Immigration and American Identity

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Pre-Marxist thought conceptualized identity as fixed, unchanging, and wholly autonomous. Postmodern theorists, on the other hand, have sought to reject any notion of an autonomous self, emphasizing, instead, various conditions of existence that act to constitute the subject. As part of the rejection of the autonomous self we have come to understand identity not as positive—that is, not as an independent or absolute entity—but as negative identity can be defined only differentially in relation to what it is not.

Identity, then, requires an "other", against which it can contrast and define itself. National identity is no different, and in delineating its boundaries a nation defines an internal and an external, a domestic and a foreign, a national self and its contrasting other. American national borders do not entirely divide the internal from the external, however, as evidenced by the more than 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States today. Yet these immigrants, the included and excluded, bolster rather than ossify a sense of American identity by providing proximate examples of juridical, cultural, and linguistic difference that American citizens freely appropriate in order to fabricate a differential national identity.

My work focuses on American identity and today's most conspicuous American other—the ever increasing Latin American immigrant—in the context of contemporary fiction and films as well as the current political debate. The racialization and criminalization of Latin American immigrants fosters the sense of an immigration crisis, and allows for their exclusion from the cultural and political domain of the nation and their subsequent exploitation at the hands of American capitalism. Among other texts I analyze the criminalization of the immigrant and the resulting call to vigilantism as portrayed in the film "Children of Men", as well as the sense of a double-consciousness—both American and not—felt by immigrant progeny, even as citizens, in the novel "The Namesake."