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**Cultural and Migrant Identities in Cristina Henríquez's Novel  
"The Book of Unknown Americans": Using Homi Bhabha's  
theories, a Postcolonial study.**

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**Abstract**

*Through the theoretical framework of Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial concepts of culture, the imitation, hybridity and Third space, this study takes up the themes of cultural hybridity and migrant identity in Cristina Henríquez's The Book of Unknown Americans. This novel provides a view of how Latin American immigrants do the murkiness of cultural adaptation and their alienation and belonging in the U.S. Alma, Arturo etc. become the key characters who personify the such struggles and transformational potential of hybrid identities who build between the cultural heritage and the norms of host country. The adjacency to Bhabha's work on identity as a fluid, dynamic thing constituted by ambivalence and negotiation is brought out in the analysis. In between spaces see Alma's struggles to remain 'Mexican' while adapting to American culture, Arturo's struggling with economic exploitation, and Mayor's multi-cultural identity as a second generation immigrant.*

*The novel, further, brings to light larger, social and more political aspects, such as systemic discrimination and marginalization and solidarity among migrant communities. The theoretical framework used in this study is in a postcolonial perspective that allows the reader to understand migration and identity through the analysis of Henríquez's novel from the point of cultural hybridity by Bhabha.*

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## المخلص

من خلال الإطار النظري لمفاهيم هومي ك. بابا ما بعد الاستعمارية المتعلقة بالثقافة، بما في ذلك المحاكاة، التهجين، والفضاء الثالث، تتناول هذه الدراسة موضوعات التهجين الثقافي وهوية المهاجرين في رواية كريستينا هنريكيثز *كتاب الأمريكيين المجهولين*. تقدم الرواية رؤية حول كيفية تعامل المهاجرين من أمريكا اللاتينية مع تعقيدات التكيف الثقافي وما يواجهونه من اغتراب وانتماء في الولايات المتحدة. يصبح كل من ألما، وأرتورو، وغيرهما من الشخصيات المحورية تجسيدا لهذه الصراعات والإمكانات التحويلية للهويات الهجينة التي تنشأ بين التراث الثقافي ومعايير البلد المضيف.

تبرز الدراسة صلة الرواية بأعمال بابا التي تناقش الهوية ككيان مرن وديناميكي يتشكل عبر التردد والتفاوض. تظهر هذه الديناميكية في الصراعات التي تواجهها ألما للحفاظ على "هويتها المكسيكية" أثناء التكيف مع الثقافة الأمريكية، وفي معاناة أرتورو مع الاستغلال الاقتصادي، وفي هوية مايور المتعددة الثقافات كجيل ثانٍ من المهاجرين. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تسلط الرواية الضوء على الجوانب الاجتماعية والسياسية الأكبر، مثل التمييز المنهجي والتهميش والتضامن بين المجتمعات المهاجرة. يعتمد الإطار النظري المستخدم في هذه الدراسة على منظور ما بعد الاستعمار، مما يسمح للقارئ بفهم الهجرة والهوية من خلال تحليل رواية هنريكيثز من زاوية التهجين الثقافي وفقاً لنظريات بابا. كما يقدم البحث توجيهات لدراسات مستقبلية تشمل مقارنة بين روايات مهاجرين أخرى ورؤى عالمية حول التهجين في الأدب. ويبرز الأدب كوسيط لاستكشاف الهوية والصمود وديناميكيات التفاعل الثقافي في عالم معولم، من خلال الانخراط مع التجارب الحياتية للمهاجرين.

## Introduction

Over the past decades, migration and cultural identity have become key issues of contemporary literature that in turn relates to the processes of globalization and people's migration across borders. However, negotiation of identity is a fraught way of life for many migrants, often living in alien, sometimes hostile cultural environments, such as alienation, discrimination and seeking belonging. These are not personal struggles, but sociopolitical and born out in larger systems of power and control that prioritise the oppression of migrant communities. The present circumstance provides a rich literature that may be used to explore these experiences throughout the studies of the skills of resilience and the adaptability of persons living amidst the complexities of a postcolonial cultural hybridity.

As likely as any other narrative that tackles the questions of how we become the people we know ourselves to be, Cristina Henríquez's novel *The Book of Unknown Americans* is an authentic work that appropriates the struggles of the emigrant experience in the United States. The novel braids together the voices of both Latin American immigrants in order to show their struggle between cultural dislocation, economic hardship and systemic prejudice. The first major theme of the novel, which is illustrated through Alma and Arturo Rivera characters, who take Maribel to Mexico for better life but failed, however, they

are caught in a vise of identity quagmire. As Alma reflects, "We had bundled up our old life and left it behind, and then hurtled into a new one with only a few of our things, each other, and hope" (Henríquez, 2014, p. 11).

This highlights the emotional and psychological challenges that migrants face in their journey toward achieving a sense of belonging. It provides a critical perspective for examining *The Third Space* and Homi K. Bhabha's idea of cultural hybridity. Bhabha describes cultural hybridity as emerging from "in-between spaces" where different cultures interact, resulting in the creation of new, hybrid identities (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). These spaces are sites of negotiation and transformation, challenging traditional notions of fixed cultural identities. In *The Book of Unknown Americans*, the characters exemplify this dynamic as they navigate between their native and adopted cultures. For instance, Mayor Toro, a second-generation immigrant, embodies the tension within cultural hybridity—he feels disconnected from his Panamanian heritage while also remaining distant from his American peers. Reflecting on his experience, he admits, "Looking back, I didn't even know enough Spanish to have a real conversation with my relatives" (Henríquez, 2014).

At the same time, he feels excluded from his American peers, observing, "It was like I was stuck in the middle—too American for my family, but too foreign for everyone else" (Henríquez, 2014, p. 35). Ambivalence throughout is a constant theme of these sentiments, reflecting hybrid identities' internal conflict. Henríquez's novel is not simply literary but also a political public issue. Her characters' struggles are real world struggles of migrant people: linguistic barriers, limited opportunities, and prejudice. As Bhabha argues, these experiences are crucial to understanding the "processes of cultural translation and negotiation" that define modern societies (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). The novel adds to the ever expanding discourse of race, identity, belonging and migration, as the narratives presented promote the need to discuss the intersections of power dynamics in the body politics of migration.

