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## Emerging Voices

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# EMERGING VOICES

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David Rodriguez-Oporta  
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*Through our continued collaboration with the Office of First-Year Experience, the staff of the Lehigh Review has once again compiled a selection of talented young writers for the “Emerging Voices” section of the journal. In the summer of 2013, incoming students read Brando Skyhorse’s *The Madonnas of Echo Park*: a novel which follows a cast of characters indelibly linked by their experiences growing up in a once-dangerous and recently-gentrified neighborhood in Los Angeles. Students were asked to think and write critically about their own relationships to residence: to articulate the ways in which their identities have been influenced by their hometowns; to consider how moving to Lehigh’s campus might impact that influence; and/or reflect on the consequences of having an identity based in the idea of “home.” We are proud to showcase the winners of that effort: some of Lehigh University’s best and brightest young authors, who remind us that Lehigh’s superb talent exists at all levels.*

## DWIGHT KESSLER

Every high school student in history cannot wait to graduate. They want to get out of their so-called “prison” and go into the world to accomplish bigger and better things. When they toss their caps up, they look to the future and it is big and bright in their gleaming eyes that may be filled with tears. Looking back, however, that time was so abrupt it was sickening. All of the things I had worked so hard for in my 12 years of schooling were thrown behind me as I was shipped away to college. All of my friends and the people I cared so much about simply vanished. Much like the abrupt changes to the environment and the people of Echo Park, my life went from perfect to nonexistent. I felt like I had nothing and, somewhat still, I would give almost anything in the world to have my old life back.

Almost all of the characters in Echo Park lost their identity with their hometown at some point in the book. When, or if, they left Echo Park, they left everything they knew behind, much like Hector in the first chapter of the book. Furthermore, the characters that remained in Echo Park saw their identities crumbling around them as their childhood and livelihoods were destroyed by outside forces bit by bit.

My world, however, crumbled instantly. During the first two months of college I was struggling with making the adjustments that were necessary. I was trying to claw my way back to my old life by talking to my friends and others from home rather than embracing what I could have here. To a certain degree, I was still home, back in high school with all the people I care about, mentally; but physically I was at college. The loss of identity and stature that I had in high school broke me to a point I wasn't proud of. My hometown and the life I left behind wouldn't leave me.

As for me, the resistance that I feel as I cling onto my past is just another obstacle

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in life I have to overcome. I need to learn to be my own person against the unfathomable odds around me. I need to learn to be happy with the new things in my life rather than trying to cling to happiness in memories. I need to embrace the opportunities in the present rather than looking to the past for comfort. My hometown and its memories will never let me go, but I need to embrace whatever comes my way in my new situation with open and accepting arms.

## DOMENICA MASSAMBY

Having originated from Maputo, Mozambique (a somewhat big, yet understated, less developed coastal country) and having lived in Tokyo (one of the biggest, most populated and popularly referenced cities of the world) Swaziland (one of the last remaining monarchies) and recently Zimbabwe (a country struck by political unrest and social conflict), I can definitely say I am aware of the differences that exist between my hometown and its surrogates. I remember anticipating returning home from Japan after almost six years of separation. To me, Maputo represented heritage, dynamic culture and

a place of ease. Nevertheless, I was scared to leave behind the comfort of Tokyo, its opportunities and its security. Most of all, I was scared of not finding a place for me to grow intellectually: one, because I was accustomed to speaking English, and two, because I was concerned about the quality of education. It would be the first time I clearly understood the degree and impact of change of residence.

I thought *Would a poorer education turn me dumb? Would a lack of infrastructure mean I was limited in my creativity?* Looking back I guess my ignorance as a child misled me quite a bit. Because when I returned home, everything seemed to have changed. It wasn't necessarily a bad or a good thing, but it had changed. When you live far from home for such a long time, you begin to assume nothing has stayed the same.

It was weird to finally realize how fast Maputo was developing in terms of its economy. I'd see new businesses emerge and shopping malls be erected. Despite all the changes my city was going through, both in administration and infrastructure, I wanted always to return there.

Today, living in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania—a town with a whole new climate, culture, and history—I feel that my home will only change faster and more drastically with every visit back home. I know, however, that I still want to return to the place I first called my home. Before leaving for the United States, I reflected a lot on how everything would have changed by the time I graduated. I thought about how people would change, as they obviously did and do, because nothing in the world is constant.

Recently, my country has been facing threatening political issues, which have made me really consider my home in a larger socio-economic and political context. Because I know that today I live in such a culturally and historically different city from my hometown, home will always seem to be changed. And because I am not physically in Maputo, I will not change in the same way the Mozambicans will to adapt to their new lifestyle. I think it's important to understand

that as a student, the change I will perceive is different from those of the characters in *The Madonnas of Echo Park*. A lot of the characters were living in Echo Park throughout the changes they experienced. Additionally, I feel that characters like Duchess and Angie, who were born or still growing during the changes are more likely not to perceive the change than others. Similarly, my age makes it difficult to really determine what is changing, whether it is myself maturing or whether it is my hometown transforming.

