappetizing place, and reverse it, actually write a book that is a kind of homage to New Jersey" (Shea 126). Ford presents this enterprise rather like a literary puzzle to be solved.

Because of Ford's southern roots in Mississippi, his attitudes about the meaning of place and his choice of a northern state for a setting are a subject of conjecture among the critics. According to Martyn Bone, some southern writers are prejudiced against northern cities, which they consider "nonplaces" (99). In 1976, after the publication of *A Piece of My Heart,* which Ford set in Arkansas and Mississippi, Larry McMurtry, the novelist of the Old West, wrote a disdainful review in the *New York Times,* in which he complained that "The South—dadgummit—has struck again, marring what might have been an excellent first novel. *A Piece of My Heart* shows obvious promise, but it also exhibits all the characteristic vices of Southern fiction . . . . If the vices . . . could be squeezed into one word, the word would be neo-Faulknerism." For a novice southern writer trying to become established, these are daunting and damning words. Several

critics, including Bone (106), theorize that this cutting review impelled Ford to abandon his writing about the South. One of the complicating factors for Ford, discussed by Bone at some length (119), is that critics assume Ford, as a Southerner, is by definition in thrall to the southern sentiment about "sense of place." Some critics discuss Ford as a "southern" writer; Josep Armengol quotes Fred Hobson's view of Ford as a writer in the southern tradition: "the more Ford protests that he is not interested in the past, in family, in place, in community, and in the South, the more we are convinced that he is" (4).

Ford explains that he does not have to write about the South because Welty and Faulkner wrote so well about his birthplace, "I don't have to worry about it. Mississippi is well on the literary map" (Barton). Ford admits that he was "irked by the critics' readiness to file him neatly under Southern writer." He wreaks his revenge by publishing a piece on regionalism. In 1986, in an article in *Harper's* magazine written while he was still living in Mississippi, Ford strongly rejects what is known as "Southern writing." He states definitively, "there is no such thing as Southern writing or Southern literature or Southern ethos." He emphasizes that he is "sick of the whole subject." He continues that the term "Southern writing" is just a cover for regional writing and that categorizing it as such "inflicts upon art . . . arbitrary and irrelevant limits, shelter from the widest consideration and judgment, exclusion from general excellence." He sums up, "William Faulkner, after all, was not a great Southern writer; he was a great writer who wrote about the South" (43). The tone of Ford's article is angry, disappointed, and final.

While Philip Roth accepts the term "regionalism," saying, "the great American writers are regionalists" (Posnock 7), Ford is not alone in his critique of the concept of regionalism in fiction. Wallace Stegner does not like the term "regionalist," because "it

carries with it the onus of obsolescence" (Bontly 201). According to Gillian Tindall, "No literature that needs to be categorized as 'regional' can be first rate" (4). Anita Desai finds "regionalism" an unfortunate label since "it implies restriction and confinement and a sense of place has a wider compass" (102). Even one of the supreme southern writers, Eudora Welty, thinks, "'Regional' [is] a careless term, as well as a condescending one . . . an outsider's term" (132).

Part of the interest in Ford's choice of New Jersey for a setting stems from the long-time understanding among some literary critics that "sense of place" is essentially a southern tradition, one attached to the work of writers like William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, and Tennessee Williams. One of the first attempts to define the phrase appears as late as 1989 under "Place, Sense of" in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, by Charles Reagan Wilson of the University of Mississippi. Of this entry, Bone writes that sense of place has been "so integral to southern literary and cultural discourse that it was deemed worthy of its own entry in the monumental [encyclopedia]. Wilson made a valiant attempt to explicate this ubiquitous but usually underdefined concept" (vii). Wilson writes, "Until recently southern whites frequently used *place* to indicate the status of blacks . . . . But racial place was only one aspect of a traditional southern attachment to the region—one had a place in a local community, among a broad kin network, and in history." He goes on, "attachment to place gives an abiding identity because places associated with family, community, and history have depth . . . . The evidence of a deep-seated southern sense of place is extensive," referring specifically to Native Americans, the first settlers in the region. He recognizes Mark Twain's Mississippi River and William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County as examples

of “memorable literary landscapes of place” (1138). On the topic of southern literature and his early reading, Ford says he was not interested in Mark Twain because he already knew “what life on the Mississippi was like,” though he apologizes for the “heresy.” He wanted to leave Mississippi because he knew “bad times” were coming and he hoped “to save myself. To reinvent myself” (Lyons).

Ford emphasizes that he has simplified his life—married, no children—in order to move around until he finds a place to write about: “I live where I live because that’s what fuels my work” (Grondhal 67) and, underlining the point, “New places give me something I can use” (McQuade 75). His places are “all made up” and “usually places are backgrounds for me” (Lyons). “I try to exhaust my own interest in a place,” Armengol quotes Ford as saying. “Then I’ll just move on, write about someplace else where I kind of notice again how people accommodate themselves to where they live” (5). Always on the lookout for a location for his fiction, Ford also journeys around the country “to hear another idiom and see a different landscape to which I can dedicate language” (Schumacher 99). Thornton Wilder, known for creating the typical, mythical American town where people remain forever, surprisingly found Americans peripatetic and “traced the American’s unwillingness to stay put and [their] ‘unrelatedness to place’ to the fact that ‘Place and environment are but décor to his journey. He lives not on the treasure that lies about him but on the promise of his imagination’” (Franklin 17). Ford too finds place just “décor.” He likes his characters to move around from place to place: “if it didn’t have that movement among those places [in relation to the setting] . . . it would be a static book” (Lyons). He likes people as peripatetic and rootless as he.

Thus, when Ford begins writing the first novel in what becomes his New Jersey trilogy, he does not believe that place forms and affects a character's identity and destiny. Five years after the publication of the final volume of the New Jersey trilogy, David L. Ulin, book critic for *The Los Angeles Times*, interviewed Ford. In the resulting article, Ford says, "Growing up in Mississippi and being told [that] this defined me, set me on a path away from [the idea of] place as generative." He decides that place has no power over character but just serves as "background scenery." He says, "I didn't want the place I came from to be responsible for me," or, in other words, to make demands upon him. When Ford has Frank Bascombe proclaim in *Independence Day*, "Place means nothing," Ford explains that this comment from his narrator is a means for Ford of "throwing down a gauntlet," challenging the reader to view place as he does: Ford, at that point, sees no interplay between place and character. Given this background on Ford's perceptions of place, the discussion turns to the New Jersey trilogy.

The first two novels in Ford's trilogy, *The Sportswriter* (*SW*), published in 1986, and *Independence Day* (*ID*), 1988, are set in the affluent, largely white town of Haddam, a fictional suburb based on attributes of Princeton ("some inspiration from it," Ford tells Elizabeth Farnsworth), Pennington, and Hopewell. The locale for the third novel, *The Lay of the Land* (*LOL*), 2006, is Sea-Clift, a fictional composite of Seaside Heights, Seaside Park, and Ortley Beach (McGrath). Each novel takes place over a public-vacation weekend—Easter, Fourth of July, and Thanksgiving, respectively. In America, these holidays symbolize home and family, neither of which Frank fully possesses. Over the trilogy's span of seventeen years, the climate in America remains steadfastly Republican: on the 1983 Easter weekend, when Frank is thirty-eight, Reagan presides as

president; Fourth of July 1988 falls at the end of Reagan's second term; and Thanksgiving 2000 witnesses the contested election between Bush and Gore. Frank dubs himself a "classic (and possibly chickenshit) liberal" (*LOL* 285).

The following discussion isolates and explores nine elements of "place" in Ford's narrative art. First, place represents point of view, including perspective and voice; it is the locus where the writer stands and from which he observes the passing parade. An author's decision about point of view shapes his narrator's relationship to his place, his environment, and his surroundings. For Ford's first-person, present-tense narrator, he creates Frank Bascombe, a novelist manqué, former sportswriter, and, finally, "residential specialist" (*ID* 91), to comment on and interpret the scene. As to his relationship with his narrator, Ford says firmly, "I never identify with Frank . . . . I always maintain a rather scrupulous artisan's role toward my narrators. They are always illusions or characters made up of language . . ." (Guagliardo 154). Because the two men have parallel biographies, both Southerners, both writers, Ford asserts his distance from his narrator to guard against a reader's assumption that Frank is his alter ego.

Frank is often chatty, sometimes addressing the reader directly in a cozy, second-person way—"It is the way you feel . . ." (*SW* 10), or, "Picture in your mind . . ." (*SW* 48). Frank begins his story by proffering his specific street address, 19 Hoving Road, Haddam, New Jersey, "as sun-dappled and vernal as any privet land in England" (*SW* 52). With this act, Frank places himself definitively and defiantly at the center of his universe. He considers himself fortunate to have found this place: it is better to come "to earth in New Jersey . . . than [to keep] searching for some right place that never existed and never will" (*SW* 53). In the ensuing trilogy, place is central to his role: "I stayed put

where I was and more or less knew my place. Haddam, New Jersey" (*ID* 142). Frank, who is not ambitious in a worldly sense, plays with the clichéd phrase about social rank, "to know one's place." Frank's ongoing effort throughout the three novels is to examine, to understand, and, ultimately, to "know" his place. This progression of mental states implies that place exerts forces and influences upon him that require his consideration. New Jersey "feels as unpretentious as Cape Cod once might've, and its bustling suburban-with-good-neighbor-industry mix of life makes it the quintessence of town-and-country spirit. Illusion will never be your adversary here" (*SW* 53). Pragmatic Frank fears being tricked, deluded, and wants a place that is not complex, confusing, or figurative. His needs are innocent and literal: "stable property values, regular garbage pickup, good drainage, ample parking, located not far from a major airport" (*SW* 104). Frank presents himself as a suburban Thoreau, living a simple life; beneath this veneer of complacency, he pulses with unanswered concerns about life, such as sorrow, inequity, satisfaction, and doubt.

A narrator continuously in the reader's company for three long novels is bound, eventually, to sound solipsistic, a modifier recurring in the work of critics like Brian Duffy (43) and Huey Guagliardo (154); nevertheless, Frank, driving around in the obligatory suburban mode—a Chevrolet Suburban, appositely—and describing what he perceives, is a self-absorbed but humorous, affable, intelligent, and well-intentioned guide on his incessant forays through the suburban roads of central New Jersey. He continually searches for answers about his manner of living; the reader hears his voice clearly as he comments upon his environment. Frank appears to react to his environment, to allow it to define him, and to show signs of the effects of his surroundings upon him.

The discourse tracks such changes in Frank's attitudes toward place for assessment toward the end of the chapter.

He presents his current perspective, which excludes an interest in the past. "All we really want is to get to the point where the past can explain nothing about us and we can get on with life." He says, "Americans put too much emphasis on their pasts as a way of defining themselves . . ." (*SW* 24). Frank wants the present to define him, foreshadowing the hereness theme of treasuring the here and now. Starting out with a clean slate, Frank is impatient to find out what is ahead, rather than dwell on the past; in rejecting the past, he is denying his southern birthplace. Frank, who lives in Haddam year round, is not the only rootless resident. Haddam is one of a number of "deracinated enclaves" (*LOL* 99) in New Jersey. Few residents still have native connections—some come from New England, "a small, monied émigré contingent;" some are "mostly commuters down to Philadelphia with summer houses in the Cape and on Lake Winnepesaukee;" and some constitute "a smaller southern crowd . . . with their own winter places on Beaufort Island and Monteagle" (*SW* 49). They have left their origins behind them.

Acting upon his belief that his past is irrelevant, Frank names his current condition his Existence Period, whose rules require that he "let go of the past" (*ID* 95). The tenets of his Existence Period are "persistence, jettisoning, common sense, resilience, good cheer" (*ID* 390). These goals define Frank's personality and approach to life—making an effort, getting rid of extra baggage, using his head, enduring what he cannot escape, and trying to feel, or at least display, optimism. With time, he reshapes his perspective into his Permanence Period, which, he explains, is the time in one's life when

"You can't completely fuck everything up anymore, since so much of your life is on the books already. You've survived it" (*LOL* 75). He adds that the Permanence Period is "that period in life which after you die you will be remembered for. The past no longer impinges on you" (Birmbaum). Frank evinces a determination not to feel, or at least exhibit, regret or remorse. "What's done is done" could be his motto as well as Macbeth's, although in a slightly different context. Toward the end of the trilogy, Frank calls his third period the Next Level, in which "life can't be escaped and must be faced entire" (LOL 466). This period is the most difficult one for Frank to conceptualize, because the old standards seem to have vanished. He explains, "The Next Level of life offers its rewards and good considerations. But only if you let it" (484). Frank finds that he must be open to his place and whatever comfort and assistance it provides.

Frank's voice and tone are sometimes self-deprecatory, often satirical, and, occasionally, witty. "These are comedies, but realistic, good-natured adventures, sunny—except when it rains" (Hardwick 296). Throughout the trilogy, he demonstrates his genuine affection for New Jersey; still, in his background explications, his tone borders on the cynical: "Living in a place is one thing we all went to college to learn how to do properly, and now that we're adults and the time has arrived, we're holding on" (*SW* 49). Frank's tone is often ironic, an assessment with which many critics disagree. Brain Duffy calls Frank "unironic" in his conclusions (313) and quotes Ford's saying that he wanted to talk about the suburbs in "unironic terms" (19). Another critic finds, "One looks in vain for irony in Frank's real estate showmanship" (Hogan). These claims that Frank is unironic are gainsaid in a variety of instances. When describing his youthful ball-playing days, Frank complains that, although he was physically graceful, he

had an "inbred irony that seemed to haunt me" and made him unable to play loosely and well (S*W* 27). His explications of his states of mind—the Existence Period, the Permanence Period, and the Next Level—are too sententious to be taken seriously. His habit of tossing off flippant comments about the meaning of life is ironic: "Life itself is a made-up thing composed of today, tomorrow and probably the next day" (*LOL* 250). A prime example of irony occurs in his two-faced approach to selling real estate. When Frank recites the litany of realty, he consciously rearranges his facial expression to avoid showing the derision he feels. Most ironic of all is his stance on literalism. He claims to seek "more simple and literal ways" (*SW* 132), while hiring the services of a palmist to plumb the mysteries of his life. He professes he has no use for illusion or figurative language or literature, which he finds too complex and deep—"Literature's consolations are always temporary" (*SW* 223), and yet, ironically, the words "literal" and "literature" derive from the same stem. Finally, on the subject of irony, cumulative clues suggest Ford's protestation that place means nothing may turn out to be ironic.

Second, place represents "here" or "hereness." Hereness is a physical and emotional presence, identity, and immediacy. Throughout the trilogy, the recurring place-adverb "here" reifies place in its vividness and vitality, and underscores Frank's relationship to it. "Here" derives from the Old English word *her*, "where one puts oneself." "Hereness" symbolizes current existence: the here and now, what is immediate, of the moment, within reach, and intimate. Welty believes the writer must answer the questions, "What's happened? Who's here?" (118). "Hereness" bespeaks belonging; for a person not be present in his life is equivalent to his alienation. In his

early appreciation of Haddam, Frank is trying to remain open to place and parse its role in his life and in the overall picture.

An article on James Fenimore Cooper's fiction analyzes the use of the adverb "here," which linguists call "a deictic marker . . . an orientational referent." This adverb creates "a fully shared spatial and temporal framework for conversation . . . . As a written textual signifier, the deictic adverb freezes speaker and listeners in an eye-centered, painterly frame" (Engell). Early in the trilogy, for example, Frank tells his readers, "I like it here" (*SW* 32); in response to the word "here," readers focus on Frank's framed place. As Ford says about *Independence Day*, "The novel gets to say we're present tense here" (Majeski). His choice of the present tense expressly emphasizes "hereness." "Here" constitutes a refrain throughout the trilogy. In *The Sportswriter*, Frank has already spent a decade in Haddam, has put his past behind him, and particularly admires the summer season, "a token of the suburbs I love" (*SW* 14); he exults, "I could live here forever" (*SW* 48). Driving around the Haddam area, he passes numerous township signs announcing, "HERE!" (*SW* 239), as though reconfirming his existence. Sometimes he walks down a street, looks into the window of a house "lit with bronzy cheer," and thinks to himself, "What good rooms these are. What complete life is here" (*SW* 51). The felicitous phrase, "bronzy cheer," evokes the image of the house's interior, the glow from a fireplace reflected off low, tasteful copper lamps. Frank's ebullience about the suburbs ignores the array of problems he will soon acknowledge are besetting the people who live in these houses.

Frank experiences a moment of insight at the finale of each novel; these climaxes are directly related to the intrinsic hereness of place. Although Frank announces that he does not believe in epiphanies, "the seeing-through that reveals all" (*LOL* 343), he clearly experiences them at the end of these books. These three epiphanies occur with ascending levels of intensity—the first is relatively potent; the second, formidable; the last, euphoric. In these three discrete "moments," Frank's environment succors him—the ambience of Haddam; the nourishment of the crowd in the parade; and the solace of the soil, or sand, at the Jersey Shore. He is fully in synchronicity with place, which gives him what he needs and wants—to belong. The interplay between place and character is on full display, regardless of Ford's (and Frank's) dictum that place means nothing. In the first instance of an epiphany, as *The Sportswriter* ends, Frank, after a long period of mourning and concomitant dreaminess, feels at one with himself and at home here in Haddam. The feeling is immediate—"cool," "new," fleeting, and "glistening." He says, "And since that is not how it has been for a long time, you want, this time, to make it last, this glistening one moment, this cool air, this new living, so that you can preserve the feeling of it, inasmuch as when it comes again it may be too late" (*SW* 375). Maintaining the moment and the place is a key sign of "hereness."

In the second epiphany, at the end of *Independence Day*, Frank returns to Haddam after a traumatic experience. Alienated and sad, he tries to reactivate his life and to become more connected to his community. On the Fourth of July, he drives to his office and leaves his car to watch the parade. Slowly, he rejoins his milieu; he is here, surrounded by and rubbing arms with members of his community and feeling their presence. This time, the atmosphere is sunny, nice-smelling, close, "rich," and "warm."

He says, “I am in the crowd just as the drums are passing . . . . I see the sun above the street, breathe in the day’s rich, warm smell. Someone calls out, ‘Clear a path, make room, please!’ . . . . My heartbeat quickens. I feel the push, the pull, the weave and sway of others” (*ID* 451). This sensation of brotherhood and belonging constitutes another moment in which Frank wants to preserve the present and the place.

In the third instance, when *The Lay of the Land* ends, Frank accepts his son’s death and recognizes, “*Here* was necessity.” When Frank strolls next door to negotiate a neighbor’s quarrel, a young thug shoots Frank in the heart. His reaction is, “you’ll learn something about necessity—and quick” (*LOL* 484). On the day he arrives home from the hospital, “the weather turned ice-cream nice, and the low noon sun made the Atlantic purple and flat, then suddenly glow as the tide withdrew.” He savors the assonance of “the low” and “the glow.” His environment is feeding and sustaining him. He wades into the ocean, sensing the water around his ankles, the sand (the soil) under his feet, and feeling an acute physical as well as emotional identification with the place. “And I thought to myself, standing there: *Here* is necessity. *Here* is the extra beat—to live, to live, to live it out” (*LOL* 485). Here on the Jersey Shore he experiences this epiphany. Natty Bumppo, at the end of *The Prairie*, shouts “Here!” Here in Missouri is the place where he wants to be buried (Engell). Here at the Jersey Shore is where Frank Bascombe wants to live out his life, in “human scale upon the land” (*LOL* 485). Frank enters into a reciprocal and harmonious relationship with the landscape.

Frank’s three moments of feeling united with place and receiving solace from and coherence with it echo a fragment written in a letter from Herman Melville to Nathaniel Hawthorne: “Lying on the grass on a warm summer’s day. Your legs seem to send out

shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head. This is the *all* feeling" (Marx 279). As each novel ends, Frank experiences the "all feeling." Ford states, "I have always put a lot of stock in those last movements in a book" (Birnbaum). The "all feeling" of place is alive, active, and giving; Frank belongs to his place.

To corroborate the hereness theory of place-adverbs, Ford paraphrases a respected source: "John Gardner wrote in his book, *On Moral Fiction*, that life is all conjunctions: this and this and this, whereas art is all subordinations . . . always through the agency of adverbial . . . constructions. That's what novels provide us about life" (Duffy 351). Ford believes that using adverbs in the way Gardner applauds is not just spouting a "succession of things" but, through their "connecting" and "appraising" functions, adds to the meaning of place in the narrative (Duffy 351).

Elinor Ann Walker offers a different view of the three epiphanies. She interprets them instead as examples of "locatedness," a word Ford often uses; she believes the sense of locatedness is transient, "not dependent upon your surroundings but on recognizing a crucial moment" (*Richard Ford* 10). Her suggestion that "surroundings" do not play a role in the three "moments" is highly debatable: in each case place strongly influences Frank's reactions, especially his feeling of belonging; the "surroundings" are not just "background scenery" (Ulin).