### Literature Review

Other studies on migration, on identity, on *The Book of Unknown Americans*. Migration and identity are already established themes in literary studies, but especially so, migrate and identity in works dealing with the immigrant experience. Literature is important as a medium to learn about the ways in which migration affects the personal, social and communal. From literature, we come to understand the lived realities of the migrants and appreciate a singular viewpoint that involves, at once, their struggles and their triumphs. As Grams asserts, literature provides a "window into the lived experiences of migrants, highlighting the complexities of cultural adaptation and identity formation" (Grams 2018, p. 45). This idea really strikes a chord with Cristina Henríquez's

*The Book of Unknown Americans*, a lauded look at Latin American immigrant experiences in the US. Taken together, these themes are addressed in the novel that also makes a major contribution to the underlying debate about migration and identity. The importance of research on *The Book of Unknown Americans* can be outlined by using research that it depicts the various narratives in Latin American immigrants. early studies, particularly in works that explore the immigrant experience. Scholars have emphasized the importance of literature as a medium to understand the personal, social, and communal effects of migration.

Literature offers insight into the lived realities of migrants, presenting a nuanced exploration of their struggles and triumphs. As Grams asserts, literature provides a "window into the lived experiences of migrants, highlighting the complexities of cultural adaptation and identity formation" (Grams 2018, p. 45). This idea resonates strongly in Cristina Henríquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans*, which has been widely praised for its portrayal of Latin American immigrant experiences in the United States. The novel addresses themes such as cultural hybridity, economic hardship, and belonging, making it a significant contribution to the discourse on migration and identity. Research on *The Book of Unknown Americans* underscores its importance in depicting the diverse narratives of Latin American immigrants. Smith and Hernández describe the novel as "a poignant exploration of the challenges immigrants face, from economic struggles to cultural dislocation, while also celebrating their resilience and humanity" (Smith & Hernández, 2020, p. 112). Each of these challenges are not of the same degree of challenge, rather they fluctuate, based on different backgrounds of characters, ability in the linguistic field and the personal desires of a character.

One of the things that truly sets this novel apart is its ability to speak these different experiences. A novel's polyphonic narrative structure, in which various characters recount their individual perspective in different parts of the narratives, has been scrutinised in specific studies. Hernández argues that this approach "amplifies the diversity within the immigrant experience, challenging monolithic representations of Latinx identity" (Hernández, 2021, p. 89). Like the complexity of the immigrant experience itself, this narrative strategy offers a mosaic of perspectives, many voices, and a collective story, instead of a homogenized one. Like Brown, however, the role of language in the novel is also shown by Brown to not only contribute to alienation but also a site of resilience and negotiation. Brown asserts that "language in the novel serves as both a dividing line and a bridge, encapsulating the duality of the immigrant experience" (Brown, 2019, p. 67).

These ideas have been further developed through further research on the relationships between gender and culture, and identity in the novel. To illustrate, Delgado (2020) analyses images of female characters such as Alma Rivera, who narrate their experiences from a gendered view on migration that focuses on the specific challenges to immigrant women.

Delgado writes "Through Alma's journey, Henríquez emphasizes the emotional labour of mothers who work through cultural hybridity both for themselves and their children," (Delgado, 2020, p. 102). This perspective provides another layer, contrasting the multiple ways migration can exist as it depicts multiple ways that identities intersect to impact each other. Pérez also looks at the socio-political aspects of the novel, through their interrogation of how Henríquez denounces American systemic inequalities and xenophobia. Pérez argues that *The Book of Unknown Americans* "provides a sharp commentary on the structural barriers that immigrants face, from exploitative labor practices to radicalized perceptions of identity" (Pérez, 2022, p. 88). This critical lens allows us to see how the novel engages with larger issue at hand and therefore positions the work of literature to be at the same time deeply personal and at the same time very politically relevant. Scholars have brought to the fore *The Book of Unknown Americans*' thematic richness and structural innovations, and have begun to employ it as a key text in the historical study of migration and identity. Its multi-voiced, linguistic narrative, the number of speakers it includes, and its analysis of gender and socio-political issues all make it an indispensable text for understanding immigrant experience.

### **Postcolonial Theory and Its Relevance to Literary Analysis**

Postcolonial theory, an interpretive critical approach to literature, examines colonialism and imperialism as ongoing influences on culture, identity, and power. This thesis uses postcolonial theory to explore how colonial histories continue to shape cultural dynamics and relationships, particularly in terms of identity formation and representation. At its core, postcolonial theory challenges colonial domination by analyzing literature's role in reflecting, reinforcing, or resisting power dynamics within colonial contexts. Edward Said's groundbreaking work, *Orientalism* (1978), established the foundation for postcolonial studies by critiquing how the West historically constructed the East as the "Other." Said argued that literature and cultural production played a significant role in reinforcing stereotypes and hierarchies that upheld colonial ideologies. These representations were far from harmless; they were closely tied to the exercise of colonial power, serving to justify and maintain Western dominance.

As he said, "The Orient was not a fixture of nature. The way the West represented it made it Oriental," (Said, 1978, pp. 6). Scholars now turn to his

insights to interrogate how literature reflect and subverts these dynamics in ways that postcolonial theory helps us to read literature that engages with themes of migration, identity, and cultural exchange. This discourse was expanded, however, by the work of Frantz Fanon in his highly influential work *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), which addresses in terms of its psychological and cultural consequences the colonization of peoples. Fanon writes about the dehumanizing processes of colonial domination on the colonised, the internalized struggles with an identity, with self-perception. His statement, "To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (Fanon, 1961, p. 8), underscores the deep connections between language and cultural identity. And Cristina Henríquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans* in particular is a book that works with both language as a barrier and as a means of negotiation for the immigrant characters.

