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Through the Lens Darkly:  
Accented Filmmaking in Mira Nair's *The Perez Family*

Among the South Asian women filmmakers, Mira Nair is undoubtedly the most prominent and productive one. Starting as a student of sociology who recorded the social changes of Indian society through her documentaries, Nair has moved into feature films with her widely acclaimed *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) and into Hollywood with her later productions. Through the camera lens Nair looks closely at India, diasporic experiences, and North America. Nair first provides insight into Indian society with her documentaries *Jama Masjid Street Journal* (1979), *So Far from India* (1982), *Indian Cabaret* (1985), *Children of A Desired Sex* (1987), and a portrayal of the subalterns in *Salaam Bombay!* (1988). In the historical drama *Karma Sutra* (1997) and the contemporary melodrama *Monsoon Wedding* (2002), Nair further reviews the position of women in India. She also chooses to represent diasporic experiences through the melodramatic form in *Mississippi Masala* (1992), *The Perez Family* (1995), and *My Own Country* (1998). As her film career matures, she takes on even more diversified subject matters. In her recent feature film *Hysterical Blindness* (2002) Nair looks into the lives of lower-middle class white women, records the aftermath of 9/11 in a documentary short "India" (2002), and adapts Anthony Trollop's *Vanity Fair* into a period drama. Except for the nineteenth-century setting of *Vanity Fair* (2003), there appear to be two main foci of Nair's filmic oeuvre: lives of the South Asian diaspora; and those of the minorities in American society: immigrants, peoples of color and the lower classes, victims of diseases, and the list goes on. This paper focuses on Nair's "accented" representation of diasporic experiences in *The Perez Family*, in which Nair documents lives of Cuban boat people making their way to Miami. The first part of the paper is a brief introduction to the controversies over Nair's career in order to contextualize Nair's filmic works in general and *The Perez Family* in particular. It is followed by a close reading of the heterogeneous "accents" in *The Perez Family* in order to expound ways in which Nair represents the formation of a new Cuban American family and probes beneath the surface of the containment of a romance comedy, thereby leaving a cinematic landmark on the American consciousness.

In his chapter "Bombay Cinema and Diasporic Desire," Vijay Mishra historicizes the origin of the Indian diaspora as coming out of "two quite distinct moments in the history of capital. The first moment (of classic capitalism) produced the movement of indentured labor to the colonies (South Africa, Fiji, Trinidad, Guyana, etc.) for the production of sugar, rubber, and tin for the growing British and European markets" and results in what he terms "the old Indian diaspora of plantation labor"; the second

Indian diaspora, or the post-1960s “diaspora of late capital” (236), Mishra points out, is “distinguished by the movement of economic migrants (but also refugees) into the metropolitan centers of the former empire as well as the New World and Australia” (235). Born in India and educated both in India and the United States, Mira Nair belongs to this second diaspora, out of which grows “an important market of popular cinema as well as site for its production” (Mishra 236) and a special diasporic film culture of “the ‘Brown Atlantic’” (Desai ix).<sup>1</sup> The multiple routes of Indian migrations in “the Brown Atlantic” provide Nair with the background of those “twice displaced” emigrant characters in *Mississippi Masala* and *My Own Country*,<sup>2</sup> who are forced to leave their African birthplaces and are finally relocated in the United States.

As a filmmaker Nair is always a controversial figure, not only due to her frequent choice of transgressive subject matters but also because of her relative success in the mainstream film industry. She is cited by Hamid Naficy as one of those minority filmmakers who benefit from “a social and professional mobility in the new land by means of cinema” and who “move out of minoritarian cinema into the mainstream by making popular films” (“Between Rocks and Hard Places” 133). Since professional and social advancements are often regarded as signs of deviation from one’s roots, Nair’s gender and class identity—a middle-class woman with an elitist education—further renders her a suspect of intellectual compradorism. This upward mobility results in a polarized access to her films. On the one hand, she has been criticized for being a “part of a tokenized minority of ‘post-colonial’ scholars and artists who function as both collaborators and resisters” (Ballal 95). Furthermore, her films about India, such as *Salaam Bombay!*, have been criticized as providing inside information from the perspective of a native informer to international audiences. On the other, she is praised as “a cineaste of uncompromising feminist postcolonial subjectivity in-the-making” (Foster 111) and as someone who deploys a “politics of provocation” in her films to shock her audience into a new awareness.<sup>3</sup> According to Alpana Sharma, the purpose of this kind of provocative filmmaking is to sharpen our senses through transgression: “Her camera opens out both ways: It asks us to look at its subject just as frankly as we look at ourselves looking, in the process breaking down the dialectic of inside and outside, subject and object, viewer and viewee” (92).