Third, place, to be compelling, is detailed and precise, not generic or vague. Critics writing on place in fiction concur on the indispensable nature of particularity and specificity in creating the "ambience" of place. Elizabeth Bowen writes, "No story gains absolute hold on me if its background—the ambience of its happenings—be indefinite, abstract, or generalized" (*Pictures* 34). William Carlos Williams compares the

importance of detail in fiction to his medical practice in Rutherford. He warns the writer not "to talk in vague categories but to write particularly, as a physician works, upon a patient, upon the thing before him, in the particular to discover the universal" (Turner 297). Frank's skillful use of detail relates the specificity in the Haddam residents' daily lives to the larger meaning of their existence in suburbia. Ford explains his method for gathering details about New Jersey for *The Sportswriter*. "A place makes itself felt entirely through particulars," he says. "I've got a notebook, a whole lot of details, and that's really where that sense of place comes from" (Bonetti 17). Ford reports that readers often ask him whether Frank is Everyman (Ford "Chance"). Although Frank did once say, "Give me a little Anyplace" (*SW* 103), referring to an uncomplicated town like Haddam, Ford emphasizes that the character of Frank is not emblematic; Ford believes fictional characters "should be as variegated and vivid of detail and as hard to predict and make generalizations about as the people we actually meet every day." He tries to make his characters "surprising" and "incalculable," the latter word borrowed from E. M. Forster. About details, Ford says, "My novelist's version of sensation, of being up against the world, is to keep my nose pressed similarly up to the palpable, mutable, visible, audible, smellable and for the most part disorderly world, flooded as it is with exquisite, intractable irresistible details" (Ford "Chance"). This passionate avowal provides a fine example of the way Ford's cumulative use of precise detail creates a sense of place—for all the senses.

Ford understands the way to set a scene, how to evoke its mood by employing particularity of detail. He opens *Independence Day* with a description of a suburban summer day, embellishing its sensuous features with words like "soft," "sweet," "balm,"

"careless," "languorous," "mysterious," "peaceful," and "still and damp": "In Haddam, summer floats over tree-softened streets like a sweet lotion balm from a careless, languorous god, and the world falls in tune with its own mysterious anthems. Shaded lawns lie still and damp in the early a.m." (3). Frank later denies any "spiritual" qualities associated with his perception of place (*ID* 442), but in this passage he uses several words, such as "gods" and "anthems," that imply a certain mystique lurking in his landscape. Frank excels at identifying the quintessential, behavioral, financial, and topographical attributes of New Jersey. Ever in his car, he winds out into rural Haddam's horse country, a wealthy part of the area, and draws a telling comparison between the patriots of yesteryear and today's debutantes, garbed in riding regalia. Here is the place:

> . . . where fences are long, white, and orthogonal, pastures wide and sloping, and roads . . . slip across shaded, rocky rills via wooden bridges and through the quaking aspens back to rich men's domiciles snugged deep in summer foliage . . . and here, wedges of old-growth hardwoods still loom, trees that saw Revolutionary armies rumble past, heard the bugles, shouts, and defiance cries of earlier Americans in their freedom swivet, and beneath which now tawny-haired heiresses in jodhpurs stroll to the paddock with a mind for a noon ride alone. (*ID* 128)

Hardwick writes, "As always, with Richard Ford, the sense of place, towns, houses, highways is luminous with lavish, observed detail" (295). Ford's keen characterizations of various residents of Haddam bring them to life: "They're tall, white-haired galoots from Yale with moist blue eyes and aromatic OSS backgrounds" (*SW* 50), the World War

II intelligence agency peopled by Ivy League graduates. The aroma to which Frank alludes implies a mix of aristocracy and mothballs.

Fourth, place is a neighborhood, an important feature in the local landscape. "Literary art can illuminate the inconspicuous fields of human care such as a Midwestern town, a Mississippi county, and a big-city neighborhood" (Tuan, *Space* 162). Haddam constitutes a conglomerate of suburban neighborhoods exhibiting a range of social standings and disposable incomes. Frank finds his neighbors "fine people, conservative, decent" (*SW* 5). He loves the suburbs and reacts sensuously to their smells, "the cool, aqueous suburban chlorine bouquet . . . from a swimming pool or a barbecue or a leaf fire" (*SW* 14). Frank feels at home in the suburban neighborhoods of Haddam; the town makes him optimistic, magnanimous, and affirming: "Nowadays, I'm willing to say yes to as much as I can: yes to my town, my neighborhood, my neighbor, yes to his car, her lawn and hedge and rain gutters. Let things be the best they can be**"** (*SW* 52).

After working on a sports magazine, Frank becomes a real estate agent, combating alienation and feeling the need for civic engagement. He needs "a greater sense of connectedness" (27) to his community. He knows intuitively, as well as through his business sense, that changes are afoot in suburban redevelopment. Frank says, "We want to *feel* our community as a fixed, continuous entity . . . as being anchored into the rock of permanence; but we know it's not, that in fact beneath the surface . . . it's anything but" (*ID* 439). Kakutani explains Frank's alienation as part of the "middle-class community caught on the margin of change and reeling, like Frank, from the wages of loss and disappointment and fear" ("Afloat"). Nick Hornby sees in Ford's first two novels in the trilogy "a powerful sense of place and dislocation" (97). Duffy is more

pragmatic about Frank's desire to participate in his community, explaining that Frank can afford to feel this way. His new sense of "social responsibility and civic identity are functions of the market economy, and made possible by his financial independence" (65). Although Frank becomes rich in the real estate business, his emotional and psychological wellbeing is not necessarily intact. A novice in responding to and interacting with his environment, he seems to vacillate in his relationship to his place; he denies and accepts its nature in the same breath.

Frank is facile at sizing up the sociological and economic features of each smaller neighborhood in or abutting Haddam. Three specific neighborhoods are emblematic of the human geography in New Jersey: a white liberal neighborhood; an African-American middle-class enclave; and an older white conservative portion. First, he assesses his divorced wife's neighborhood, called The Presidents. He appraises its "precise fifty-foot frontages, mature mulberries, and straight sidewalks," as a suitable spot for her to bring up their two children. Although not yet a realtor, he thinks like one as he sums up her neighbors, who are young, liberal, idealistic, "spotted a good investment and acted fast, and now have some value to sit on" (*SW* 106). Frank knows that the banks have treated the residents well with "mortgage points and variable rates" and that they have prospered in their jobs as "stockbrokers, corporate speech writers, and public defenders," with the result that they have maintained an excellent "proud, close-knit neighborhood and property-value ethic where everybody looks after everybody else's kids and grinds their own espresso" (*SW* 106-07). Frank's slightly dismissive description of these citizens, fortunate in their worldly goods, encapsulates a neighborhood that reveals the correlation

between its residents' real estate values and their identities—an example of the economic relationship between place and character.

Frank views investing in rental property as philanthropic and civic-minded. He buys two houses in the "quiet, well-treed street in the established black neighborhood known as Wallace Hill," a venue inhabited for decades by "reliable, relatively prosperous middle-aged and older Negro families." The houses are small, built close together and kept in meticulous condition, "whose values . . . have gone steadily up" (*ID* 24). Frank buys these houses to rent because he imagines he can contribute to the black neighborhood by giving the residents a sense of "belonging and prominence . . . that these citizens might yearn for, the way some of us dream of paradise" (27). If Frank sounds slightly patriarchal, though well intentioned, in this magnanimous undertaking, still he understands that owning a house and belonging to the community are synonymous and valuable.

Having surveyed a liberal, affluent, white neighborhood and a black, middle-class enclave, both in Haddam, Frank visits a politically conservative area on the north side of Brunswick Pike, which has grown out of the "suburban sixties." From the street, touches of elegance and maturity are evident in the "long manorial lawns" with "heavy hemlock growth" that give these "white, set-back, old-money mansions" some privacy. The original houses have received some modern improvements and a few newcomers may have infiltrated the neighborhood, but basically the residents are "original owner-pioneers holding fast to the land and happy to be . . . . It's now a 'neighborhood' . . . where fiscal year to fiscal year everybody's equity squeezes up as their political musings drift to the right" (*LOL* 51). Frank appears to emphasize investment and property values over

quality-of-life issues and community standards, until he turns from conservatism to a more liberal environment at the Jersey shore, where he finds a venue in which the residents care less about money and more about enjoying life.

Fifth, place is geography, topography, and landscape. Laura Winters describes Willa Cather's having "a geographical *imagination*. Her characters are intricately connected to the places they inhabit" (5). Although Frank does not, at first, feel closely linked to the place he inhabits, he is hopeful about its earliest signs. A pragmatic, literal man, he easily understands New Jersey as "the most diverting and readable of landscapes, and the language is always American" (*SW* 52). Because he can "read" it, he can explain why "An American would be crazy to reject such a place." The New Jersey landscape is "muted and adaptable" (97). For Frank, Haddam initially exhibits the necessary attributes for an ideal place in which to live: it is solid, scrutable, and clear. He finds in Haddam what he was seeking, which is "as straightforward and plumb literal as a fire hydrant" (*SW* 103). He suggests, "We all need our simple, unambiguous, even factitious landscapes like mine" (*SW* 103). He admires the "suave and caressing literalness" (*SW* 52) of the New Jersey coastal shelf; these sophisticated and seductive words in Frank's description of the Shore form a significant part of his charm as narrator. His topography tends to embrace the public spaces of suburbia—freeways, traffic and more traffic, professional buildings, shopping malls, food courts, automobile appliance stores, outlets, and the like. Frank drives, for example, through Hightstown and heads north, observing "the flat, featureless, bedrenched Jersey flatlands—a landscape perfect for easy golf courses, valve plants, and flea markets" (*SW* 56). Frank finds the landscape congenial, amusing, and interesting.

Much of the external world he views from his automobile window—or from an airplane. "The turnpike is beautiful!" he exults, as he looks down upon the highway during one of his flying jaunts (*SW* 183). Frank's view is rarely of nature; his outlook is not pastoral, except for a few moments at the Shore, and, even there, with "a cellular tower camouflaged to look like a Douglas fir," an onlooker would be unable to tell what the "natural landscape looks like" (*LOL* 292). As he shows in his astute assessments of neighborhoods, Frank is a "great cartographer of the American physical and cultural landscape," recording "the human and physical geography of towns, villages, and countryside, the booming mall and ubiquitous franchises, the declining shopping sectors of town centers" (*LOL* 116). Like an observant and sympathetic doctor, Frank takes suburbia's temperature and pulse along with his own, measuring the relative prosperity of the outlying malls as opposed to the old-fashioned stores in town centers whose clientele is declining and dying. Frank drives past a neighborhood where "for sale" signs are going up. This might be worrying to some, he says sardonically, "Though to me it's all as natural as pond succession. I like the view of landscape in use" (*LOL* 36). That land is becoming scarce in suburbia does not yet appear to bother him, perhaps because he does not yet feel one with the community but holds himself unengaged, on the outside.

Frank articulately evokes landscape in his title, *The Lay of the Land*. Watching land cleared for "megahouses" to go up in vast housing developments, Frank says goodbye to the land his son once trod, "The old lay of the land" (44). His first wife is "a life-long essentialist and thinks there's a way all things should go, no matter how the land lies around her feet" (144). He thinks, "That is why the dead should stay dead and why in time the land lies smooth all around them" (250), a statement ripe with Frank's belief

that mourning the past is useless; the land will settle everything. On Thanksgiving Day, Frank accommodates a client with a "lay-of-the-land" (269) tour of Sea-Clift, Ortley Beach, and Seaside Heights. In Ford's interview with Brian Duffy, which appears at the end of Duffy's book about Ford, the two men discuss the title, *The Lay of the Land*. While planning the novel, Ford says he was thinking about "how the American landscape lies." Duffy replies, "There's a sense of stocktaking in the title" (321). Ford agrees that there probably are a few moments in the trilogy when Frank scolds himself for using the term "stocktaking," which he considers a literary cliché.

Duffy interprets "stocktaking" to mean that Frank is taking inventory, an inference that does not mesh with Frank's opinions about the need to shed the past or his aspirations for the immediate present. The title "the lay of the land" does not signify taking stock; the phrase, attached to the surveyor's trade, denotes looking ahead, scouting, making a reconnaissance, mapping out a site, like a pioneer, a soldier, an explorer, or a geologist. The expression is Ford's conception of Frank's coming to grips with his landscape, his surroundings, and how to live in, appreciate, and belong to it. The adage is flush with echoes from late nineteenth and early twentieth-century literature: Mark Twain in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)—Due to some mischief from the duke and the dauphin, Jim disappears from the raft and Huck must try to free him; he sets out alone, "But I didn't mind, because I didn't want to see nobody just yet—I only wanted to get the lay of the land" (143); Jack London in *Burning Daylight* (1910)— the protagonist (appositely, an Alaskan real estate speculator) asks the woman he wants to marry if she is interested in marrying anyone else. "You see, I've just got to locate the lay of the land" (194); Ambrose Bierce in "Present at a Hanging" (1915)—Orrin Brower

is a fugitive from justice; it is dark in the forest and he is unarmed. "As Brower had never dwelt thereabout, and knew nothing of the lay of the land, he was, naturally, not long in losing himself" (16). Marx mentions Hawthorne's "Sleepy Hollow," in which "the lay of the land" keeps him from being disturbed by the train whistle (28).

Ford's use of the phrase "the lay of the land" can be read as a synecdoche for the novel and for the trilogy as well. The saying is emblematic of the social and economic landscape of central New Jersey, which Frank examines intimately in the three novels. Neither looking back to appraise the past, nor sorting through and evaluating his decisions and actions, he is involved in plans to take advantage of and to stay engaged in the here and now. Frank is not interested in the past, as he has expressed in regard to his Permanence Period: "I cannot say that we all need a past in full literary fashion or that one is much useful in the end" (*SW* 371). Frank so pointedly avoids memories of the past that he almost appears too eager to forget. "Sometimes we think that before we can go on with life we have to get the past all settled . . . . But that's not true. We'd never get any place if it was" (*LOL* 107). Frank explores the physical and emotional lay of the land—the landscape and its surroundings, its contours, and its shape; he senses the promise and potential in the landscape and accommodates to his place with cheer, acceptance, and perseverance.

Like Roth and Newark, New Jersey, Ford is writing about Haddam, New Jersey, as well as America; Ford's novels are commentaries on America with "central New Jersey serving as microcosm" (Shea 126). In reference to his trilogy, Ford tells Duffy, "There's no doubt that I was trying to write a book about America" (68). For Frank, America means the New Jersey suburbs; the New Jersey suburbs mean people's finding

suitable homes to establish themselves in their suburban lives. Duffy describes Haddam as symbolic of "the American dream: having one's piece of real estate in a good community where property prices are stable, crime low, services good, and where the social class and racial hierarchy is [are] understood and respected by all" (48). By the final novel, Frank laments, "America is a country lost in its own escrow" (*LOL* 407). Suburban folk are deep in debt and drowning in mortgages. Sirens, flashing lights, and police officers proliferate in these suburbs.

Frank knows from serving his clients that most people are late arrivals wherever they move. When he and Ann moved to Haddam it was with the "uneasy immigrant sense" that everyone else had lived there since Columbus (*ID* 27). Frank appreciates that America is a country built on immigrants and stresses its multicultural features in central New Jersey. He identifies with newcomers: "Longing's at the heart of transience—able to withstand the feeling of personal temporariness, being someplace with the wrong papers, knowing no one in the neighborhood, like the emigrant experience at home" (Barton). He understands the "slightly painful nostalgia—the way emigrants are said to feel when they leave home, where hardships await, and in the end old concerns are only transported to a new venue" (*LOL* 431). Frank's real estate partner in Sea-Clift is an immigrant from Tibet. Ford is well aware of the social and racial problems, inequity, lack of opportunity, assimilation, and questions concerning the American national identity, when he remarks to Duffy, "It's a natural outgrowth of the ways . . . in which America has replenished its populations through immigration" (329). Frank is hard to read on the question of immigration and its effects on real estate values. He provides a humorous and unflattering portrait of some South Koreans' razing his Hoving Road

property and building a seminary. Frank quotes half-seriously from a publication purporting that real estate "is the true American profession," but he does believe the basis of the article, the ineluctable fact that people—all people—deserve good, suitable housing (*ID* 440).

Out-of-towners flock to Haddam, looking for dream houses, which activity is reminiscent of so-called flatlanders who travel to Vermont looking for the perfect Revolutionary farmhouse—arousing sad memories of Seymour Levov's moving to a gentile paradise in *American Pastoral*—where their lives will be mystically transformed and they will finally write that novel, or plant that garden, or fall back in love. In fact, Frank mentions that when he was thinking of moving to New Jersey, the real estate ad for Haddam resembled Vermont. "I'd seen an ad in the Times, making it look like an undiscovered Stowe, Vermont," where he could invest his movie money from *Blue Autumn*, his book of short stories (*SW* 39), in a fine, fulfilling house.

Sixth, place is a trope. "Place has a literal and a symbolic value, a function serving both geographical (representational) and metaphorical ends" (Lutwack 31). As discussed above, the title phrase, *The Lay of the Land*, is a synecdoche for the trilogy in its evocation of the physical landscape and its impact upon Frank's realization of belonging to the place. An extended conceit in Ford's trilogy is a succession of metaphors about real estate. In the second novel, Frank, who has been mulling over ways to contribute to his community, decides to abandon sports writing to become a real estate agent after an acquaintance persuades him that the business offers a diverse and interesting group of people to meet and a great deal of money to reap. Frank understands innately a basis for purveying real estate: "you don't sell a house to someone, you sell a

life" (*ID* 112). In other words, he has found a metaphor in the real-estate endeavor: houses ratify people's identities; people believe houses reflect who they really are. As Frank becomes more experienced in the trade, he finds a second metaphor: houses and their locations, especially their locations, represent social distinctions and separate people by income and prestige.

Frank's reconnecting with his family and selling real estate in the suburbs in *Independence Day* is "a heady metaphor for the nature of attachment" (Majeski). Though stoic and patient, Frank still feels connected to the former life he lived in Haddam with his family, though he rejects as unhelpful the strong affection he feels for this past. Frank's partner from Tibet has "comprehended his role as being a 'metaphor' for the assimilating, stateless immigrant who'll always be what he is . . . yet who develops into a useful, purposeful citizen who helps strangers like himself find safe haven under a roof" (*LOL* 16). Mike has adapted to the New Jersey suburban way of life; Frank goes out of his way to help Mike assimilate, belong, and prosper.

In *Independence Day*, Frank spends an inordinate amount of time trying to identify and sell a suitable and affordable house to an unlikable and intractable couple named Markham. Whenever Frank proposes a house for them to look at, Joe Markham's characteristic riposte is, "I wouldn't live in that particular shithole" (*ID* 41). This real-estate salesman's interlude provides the reader an opportunity to examine Frank's character, his tenets, and his way of dealing with people regarding commercial place. In his daily round selling houses, he smiles and smiles, but is not a villain like Claudius; he adjusts his expression—"I make my cheeks smile" (*LOL* 40)—so that people will like him, trust him, buy houses from him, or sleep with him; he wants to accommodate, to

mediate, and to make people happy. He tries, for the most part, to be honest and straightforward and to refrain from saying a house is "interesting" or "has potential" when he thinks it is "a dump" (*ID* 41).

The Markhams will never grasp what the metaphors of real estate have taught Frank: "The gnostic truth of real estate [is that] people never find or buy the house they say they want" (*ID* 41). Walker contributes to the idea of real estate as a metaphor. For people like the Markhams, "the search for a home becomes one metaphorical crux of this novel: the quest for the delicate balance between dependence on and independence from place, people, and self" (135). Walker seems to be conceding that there is, in fact, an interplay—"dependence on" and "independence from"—between place and people. For Duffy, "The function of real estate is a metaphor for the hazardous negotiations and choices of adult life" (64). Duffy also describes Frank's home in Sea-Clift, surrounded by water on both sides and joined to the mainland by a bridge, as "a permanent metaphor for his tenuous hold on life" (142). Duffy's use of "tenuous" does not accord with Frank's full engagement in his life in Sea-Clift in *The Lay of the Land*. Frank pretends he does not use figurative language—"Life doesn't need a metaphor, in my opinion" (*SW* 125)—but he does use a metaphor, among many, to describe the literal place with the expression, "location is everything" (*SW* 50), meaning location symbolizes status in the suburbs. As Walker observes, "Location, in all its meaning, is paramount, since Frank is now a real estate agent" (17). This theme, that the setting for houses in the suburbs corresponds to their social cachet, stretches back to Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and her three New Jersey novels about social class in the village life of Metuchen and the auspicious placement of houses on their properties.

Seventh, place is language. Place, says Ford, is made of language "in a way that substantiates life, reifies life" (Duffy 325). Ford's fluent use of language is a precious tool—both colloquial and cerebral, laconic and expansive, and sensuous and sensitive. Ford says, "I'm always interested in *words* . . . describing a character or a landscape" (Lyons). He cares deeply about language and speaks in every interview about lingering over his choice of words: he has a "concern for the nuances of language" [vii]; is "preoccupied with language" [x]; and is "dedicated to language" [xii] (Guagliardo). Ford is aware that "the integrity of his language is intimately related to the place where he lives. For him, every place has a language of its own" (Smith). Frank, on the other hand, uses language to get what he wants. He cynically advises his partner to tell the woman from the Neighbors Coalition, whose constituents are anxious because wreckers are tearing down a house in their neighborhood, to sell the lot to a citizen who can afford it and "find suitable language to make it seem good for everyone and what America's all about" (*LOL* 405). In the same vein, Duffy comments on Frank's "facile use of language," which allows him "to configure the world to suit himself and to deflect commitment and responsibility" (106). This questionable gift resembles Frank's ability to smile appropriately through strained or taxing meetings. Frank weighs with care which voice and language he will to use with his former wife (*SW* 11); he adapts a fake voice to certain occasions.