Alma Rivera's struggle to learn English is also a reflection of her trying to carve a path of some kind of cultural integrity whilst in a new cultural landscape. Though unlikely to have recognized it directly, Fanon's analysis offers a way to see these struggles as elements of a broader postcolonial experience in which language functions as a battleground in the struggle for cultural adaptability. From the work of Said and Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha introduced important concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and in between spaces, the bomb of which has been exploded on the center of postcolonial theory. In *The Location Of Culture* (1994) Bhabha suggested that identities are not unequivocally defined, either as ethnocentrically fixed or as bipolar oppositions, but are always contested and reworked in the discourse of cultural contact. He proposed the term of cultural hybridity to replace the notion that different cultures merge together to result in creation of new identities. Bhabha stated, "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 112). It takes this notion directly at the heart of the ways in which identity is traditionally understood—in terms of its stability or singularity—and instead anatomizes its fluidity and dynamism. Bhabha's notion of *The Third Space* goes further in understanding of the field of cultural negotiation for he argues that it is in these in between spaces, that new meanings and identities are written.

He described *The Third Space* as "a space of enunciation" where the boundaries of cultural authority are blurred, allowing for the emergence of hybrid identities (Bhabha, 1994, p. 36). In comparison to characters such as Mayor Toro and Alma Rivera in Henríquez's novel, this theoretical framework is particularly relevant as characters that are living in that strange mixture between cultures. Mayor, as a second-generation immigrant, embodies the fluidity of hybrid identity, feeling "too American" for his Panamanian relatives

yet "too foreign" for his American peers (Henríquez, 2014, p. 34). Bhabha's ideas about complex dynamics are used to unpack these complex dynamics into a more nuanced lens in which to look at the experiences of the characters. In addition, postcolonial theory is indispensable when we contemplate socio political aspects of migration since this theory provides us the contours of the systemic inequality and power balance and in that way the experience of the marginalized people.

Pérez expands on Bhabha's ideas by arguing that literature serves as a "transformative space" where the voices of the marginalized are amplified, challenging dominant narratives of power (Pérez, 2022, p. 90). The transformative potential of Henríquez's novel is evinced by his granting voice to various immigrant experiences, replaced monolithic visualisations of Latinx identity, and also the resilience of migrant communities. In short, postcolonial theory is a well-developed framework in which to examine how power, identity, and cultural exchange interact with each other in literary texts. Contemporary scholars such as Pérez and ancient works by Said, Fanon, and Bhabha make the point that thinking of literature as a context for contemplating the implications of migration and identity in a postcolonial world is crucial.

### **Homi Bhabha's Key Concepts: Hybridity, Mimicry, and In-Between Spaces**

It is to Homi K. Bhabha's theories that much of post-colonial studies owes for its complexity: theories that explain how identities come about and how they can be utilised in cultural interaction / migration. In particular, his ideas on hybridity, mimicry and in between spaces allow us to understand how people and the communities can actively create their own meanings for cultural tensions in the former colonial and migratory confines.

#### **Hybridity: Cultural Negotiation.**

In Bhabha *The Location of Culture* (1994) he defines the cultural hybridity as the way in which new identities are emerging in the interstices (in between) of different cultures. The concept of a fixed identity is rendered problematic by the hybridity of identity, which insists that identity is always fluid and always mutable. Bhabha writes, "It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationhood, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). The negotiation of hybrid identities are a very fitting concept for *The Book of Unknown Americans* but also for the lives of characters such as Alma and Mayor. For instance, Alma is attempting to carry on Mexican traditions but something holds her back. She remembers laborious efforts trying to cook one of our favourite meals only for the ingredients to be

different, and the taste never as good as it used to be. It's as if even our food didn't belong here" (Henríquez 2014 p. 52).

By means of these efforts to counter hybridity through cooking and rituals of family, these are story of the inventive ways to tackle such drives, describing the difficult and enjoying work which accompanies such aspirations. Similarly, Mayor Toro is another immigrant, second generation of Panama and America. He feels disconnected from both cultures, a struggle that aligns with Bhabha's idea that hybrid identities are characterized by ambivalence and a sense of being "neither here nor there." Mayor's own personal conflict of internalisation is thus a transforming rite of passage of hybridity in that Mayor's identity is internalised in The Third Space.

### **Mimicry: Compliance and Subversion.**

Accordingly, this second corner-stone of Bhabha's theory is mimicry, the way in which colonized or marginalized people simply act out parts of the dominant culture. Before we say this mimicry conforms, it actually resists, disclosing the contradictions and contradictions of dominant cultural authority as a web spreading machine. Bhabha explains, "Mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). Henríquez's novel contains a troupe of mimicry in characters attempting to synthesize their traditions into American society. For instance, Alma and Arturo are trying to get their English and gain access to American institutions, schools, workplaces, and yet their encounters often also show the splices and conflicts of their assimilation.

Henríquez uses Alma as an example of when she reflects: 'I tried to explain what I meant, but words felt clumsy and foreign on the tip of my tongue, and I could tell it didn't understand' (Henríquez p. 66). But mimicry works poorly when communicating with teachers, healthcare workers as the pitfalls in mimicry: miscommunications abound. Even attempts at assimilating the dominant language are met with frustration, and misunderstandings. The duality of mimicry fits Bhabha's thinking of mimicry both empowering survival and challenging the hegemony of the dominating culture.

### **In-Between Spaces: Liminality and Transformations.**

This may be idealising the sense of liminality in identity formation, as Bhabha is fond of in between spaces. These spaces are characterized by negotiation and transformation which at once trouble set notions of culture and of identity. As Bhabha explains, "The beyond is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past... it is a space of intervention" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). This is a unique theoretical lens that it can tell us about how Henríquez's characters manoeuvre through their hybrids identities. It is physical manifestation of an in-between space: the apartment complex that the Rivera family live in. This community is a cultural exchange and negotiation

community made of immigrants from different Latin American countries. Residents tell story of displacement and resilience to create a hybrid cultural environment that blends their native traditions with the realities of their new lives in the U.S. Alma says “Here we are all from somewhere else”.