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<sup>1</sup> In Jigna Desai’s *Beyond Bollywood*, a comparative study of “films in English from and about the ‘Brown Atlantic’ (South Asian diasporas in the United States, Canada, and Britain)” and Indian films, South Asian diasporic cinema is defined as “a developing cinema that negotiates the dominant discourses, politics, and economies of multiple locations. This political and cultural economy affects the form, production, and circulation of the films. South Asian diasporic cinema negotiates and traffics among the two largest global cinemas—those of Hollywood and Bollywood—as well as individual national cinemas including British, Canadian alternative U.S. and alternative Indian” (35).

<sup>2</sup> See Binita Mehta’s essay on *Mississippi Masala*.

<sup>3</sup> Alpana Sharma argues, “Her entire filmography to date, while certainly not produced expressly with the intent to shock, characterizes Nair as a non-traditional filmmaker unafraid of controversy” (91).

In this way Nair's explorations of polemic subjects are not seen as trading on shock value but rather as offering a chance for reflective inspection that will lead to renewed insights. The sexually explicit scenes in *Mississippi Masala* and *Karma Sutra*, for instance, are not just meant to arouse but to inspire a rethinking of the meaning of bodily pleasure, especially from a feminist perspective.

The controversies regarding Nair's film career, therefore, to a large extent are resultant from her liminal status as a diasporic filmmaker from the Third World. Her own liminality in turn leads to a strong interest in marginal characters. Nair once stated: "I would have to admit that I have always been drawn to stories of people who live on the margins of society, on the edge, or outside, learning the language of being in-between, always dealing with the question: 'What, and where, is home?'" ("The Language of being in between"). This question of the definition and location of home for marginal people becomes a central problematic that Nair is working with in her filmic texts; almost all her main characters struggle to find a place called home: Ashok the immigrant worker in New York who is struggling with his duty to bring his family to the Big Apple in *So Far from India*; Krishna the abandoned child who has landed in the red light district of Bombay in *Salaam Bombay!*; Mina the Indian girl who was born in Uganda, working and living in a Mississippian motel and falls in love with an African American carpet cleaner; Abraham Verghese the Indian doctor with an Ethiopian birthplace who is helping people in a small town of Tennessee to fight against the AIDS epidemic, just to mention a few examples. The pursuit of an elusive sense of being "at-home" and of belonging for the migrant/migrating characters is therefore almost always a structuring principle in Nair's films.

Nair's own diasporic background and this quest for being "at-home" make her one of Naficy's "accented filmmakers," "exilic and diasporic filmmakers...who work in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices" (*Accented Cinema* 10). "By dint of their education, class affiliation, multilingualism, cosmopolitanism, and distance from the homeland," Naficy further points out, using Mina Nair as an example, "accented filmmakers are structurally outsiders, however much they desire to be considered insiders, either within their own native culture or within the host society" (*Accented Cinema* 70). This difficult position as an outsider finally results in a special double-voiced "accented style," which is a hybrid construct of "the cinematic traditions" of the dominant cinema and "the exilic and diasporic traditions" of the deterritorialized filmmakers (*Accented Cinema* 22). A question that is especially pertinent to Mina Nair and the answer to which remains to be seen is whether accented filmmakers can keep this special double voice and double consciousness throughout their careers without being consumed by the mainstream film industry.

