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Transposed Fictions: Speculative Genre Intrusions and Border Crossing Narratives in Twenty-First Century Literature

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Dedication

To my mom and dad, who made everything possible.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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In the 21st century, greater critical and popular attention is being paid to the ability of speculative fiction genres to represent geopolitical and socioeconomic realities, and in particular to provide new forms through which minoritized voices can reveal and resist oppressive structures of power. My dissertation examines novels in contemporary North American fiction that instantiate a new form of literature centered on outsider perspectives to the dominant middle-class American culture, through the transposition of speculative fiction elements into an otherwise mimetic real-world context that purposefully eschews the creation of fictional speculative settings, in order to reveal and resist the daily realities of economic inequality, resource exploitation, and racial exclusion in an increasingly globalized and technologically permeated world. I analyze the way the perspectives of minoritized and transnational subject positions, in combination with the intrusion of politically meaningful speculative phenomena, create an estranging effect that brings into relief the inequalities and exclusions that underpin market-driven neoliberalism and the privilege of wealthy nations in the global north. In

my first chapter, I situate these novels, which I term transposed fictions, as successors of postmodern qualities represented in the works of Don DeLillo, whose concerns with the estranging conditions of the mundane, evinced most clearly within *White Noise*, provide a precursor to transposed fictions from an insider perspective. In my second chapter, I analyze M.G. Vassanji's novel *Nostalgia* as a key example of a speculative intrusion within real-world contexts creating sociopolitical estrangement, in this case a Canada that offers both immortality technology and a troubled relationship with dehumanized nations in the global south excluded from access to resources. In chapter 3, I examine Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* as a further example of real-world contexts turned speculative through an irreal focus on transnational migration. In chapter 4, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* provides an outsider perspective on mundane American reality looking back on the hegemonic nation's collapse. Finally, in chapter 5, I examine the immigration experience of Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as an example of speculative intrusion providing the opportunity for expression and resistance to structures of exploitative political power.

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Introduction

In the 21st century, works of fiction that deploy speculative fiction elements while maintaining a firm foothold in the world of the contemporary present as a mimetic setting have garnered more and more critical as well as popular attention. These novels come in the wake of the increase in popularity and marketplace penetration of speculative fiction overall[1], and also add to a variety of traditions in American fiction that incorporate fantastical and fabulist elements of plot and theme, as well as sharing some qualities with fiction traditions from throughout the globe, such as magical realism. In this dissertation I examine a particular subset of these works, which I argue implant tropes and plot devices common in speculative genres, within a setting otherwise presented as our own everyday contemporary reality, to achieve unique discomfiting effects that respond to and lay bare contemporary century political concerns of globalization and economic global inequity, migration and immigration restriction, the maintenance of racialized discrimination and race categories, and the way 21st century technologies have accelerated these processes of global exploitation and border reinforcement.

The novels I examine in this dissertation share a constellation of features which I argue represent a literary attempt to capture the unique experiences of daily life in the 21st century context of globalization and technological acceleration in service to market-

[1] In early 2018, *Forbes* magazine reported that "combined print and digital book sales in the genres of science fiction and fantasy have doubled since 2010" (Rowe), and *Wired* reported in 2016 that major publishers who traditionally avoided genre fiction were planning fantasy and science fiction imprints, quoting Houghton Mifflin Harcourt senior vice president Bruce Nichols's assertion: "It's no longer the case that the world is split between a sort of pulp ghetto and the literary world […] The entire genre has gone so mainstream" (Newfound).

driven neoliberal logics of international resource exploitation, and most directly the inclusion or exclusion of certain populations as insiders or outsiders to the privilege of wealth and safety that characterizes wealthy Western nations – a privilege predicated on the exclusion and exploitation of outsiders. This constellation of thematic and formal features includes the use of our own ordinary contemporary world as a contextual setting, instead of the "worldbuilding" or deliberate creation of a world setting different from our own with its own established rules and histories, which characterizes mainstream speculative fiction genres; a consistent preoccupation with the mundane and unexciting realities of daily life, rather than the broad scope and stakes of most mainstream speculative plots; the intrusion of speculative, irreal elements on this otherwise mimetic context which are closely tied with sociopolitical issues of inclusion or exclusion, in my analysis; protagonists who themselves inhabit an "outsider" subject position to the middle-class North American culture presented as dominant within the novels[2], either due to immigrant identity, minoritized racial identity, or both; and the inclusion of explicit discourse on issues of immigration, globalization, or racialized exclusion in the contemporary world.

These works, which I refer to as "transposed fictions" after the transposition of speculative elements they deploy into the mimetic contemporary real-world setting they employ in lieu of "worldbuilding" a speculative setting, represent a new trend born from the unique political conditions in the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st

[2] In some of the novels, Western Europe and the UK are also explicitly linked with North America in the binary of power that excludes the Global South. In all of the novels, this broad global segregation based on economic status and racialized identity formation exists implicitly, but North America makes for the prevalent setting and symbol of the "first world."

century, in combination with the unique perspectives of transnational authors who intend to interrogate and intellectually dismantle geopolitical borders as well as the generic borders of literary work. Neither straightforward SF nor mainstream fiction devoid of speculative elements alone, however, is sufficient to capture the unique cultural markers of the contemporary. By transposing speculative approaches to mimetic settings, these narratives force audiences to examine realities of the present which are generally hidden by familiarity, a mode that makes visible issues of social and economic marginalization and exploitation, technological acceleration, and policies of political inequality and resource exploitation.

In his Editorial Introduction to a volume of *Historical Materialism*, science fiction author China Miéville examines the way "the peculiar nature of modern social reality and subjectivity," and in particular the commodity fetishism of the "lived reality of capitalism" make "the fantastic" a particularly relevant topic for contemporary discourse (41). Because commodities – and I would add to that the political and social structures which distribute commodities, resources, wealth, and political power to privileged segments of the population while restricting access by other segments according to class, race, and gender – form the fundamental determinants of different subjects' conditions, the "social relations of the everyday" make up the "fantastic form," a disconnected surface reality, even though they are often mistaken for the reality itself (41-2). Because "'real' life under capitalism is a fantasy," then "'realism,' narrowly defined, is therefore a 'realistic' depiction of 'an absurdity which is true,' but no less absurd for that' (42). The contemporary political and economic context all but demands speculative fiction to

approach an apt representation of reality. The transposed fiction I will examine, however, does what most science fiction can't: it brings the speculative home, revealing the absurdity of he contemporary without the mediation of immersion in a new world. My dissertation explores the way the permeability between genre boundaries captures new and revealing characteristics of the present, shedding light on structures of power and control in the social relations of North America and its relationship with the rest of the world, as well as shedding light on the permeability and eroded courses by which those structures are potentially bypassed.

In these texts' formal concerns, flow and permeability oppose the attempts to reinforce borders that restrict the movement of people and ideas. These texts do not adhere to the categories or structures of the straightforward science fiction genre nor mimetic conventions of mainstream fiction. It is in fact the texts' movement across tropic conventions of both types of fiction that define their unique effect, requiring a questioning and consideration of the formal boundaries themselves to address the sociopolitical concerns being reflected. Fluidity and confluence define the trespasses and transpositions that also act as catalysts for even newer avenues, which could not have been approached without the breaking of generic boundaries. Gloria Anzaldúa refers to those who live in the "constant state of transition" within the "vague and undetermined place" between boundaries as "*los atravesados*": roughly, those who cross, or those who cross over. I posit that not only do new, transposed fictions capture the experience of groups and individuals who "go through the confines of the 'normal'" (25) but the stories, by crossing the confines of the normal, themselves *atraviesan* (go through,

trespass, break and enter) the "unnatural boundar[ies]" (25) of contemporary North American culture.

The new potentials created harken back to the potentials of SF itself, in which an imaginary horizon replete with a thoughtfully constructed fictional frame of daily reference, creates a backdrop to speak on social concerns including globalization, migration, racism, and the creation of egalitarian and diverse societies. As elucidated by scholars from 20th century philosophers like Ernst Bloch to contemporary literary critic Phillip Wegner, a utopian ideal has characterized the schema for the Western conception of futurity throughout modernity, and that conception has influenced the paradigm by which traditional science fiction generates verisimilitude and imagines futures capable of effecting broad social and political change. The texts I examine seek to transpose the contextual realities of the contemporary world and the conventions of mainstream fiction into that imaginary horizon, a uniquely 21st century project of narrative. The way elements of each literary tradition break boundaries into other literary traditions in these works not only adds meaningful lenses for interpretation but actually clarifies the course each tradition continues to follow. Gloria Anzaldúa imagines the experience of being "sandwiched between two cultures" as in part " a struggle of borders," a "constant state of mental nepantilism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways" that she visualizes as a position similar to standing on a riverbank, undecided on whether to cross over to meet the dominant culture, building a bridge, or to "cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory" (100-101). That metaphorical image resonates in the works of speculative authors from immigrant backgrounds and positions minoritized in North

America due to race as well as economics, which consistently reach for a new form to effectively capture their experience.

Amy Kaplan provides a useful historical and methodological framing for the role of generic transposition which I posit in these texts, within the context of American literature's movement from the work of "realist" authors at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, and towards the 20th century projects of modernity and postmodernity[3] that predict the unique modes of contemporary narratives, and the way these projects in literature intersect with lived daily reality. Within *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Kaplan examines the way "realism" as a literary mode has "undergone dramatic reversals" from "a progressive force exposing the conditions of industrial society" to "a conservative force whose very act of exposure reveals its complicity with structures of power" (1). This shift "accompan[ies] changes in the historical understanding of American capitalism, from a class-based system structured by relations of production to a culture of consumption and surveillance which sweeps all social relations into a vortex of the commodity and the spectacle" (1). Underpinning criticism that characterizes the movement of American literary realism as a failure "is the assumption of an inadequate relation between American fiction and American society" (1). Kaplan presents Richard Chase's argument that it is the "richly textured social world of the European novel" that allows characters to "develop in relation to entrenched institutions and the struggle within classes" whereas the "isolated hero of the American

[3] In the first chapter, I begin by considering the context of American postmodern approaches (through Don DeLillo) as a historical and formal precursor to the new mode in contemporary literature that forms the main subject of my dissertation as a whole.

romance, in contrast, embars on a melodramatic quest through a symbolic universe, unformed by networks of social relations and unfettered by the pressure of social restraints" (2). This framing, which Kaplan characterizes as the "seemingly worn out romance thesis" (3) has "limited the range of critical inquiry" in 20th century American fiction by displacing "realism to an anomalous and distinctly un-American margin of literary criticism" (3). "Realist" fiction – American fiction deeply concerned with social realities of class and the way social forces including economic forces impact subjectivity or even preclude agency – was judged by 20th century critics "either by their mimetic accuracy, which usually missed the mark, or by New Critical measures" concerned with formal unity and generally dismissive of literary connections with reflections of social forces who thus found realist work "lacking" (5).

Importantly, in Kaplan's view, it is "the perceived failure or impossibility of mimesis" that "has led recent critics to chart a more dynamic relation between social and literary structures, one that does not place the text outside society as an imaginative escape, a static window for observation, or a reflecting mirror" (6). Rather, "historical perspectives hold that the textual production of reality does not occur in a linguistic vacuum; neither is it politically innocent, of course, but always charged by ideology – those unspoken collective understandings, conventions, stories, and cultural practices that uphold systems of social power" (6). This understanding of "discursive practices," which begins "to treat literary form as a social practice" and "reclaim the American novelist's engagement with society" by understanding how realists "actively create and criticize the meanings, representations, and ideologies of their own changing culture" (7),

interestingly, also defines the purpose of *irreality* within my analysis – of speculative elements that do not and could not exist in our real world, and the way their insertion into otherwise mimetic contexts and settings sheds light on the ideologies and political forces of our own changing cultures.

In the first chapter of my dissertation I examine literary postmodern works by Don DeLillo surrounding the turn of the century (and millennium), in order to examine the ways contemporary American fiction, and specifically contemporary American fiction with speculative elements, has adapted, evolved, hybridized, and created present-day forms following the postmodern mode, whose qualities recall comparisons and contrasts with the project of modernism and before that the project of realism. As an author with a long-lasting project of literary production, DeLillo provides the opportunity to compare the themes and conventions of 20th century work speculative elements and concerns with those works by authors whose work was published and concerned only with the contemporary. DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) can, briefly examined, provide insights on realistic and science-fictional fears of human-created apocalypse in conjunction with the social anxiety of the end of the 20th century. The continuity of DeLillo's works throughout near-past decades and into the present make for a body of work uniquely useful to the concerns of an emerging and still-evolving contemporary mode; ruptures within the continuity offer insights into daily live and technoculture, as well as the surrounding ideological preoccupations around the 1980s, 2000s, and today. Crucially, DeLillo's illustrations of the postmodern alienation that characterizes the mundane daily reality of middle-class American main characters provides an "insider"

perspective, that of economically-privileged, white, and native-born citizens generally conforming to social expectations, which helps to define the bounds of "insider" and "outsider" points of view. DeLillo's novels, the first works examined in this dissertation, are not themselves transposed fictions but rather establish necessary context for the transposed fiction novels that make up the subject of all of the following chapters of the dissertation.

In the second chapter, my analysis of M.G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia* (2016) examines an immigrant experience from a resource-poor region maligned by the West to North America with a specific speculative focus: the personal experience of assimilation that is science-fictionalized to question national identity formation. In a future where the privileged classes of the "developed" world have access to immortality as a commodity in the form of "rejuvenation" technologies that forestall death, rejuvenation is always accompanied by a necessary memory erasure and the assignation of a new set of memories, composing a new identity. In the backdrop of mundane life in the primary setting of Canada, military operations maintain the privilege and wealth of the population by enforcing the "Long Border" that separates poorer nations in the Global South from the wealthy "developed" world, Protagonist Frank Sina, a doctor who has undergone rejuvenation and provides rejuvenation services for clients, including treating the sometimes-catastrophic consequences on the psyche that occur for clients when memory erasure fails to work, comes to discover over the course of the narrative that his own original past lies on the other side of the Long Border, in the economically struggling nations that resist North America's hegemonic rule. Through the metaphoric device of

the psychological "nostalgia syndrome" that disrupts Frank's understanding of himself and the world, I examine the way Vassanji – a Canadian author born in Kenya to Indian parents and raised in Tanzania – portrays the processes of assimilation as both coercively damaging and productive for examining the nature of cultural identity.