Despite this, with your support, we make this a home — together” (Henríquez, 2014, p. 87). It signifies the ability of spaces in between to belong and connect as a potentiality for what might be called cultural dislocation. The Mayor and Maribel relationship also reflects the potential of in between spaces. It is a bond that closes the culture differences and creates a common understanding across the political divide that cultures often come with. It shows how Bhabha thought in between spaces are creativity and imagination, and that such spaces are creative fields where new cultural meanings and practices are formed. The framework Bhabha’s notions has been expanded by scholars of literary and cultural context. Young would suggest that the concept of hybridity is as much a real lived experience (albeit a specific one) for many people in a world of rising tide of movements and interchange of culture as it is a hypergloss in the heads of theorists.

He notes, “Hybridity is the condition of living in a world of shared and overlapping histories” (Young, 2003, p. 23). Looking towards the lives of the characters in the Henríquez novel, with the challenges of so many cultural and historical blows, allows us to look further. Pérez also deals with the social and political side of hybridity, i.e. hybridity is not only a space between spaces, but also a resistance to systemic patterns of inequality. She argues, “Hybridity is not simply about blending cultures; it is about challenging the structures that create divisions and hierarchies” (Pérez, 2022, p. 88). Through this critical lens it discusses how the characters in the *The Book of Unknown Americans* reject and redeem the power relations of their new surroundings. Through the powerful lenses of Homi Bhabha’s hybridity, mimicry and in-between spaces offered, the book of Unknown Americans is analyzed. Through these lenses of a cast as active agents of cultural negotiation, hybrid identities in a migratory context become legible. Finally, we discover with this analysis, that the theoretical framework of Bhabha does potentiate the opportunity to transform cultural interaction by positioning the novel, that shows that identity is dynamic.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Defining Cultural Hybridity**

Turning identity formation round in situations of migration and cultural contact is rooted in Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of cultural hybridity. In *The Location of Culture* (1994; Bhabha 1994), Bhabha argues not that hybridity is a blending of cultural components but rather a configuration of many cultural

sources and discursive practises for destabilising understandings of cultural and social identity, both as culture specific and general to sociality. He states, “Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 112). It is this idea that is directly translated to *The Book of Unknown Americans* because the characters are trying to learn how to honour their heritages and assimilate their ethnicity into the next culture, new society. Alma Rivera’s effort Learning how to cook is difficult, especially when the ingredients aren’t the same as they used to be, is how Alma describes it: ‘Even if I wanted to cook our favourite meals but the ingredients weren’t the same.’ I often could not find the right spices and when I did, they just didn’t taste like home” (Henríquez, 2014, p. 52).

From all her attempts to cook traditional Mexican dishes for her family is how she keeps part of her cultural continuity, including her attempts to objectify when introducing new things to her family by cooking them the traditional Mexican way. Similar to Arturo Rivera, the American work ethic and values in the office conflict with the Mexican work ethic and values in his work. Arturo remarks, “I wanted to work harder, to prove myself, but it seemed no matter what I did, it was never enough for them” (Henríquez, 2014, p. 103). In these pages, these examples (and many others) make clear the complexities, the ambiguities, of cultural identity not at all constituted but in the process of being done so.

### The Third Space

According to Bhabha, the Third Space is the space of (forced) contact generated by the involution of cultures into contact producing new identities. Bhabha explains that the Third Space is “a space of enunciation” where cultures intersect, and new meanings are created (Bhabha, 1994, p. 36). This space isn’t set, it’s dynamic, humble by the people that come in and push against the traditional markers and talk about hybrid identities. *The Book of Unknown Americans* transformed characters’ experiences in The Third Space. For example, Mayor Toro (a second generation immigrant) is literally living amidst these conflicts. He speaks fluently in English, lives according to American social norms, but he can’t live without his Panamanian heritages. He has been isolated from both culture by this duality. Henríquez writes, “Mayor felt too American to fit in with his Panamanian family but too foreign to be fully accepted by his American classmates” (Henríquez, 2014, pp. 34-35). In the Third Space is the conflict here, of how to exist in identity.

The novel also gives descriptions of the spaces in which cultural hybridity is physically practiced. Just so the apartment complex the characters live in becomes a microcosm of the Third space. This is a place where immigrants from other Latin American countries share traditions while they adapt to

American culture to survive. Alma reflects on this communal environment, saying, “Here, we were all from somewhere else, but together, we made this place feel like ours, even if it was only for a little while” (Henríquez, 2014, p. 87).

When people asked me ‘what I miss’ and when Alma told the neighbours ‘the foods we couldn’t find, the lives we left behind’ and ‘the things we miss’ (Henríquez, 2014, p. 88), we talked about ‘the foods we couldn’t find, the lives we had left behind’ and the ‘things we missed.’ The third space, being the communality between diversity and unity, an environment in which cultural hybridity, in terms of its connectivity and transformation, locates.

### **Application to the Text**

As brilliantly illustrated by Cristina Henríquez’s *The Book of Unknown Americans*, Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial constructs of mimicry, The Third Space, and hybridity are all embodied. The novel draws from its characters to explore the means by which cultural negotiation and adaptation produce the Latin American immigrants’ identities. By depicting how the stricture that bound them was always being balanced by hybrid identities, experience of the characters point to the struggle between assimilation and cultural preservation.

### **Mimicry: Resistance and Adaptation navigation.**

Within Bhabha’s theory, mimicry is the act of adopting some aspects of a dominant culture in ways in which the subject underlines the subversion of the authority of a culture. About compliance and subversion, the characters tries to get to grips with American social norm and picks up with English a duality which is compliance and subversion. Alma Rivera is still trying to know American institutions like schools and health care systems, with linguistic and cultural barriers. I get really frustrated in one scene, ‘cause I tried to explain Maribel, tell them what she needed, but my words came out wrong.’ “It looked like they didn’t want me there” (Henríquez, 2014, p. 65). It felt like something she was doing, an attempt to circuit a gap, linguistic gap and cultural misunderstanding. While there are these hurdles, Alma must mimic English, if she does anything with a copy of American culture, she does it with a copy of American culture because she needs it and holds on to her culture and her heritage. She reflects, “Every word I learned felt like a tiny victory, even though I knew I would never sound like them” (Henríquez, 2014, p. 66).