Although, as mentioned already, Naficy has also cited Nair as an example of a minority film maker who has moved “up” to mainstream cinema, it could be argued that Nair in her film productions always strives to keep her “accent” and to incorporate different variations of the “accented style” that she started with, be they independently made or supported by the studios. Here *The Perez Family* becomes a case in point in that it is a film funded by a big studio and in which Nair has to practice a different “accent” to her own in her representation of marginal characters seeking to claim the United States as their home. This film, which has received mixed reviews and has seldom been discussed, is special among Nair’s films about diasporic experiences in that it is at once a subject matter with which Nair is unfamiliar—Cuban refugees in America—and one that is closest to her heart—the lives of immigrants and exiles. How to make a film about a different ethnic community from her own and still to remain a “faithful translator” of Hispanic culture is in every way a challenge for the Indian filmmaker. To put it another way: If Nair wants to maintain an accented style in this film, the second tradition in the film besides the Hollywood mode of melodramatic comedy becomes problematic; for by attempting to adopt the “accent” of the Cuban immigrant, Nair can very well be accused of appropriating the Cuban accent and of performing a ventriloquist act. What makes Nair’s task even more difficult is the need to balance the different traditions that seem to compete with each other, as well as her reported struggle with the studio over the control of the film.

*The Perez Family*, adapted from a novel by Christine Bell, is made in the Hollywood tradition of a romance comedy in its visualization of the interactions between immigrants and their naturalized habitats. Juan Raul Perez (played by Alfred Molina) is a Cuban plantation owner who has been imprisoned by Castro for twenty years. His wife Carmela (Anjelica Huston) and daughter Teresa have escaped to Miami in the meantime. Upon his release Juan takes advantage of the boatlift and sails to the U.S to search for his lost family. En route he comes across Dottie (Dorita) Perez (Marisa Tomei), a cane cutter and part-time prostitute. The plot follows that of a comedy of mistaken identities in that Juan and Dottie are taken to be man and wife by an American immigrant officer. Carmela’s brother Angel fails to locate Juan because of this mistake. As a consequence Carmela is left heartbroken and Juan is left stranded in the refugee tent city inside Miami Orange Bowl. Dottie exploits the mistake by collecting three Perezes from amongst the refugees to make up a family of four in order to get a sponsor for her entry into the U.S. and away from the football stadium. The Perez family ends up selling flowers on the roadside to people who are driving by. In the meantime, Carmela gives up all hope of a reunion with Juan and decides to start dating a federal officer who has been called to her house by the alarm system installed by the neurotic Angel. Juan and

Carmela are finally reunited, only to decide that they would rather follow their hearts rather than their marriage vows.

This comedy of romantic love in the diaspora is relatively less known among Nair's works and has received little critical attention. *The New York Times* reviewer Caryn James writes that the film "exists too much on the surface" although "that surface offers its own visual and aural glitter." In her analysis of *Mississippi Masala* Gwendolyn Audrey Foster cursorily states, "Like *Mississippi Masala*, *The Perez Family* uses the standard Hollywood romance formula as a tableau to stage political critique and to embody the visual pleasure of people of color" (126-27). The comments on the film's superficial and formulaic quality in fact reflect on Nair's accented style of filmmaking, in which the surface is actually the source of depth with the coexistence of conservative normality and potential radicalism in its deployment of Hollywood conventions. Nair uses Hollywood conventional elements in order to mobilize a critical inspection of the media imperialism. The voice of the visually colonized, in turn, will speak back to the American media empire.

The conventional plot of fantasy versus reality prevails in the film and is best exemplified in Dottie's obsession with John Wayne, a trope from the frontier myth which presents the cowboy figure as the imagined embodiment of the American spirit of freedom. The Duke's cinematic presence as *the* American hero is produced and disseminated by the American mass media. It is Hollywood's commodified version of the American dream in which individualist heroism is celebrated for its capacity to fight against social and natural adversaries. The celluloid cowboy who freely roams the "uncivilized" land of the West embodies the quintessential American cultural myth of freedom and mobility, which is then exported to the global market via the neo-imperialist conquering force of the mass media. Jinga Desai analyzes Nair's submission to the "frontier myth or U.S.-domesticated nomadism" in *Mississippi Masala* represented in the film's emphasis on replacing the diaspora with the open space of the American West (73). The same myth, I would argue, is deliberately recycled in *The Perez Family* to criticize American visual imperialism. Dottie becomes the ideal female spectator of Hollywood westerns who is completely seduced by the visual pleasure of American macho heroism and the cinematic construction of America. Her repeatedly expressed desire to "fuck John Wayne" bespeaks a heterosexual desire induced and produced by this visual pleasure. Nair underscores Dottie's obsession with Hollywood and Wayne by playing on geography. On their way to Orange Bowl, Dottie spots the name 'Hollywood' on a road sign and gets excited about how close John Wayne is. In a sense, the character of Dottie is defined by this heterosexual fantasy peddled by the studios, which for Dottie safeguards her entrance or prevents her entry into the American dream. Furthermore,