Frank, eloquent in communicating the language of real estate, appreciates the finer points of the technical vocabulary and glibly speaks the lingo as he guides potential clients through the social and economic topography of New Jersey. Using his wiles to make a client feel special, Frank describes a house that has long been on the market: this

is “a place requiring ‘imagination,’ a place no other clients could quite ‘visualize,’ a house with a “story’ or a “ghost,’ but which might have a *je-ne-sais-quoi* attraction for a couple as amusingly upbeat” (*ID* 60). Kakutani criticizes Ford’s tendency to talk about New Jersey property values and realtor strategies for “genuine insights about how people live today” (“Afloat”). In Frank’s defense, he believes that in suburbia real estate issues provide real insights into people’s lives; he tries to pay attention to people’s problems.

Language enhanced by literary allusion creates and conveys place by opening a window into a complementary or contrasting landscape; intertextuality transforms the experience of place. Curiously, Frank claims to scorn literature; the seat of his most elaborate self-delusion is his rant at “great literature:” “Great literature routinely skips them [moments when large decisions get decided] in favor of seismic shifts, hysterical laughter, and worlds cracking open, and in that way does us all a great disservice” (*LOL* 228). Frank claims, “There are no transcendent themes in life which is a lie of literature and the liberal arts” (*SW* 16). He dislikes novelists who write about the past: “I know I’m always heartsick in novels . . . when the novelist makes his clanking, obligatory trip into the Davy Jones locker of the past” (*SW* 24). For a man who, in truth, is literature’s intimate friend, Frank frequently resembles the lady in the play within the play who protests too much.

Frank’s apparent disdain for literature is ascribable to his failure as a novelist, or, rather, his decision not to pursue novel writing. He speculates he does not have enough intuition about people to “soar off” to places where writers like Tolstoy and George Eliot travel. He believes he suffers from “a failure of imagination” and has “lost his authority” (*SW* 46). Frank is not able to communicate “the play of light and dark” in literature the

way the great writers can (*SW* 46). Though he is not embarrassed by his stories, he is unable to finish his novel; he has never lived in the place where his novel is set. For reading these days, Frank enjoys obituaries and real-estate listings. He is a different man from the one who, shortly after his son's death, taught English literature in a New England college for some months. Paradoxically, Frank quotes literature continuously. While in the ambulance, after he has been shot, his memory fills with literature. He quotes Henry James at his death: "So it has come at last—the distinguished thing" (*LOL* 466), and Wallace Stevens, "In an age of disbelief . . . it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief in his measure and his style" (*LOL* 477). When Frank believes he is dying, literature is his companion.

Frank's use of literary allusion to convey place is copious, limited here to three examples—Scott Fitzgerald and James Fenimore Cooper, both of whom wrote fiction set in New Jersey, and Herman Melville. Frank's intertextual dialogue with *The Great Gatsby* is topographical as well as substantive. Horst Kruse states that Ford's trilogy is the most "prominent instance of a response to *The Great Gatsby* in the past two decades as well as one of the most deliberate and sophisticated attempts to construct a place in fiction" (209). Kruse determines that Frank's decision to live in New Jersey is "deliberate, and his feeling for New Jersey as a place is affirmed from the very first to the very last pages" (209). Frank has at his disposal "an enormous store of literary works" (210). Kruse's double use of the word "deliberate" emphasizes Ford's choice of a New Jersey setting for *The Sportswriter*, leading to Frank's resolution to leave Manhattan for New Jersey. As an aside, Kruse mentions the presence in Frank's office of a copy of William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* by (*ID* 112). Williams's devotion to New Jersey as

a locale "supports the strong sense of place that pervades the trilogy" (Kruse 210); this idea echoes the examples of Williams's view of place in this study's introduction.

The geographical references to *Gatsby* strengthen Frank's affection for and identification with his landscape, his own lay of the land. Some references to *Gatsby* are oblique, others outright. The first reference in *The Sportswriter* to *Gatsby* is a scene that evokes Nick Carraway's final vision of Gatsby's dock on the Long Island Sound, showing Frank's "staring off at the jeweled lights of New Jersey, brightening as dark fell, and feeling full of wonder and allusion, like a Columbus or a pilgrim seeing the continent of his dreams for the first time" (*SW* 83-84). In *Independence Day*, Frank appreciates that "in three hours you can stand on the lapping shores of Long Island Sound, staring like Jay Gatsby at a beacon light that lures you, or . . . in three hours you can be heading for . . . where Natty [Bumppo] drew first blood" (Kruse 213). In *The Lay of the Land*, Frank, in a garage having his car fixed, notes the mechanic is reading a "foxed copy of *The Great Gatsby*" (*LOL* 326) and remembers, "Garage mechanics . . . play a pivotal role in Fitzgerald's denouement" (*LOL* 326). These examples serve to illustrate Frank's preoccupation with the correspondence between life and literature, which he tries to deny, as well as to underscore his deep association with his physical and emotional place, which he has yet to acknowledge.

In contrast to the allusion to Jay Gatsby, in which the connection between Frank and Gatsby is instantly recognizable, the reference to Natty Bumppo, hero of *The Deerslayer* and other novels, is subtler. In *Independence Day*, Frank drives, with Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" in his glove compartment, to Cooperstown, New York, accompanied by his unhappy teen-aged son, and checks into The Deerslayer Inn. From

there, as Frank points out, they are only three hours from Gatsby's house. Rather than stir up an interest in the lone warrior, Natty Bumppo, who carves out a manly life in the wilderness, Frank carelessly dismisses Cooper as "a famous American novelist who wrote a book about Indians playing baseball" (*ID* 644). Frank misses the opportunity to show his son, who needs role models, a meaningful connection between this American folk hero and his own life.

In the third literary allusion, Frank's dreaminess summons up an image of Ishmael and his similar condition. Frank's dreaminess, his alienation, is a recurring theme; his state of mind is defined as "tinged with expectation" (*SW* 5); "a state of suspended recognition" (Caldwell 42); "losing his moorings" (*SW* 128), and "detachment" (Hoffman). Ishmael's dreaminess and listlessness are one with his meditativeness, like Frank's with his continuous ruminations. Often, for Ishmael, performing his tasks is similar to taking opium, sending him into a reverie reminiscent of his feelings of otherworldliness. Many times his daily activities lull him into a dreamy mood: when he is working the sperm; at the helm; weaving mats; or manning the forecastle. In the South Seas, "there are times of dreamy quietude" (405). Ishmael's dreaminess distances him from the burdensome and stressful realities of life aboard ship to free him to address his apostrophes to his reader. Frank found at university that the real mystery of life, the "very reason to read," was always ruined when teachers of literature "analyzed the meaning away" (*SW* 223). His narrative explodes with literary allusions that are meaningful about place and comforting to him. In a last example of a literary allusion, Ford teases his readers by naming the machine shop on the Jersey Shore, "Only Connect Welding" (*LOL* 273).

Eighth, place represents change, social, economic, and geographic. Change means the end of pastoral life and the loss of Eden. Frank notes with nostalgia the passing of rural life in his neighborhood, long before it became a "wealth belt" (*LOL* 37); the reader notes Frank is thinking about the past. A land developer is building cheap houses where once in a "gilded time" stood a vegetable stall piled with "red mums, orange pumpkins, fat dusty tomatoes, leathery gourds, sunlight streaming through the rough cracks in the warm-rich-aired produce stand" (*LOL* 41). The countryside of the MacDonald farm—the farmer's name was Macdonald, despite the children's song—where once Frank brought his children, will soon be covered, ironically, with McMansions (*LOL* 37). In *Independence Day*, Frank notes that changes are beginning to encroach upon the suburbs. He drives away from the "serenely tree-studded and affluent groves of nearby Haddam" to a place known as Penns Neck, "not much of a town, much less an area: a few tidy, middle-rank residential streets situated on either side of busy 571, which connects with the gradually sloping, light-industrial, overpopulous coastal plain where housing is abundant." In the past, sufficient land existed to reinvent Penns Neck into "a spruced up, Dutchy-Quakery village character, islanded by fertile cornfields, well-tended stone walls, and maple and hickory farmstead teeming with wildlife." Those days are past, when land and wildlife were plentiful. Now the neighborhood is "just one more aging bedroom community for other, larger, newer bedroom communities, in spite of the fact that its housing stock has withstood modernity's rush, leaving it with an earnest old-style-suburban appeal" (*ID* 58). No town center remains, only a couple of at-home antiques shops and a lawn-mower repair and a gas station-deli on the state road: the land, the wildlife, and the town have disappeared.

Frank rarely reminisces, because he believes that dwelling on the past is futile, but he does recall that when he first arrived in Haddam one could find a good cheap lunch. "I loved it here then" (*LOL 77*). "Here" has changed. When he learns that someone has exploded a device at the local hospital, he says, it is "hard to contemplate here being the target" (*LOL* 83). "Here" is unrecognizable. Frank analyzes changes in Haddam in terms of, and as a result of, consumerism—America is "anaesthetized by consumerism" (Duffy 326)—and suburban sprawl. Duffy, who uses the word "suburbanization" (113), blames this phenomenon for fragmenting American society (77). He sees the "suburbanization" of America as an important factor in the collapse of community life, particularly relevant to the suburban world of Haddam, New Jersey (100). Alienation results. Another of Frank's diagnoses is that "in-depth communication with smaller and smaller like-minded groups is the disease of the suburbs" (*LOL* 145). Frank finally leaves Haddam because he is sick of selling real estate that costs too much: ". . . there behind its revetment of Revolutionary oaks and surviving elms, from its lanes and cul-de-sacs, its wood ricks, its leaf rakage, its musing, inside mutter-mutter conversations passed across hedges between like-minded neighbors who barely know one another and wouldn't otherwise speak." These residents are alienated even from their neighbors who think identical thoughts. There is no room in this historic site for the freedom of exchange of ideas that was the basis of the American Revolution.

Floyd Watkins observes that, while American fiction was once known for elaborate mansions, like Thomas Wolfe's Altamont and Nathaniel Hawthorne's House of Seven Gables, fictional characters no longer live on big isolated properties, as less and less land remains available (13-14). In Haddam, big houses are no more; the lots for

building houses become smaller and smaller. For the housing development devouring the farming country Frank remembers, one hundred and twenty-five acres are available if the builders "clear the woods," which means about forty houses on three-acre lots. Frank's spirits sink when he hears these statistics: they mean "a living room the size of a fifties tract home" (*L0L* 40). Having decided that the price of housing in Haddam has risen too high, Frank removes to Sea-Clift, where he finds more congenial inhabitants, who are not in a terrible hurry to get ahead and are more interested in their quality of life than in their social status. After his change of address, he returns to Haddam on business; a sense of melancholy and regret overcomes him, being "in the neighborhood again, feeling unsanctioned by the place. And shouldn't I feel it even more *here*, because my stay was longer, because I loved here, buried a son nearby, lost a fine permanent life here, lived on alone until I couldn't stand it another minute" (*ID* 442). The return to the hereness theme—"even more *here*"—bespeaks the transformation of the place; it seems to hold no sway over him, spiritual or emotional.

Early in the trilogy, Frank's girlfriend's father calls Barnegat "our little Garden of Eden down here" (*SW* 262). Frank often thinks of certain paradisal times of day in the suburbs, late afternoons, when all is well. "It is for such dewy interludes that our suburbs were built . . . . That simple measure of day and place . . . . These interludes elicit a pastoral kind of longing" (*SW* 312). He passes a housing development: a sign reads, "A good life is affordable here" (SW 312). To highlight the social and economic transformations overwhelming New Jersey, Frank portrays, in his realtor's argot, the New Jersey real estate "*mise-en-scéne*" after real estate went "nuts," and realtors even "nuttier," and a new vocabulary replaces the old:

> Expectations left all breathable atmosphere behind. Over-pricing, under-bidding, sticker shock, good-faith negotiation, price reduction, high-end flux were all banished from the vocabulary. Topping price wars, cutthroat bidding, forced compliance, broken leases, and realty shenanigans took their place. The grimmest, barely habitable shotgun houses in the previously marginal Negro neighborhoods became prime, then untouchable in an afternoon. (*LOL* 84)

Frank can sense the changes; they are enough to chill him: Haddam "felt different to me—as a place" (*LOL* 88). "Haddam stopped being a quiet and happy suburb . . . and became *a place to itself* . . . a town of others, for others" (*LOL* 89). People no longer know each other; Haddam is no longer a community; the old-timers are gone. The use of the word "others" is an unpleasant reference back to Frank's ambiguity about immigration; there is a pejorative implication to his statement about newcomers' being strangers, aliens, others.

With his sharp eye for detail and his deft vocabulary, Frank inventories items related to the changed landscape and the glut of consumerism—the "slow-motion consumer daze on Miracle Mile" (*LOL* 193). He and Mike, his partner from Tibet, have been to Toms River in the morning and are traveling back on Route 37 in the afternoon. The road construction has stopped, but the highway is no less crowded:

> . . . due to the Ocean County mall staying open 24/7, and all other stores, chains, carpet outlets, shoe boutiques, language schools, fancy frame shops, Saturn dealerships and computer stores the same. Traffic actually moves more slowly, as if everyone we passed this morning is still out

> here, wandering parking lot to parking lot, ready to buy if they just knew what, yet are finally wearing down, but have no impulse to go home. (*LOL* 193)

His exhaustive checklist of stores is depressing; consumers have turned into zombies.

Frank is also a consumer; in a felicitous phrase, Bone calls him a "consumer of *places*" (104). He is a buyer of local developments, mammoth estates, rental properties, hamburger stands, and all kinds of places. He is not anti-development but wary, trying to warn his partner Mike to temper his enthusiasm for land development. Mike happily accepts the "self-interested consumer-mercantile [principles] of the real estate business" (21). Duffy points out to Ford that, in *The Lay of the Land*, he establishes "commerce as a defining American value and activity," to which must be added the buying and selling of houses. Ford tries to make Frank's stance on commerce in real estate more affirmative: "Commercialism is ugly, but it has it pluses. It is not always pretty but it is always progressive" (330).

Frank describes and evokes change as well at the Jersey Shore, his prose filled with comparative adjectives. Urban renewal renders everything natural reduced—fewer trees, fewer leaves—as well as what is humanly produced—less swell, less tall, less glitzy, less vulgar:

> All around the Queen Regent is a dry, treeless urban-renewal savanna stretching back to the leafless tree line of Asbury. Where we're currently driving were once sweller, taller hotels with glitzier names, stylish seafood joints with hot jazz clubs in the basement, and farther down the now-missing clocks, tourist courts and shingled flophouses for the barkers and

> rum-dums who ran the Tilt-a-Whirl on the pier or waltzed trays in the convention hall, which itself looks like it could fall in the a rising tide and a breeze. (*LOL* 298-99)

The landscape is cheap, insubstantial, and outmoded.

The cause of the most serious changes to the landscape on the Shore is the natural disaster of a hurricane. Frank explains that now there are only five "cottages" left from the previous fifteen—grandiloquent old gabled and turreted Queen Annes, rococco Stick Styles, rounded Romanesque Revivals—is that the others "were blown to shit and smithereens by Poseidon's wrath and are now gone without a trace. Hurricane Gloria, as recently as 1985, finished the last one." Now, he says, "Beach erosion, shoreline scouring, tectonic shifts, global warming, ozone deterioration and normal w&t [wear and tear] have rendered all us 'survivors' nothing more than solemn, clear-headed custodians to the splendid, transitory essence of everything . . . . None of this, like none of us, is going to last here" (*LOL* 207). "Here" is not permanent. Frank confirms this lesson later, when he is shot in the heart. [At an appearance in New York in April 2013, Ford surprises his audience by reading from an unpublished story in which Hurricane Sandy destroys Frank's beach house and he moves back to Haddam (Liu).]

In his discussion of *Walden*, Marx writes that the American economy by the mid-1840s produced "quiet desperation" and "men have become the tools of their tools" (247). As Frank tries to "simplify" his life, he undoubtedly thinks of Thoreau, to whom he refers frequently (*LOL* 354, Guagliardo xii, 142, Walker, *Richard Ford* 12). Frank says, "In the waning weeks of this millennial year, in which I promised myself as a New Year's/New Century resolution to simplify some things . . . I needed to get right" *(LOL*

6). Again, Marx writes that heroes like Huck Finn and Ishmael wish to withdraw from "oppressive civilization" (338). Frank moves to Sea-Clift because it was "seasonal, insular, commuter-less, stable, aspirant within limits" (*LOL* 399). Situated at Barnegat Bay, Sea-Clift, "is beckoning as heaven . . . in my glassed-in living room overlooking the grassy dune, the beach, and the Atlantic's somnolent shingle." He reports his modest and self-absorbed goals: "My attitude's the same: quit fretting, keep the current inventory in good working order, rely on your fifties-style beach life, and let population growth do its job the way it always has. What's the hurry? We've already built it here, so we can be sure in time they'll come" (*LOL* 401). Frank used to be all in favor of growth and increase, but now, while other groups are working on ideas for "revitalizations," like reclaiming Barnegat Bay, he is rooting for zero population growth and fewer people in the area (*LOL* 399).

Ninth, place is a journey. Gillian Tindall sees all novels as journeys, "from the known to the unknown, from shelter to exposure, from identity to anonymity, from safety to danger, and from captivity to freedom" (116). In Ford's trilogy, the central voyage is an internal, mental one for Frank, a continuous struggle to find the meaning of his place in the world. His journey is one of self-exploration and self-analysis to probe his identity and his destiny. Wendell Berry's familiar maxim is apposite: "If you don't know where you are you don't know who you are" (Stegner 199). The trilogy represents Frank's middle-aged journey—"a first-person excursion through New Jersey," as Hardwick calls it (294). Perhaps Frank travels because his "drunk old professor at Michigan believed that all America's literature . . . was forged by one positivist principle: to leave, and then to arrive in a better state" (*LOL* 337). Frank calls his life "a journey toward someplace

yet to be determined that I have good hope for" (*ID* 386). The Permanence Period, for Frank, means "when the past seems more generic than specific, when life's a destination more than a journey" (*LOL* 46). Frank understands his life's journey is here in Sea-Clift. "Here is necessity," he says at the end of *The Lay of the Land* (485).

For some, Frank's typical journeying around New Jersey in his car has too many "twists and turns in its itinerary"—too many routes, route numbers, highways, place names, and ordinary sites (Dyer 152). Frank drives continuously around Central New Jersey, "a perpetual escapee from Manhattan, from fiction, from the rigors of family life" (Hoffman). Frank views his life as going out into America each day and coming "home each day with the new knowledge gained about his country and himself on his journeying" (*LOL* 116). In the end, like some of Roth's characters, he changes places by moving to Sea-Clift, but he stays near Haddam and within the state of New Jersey. Instead of traveling like Ford to pick out a location for his fiction, Frank travels to turn his "new knowledge" into insights and platitudes about New Jersey suburbs. Because the reader is privy to Frank's reflective nature for such a long period, some of his remarks about place are bound to sound like tired aphorisms; for example, "No place is without a downside" (*ID* 288), one of the comments he makes on his trip with his son.

This discussion has explored nine ways in which Ford conveys place and its impact on his narrator, Frank Bascombe. To summarize, Ford reveals the meaning of place through Frank's wry, ruminative, and, at times, alienated perspective. Place persuades Frank that his life is in New Jersey: "here is necessity" (LOL 485). Place becomes real to the reader entirely through particulars—"exquisite, intractable irresistible details" (Ford "Chance"). Place is a neighborhood, where people's aspirations and

political affiliations are apparent. Place is a literal and sensible landscape that corresponds to Frank's need to understand its social geography. Place is language, a careful choice of words, and literary allusion, as well as a tool for Frank to ply his realty trade. Place is a metaphor for houses, homes that ratify their owners' identities. Place is change, the transformation of pastoral life for suburban sprawl. Place is a mental journey for Frank to find his niche and to engage in the here and now.

The evolution of Ford's attitudes toward place and the question of interplay between place and narrator loom clearly in the analysis of the three novels and call for an assessment of Ford's thought processes, revealed in interviews, as he changes his opinion to find place determinative. His original premise was that place did not affect or change a fictional character's identity in any way; place was solely background. He did not accept the idea that his southern birth defined him and determined his views about place. He sought to free himself from his southern roots and to treat place as scenery. He did not wish his heritage to impinge upon his choices. When he had Frank say, "Place means nothing" in *Independence Day*, he was challenging the reader by setting up a fictional situation in which place, and its physical, emotional, psychological, and metaphorical impact on character, were on full display for interpretation. Ford constructed a conflict between place and character, as a test to discover if there were any reciprocal interplay or influence, and built on the narrative tension surrounding Frank's conflict about place—his ambivalence, inconsistency, and vacillation.