In the third chapter, I examine Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), which brings its refugees, whose country descends through the violence of war into the real-world science fiction of wartime dystopia, to migrant camps in Europe and North America, conveyed by magically transporting doors. There they face resistance to entry from local residents and government militaries alike, including armed resistance, while questioning the concepts of borders and nativity themselves, undergoing the science-fictional experience of transportation to a new world with different frames of reference for technology, economics, and cultural habits of belonging. Due to gaps in standards of living and the ubiquity of technology in the United States, immigrants have described their arrival experience as a futuristic one; meanwhile the United States has been responsible for establishing and maintaining despotic governments that support American interests, while American satellites and drones (described as "flying robots" science-fictionally in Hamid's *Exit West*) conduct both surveillance and combat missions. In the stories of main characters Saeed and Nadia who escape from a war-torn Middle Eastern region to Mykonos, London, and then cities in California, author Hamid (who has lived in Pakistan, the U.S., and the U.K.) envisions transposition as a device for not only understanding the daily reality of both insider North American "natives" and outsider

immigrants but also for creating new ways of being, and of sharing resources and affirming cultural identity, for both groups.

In the fourth chapter, my focus turns to Colson Whitehead's conception of mundane American life, projected into an apocalyptic future within his novel *Zone One* (2011). Whitehead, of course, is a deeply American author. Rather than a transnational perspective, his narrative elucidates life in the "insider" culture of a middle-class America, from the point of view of minoritized African American protagonist Mark Spitz. His perspective encapsulates the contemporary United States' middle class dream, revealing simultaneously the underlying fissures and dark sides of capitalist wealth and privileged daily reality. In a future following the overrun of the country by zombie-like "skel" creatures and requiring the reconstruction of the nation from near-scratch, the primary project of the reinvigorated American dream following the nation's systemic collapse is territory reclamation and reinforcement, with an erected concrete wall separating the "Zone" of Manhattan – a potent symbol of American economics and hegemony – from the dangers outside. Once again, the interrogation of borders in a speculative context reveals obscured political practices that maintain North American privilege. Although the novel is set in a disaster zone, the mundane realities of late 20th century and early 21st century America form the primary site of rumination for the novel's themes.

Reflections on the ruins of the past form a hallmark of discourse in any postapocalyptic novel, but the level of attention on the artifacts that defined the structures of the past reveal these works' visions to be focused on the particular structures of the

present, with the future acting as a lens through which contemporary realities can be brought into focus. This cognitive estrangement of the present world is a feature of all science fiction but the post-apocalyptically mundane differs formally from works more in line with speculative genre conventions at large by leveraging the context and setting of the real world as often or more often than they commit to consistent world-building for the new science-fictional setting; as a result these novels' allegorical characteristics are more pronounced. The emphasis in *Zone One* on Mark Spitz's exploration of the remains of modern day corporate office buildings, and those undead who continue to mime mundane office tasks, create an uncanny, estranging effect for the characters and the novel's audience, but the effect draws on more than immediate emotional discomfiture: the trappings of office life explicitly reflect the undead nature of the average worker's contemporary daily experience, and the decayed structures by which those workers are kept in repetitive, docile positions – both of which the novel's characters reflect on when faced with the office buildings' postapocalyptic incarnations. The marginalization of *Zone One*'s narrator Mark Spitz makes for a major framing concern of the narrative: in his own view, his position in the pre-apocalyptic world was less desirable than his position after the collapse, a practical realization that brings into stark relief the political and economic structures that underpin 21st century American life.

The fifth and final chapter examines the Latin American immigrant narrative of Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), which brings issues of migration, minoritization, and globalized segregation and exploitation to the forefront both thematically and formally. Relating the familial trajectory of three generations'

movement from the Dominican Republic under the mid-20th century U.S.-backed dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo to contemporary New Jersey, *Oscar Wao*'s metafictional narrator comments on real-world historical events as they impact the characters and knowingly injects the narrative with magical elements, and characterizes the relationship between the eponymous protagonist's love of science fiction and his family's realistic immigrant experience by wondering, "What [is] more sci-fi than Santo Domingo? What [is] more fantasy than the Antilles?" (Diaz 6). *Oscar Wao* presents immigration itself as an experience that not only resembles science fiction but creates a frame of reference that uniquely primes subjects to understand and exist in the science-fictional contexts of contemporary reality. More important than the knowledge of speculative fiction works that narrator Yunior and main character Oscar possess and allude to within the novel, and which informs their perspective of the daily reality they exist in, Yunior also inserts fabulist figures and myths throughout his telling of the migration narrative, using the concepts of malevolent and benevolent forces and beings to illustrate the political forces exerted by nations like the United States on the lives of Dominicans subject to capricious and violent persecution, both before and after immigration.

Throughout these texts, as my analyses explore, speculative transpositions function by turning the focus of the narrative towards the ordinary and mundane realities of daily experience, and on the way these realities are sustained by the creation and reinforcement of borders that separate wealthy Western nations with colonizing histories from economically deprived populations whose exploitation makes the economic privilege of the West possible. By making the ordinary something strange, these political

realities that underpin an increasingly globalized and market-driven contemporary context are unearthed from their usual obfuscation. Like the transporting doors in Hamid's *Exit West* which allow refugees to circumvent political borders or the Mongoose in Diaz's *Oscar Wao* which appears in moments of crisis to embolden marginalized victims, my analysis examines the way the speculative within these texts reveals unforeseen potentials within the dire situations of the familiar 21st century.

Chapter 1

"Whatever Relaxes You is Dangerous": Passivity and Postmodern Potentiality in Don DeLillo

Many scholars examine the work of Don DeLillo as a voice of change in American literature, characterizing in particular the themes and concerns that define the latter half of the 20th century and movement into the 21st. These analyses are particularly apt considering the breadth of moments with which DeLillo's work engages, from the early 1970s into the 2020s. I intend to position DeLillo's work not only as an example of shifting literary focus in contemporary literature, but as a harbinger and, at times, prototype of the specific mode described in 21st century works throughout my dissertation's other chapters.

DeLillo's novels, several of which make use of speculative fiction settings and themes to depict facets of the present, engage regularly with intertwined concerns of accelerated technological development, alienating cultural consumerism and massification, and the soporific mundanity of individual subjects' lives separated from processes of actual power and agency. These speculative intrusions into daily reality both predate and predict the speculative intrusions in those works I call transposed fictions in my other chapters. The novels of transposed fiction inherit and adapt the postmodern tradition in which DeLillo works, also finding importing revelations through the juxtaposition of the fabulist and the mundane, and also shining light on the conditions created by a globalizing and technologically accelerating period in time, at the same time as they inherit and adapt a variety of other generic and cultural traditions.

There are several important ways in which DeLillo's writing diverges from transposed fictions. For example, DeLillo's work rarely foregrounds issues related to migration or characters from cultures outside of the United States' middle class. DeLillo provides an "insider" perspective to the mundanity of middle class and upper class America, and usually explores characters in this culture whose safety and comfort depends upon remaining geographically and ideologically static; by contrast, the characters of transposed fictions bring "outsider" perspectives, their survival and ambition depending on movement, from place to place, and from previous cultural contexts to new ones. In DeLillo's formal and thematic qualities, however, similarities between his work and the transposed fictions examined in the following chapters of this dissertation are evident. The concerns, fears, and desires that become thematic foci and sites of speculative imagination, attached to issues of immigration and non-U.S. identity, affect middle class Americans within DeLillo's novels as well; these narratives identify the estranging elements of American life that marginalized perspectives and immigrant perspectives find strange decades later as well. My examination will focus on literary critics' interpretations of DeLillo's novels and the way their themes and historical engagement provide context for the novels I examine in the upcoming chapters. DeLillo's novels, in particular *White Noise* (1985), provide signposts for growing literary focus on the themes of the 21st century in transposed fiction, and make particular use of science fictional elements, on which their plots are predicated.

My purpose in this chapter is not to provide an additional analysis of DeLillo's novels in and of themselves, many of which have been written and many of which are

cited here. Rather, my intent is to trace the increasing elaboration of certain themes throughout these works over time, and to contextualize the novels of transposed fiction as evolutions on these themes. DeLillo provides a deep and thorough exemplar of a certain generation of "native" U.S. writers who address the effects of globalization on U.S. culture and daily life, while the 21st century transposed fictions I examine in the other novels analyzed in this dissertation provide a perspective from the outside – from immigrant and "othered" communities well aware of their situation on the outside. In DeLillo's work, a changing sense of U.S. identity arises in the movement towards and into the 21st century – a bellwether for the necessary changes in U.S. literature accompanying the changes in the nation itself, anticipating a turn towards the speculative that is necessary to communicate the realities of the contemporary world.

The critical analysis of Don DeLillo's work in the landscape of contemporary American fiction tends to share an awareness of his literary efforts striving for, or working towards, something new in response to cultural shifts. The cultural shifts his work responds do are often described in terms of postmodern concerns solidified by 20th century theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard: the ascendancy and globalization of late capitalism, the acceleration of information and communication technologies, and the massification of culture in the forms of media and art. But in this paradigm, DeLillo also responds to something new in postmodernity, and *does* something new in postmodernity. In particular, DeLillo's work hints at the potential for revolutionary action against a complacent status quo that conditions passivity through fetishized commercialism, commodification of the self, and routinized emphasis on the

mundane. The intrusion of speculative elements highlights the absurdity of the everyday in DeLillo's work, but in DeLillo's narratives the protagonists fail to take decisive action in response to their recognition of the absurd. The outsider figures who make up the main characters in transposed fiction, often out of necessity, scrabble and adapt for survival in any way possible (as in *Zone One*), seize opportunities for escape (as in *Exit West*), take subversive actions against a status quo they see to be unjust (as in *Nostalgia*), or defy the representatives of structural power openly, accepting the consequences of that action (as in *Oscar Wao*). The "natives" of the middle class American world in DeLillo's novels are generally defined by a ruminative passivity – although often insightful, their reaction to recognizing the strangeness, dehumanization, and even danger with which late capitalism has infused their world is a reaction of resignation, or at most, a drive for self-preservation without regard for the rest of the population. Therefore, the recognition of the absurd never catalyzes a sea change. It is the external perspectives to come in transposed fiction that open the possibility of broad social action in contemporary fiction.

In his monograph on DeLillo's work, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction*, Peter Boxall elaborates on this potential, arguing that possibility is considered dangerous by both sides of the political divide. The political right, in his analysis, has "vested interests" in "an irrational status quo" that "yields profit and comfort," and is therefore incentivized to "deny the possible," while those on the political left "struggle against the status quo" but "an investment in the possible can seem too often like a distraction" (1) from the injustice and inequality of the present. For both mainstream axes of political ideology the future must be kept at bay, either as undesirable outright, or as an abstract

ideal that threatens to draw attention away from the urgent needs of the present. In both DeLillo's work and the transposed fiction of the contemporary, however, the present itself becomes a site of invasion by the future: irreal elements of speculative possibility break into the ordinary context of the present day, in the form of airborne toxic events, teleporting doors, or atavistic spiritual intervention, to name a few.

These strange interpositions in both DeLillo's work and transposed fictions, phenomena inserted as if from a different world, emphasize through contrast the regularly-ignored strangeness of our own world, but a key difference between these texts and most speculative texts lies in the reception the insertion of the speculative receives within the world of the narrative: much like in the tradition of magical realism, the jarring and paradigm-shifting is immediately accepted as real and normal – without widespread surprise or existential reconsiderations of the world.[4] Many scholars of DeLillo and of *White Noise* in particular identify in the work a tension that signals latent possibility. In "Rethinking Postmodern Narrativity: Narrative Construction and Identity Formation in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," Annjeanette Wiese contends that DeLillo serves as an example of the way contemporary fiction "specifically highlights and reclaims the importance of narrative structure in relation to identity and human experience. In other words, fiction provides a distinctly narrative means of countering the loss of individual,

[4] I explore the ways these works diverge from "magical realism" as usually understood in my chapter on *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, including how in transposed fictions the speculative elements are usually new and appear suddenly rather than forming a longstanding part of the world. More importantly, reading these works as something new rather than as straightforward continuations of earlier traditions like magical realism reveals new meanings in the present and new potentialities for the future - a divergence that I set out in the Introduction and which I continue to explore here, reading transposed fictions as evolutions of many literary traditions including magical realism as well as the postmodern tradition evinced in DeLillo, while they also provide new purposes and forms.

meaningful experience so often associated with the ahistorical, simulacral, and absurdly ironic nature of postmodernity" (2). Wiese therefore presents as premise for the examination of DeLillo's novels that it is the nature of the world which contains postmodern qualities of absurd irony and that literature such as DeLillo's not only reveals these realities but counters them.

In *White Noise*, Wiese establishes, it is mimesis that creates tension between theory and narrative, between the world in the novel, and the world (ours) in which the novel was written. On the other hand, in the transposed fiction of the 21st century, departures from mimetic representation create the tension that reveals critical aspects of contemporary lived experience. Both the postmodern mode evident in 1985's *White Noise* and the modes of the contemporary novels examined in other chapters depend upon an amount of exaggeration and confabulation to lay bare the underlying cultural elements they portray; the former more on exaggeration and the latter more on confabulation – as Wiese says, a "hyperbolically postmodern America" (3). Although Wiese, while examining the way *White Noise* is "highlighting how this particular manner of shaping experience affects our cultural imagination and self-awareness at a time in which narrative structure is often repudiated by the consumer-oriented and media-informed content of our lives" focuses on "the often unnoticed impact of narrative on identity formation," her premise provides a useful starting point for examinations of literary genre, culture, and reality. More specifically, this work "calls attention to the inauthenticity and sometimes total impracticality of dominant postmodern philosophical positions – issues that become clear when such positions are applied to situations that

resemble realistic, or at least plausible, human experience. As such, postmodern culture is set up as a counterpoint to the narratively presented content in the novel" (3). In contemporary transposed fictions, this realism – or plausibility – of human experience changes.