Arturo Rivera is taken in his workplace in his image and the shape of other such as he conforms to the demands of his American employers, who exploit him. His silence promises the family his survival. His quiet, resilient and firm resistance is put up. This aligns with Bhabha’s assertion that mimicry “represents a flawed imitation that reveals the ambivalence of colonial discourse” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). Adaptation can mean adapting to survive, and

adaptation for subtle defiance — all happening at the same time — as Arturo's experiences demonstrate.

### **The Third Space: Bridging Cultures.**

An understanding of the cross cultural interactions within Henríquez's novel necessitates the understanding of what Bhabha defines as the Third Space. Borrowing from metaphorical use, the Third Space is a site of negotiation where identities are constructed and new cultural meanings are imagined. To give you an idea of how this is all perfectly in place with Mayor Toro and Maribel Rivera seems very powerful. As a second generation immigrant himself, Mayor, does his best to make Maribel feel at home in this country that he is trying to learn as an immigrant, bridging a gap between Maribel's Mexican background and the American culture he longs to familiarize himself with. Mayor reflects on their bond, saying, "With Maribel, it was like I could see the world through her eyes—her Mexico and my America, blending into something new" (Henríquez, 2014, p. 105).

Like Maribel, Mayor begins to feel a bit less lonely, and much more connected to her new environment in saying, 'Mayor even made it feel less lonely, like I could be here and still hang on to the pieces of me I thought I had lost' (Henríquez, 2014, p. 106). This Third Space shows how the relationship that Mayor develops with Maribel leads her to understand Maribel's heritage and to introduce Maribel to the experience of growing up in America. The Third Space is a dynamic pleasure of a reminder that The Third Space could be crucial to unlocking a different, more transformative way of inhabiting and being with one another. Mayor and Maribel's bond symbolizes the merging of cultural perspectives, illustrating Bhabha's assertion that The Third Space is "neither the one nor the other" but a site of intervention and reimagination (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). These are interactions which have synergies between a cultural hybridity and mutual growth and shared identity. Emphasizing Diversity The novel's plethora of narratives mirrors Bhabha's theory of hybridity and The Third Space; what are inherently heterogenous theories.

Henriquez gives voice to characters across a continuum of the immigrant experience, and stresses the complexities of the interplay of individual and collective identities. The story of each character helps explain the difficulties and the potential of cultural 'hybridity'. Specifically, Alma and Arturo are the first generation immigrants' struggle and Mayor symbolizes the difficulties faced by second generation immigrants who are situated within the crossfires of dual cultural expectations. This narrative strategy aligns with Bhabha's idea that hybridity challenges monolithic representations of identity, instead offering a "collaborative and dialogic" perspective (Bhabha, 1994, p. 36). Henríquez renders the immigrant experience with a mosaic of voices that reveal the

richness and complexity of identity construction in a world in which production of identities occurs through migration.

Plenty of Narratives: Bhabha's theory of hybridity and The Third Space; in the novel, a variety of (heterogenous) theories. Henriquez offers voices to characters across a continuum of the immigrant experience, and emphasizes the fusion of individual and collective identities. The story of each character helps explain the difficulties and the potential of cultural 'hybridity'. For example, Alma and Arturo are the first generation immigrants' struggle, and Mayor symbolizes difficulties that second generation immigrants caught in the crossfires of dual cultural expectation. This narrative strategy aligns with Bhabha's idea that hybridity challenges monolithic representations of identity, instead offering a "collaborative and dialogic" perspective (Bhabha, 1994, p. 36). Henríquez offers a mosaic of voices that negotiate the richness and complexity of identity construction in a world in which identities know are produced through migration.

#### **Broader Implications.**

The portrayal of mimicry, the Third Space, hybridity, and the socio political dynamics of migration only scratches the surface of what Henríquez offers not only of these individual characters, but more broadly of the social and political traction of migration. Pérez (2022) argues that the novel serves as a critique of systemic inequalities, stating, "Henríquez exposes the structural barriers that immigrants face, from linguistic exclusion to economic exploitation, highlighting the resilience required to navigate these challenges" (Pérez, 2022, p. 88). But an awareness of this aspect of Henríquez's work helps bring colour to its part in a wider argument about what it means to adapt to a cultural context that is so many ways the same.

Young (2003) further emphasizes the importance of hybridity in globalized contexts, asserting that it "represents the lived reality of negotiating overlapping histories and cultural frameworks" (Young, 2003, p. 23). By stepping into one more remove further along this theoretical lens, we can witness the processes of displacement and connection characteristic of Henríquez's characters as a negotiation of culture in a globalized world. For example, the contribution of the novel's narrative, which in mimetics echoes hybridity in the aspect that identity isn't represented in monolithic terms, is such polyphonic, mosaic collage of tales. Following Bhabha, Henríquez's novel gives a good illustration of how these Bhabha's postcolonial concepts (mimicry, The Third Space, hybridity) are applied. It also works out this novel's demonstration that cultural negotiation is socially ambivalent and creative, through the characters' struggles and relationship to each other. With this, Henríquez enriches the experience of immigration by bringing additional diversity of narratives through a polyphonic

structure that will resist the singular unfolding of a single and narrative by celebrating the malleability of identity. This analysis shows that *The Book of Unknown Americans* is a compelling text of cultural hybridity with intimate truths as with universal importance and proves how *The Book of Unknown Americans* is a text 'primacy of cultural hybridity.'