A familiar trope, the concept of a writer's rootedness in the soil, arises frequently in discussions about place in fiction. In the South, feeling rooted in his native soil is often assumed to be the basis of a writer's perspective and the way he is grounded.

Welty writes, “It is by knowing where you stand that you grow able to judge where you are” (128). Ford’s response, based on his version of locatedness, has another interpretation: the notion of rootedness grows from the ground up to form a character; locatedness, on the other hand, is conferred from the top down and is whatever a character grants his place. Ford adheres to the sentiment that a writer need not limit his choice of fictional place to where he was born. Quite the reverse, Ford says forthrightly: “It pisses me off that some people think I shouldn’t be writing about Montana because I wasn’t born there” (Merriam 91).

On his view of place, Ford continues, “I grew up in the ‘60s and I’m a little suspicious about sentimentality in landscape” (Booth 69). Duffy asks about Ford’s perception of landscape. In one of his most forceful statements about the lack of interplay between place and character, Ford responds that he tries to evoke a “sensuous background” (Ulin) in his novels, but he does not believe that “the landscape of New Jersey . . . has really much of anything of importance to do with the behavior of the people in it . . . . I don’t think place has a germinal aspect” (Duffy 324). Ford’s use of the word “germinal” echoes his comment that at first he did not believe in place as “generative” (Ulin). He continues to argue that place does not create or produce any relationship with or have any effect upon a character. People behave the way they do for reasons they alone are responsible for. He adds two related thoughts, “So it isn’t as though the landscape forms them in any particular way” (Ulin), and “landscape in my stories is always just background to what the characters do” (Ravelais and Levasseur 169). These examples underline Ford’s contention that places are only “backgrounds” or “scenery” for him. When reminded that much of his writing seems to be about the place,

Ford replies, “I violate my own rules. My rule is . . . ‘place means nothing.’ But in the pursuit of trying to make these books interesting, I end up getting interested in the places themselves” (Hinzen).

Ford has not yet renounced the idea that place means nothing, but he is drawing closer to acknowledging that geography, surroundings, and environment play a role in characters’ lives. Ford believes that when one is a “Southerner it’s very appealing to think that you are who you are, that your character is fixed” (Majeski), which implies he believes that moving from one’s birthplace and living in another place can affect a character. He says, “I didn’t see anything about New Jersey that would obligate me. I wanted to set stories there, to purloin the place . . . but I didn’t feel any obligation to be faithful to the place,” the way he would have felt obliged to be with Mississippi (Barton). “Purloin” is an interesting choice of words—to appropriate or steal the New Jersey setting for his fictional use suggests a breach of trust. Ford claims he only needs to know a place to a certain degree; he actually lives in his head (Barton). Ford chooses New Jersey calculatedly, like a specimen for examination; he says he wants to pay homage to it, yet he needs the full experience of writing the trilogy about New Jersey to understand the role of place in it.

Walker pays meticulous attention to Ford’s various explanations of his views on place. At one point, he narrows down his perception to one definition, equating place to where he works: “My sense of locatedness is actually just a matter of where I work, and the contact I keep with people I love” (*Richard Ford* 12). He continues, “Place is wherever we do good work; otherwise, place is a meaningless abstraction” (13). Walker notes Ford’s fascination with a personal, “human response to geography . . . .

Locatedness has little to do with place and everything to do with a person's awareness of self and other" (205). Walker thinks Ford's definition of place results from his growing up in a hotel and from his rejection of the label "southern writer" (13).

During Ford's interview with Walker, which takes place a year before her monograph on him was published, she asks him to talk more about "locatedness." His theory about place is that there is no interplay, no interdependence, and no relationship between a person and a place. A person does not receive anything from place: "I think one's sense of locatedness represents the claim you make on place, rather than the claim it supposedly makes on you. Because a person does not receive anything from a place, anything you feel about a place, anything you think about that place at all, you have authored and ascribed to some piece of geography. Everything that defines locatedness is then something that you yourself generate" (Walker, Guagliardo 142). Since place does not contribute to an experience, when a person calls what he is experiencing "a sense of place," he is just expressing what he feels, not what the place has created. Ford finds he has nothing to teach except that "love is transferable; location isn't actually everything" (*SW* 217). Again, Ford's use of the word "generate" in his statement, "something you yourself generate," refers back to his original thesis that place is not "generative."

To put the idea another way, Ford continues, when in *Independence Day* Frank says, "'place means nothing,' what he actually means is, 'this place ain't givin' me nothing,' and I want something from it because I've been here, I've felt things here, and now I'm here again, and I don't feel anything, he's just realizing what I just said: that places don't have characters and don't literally give us anything" (Walker, Guagliardo, 142). In that passage, the sequence of the words "here" is notable. Ford is not trying to

express that place "means" nothing, but that place "gives" one nothing. Places are real, but the way a character feels about them is something he makes up, or creates himself. In other words, Ford does not believe place or landscape "forms" characters (Duffy 324). When Duffy asks Ford what his notion of belonging is, Ford responds, belonging "can be love . . . . Or you can be attached to a place and its history and that will give you a sense of belonging" (Duffy 353). This statement, that place gives a character a sense of belonging, contradicts Ford's view that place gives a character nothing.

In the discourse on place, "sense of place," as its name implies, is sensory in origin, while the phrase "spirit of place," which many critics use, connotes a distinctive spiritual atmosphere or pervading spirit. Leonard Lutwack writes, "Even for modern realists there is sometimes a curious removal from the physicality of place to the realm of the spirit" (32). Philip Hensher believes, "The spirit of place in a novel . . . is part of the humanity at the center of the endeavor." Frederick Turner's book is entitled is *Spirit of Place*: *The Making of an American Literary Landscape*. According to D. H. Lawrence, "Every continent has its own great spirit of place. Every people is polarized in some particular locality, which is the homeland" (6). In Laura Winters's chapter on Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, she describes the protagonist's "search for the sacred places" (62). Native American authors feel the land's spirit, which Leslie Marmon Silko defines: "That's when you're in perfect balance, inward and outward. Everything's perfect" (Turner 351). Welty agrees: "From the dawn of man's imagination, place has enshrined the spirit" (123). Not all authors subscribe to the concept of spirit of place.

These insights into the "spirit of place" in fiction provide a useful starting point for an assessment of Frank's relationship to and interpretation of place in his journey throughout the trilogy. Frank claims he does not believe in sacramental or spiritual places. He thinks, "We just have to be smart enough to quit asking places for what they can't provide, and begin to invent other options . . ." (*ID* 442). In the run-up to Frank's celebrated phrase, "Place means nothing," which Ford discusses with Ulin, Frank introduces that statement by saying, "It is another useful theme and exercise in the Existence Period, and a patent lesson of the realty profession, to cease sanctifying places" (*ID* 151), by which he means "houses, beaches, hometowns, a street corner where you once kissed a girl," and the like. "We may feel they *ought* to, *should* confer something—sanction, again—because of the events that transpired there once . . . . But they don't. Places never cooperate by revering you back when you need it. In fact, they almost always let you down . . . shove off to whatever's next, not whatever was. Place means nothing" (*ID* 151-52). Later, Frank asks himself if there is "any cause to think a place—any place—within its plaster and joists, its trees and plantings, in its putative essence *ever* shelters some spirit ghost of us as proof of its significance and ours?" (*ID* 442). Frank appears to have rejected the spirit of place, though his three epiphanies, among many examples, are supreme instances of a mystical, personal connection between Frank and place. Towards the end, particularly after being shot, he admits, when he is reformulating the tenets of his Next Level, "a sense of spirituality can certainly help" (*LOL* 484).

At the outset of the trilogy, as Frank drives around Haddam commenting on its strengths and weaknesses, he reacts readily to his environment, allowing it to define him, which suggests he is interacting with his place. At first, Frank, who has experienced

certain difficulties in life, is almost ecstatic about his place, appearing to relate to it and draw sustenance from it. Then, in *Independence Day*, after numerous apostrophes to Haddam, Frank plants one of his surprises: "Places never cooperate by revering you back when you need it . . . place means nothing" (151-52). Walker confronts this initial inconsistency by interpreting Frank's remark to imply that place may only appear to provide "a refuge" but is "totally bare of meaning" until a person breathes significance into it by occupation, thought, memory, and a history shared with someone else" (*Richard Ford* 170). She does take note of Frank's ambivalence here; even as he says these things, he counters them. "He finds himself lurking around sites that have been formerly significant" (170). She does not spell them out, but they include his visit to the graveyard where his son, Ralph, is buried; he quotes from "Meditation," by Theodore Roethke—"I have gone into the waste lonely places . . . (*SW* 18).

At various points in the narrative, as Frank reflects upon and reacts to place and the effect of place and landscape upon his identity, he seems uncertain and erratic about place's meaning and impact. Early in the trilogy, Frank, who has lived in Haddam for a decade before the action begins, says, "Location is everything" (*SW* 50). More than half way through that novel, he decides, "Location isn't actually everything" (*SW* 217). In between those two admissions, he has lavished accolades upon the town, especially because he admires the simplicity of Haddam; everyone needs "Places without challenge or double ranked complexity" (*SW* 103). When Frank returns to Haddam after respites in several other states and in Europe, he feels, to the contrary, that Haddam, in the northern state of New Jersey, is very much of a location. He arrives "with a feeling of renewal . . . that immediately translated itself into homey connectedness to Haddam itself, which felt

at that celestial moment like my spiritual residence more than any place I'd ever been, inasmuch as it *was* the place I instinctively . . . came charging back to" (*ID* 93). Frank uses the terms "celestial" and "spiritual" despite the fact that he states later, as noted, that he sees no reason to believe a place ever "shelters some spirit ghost" (*ID* 442).

Frank "still favors New Jersey's sense of place over Mississippi" (Bone 118); he shows his preference by not returning to his birthplace. He explains, "Of course, having come first to life in a true *place*, and one as monotonously, lankly itself as the Mississippi Gulf Coast, I couldn't be truly surprised that a simple setting such as Haddam . . . would seem, on second look, a great relief and damned easy to cozy up to" (*ID* 93). Frank remarks, "My own history I think of as a postcard with changing scenes on one side but no particular or memorable messages on the back. You can get detached from your beginnings . . . just by life itself, fate, the tug of the ever-present" (*SW* 24). He lingers over his birthplace and his past. He adds that his parents had "no particular sense of their *place* in history's continuum" (*SW* 24). He admires them for not feeling they were special or consequential in the universal picture. The fact that Frank italicizes the word "place" twice is worthy of consideration; with this typographical clue he suggests, ironically, that the word "place" in this context is somehow unsavory or unpleasant to him because of its southern connotations.

Frank meditates upon the meaning of "home." He wonders whether it is the place in which you are born or the place you choose for yourself. He might be speaking of himself, his roots in Mississippi, and his decision to leave New York for New Jersey. Perhaps, he thinks, home is "someplace you just can't keep from going back to though the air there's grown less breathable, the future's over, where they really don't want you

back, and where you once left on a breeze without a rearward glance" (*LOL* 14). Frank intimates that hard feelings arose from family or from critics when he turned his back on his southern home. He believes that home is a "musable" concept when a person is, as he was, born in one place, educated in another, moved to a third—and has spent his career finding suitable "homes" for others. "Home may only be where you've memorized the grid pattern, where you can pay with a check, where someone you've already met takes your blood pressure . . ." (*LOL* 14). This definition of home is neither cheerful nor inspiring, when its sum represents traffic patterns, paying bills, and knowing your primary care physician. Home "is the old homestead, the old neighborhood, hometown, or motherland" (Tuan, *Space* 3), but not for the people living in Haddam's suburbs, who are rootless newcomers, summer people, winter people, immigrants, and commuters. Frank gave up writing because he lost interest in his novel, which took place in Tangiers, a locale unknown to him. His fiction, he concedes, was "set in places . . . I had never been" (*SW* 46), corroborating the need for an author to understand the culture and the place that he is trying to conjure up.

While Martyn Bone argues articulately that Frank "refuses to conflate self and place" (119), evidence for the opposite view is abundant in Frank's actions. After his divorce, for example, he sells his house and then spends an evening sitting in his car in front of his old house, weeping over memories attached to it. He pretends where he lives does not affect his life, but after his wife remarries and moves away, he buys her house in order to manufacture closeness to the memories of his family life; he concedes that "houses can have this almost authorial power over us, seeming to ruin or make perfect our lives just by persisting in one place longer than we can" (*ID* 106). Frank continues to

struggle with his reaction to place. He deceives himself into admiring his objectivity about place and its emptiness; it is he who is empty, denying what place has and can bestow upon him. The reader remembers when Frank says, "I love it here," as well as his epiphanies about place at the endings of the three novels. Frank's three epiphanies movingly belie the suggestion that Haddam is bare of meaning for Frank. The three moments of the "all feeling" succor, nourish, and cherish him, finally giving him the "necessity" to live in solace and connectedness. Haddam makes him want to participate in the community, to do more for others, and to become more engaged and less alienated. Frank contradicts himself in his remark, "A town you used to live in signifies something—possibly interesting—about you: what you were once" (LOL 13). This insight that a previous residence means something about a person's identity can only be possible if place means or gives something. When he revisits Haddam after he has moved to Sea Girt, he regrets that he feels unsanctioned by the place, even after denying that place has the capacity to confer anything upon a person.

As the novel progresses, the evidence amply reveals both Frank's lessening uncertainty about place and also his changes of heart, which end in an affirmation of the intense impact that place has upon him. By the end of the trilogy, Frank accepts and welcomes the fact that he identifies with his environment and that his environment stimulates and comforts him. Welty writes, "Place, then, has the most delicate control over character too: by confining character, it defines it" (122). This beautiful insight about the way place "controls" character helps explain Frank's transformation. At first, he does not feel "confined" by his place: he travels, he dreams, he observes, and he ponders. He feels undefined, because he is still ruminating on the best way to lead his

life; only at the end does he accept that his place defines him and his destiny. Place does have an impact on characters' identities and an effect on their feelings of belonging or alienation. The alienation of the suburbs is connected to rootlessness; a character like Frank can transplant himself to a new place by identifying with, reacting to, and belonging in it, even though it is not his native soil. Frank even begins thinking about where he might like to be buried, "since once you wander far from your own soil, you never know where your final resting place might be" (439).

Frank's mature realization about place and his concession to its role and importance in influencing and forming a character's identity and destiny bring the discourse back to Ford's decisive interview with Ulin. "'Place means nothing,' I wrote in *Independence Day*, he says with a rueful laugh." In the end, Ford concedes that "he now believes there must be some generative relationship [and some] interplay of character and landscape." Ford discovers, as he writes about Frank, that place is a fictional element of significance in the narrator's life in terms of richness, joy, sorrow, purpose, and disappointment. Ford also finds the "seam of optimism" that was his stated intention when he first set out to pay homage to New Jersey. By the end of the trilogy, even as Ford once denied the impact of place, so he now illuminates its primacy; he starts out a skeptic about the nature of place and, ironically, finds it determinative after all.

CHAPTER THREE: JUNOT DÍAZ

"Here is where I kissed my first girl."

Through an examination of three works by Junot Díaz, his novel, *The Brief, Wondrous World of Oscar Wao* (*Oscar*), and his two short-story collections, *Drown* (*Drown*) and *This Is How You Lose Her* (*How*), this chapter investigates the effect of dual places, the Dominican Republic and New Jersey, on the identity and destiny of Yunior, the narrator. It demonstrates that the impact of place on Yunior's destiny entails his determination to bear witness in his writing to immigrants' voices that have gone unheard, "to sing my community out of silence" (Messer). This chapter applies nine narrative elements to Díaz's craft in conveying place: point of view, hereness, detail, neighborhood, home, language and literature, metaphor, environment, and journey.

Junot Díaz's main understanding of his world is its duality. Uprooted from his first home in the Dominican Republic in 1974, he embraced central New Jersey, "my beloved second home" (Brand). He loves both places: "I can't imagine life without my 'roots.' Without Santo Domingo, without New Jersey, I simply would not exist and it means everything to me to keep them close to my heart, to spend . . . time in communion with these places" (*Splash*). He says, "My home country is really screwed up, politically, economically, socially, but I love the place" (*BookBrowse*).

Díaz recognizes that his two places, his two worlds, clash within him: "I have all these kind of weird worlds and all these kind of weird languages, and when I write it's the only place they come together" (Williams). He incorporates into his writing his two worlds, consisting of different languages and books and distinct cultures and

perspectives, to weave the various components into one whole. "I come from a super-gangster neighborhood in Santo Domingo . . . . I grew up super-poor next to the largest active landfill in the tri-state area" (Williams). Illiterate in English when he arrived, he scored well on tests and went to a school for gifted children. He declares, "I am an immigrant and I will stay an immigrant forever" (Guthman) and travels often to his birthplace. As an airline passenger says to one of the characters on a trip "home" to America, "Santo Domingo will always be there. It was there at the beginning and will be there at the end" (*Oscar* 210).

Díaz explains his relationship with New Jersey. Here, he says people "live a mile from the most important powerful metropolis in contemporary imagination but belong to the sector that is most ridiculed and ignored" (Williams). The contempt, based on lack of understanding, that some people hold for New Jersey is familiar to him because no one in his new world had ever heard of Santo Domingo. "New Jersey people are deeply colonized," by which he means they are vassals of New York City or Philadelphia. "I like New Jersey for what it is" (Williams). Growing up, Díaz suffered a hard life in both the Dominican Republic and in the "dystopic underbelly of New Jersey . . . . We lived in the designated low-income community zone on the periphery of the periphery," he tells Morales (120).

To express what it is like to live on the fringe, Díaz says, "New Jersey is an allegory for marginality" (Williams). Coming from this place, "no one would imagine I would be writing. I was a pissed off kid of color thinking people hate us. They all have more than me" (Solomita). Living on the "periphery of the periphery" represents displacement and exclusion for Díaz and for Yunior. Díaz often has to defend New

Jersey as a place, saying, "People think of New Jersey as 'a place of transit, temporary—an exit off the highway'" (Stewart). His remark recalls the volume called *What's Your Exit? A Literary Detour Through New Jer*sey, a collection of contemporary fiction, poetry, and essays. The title is based on a joke: when someone says he lives in New Jersey, the interlocutor asks, "Oh? What exit?" Díaz continues, "The New Jersey I write about isn't hidden. It just isn't the suburbs and isn't the turnpike or the Garden State" (Stewart). His sense of place and his settings are specific and recognizable; in fact, he says, "His editors in Manhattan told him, 'Make it not so New Jersey.' They said, 'Make it anywhere.' But it's not anywhere, he said. 'I love this state. New Jersey for me is so alive with history. It's old, dynamic, African-American, Latino'" (Stewart). He retained his image of the place intact and did not make the changes the editors suggested.

In an interview with Elizabeth Taylor, writer, critic, and Pulitzer Prize juror, a role Díaz assumed in 2010, he talks about his split persona as a migrant, his love for his dual settings, and his acute, immediate sense of his alternating places. "I have a very powerful sense of place, but I have a very powerful sense of being a migrant, so it is both. It seems like I'm always leaving my home. That's part of the formula." He continues, "I love the Dominican Republic. I go back all the time. I love New Jersey. I go back all the time. But . . . when I close my eyes and see home, it's both the Dominican Republic and New York City." Díaz finds it "strange the way we create our sense of place, [it is] very distributed" from all kinds of sources and different people and cultures" (Neiman). Díaz says place in his fiction has always been a given—New Jersey and the Dominican Republic and some New York City—so "from one perspective you could say that the place in my work always comes first" (Messer).

The following discussion isolates and explores nine elements in Díaz's narrative art for conveying "place." First, place represents point of view, perspective, and voice for the writer: it is where he stands and what he observes. Hemingway's objective was to show "the precise relationship between what he saw and what he felt" (Baker 55). Díaz chooses for his observer a young man about his age, Yunior de las Casas, who immigrated with his mother and brother to New Jersey when he was nine, rather than six, like Díaz, and who shares many facets of Díaz's biography. Both men were born in the Dominican Republic, moved to New Jersey to reunite with their fathers, lived near an enormous landfill, attended Rutgers, had a brother diagnosed with cancer, and became a writer and professor in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Díaz's nickname within his family and close friends is "Yunior." Díaz's mother's name is "Virtudes;" Yunior's mother's name is "Virta": both mean "virtue."

When asked whether Yunior is his alter ego, Díaz almost always answers "yes." Richard Wolinksy notes, "Yunior vacillates . . . toward the revelation that narrator and author are not necessarily distinct." In this exchange, Díaz denies that he and Yunior are one; in other interviews, however, he embraces Yunior as his alter ego: "Yunior is the most productive alter ego I've ever created" (Brand); "He is certainly an alter ego in some ways" (Lopate); and "He's my hypertonic alter ego" (Frangello). Díaz confirms his genre is fiction, but he enjoys toying with the reader about his identity. "It's true I play with autobiography, he says, but his work is not autobiographical . . . . The same way a memoir is also a kind of fiction" (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant). He continues, "No matter how much I tell people who I am, that only increases the tension of unknowability. The suspicion will always remain: he must be hiding something." And he is hiding

something. "People will want to fuse you to your fiction . . . . That is the beauty of fiction. We have unreliable narrators" (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant).