In obvious ways, there is less mimesis of the real world when speculative tropes form a keystone of the novels' plot. Human experience does not include contention with the "skel" creatures of Whitehead's *Zone One,* the magic doors of Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, the reincarnation of M.G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia*, or the transposed speculative elements of any of the other contemporary novels examined in this dissertation. On the other hand, these novels capture a plausibility of human interaction that often exceeds the plausibility of human interaction in *White Noise.* This is clearly deliberate in *White Noise* – the exaggeration of strangeness in the novel's human interactions, including conversations, career choices, and mundane daily events are in part the point. The emphasis on mundanity in *White Noise* forecasts the current trend I argue defines the particular use of speculative elements within contemporary transposed texts: their insertion of the speculative into the world's most ordinary events.

Although their contexts, approaches, and aims are never exactly the same, both DeLillo and the contemporary authors of transposed fictions address the prevalent failure of imagination or possibility that Boxall examines through Fukuyama: the one system in which capitalism has no viable alternatives and in which "this sense of historical completion, and of a failure of resistance to a global capitalist hegemony is pervasive in contemporary culture," in which there pervades a cultural exhaustion which Deleuze

called “exhaustion of the possible” (Boxall 3). In transposed fiction, the introduction of the speculative provides new possibilities – a new generic context offers a world in which possibility is not exhausted. In Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*, for example, the sudden appearance of possibility in the form of doors that allow instantaneous travel between nations directly represents the unforeseen possibilities engendered by immigration, including the changes in population and culture that immigration brings. *Exit West* portrays emigration as a life-saving opportunity for refugees of war and poverty, and it portrays vibrant, productive communities arising in wealthy locations that previously restricted or excluded newcomers, such as in Northern California and London. In other examples, speculative intrusion creates danger or ambivalent change along with opening new possibilities, but the opening of possibility is always there. In Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*, for example, the transformation of much of the population into roving “skel” creatures, like the zombies of horror movies, leads to the collapse of the American nation and the safety of ordinary life in North America. However, main character Mark Spitz muses as he and his colleagues work towards a slow and difficult reconstruction that he wonders if the old racial prejudices, including discrimination against African Americans like himself, will return when the world is rebuilt – implying that at least temporarily those prejudices have been muted, and that the possibility exists they will *not* return as they existed in our world. Even when a further awakening of the “skel” creatures eventually reveals that the dream of organized reconstruction was an empty façade, this further collapse also reveals and undoes the corrupt exploitation of the temporarily ruling reconstruction government. In transposed fictions, in part because the perspective begins

from an "outsider" status, the future and the speculative offer a potentiality more optimistic than that of the conceptualized future in the literature of the "native" North American postmodern, which DeLillo's work represents.

Boxall argues that in DeLillo's work, the "future is already here" but here the results are not desirable: the future of "unrealised possibility" is "forcing itself into the now, as the culture reaches past its own spatial and temporal margins, colonizes its own outsides, brings even unlived time under the jurisdiction of the global market," exposing "a globalised culture that has absorbed its own margins, and crossed its own far horizons," precluding the possibility of "inspiring against the state" (Boxall 4-5). DeLillo's portrayal, however, sheds light on this approaching mundane apocalypse of sorts, sounding the kind of subtle alarm that his fictional characters ignore - an alarm that contemporary forms of literature take up with their own perspectives. In transposed fictions, the future is breaking *into* the "here" of today, and its intrusion sheds light on the mundane absurdity of the present that is already here, but also opens fissures of potentiality for the creation of something different. In his chapter on "The historical counterfunction," Boxall wonders if there is space in history for "new and previously unimagined nuances in the material texture of history" (59) - in my view, transposed fictions create a space for engaging with immediate history and the unimagined by threading portals between different temporalities, between real and irreal material histories. In part this reinvigoration of imagination comes from the diversity and plurality of experiences of the traditions that influence, and are represented in, this newer form. Outsider perspectives, histories, and forms – forms of seeing the world, of behaving, and

of storytelling – in combination with the material realities of the United States lead to the discovery of new spaces and methods for engagement, of the kind in *Exit West* and *Zone One* and other transposed fictions.

Understanding the new potential requires understanding why works such as DeLillo's, the fiction of "insiders," do not harbor this particular potentiality. Mark Osteen asserts that DeLillo's work at large "undertakes a dialogue with American cultural institutions and their discourses that dramatizes the dialectical relationship between" what he calls "American magic and dread," an allusion to a phrase within *White Noise*. He goes on to elaborate on the phrase by positing that "the bombardment of consciousness by cinematic and consumer images; the fetishization of secrecy, violence, and celebrity; the fragmentation of the grand narratives of history, heroism and high culture all combine to induce a paralyzing dread" (1). Osteen's characterization of the prevailing cultural mood within the daily experience of the characters' lives as "paralysis" captures the characters' sense of agency, or lack of agency, astutely. Even when reacting to drastic actions, characters in DeLillo's work tend to move and speak as if casual acceptance, and their contemplation of their own casual acceptance, have preempted the ability to break into new forms of action.

The operative word for those actions DeLillo's main characters do take is reaction, since it is generally an external catalyst that forces the protagonists to take any action at all. Jack Gladney refuses to act in the face of *White Noise*'s airborne toxic event, in which dangerous contaminants threaten him, his family, and the entire area. Jack's semi-indifferent reaction is born from the expectations of Jack's society and the

expectations of his role within it: “I’m not just a college professor. I’m the head of the department. I don’t see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event” (117). Ostensibly, Jack is able to understand the danger to himself, and that a strong reaction would be rational, but he has been conditioned by his position and the culture that surrounds him to know that he is expected to act without strong reactions, and to believe he will not be affected by real dangers, even when this behavior is absurd. In light of Jack’s deliberate self-styling within the role of his academic position, his preoccupation with fulfilling external expectations provides a dominant motivation for the ways he makes decisions on a daily basis. He appears to be so conditioned, however, that excusing inaction by using his position may be more of a justification after the fact than a true motivation.

Characters like Jack are resistant to take action for themselves in general – it is specifically his status as a college professor that Jack cites as a reason action is not necessary; he believes those of his position are not required to act. He represents an exaggerated satire of a broadly believed cultural mythology: those in the comfort of a privileged middle class and upper class America, unlike the strivers who feature in transposed fictions, are cushioned from the globalized situation, even when the injustices, absurdities, and even dangers of that situation become manifest. This is the response DeLillo’s work captures and portrays: in content, his characters are wracked with confusion, fear, and either guilt or self-absorbed hubris as they respond to the recognition of the absurd with passivity; in form, this privileged insider perspective lends itself to postmodern irony, and the realities of the postmodern world in late capitalism are revealed even as the characters go into denial.

Meanwhile, in transposed fictions, this paralysis in the 21st century is actively combated – in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), it is identified and thoroughly autopsied as a facet of daily life for ordinary people at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st. Attempts to rediscover personal agency and choice form the motivating drive - at least at the end of their character arcs - for the likes of Mark Spitz in *Zone One*, Nadia in *Exit West*, Oscar in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and Frank Sina in M.G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia* (2016). They all examine the remains of the millennium turn, somewhat freer from this paralysis than DeLillo's characters had the luxury - or perhaps wherewithal - to be.

On the other hand, these 21st century characters' worlds – their societies and their daily lives' routines – have often crumbled. Their stories tend to deal with the redistribution of the fragments previously shored against their ruins, so to speak, in the modernist projects of the mid-20th century. Those fragments are exploded out in the 21st century by war, by corruption, by unexpected biological threats – all driven by the technological acceleration, personal alienation, and cultural schizophrenia that defined late postmodernity throughout the decades surrounding the millennium turn. Although Boxall argues that in DeLillo's work the future has already arrived, because potentialities of action have been preempted by the paradigm of the market, this kind of apocalypse occurs internally, within a culture that merely accelerates the processes already at work, and within individuals' conceptions of what is possible. To paraphrase William Gibson's famous quote, neither the future nor apocalypse are distributed equitably. As some characters in transposed fiction novels recognize, apocalyptic ends can come at different

times to different places and cultures and people, while other people are not affected at all – or even benefit from it. Yunior, the narrator in *Oscar Wao*, muses that the arrival of Europeans to the West Indies was the beginning of "doom" for Indigenous cultures, and in some Middle Eastern nations, such as those that *Exit West* characters Saeed and Nadia live in, the arrival of military drones and bombs used by Western nations in war herald an apocalypse for the country. As the other side of the coin, I argue the kind of internal death of possibility that Boxall sees subsuming the world also does not reach everywhere and everyone simultaneously. Within those very cultures exploited for the gain of wealthy imperialist nations, the lack of safety and comfort foments the possibility for action missing from DeLillo's characters.

In several of the novels used here to exemplify transposed fictions, the apocalypse occurring externally is a fundamental element of the plot precisely because the main characters of these texts are often themselves immigrants from parts of the world (or from minoritized populations) directly exploited or excluded from the soporifically mundane comforts that motivate inaction in the middle class and upper class of wealthy nations: Saeed and Nadia seek asylum from a war-torn Middle Eastern nation in *Exit West*, the Cabral family of protagonists in *Oscar Wao* flee from the violence of the U.S.-backed Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, Frank Sina and his family in *Nostalgia* come from the impoverished, exploited, and maligned other side of an international Long Border, and even Mark Spitz, who is deeply American, reflects on how the racism that affected him as an African American before the apocalypse has been temporarily superseded by other dangers. In their stories we see the other side of the inequality,

exploitation, and neglect that make the very comforts Jack Gladney enjoys possible. These characters have not been conditioned to exhibit passivity in exchange for privilege the way the beneficiaries of wealthier nations have been because - in varying degrees - they do not receive those comforts in the first place. This is also why their stories allow for a reinvigoration of the action potential lacking in *White Noise*: they break into the setting of the soporific and mundane with the ability and impetus - and often the immediate need - to act. The speculative intrusions in the narratives of transposed fiction reveal how the mundane, in wealthy nations, camouflages strange and unjust political systems, but its characters were never lulled to inaction by the mundane – they are accustomed to external apocalypses, and to the movement and resistance necessary to survive within an apocalyptic environment.

Osteen argues that paralyzing dread motivates the characters in DeLillo's novels to "respond by seeking forms of magic - quasi-religious rituals, pseudo-divine authorities, miraculous transformations - that they hope will help them rediscover sacredness and community" (1). Osteen's analysis reads in DeLillo's work the idea that rituals and structures once established sensical connections between the individual and society (instead of isolation) and generated cultural purposes (instead of aimlessness), providing individuals empowerment (instead of paralysis). Through the loss of these shared cultural touchstones, Osteen posits that a facet of community is considered lost. The magic they sought was sought in the pursuit of preservation, even regression. By contrast, magic in transposed fictions, like futurity, creates opportunities not for a reclamation of a mono-cultural community but for a reclamation of personal, individual power, and that power

flows from border crossings and fissures rather than the reestablishment of older structures. This newer approach in transposed fictions achieves greater success in creating possibility and overcoming paralysis. This magic is about disruption.

In his chapter on *White Noise* in particular, Osteen describes the search for this counteraction of paralysis in DeLillo's characters' attempts to "counteract dread" through "mouthing chants and litanies, practicing pseudo-religious rituals, crafting narratives that deflect or purge their fear, performing violent or death-defying-actions" - a characterization that emphasizes the mythical and its relationship with death in the novel explicitly. In line with how the novel "depicts postmodern mortality" as a constant and mundane reality, "characters seek luminous moments through consumption," not in historically spiritual sites "but across the street and in the living room: the supermarket, the shopping mall, the TV set," which "functions not only as the main medium of information [...] but also the chief disseminator of capitalist ideology" (165). These sites of consumerism and, it is implied, numbing pastimes fail to provide the reconnection and revival the characters seek because they are examples of precisely that cultural alienation and commercialism that Boxall describes as preempting the potential for action.

For Osteen, it serves as a productive strategy "to address the themes of death and of consumption through the metaphor of the channel" (165-6). "Channeling," with its many spiritual connotations, performed through literal TV viewing and other pop culture rituals, provides "remarkable resonance by compelling us to listen again to the 'noise' of our own popular culture, and to revisit those postmodern temples - the supermarket, the mall, the TV, the motel" (166). In these places, Osteen points out, profit is a driving

purpose. They only masquerade as places of true possibility. The strivers of transposed fictions are not conditioned to associate familiar norms and customs with safety and comfort – instead, perhaps because their cultural identity itself is often associated with financial and material insecurity – these characters are more likely to act pragmatically, ready to take advantage of paths that offer survival and potential even when those paths contradict traditions. For example, Nadia in *Exit West* gains cultural capital by joining a council of Nigerian immigrant leaders, even though she is not Nigerian; Holly Chu in *Nostalgia* joins the Maskinians, the militant "barbarians" set against the wealthy European and American nations where she was raised, after she is first captured by the Maskinians and then shown the injustices of the global segregation. In these examples also the value of emigration, of multicultural perspectives, and of crossing boundaries of identity are emphasized – in contrast with the insular, capital-driven rituals of DeLillo's characters.