### Textual Analysis

#### Character Analysis

##### **Alma Rivera: The Struggle between adaptation and hope.**

Alma Rivera is an emotional and cultural journey through what migrants go through in order to thrive and hang on to your culture in the new country. It's around her dilemmas being bicultural, somewhere one does not know. Alma's reflections reveal her feelings of displacement: "We had bundled up our old life and left it behind, and then hurtled into a new one with only a few of our things, each other, and hope" (Henríquez, 2014, p. 11). Stated otherwise, this is Homi Bhabha's ambiguity of being in The Third Space where people continually negotiate their identities in the presence of cultural difference (Bhabha, 1994:36). She is wanting to keep her cultural roots with recipes and tables of familiar ingredients. Alma remembers this in a poignant scene standing in the aisles, searching for what she needed, but nothing 'was the same.' Even (Henríquez, 2014, p. 52), the vegetables seemed foreign.

This culinary act of preserving cultural practices lies within studies of migrants' assertions of heritage in the diaspora Cohen , 'food as a tangible connection to one's homeland, a way of holding cultural identity while it is dislocated' (Cohen 2008, p. 202). Additionally, Alma's guilt for her daughter Maribel's car accident and all the more so, the money or the responsibility to move the family to the U.S., makes Alma's feelings bolder. 'Whenever I look at Maribel, I remember what we decided, she said, 'How can I forget?' We were two adults with two children and every time I look at Maribel, I see the weight of our decisions.' What if we had stayed? What if we hadn't left everything behind?" (Henríquez, 2014, p. 86). This is instead how migrant narratives come filled with loss, guilt and adapting, how personal and cultural challenges collide in a reservoir of resilience and in the strain to find a place to live.

##### **Arturo Rivera: Resilience and Alienation.**

Arturo Rivera's experience is common to the migrant: economic exploitation, cultural alienation. Arturo, a third generation farm worker, uses his family as a source of the only income for his family unit as he walks across endless green fields working on a much harsher condition in the mushroom farm that supplies his family with food. "This is not what I pictured." And we do what we must, (Henríquez, 2014, p. 132). For many migrants, Arturo says what they do to avoid dying, at turns to their dignity. The gruelling work

conditions which migrant labourers experienced are very difficult because the migrant labourers face systemic inequality. Arturo reflects on this, saying, “They pay us just enough to keep us quiet, but never enough to get ahead” (Henríquez, 2014, p. 135).

In accordance with Frantz Fanon’s analysis in *The Wretched of the Earth: His life is an epoch, an Odyssey*, the settler makes history”. He is so ... he is the MOST absolute beginning... Meanwhile, the native is being hemmed in: As Fanon states, one was kept outside of existence, unable to make his history” (Fanon, 1961, p. 64). Arturo’s situation is how Fanon divides an already marginalized group of people among them there is a colonised elite and an occupied population of dependents. Arturo’s isolation is added to by language barriers and lack of work contact. This task of speaking the words they want to hear only adds to the extreme alienation he speaks of in “I can do the work, but I can’t speak the words they want to hear” (Henríquez, 2014: 133).

Homi Bhabha talks of this alienation as a heterogenous situation that is a state of being which people are alienated so that they sit in between contradictory cultural expectations but continue to be themselves. By the end — Arturo’s tragic death, his end — Arturo’s end is, and therefore a sign of the inexorable underside of the migrant worker in a hostile land, and of the novels’ critique of systemic injustice. In calling attention to the precariousness of migrant labourers, Henríquez turns to Arturo’s story — we don’t actually meet Arturo — because when bad things happen to armies of undocumented workers, Arturo has few means or recourse.

### **Mayor Toro: Navigating a Hybrid Identity.**

His identity is a perfect example of hybrid identities: Mayor Toro is a second generation immigrant. A native of Mayor, he grew up in the U.S. and is born to Panamanian parents, so he has to work out how to deal with that heritage and his slant on Americana. He admits he is disconnected from his Panamanian roots: ‘I didn’t know enough Spanish to have a real conversation with my relatives.’ I felt like an outsider in a family I’m supposed to belong to” (Henríquez, 2014, p. 34). In school meanwhile he’s alienated because he’s an ethnicity, with his cheesy being mocked. He recalls, “They called me ‘Panama Boy,’ even though I felt more like just a boy trying to fit in” (Henríquez, 2014, p. 35). In *The Third Space*, living on this culture’s border is a dual struggle which functionally represents this *\_place\_* of the time’s cultural tangle and change.

As Homi Bhabha explains, “The beyond is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past... it is a space of intervention, where cultural differences meet and create new forms of meaning and identity” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). Mayor’s relationship with Maribel Rivera is symbolic cultural hybridity.

Mayor uses their bond to reconcile his two identities: he reads his heritage, he learns to enjoy it, and also his American identity. "When my life seemed to be over with Maribel," he thinks, "I didn't have to explain myself." You made me feel (Henríquez, 2014, p. 105) you were raising me to be Panamanian, and to also be American.' Looking at the interactions he sheds light on the possibility of spaces between spaces for connections and understandings as Bhabha suggests the hybrid is a space for creative reimagining by making new cultural meaning and practices.

### **Challenges with Alienation, Discrimination and Belonging.**

In her novel *The Book of Unknown Americans*, Cristina Henríquez provides a vivid picture of the things that can go very wrong when migrants arrive in a different country: the sense of never being able to make connections, the feeling of being alone, you always being made aware you are not from round here or anywhere else; how very hard to belong. Close because these attributes are part of the migrant status and nobody fights through emotional and macro level trap doors erected in a new environment. Alma Rivera's isolation is a microcosm of the more universal migrant experience. "Given the context, the scenes that really get you are her, unable to communicate easily in English and we're having another episode of felt vulnerability and exclusion like in a more somber scene where she can't fight for her daughter Maribel inside school." Lacking linguistic and cultural means, she feels powerless and tells us, as she tried to make them understand, even though my words were clumsily foreign and their faces didn't hear me (Henríquez, 2014, p. 66).

This frustration reflects the alienation migrants often endure in unfamiliar societies, aligning with the broader theme in migrant literature, where, as Cohen observes, "Language becomes both a marker of cultural identity and a barrier to integration, amplifying the sense of dislocation" (Cohen 2008, p. 205). The novel also brings to light systemic racism that keeps migrant hardship in place. The economic injustice immigrants endure in the workplaces is illustrated by Arturo Rivera's story. Arturo notes, "They give us just enough to get by, but never enough to feel like we belong" (Henríquez, 2014, p. 135). The low wages and inhumane working conditions suggest that undocumented and economically marginal migrants are vulnerable simply because they are legally insecure and therefore typically have little in the way of protection from the abuses of systematic worker exploitation that affect native workers.