#### **DAVID RODRIGUEZ-OPORTA**

I was born in Miami and lived there for 14 years. Afterwards I moved to different cities, but every summer I would return to my hometown and always found something different. At first, I despised the small changes I noticed because in my mind I always kept a concept conserved of what my hometown should be like, but when I returned to find things different

I felt left out. Over the years, however, I realized that even though my hometown changed in small ways, I was the one who had changed the most. After moving out of Miami, I had to adapt to different schools and cities. I learned how to live in different environments and learned to become an open-minded person. Now every time I return to my hometown, I enjoy seeing the hometown that set the foundation for my identity. In Brando Skyhorse's novel, some characters move on and choose to relocate from their hometowns and feel very nostalgic when returning. Other characters feel that their hometown moved on without them. I have learned, from personal experience, that your hometown is like a second home to you and it always will feel like it does not want to let you go.

However, in order for us to be able to fully develop their characters we must detach ourselves from our hometowns and find our global identity; the type of person we are in this world, not just in our hometown. Many characters struggle with this concept: Freddy and Efren both find themselves in sticky situations but neither of them thinks about leaving the city and discovering their identities elsewhere. Hector has only known Echo Park and he closes his mind to believe that that is the only city in which he belongs.

Our identities are directly linked to the setting in which we grew up in. Our culture is a key factor when developing our identities. Language, morals and beliefs are all affected by the culture our hometown engulfs us in. For those students who have spent their entire lives in a city, coming to Lehigh will be a challenge to the identities they have already created for themselves. Because Lehigh and the South Bethlehem area have their own unique culture and are composed of diverse people from different backgrounds, each and every student's identity will be put the test and fully developed here at Lehigh University.

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## NICHOLAS TROVALLI

The city of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania has seen better days. Last year, Harrisburg earned the ranking of the twentieth most dangerous city in the United States, and this year's ranking falls only slightly behind. Soaring violent crime rates continue to tarnish the south-central Pennsylvanian capital, branding it as the "worst big city" to inhabit within the state. To make matters worse, the now bankrupt city has been battling financial disarray for the past few years, and its public education systems have recently garnered much scrutiny from state government officials. It just so happens that I call Harrisburg my hometown, my Echo Park.

I do not turn my back to any of the "hard knocks" that my hometown has given me over the first 18 years of my life. Rather, I feel they have sculpted my character, and I embrace them. Though it pains my heart to see young, innocent faces that I grew up with turn to mugshots on the evening news, I understand that ultimately, everything I have endured thus far in life only makes me a stronger, more diverse person.

Make no mistake about it, I feel very lucky to be here at Lehigh, arguably one of the most prestigious universities in the entire country. As my senior year progressed, I began to wonder about some of the dealings around my high school, and I became concerned about whether these anomalies would affect my chances of earning admission into a well-respected university like Lehigh. Now that I am a Lehigh student, I am experiencing a bit of trouble adjusting to certain aspects of university life. I have never stolen anything from anybody in my entire life, yet I am unaccustomed to being able to walk through the library or dining hall while wearing my backpack. I feel hesitant to walk around our entirely secure campus at night

## AT LEHIGH, I FEEL THAT MY SURROUNDINGS CHALLENGE MY IDENTITY.

because in Harrisburg, you only did that if you sought trouble.

In my first few weeks here, I feel that some people have received me incorrectly. I have had people tell me that they initially saw me as "scary," "thuggish" and "stupid." A few of my peers had the guts to tell me they labeled me as "someone I wouldn't want to talk to," "someone who doesn't belong at Lehigh" and "someone who uses drugs and smokes all the time" before they actually got to know me. These startling confessions confused me. I don't quite understand why people see me like this, because I would like to think that I embody the exact opposite characteristics of the aforementioned. I am trying to figure out if the way I talk, the way I dress, or my interests have anything to do with it, but I would be very disappointed if my perceived "hip hop" tendencies tarnished my self-image in any feasible way here at Lehigh. I am concerned that I strike my peers the wrong way, and I want to prevent that from happening in the future.

I read Brando Skyhorse's *The Madonnas of Echo Park* a few months before coming to Lehigh. At the time, I felt little to no identification with any of the novel's characters because I had never felt displaced

in an alien environment before. After being here for a few weeks, I now understand the characters' problems with identity development much more easily. At Lehigh, I feel that my surroundings challenge my identity. Now that I spend most of my time in a place where Harrisburg's norms become abnormalities, I believe an external force exists that attempts to pressure me to greet people with a simple hello rather than a "yo."

You cannot throw a tiger into the lion's den and expect positive repercussions. Similarly, you cannot expect a kid born and raised in one environment to move to a completely foreign environment and adjust easily. I do not wish to assimilate because I take pride in distinguishing myself. Harrisburg made me who I am, and although its outsiders may question my devotion, I am a proud product of Harrisburg, and I would not wish for it any other way. Just as Echo Park's residents hold on to their past traditions from Mexico, I shall continue to hold on to my past traditions from Harrisburg. I wholeheartedly believe that I will find great joy in my next four years here at Lehigh, and I cannot wait to see what the future holds for me and my peers. I have emigrated from Harrisburg to Bethlehem. I cannot turn back now.