the film reveals that her sole motivation of going to the U.S. is to consummate her sexual fantasy with her hero. Her naivety is therefore both a comment on the seductive mode of interaction between Hollywood and its audience, as well as on the mono-vision of immigrants who single-mindedly embark upon the journey away from home.

On a meta-filmic level, Dottie's naivety opens a space for Nair the filmmaker to reflect upon the illusionary nature of Hollywood productions and on her own career as one of the providers of illusions. Nair deliberately reveals her self-reflexive intention through the Indian immigration officer (played by Ranjit Choudhry) who mercilessly disillusiones Dottie with the news of the Duke's death and who also jokes about the cowboy/Indian melodrama. The immigration officer's joke that the Indians on the silver screen in the Western are "[n]ot my kind of Indians" pokes fun at the historical misnaming. It alludes to Christopher Columbus's mistake which made "Indians" out of Native Americans. The scene of Dottie's disillusionment also signifies a time lag that exists between the immigrant woman's media-produced America and American reality. (Juan also does not know that Elvis is dead, which reinforces the sense of a time lag.) The news of John Wayne's death supposedly should have shocked her into an awareness of reality. Nair nevertheless seizes the opportunity to further criticize the seductive power of Hollywood cinema as well as the Anglo-centrism involved in frontier heroism. During the showing of John Wayne's *Angel and the Bad Man* (1947) Dottie gets all excited and almost goes into a state of orgasm. Then the aged film stock gets burned and this interrupts her self-indulgent erotic reaction, only to replace the image of the Duke with a "real" Anglo macho figure that seems to be a wish fulfillment for Dottie: out of the burnt hole in the middle of the black and white film on the silver screen walks the Caucasian security guard Steve. Dottie ecstatically gazes at and reacts to this coincidence. By calling Steve "My United States freedom hero," Dottie is seen again as a visually colonized female spectator placed into her "appropriate" position as a believer of the American dream by the cinematic image. It seems her celluloid cowboy lover is miraculously resurrected in the flesh-and-blood blond guard. Not surprisingly the scene then cuts to Dottie and Steve violently making out in a corner of the stadium. However, once more Nair denies Dottie a fulfillment of her American dream. Finally, when she is about to consummate her sexual relationship with Steve (wearing a suggestive cowboy outfit) Dottie discovers that Steve treats her as a prostitute, just like the overseer on the Cuban plantation whom she left behind. A distraught Dottie then walks out of Steve's apartment into the Miami night and back to the deserted stadium, where earlier Juan had struggled with the guards to protect his "son" Felipe from being forcefully removed and where now only the grandfather

is left. This second disappointment and the fear of losing her new family again finally guide her back to the fold of “her people” and to a “proper” relationship with her assumed family. The sex that Dottie has saved for John Wayne is finally consummated with Juan, the Cuban John. Significantly, the next morning after they become a real couple Dottie decides to change her name back to Dorita. This reversal symbolizes Dottie/Dorita as being “decolonized” and liberated from her fantasy. The romance of the two refugees of course again brings back the normative heterosexual discourse of Hollywood’s melodramatic romance, but only after this visually produced romance plot has been thoroughly interrogated.