Most of Díaz's stories are told in the present tense and in the first person; Yunior describes his own experiences in central New Jersey and, in the case of *Oscar*, narrates Oscar's story partly from Yunior's perspective as Oscar's best friend and much of it from that of Oscar and his family members. In some of the stories, Díaz changes Yunior's point of view to second person, "not imperative, not epistolary, but rather a stand-in for the first person: you for I: This is how I do it" (Pearlman). Díaz uses the second person as a way to achieve some distance from the reader. He says, "It's really an interesting form because it allows for a certain cooling down" (Wolinsky). Critics agree in their enthusiasm for Díaz's "urgent, first-person voice" (Guthman) and his "profane, lyrical, learned, and tireless" voice (Scott).

In his article on point of view in American fiction, Ben Railton compares the narrators in Díaz's *Oscar* and Roth's *American Pastoral*. These narrators, Yunior de las Casas and Nathan Zuckerman, are both novelists, both "engage metatextually" (133) with the books they are writing about their title characters, and both know their characters personally; in other words, Díaz's Yunior has the same relationship with Oscar Cabral de León that Roth's Nathan Zuckerman does with Seymour Levov (134). Both are chronicling their characters' dreams of their American lives in New Jersey. Yunior's metatextual prologue concentrates on the concept of *fukú*, "the Curse and Doom of the New World," and describes his book about Oscar as a *zafa*, or counterspell (142). Nathan begins as first person narrator and later leaves Seymour to tell much of his story. Nathan's objective is to write "a realistic chronicle" of Seymour, whom he sees as a

representative of the American dream (143). Nathan says Seymour's was a "magical name" in his Newark high school and later refers to his "mystique" (144). Each character bonds with a mythological figure, Seymour to Johnny Appleseed, Oscar to a character from DC Comics, as the novelist-narrators imagine their characters living within the American dream.

Yunior's voice is original, dazzling, moving, and alive. David Lodge would have employed the term *skaz* to define Yunior's voice and its provenance: "*Skaz* is a rather appealing Russian word (suggesting 'jazz' and 'scat') used to designate a type of first-person narration that has the characteristics of the spoken rather than the written word" (18). In this form, in which the narrator addresses himself as "I" and the reader as "you," as Yunior does, the narration comes across as informal and colloquial. Two of Lodge's exemplars are Mark Twain's Huck Finn and J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield. No reader could forget reading the initial page of *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1951 for the first time and thrilling to the phrase "all that David Copperfield kind of crap." Less daring, but still new, was the period teenage slang with which Salinger endows Holden: "Strictly Ivy League"; "Big Deal"; "phony" (19); Lodge's discussion of sense of place reintroduces the term *skaz* with his example from Martin Amis. In the novel *Money*, John Self, the appositely named, egocentric narrator, uses a kind of slang, or *skaz*, in which the "key trope" is hyperbole (58). In Los Angeles, Self exaggerates, "The only way to get across the road is to be born there," sounding very much like Yunior.

Humor is a critical element in Yunior's voice. Díaz uses the term "hybrid" to describe the category of *Drown*, which is neither a novel nor a short story collection, "but something a little more hybrid, a little more creolized" (*BookBrowse*). Yunior's narrative

tone in *Oscar* presents an emotional hybrid, since he is funny and tragic at the same time. He says the challenge for him in *Oscar* was trying to compare *Zardoz,* a science-fiction fantasy film of 1974, to the dictatorship of Trujillo, while referring to many other genres and movements simultaneously. He says, "I wanted a narrative that could be [both] top-level hilarious and top-level heartbreaking" (*BookBrowse*). Díaz's style and his personality, recreated in Yunior, demand humor to react to a place that appears intolerable. Díaz's short story, "Monstro," published in *The New Yorker*, is a science-fiction tale about the appearance of a mysterious disease on the Island of Hispaniola and the way the self-centered, womanizing narrator, with a style akin to Yunior's, goes about confronting a national disaster; his colleague approaches the crisis from the point of view of financial gain. The story provides an example of Díaz's sense of humor, using irreverence and satire in an instance in which convention might deem it inappropriate.

In a note at the end of her article on "Monstro," comparing it to Alejando Brugués's film, *Juan the Dead* (2011), Sara Armengot comments on the "specifically Caribbean humor" of Brugués's use of the Cuban *choteo* and Díaz's adaptation of the popular Dominican tradition known as *dar cuerda*. As the Cuban writer and dissident Reinaldo Arenas demonstrates in his fiction, the most effective weapon against dictators is mordant humor or *choteo*; Arenas's humor applies to Cubans and Dominicans alike. "A sense of humor is fundamental, it's one of the gifts we have; if we lose our smile, we don't have anything . . . . With humor you evoke reality in a more disrespectful manner and therefore you can come closer to it without the distancing effect that is typical of all seriousness" (Soto 67). Through his sense of humor, expressed in mockery, satire, and

parody, Arenas is able to express his "anguish and love" for his country (Soto 45), echoing Díaz's sentiments and ideas.

Second, place represents "here." Place is a physical, psychological, and emotional presence; it is identity and immediacy. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare celebrates "hereness" in the discovery of the New World and "its palpable presence" (Leo Marx 47). When Prospero's shipwrecked party first explores the island, Gonzales says, "Here is everything advantageous to life" (Marx 46). An immigrant, catching a first glimpse of the American coast, might utter such words. Bill Moyers recognizes Díaz's immediacy in his prose and calls him "a spotter of the future, a curator of the past, a man very much of the here-and-now." Díaz describes Yunior's voice in *Drown* as possessing "a rawness, an immediacy" (Frangello).

When Yunior immigrated to America at age nine to a ghetto near a landfill in Parlin, his life was still "there" in his old home; he felt no "hereness" in his new home in New Jersey for a time. His ancestors and his past resided in his first home, there in the Dominican Republic; as a teenager, he begins to formulate memories of this new place, here in New Jersey: "Everything that catches in my headlights, the stack of old tires, signs, shacks, has a memory scratched onto it. Here's where I shot my first pistol. Here's where we stashed our porn magazines. Here's where I kissed my first girl" (*Drown* 58).

In other examples of "hereness," when Yunior's Papi leaves his family and comes alone to America, a veteran migrant tries to cheer him with hope for the future: "You get your familia over here and buy yourself a nice house and start branching out. That's the American way" (*Drown* 190). In the Dominican Republic, Yunior and his brother are

very poor, do not have enough to eat, suffer worms annually, can't afford the fees for school uniforms at the Mauricio Baez School, have one pencil each, and confront rats in the barrio. "The only way we could have been poorer was to live in the campo or to have been Haitian immigrants" (70). Their mother works "ten- to twelve-hour shifts for almost no money" (71). During summers, when they visit relatives in the *campo*, they say to the other children, "We're not from around here. We can't drink the water" (15). They don't belong in that neighborhood. Back in New Jersey, a woman migrant says, "Most of people I know in the States have no friends here; they're crowded together in apartments. Another woman tries not to think of home and her children: 'This is how [she] survives here, how she keeps from losing her mind over her children. How in part we all survive here'" (*How* 67).

Francine Prose recognizes the "hereness," the present, in the way Díaz's writes: "No one else has conveyed, with quite such immediacy, the experience of Dominican Americans inhabiting two countries and two cultures without feeling entirely at home in either." She uses the word "immediate" again, later in the review: Díaz describes himself as being, "like his characters, still the kid who grew up in his New Jersey neighborhood**.** It seems important to him to establish that his connection with the raw material of his fiction is immediate, personal, and deeply felt rather than distanced and nostalgic." For Díaz and Yunior, life is not in the past; life is happening in the present, here and now. José Antonio Burciaga knows about "hereness"; he is a poet of the border region with Mexico. In his poem from "El Juan from Sanjo," Burciaga writes: *Sabes que, ese*? [dude] / I'm a loco from the word go, / In the purest sense of the word *loco*, / From the Latin, / Loco citato, / The place cited, / I know my place, *ese*, / I know my

location, / My station / *Es aqui*! [It is here!] (Morales 119). The poet knows his place, by which he suggests the subordinate place in which people perceive him as an alien, an Other. For Dominicans, the new social climate is harsh, making the immigrants feel foreign and like people from another planet.

Third, place is detailed and precise, not generic or vague. Dorothy Van Ghent writes about fiction: "The general meaning of the scene is dependent wholly upon particularity or embodiment" (5). Jeffrey Brown remarks that *Oscar*, a familiar tale about an immigrant family, becomes "a very particular kind of family with a particular history." Díaz responds, "The universal springs from the particular." He refers to *Moby Dick*, one of his favorite books: "the particularity of it, the specificity of it, is in some ways what lends its power." Díaz is specific in his precise portrayals of people and place, its scenes and surroundings, and also in his depictions of the mundane local landscape: the dump, the roads, highways, routes, bus stops, malls, diners, trailer parks, electronics stores, and names thereof. Yunior pinpoints places in his life like the Crossroads, the bar and restaurant in Garwood (*How* 3); the specific exit, 125, for South Amboy off the Garden State (34); the school bus route, 516 (34); and the Woodbridge mall (4). Yunior relates that at one time Oscar has a putative girlfriend whom he meets at a mall on Edgewater Road, where Oscar buys his anime tapes and mecha models and which "he now considered part of their landscape, something to tell their children about" (*Oscar* 48). These local details add color and meaning to the milieu. Díaz's novels are not "exotic"; he renders "in detail and tone an America that is more recognizable by the day" (Villalon). Díaz portrays America as a country in which characters "have a foot in two countries, in which familiarity with two cultures and languages is common, in which

working for a living and coming up short is the wider reality and pigeonholing people is futile but still pervasive" (Villalon). Rather than oversimplifying or compartmentalizing, Díaz finds and conveys the characters' specificity, their uniqueness, and their humanity.

Oscar, overweight, shy, introverted, awkward with girls, and an incipient writer, is not a prototypical Dominican male. His romantic nature yearns for girls though he is unsuccessful in his pursuits. Yunior reports, "Patterson was girls the way Santo Domingo was girls, and if that wasn't enough for you . . . then roll south and there'd be Newark, Elizabeth, Jersey City, the Oranges, Union City . . . an urban swath known to niggers everywhere as Negrapolis One" (*Oscar* 26). When Oscar returns as a substitute teacher to Don Bosco Tech, his school in Paterson, Yunior reports the details of his friend's daily trial: "Every day he watched the 'cool' kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminine, the gay—and in every one of these clashes he saw himself" (*Oscar* 264). Yunior depicts the sense of place, the sounds, smells, and sights, of the world of Latino immigrants' children—"the strip malls of Route 9; the refrigerator with its embarrassing Government cheese; the utility room with an oil-splotched floor" (Stewart). Yunior, describing preparations for inviting a girl over, advises his reader, "Clear the government cheese from the refrigerator . . . take down any embarrassing photos of your family in the campo, especially the one with the half-naked kids dragging a goat on a rope leash . . ." (*Drown* 143). Before Oscar attends Rutgers with Yunior, he lives with his mother and sister in Paterson, which was a magnet for immigrant laborers coming to work in its factories.

Several Latina writers who immigrated to New Jersey describe in their fiction the situation in Paterson. Patricia Engel is a child of Colombian immigrants whom Díaz salutes in his acknowledgments for *Oscar*. In the story "Lucho" from the collection *Vida*, Sabina says, "We were foreigners, spics, in a town of blancos. There's tons of Latinos in New Jersey, but somehow we ended up in the one town that only kept them as maids" (3). In Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Line of the Sun*, for which she received a Pulitzer Prize nomination in 1989, immigrants settle in El Building, a Puerto Rican tenement. The family fits into neither white nor Latino society. Their neighbors cook rice and beans, recreating their lives on the Island, "except that here in Paterson, in the cold rooms stories above the frozen ground, the smells and sounds of a lost way of life could only be a parody" (223). The themes in these two works—displacement and insularity—are familiar to the characters in Díaz's fiction.

In an interview with Diógenes Céspedes and Silvio Torres-Saillant, the latter compliments Díaz's use of details that evoke place through sense of touch. He says, "Your handling of language strikes me as rather special. I have elsewhere noted the plasticity of your text, its tangibility." He continues that Díaz's language has the power to "communicate emotions and states of mind through concrete images and vivid scenes . . . not in ideas but in things." He is quoting William Carlos William's epic poem *Paterson*: "Say it, not in ideas but in things— / nothing but the blank faces / of the houses / and cylindrical trees / bent . . . ." When Díaz began writing screenplays at Cornell, he learned how to deal with "concrete images and externalities." His latter expression evokes the pebble-in-the-pond, ripples spreading out the meaning, which effect arises from choosing the perfect detail.

The value of accumulating precise detail is closely connected with truth or verisimilitude in the art of fiction writing. Without intending to say that one genre is better than another, Díaz believes human experience is so complex in its "real and strange multidimensionality" that a novel captures the truth better than nonfiction. A writer can create something that is entirely fictitious, yet "it produces all sorts of knowledge and insight that wouldn't be accessible if it wasn't for this lie. In other words, this lie produces a whole bunch of truths" (Williams). Ishmael agrees: "It is not down on any map; true places never are" (*Moby Dick* 57). In Welty's cogent and elegant thoughts on place in fiction, she explains what she means when she writes, "Fiction is a lie. Never in its inside thoughts, always in its outside dress" (119). Through the evocation of place the writer must make the reader believe the story: "The world of appearance in the novel has got to *seem* actuality" (121). She reaches her crescendo: "The moment the place in which the novel happens is accepted as true, through it will begin to glow, in a kind of recognizable glory, the feeling and thought that inhabited the novel in the author's head and animated the whole of his work" (121).

Fourth, place is a neighborhood, an essential part of the local landscape. Dorothy Van Ghent, in an assessment of *Adam Bede*, writes that in fiction "the community can be the protagonist" (177); this concept can be applied to Parlin and its environs. The stories in *Drown*, Díaz says, are "deeply about family, and what it means to be part of a community" (Morales 121). The reader becomes familiar with "the Dominican enclave in New Jersey: its apartments, its generational conflicts, its parties, its longing, its stubborn hopefulness, its habits of ruinous infidelity and promiscuity" (Pearlman). Díaz's craft lies in the supple and fluent way he conveys his neighborhood, showing

diverse readers a side of New Jersey he knows has not been deeply explored. He enables "his gringo audience to spend time in neighborhoods that in the past they might have sped through, on their way somewhere else" (Prose). In his conversation with Moyers, Díaz says, "We take great pride in our collectivity . . . . Listen, I come from this community. In this community we have pride. In this community we try to help each other." He is talking about neighborhoods, community activism, and grassroots efforts, when he says, "The biggest megaphones want to talk about the person on top . . . there are all these other little megaphones that are telling you and whispering that 'This is beauty, this is humanity, this is America.' And sometimes some of us have to listen to those lower whispers." For Díaz, novels are authentic if they concern human experience, particularly the attribute of compassion. "Yunior has to write. In other words, to write a fucking good book you don't need lots of talent; what you need is more humanity . . . or what we would call sympathy or compassion" (Fassler).

Yunior provides a vivid view of his neighborhood from the main boulevard in Parlin, from which only a tiny wafer of ocean is visible. The housing projects are a shambles, with many of the buildings unfinished and looking, in one of Yunior's compelling images, like ships of brick that have run aground, and barely any grass grows:

> From the top of Westminster, our main strip, you could see the thinnest sliver of ocean cresting the horizon to the east. The ocean might have made us feel better, considering what else there was to see. London Terrace itself was a mess; half the buildings still needed their wiring and in the evening these structures sprawled about like ships of brick that had

> run aground. Mud followed gravel everywhere and the grass, planted late in the fall, poked out of the snow in dead tufts. (*How* 121)

Yunior, who plays truant, gambles, and sells dope, among other activities and transgressions, magnifies another aspect of the neighborhood. He and his friends are youngsters who commit dangerous and irresponsible acts, like starting fires; who endanger their health with drugs; who waste their time because they see no point to anything; whose playground is the dump; and whose parents' lives are too overwhelmed with reality, poverty, and worry to oversee them. Here is the way they use their neighborhood:

> The corner's where you smoke, eat, fuck, where you play selo. Selo games like you've never seen. I know brothers who make two, three hundred a night on the dice . . . . We're all under the big streetlamps, everyone's the color of day-old piss . . . . The Pathfinder sits in the next parking lot, crusty with mud but still a slamming ride. I'm in no rush; I take it out behind the apartment, onto the road that leads to the dump. This was our spot when we were younger, where we started fires we sometimes couldn't keep down. Whole areas around the road are still black. (*Drown* 57-58)

Army recruiters roam the neighborhood looking for prospects. It is no coincidence that the U.S. Army recruited Díaz's nephews into the military, both of whom were deployed to Iraq. Says Yunior, "I keep an eye out for the recruiter who prowls our neighborhood in his dark K-car" (*Drown* 100). Yunior, like Díaz, knows where the library is. "Being truant . . . I watched a lot of TV and when it got boring I trooped down

to the mall or the Sayreville library, where you could watch old documentaries for free. I always came back to the neighborhood late, so the bus wouldn't pass me on Ernston and nobody could yell 'Asshole!' out the windows" (*Drown* 102).

Oscar teaches at Don Bosco, his old school in Paterson, where he used to live. Had anything changed? Yunior asks rhetorically. "Negro, please," Oscar answers sarcastically. Yunior's vernacular typically contains literary or genre allusions:

> Certainly the school struck Oscar as smaller now, and the older brothers all seemed to have acquired the Innsmouth 'look' [H. P. Lovecraft's hybrid race] in the past five years, and there were a grip more kids of color—but some things (like white supremacy and people-of-color self-hate) never change: the same charge of gleeful sadism that he remembered from his youth still electrified the halls. And if he'd thought Don Bosco had been the moronic inferno [Martin Amis's critique of America] when he was young—try now that he was teaching English and history. (*Oscar* 264)

Oscar experiences a different neighborhood when he travels with his mother one summer to Santo Domingo. Yunior's striking sense of the Dominican place is conveyed through palpable sensations like the burning heat on skin, the vegetative smell, the sound of peddler's purveying their wares, the Proustian reference to the memorable taste of the "madeleine," the press of people, the noise of the broken-down trucks, and the hustle mixed with the languorous pace:

> The beat-you-down heat was the same, and so was the fecund tropical smell that he had never forgotten, that to him was more evocative than any madeleine, and likewise the air pollution and the thousands of motos and cars and dilapidated trucks on the roads and the clusters of peddlers at every traffic light . . . and people walking languidly with nothing to shade them from the sun . . .

A war scene intervenes. It is a battle for life, with buses looking like ambulances carrying bodies, bombed-out buildings, starvation, poverty, devastation, and the harsh alliteration of "crumbled crippled concrete":

> . . . and the buses that charged past so overflowing with passengers that from the outside they looked like they were making a rush delivery of spare limbs to some far-off war and the general ruination of so many of the buildings as if Santo Domingo was the place that crumbled crippled concrete shells came to die—and the hunger on some of the kids' faces, can't forget that . . . (*Oscar* 273)

In one story, Yunior travels to the Island with a friend who is visiting his girlfriend and his putative baby in a remote place of unimaginable poverty: "Squatter chawls where there are no roads, no lights, no running water, no grid, no anything, where everybody's slapdash house is on top of everybody else's, where it's all mud and shanties and motos and grind and thin smiling motherfuckers everywhere without end, like falling

off the rim of civilization" (*How* 203). The "rim of civilization" evokes Díaz's earlier recurring image of immigrants' surviving on the utmost fringe, the "periphery of the periphery" (Morales 120).

Back in New Jersey, Yunior's neighborhood inevitably changes as the fortunes of the residents change. From the Laundromat at the mini mall on Ernston Road, Yunior and a friend walk back "through the old neighborhood, slowed down by the bulk of our clothes. London Terrace has changed now that the landfill has shut down. Kicked-up rents and mad South Asian people and whitefolks living in the apartments, but it's our kids you see in the streets and hanging from the porches" (*How* 42). Prices are going up. "The Banglas and the Pakistanis are moving in." A few years later, his mother moves too, up to the Bergenline in Union City (*How* 171).

Fifth, place is a house, an apartment, or Section 8 public housing, known as the projects. It is home. For some immigrants, moving from one milieu to another "is a displacement from one place, home, to another place, home, in which one feels at home in both places, yet at home in neither place" (Morales 7). For Yunior and for Oscar, both New Jersey and the Dominican Republic are home. After a snowfall in New Jersey, Yunior reports, "That night I dreamed of home, that we'd never left . . . . Learning to sleep in new places was an ability you were supposed to lose as you grew older, but I never had it. The building was only now settling into itself; the tight magic of the just-hammered-in nail was finally relaxing" (*How* 135). The "tight magic" of the new nail slowly "relaxing" and expanding in its place in the new lumber is an idiosyncratic image of the building's interior construction making itself at home, just as Yunior tries to become acclimated to a new and unreal setting.