It is also obvious from the marginalization of the Rivera family, within their neighborhood, that migrants undergo social exclusion. This is exemplified when Alma overhears neighbors questioning their presence, reinforcing Edward Said's concept of "othering," where "the Orient is not only represented as inferior, but also as a means of defining and strengthening the identity of the

West” (Said, 1978, p. 54). Said’s theory underscores how dominant groups use language and representation to perpetuate power hierarchies, situating migrants as perpetual "others."

Though migrant communities are resilient, reputed as one, Henríquez says. The space of a soon to be foreclosed apartment complex where the Riveras live, becomes the space in which communal support and connection takes place. The people that live here come from different Latin American countries and the way we are trying to bring that back and share that back with our culture and traditions, that's how we're trying to get a sense of home cause we're not really at home in society. This environment exemplifies the dual nature of the migrant experience: But the larger society alienates and excludes persons while the smaller society provides comfort and power for these persons. You all come from somewhere else, 'Alma says,' you are all from somewhere else.' Where we are together. This world, we cling onto each other, spend hours talking about our past lives ('This world, we cling onto each other, spend hours talking about our past lives' (Henríquez, 2014, p. 87). It's this that it's saying: you cannot defeat the challenge of being a migrant without community and you do not have space for belonging in the face of otherism.

### **Language and Communication.**

*The Book of Unknown Americans* works as both a barrier against classification and as a means of negotiating wider cultural adaptation. Alma and Arturo have been successfully disconnected from American society by limited English proficiency. Just as non-native speakers everywhere feel lonely because they are unable to speak the language, Alma is lonely because she cannot speak the language. “So bad she feels bad, ‘Cause I couldn’t say the words that I should have said, and even though they might have been said, well they didn’t get it”. Instead, I was invisible. (Henríquez 2014, p. 65). This could be the generated feeling of invisibility and powerlessness that she grows more alien, that is alienated, that she cannot tell herself fully in English. In fact, as Henríquez notes (p. 133), at work, too, we have linguistic barriers as during Arturo, “They didn’t care what I said, they cared that I continued to work and that I didn’t cause problems.” He cannot promote good conditions and learn how to live with others, because of a lack of language skills. Off the other way around, language is also a marker of resilience of adaptation. The determination matches the desire Alma has to acquire English as a way to bulldoze her way over these barriers and to move through her new environment.

She reflects, “Each word I learned felt like a small victory, a step closer to understanding and being understood” (Henríquez, 2014, p. 66). The double nature of language in the experience of the immigrant, language can be broken and wean one from one's society and heritage, and at the same time can

reinforce individuality through the process of building the new: the third, the hybrid. My hybrid cultural self is a festivity like Mayor Toro. Mayor (Henríquez 2014, pg 105), as a second generation immigrant, 'Could speak both languages and felt that 'I could live in two worlds at once, even if I didn't fully belong to either.' This dynamic aligns with Homi Bhabha's assertion that "language is central to the articulation of hybrid identities, allowing individuals to negotiate between cultural frameworks and create spaces of shared meaning" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 36). In this light, language becomes the site of struggle and transformation: It reflects the urgent dialogues of the cultural adaptations happening and the absence of hybridity that threaten in its absence.

### **In-Between Spaces.**

Henríquez is writing about in-between spaces that allow cultures to cross, or, more generally, be in dialogue, to transform, and to negotiate new identities. One, the apartment complex you see the Rivera family living in is. This way serves as a microcosm of cultural hybridity, where immigrants from various Latin American countries populate this. Through it, the resident goes on to maintain their own style of life whilst also adapting to American life by using dividing such things as common and shared space to separate the resident according to their common and shared space. And we're all from somewhere else, Alma thinks, so here. But we make this place ours," (Henríquez, 2014, p. 87). The idea here is looking at the encompassing nature of such spaces for the potential for belonging, cultural exchange and through the merging of identities, resilience and unity. Maq Amaq with Maribel Rivera also illustrates that in between spaces can be created, between Mayor Toro and Maribel Rivera. Mayor is also a second generation immigrant who helps Maribel when she is first in her new environment, but she is also a bridge to Maribel's past as a Mexican American and her present as an American. Mayor recalls with whom Maribel bonded: 'It was like space between who I was, and who I wanted to be, wasn't so wide' (Henríquez 2014, p. 105).

With this their relationship represents what is the possibility of collective development and listening in hybrid spaces, as Mayor can understand Maribel's lineage and Mirabel his in America (Henríquez 2014: 104–6). This dynamic aligns with Bhabha's concept of The Third Space, which he describes as "a space of negotiation where cultural differences encounter and transform each other into new forms of meaning and identity" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 36). It also manages to paint shared spaces as extended to the cultural and linguistic levels. For example, the usage of Spanglish (in) or the mixing of Spanish and English spoken so naturally by these persons clearly indicates their negotiations of dual ethnicities. Pérez (2022) highlights the importance of such linguistic practices,

arguing that “language hybridity is both a survival strategy and a reflection of the fluidity of immigrant identities” (p. 91).

The linguistic blending with which they perpetuate this indicates the ability and flexibility of migrants to inhabit cultural and linguistic borders. One example is that Alma says that language is a shared identity even when we did not use the same words, in which case we ‘understood each other’ (Henríquez, 2014, p. 88). Between is also a place of negotiation between cultural practices, which the novel offers. Taken together, they’re a hybrid community, born of both there and here, and it’s evident in the gatherings of food and fortunes and traditions in the apartment complex the residents share. These cultural gatherings continue to exist, each bring a background and even today they unite in a kind of shared belonging. This communal dynamic aligns with Bhabha’s assertion that The Third Space is “not a space where identities are erased, but where they are reimagined and transformed” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). Henríquez’s work in these spaces addresses their capacity to serve both toward individuality and unity for migrant communities through the hybridity of those spaces. *The Book of Unknown Americans* is a beautiful exploration of the Muslima modus operandi of alienation, of language, of cultural hybridity.