Once Dottie is completely disillusioned about the American cowboy, the rest of the drama concentrates on how the Cuban immigrants survive in the land of freedom. The film’s Cuban “accent” is where Nair can be criticized most readily as superficial since it is about an ethnic community out of the Indian filmmaker’s league. In this case what is at stake is Nair’s role as a successful “cultural translator.” Nair has accomplished this task by filming the Cuban community through “emphatic knowledge” (Foster 115) that can lead to border crossings.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, she relies on her own lived experience as a diasporan that bridges the cultural differences of the two ethnic communities. In this context the film also explores the reconfiguration of family and kinship system in the process of transnational migrations. The Perez family of the title is in fact a microcosmic representation of the Cuban immigrant community. Besides Juan and Dottie, the make-shift family also includes Grandfather Armando, the traumatized and disabled soldier who prefers to run naked or to climb up a high post to “look for Cuba,” the homeland that he was forced to leave behind, and Felipe the street smart orphan who ingratiates himself into the family and exploits Dottie’s maternal instinct. In a sense this Perez family is an exaggerated enactment of the freedom of choice in American democratic rhetoric. It also suggests the formation of a new Cuban American family which is built upon an alternative kinship system. Interestingly, there is another Perez family which is based on blood relations and consists of Juan, Carmela and Teresa. The coexistence of the double versions of the Perez family signifies the duality of the diasporic identity and thereby resists against any “singularly authentic” conceptualization and representation of an ethnic group. This duality also calls for a rethinking of the definition and location of home and family in a diasporic condition, a topic that Nair is most familiar with.

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<sup>4</sup> Foster argues for the importance of the use of emphatic knowledge when we attempt to “speak for” the subalterns: “Certainly cultural and historical determiners must be kept in mind when making or talking about films on the ‘culturally invisible,’ the culturally silenced and politically oppressed subalterns of the world; but cultural/historical knowledge must not be repositioned as a new frontier/border or silencing mechanism itself” (115).



On the other hand, Nair reaches beyond the common denominator of diasporic experiences and strives to build appropriate socio-historical and cultural-religious contexts for the Cuban exiles in the film. The film is set in 1980 when the Mariel boat people left Cuba for Miami. While as in *Mississippi Masala*, Nair does not dwell too much on the historical background of the exodus (only a few clues such as the TV news broadcasting in Carmela's living room showing Castro in a newsreel serves as an indicator of the event) the film nevertheless demands from its audience extra-filmic literacy of the history behind the boatlift. Through Angel's paranoiac obsession with Carmela's security, the film also records the fear and distrust of the established Cuban American community against the newcomers, or "Marelitos" as Angel labels them. This excessive fear hints at intra-communal divisions and disturbances, although they are significantly downplayed in the overall comedic treatment. Various aspects of Cuban culture also surface in Luz Paz, the grandmother/spiritual healer figure who interprets Juan's obsessive concern over his bad teeth as a manifestation of his anxiety for his manhood and virility, and tries to save Juan's "marriage" by sending Felipe to buy Juan some false teeth. The folk song that she keeps singing is also one of the theme melodies that are repeatedly played on the soundtrack. Interestingly, it is through this act of generosity that Felipe is incorporated into the Perez family; it is right after he runs into the gangster to whom he owes money and when in his hurry to escape he is knocked unconscious that the resourceful Dottie claims him as her long lost son.

Cinematically, the filmic narrative framed by scenes of the island homeland creates a distinct sense of Cuban presence. After the credit lines the film opens with a band playing traditional music on a beach where the bourgeoisie are enjoying a leisured outing on the sandy beach and servants are seen preparing traditional food. The camera captures an overall sense of class stability and family unity as it captures adults engaging in amiable conversations and children playing or napping. A young man in particular is seen dancing with a young woman. With the presence of nuns, school girls and old women embroidering, the scene appears to depict the Cuban middle class before the revolution. Then on the soundtrack the music fades away and is replaced by the sound of splashing ocean water and the distant sound of a trumpet. The scene then cuts to an extra-long shot that views the beach from the angle of the ocean and then the young man is seen standing alone on the deserted beach, calling out the name Carmela and watching five people wading into the sea in their party dresses, a young woman holding a child amongst them. When the scene abruptly moves to a dark prison cell, we realize that the opening scene is actually a representation of Juan dreaming about his former life and of the departure of his family to the other shore. The bright sunshine on the beach and the dimly lit prison