In addition to the sites of pseudo-spiritual power, where mythic rituals and attempts to counteract death are projected onto capitalist forms, Osteen highlights the importance of "packaged commodities" (167). In the same way that *White Noise*'s first scene, in which college students arrive on campus at the beginning of the academic year, "depicts not the students but only their possessions, implying not only that higher education is a commodity, but also that the students have disappeared into the glow of their tennis rackets, drugs, computers, Dum-Dum pops and Mystic mints," human agency is generally depicted as subsumed within cultural commodification (3). Possessions and pop culture touchstones serve as not only synecdoche for individual subjects but at times

replace the individual subjects. As Osteen mentions, this commodification and replacement of the self is evident in Jack Gladney's role as a professor of Hitler Studies – especially because even the content of the field itself seems unimportant to Jack, remaining unexplored and undescribed while meta-considerations such as the popularity of the field in academia itself looms large in his mind.[5]

His role serves an important function as Jack's justification for socially-expected anesthetized behavior; that his role serves as an example of human commodification only reinforces the value of paralysis for the status quo: paralysis is conditioned, expected, and rewarded in a system that values commodification and comfort above individual agency and action. For Jack, appearance itself has become substantial, but his awareness of this fact makes Jack uncomfortable. Jack's academic career has blossomed since he pioneered the field of Hitler Studies, but he feels that much of his professional stature is based on external indicators – not the least of which, in Jack's mind, is his physical stature. The same university chancellor who agrees to the creation of the department and encourages its success advises Jack "against what he called [Jack's] tendency to make a feeble presentation of self" and recommends "bulk," an "air of unhealthy excess, of padding and exaggeration, hulking massiveness" (DeLillo 15-16). The goal of these physical changes is not to make Jack more traditionally attractive, but the opposite, apparently more in keeping with the idea of what someone in his role *would* look like: "If I could become more ugly, he seemed to be suggesting, it would help my career

[5] And one of the valences of this strange, satirical portrayal of Hitler Studies is also that tragic and important histories have been packaged and commodified for academia.

enormously" (15-16). Jack's unease becomes clear in the last sentence of the passage, which also ends the chapter: "I am the false character that follows the name around" (16). The commodified label of a packaged commodity role overtakes reality - an idea instantiated in the supermarket products depicted later in the novel.

White Noise provides a remarkably salient depiction of this system of simulation and paralysis, as well as forecasting the new possibility in transposed fictions. As Boxall notes, "*White Noise* is set in an eternal present which fails, eternally, to become present" (111). It is exactly this alternative, speculative present which begins to break through the pores and fissures of the mundane contemporary in transposed fictions. Where Boxall focuses on the potentialities of death to counteract this end - an internal shift - I aim to highlight the potentialities that come from the imagination of a different futurity that comes from outside the delineated borders: temporal borders, generic borders, and no less importantly, international borders. In *White Noise*, Boxall argues, a temporal boundary does not allow for new, revolutionary action which would break subjects from their paralysis: "finding ourselves adrift in unbounded narrative time does not allow us to occupy the moment, to live for the now, to seize the day. Instead, we feel constantly as if we have been here before as if the present which we occupy is somehow already second hand, already elsewhere" (111). This surreal ordinariness, for which a disconnection from history is at least partially responsible, remains an inescapable context throughout the novel.

The often examined supermarket scenes in *White Noise* provide overt examples of the mode in which the extreme mundanity of everyday life in a numbed and privileged

environment obscures underlying absurdities such as environmental dangers, war, exploitation, and economic inequality. In the more recent works of transposed fiction these deeper realities are brought to light through the intrusion of speculative elements *and* the perspectives of main characters from minoritized groups - these two facets in conjunction bring the underlying sociopolitical factors into relief and, in the majority of stories, allow for direct action to be taken: Saeed and Nadia's migration in *Exit West*, Frank Sina's rediscovery of his actual heritage and migration in *Nostalgia*, and the Cabral family's defiant migrations in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* all exemplify agency and action against the structures that restrict their agency.

These novels' characters bring unique cultural histories of migration which enable them to recognize and refuse the strategies of cultural paralysis that surround them. Additionally, these characters are not provided with the benefits of accepting paralysis, coming from nations with a history of exploitation or exclusion from global wealth, and/or belonging to populations with a history of suffering from institutional racism. These characters are less passive within the absurd and mundane because they are less conditioned and less incentivized to remain passive. When speculative potentialities offer the opportunity to act - often through new forms of border crossing - these characters seize the opportunity. By contrast, DeLillo's characters in the examined texts are often middle class or upper class, born and lifelong conditioned in the United States - they also live in a temporal space less invaded and impacted by the communication technology, globalization, and more normalized mainstream concern with migration and

multiculturalism that differentiate the 21st century.[6] DeLillo's characters are beginning to recognize the absurdly mundane context which Hamid, Vassanji, and Diaz's characters will act out against, although DeLillo's characters react with inaction still.

Jack Gladney, acting as *White Noise*'s protagonist and narrator, first muses on the supermarket during a visit in the novel's fifth chapter where he and his wife Babette run into Murray Jay Siskind, a professor colleague of Jack's who specializes in American popular culture and reinforces the common postmodern attribute of ignoring academic borders that separate high culture from pop culture. This chapter, coming early in the 40-chapter novel, sets up a focus on mundane surfaces obfuscating deeply important and existentially unsettling underlying realities: Jack begins the chapter by telling himself, "Let's enjoy these aimless days while we can," as he fears "some kind of deft acceleration" (18). Jack jars himself awake with anxiety over his own mortality, wondering about the experience of death itself. His contemplation of death is followed by the simple non sequitur, "Blue jeans tumbled in the dryer" (18). Only this trivial intrusion of the quintessentially mundane transitions from Jack's meditation on death to Murray Jay Siskind at the supermarket.

In this initial visit, Jack first notices the way Murray's "basket held generic food and drink, nonbrand items in plain white packages with simple labeling. There was a white can labeled CANNED PEACHES" along with a variety of other banal items marked with plain labels, representing what Murray calls "the new austerity," somehow

[6] The latter is more true of works like *White Noise*, which I focus on here, than DeLillo's most recent works, such as *Zero K* (2016) and *The Silence* (2020) - though the former points about character identity still hold true in these.

"contributing to some kind of spiritual consensus" (DeLillo 18). Murray's basket holds real commodities but their didactic presentation, the items in the packages indistinguishable except for labels - even the "white package of bacon" lacks "a plastic window for viewing a representative slice" (18) evokes semiotically the idea that these are archetypal examples of commodity, each one a package so carefully curated, and disassociated from its contents, that it could easily be mistaken for simulation.[7]

Evoking Baudrillard's descriptions of postmodern simulacra, Osteen examines how "shopping produces a simulated self who is not an individual agent but an element of the system of capitalism" so that "consumption turns persons into packages" and "we become spectacular commodities who consume everything we see, but most of all, ourselves" (Osteen 171) At least for Osteen, the issues of commodification are closely interrelated with television, as methods of control, commercialization, and distraction from material realities.[8] The abundance of signs, in both the literal and semiotic senses of the word, within the supermarket reflects an uneasiness that Jack feels throughout the novel with simulacra – particularly with the distance between the external trappings of daily life and the reality of lived experience. In an earlier exchange that characterizes this anxiety simply, Jack debates his teenage son Heinrich on whether or not it is raining. The

[7] This plain, overtly semiotic packaging of commodities in the supermarket is recreated visually to evoke a detached and unsettling relationship with the material and mundane in the first episode of the dystopian *Handmaid's Tale* television series adaptation (2017), a reflection that emphasizes the dystopian and science-fictional qualities of *White Noise*'s ordinary late-20th-century life.

[8] This idea is supported by John Duvall in his editorial introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, "The Power of History and the Persistence of Mystery," in which he argues that in White Noise, "the pressures of advertising and capital" undercut our ability to think historically, and "structures of thought seem to have been coopted by the logic of television genres" (Duvall 2). He characterizes Jack Gladney's culture as "a culture of simulation" (2), in agreement with Boxall's characterization in *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* of *White Noise* itself as "a lock-step dramatisation of the theory of Jean Baudrillard" (Boxall 114).

conversation begins when Heinrich makes the declaration, "It's going to rain tonight," to which Jack responds "It's raining now" (DeLillo 21). Heinrich affirms: "The radio said tonight" (21). Jack can't help but appeal to the direct evidence of firsthand experience: "Look at the windshield […] Is that rain or isn't it? […..] Just because it's on the radio doesn't mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses." Jack attempts to turn this absurdist debate to a concretized example, hoping that Heinrich will acquiesce to the truth of personal experience:: "What if someone held a gun to your head? [….] He holds a gun to your head and says, 'Is it raining or isn't it?'" (21-2). Heinrich responds in a broader postmodern perspective, questioning the metanarratives of singular truth, and reinforcing the postmodern tenet that personal truths are chosen and affirmed. "What truth does he want?" he asks. "Does he want the truth of someone traveling at almost the speed of light in another galaxy? [….] What good is my truth? My truth means nothing. What if this guy with the gun comes from a planet in a whole different solar system?" (22). For a brief period of time in this passage, Jack recognizes the absurdity of simulacra which he cannot recognize while shopping for commodities, lulled into the comfort of that system.[9] Notably, within the novels of transposed fiction I examine, characters who lack access to this system of overabundant commodities do not find these postmodern dilemmas meaningful – they struggle through real material hardships, and escape the crises of existential simulation which are indicative of the privilege of living mostly detached from material necessity. The exclusion of characters from "outsider" cultures

[9] Here also, Heinrich adumbrates science-fictional thinking. The father-son pseudo-argument represents a mundane event – on one level a silly debate with a knotty teenager, but at the same time, the question addresses a main source of Jack's confusion in the world.

from these systems of soporific simulation contributes to their willingness to take decisive action in general.

In the supermarket, Jack describes a seemingly random array of trivial marketable commodities as context, including pain relievers and ginger ale, and "paperback books scattered across the entrance" (19-20) before describing the commodification of false security and of complacency explicitly:

> It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plentitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls - it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less […] (20)

In his own reaction to the satisfaction and fulfilling sensation of purchasing, the important elements of which are described as packages and setting rather than the items themselves, Jack mirrors Murray's more academic contemplation on consuming. "Most of all, I like the packages themselves," says Murray. "This is the last avant-garde. Bold new forms. The power to shock" (19). There is irony here - nothing about the supermarket shocks anybody - but also multivalency: it *should* be shocking, perhaps, for packages to elicit a sense of well-being, security, and contentment in the face of overt concerns about death and implicit concerns about society and meaning, even if this form of consumerism is nothing new or bold, even if it is regular fare for scholars such as

Murray Jay Siskind. These deeply conditioned responses – the sense that consumerism can provide security – emphasizes how capitalist logics have penetrated and pervaded their worldview. Examination of *White Noise*, such as the recent analysis by Muhsin Yanar for example, focus on the way "Americans have resorted in an unreal life to consumption" and "how they are erased in these environments" (Yanar), building on theoretical frameworks including those put forth by Baudrillard, McLuhan, and Zygmunt Bauman.

In *Consuming Life*, Bauman examines how "only commodities can enter the temples of consumption by right, whether through the 'goods' or the 'clients' entrance; inside those temples, both he objects of worship and their worshippers are commodities" (62). This framing of capitalist logic in society at large, reflected in the supermarket description of *White Noise* and overlapping with Osteen's analysis of ritual within DeLillo. Highlighting the way "members of the society of consumers are themselves products of commoditization," Bauman examines how "members of the consumer society are obliged to follow the self-same behaviour patterns they wish the objects of their consumption to obey" and the way members of a consumer society "must meet the conditions of eligibility defined by market standards [….] expected to make themselves available on the market and to seek, in competition with the rest of the members, their most favourable 'market value'" (62). In his conceptualization of "the daily operation of the present-day, mature society of consumers […] the 'rights of the citizen' are grounded in, and overlie, the genuine or assumed capacity of the competent consumer" (64). Therefore, Bauman explains:

> A considerable number of consumers *de jure* fail the test which has been set, informally yet all too tangibly, for consumers *de facto*. Those who fail the test are 'failed consumers', sometimes subcategorized as 'failed asylum seekers' or 'unlawful immigrants', at other times as the 'underclass' (that is, a motley assortment of individuals refused access to any of the acknowledged social classes, ineligible for class membership as such), but most of the time scattered anonymously in the statistics of the 'poor' or 'people below the poverty line'[…] (64-5)

This description can be mapped clearly onto the relationship between the middle-class American "insider" characters of DeLillo's fiction – like Jack, Babette, and Murray in the supermarket – and the "outsider" characters of transposed fiction, like asylum seekers to the U.S. Saeed and Nadia in *Exit West*, the U.S.-immigrating Cabral family in *Oscar Wao*, and U.S. underclass denizen Mark Spitz in *Zone One*. Furthermore, this connection underscores the role of the United States in particular as a consumer society defined by market standards, which can accept or reject aspirants according to its tests. Bauman names the United States in this role explicitly, identifying it as "ostensibly the world's most powerful economy, looked up to as a success model to follow by most inhabitants of the globe who seek the ultimate example of a gratifying and enjoyable life" despite being "perhaps deeper in debt than any other country in history" (80). He goes on to characterize the "rulers and the citizens" of the U.S. as "addicted to (and dependent on) imported money as much as they are addicted to and dependent on imported oil" –

referencing the very resource exploitation that is visited upon outsiders to the consumerist society, and which makes the abundance of commodities for insiders possible.

The supermarket continues to serve as a place of great importance for Jack throughout the novel, which includes many visits, and it continues to serve as a space of comfort as the outside world becomes stranger and more threatening, with the coming of the airborne toxic event. Not long after expressing his inability to see himself, a college professor and department head, fleeing from an airborne toxic event, Jack returns to the supermarket, now "full of elderly people who look lost among the dazzling hedgerows" as they prepare for an approaching snowfall (167). For consumerist Americans, of reorganized shelves and inconvenient weather creates a world disruption – in contrast with the characters of transposed fiction, for whom apocalypse is often literal. The snowstorm's ordinary hazard - much less pronounced than that of the airborne toxic event - motivates action that is familiar more than the new and unknown danger motivates any action: "Older people in particular were susceptible to news of impending calamity [....] Whipped into a frenzy, they hurried to the supermarket to stock up" (167). The routine of winter storm preparation mimics action but, as a process, it is already subsumed in the process of purchase as purpose, and focuses the town's inhabitants on the familiar. As Jack says, strangely, when discussing Babette's mundane coffee habit: "Whatever relaxes you is dangerous. If you don't know that, I might as well be talking to the wall" (DeLillo 102).