Immigrants ask themselves where, or what, is home. While Oscar is in the Dominican Republic, he refuses "to succumb to that whisper that all immigrants carry inside themselves, the whisper that says, *You do not belon*g" (Oscar 276). When the Dominican officials torture Oscar, the shock of pain shoots him back home in his imagination to New Jersey. He feels as though he is falling straight for Route 18 in New Brunswick, his other home. This is the place where he, his sister Lola, and his best friend, Yunior, travel frequently on the E Bus on Commercial Avenue, from which they could see the lights of Route 18. After Oscar insists upon returning to the Dominican Republic, Ybón, the woman he loves, is nervous for his safety and begs him to go home**.** She sends him a letter: "I don't want you to end up hurt or dead. Go home." He responds, "But beautiful girl, above all beautiful girls, this is my home." She answers, "Your real home, mi amor?" "A person can't have two?" he asks (*Oscar* 318). This poignant and piquant question underlies Díaz's meditation on the effects of immigration.

For most people, owning a house symbolizes the American Dream. The intense belief for Dominicans is that "To own a house in this country is to begin to live" (*How* 69). In one story, the housing market is striated with racism and ethnic tension. "Few people will sell to us," says one disheartened character (63); the only houses available to Hispanics are in terrible condition. The women in another story have come to New Jersey alone and can barely survive, because they are separated from and miss their children. They compare their condition to "sleepwalkers" (68). Many of these women do not survive: they "have moved on or gone home" (75), to the other home. One of the narrator's workmates is unhappy; she assumes the woman misses her son or the father,

"Or our whole country, which you never think of until it's gone, which you never love until you are no longer there" (6). The Dominican Republic will always be there.

Sixth, place is language. When Díaz arrived in New Jersey at age six, he spoke no English. While Díaz speaks English well now, it is not natural for him. He says "learning English is such a violent experience for a kid" (Celayo and Shook). One of the difficulties of learning English is that, "When you are an immigrant," he says, "you wonder all the time about whether you are making a mistake or misusing an idiom or something like that" (Williams). In any analysis of Díaz's work, the first characteristic generally seized upon by the critics is the brilliant, multi-ethnic, hilarious, and original language Díaz creates for Yunior to employ. The attributes affixed to his language form a lengthy list: Spanish; English; Spanglish; argot; vernacular; idiom; hip-hop; skaz; urban slang; Dominican slang; vulgarity; profanity; and journalism. Kakutani refers to "flash words," "razzle-dazzle talk," and "magpie language" ("Travails"). Allusions abound in his language to the science-fiction and comic-book popular culture. Díaz explains, "I was trying to see how far I could push English to the edge of disintegration, but still be, for the large part, entirely coherent" (Celayo and Shook). The novelist Francisco Goldman calls Díaz's language "a revelation, the very soul of a new identity. It is Díaz's own, but also that of a new kind of 'American'" (Bures).

Ed Morales examines the meaning of Spanglish and the way Yunior uses it to convey place: "Spanglish can't escape the idea of new space, of movement, just as the literal cognate of translate, *trasladar*, in Spanish, means to move to a new place" (119). He finds "Spanglish" a more useful term than "Latino" to express what constitutes a mixed-race culture. "Spanglish is a feeling, an attitude that is quintessentially American"

(11). At the root of the phenomenon of Spanglish is a universal state of being, which is connected to being displaced, having two homes, feeling at home in both places, "yet at home in neither place" (7). Latinos in the United States are descended from a large group of mixed-race people and positioned to be "primary proponents of multiracial America's future" (9). Díaz is a leader in the literature of this movement. Morales sees in Díaz's career the "assimilation/return to the roots experience" that is replicated in many Spanish arts careers (56); that is, Latino/a artists are assimilating into the American culture and making use of their home cultures as well.

Some critics note Díaz's use of "code-switching," the practice of alternating between two or more vernaculars in conversation, which can be "an expansion of communicative and expressive potential" (113); Morales believes, however, that the most striking feature of Díaz's language is not only code-switching but his measured use of Spanglish: "a direct, unapologetic injection of Spanish into an English narrative" (119). Díaz possesses "a riveting conversational voice that is not afraid to drop hip-hop, Spanish, or old school New Yorkese" (120). Díaz was almost assimilated in middle school in New Jersey, but resisted it enough to concoct "a voice that combines Spanglish urban dialect with Caribbean tin shack realism" (120).

Díaz says his writing is taken "directly from the Dominican experience, which is simply an extension of the larger African diaspora" (Morales 120). He lived in a low-income corner of Parlin, New Jersey, but was bused to Oakridge, an elite elementary school in Old Bridge, which probably allowed Díaz to keep his own voice. Díaz has wide appeal, with many different categories of readers: he has drawn an unusual audience, "a bizarre meeting point between *New Yorker* gentility and ghetto poetics"

(122). His way of describing the bleak peripheral existence of suburban people of color is "groundbreaking" (122). Using all the tools at his disposal, Díaz successfully transmits and illuminates his place in New Jersey. Pointing out that Díaz's characters are almost entirely drawn from the lower classes, Morales wonders whether publishers consider these characters "more authentic." Díaz says he chooses characters from the "lower classes" because those are the people in his life and in his place, the people for whom it is natural to speak a mélange of English, Spanish, urban English, nerdish, and a couple of other idioms; without these, their lives would be "inauthentic. We do not live in a monolingual world and neither do my characters" (*Splash*). He does not translate his Spanish words for the reader because he is not a "native informant." He is not dictating to the reader, like a first-grade teacher, "This is Dominican for food. This is a Spanish word. I trust my readers, even the non-Spanish ones" (Stewart).

Díaz's language "exchanged the standard diction of traditional fiction for the flashier, jazzier location of the urban barrio, with just enough Spanish to convey the flavor and rhythm of a hybrid language and without mystifying or excluding English-speaking readers" (Prose). Díaz's choice of an epigraph by Gustavo Perez Firmat for *Drown* expresses the way Díaz feels about writing and speaking in English. "The fact that I / am writing to you / in English / already falsifies what I / wanted to tell you. / My subject: / how to explain to you that I / don't belong in English / although I belong nowhere else." David Gates says about the quotation, "That's as good a history of American literature as you're apt to find in ten words." Firmat's ambivalence exhibits once again the two-worlds, two-places syndrome in Díaz's writing. For him, "every

word involves a choice between past and present, *campo* and barrio, *mercado* and mall" (Prose).

Another way to speak, to use language to convey place, is through the medium of silence. Willa Cather describes silence: "Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there . . . the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it . . ." (*On Writing* 41). Díaz's motives for using silence are emotional, political, and cultural: "I find in the culture silences, places people don't want to talk, and I build on them." He continues, "What we have gotten in lieu of conversation is mostly silence, a terrible corrosive silence" (Moyers). He wants to help readers probe the silent spaces and look for the meaning in their dual lives. This use of silence is the subject of an article by Kristof Peleman et al., which the authors call the "reading between the lines" of Díaz's work. Díaz tells them, "The most important things are the things I don't say" (3). He challenges readers to look beyond stereotypes, to examine their own "framing devices in order . . . to consider the possibility beyond those frames" (5). He wants them to question whether all Dominican men are macho, for example, or all white boys science-fiction fanatics. Or, putting it another way, "Díaz silently challenges the categories people associate you with. Are you cool? Or are you a nerd?" (7).

For a mute, emotional effect on a character, Díaz depicts the image of the burn scar on Oscar's mother's body, "as vast and inconsolable as a sea" (*Oscar* 51). Caused by terrible abuse, the disfigurement offers a silent reminder of the "pain and loss that any immigrant, either of African or Dominican descent, has to go through" (Peleman 6). From his political point of view, Díaz is illustrating the fear and resulting silence that

surrounds a dictatorship: "The regime did not allow anything to be written about the dictator or the dictatorship" (Peleman 9). Díaz challenges his readers to look for and fill in silences about places and events where they have never ventured: "as writers we're seeking absences, we're seeking silences, we're seeking spaces that people haven't entered" (Wolinksy). He believes the reader has the sensibility to interpret the silence, "the things that the characters don't say, the gaps between people's sentences, the ellipses between what we feel, what we see, and what we recognize" (Lewis). He chooses not to use quotation marks for dialogue because some parts of what the characters say can be imagined rather than spoken: "the way memory works in my stories has everything to do with why there could easily be confusion between the spoken word and the imagined word" (Lewis). In these cases, Díaz is not interested in whether the character says the words or thinks them; the reader will hear them anyway.

Díaz's passion for science fiction and its relevance to his language relates to his discussion about silence with Edwidge Danticat, the Haitian-American writer and critic. He explains, "so much of our experience as Caribbean Diasporic peoples . . . exists in silence." He grew up "bookish and smart" in a poor urban community in central New Jersey: "Time-travel made sense to me because how else do I explain how I got from Villa Juana, from latrines and no lights, to Parlin, NJ, to MTV and a car in every parking space?" Science fiction offers a meaningful analogy because his "community has been a victim of a long-term breeding project . . . that was one component of slavery; we were systematically bred for hundreds of years." This topic has attracted science fiction writers since its inception; he gives the example of H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor*

Moreau. He knows that a silence exists: "In mainstream literary fiction nobody's really talking about breeding experiments."

As a genre nerd, Díaz loves Jack Kirby's *The Watcher*, about a fictional extraterrestrial race; his favorite villain is Darkseid, who played many roles in DC Comics, including acting as the archenemy of Superman. Darkseid's main power is the Omega Effect; he can vaporize a person until he chooses to resurrect him: "Now if that's not a basic dictator power I don't know what is," says Díaz. Danticat responds, "I think dictators want to silence writers because they want to be the only ones speaking." Díaz observes that Trujillo's real writing was "done on the flesh and psyches of the Dominican people." This image resonates with a piercing echo of Kafka's "The Penal Colony," in which the execution device gouges out the condemned prisoner's sentence upon his naked flesh. Díaz knows the "emptiness and silence and abstinence in the historical record of the Caribbean" (Neiman). The fear people had of speaking shaped his distrust of politeness, "a form of silencing" (Williams).

Danticat wonders whether there is any backlash from critics or readers over Díaz's profuse use of the "N-word." He responds that he sees a clear distinction between "representing" a word and "endorsing" it. He says Dominicans are "perpetually singled out whenever there's a discussion of self-hatred and black denial" and argues that those sentiments are inaccurate: Dominicans have the highest rate among people of color of identifying themselves as "of African descent." Díaz's profanity does not appear to be a problem to most critics. In passing press interviews, Díaz often speaks colloquially and, sometimes, profanely; in his intellectual, thoughtful, and serious exchange with, for

example, his fellow-Dominicans Céspedes and Torres-Saillant, his responses are unfailingly elevated and formal.

In an article about "textual territory and narrative power," Richard Patteson draws a metaphorical comparison between language and space, or place, and the power of the "single voice." In *Oscar*, for example, Yunior's narration both challenges and exercises authority: "the act of telling is itself an exercise of power" (5). Díaz explores "the writer's ability to exercise power over the space he commands through his narration." Patteson explains that the Spanish *dedr*, to tell, and the English and Spanish words for "dictator" share the same Latin root. Yunior creates a "textual space"—Dominican and American—in which he combines English, Spanish, street slang, "fanboy jargon, and the jargon of the academy" (7). When Yunior addresses the reader, "Negro [or the more extreme form], please—this ain't a fucking comic book!," he shows he is in control. Patteson also discusses "the silences and the blankness imposed by colonial authority"; Yunior often refers to the "blank pages in the history of a society, a family, or an individual" (15). For Yunior, "the text represents, among other things, life; the book he writes is an effort to fill the blank left by Oscar's death" (16). Díaz is fully aware of how many stories about the power of place are left untold; his goal as a writer is to fill in some of these spaces and represent some of these voices.

Seventh, place is a metaphor. One overriding metaphor in Díaz's fiction is the comparison of an immigrant to an alien, an Other, one who does not belong. Díaz also uses "prepackaged metaphors" to communicate what is impossible to express. In the case of Trujillo, for example, a contemporary reader cannot really grasp what a dictator like Trujillo meant to his victims—what it was like for one person to have "such extreme

power" (Ali). Thus, when Yunior calls Trujillo a Sauron, he compares him to the tyrannical antagonist in Tolkein's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Yunior compares living in Santo Domingo during the Trujillato to "being in that famous Twilight Zone episode . . . where the monstrous white kid with the godlike powers rules over a town that is completely isolated from the rest of the world . . ." (*Oscar* 224). The "prepackaged metaphor" allows the reader to comprehend the enormity through the comparison (Ali).

Aside from genre fiction, the imagery in Díaz's language, is rich, poetic, and evocative of the grim nature of the local landscape and its effect on the characters. His own neighborhood is "sickly," colorless," and "old": "The dump has long since shut down, and grass has spread over it like a sickly fuzz, and from where I stand, my right hand directing a colorless stream of piss downward, the landfill might be the top of a blond head, square and old" (*Drown* 99). In another scene, Yunior and his girlfriend are out for a walk in which discarded glass bottles dominate the view: "We head down a road for utility vehicles, where beer bottles grow out of the weeds like squashes" (*Drown* 60). The winter weather, hard to endure for a boy from the Tropics, brings punishing, filthy frigidity: "The cold clamped down on my head like a slab of wet dirt." He and a friend drive to Perth Amboy, where nature is cold and uninteresting: "The cattails on the banks of the Raritan were stiff and the color of sand" (*How* 127). In a dismal description of Santo Domingo, amongst the "battered cars, the battered motorcycles, the battered trucks, and battered buses," he does catch a glimpse of the sea, "like shredded silver" (*Oscar* 9).

Díaz's imagery about place and its effect upon human misery is powerful and distinctive. One migrant woman who has come by herself to New Jersey says, "I was so

alone that every day was like eating my own heart" (*How* 55). Yunior exhibits tenderness as he watches his overworked Mami falling asleep: "Her eyelids tremble, a quiet semaphore" (*Drown* 107). A woman who works in the hospital laundry reads the bloody marks on the sheets like tea leaves: "I never see the sick; they visit me through the stains and marks they leave on the sheets, the alphabet of the sick and dying" (*How* 54-55). When Yunior sees a letter from a girl he once loved and betrayed, "Magda's handwriting still blasted every molecule of air out of my lungs" (*How* 25). His brother Rafa's dying of cancer was an impassable road, "a long dark patch of life like a mile of black ice waiting for me up ahead" (*How* 38). In his apartment in New Brunswick, which he shares with his boys, he listens to the ambulances tear down his street. He could hear from his window the trains from Princeton Junction "braking . . . a gnash just south of my heart" (*How* 86), as though the trains were grinding their teeth in rage. The brothers try to help their Mami learn English, experimenting with the way the foreign words reverberate. "Just tell me, she said, and when we pronounced the words slowly, forming huge, lazy soap bubbles of sound, she never could duplicate them" (*How* 124).

Besides language, place is literature, intertextuality, and allusion. The fount for literature is a library. Before Díaz came to New Jersey, he had never seen or been in a library. The librarian at Madison Park Grammar School speaks no Spanish, but she makes it clear to this illiterate little boy that he could take out any book he wanted. The first book he pulls out was a child's version of a Sherlock Holmes story and "I never looked back" (Moyers). As an immigrant child, he is both stunned and inordinately proud of this opportunity in his American experience to learn: "This is part of our civic resources. This belongs to all of us" (Moyers). As a child at the New Brunswick Free

Public Library, he finds books about inner-city streets and barrios: "I'd be so many times sitting here chilling" (Stewart). He is a reader from the very beginning, though this pastime is not a part of the popular culture. "Even as a kid, when it was definitely not cool to read, he was a hybrid: hanging out with his buddies but also frequenting the New Brunswick Public Library and devouring books" (Guthman). Díaz says, "Reading was a form of consolation for a Dominican immigrant kid, a way to approach language in the quiet of my own head without people ridiculing me. Reading was something that spoke to a deep part of me" (*Splash*). He says that a part of him is still wondering how it was that a Dominican kid like him left his island and came to New Jersey. He attributes some of his dependence on reading to his search for the answers to his questions about who he is and what New Jersey is. Perhaps "books would not only explain this new place but would explain me" (Barnet). He acknowledges that, like Oscar, he also loved to read science fiction, fantasy, horror, and pulps. Reading was "my escape from my father and my neighborhood" (*BookBrowse*).

At Rutgers, Díaz discovers "a totally different world of literature with the power to transform lives . . . to intervene in larger questions of society" (Wolinsky). Some of the most important writers for him at that time were Toni Morrison, Sandra Cisneros, Leslie Marmon Silko, Maxine Hong Kingston, and William Gibson—an admirable rainbow coalition. Classical literary allusions, as well as genre references, suffuse his fiction. While Díaz is at Rutgers, he takes a class on James Joyce, which suggests *Ulysses* as one of the models for his abundant use of intertextuality. In his interview with Brown, Díaz says the title of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* pays homage to Hemingway ("The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber") and to the poet, "['Wao'] is

a mishearing of 'Oscar Wilde.'" He salutes "Bartleby the Scrivener" by describing his recalcitrant girlfriend: "A lot of time she Bartlebys me, says no, I'd rather not" (*How* 7). His frame of reference is extravagant. In *Oscar*, to cite only a fraction of his allusions, he refers to both Caliban and his mother, Sycorax, ugly outsiders also from an island; "a terrible beauty is born," recalling another revolution (Yeats 91); and, again, Melville, "Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?, a mad man, or woman in this case, going after his prey" (*Moby Dick* 95). Several critics point out the echo of the last line of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, "The horror!" in Oscar's final words, "The beauty!" (Céspsedes).

Díaz is an unreserved fan of Melville's *Moby Dick.* He describes with glee the multiethnic nature of *The Pequod*. "In Captain Ahab's whaling crew, men of every race are thrown together in pursuit of the elusive and the mythical." Díaz sees this as a parable of America then and now. "I didn't expect it to be so contemporary" (Moyers). "I had grown up in a place called London Terrace, New Jersey, where the guy down the street was Uruguayan, the woman across the street was Korean, the person around the corner was Egyptian. There were Dominicans. There were African Americans. There were white folks. And I felt like we were growing up in this tiny little *Pequod* . . . this real diverse kind of ship." He delights in Melville's vision and foresight: "At a metaphorical level, he's describing in many ways the stupendous diversity of the American character. And sort of how we live together, how we work together, and how like a ship a nation must have a common purpose" (Moyers).

Several critics note resemblances in Díaz's fiction to Philip Roth's—the mixture of gentleness and profanity; the similarity of first-person narrator-novelists; the stories linked by the same narrator; the challenge of racial tension; and the game of disguising

the identity of the narrator. "More than half these stories . . . are virtuosic, command performances that mine the deceptive, lovelorn hearts of men with the blend of tenderness, comedy, and vulgarity of early Philip Roth" (Daley). The relationship of Díaz's Yunior to Oscar is comparable to that of Roth's Nathan to Seymour (Railton). "Díaz is surely picking up the pieces of Yunior's life and converting them into a multi-volume tale not unlike Philip Roth's Nathan Zuckerman" (Barrios). "As a writer describing oppression and ethnic tension, his work aligns with Zora Neal Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Philip Roth" (Finn). Philip M. Stephens calls his review of *Oscar*, "Goodbye, Columbus," recalling the explorer, the messenger of Curse and Doom, as well as Roth's title. Díaz himself attributes one of his techniques to an influence from Philip Roth. "There is a game he played with readers that is wondrous, man [the game of who the narrator is] . . . . He's a Jersey boy—a bad boy, a very bad boy. But with an astonishing commitment to the fucking craft" (Kachka).

The most significant genre for Díaz while growing up, as well as in writing his stories, remains science fiction. Coming from a 1970s Third World country to New Jersey was like traveling in a time machine (Wolinsky). Oscar's love of the genre came from "abruptly wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey—a single green card shifting not only worlds (Third to First) but centuries (from almost no TV or electricity to plenty of both" (*Oscar* 21-22). Oscar reads a lot of science fiction—writers like Lovecraft, Wells, and Asimov—and is obsessed with anime and manga, Japanese animation and comics. Díaz had end-of-the-world visions growing up in the Reagan years, in which everyone, especially children, feared a nuclear blast. "It was 1985. You were sixteen years old and . . . like totally utterly convinced—that the world was going to blow itself to pieces"

(*How* 151). New Jersey "was in the third ring of the concentric rings of destruction" (Bures). As he was growing up, he developed an overweening interest in "apocalyptic narrative," as illustrated by his story, "Monstro," about a dystopian occurrence on the Island of Haiti.

The science fiction component for the unconventional fiction Díaz is producing is a key ingredient to his success and acceptability as a writer: when writing about the Dominican Diasporic experience, "to hew too closely to the canonical ideal of what literature is would limit you." He believes that often the only way to describe his life, "the 'surreality' and 'irreality' of some of the things that people like myself have experienced—is through lenses like science fiction" (Lewis). He says when a reader is transported to a place like central New Jersey, "the narrative that would logically be most useful would be not only space travel—traveling between two planets—but time travel . . . being a person of color, being a third world person traveling between the third world and the first world. And even the terms 'first world' and 'third world' already intimate science fictive travel between planets" (Lewis). Díaz finds third world people the innovators: "They're the people who really just create other exemplars, other lines of being that don't describe some of the Western bullshit" (Lewis). He is disappointed by the way writers of color often do nothing more than perform "their 'otherness'" (Lewis). In his own work, he is trying to change that attitude of focusing only on their differences.