cell create a sharp contrast to highlight Juan's change of social status. The contrast establishes the basic tone of the film in which dreams are pitted against stock reality both in Mariel and Miami. The beach scene is repeated again in Juan's dream when he is sleeping in the same bed with Dottie. While he is still calling out the name Carmela, the girl in the dream has changed into Dottie, which subtly suggests a change of heart, though unrecognized, in Juan. The theme music is played again when Juan makes love to Dottie the first time, after he witnesses Carmela flirting with the federal officer and decides to "stop waiting." This message of the necessity to let go of the past is reiterated by Carmela when she is finally reunited with Juan. Here we are invited to see beneath the surface of the romantic comedy to detect a metaphor for the exilic condition. Carmela is virtually saying that the fear of letting go of a familiar past has prevented them from getting new lives. As a consequence they have spent twenty years suspended between Cuba and the U.S. The act of dissolving old marriage vows and going to their respective new loves allows them to embark on new lives. Thus at the end of the film the camera is symbolically saying "goodbye" to the island for the immigrants by presenting a brief scene and a last look at Cuba. While the frames with roses presenting the credit lines at the beginning of the film suggest romantic love, the three views of the beach represent the progress of the Cuban immigrants in the new land.

The film also uses music and dance as authenticating devices to strengthen the overall Hispanic "accent." It opens with a stylized performance of traditional Cuban music in Juan's dream and towards the end it presents another performance of Cuban music and dance at the Valedero festival staged by Angel's mistress, Flavia. Dottie's dance on the boat on her way to Miami and the little girl who dances to the Cuban music in Little Havana, as seen by Juan when he is searching for his way to Carmela's house, are further examples of the Hispanic dance culture. In fact, all of Nair's films make much use of musical and dance elements, which to a certain extent can be regarded as variations and ethnicized forms of the Bollywood song and dance tradition. Not surprisingly, *The Perez Family* also has a close affinity to Bollywood films in its deployment of musical and dance performances, although in a rather more reserved way than that of the Bollywood model.

Besides the double traditions of the Hollywood convention and Cuban cultural voices, therefore, there is also the "Indian accent" which is a predominant presence in Nair's films and with which she navigates between different film genres and traditions of Bollywood and Hollywood to represent characters of different classes and races. India is a constitutive element in her films as evident in the constant use of Indian characters, especially in her own cameo appearances in several films. For instance, in *The Perez Family* Nair plays a woman who drives by and buys flowers from Dottie

because she is “tempted” by the flamboyant Cuban immigrant selling flowers at the beach front.<sup>5</sup> The Indian immigration officer who guides Dottie through the process of getting sponsorship and who orchestrates the transportation of the Cuban immigrants in and out of Orange Bowl stadium is another ostensive Indian presence in the film. The insertion of this Indian character in the film accentuates the comedic aura through his wisecracking comments on Dottie and her American dream. With his official status as one who regulates the process of immigrant naturalization, he apparently stands out as a signpost of successful assimilation into American institutions. However, his Indian accent at once adds to the heteroglossic soundtrack of the film and signifies a part of the immigrant culture that is inassimilable. This inassimilable element, it could be said, represents the very spirit of accented cinema and embodies an irreducible trace of the diasporic migration.

Mira Nair once commented, “Distance from a community is something which used to confuse me but now I use it as a tool for my films” (Anbarasan and Otchet). In his introductory essay to a collection of essays on exilic films and media studies, Homi Bhabha articulates “an archaic root of the ‘exilic’”:

it is worth remembering that the term also carries within it, invisibly, unconsciously, its Latin root, *Salire*, ‘to leap.’ It is the ethical ‘leap’ that requires us, in a kind of bounding, boundary-breaking movement to move, as Benjamin suggests, beyond ‘our metropolitan streets and furnished rooms’; to revise our knowledge of some of the ‘savage’ discourses of power, possession, knowledge and belonging, that rise from the uncanny far-flung ruins and debris of metropolitan discourse. (xii)

The exilic movement of transnational migrations is therefore a way to refresh our jaded senses and to achieve new insights. Through representing the Cubans who sail across the ocean in search of freedom and the opportunity to rebuild their family in *The Perez Family*, we see how Mira Nair uses her filmmaker’s lens to make these “leaps” possible for immigrants. Most important, this film with multiple “accents” also makes it possible for Nair herself to go beyond the boundary of the familiar Indian subject matter to document lives of different classes, ethnicities and races. The making of *The Perez Family*, therefore, signals a landmark for the diasporic filmmaker as well as for the American audience.

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<sup>5</sup> Nair is also the Indian **gossip** who reiterates the law of color and racial lines and resists any impingement against the traditional way of life both in *Mississippi Masala* and *My Own Country*.

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