In the supermarket, the static nature of the space reinforces passivity, even if signs of decay - a socioeconomic danger - accumulate outside, as "houses in town were

showing signs of neglect" and "the park benches needed repair, the broken streets needed resurfacing" but "the supermarket did not change, except for the better. It was well-stocked, musical and bright. This was the key, it seemed to us. Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip" (170). This idea is not drawn from substantial aspects of reality. Rather, like the satisfaction that comes from packaging, the comforting reaffirmation of passivity is born from "the dense environmental texture" that Jack is self-aware enough to recognize: "the automatic doors opened and closed, breathing abruptly. Colors and odors seemed sharper. The sound of gliding feet emerged from a dozen other noises, from the sublittoral drone of maintenance systems, from the rustle of newsprint as shoppers scanned their horoscopes in the tabloids up front" (168). Conditioning makes mundanity sharp, reinforcing paralysis that is mistaken for deliberately chosen comfort.

Clearly, it is for a reason that later the supermarket serves as the site from which authorities provide orders to the population regarding the disaster of the airborne toxic event - the supermarket is a site of control. "A man's amplified voice boom[s] across the street from somewhere inside the supermarket" to command the town's population "on behalf of Advanced Disaster Management, a private consulting firm that conceives and operates simulated evacuations" right after Jack finishes his "second medical checkup since the toxic event" (204-5). In conjunction with the supermarket's valence as a place of comfort, its deputization by this group emphasizes the two other defining features of its identity: a place of profitable commercialization (despite its generic government-sounding name, Advanced Disaster Management immediately identifies itself as a private

consulting firm) and a place of simulation (despite real dangers, the focus here is only on simulated drills).

Because of its calming familiarity, the supermarket is useful for regularly reinforcing passivity and routinized behavior, and that quality here is speculatively extrapolated as the supermarket becomes useful to introduce new processes and methods of control: like in truisms about frogs allowing themselves to be boiled alive if the water temperature is increased gradually, the "environmental texture" of the supermarket forms a familiar lukewarm solution in which new and dangerous factors can be subtly introduced. There are at this point of the novel three actual dangers for the characters in the story: an approaching snowfall, the airborne toxic event, and the gradual economic decline of the town. The town's residents are interested in addressing exactly one of these dangers: the weather. They have been successfully inured to ignore encroaching dangers outside of their routine and outside of the focus encouraged by higher governmental powers, here represented by the Powers-That-Be-styled organization of Advanced Disaster Management – a science fictional entity to meet the science fictional contrivance of the airborne toxic event.

It is a common thread in scholarship of DeLillo's novels that he anticipated, even strove towards, a new form of fiction which engaged in particular with the alienation of daily experience from history, with the acceleration of communication technology and mass media, with the globalization of an American ideal, and with the subjective sense of absurdity created by those qualities. In *Postmodern Counternarratives: Irony and Audience in the Novels of Paul Auster Don DeLillo, Charles Johnson, and Tim O'Brien*,

Mark Donovan refers to earlier novels as "products of a period in which writers felt the urge to stand outside common perception, uprooting the anxieties, threats, and disheartening political and economic agendas that were arguably ignored by the public and the media" but that the "opening salvo of the new century has presented much different challenges, however, as millennial apprehensions quickly gave way to questions about the storyteller's role in an age of war, heightened terrorist threat, and a revised assessment of American's role on the global stage" (179). John Duvall, in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo,* makes explicit the meta futurity of DeLillo's oeuvre, commenting that DeLillo's work "anticipate[s]" and "comment[s] on cultural trends and tendencies, the full significance of which emerge only after his novels are published" (1), a comment endemic to science fiction – and the fact that it is levied at even those of DeLillo's novels which do not incorporate overtly speculative elements like the airborne toxic event only highlights how even DeLillo's portrayal of the mundane can be productively examined as speculative. DeLillo's entire corpus of work - including those novels which are explicitly identified as belonging to a different genre than science fiction - is credited with this particular quality of anticipation. Referring back to my earlier examination of the inequitable distribution of the apocalypse, I argue that DeLillo's "insider" perspective awaits both the apocalypse and new ways of resisting it, whereas the "outsider" perspectives of transposed fictions are experiencing both.

Boxall posits that DeLillo has been read too much in light of false oppositions, whether they are between the political and the apolitical, depthless and authentic,

autonomous or decadent - all “hypostasised false distinctions” in the wake of postmodernism (15). He argues that this skewing has “occluded” important ways DeLillo offers to “rethink the culture” as “at once a critique and an enactment of the possibility of fiction” (15). He positions these works as “balanced on a new kind of critical possibility, a possibility which is difficult to hold to the light, which does not conform to the existing divisions of intellectual labour and partisanship” and centered on “an unnameable longing, this yearning for something that is missing in history, that is the very spirit of theory and of philosophy, as it is the driving force behind DeLillo’s writing” (15). Although in his view DeLillo’ work does enact “a collapse of ethical opposition, of a kind of descent into a countercultural violence which imply mirror and double the violence of global capitalism” - one of the ways a market-totalizing future has, in DeLillo’s novels, already arrived - this “is accompanied in DeLillo by a writing toward the not yet seen that lies latent in the culture, and that points towards the possibility of an ethical becoming whose contours are not yet imaginable to us” (16). I argue the novels of transposed fiction which I examine in this dissertation’s coming chapters actually take on exactly this work, carving out the contours of ethical becoming through their intrusion into the mundane with both the same kind of speculative incursions seen in postmodern works like DeLillo’ *White Noise,* with an added potential of action born from perspectives of immigration and minoritization, through which latent imaginations of the possible are made manifest.

Chapter 2

"I Have to Go Home… You Must Let Me": Remembering Identity Across Borders in M.G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia*

In the imagined future of M.G. Vassanji's novel *Nostalgia* (2016), the end never has to come – at least not because of an individual's biological mortality. Thanks to organizations like the one protagonist Dr. Frank Sina works for, the Sunflower Centre clinic[10], those with the means to purchase the service can extend their lives well beyond the natural human lifespan. "Regeneration techniques" have "advanced to allow the body to last longer" effectively enough that they are considered to provide "new bodies" with a "flawed immortality" in which "the body may creak and wobble," but continues to function, perhaps indefinitely (Vassanji 7). This longevity, referred to as the extension of "body-age" in the near-future Canadian setting that backdrops most of the narrative, does not meet with much overt social resistance or persistent philosophical ramifications in and of itself. There are religious groups that protest the practice, believing that immortality disrupts the natural order, and some of the young generation resent those who extend their body-age for not allowing others to take their place in the workplace and economy, but in daily life those who regenerate themselves like Frank Sina himself does are able to ignore these groups and live their lives as normal. The overhaul of memory and the reconstruction of identity which necessarily accompanies the longevity creates many of the conflicts and complications, especially for those who perform the

[10] Never discussed in the novel, but part of a concern with meaningful names, the clinic's namesake flower brings multiple salient features: of course the most popular sunflower is an annual plant, which dies but spreads seeds widely to return again; each "flower" is actually made up of thousands of smaller individual flowers; and sunflowers have been planted in attempts to alleviate the toxins of nuclear radiation.

regeneration: the issue comes with, as Frank describes it, “the problem of what to do with the vast amount of information we carry” (7). While he implies that the brain might be organically incapable of holding many lifespans of memories, Frank admits the true drawback would be people “burdened by quantities of redundant, interfering memories,” and especially the effect of “painful and messy ones” (7). The solution lies in renewing “selected portions of long-term memory,” creating new memories that form entire “new lives” (7). The resulting process, dubbed “rejuvenation,” then is not simply the extension of life expectancy and health but rather a clean break with one’s identity wholesale, and mental reincarnation as a new person, one who is legally protected and prevented from ever accessing their former past life – no record remains, and ostensibly, no former relationships continue, even when it comes to family.

As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Frank Sina is not an “ordinary” case of regeneration and memory replacement, nor an ordinary rejuvenation center doctor. Although he no longer consciously remembers it, Frank was once part of a community in a nation far from Canada, excluded from the resources and wealth of the privileged developed world and deliberately maligned in the West. In fact, Frank was part of a royal family there with militant ties, but as a thoughtful and peace-minded scholar, Frank had no interest in making war and migrated to the “North American Alliance” that includes Canada in order to study and to work as a physician. After his family participates in military operations against the North American Alliance, Frank is ultimately deemed a risk, captured, and forced into memory erasure – a history that is only revealed to Frank and the reader during the final chapters of the novel. Years later,

he lives a new life, working with the very processes that deleted his previous life. Here questions of personal identity intertwine with questions of cultural, ethnic, and national identity and the definition of these identity markers in an ever-more globalized and yet segregated world. The erasure of memory, including the erasure of culture and even of family, mimics in a speculative mode the "assimilation" ideology often professed in wealthier nations: that in order to "belong" and gain acceptance or approval, immigrants must subordinate their own cultures to the dominant culture of the destination – down to language, dress, and other elements where the personal is hard to disassociate from the national or ethnic. Through erasure of elements of their identity, immigrants are more easily offered entry into the "insider" world of desirable safety and economic privilege – benefits that in a globalized world are often gained through the exploitation of less wealthy nations.

As Svetlana Boym explores in *The Future of Nostalgia*, "nostalgia too is a feature of global culture," one "exported all over the world" like "money and popular culture"; however, "it demands a different currency" from those features that are more easily commodified, already automatically subsumed into capitalist logic and the marketplace. Nostalgia, more difficult to define and more difficult to control, is linked with the poets and philosophers responsible for coining key features that define globalism, such as "progress, modernity, and virtual reality" (17-18), reclaiming in part those ideas from commodification and characterizing the "currency" needed to engage with nostalgia as one not easily produced by market logic. Where "the study of nostalgia does not belong to any specific discipline," it "frustrates psychologists, sociologists,

literary theorists and philosophers, even computer scientists" and "reflects a fear of untamable longing and noncommodified time," rejecting the "quick fix and sugarcoated palliatives" (18) that the Sunflower Centre purports to offer in Vassanji's *Nostalgia*. As Frank's "memory rejection" symptoms intensify, the inadequacy of palliatives provided sugar-coated to wealthy clients and the inadequacy of the marketplace logic of assimilation as a whole is revealed: even without a full and conscious understanding of his own cultural history, the non-consensual arrangement extended to immigrants, exchanging privilege for cultural authenticity and history, fails. This transactional paradigm cannot understand, much less counteract, the desire for actual belonging and agency that Frank's psyche demands. Nostalgia manifests as the result – not only Frank's longing for his family and former community, although that is present, but also a desire to belong authentically in a home that accepts him for his real self.

This "longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" for Boym includes two important elements: "a sentiment of loss and displacement," but "also a romance with one's own fantasy," a kind of love that "can only survive in a long-distance relationship" (Boym 14-15). This description characterizes the relationship we will come to discover between Frank Sina and his original homeland – a place far away, Frank's original memories of which have been mostly erased or suppressed, and a history that leads to Frank's psychological disturbances, as he experiences feelings of loss and displacement for a belonging he cannot remember but imagines warmly. For Frank, the romance of his own fantasy revolves around his lost family and his former community, which he cannot remember the details of but still feels an affective connection to, part of

the “scraps” left to him that he hopes might still be “retrievable” after the forcible eradication of his own cultural practices and allegiances (Vassanji 1). For the dominant middle class North American culture, part of the fantasy of a home that never was includes a national past that was monocultural and unconcerned with the issues of immigration and minoritized ethnic groups – a fantasy that drives the desire for convenient and self-negating assimilation in those like Frank Sina.

Boym categorizes nostalgia as either “restorative” or “reflective,” where restorative nostalgia “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of lost home,” the kind of nostalgia “at the core of recent national and religious revivals” which “does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition,” protecting “the absolute truth” of a society’s metanarratives and cultural mythologies (18-19), intending to incarnate “the imagined community” in order to reinforce “one’s own self-perception” (61). This is the form of nostalgia that motivates the North American desire for normativity and enforced assimilation. “Reflective” nostalgia, in contrast, “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity,” focused on “the longing itself” (19) – this is the kind of nostalgia that exists in Frank, as he “lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history” and “the dreams of another place and another time” (62), the kind of nostalgia that exists in those immigrant populations whose cultural history is not affirmed but disregarded and in some cases erased.

In Frank’s world, when nostalgia leads to disturbances in the psychology of the rejuvenated, these disturbances are categorized as “memory rejection,” a function supposedly not resulting from the arousal of old history but from an improperly applied

new and false history: “the patient’s fiction, the implanted autobiography, was rejected by her brain, and that was not only embarrassing but possibly dangerous” (Vassanji 80). When this effect becomes serious, leading to fractures in the subject’s psyche and even to the loss of sanity and the self, it is termed “nostalgia syndrome.” For the Sunflower Centre where Frank works, providing an expensive service to clients, the problem and solution are both technical: “The task at hand was to debug the fiction, find the contradictions in it, one or more. Sometimes they can be trivial, a chronological or factual error, for instance” (80). Even when the problem is complex, “stored deep inside the mind, often in pieces across the brain,” the “bugs” are “eliminated electromagnetically” (80). In her analysis of nostalgia at large, Boym references how “in the seventeenth century, nostalgia was considered to be a curable disease, akin to the common cold,” but “it would not occur to us to demand a prescription for nostalgia” today: “By the twenty-first century, the passing ailment turned into the incurable modern condition” (Boym 15). In the projected future of Vassanji’s *Nostalgia,* the paradigm has turned clinical and pragmatic again, the cure of “opium, leeches and a journey to the Swiss Alps” replaced by modern devices that ignore the deeper societal and personal causes even more: memories simply “vanished into that nothing of electromagnetic noise” (Vassanji 1). In this way, the market-driven society of Frank Sina’s Canada, and especially his Sunflower Centre, attempts to control nostalgia as a biological ailment with a technical solution, appropriating and harnessing the concepts of progress and modernity that Boym attempts to reclaim as sites of complex theoretical, affective, and even poetic thought. Instead, the

rejuvenation centers apply technocratic solutions and capitalist logic, supposedly removing the hindrances of nostalgia as part of their service for a fee.