Despite Díaz's fascination for genre fiction, like science fiction, horror, and fantasy, critics received his work almost from the start as mainstream and literary fiction. In an article about literary space and genres, Ed Finn applies digital humanities (DH)—the practice of humanities research in and through information technology—to Díaz's

work. Finn says Díaz uses "tropical magic realism, punk-rock feminism, hip-hop machismo, post-postmodern pyrotechnics, and . . . multiculturalism." Díaz asks his reader to traverse a "middle ground where Caribbean history, language politics, and the class and ethnic tensions of immigration collide with the nerdy core of the mainstream imagination." Network analysis of professional book reviews and commercial consumption, such as the mechanism, "customers who bought this item also bought," allow DH to explore the "emerging space of cultural distinction for a particular author's work at a particular time." Díaz "did not take solace in his identity as a Dominican American, but instead, in his own words, became 'a nerd, watching all those bad science fiction movies and reading cartoons.'"

In Finn's analysis of Díaz's place—his professional rank—in literature, Díaz's books start out in the context of "mainstream commercial success." Next, he becomes a "literary gateway" between "Hispanic & Latin American Fiction" and "a distinct canon of mainstream prize-winners." Then he enters the "mainstream American canon" and "a clearly demarcated space of literary study." There, "he teeters between 'ethnic studies' and mainstream canonicity." Finally, says Finn, "Celebrated for his innovative style, his nerd credentials, and his esoteric references, Díaz is still defined primarily by genre in the market," the genre being "the nerdy immigration narrative." He is a writer of literary fiction, yet he is firmly linked to popular culture, with films such as *Star Wars* and books like *The Lord of the Rings*. Thus Díaz's "cultural territory," his place, brings together the "political, cultural discourse of Latin America and the innovative energy of the best contemporary (white, male) American authors . . . that interprets them according to the logic of an ironic nerd discourse." His space in the spectrum reflects his professional

place; he sees himself as a part of multiple traditions: "I'm part of the mainstream American literary tradition. I'm part of the Latino literary tradition. There's also the oral tradition" (Finn).

Critics—and publishers—now recognize his work in the mainstream and literary-fiction category. He jokes, "They're so happy to claim me as literature because it makes them all look better" (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant). Díaz becomes testy when *BookBrowse* asks him if he thinks *Oscar* might seem too narrow to appeal to non-Latino readers; he responds sarcastically, "How do you phrase this question for more 'mainstream' writers—'Do you think your whiteness and your white subject matter will limit your appeal'"? His response shows his sensitivity to the question and his political resolve to work on behalf of writers of color. Díaz responds similarly when Wajahat Ali, the Pakistani Muslim American playwright and critic, inquires whether his stories are only for ethnic audiences and might be difficult for "mainstream audiences." Díaz expresses himself forcefully about people's still insisting the "Western Canon must be White and English." He has learned that "white supremacy" is never satisfied but always wants to make a story "whiter," particularly in films (Ali). To this point, in March 2014, a lead article in the *New York Times* Book Review reveals the comparatively tiny number of children's books written about people of color (Myers).

Eighth, place in postindustrial New Jersey is environment; in this case, a degraded one with a toxic atmosphere. In several cynical comments, Yunior warns his reader what to expect of the New Jersey landscape. "Winter was settling his pale miserable ass across New Jersey" (*Oscar* 33). He continues, "The skies will be magnificent. Pollutants have made Jersey sunsets one of the wonders of the world" (*Drown* 147). Going back to

Paterson, Oscar and a friend return by the Elizabeth exit, “which is what New Jersey is *really* known for, industrial waste on both sides of the turnpike” (*Oscar* 39). The experience of living near a landfill, which arises in many stories, is emblematic of Yunior’s youth, making a lasting imprint on his identity in terms of feeling displaced and rejected. For Yunior and his older brother, Parlin represents a hostile environment: “The world was ice and the ice burned with sunlight” (133). The two boys have never lived in a cold climate; they do not speak English; they live near a dump. When the dump trucks arrive, the landfill is smelly from the rotting layers of garbage, noisy from the bulldozers and the thousands of crying birds, and inhospitable in every respect:

> Each day the trucks would roll into our neighborhood with the garbage. The landfill stood two miles out, but the mechanics of the winter air conducted its sounds and odors to us undiluted. When we opened a window we could hear and smell the bulldozers spreading the garbage out in thick, putrid layers across the tops of the landfill. We could see the gulls attending the mound, thousands of them, wheeling. (*How* 134)

Díaz speaks to a classroom of students about living in a neighborhood that was primarily African-American and Puerto Rican, with no more than twenty Dominican families. London Terrace Apartments was situated near one of the largest chemical dumpsites in the country. “Coming from this place no one would imagine I would be writing. I was a pissed-off kid of color thinking people hate us. They all have more than me” (Solomita). He might have told the young students about his friend who “had this phony-as-hell English accent. It was the way we all were back then. None of us wanted to be niggers. Not for nothing” (*How* 39); or about the way he spent his time when he

was their age: "I was out of school most of the time and had no friends and I sat inside and watched Univision or walked down to the dump and smoked the mota I should have been selling until I couldn't see" (*How* 39); or how he makes fun of himself: a girlfriend paints him with his "I-had-a-lousy-Third-World-childhood" look (*How* 45).

Yunior obsesses about his environment: "At the end of the month the bulldozers capped the landfill with a head of soft, blind dirt, and the evicted gulls flocked over the development, shitting and fussing, until the first of the new garbage was brought in" (*How* 136). From the window, Yunior sees white children playing outside their apartment. "In less than a year they would be gone. All the white people would be. All that would left would be us colored folks" (*How* 137-38). Yunior and his brother "went down to the edge of the apartments and looked out over the landfill, a misshapen, shadowy mound that abutted the Raritan. Rubbish fires burned all over it like sores and the dump trucks and bulldozers slept quietly and reverently at its base" (*How* 138). The dump trucks kneel down in worship to the idol of the landfill. The dump "smelled like something the river had tossed out from its floor, something moist and heaving" (*How* 145). The "something" recalls his image of the summer heat, which is "like something heavy that had come inside to die" (*Drown* 92). In both instances, some offensive, dangerous presence is loitering outside, trying to find a way in, like the wild black animal roaming outside the white South African suburbs in Nadine Gordimer's *Something Out There*. The metaphorical "something" is the black African presence, the Other; the displaced Dominican immigrants are treated as the Other, the "something out there."

James Acquavella exposes the truth about landfills in New Jersey, although he reports some agencies still deny any such facilities existed. Before the 1960s, people

thought wetlands were useless except for dumping garbage, which is devastating for people who live near the sites as well as for the ecosystems they harbor. Leachate, a liquid material that escapes the boundaries of the landfill and enters the environment of surrounding areas, can potentially contaminate soil and groundwater supplies. Southwest of the landfill sites is Cheesquake State Park, showing that London Terrace apartment complex in Parlin was in the "superfund" site area. About 50,000 people live in the area, with about 5,000 residents, the Díaz family among them, within a mile's radius of the site. According to Acquavella, the aquifers, which provide most of the drinking water for Old Bridge, Sayreville, and surrounding areas, run near the landfill site. In the 1980s, studies of the effect on human and natural life revealed that one bulldozer operator testified burying drums filled with hazardous waste by the truckload. In summer, unaware of the danger, Yunior "and my pathetic little crew hiked over to Morgan Creek and swam around in water stinking of leachate from the landfill" (*How* 35).

Stories of living on the periphery like this are familiar to Yunior and his community. For the immigrants who come to New Jersey without their families, the loneliness and poverty of the place are ineffable. When the woman who will become Oscar's mother leaves the Dominican Republic at sixteen, she cannot know "the heartbreaking drudgery of the factories, the loneliness of Diaspora, that she will never again live in Santo Domingo, her own heart" (*Oscar* 165). The conditions are crowded and terrible: "Unlocked doors and Dorito crumbs, maybe an unflushed toilet. Always puke, in a closet or on a wall" (*Drown* 55). One woman stays with another who left her own children back on the Island: "She understands what has to be sacrificed on a voyage" (*How* 54). His brother Rafa's girlfriend lives in a crowded one-room apartment

with four younger siblings and a disabled mother (*How* 151). Living conditions are so tight that Yunior can hear a girl washing her face in the bathroom just below him. Yunior and one of his girlfriends, who stays with her aunt, are like homeless people, until they find an empty apartment in which to be alone; then they seem "like normal folks" (*Drown* 65). The heat is so unbearable in the apartments that the kids go to the community center to jump "over the fence into the pool" (*Drown* 92). Often the police arrive to scatter the young swimmers.

The immigrants labor over brutal jobs and suffer many hardships. "We are not here for fun," says one woman (*How* 59). Another woman has worked for five years in the laundry at St. Peter's Hospital in New Brunswick: "Never late. Never leave the laundry room. Never leave the heat. I load washers, dryers, peel the lint skin from the traps, measure out heaping scoops of crystal detergent . . . . I sort through piles of sheets with gloved hands" (*How* 54-55). Díaz says, "The poverty . . . it's hard to wrap my brain around it" (Stewart). When he was in high school, his father lost his job as a forklift driver. The place is full of racism and discrimination against immigrants. Yunior reports, "I got jumped as I was walking home from the Roxy. By this mess of New Brunswick townies" (*Oscar* 167). Because of where he lives, no girl's parents will want her to see him: "People get stabbed in the Terrace" (*Drown* 144). One woman has a married companion who talks about "the house he wants to buy, how hard it is to find one when you're Latino" (*How* 51). A girlfriend of Yunior's takes up with a truck driver; she moves with him to Manalapan where he abandons her at the end of the summer. The only house he could find "was one of those tiny box jobs with a fifty-cent lawn and no kind of charm" (*How* 40).

By describing different ways of living, Yunior evokes the ethos of the place, the social and racial distinctions. He and one of his boys work for a company that sells pool tables—Buckinghams, Imperials, Gold Crowns, whose brand names distinguish the social class of the customer. Yunior pays great attention to their customers' expensive consumer items, the clothes, watches, and shoes of the rich. He manages to control his customers subtly by making fun of them and rousing their suspicions.

> You should see our customers. Doctors, diplomats, surgeons, presidents of universities, ladies in slacks and silk tops who sport thin watches you could trade in for a car, who wear comfortable leather shoes. Most of them prepare for us by laying down a path of yesterday's *Washington Post* from the front door to the game room. I make them pick it all up. I say, "Carajo, what if we slip? Do you know what two hundred pounds of slate could do to a floor? The threat of property damage puts the chop-chop in their step . . . . Sometimes the customer has to jet to the store for cat food or a newspaper while we're in the middle of a job. I'm sure you'll be all right, they say. They never sound too sure. Of course, I say. Just show us where the silver's at. The customers ha-ha and we ha-ha and then they agonize over leaving, linger by the front door, trying to memorize everything they own, as if they don't know where to find us, who we work for. Pruitt. Most our customers have names like this, court case names: Wooley, Maynard, Gass, Binder, but the people from my town, our names you see on convicts or coupled together on boxing cards. (*Drown* 130).

New Brunswick, and, specifically, Rutgers University, play a significant role in Díaz's life, and Yunior's. Díaz says, "I can't help but write about my time at Rutgers. For me, it was very, very important" (Meier). For Díaz and Yunior, going to Rutgers saves their lives in terms of their futures, especially as professional writers. Yunior is often cavalier about Rutgers, concentrating, as is his wont, on the girls there. "Rutgers was just girls everywhere, and there was Oscar, keeping me up at night talking about the Green Dragon" (178). He and Magda are in love; they spend time "rummaging through the New Brunswick library together" (*How* 4). Yunior cruelly betrays her, and, when their love affair is over, says, "all I can manage is a memory of the first time me and Magda talked. Back at Rutgers. We were waiting for an E Bus together on George Street and she was wearing purple" (*How* 24). He sees Lola, Oscar's sister, sitting in front of the Henderson Chapel reading a book. "I watched Commercial Ave. slide past and there in the distance were the lights of Route 18. This would always be Rutgers for me" (*Oscar* 198). He remembers, "That was the summer I couldn't sleep, the summer I used to run through the streets of New Brunswick . . . . I remember running around the Memorial Homes, along Joyce Kilmer, past Throop, where the Camelot, that crazy old bar, stands boarded and burned" (*How* 85). At Rutgers, Oscar has trouble attracting girls as usual. He would "sit at the E bus stop and stare at all the pretty Douglass [the women's residential college] girls and wonder where he'd gone wrong in his life" (*Oscar* 49). Because Oscar is Yunior's friend and because housing is scarce, Yunior agrees to room with Oscar in Demarest Hall, which Yunior considers full of "weirdos, and losers and freaks" (171); Yunior applies for a writing section at the university. Years after Oscar's death, Yunior dreams, "We're back at Rutgers, in Demarest, which is where

we'll always be, it seems." (324). Rutgers, and the literature he discovered there, stimulate and preserve Yunior's talents as a writer, as they do Díaz's.

Ninth, place is a journey. In Díaz's fiction, place is the journey of the Dominican diaspora, its origins, and its effects on characters' identities, essentially Yunior's. The larger background is the conquest of the New World and, as he calls it, "the fucking biggest genocide that ever happened" (Celayo and Shook). Dominicans did not emigrate to the United States in large numbers until the 1980s. In 2013, 115,000 Dominicans live in New Jersey, as opposed to 72,000 in Florida. Díaz "knows about poverty, racism, and marginalization; he knows how immigrants become targets for misdirected resentments" (Guthman). Immigration is a topic American politicians cannot handle or solve: Díaz says, cynically, "Immigration is this year's [2006] gay marriage" (Guthman). Díaz knows that "immigration is not a singular event but a way of life involving travel to and from the homeland, a journey with the power to reawaken all the anticipation and terror of the initial departure" (Prose). Some critics note the correspondence between Díaz's stories and *The Odyssey*. *Drown* is a "veiled retelling of the *Odyssey* through the eyes of Telemachus and Penelope" (Bures). Díaz recognizes that "the ultimate odyssey"—the fundamental journey—is immigration (Bures).

The concept of rootedness in a place and its relationship to a character's identity is an oft-discussed issue in American critical literature. In Cather's fiction, "landscape is destiny, as seen in her characters' obsessive need to root themselves in a particular landscape . . ." (Winters 3). Guy Davenport writes, "The imagination is . . . rooted in a ground, a geography" (4). Díaz says, at the beginning of this chapter, "I can't imagine life without my 'roots.' By "roots" he means his identity related to his culture, which

will always survive, and his connections with Taino Indians, with Africans, with Spanish people, with the soil and the place. He uses the term "uprooted" for migrants who come to New Jersey: "when a generation survives violence and repression, the next generation suffers. Especially when it is uprooted and moved to a country that offers minimum-wage jobs and a less-than-warm welcome" (Prose). When Yunior describes Oscar's "wrenchingly relocating," the echoes correspond to the terrible uprooting and relocation of black South Africans to "homelands."

In the literature about immigration, the dominating term is "assimilation," which is generally treated as a worthy goal. A. O. Scott writes of *Oscar*, it is "a novel of assimilation, a fractured chronicle of the ambivalent, inexorable movement of the children of immigrants toward the American middle class, where the terrible, incredible stories of what parents and grandparents endured in the old country have become a genre in their own right." Díaz has an insurgent interpretation of assimilation. Growing up in New Jersey, he was aware of two great pressures upon him—"the Scylla and Charybdis of my childhood": to escape his community to build a life in a different world or to stay in his community to try to make it better. He says, "Yunior grows into a man who still keeps very close to his culture of origin . . . and who doesn't seem to fall prey to the mythology of 'getting out' or assimilation" (Frangello). He certainly could not imagine a "need to erase the past" that made him a success. For Díaz, "the most interesting immigrant writing involves stepping outside that old, dreary binary [home/failure or away/success]." In his writing, Díaz is trying to be more complex and avoid tired formulas like the old "binary": for him, "any success that requires you to sacrifice your younger self over the altar of advancement is no success at all—at least not to me"

(Frangello). Díaz realizes divisions and differences exist within the Dominican diaspora; it is not so uniform and united as some might believe. He finds it puzzling that people who are ostracized by the mainstream community alienate comrades within their Diasporic community (Ali). At Rutgers, the kids of color tease Oscar by saying, "You're not Dominican" (*Oscar* 49), and making him feel displaced.

The connotations of the immigration process are more complicated than the concept of assimilation. Some immigrants think "the only way you could be an authentic 'brother' was to 'stay in the projects' forever: "You had to choose one or the other but not both." Díaz never intended to stay in the projects forever, but he would never turn his back on New Jersey; he tries to help his larger community of writers of color and bemoans the lack of names of writers of color on lists of best sellers. Díaz created Yunior as a character who, like himself, was emblematic of the many contradictions facing a bright young immigrant. He "baked these tensions right into [Yunior's] character, made it part of his journey" (Frangello). Yunior is trying to "defy the old formulas . . . to stay in touch with home while also embracing fully the world." In sum, says Díaz, "He is both Dominican and an urban New Jersey kid. Both ghetto and grad school. Both *bruto macho* and perceptively sensitive. Both immigrant and native" (Frangello). Many such young people are out there in the neighborhoods of America. Ten years after Oscar's death, Yunior has changed in his journey to manhood: married, he owns a house and teaches composition and creative writing at Middlesex Community [County] College. "These day I write a lot . . . . Learned that from Oscar" (*Oscar* 326).

In the twenty-first century, a relatively new term in the discourse about immigration is "transnational migration," the idea that more people will belong to two or

more societies at the same time. Díaz considers himself both Dominican and American. As he says, he is an immigrant and will always be an immigrant: he is a "transnational migrant" for whom "home means more than one country" (Levitt). Transnational migration does not have an injurious effect on assimilation, nor on migrants' ability to contribute and be loyal to their host country. Transnationalism studies the way people operate beneficially "across cultures" (Levitt). Díaz travels to the Dominican Republic, his other home, three times a year and currently lives among Dominicans in New York. As Yunior says, "I love Santo Domingo. I love coming home to the guys in blazers trying to push little cups of Brugal into my hands. Love the plane landing, everybody clapping when the wheels kiss the runway" (*Drown* 9). Oscar repeats the same sentiment when he returns to Santo Domingo on his last, fatal trip: "The first time he flew to Santo Domingo he'd been startled when the applause broke out, but this time he was prepared, and when the plane landed he clapped until his hands stung" (315).

The older term, multiculturalism, has typically meant several different cultures living within one society. The issue of moving beyond multiculturalism to transnationalism underlies the article by E. A. Mermann-Jozwiak on ethnic Studies and *Oscar*, in which she observes that authors like Díaz "highlight contemporary migratory patterns, intercultural exchanges, and international dependencies" (3). Most identity quests take the form of a single journey; Díaz portrays Oscar's family movements back and forth from the Dominican Republic to America as "regular and circular" (7). In her analysis of the brutality of the U.S-backed Trujillo regime, Mermann shows "a nation that centrifugally expelled and dispersed its population into the diaspora" (8). The journeys Oscar's family takes back to the Dominican Republic are not "in search of roots

that lead to a recovery of the individual's cultural identity;" rather, they are seeking dual cultural identities in the Dominican Republic and America (8). In the case of Oscar's family, their fate is intertwined with what Díaz calls "the Curse and Doom of the New World," caused by Columbus's conquest of Hispaniola in 1492-93 (*Oscar* 1). Home for a transnational migrant means more than one country; for Oscar, the Dominican Republic is "both home and not home, and the tension between belonging and not belonging is always clear" (Mermann 16). Sending or taking children back to the Dominican Republic "demonstrates the way in which foreign-born immigrants maintain contacts with their homeland and the difficulty of creating a sense of home in the new country" (Mermann-Jozwiak 140). Yunior explains, "Every summer Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine into reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children as it can . . . . Like someone had sounded a general reverse evacuation order: Back home, everybody! Back home!" (*Oscar* 271).

Díaz thinks the role of the United States in the Dominican Republic "casts a shadow onto the United States. Its involvement, which is completely forgotten, has shaped the entire destiny of this one country" (Celayo and Shook). He refers largely to the U.S invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1916 and to U.S. support for Trujillo, to whom Yunior often refers as "viperous" (*Oscar* 230). The weight of the past, of that history and that place, he says, will last "forever." He believes "immigrants in general . . . are really extraordinary individuals . . . to give up one world and go to another" (Celayo and Shook). As a little boy he kept trying to find out why he was in the United States. People talked about "a better life," but that wasn't a sufficient explanation for him. As he asked questions, he found out the reason "we're here is inextricably tied up with why the

United States is here. You can't talk about the United States unless your first words are 'Santa Domingo'" (Celayo and Shook).

Place is ever-present for Díaz. He tries to decipher the "code" of the Dominican Diasporic experience and the American experience, which are "all hooked together" (Lewis). He has explained how it feels as immigrants to live in two worlds, two places, at the same time, and to be aware of who he is: "In a way, your imagination was bifurcated—two branches." Another sensation for immigrants is living not only in the past and the present, the way most people do, but living in the future, too, in their imagination. He says, "You have to have an amazing imagination to be an immigrant" (Lewis). The past is always present. He stresses the necessity he feels as a writer "to be a true witness to who we are as a people and to what has happened to us. That is the essential challenge for the Caribbean nations—who, you have pointed out, have been annihilated by history and yet who've managed to put themselves together in an amazing way" (Danticat). They have survived, their pasts always with them and their futures ahead of them.