Henríquez centers on the bicultural nature of these experiences, an experience of being resilient and an experience of exclusion, to argue for the capacity of community and interstitial spaces that engender transformation. Moreover, the novel presents language as a hindrance to, and a resource for, the adaptation taking place in light of the cultural negotiation it represents. Ultimately this text describes how migrants create identities in the making of a hybrid space, contributing to an understanding broader of belonging and cultural exchange.

### **Connecting Themes: In the Novel and in the Theories of Bhabha.**

The theoretical insights of Homi Bhabha on hybridity and identity brought to its pen not only by Cristina Henríquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans*, but by it too. Cultural hybridity involves the forging of new identities between spaces where cultural interaction provokes negotiation, and transformation. Bhabha explains, “It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationhood, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). As in the case of the novel, the novels theme of hybridity is also key in the novel, centered towards migrant characters struggling and succeeding with ties to having dual culture affiliations. Alma Rivera is such a person: the gap that formed between one’s personal identity of Mexicanism and participating in the progress of the American way of life. In her battle to find some traditional practices such as cooking, to save for us, the

Mexican dishes, which were captured. "I tried to cook those dishes we loved, because the ingredients didn't taste the same."—Alma It was as if our food was foreign" (Henríquez, 2014, p. 52).

The representation of hybridity, preservation and its coexistence with adaptation is this. Bhabha describes such ambivalence as a key feature of hybridity, arguing that identities are "neither fully assimilated nor entirely separate but continuously redefined through negotiation and reinterpretation" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 112). In explaining how Mayor Toro's own story as a second but not first generational immigrant helps explain the complexity of the hybrid identity created in which we live, further details. He struggles with feeling "too American" for his Panamanian relatives and "too foreign" for his American classmates, stating, "It felt like I was stuck in between, never fully belonging to either side" (Henríquez, 2014, p. 34). According to Bhabha, in such spaces of negotiation—The Third Space—such differences between constant identity are deconstructed, such space is created for creativity, and the cultural affiliations are reconstructed. Bhabha asserts, "The Third Space enables new positions to emerge, displacing the histories that constitute it, revealing the complex negotiations of cultural meaning" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). The novel illustrates out this, by emphasizing the exemplary represented in Mayor's internal conflict graph in the novel, and by indicating that in Bhabha's words, identity is fluid and tectonic.

### **Social and Political Dimensions: Marginalisation, Integration, Power Dynamics.**

Just as Henríquez tracks broader social and political issues, his novel also enters the marginalising, strives for integration, power politics that are the condition of the migrant experience. The novel spans how immigrants are economically exploited by the Rivera family, socially ostracized, and unable to speak the language. However, Arturo Rivera cites the example of a mushroom farm where 'migrant labourers are horribly exploited, with very harsh conditions and low wages.' Arturo remarks, "They paid just enough to survive, never enough to thrive" (Henríquez, 2014, p. 135). It espouses the experience of Frantz Fanon's critique of colonized or neocolonized ideologies that perpetuate inequality and marginalization. Fanon argues, "The native is exploited by the settler class, who denies him the means to exist while using his labor to perpetuate their own dominance" (Fanon, 1961, p. 64). Prin Alma's dealings with its neighbours show the prejudice and stereotyping that happens in migrant communities.

Once, while Alma overhears another talking to a neighbor, 'I don't know why they're here,' They don't belong" (Henríquez, 2014, p. 87), reflecting the persistent "othering" of immigrants. This conforms to the idea of Orientalism as

Edward Said makes it: as dramatization of the colonized as the outsiders in order to reinforce the existing apparatus of power. Said states, "The Orient is not only represented as inferior but is instrumentalized to define the superiority of the West" (Said, 1978, p. 54). Yet the book also demonstrates how resilient and how agency migrant communities are. An apartment complex of mixed backgrounds settling in, and opening up and supporting people. Alma reflects on this, saying, "We all carried our losses, but here, we found a way to carry each other too" (Henríquez, 2014, p. 89). This collective resilience questions the often taken for granted narrative of immigrant vulnerability but uncovers the powerful role of narrative of empowerment and community building when this space is one of exclusion and marginalization.

### Conclusion

Through The analysis of *The Book of Unknown Americans*, the study has interhected with the study of cultural hybridity and migrant identities from the angle of Homi Bhabha's theories. A novel forcefully carries out the experiences of the Latin American immigrants as they try to reconcile their cultural heritage with the demands of American society. Most of the hybrid beings in this novel exercise the power and potential of being just that, complex. Alma's story is an example of struggle within a storey of cultural and emotional struggle against trying to cling to her Mexican identity while she learns American norms. We see what the systemic exploitation and alienation of Arturo's life as a migrant worker looks like and where a specific form of belonging is physically located by narrating Arturo's marginalised and exploitative life as a migrant worker, and Mayor's hybridised and negotiated sense of belonging in The Third Space. Like social and political dimensions such as marginalisation, discrimination and resilience, the novel also captures this broader topic. Through its multi-vocal structure, that diversity of the migrant experience is built in *The Book of Unknown Americans*; identities do not exist as fixed or singular, but always in dislocation.

This shows why the thinking of the world's demographers about migration has to include consideration is given to the crucial role of cultural, economic and social forces. Homi Bhabha's views of cultural hybridity and The Third Space were used heavily in the analysis of how the novel sought to explore the problem of identity and belonging. He particles derived by the cargo of cultures encounter are described by Bhabha's theory. His concept of ambivalence, negotiation and innovation is essential to his approach of explaining how migrants act to deal with what is distorting in the act of cultural displacement. This investigation examines the type of alignment of the novel with Bhabha's assertion that the Third Space is a site of creativity and uncreative forced reinvention where new cultural meanings and identities are constituted.

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