Frank, working as a doctor who specializes in the creation and maintenance of new memories for rejuvenated patients, and who himself has undergone rejuvenation, encounters one such "nostalgia" case in Presley Smith, an afflicted new patient whose new memories turn out to be the creation of the government's Department of Internal Security. This department is responsible for reprogramming individuals deemed dangerous to national security through the same rejuvenation process the wealthy employ to begin anew, and Frank's journey through that rabbit hole kicks off the occurrences of the novel's plot. The future of the novel brings changes to geopolitical borders as well as to the border of human life expectancy, although these national shifts, even more than rejuvenation for individuals, are a matter of re-defining rather than re-creating. The relatively wealthy, technologically developed, and generally safe regions of the North Atlantic Alliance (N.A.A.) include Canada where Frank Lives in a future Toronto, the United States. and implicitly Western Europe. On the other side of "the Long Border," as it is regularly called, lies the other world: regions of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East where deprivation and war characterize daily life. "The war-torn country" of Maskinia, Frank describes, "lies safely away from us behind the Long Border," where it "baffles us and frightens us" so that "we wish we could solve or even disappear it, and even as we observe it and describe it, it remains the persistent unknowable alien" (Vassanji 19-20). He watches a news report on "a severely deprived area in the city of Sinhapora in

Maskinia" from the safety of his "media room" (19-20), as yet unaware that Maskinia itself is in truth his country of origin.

These geopolitical delineations, though exaggerated and projected into a situation years in the future, are drawn not from science fiction worldbuilding but from the global trends evident in the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. Like all of the novels examined in this project, the setting relies upon the contemporary world in which the novel is written and read for context rather than the creation of a new setting; the speculative defamiliarization of recognizable trends and patterns reveals underlying structures and realizes political intentions that are already at work. The conflicts in the narrative, fomenting around global and personal borders defined by culture, nationality, and personal identity, illustrate this transposition of speculative tropes and bring to light the function of these established boundaries. As Boym elucidates, emphasizing the relationship of memory with speculation and with the material and political concerns of the present, "fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future" and "nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory" (17-18).

Diana Brydon examines in "Risk, Mortality, and Memory: The Global Imaginaries of Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, M.G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia*¸ and André Alexis's *Fifteen Dogs*," the way that each of the three Canadian novels she focuses on "begins with a speculative inquiry based on asking the question: 'What if?' But unlike much speculative fiction, they do not ask 'what if the world were different?' Instead, they

ask how a shift in the current order might enable a deeper insight into the way things are" (99). This observation aligns with a key criterion for the texts I examine, which I refer to as a purposive absence of worldbuilding – a setting in which the ordinary realities of contemporary life form the structure on top of which speculative possibilities are built. When it comes to *Nostalgia* and the other texts on which my own analysis focuses, however, this narratological choice intertwines with a specific thematic aim: namely that the merger of real-world setting and speculative tropes within these migratory works captures the particularly strange elements of existing within early-21st-century geographic and political power relations and borders, and reveals the nature and qualities of real-world structures which could otherwise remain camouflaged by inured mundanity. Frank's own experience of migration and forced memory erasure provides a focalizing example of political anxiety surrounding borders and immigration.

Brydon points out how *Nostalgia*'s imagined near futures are predicated on "colonial and capitalist exploitations of the past," and a system wherein environmental ravages "are inequitably distributed among the poor and the racialized" (99). I argue the novels' focus away from inventing a new world with its own rules (worldbuilding) and instead on the current order, defamiliarized by a speculative "shift," achieves the precise aim of revealing that order itself, and highlighting the way colonial and capitalist exploitation underlie that order. Colonial histories, in the context of 21st century neoliberalism, continue to structure "insider" and "outsider" identities in relation to the privilege and safety offered by wealthy and exploitative global powers. The outsider perspective employed in *Nostalgia,* and within several of the novels in my analysis – the

perspective of a peripatetic narrator from overseas – plays a key role to creating that meaning. Much like speculative fiction will often employ an outsider character to stand in for the reader in unfamiliar settings, enabling them to express surprise at the systems at work in the fictional world which the reader might also feel, and allowing other characters to explain those systems in detail for the outsider character (and the reader), outsider protagonists in transposed fictions like *Nostalgia* make legible to a desensitized audience the systems of racialized economic inequality in the 21st century and enable us to feel surprise at their insidious qualities.

While "the globality of *Nostalgia*" engages with "shifting internal and external borders, mediating between colonialisms old and new, encompassing transnational migration, and ongoing friction between Eurocentric America and its others" (Brydon 99) it is neither America per se with which the novel is concerned nor are physical borders the only borders with which the novel is concerned. In fact, not only is "the Long Border" never precisely defined within the novel, it would be impossible for the nations and continents which are described on either side to be separated by a single physical border – or, in some cases, by any physical barrier at all except an ocean. It is the process of creation and definition for borders both external and internal, and even, often, the failure of these borders, which form the thematic backdrop of the narrative. The conception and creation of borders is intertwined with the creation of new identities and memories within the novel, bifurcating insiders from outsiders through technical methodologies which the privileged governments of wealthy nations believe lie under their control.

Even within the North American Alliance., categories and borders enforce biopolitical segregation and power differentials in ways both new (rejuvenation) and old (disenfranchisement, exploitation, and exclusion). Those who have been rejuvenated are termed "GN" or "new-generation person" while those living their first lives are "G0," colloquially "BabyGen" or "Babies," and the division between these groups manifests in social tension. The ethical dispute over rejuvenation sparks protests and a movement by G0 people who argue that only one lifetime should be lived. While those who enjoy the privilege of middle-class wealth as Frank does after adopting his new identity are insulated from these protests, which do not seem to affect his daily reality all that much, it is the very issue of resources and the availability of jobs that underpin these protests in the first place. For anti-rebirth activists, including both of the women with whom Frank has close relationships over the course of the novel, the technology-achieved reincarnation that Frank and others like him have availed themselves of signifies a greedy disruption of the natural system. In the eyes of many religious or spiritually minded opponents of rejuvenation, such as Radha, the woman Frank befriends and confides in as he novel progresses, human forms of life extension or rebirth remove purpose and meaning, corrupting the plans of higher powers or sidelining the metaphysical destinations intended for humans' eventual attainment. For other detractors, like Joanie the "BabyGen" partner Frank lives with, objections to rejuvenation are based on more practical and immediate concerns, the material symptoms of disturbance surrounding economic opportunity and sustainability. After all, Frank is not very surprised to learn, from anti-rejuvenation activists at an academic conference where the audience has more

comments than questions, that "youth unemployment is approaching thirty percent" (Vassanji 183). To the young and struggling, prolonging life serves as another way the privileged can take more than their fair share, while the less fortunate's poverty makes for an ignored side effect at best, a cultivated precondition for the success of the wealthy at worst.

For both the spiritually and materially motivated, rejuvenation not only derails the expected sequence of human life but undermines the order of humanity, demeaning and cheapening the experience of living in order to fulfill base, ignorant, or narcissistic incentives. Within their perspective, to rejuvenate is to become an undesired zombie clogging up the space and consuming the limited resources of earth, and worsening the system at large for others in the process – metaphorically akin to the stragglers, if not the skels, in Whitehead's *Zone One* discussed in an earlier chapter. Also like in *Zone One*, the implications of this broad transformation revolve around the social and economic inequity already premised and actively reinforced from before the introduction of the novum, or change. The most privileged, and the government institutions that facilitate their interests, are concerned with the quantity of life they can enjoy, not the quality of life in the world at large.

Throughout the novel, the social discontent over rejuvenation coincides with social unrest over tense relations and crises between the North Atlantic Alliance and the rest of the world, behind the so-called Long Border. Both the domestic and international unrest surrounds issues of economic greed and exclusion along with clashing cultural beliefs and definitions of identity. Some of the most salient and incisive revelations on

the geopolitical realities of the near-future world, its political and economic structure, and the real-world "absurdity" the novel captures occur during political pundit Bill Goode's exaggerated commentary on current events in his show "The Daily Goode." Employing an artificial foil with nominally opposing views in the form of a different milksop academic guest every episode, Goode himself pushes a hard line of pseudo-populist ethnocentrism, Western Civilization exceptionalism, and disregard for human life in regions on the other side of the Long Border. When Frank returns home at the beginning of the novel, it is this show that breaks the news for him on the abduction of "a naïve young XBN journalist named Holly Chu [who] had ventured out to a severely deprived area in the city of Sinhapora in Maskinia," the "war-torn country" behind the Long Border which Frank defines explicitly as "our Other […] our constant dark companion on the bright path of our progress" (Vassanji 12). The discourse of Goode's show reinforces anxieties surrounding difference and migration while reassuring viewers that the insider/outsider boundaries are maintained.

Maskinia itself is rife with syncretism, a meeting of Asian, African, and other regions, most likely including South America, which would be the only area of the world on the other side of the so-called Long Border which literally shares a border with the North American state in which Toronto lies. A "vaguely defined area of Region 6 troubled by poverty, disease, civil wars, and corruption," Maskinia, whose name "is believed by some scholars to be derived from … South Asian and African languages, through Arabic" and is waxed as "beggar, or someone deserving charity," was "occupied by sovereign nations that had achieved independence from European dominance in the

twentieth century" (Vassanji 171). This historical description, in a defamiliarizing diction similar to the description of North America in Hamid's *Exit West,* highlights multicultural influences as well as a colonized past. The Freedom Warriors militia, which "has controlled the central portion of Maskinia for over thirty years," began from "an Islamic fundamentalist organization militantly opposed to the Western way of life" but eventually "it has stayed away from overt Islam, allowing instead for the syncretistic cultures and modes of worship that have emerged from the large-scale upheavals, migrations, and admixtures of populations following the Great Explosion" (174). The Long Border itself is an idea – a wall to alienate and exclude all other peoples of the world, a barrier to deflect their desperate pleas for assistance or equality, a shield to batter down the occasional guilt that arises from the privileged West. While enforced in some places with actual barriers, and in all places with legal or military response, it is more the psychological exclusion, material exploitation, and Othered identity which make up the components of the Border. The impossibility of the geography implied by the "Long Border" estranges the mundane acceptance of the socioeconomic borders that divide the world in our contemporary understanding – a speculative device that joins the magic doors in *Exit West,* in my analysis, as speculative transpositions that illustrate the absurdity of everyday geopolitical paradigms.

The abduction of Holly Chu drives the conversation on "The Daily Goode," which turns to broad policies and attitudes towards other nations and their people. "Do we let those areas behind the Border suppurate in isolation until drained of all their miserable, poisoned life, and they can start afresh?" Bill asks hopefully, alluding

inadvertently to some of the same issues under debate for individual rejuvenation. The thematic parallelism of those two issues in this debate draw attention to the way biopolitical concerns and decisions about individual life are deeply intertwined with concerns of geopolitical resources and globalization. Questioning why it was "even necessary for such places to keep existing on our planet," Bill offers "attrition" as a "better solution" for countries outside of the North Atlantic Alliance, obfuscating the violence of such a process: "shouldn't we let them fade away in their misery and hatred?" (13). Although Bill's guest argues for "traditional humanitarian values," explaining "most of them are innocent men and women who've done us no harm," even his own final point that "letting fellow humans just die" would "[desensitize] us in our treatment of the less fortunate among our own population" belies an accepted paradigm of biopower in which foreign populations figure lower on the hierarchy of human worth (14-15). While it's almost certain that Bill Goode's viewing audience makes for a biased population sample, the result of a live informal poll during the show with 91.5 percent of viewers in favor of the option "Let them die" for everyone outside of the N.A.A. reveals a general public acceptance of these views (15) – a satirizing representation of nativist and jingoistic cable news pundits and their ability to influence their audiences towards acceptance of the inhumane, but a satire that is only slightly exaggerated beyond the reality

Goode debates the merit in cutting off "large numbers of people" like "cancers from the body," partly to allow the "good that's in the human race" to be preserved (read:

the North Atlantic Alliance)," and partly to "save on resources" (Vassanji 13-14).[11] Neither he nor his guest discuss the possibility that the N.A.A., its allies, and its forebears, through continued wars and physical exclusion from resources, following centuries of colonial exploitation and disenfranchisement in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, could inherit responsibility for the conditions of Maskinia, rather than simply an abstract responsibility of humanitarian magnanimity to express in relation with the region. Maskinia itself, "out there somewhere in Region 6 behind the border" (16) where "most people couldn't even point to it on a map" stands in for parts of the world exploited and excluded, where populations are reduced to foreign-ness, inscrutability, or hostility in the Western perspective. Rounding out the nature of these locations in the eyes of the N.A.A. are Bimaru where "the punitive, preventive war was dragging on" and "elsewhere still," where "some sixty refugees had attempted last week to swim under the EuroBarrier section of the Long Border in the Mediterranean; some twenty-five survived, the remaining were electrocuted or simply drowned," all "daily reminders [that] keep you thankful to be this side of all that horror" (16). Economic disparity and war define the relationship between the N.A.A. and other countries: a relationship mediated by the Long Border and its multiple barriers, which forbid access to the resources and standard of living enjoyed in the West, and kill most of those trying to cross over from one side to the other. The establishment of socioeconomic borders, and the exploitation of one side to favor the other from the onset of colonial history is responsible for the economic disparity

[11] A practical application of Foucault's description of the power to "make live and let die" certain populations, in order to support those in power

between regions, and that border now does the work of preventing those who suffer from the disparity from leaving their artificially defined zone. One of the novel's most important speculative and estranging devices is imagining these segregating lines on the map all around the world as one long border, between the West and those decimated by colonialism. According to Goode, not only does this system exist by deliberate design, but many in the N.A.A. would prefer an even more exclusionary, and even militantly hostile, approach to the outside world.