Immigration, a form of exile, causes problems of identity, looking for one's place and needing to belong. Indeed, David Gates points out that "mainstream American literature . . . has always been obsessed with outsiders; its Hucks and Holdens." Oscar's mother has an "inextinguishable longing for elsewheres" (*Oscar* 343). When her daughter Lola is fourteen, she is desperate for "my own patch of the world" (*Oscar* 55). The identity of the immigrants is shaped by their old place and their new place. Oscar, treated as an alien in New Jersey, takes refuge in science fiction and other fantasies to stave off bullying, racism, and cruelty. At Rutgers, "the white kids looked at his black

skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness" (*Oscar* 49). He is alien: "Immigrant saga[s] illustrate how the immigrant is considered as 'the Other,' as the person who is different, dangerous, and therefore to be kept away" (Peleman). The way people treat Oscar shows this sort of rejection. "For Yunior, Oscar represents all the Others who have been ridiculed, excluded, or negated" (Patteson 17).

When asked what attracts Dominicans to New Jersey, Díaz replies, "What attracts immigrants everywhere to a place—it's always jobs and the people who came before. My family immigrated to New Jersey right during the whole collapse of the manufacturing industries in New York . . . and there were plenty of companies up and running in Jew Jersey and people moved to those jobs" (Wolinsky). Immigration, moving from a known to an unknown place, has an impact upon masculinity. The dream of Díaz's father, a military man, was that he and his brother would be "real men." "That did not include being an artist . . . . Because my dad was that kind of dude, who thought that wasn't masculine, that wasn't manly" (Moyers). Because theirs was a separated family, Yunior can hardly remember his father: "he was the soldier in the photo. He was a cloud of cigar smoke, the traces for which could still be found on the uniforms he'd left behind" (*Drown* 70). When Yunior's father left home, he told his wife's father, "All I want for your daughter and our children is to take them to the United States. I want a good life for them" (*Drown* 164). In his stories, Díaz shows how immigration interacts with concepts of masculinity. An entire generation of Dominican boys was compelled to grow up without their fathers, who, in turn, were forced to leave the island to try to make a better life for them and their families. There was a paucity of male role models on the island; their peers had to teach them how to be a man. Women are treated abominably:

the people who show empathy, generally women, are considered weak. Yunior's father had imagined success in the U.S. was inevitable; because he is not successful, he questions his manhood and his role as a provider.

Díaz says, "I wanted to talk about gender. I wanted to talk about masculinity. I wanted to talk about race" (Wolinsky). He knows readers "see themselves, they see their men, they see their women, in these characters from this tiny little island in this tiny little state called New Jersey." He is interested in stereotypes. When Yunior introduces Oscar, he says sarcastically, Oscar has "never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him" (*Oscar* 11). Masculinity in Latin America is now "measured less in shows of courage or violence and more in tangible symbols of success, wealth, influence, and social esteem" (Riofrio 76). Standards still exist in terms of the "persistent centrality of sexual conquest" and "remains a label affixed to men by men." For Dominicans, there are two social categories—the home (*casa*) and the street (*calle*). Notions of the feminine dominate the home; males dominate the street (76). And yet, when Yunior's father had lived at home, "he'd washed and ironed his own clothes. These things were a man's job, he liked to say, proud of his own upkeep" (*Oscar* 170). As a user and betrayer of women, Yunior has much to learn. After Oscar's death, his letter to Yunior about his Dominican lover teaches Yunior that there is more to relationships than sex: "the little intimacies that he'd never in his whole life anticipated, like combing her hair or getting her underwear off a line or . . . listening to her tell him about being a little girl . . ." (*Oscar* 334).

This discussion has explored nine ways in which Díaz conveys place and its impact on Yunior. To summarize, place is a first-person narrator, Díaz's alter ego, who

often uses the second person, "you for I," form. Place relates to the reader in a way that is immediate, personal, deeply felt, and "here." Place is the particularity and specificity of detail that gives the prose its power. Place is the influence of the neighborhood on the kids, who smoke, do drugs, play games of chance, act the truant, and evade the recruiting officers and the police. Place for an immigrant is two homes; he is at home in both. Place is language, a brilliant, hilarious, and original combination of English, Spanglish, hip-hop, sci-fi, and urban slang; it is also studded with literary allusion from mainstream literature. Place is a metaphor comparing immigrants to aliens and to science fiction characters, providing some gauge for understanding the terror of Trujillo. Place is an environment symbolized by the landfill of industrial waste a mile from Yunior's house. Place is the journey of immigration in which the goal is not assimilation but embracing two cultures.

As the beginning of this chapter notes, when Díaz came to America he was looking for answers to two questions: who am I, and what is this place, New Jersey? These two questions, which turn out to be one, offer a provocative clue to assessing Díaz's interpretation of the impact of place on a character's destiny. Everything Díaz writes and says bespeaks his ethnic identity, the impact of two places upon him, and his feelings of both displacement and belonging. He is proud of being an immigrant and believes he will always be a Dominican, while at the same time enhancing his life and work as an American.

He proclaims his identity in many ways: he does not hyphenate his nationality into Dominican-American; he insists on the diacritical "í" in his published name; he lives in a Dominican community in New York; he does not translate or italicize the Spanish

words in his work; and he persuades *The New Yorker* not to italicize the Spanish words in his stories published by the magazine, despite its long-established usage code. "He is asserting his Dominicanness" (Finn). By these demonstrations, Díaz is not posturing or trying to seem more authentic or more publishable, but is seeking "coherence." Díaz sees these moves as political, "allowing the Spanish to exist in my text without the benefit of italics or quotation marks." He points out Spanish is not a minority language: "By forcing Spanish back onto English, forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I've tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page . . . . When does a 'loaned' word become an English word? Is 'hacienda' Spanish or English? . . . . Call it my revenge on English" (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant).

His sense of his ethnic identity impresses Céspedes and Torres-Saillant, who remind him that when he was at Cornell, people would ask, "Are you a writer?" and he would respond, "I am a Dominican writer," showing his identity by belonging to a place. They are impressed by how "striking" is his "sense of self-affirmation of ethnicity for somebody who only had a vague notion of Dominicanness." When Díaz arrived in America in 1974, Latinos were just beginning to assert themselves. So, Torres-Saillant says, "it was not something that required individual initiative. Rather, it was made evident to you by the environment," or the influence of place. Díaz explains, "You spend a lot of time being colonized. Then, if you've got the opportunity and the breathing space and the guidance . . . you decolonize yourself." He always warmly attributes his progress to the help and support of personal influences, such as New Jersey librarians, teachers, and professors at Rutgers. Díaz stresses the degree to which his unprecedented success, for an immigrant child, is based on good luck. He does not attribute his success to

anything special about him or his conduct but to "just luck. I'm not a good case example for young people in a way." He says, for example, "A freak accident bused me into a good school system and turned into all these different things." Or maybe, because America is so rich, "I sometimes wonder if what happened with me wasn't just the fact that there was so much lying around." In another instance, he says, "That was another thing in this chain of luck. For me things seem to have happened through luck, luck, a lot of luck." Finally, "I just keep seeing the luck involved with so much of this" (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant).

Díaz says, "as immigrants we were exposed to the ritual of work. All you see all your life is your parents working" (Céspedes and Torres-Saillant). He appreciates now the example that his mother, and others like her, set for their children, and published an essay about his mother's sterling qualities. An appealing aspect of Díaz's honest self-assessment in "How (In a Time of Trouble) I Discovered My Mom and Learned to Live" is his inability to resist the allusion to Gabriel Garcia Márquez's title, *Love in the Time of Cholera*. In this tribute to his mother, Díaz admits he was at the end of his rope in his last year of high school; he had hit rock bottom. "Things were pretty desperate" (156). He cuts school, acts out, feels angry, speaks profanely, wastes time, and sasses his mother. They are poor, his father has left to live with another woman, his brother has cancer, his mother is overworked at an ill-paid cleaning job, and life seems gloomy, hopeless, and filled with hatred for people of color. The New Jersey ambience resides ever in his consciousness. Sometimes, when he does not get on the school bus, "I walked out to the landfill and stayed in the woods as long as I could bear it" (156). When he visits his brother on the top floor of the hospital in Newark, "when you pushed your face against

his window you could see the burned-out blocks, the scarred over reminder of ’67 [the year of the Newark riots], and New York’s skyline, a million brick middle fingers pointed at the world” (157). He grieves for his mother’s hardships. His father had “shipwrecked her—abandoning her in a state where you need a car to survive, in a neighborhood cut off from any economic tides whatsoever” (157). He deftly creates an image of the desperate situation—his mother, broken up and run aground on still another island.

Throughout the interview with Céspedes and Torres-Saillant, Díaz comes across as honest, self-aware, clearheaded, and grateful. He knows that “getting to much attention early is also bad,” because it can result in a too much pressure. He allows himself to engage in fake, slightly derisive self-censure to make a point, such as, “I’m so bad and so sneaky and so evil that I’ve quoted from people’s books in my own works without even referring to their texts.” He calls himself “mean natured” because he criticizes the Latino and black writers who aim their writing at white audiences. He does not, he says, “explain cultural things, with italics or with exclamation or with side bars or asides.” He is aware, appreciative, and in awe of contemporaries of color like Edwidge Danticat: “She is humble and honest and remarkable! Her words will break your bones.” He thinks people of color have been “trained to be far more critical of our own [people]. We are trained to abuse our own. I think that’s the colonial mindset.” He is interested in having dialogue with his own communities and not just in criticizing white people. “Exposing white racism and white arrogance is important, but if I don’t criticize myself and my people, how are we ever going to get better?” He confesses that he has a political agenda: “to write politics without letting the reader think it is political. That’s my game plan for every story.” When the two Dominicans propose a launching party for the

Spanish version of *Drown,* Díaz shows a fine humility when he says, “I fear the risk of going back to the ’hood to flaunt prosperity and behave like a tourist in the eyes of people who are there all the time and have nowhere else to go.” When asked, “How does it feel going from living near ‘one of the largest landfills in New Jersey,’ as you once put it, to winning a Pulitzer in Fiction?” Díaz responds, “Hard to say. My youth, all those hardships, they’re still with me” (*Splash*).

Díaz lived in a Dominican community in New Jersey that was erased and ignored by the mainstream. He opens his heart to his friend, the novelist Francisco Goldman: “I grew up never seeing myself or my neighbors or my friends in any kind of literature. I grew up with no books or movies or TV shows that reflected my world, my identities, my struggle . . . . The real us was never shown, totally elided.” His one goal is to avenge the erasure by “singing my community out of that silence.” His motivation to become a writer is, “I wanted to be part of that movement of artists that were ensuring that the next generation wouldn’t have to endure what I endured” (Messer).

As Díaz says to Danticat, he wants “to be a true witness to who we are as a people and to what has happened to us. That is the essential challenge for the Caribbean nations—who, you have pointed out, have been annihilated by history and yet who’ve managed to put themselves together in an amazing way.” For him, it is like bearing witness—“to mark that we were here, we lived, we mattered” (Messer). These final words are emblematic of Junot Díaz and the impact of place and home upon a writer’s destiny, as well as his narrator’s, in his avant-garde American fiction.

CONCLUSION

"Location pertains to feeling; feeling profoundly pertains to place."

This dissertation argues that the three Pulitzer Prize-winning writers, Philip Roth, Richard Ford, and Junot Díaz—a native, a transplant, and a migrant to New Jersey—convey the impact of place on their characters in an immediate and compelling way. More specifically, the study contends that the neighborhoods these authors evoke—a Jewish enclave, a largely white suburb, and an immigrant ghetto—affect their characters' destinies, their feelings of belonging or alienation, and their decisions to stay in or leave their places. Reinforcing the proposition that place is destiny, Elizabeth Bowen writes: "Locality is the root of character . . . it can be destiny" (Weston 18).

To illuminate the way the three writers convey the nature and function of place, the study evaluated place as a narrative tool in the craft of fiction. It searched the critical literature on place and, from its findings, isolated and defined a dozen elements in the art of transmitting a sense of place and its impact on the narrators. Some literary criticism on fictional place extols its effects but often appears vague about the tools for communicating the influences. Great novelists writing literary criticism about place, like Eudora Welty and Elizabeth Bowen, express themselves in thought-provoking, eloquent maxims; this dissertation translates these statements into practical examples. This study applies ten definitions to Roth's work and nine to the other two writers.

The relationship between the authors and their narrators contributes to a vivid and visceral interpretation of place and its impact. The three authors enhance this effect by using first-person narrators. Moreover, the influence of place is immediate and personal,

although the action may be set in the past or recalled in memory. This concept of "hereness" is a powerful factor in the fiction of each author: Roth's narrator exclaims, "Here is where I belong!" (*IM* 235); for Ford's narrator, "Here is necessity" (*LOL* 485); Diaz's narrator recognizes home as here in New Jersey as well as Santo Domingo. Further, place is only communicable when it is specific, particular, and concrete: Roth writes about the "immensity" of detail in his childhood (*AP* 42); Ford, about "intractable irresistible details" ("Chance"); Diaz limns the grim and sordid specifics of immigrant life. The vernacular of place is crucial to awakening its atmosphere and ambience: Roth's roots render him at ease in his Weequahic vernacular; Ford is fluent in the language of real estate; Diaz riffs in Spanglish and the jargon of science fiction. Sense of place, as the term implies, depends upon sensory imagery. The local neighborhood, not the natural landscape, represents the influence of place for these three authors. Roth's characters react to their geography by moving west from Newark; Ford's narrator studies the human geography of his neighborhood by the measure of real estate value; Díaz is consumed by the pollution of his neighborhood but flourishes in the environment of Rutgers and New Brunswick. Place is a journey: Roth's characters move from their places to reinvent themselves; Ford's narrator struggles on his internal journey to recognize reciprocity with his place; and Díaz witnesses immigrants' journeys to and from their dual places and "sings my community out of that silence" (Goldman).

As Welty suggests in this chapter's title, location and human emotion are "profoundly" related (122). The interplay and interdependence between place and character and the resulting consequences of place on a character's destiny are fundamental issues in this discussion. Despite the differences among the three authors in

terms of temperament, background, style, and theme, the findings from the close readings are notable for what the writers have in common, in addition to their New Jersey settings. The study anticipated the concept of belonging or alienation in the first chapter; the similarities in the authors' other reactions to place were less expected and more subtle—the various degrees of ambivalence, ideas about assimilation, and perceptions of America that the characters experience, which are, as Welty says, "feelings" pertaining to place, along with those of belonging or of alienation.

The narrators face entirely different environments in the same state. For Roth's Nathan Zuckerman, born in the Jewish enclave of Weequahic, his neighborhood, filled with people who have lived there for two generations, is a nourishing, rigorous, and comforting haven. Ford's Frank Bascombe, a transplant from the South, yearns to find a refuge in Haddam, or, at least, a place not too alienating or demanding, in which he can find balance and reason. For Díaz's Yunior de las Casa, a migrant wrenched from his homeland, the immigrant ghetto hard by a landfill, though harsh and alien, becomes his teacher as he learns how to write and what his subject will be.

The theme of roots, soil, ground, and terrain, the physical composition of place, are frequently present in Roth's remarks. Some of his characters feel alienated in Newark and leave, despite welcoming and secure childhoods and firm relationships with their neighborhood, to reinvent themselves in other surroundings. At the outset, Ford expresses scant interest in his roots or his past; he has left them behind in the South, where he was born, but at the end he concedes the existence of an interplay between character and place. His narrator feels detached and estranged in his neighborhood, alienated by issues like consumerism and suburban malaise, but decides to stay in New

Jersey, where he finds what he is looking for. Yunior, displaced from his first home, not fluent in English, poor, and looked down upon, is the only character who patently does not at first belong in New Jersey, but overcomes his displacement and folds it into his writing. Díaz's work is deeply rooted in two places; he reveres them both and wants to honor them in his writing.

All three writers express ambivalence in their approach to place. For Roth, this sensation enables him to understand and portray the conflict within his characters, who are continuously on a journey, torn between the desire to leave and the desire to stay, "to repudiate and . . . to cling" ("Goodbye Newark"). The motivation for these characters' decisions becomes both increasingly clear and also more complex. Ford is at first inconsistent and torn about place, partially because of his being born in the south and the concomitant expectations for a southern writer. He claims initially that place is not generative until long after publishing the last novel in his trilogy was published, when he changes his mind. Díaz suffers in his childhood but finds his individual way, though not as one of the "ambivalent, inexorable movement of the children of immigrants toward the American middle class" (Scott). Their vacillating stems from their tension between two worlds and two homes; Díaz is at home in both.

For Roth's interpretation of "assimilation," Posnock uses the word "appropriation" (5), which he borrows from other writers including Henry James, because the new word does not require the "[casting] off old (ethnic) ways for new." Assimilation is not for Roth a sacrificial process, but a natural and desirable one. The estrangement and dreaminess of Ford's narrator prevents him at first from assimilating into the community, until he rises above his self-examination to join in an emblematic

Fourth of July parade. He helps his Tibetan colleague in his assimilation process. Díaz resists total assimilation by integrating his home culture with his American culture.

In his perception of America, Roth's Nathan wants to be both an American and a Jew. His Newark novels display Jewish fathers concentrating on making their children patriotic Americans. Growing up Jewish and American were for Roth—and Nathan—indistinguishable. Ford's Frank Bascombe wants to belong and contribute to a suburban community, but needs time to work out his personal problems. While planning his third novel, Ford says he was thinking about "how the American landscape lies" (Duffy 321). Díaz's Yunior wants to be both a Dominican and an American. Díaz refers to Dominican immigrant neighborhoods, community activism, and grassroots efforts when he says: 'This is beauty, this is humanity, this is America'" (Villalon).

Summing up place, Roth notes that after *Goodbye, Columbus,* "I've been dawn to depicting the impact of place in American lives" (Gray). Ford concedes that after finishing his trilogy he believes that "there must be some generative relationship [and some] interplay of character and landscape.'" Díaz is aware of how many stories about the power of place are left untold; his goal is to fill in some of these spaces and represent some of these voices.

Their approaches to their New Jersey locales closely connect these three novelists; a paragraph in a March 2014 interview with Philip Roth also brings them together. In a list of "formidable postwar writers of . . . enormous variety" stretching from Bellow to Welty, Roth includes Richard Ford; at the end, he also names "serious young writers as wonderfully gifted as . . . Junot Díaz" (Sandstrom).

Readers do not spring full blown with an appreciation for and a sensitivity to place in fiction. In their earliest exposure to reading, children listen to fairy tales, in which authentic place does not play a role. As Welty explains, fairy tales, which begin with the words "Once upon a time," end up "abolishing the present and the place where we are instead of conveying them to us" (117). In other words, the stories' imaginary places are too vague and unreal to guide the young readers' own exploration of where and who they are. Only when children arrive at stories about human experience with places, stories like Laura Ingalls Wilder's *The Little House on the Prairie*—"She liked this place, too. She liked the enormous sky and the winds, and the land that you couldn't see to the end of" (75)—or Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*—"We adored the place. Coming to it, we used to run down to the lake, dip our hands in and wish, as if we had just seen the new moon" (9)—do they recognize the thrill and significance of place. As Elizabeth Bowen says about the books she read as a child: "I am still on the lookout for places where something happened" (*Collected Impressions* 267).

Through exposure to great literature, many readers understand instinctively that place affects a character's destiny. They passionately absorb the impact on characters of locations like Melville's ocean; Defoe's island; Twain's river; Hemingway's hills; Cather's plains; Cormac McCarthy's southwestern desert; and Bronte's moors. Houses, too, affect a character's destiny: Austen's Northanger Abbey; Waugh's Brideshead; Bowen's house in Paris; Dickens's Court of Chancery; Hawthorne's house of seven gables; Lawrence's gardener's cottage; and Uncle Tom's cabin. In his article "Location, Location, Location: Depicting Character Through Place," Richard Russo explains that he found "from his reading" that "place *was* character" (68). He notes the "destiny in a

place." He continues, "the reason to pay more attention to place . . . is the belief . . . that place and its people are intertwined, that place is character, and that to know the rhythms, the textures, the feel of a place is to know more deeply and truly its people" (72).

In sum, the power of these three writers is their skill in making their readers feel emotionally and psychologically here, present, and in the moment. The other narrative devices are vital, such as the particularity of detail and the immediacy of point of view, but, essentially, being here, participating and reveling in the place, is the reader's culminating reaction. The New Jersey-related works about place produced by Roth, Ford, and Díaz, are, taken together, compelling, authentic, meaningful, and revealing; they exemplify place as character as destiny.

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Educational Institutions

School	Place	Degree	Date
Secondary:			
Concord Academy	Concord, Mass.	completed	1948
Collegiate			
Mills College	Oakland, California	B. A.	1952
Graduate			
The New School	New York, New York	MPS	1981
Drew University	Madison, New Jersey	D. Litt.	2014