Clearly, the fictional projection of Goode and N.A.A. public opinion extrapolates from the realities of late 20th century and early 21st century policies in Canada and the United States, as well as Europe and the UK who do not seem to be included in the N.A.A. but are clearly counted on the privileged side of the "Long Border." According to a Léger poll reported by the Canadian Press, 63% of respondents answered that "the government should prioritize limiting immigration levels" (Wright). A different survey from the Department of Immigration's annual tracking study reported in the Toronto Sun that 30% of respondents stated "immigration is causing Canada to change in ways I don't like" and 51% "agreed with the statement, 'Immigrants need to do more to integrate into Canadian society'" (Sun). An Environics Institute study in 2018 found that "attitudes differed according to age," with "Canadians over the age of 60" holding more negative views about immigration (Smith), a conclusion backed up by an Angus Reid Institute online survey which reported that "positive views on multiculturalism drop markedly with age" (Reid). According to Gallup Poll results published in a paper commissioned by the Transatlantic Council on Migration in 2009, "negative views are somewhat more

pervasive among the old than the young" when it comes to immigration into the United States (Suro 8). Both the categories "Percentage of Respondents by Age Who Consider Immigration a Bad Thing for the Country Today" and the "Percentage of Respondents by Age Who Want to Decrease Immigration Levels" increase in number with age and are largest at the oldest age brackets. A 2018 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found similar trends, with 42% of the youngest adults in America responding that immigration into the United States should be increased and only 18% responding that it should be decreased, while among the oldest Americans only 26% responded immigration should be increased and 29% responded that it should be decreased (Pew). These debates and differences are accelerated in the fiction of *Nostalgia*.

In the world of *Nostalgia,* age brackets mean little: the true divisions between "young" and "old" have more to do with one's status as a "New Generation" person and how many lives one has lived than with one's age in that particular life. However, Frank's perspective reflecting on a trip "behind the Border" from his youth reveals the way these trends on age and immigration attitudes continue even with new definitions of age, and in a world where borders have been drastically redrawn. Notably, the barriers that kill migrants and refugees seeking to travel into the N.A.A. do not prevent N.A.A. citizens from venturing *out*, even if only for leisure. Frank's trip behind the "Long Border" which separates the privileged populations and areas of the world from the desperate populations and areas of the world took place as a spring break lark, when Frank and his college friends "opted to miss March Madness that year" and travel to a tropical beach resort that was "trendy" for privileged students to visit, in order "to

complete your education, become aware of the less fortunate places of the world and at the same time be with friends on a holiday" (Vassanji 69). This type of excursion, in modern day termed "slum tourism," evinces the profound cultural divide born of the totalizing economic divide between the two populations, manifested materially as a physical divide. The journey also creates a border line between Frank's former and later views on the Border.

At first, Frank and his friends are excited to escape the "protected tourist colony" in which food and drinks are "flown in" from safer places and "radiation counters" are always mandated, and always indicate safety (Vassanji 69). Encouraged by the "large black and white warning sign" that marks the path to a local settlement with literal "skull and bones," the group is shocked by "a monstrous sight" so "violently at odds with the rest of the scene that we simply stopped and stared" (69-70). Simply a giant dumping ground for garbage and scrap, a "mountain of metal" of "rusting car frames and ancient electronics and cables," the existence of such a place renders the group "silent and shameful of our recent childishness" (70). Exploring further, the group is humbled by "a crater full of building debris and junk, topped by recent garbage, unbearably ugly and filthy" and then "an unpaved village street where the dwellings were as in the myriads of images we'd seen, of mud or unpainted crude bricks" (70). Even though their journey is defined by the sight of garbage and poor dwellings, and not even any particularly striking examples of actual people in pain or distress, the experience leaves Frank "genuinely despair[ing]; how could we be blind to such disparities in our world?" (71). Reflecting on his "young and idealistic" self, Frank recalls thinking, "How could we shut [the

disparities] off? We need a change in the world order. A revolutionary change" (71). Within the same paragraph of reflection, however, Frank arrives at the reductive conclusion that "it takes time to grow up to realize that all the world's problems will never be solved, poverty and violence will never be eradicated; hence we need the Border to protect ourselves" (71). Frank's subject position, a GN person of middle class comfort in the N.A.A. determines his level of acceptance to the "disparities" that temporarily shocked him, and his identity determines the retroactive interpretation of events which allows him to claim apathy and expediency as a more "grown up" set of principles. The irony to this memory and its reflection, however, is that Frank's college trip behind the border might have never happened at all.

If the events described did happen, Frank was present occupying a different subject position than the one he remembers, his reprogrammed memories changing his orientation towards the problem, and the world. Whether the trip occurred or not, the programmed memory of it reveals how the reprogramming of dissidents, and even of nonviolent foreigners like Frank whose community allegiances, the government suspects, might make them disloyal to Western ideals, purposefully ensures they lose solidarity with their previous communities – enforcing not only assimilation but a lack of fellowship and loyalty to those left behind. Those who reach the privilege and opportunity of a wealthier nation, and successfully assimilate, are required to consider themselves fortunate and identify with the defensive ethos of the new nation.

This is the caveat of the other exception to the exclusion of the Long Border, besides leisure trips by privileged N.A.A. youth. Experimentally, as Frank finds out, the

Department of Internal Security of the N.A.A. has captured Maskinians deemed a threat to national security and reprogrammed them as complacent N.A.A. citizens. Frank is one of them, although in spite of his own leaking memories he does not realize his true identity until the end of the novel. Formerly a pacifistic doctor and scholar named Emil, son to the leader of the Freedom Warriors militia in Maskinia, Frank is educated in the United States before returning to Maskinia to found schools and teach children but is sent to the N.A.A. to help negotiate a prisoner transfer after his cousin, the military leader Amirul, is captured on a secret mission. However, once in Canada, Elim is kidnaped by the Department of Internal Security and both he and Amirul, after being interrogated for military intelligence, are forced into new lives as Frank Sina and Presley Smith respectively, all of their former memories written over. Elim/Frank's own brother in Maskinia inherits the title of leader of the Freedom Warriors, Nkosi, and many years later orders the capture of journalist Holly Chu which Frank learns about obliviously on TV.

Now in the same subject position that leads Frank to believe border security is more important than addressing international disparities, Frank also dismisses those who "cling to outdated ethnic identities that most of us have forgotten" as "fanatics" (Vassanji 8). This convenient opinion appears born of expediency, before Frank discovers his identity not as a fanatic but as part of a disenfranchised and mistreated group of people whose intertwined geographic history and ethnic identity form the basis for cultural alienation and economic exploitation. His former self, a doctor and scholar who does not express any fanatical opinions or actions, by inherited and constructed identity would be considered exactly one such a fanatic by those who have awareness only of their own

culture in the N.A.A., like Frank himself when he shares the offhand opinion. Because any of his memories might be fictional, the *experiences* that contributed to Frank's political opinions and moral beliefs might have nothing to do with his opinions and beliefs at all. In fact, Frank's opinions and beliefs might actually be the *cause* of his memories rather than vice versa, since the Department of Internal Security which implanted his memories[12], it is implied, selected those memories to implant precisely because they would reinforce Frank's complacency in his new life, tamping down empathy for the other side of the Long Border and encouraging inaction. The suspicious fictionalization of memory is true for all New Generation people, but especially troubling when it comes to Frank in light of his identity. The implication, when Elim's reprogramming as Frank appears to be a success, appears to be that the social and cultural forces of identity – for example, age and nationality – determine principles and politics even when the meaning of "age" and "nationality" are somewhat shifted in the near future. This shift serves to defamiliarize the factors that characterize issues of race, immigration, and economic disparity in the contemporary world, drawing attention to them. As a more direct reflection on immigration, the speculative reprogramming lays bare the way immigrants are required to adapt to their new nationality, accepting alienation from their former identity in order to make themselves acceptable to the new nation – suffering the reflective nostalgia of unresolved longing for a home in order to

[12] Specifically memory author "Arthur Axe," whom Frank actually meets during an academic conference, and who expresses pride in his own work for accomplishing exactly this kind of on-the-nose effect with his creations.

uphold the new nation's image of itself and desire to assert its own cultural hegemony, a form of restorative nostalgia, to use Boym's framing typology.

Immediately before Frank's recollection of the trip behind the Border, Frank watches TV host Bill Goode address Holly Chu and the implicit sociopolitical realities in a "discussion of Over There and Over Here," with psychologist Peter Crawford, "author of the recent book *Between Here and There: Are We Still on the Road?"* (Vassanji 64-6). As Bill fulfills his audience's expectation to denigrate the foreign, accusing those "in Barbaria, if I may so call that foul region" of cannibalism, while in the N.A.A. citizens suffer the price of civilization: "Here we fear proximity – no, wait a minute, don't we go about shielded by clouds of protective vapour, and creams and sheaths and gloves" (66). Those from the wrong side of the Long Border are casually referred to as "barbarians," even by those sympathetic to their cause or espousing liberal-minded ideals of international reconciliation and aid; those who are less sympathetic levy accusations of cannibalism, taking the implication of barbarism yet farther. Both the epithet of "barbarians" and the allegations of cannibalism speak to a history of colonial racism whose preconceptions and symbols maintain the power to evoke prejudice: the citizens of the N.A.A. find it surprising when others are "capable of paying heed to, let alone showing compassion for, those out there who are commonly dismissed as the Barbarians" – i.e. foreigners (Vassanji 117). This idea occurs in Frank Sina's head, following a discourse with Joanie on the issue of geopolitical inequality, and echoes broad popular sentiment in the N.A.A. predisposed against the idea that "the people behind the Border, in so-called Barbaria, were only human," as Holly Chu later discovers from firsthand

experience (189); foreigners are very directly dehumanized in the N.A.A.'s eyes, barbarians to a complacent North American population that is happy to conflate deprivation with depravation.

Invoking fears of primitive violence and claims of shouldering the burden of cultural superiority, Bill is interrupted by his guest who points out that foreign exploitation "is the source of our raw materials, you mean" (67). The regions beyond the border may be "the yang to our yin" in an abstract way for the general public (67), but in fact remains a necessary counterpart to N.A.A. power for its material worth. In fact, it is later revealed, this social apathy and material exploitation is official N.A.A. policy: "a hands-off approach combined with Border vigilance, sanctions, and selective punishment (military action) is the current policy in place and known as the Mcmanus Containment Doctrine," (174) speculatively alluding to both the Truman Doctrine and the general policy of "containment" that justified post-World War II interventionism by the United States to curtail Soviet communism. The final comment on the show comes from Peter Crawford: "Some of us may wish to emigrate into exclusive space suburbs. But those of us who stay on this earth, and that's most of us, can't live in isolation from other populations. We can look away and smile in the sunshine but they are there, Maskinia exists and festers, and once in a while an incident like [the kidnapping of Holly Chu] happens" (68). Under the assumption that Holly Chu is a helpless and loyal N.A.A. subject, unavoidably sacrificed to violence born from the N.A.A.'s own exploitation and exclusion of other international communities, Bill and perhaps even Crawford are willing to accept the price of doing business. Even though the kidnapping reveals that the borders

separating wealthy Western nations from others are permeable, artificial, and ultimately ineffective at insulating certain parts of the earth from consequences affecting other parts of the earth, the reactionary pundits prefer to reinforce the illusion and reassure their viewers with it.

By the next installment of "The Daily Goode," however, the kidnaped reporter Holly Chu has been revealed as not only alive, but now a sympathetic member of the Maskinian faction, photographed posed in army fatigues with a red flag and a weapon. Frank sees public outcry both in person and online as "vicious invective" replaces the sympathy expressed for Holly in the N.A.A. before: she is called a "traitor," a "bitch," and a "communist Asian cunt" (125-6). While labels like "traitor" are directly related to her change in loyalty, and pejoratives like "bitch" or "cunt" characterize the blind misogyny that often typifies online attacks, the inclusion of "Asian," an otherwise denotative descriptor, as part of the attack reveals the conflation of race with political allegiance, and the conflation of race with identity as an othered enemy, in the eyes of the N.A.A. public. Holly Chu is racialized once she becomes unsympathetic to the N.A.A. This reality underlies the conversation between Goode and show guest "Ralph Bloom, a middle-aged academic" of unspecified specialty who attempts to explain how Stockholm syndrome can lead to kidnaping victims aligning with their captors (127-8). Even this sympathetic explanation removes the potential of Holly's agency, however, since Ralph cannot fathom – or cannot publicly admit – that a reasonable North Atlantic individual could believe the Maskinian cause against their deprivation is worthy. Assuming that Holly's motivations stem from a desire for freedom from her captors, Ralph declares,

"She's wrong, for her victimizers are terrorists and cowards" (128). Sympathetic to Holly as an individual at least, one who as a former subject of North America deserves recognition as a humanized subject, Ralph bemoans the perceived inhumanity of the group with which Holly now identifies. Bill Goode, by contrast, believes that Holly's intent to join the Maskinians is earnest and sincere but entirely condemnable: "And let me tell you, she's convincing and scary [….] She believes what she's saying. Don't tell me she doesn't!" (128). Instantly in the media's perception, Holly Chu is interpellated as an Other, an enemy, a barbarian at the gates. None who identify with the other side of the border are deserving of sympathy from Goode, or empathy – identity as native or foreign depends on ideology even more than on birthplace or civic status.

Fulfilling his role, Goode presents a simple, xenophobic point of view throughout his programs, writing off Maskinia and the half of the world on the other side of the Long Border as undeserving of assistance, inherently treacherous, and galvanizingly *foreign*. With this ethnocentric paradigm as ideological premise, Holly Chu's conversion to the Maskinian cause does not humanize the people of Maskinia or validate their worth and grievances. Instead, she herself becomes dehumanized and invalidated, not only a betrayer of Western culture but a foreigner revealed never to have been one of "us" after all. As Holly's recorded message recounts the "hunger, disease, and radiation" that regularly claim lives in Maskinia and demands ransom for the North American hostages that the Freedom Warriors militia have abducted, the narrator – here ostensibly Frank watching the program - describes the way her "North Atlantic accent and her clean features, despite the oversize fatigues, seemed to belie her message but made its threat

more real and believable" (Vassanji 129). Bill, on the other hand, "explode[s] with derision"; his very first reaction mocks the foreignness of Holly's new chosen name Umoja wa Kwanza, which means "Unity First," deliberately misspeaking it: "Umo – Umo-de-kwango – what kind of name is that?" (129). Goode neither responds to the dire threat against North American hostages that Holly implies, nor to the suffering in Maskinia with which she justifies it. Instead, his priority is to remind the audience of cultural differences, to cast the identity of the other side as unrelatable, and to scorn other languages and naming conventions in order to establish a surface sense of superiority. This casual dismissal is reinforced as Bill's audience reacts with "hilarity" in the hall (129) – complex introspection and deliberation on the geopolitical situation, dangerous to both sides, is unnecessary in this venue when insults will do.

When guest academic Ralph corrects Bill on the name Umoja wa Kwanza and reminds him that the Freedom Warriors militia is "well-known" and has "re-emerged under different names" before, dying "only to revive again," Bill interjects: "Like those insect species you find there in those hot climes… uuurrrrgh!" (129). This comment has little literal meaning; resilient though insects may be, they aren't generally a symbol associated with reviving after death, and there is no particular folklore that hot-climate insects revive after death more than others. Instead, the point of this discourse is to define the foreign as inhuman, their ideals threatening in a disturbing way, their materiality and embodiment disgusting. In the context of a privileged nation contemplating foreign populations in need of aid, Goode deploys the teeming insects trope common among opponents of immigration and refugee assistance. He proceeds to pantomime "an

exaggerated shudder, moving his hands and fingers in the air in a simulation of a crawling insect, and again the laugher predictably broke out" (129). In reinforcing this simplistic and fractious worldview against the foreign, Bill Goode is not one commentator but rather a persona that reassures the North American population, an exaggerated ideological position that the general public may not be willing to espouse directly, but is more than willing to laugh along with, accept, and be comforted by – heartened that a convenient hard line is justified against the barbaric foreign lands.

After asking (rhetorically) whether it's likely that the N.A.A. will pay the ransom to release the hostages kidnaped by Maskinia, and Ralph responds unexcitingly that "reparations are taking place" and "the key to resolving such crises is always secrecy and time bought," Bill announces decisively: "Well, we should send the troops in and crush them once again," making "a squeezing gesture with his thumb," a statement that "was rewarded again with extended applause" (130). The earnest negotiations promoted by Ralph Bloom are considered dreary compared to warfare and extermination, to say nothing of actual collaboration. Even though "the knowledge that the air had suddenly gone out of [the] headline story" when it turned out "*they* turned out not to be cannibals," the idea that "one of us actually turned into them, rejecting our civilization and values, which we justly celebrate" breeds "disbelief" in the N.A.A., accustomed to implicit superiority and apathy towards barbarians (130).

Notably, that quality Bill Goode derides, dying "only to revive again," in the world of the novel has in general become the purview of the privileged – those who can afford to purchase another life after their first. When Edwina, the friend who helps hide

Presley Smith in the downtrodden neighborhood of Lawrence Town where he avoids the D.I.S., asks Frank whether she might have another life as he does, he lets her know the process is "very expensive," beyond her means[13] (Vassanji 166). Even in North America, only the wealthy can revive, not the insect-like poor or foreigners of Bill Goode's complaints. In fact, this Lawrence Town neighborhood where men like Frank never venture illustrates the continuing domestic marginalization, discrimination, and economic inequity of North America. In this area only to visit Presley, Frank emerges "from the dank dungeon of a station from another century into a world that was alien and truly depressing" (160), a world where "crime is so rampant" that "it registers only as a colourful instant of diversion from more important news" (159). Here Frank, whose race is not discussed throughout the first half of the novel[14], does mention in passing when he is called "whitey" that he is "not exactly white" (166), an implication ambiguously hinted at by the surname Sina – but that turns out likely to be a reference to singer Frank Sinatra instead[15]. Exactly what kind of "not exactly white" Frank Sina is does not get mentioned here, nor do any other characters in the novel seem to differentiate him from the norm thus far. This lack of that about Frank's race, and the lack of any resulting effects upon his daily reality, accentuate how the traditional markers of racial identity – the external

[13] Frank still believes himself to be one of these privileged purchasers at this point in the narrative.
[14] A detail reminiscent of *Zone One*, where the protagonist's race is mentioned so sparingly that some readers mistakenly believe it is never explicitly stated. In both novels, race becomes much more important to the protagonist near the conclusion.
[15] Although the origin of Frank's name is never explicitly revealed, the same author of memories was also responsible for Presley Smith's memories and admits that name was chosen because of the Elvis Presley music that happened to play during Frank and Presley's confinement. Nevertheless, this type of ambiguity and the relationship of names to cultures factors often into contemplations of personal histories in the novel, such as Holly's choice of name change, which is mocked, and a long section of explanation for possible histories to the name of the nation Maskinia, which could be derived "from South Asian and African languages, through Arabic" (Vassanji 171).

signs by which race is read – are beginning to lose their meaning. After being shouted at with "Whitey!", Frank muses "these descriptions long lost their use in the society I come from" (Vassanji 166). When technology allows at least some people to choose their appearance, the usefulness of external features constructed as race dwindles.

The first description of a character is that of Presley Smith who has "an Afro-head with red hair and pale skin; striking green eyes, planar nose, large ears" – a combination of features that subverts traditionally racialized descriptions with a diverse set of characteristics (Vassanji 4). It is perhaps that power of selection itself which strips physical appearance of its power as a tool of discrimination, individual agency deposing essentializing categorization in the construction of identity. Instead of skin color, hair, or bone structure, to those in power it is simply location is becoming the primary indicator of status, standard of living, and access on the international stage. To those on the wealthy side of the Long Border, it's the population on the other side that makes for a monolithic and inferior Other. The distance and danger involved with even visiting the other side make the marginalization of the Other easier in some ways that the marginalization of a domestic underclass with whom contact still regularly occurs, even though economic segregation might make it rare.

Nevertheless, Frank is getting ahead of himself when he claims that racial markers in general "lost their use long ago." For the wealthy and privileged in the N.A.A., it may be that race is not a large matter of concern, because rejuvenation allows for choice in physical appearance and because nationality and geography form the most important axes of hostility and exploitation, in order to maintain the state's power and

wealth. However, Frank's visit to the Lawrence Town neighborhood makes the material reality clear, just like his college trip behind the border did (artificial or not). Here, where poverty and lack of resources define daily life, race continues to act as a determining factor of power and economics – the shout of "whitey" reveals how Frank is out of place, because the place's inhabitants do not look like him. When he is almost mugged, a police car lurking around him arrives to save him, because the authorities can also tell by his appearance that he does not belong – this area is unofficially segregated but segregated by enforcement. Indeed, when Frank contemplates how racial markers "lost their use in the society I come from," he is admitting that "his" society is a different one from the one he is walking in. So the privileged world region itself continues to harbor smaller divisions of privilege and neglect, and the borders attendant to those partitions.

The final disclosure of the plot, that unbeknownst to anyone but government overseers Holly Chu was Elim/Frank's great-granddaughter all along, seems relatively unimpactful after the revelation of Frank's true identity as a reincarnated and reprogrammed Elim. The interrelatedness of the characters, and their ability to cross over in person as well as in ideology and identity, though, draws further attention to the artificiality of borders that define and separate individuals and populations by defining them from the outside. Like Elim and Holly, who have multiple provenances for culture, education, and identity across multiple nations, Vassanji himself, a transnational author whose books are published in multiple languages, exemplifies the porousness of border classifications, or at least the complicated realities that underlie and undermine convenient border classifications. In a 2006 exchange with M.G. Vassanji by Susan

Fisher published in *Canadian Literature* a decade before the publication of *Nostalgia*, he discusses the earlier novel *Amriika* in which a young man immigrates "to the United States, which represents the ultimate West – metaphorically if nothing else" (49-50). This metaphorical representation becomes literalized in *Nostalgia*'s N.A.A. which includes the United States, Canada, and an unknown number of other countries, effectively "the ultimate West" as a state. Conversely, all other regions of the world become monolithically essentialized in the view of the West, a homogeneous Other characterized by poverty, danger, and exoticism. The syncretism of religious beliefs, languages, names, and racial backgrounds on the other side of the Long Border, at least in Maskinia and among the Freedom Warriors militia, make this oblivious conflation convenient for the N.A.A. public, as seen in Bill Goode's mockery and unwavering judgments.

In contrast with being "an American," Vassanji explains, "if you are from the outside, you're always an outsider because part of you belongs there; part of your loyalties, part of your concerns are about history in other parts of the world" (Fisher 50). Although Vassanji is describing this experience in relation to characters from other novels, this reflection on the "outsider" sheds light on Elim/Frank Sina, who believed he was an insider of the N.A.A. but always felt the doubts and questions of the outsider he ultimately discovered he was, with loyalties and concerns rooted in the history of other places in the world, manifested in his nostalgia syndrome and representative of the immigrant's reflective nostalgia, denied a home that accepts him with his authentic subjectivity. It's impossible not to apply to Elim/Frank the next concern of the immigrant outsider that Vassanji describes: "when you lose community, when you lose the faith that

held you so close to it, and you lose home, then what replaces all that?" (50). Elim, a pacifistic doctor, was ripped from his community, faith, and home by an N.A.A. kidnaping as violent and unwarranted as the kidnaping of Holly Chu and the other tourists perpetrated by the Freedom Warriors militia. His life as Frank Sina documents Elim's unending desire to replace all that he lost through a comfortable and ignorant existence in the ultimate West – a pursuit that fails, in a freeing and expectant way, when Frank rediscovers his identity and decides to leave his Western existence behind in the only way open to him, a way he considers if not hopeful then at least fitting and correct for him. When convincing Radha to allow him to end his life this way, he expresses: "I have to go home… You must let me, when the time comes" (Vassanji 252). This yearning for a home which one might never have had, a definition of nostalgia, drives the international movement that powers like the N.A.A. seek to prevent. Where Frank's particular home and barriers are speculative fiction, the power relations involved, and even to a large degree the regions affected, are easy to recognize.

Like the privileged who undergo the reincarnation process of "rejuvenation," the transposition of the speculative into the recognizable First World creates not only an external déjà vu in response to the setting, but an internal cognitive dissonance in response to viewing the borders that delineate identity and daily reality and understanding them anew – the world we know is defamiliarized and perspective reveals aspects of it as strange or wrong. This is the real "nostalgia syndrome" seeping into our consciousness through the experience of the narrative – an invasive realization of the inequitable underlying structures, disturbing the previously desirable acceptance of privileged

Western complacency, making clear the ways in which the system we have become desensitized and inured to can still surprise with its violations. Like massive structures can be looked over if they become normalized in our view, the walls that segregate and separate become apparent, are remembered.

However, there is a cause for optimism – in those places where movement does occur. Some do cross over. Not only do some cross over from one country to another physically, like Presley, who turns out to be among the most tragic of characters, but some cross over in country *and* cross over in empathy, identification, and understanding, like Holly Chu. Never entirely at ease with the Freedom Warriors's own injustices and recursive violence, she is still able to recognize the injustices and recursive violence of the N.A.A., and to redefine herself as a warrior rather than observer. The importance of her crossing over does not lie in choosing one side over another but in relating with and joining a community she was accultured to despise. And some, like Elim/Frank, cross over multiple times in identity and, finally, in choice and agency. Even though Elim/Frank decides simply to seek peace in death, his rejection of complacent middle-class Western life solidifies his free will. Just as he rejected joining his father Nkosi's militant Freedom Warriors in Maskinia, he rejects joining the oblivious security of North America predicated on foreign exploitation. Through their forced memory-creation experiment, the North Atlantic government, but more importantly rejuvenates personal identity within the individual. The coordinated efforts to suppress, control, and disarm those from the other side of the border are what ultimately resuscitate the spirit of the excluded. Those very policies that attempt to erase outsider identity through forcible

assimilation, in order to defend the socioeconomic borders upheld by a history of colonial and neoliberal exploitation serve to reveal the injustices of global disparity to both insider and outsider populations.

Chapter 3

Magic Irreality: The Globally Speculative Mode in *Exit West*

When Mohsin Hamid's protagonists in *Exit West* (2016) contemplate on one of the first dates in their relationship where they would visit if they could visit anywhere in the world, they both settle upon Latin American countries. "Cuba," answers the motorcycle-riding, independence-treasuring Nadia, who wears a dark robe traditional to the Middle Eastern country that serves as the novel's first setting only so that "men don't fuck with [her]" (17), even though she is unreligious. In her mind, Cuba evokes "music and beautiful old buildings and the sea" – subjects of solitary aesthetic beauty (24). Saeed, her more orthodox aspiring suitor, chooses Chile, and in particular the Atacama Desert, because there are so few people and lights that "you can lie on your back and look up and see the Milky Way," with "stars like a splash of milk in the sky" – a reminder that "the Earth is moving," a "giant spinning ball in space" (24-5), evoking a sublime-like awe at the systems of the universe. These glimpses into personality and theme, early in the narrative before either character has ever left their home country, also offer insight into form. Constellations make for a fitting analogue to the style with which Hamid will connect the characters, places, and ideas in the novel, orbiting the concerns of movement and globalization, finding meaning in places simultaneously alienating and connective.

Exit West follows the main characters Nadia and Saeed as they grow close while moving across the world in a world suddenly opened up by the appearance of magic doors, able to instantly transport travelers from one place to another, nations or continents away. This speculative new potentiality makes Nadia and Saeed's story possible, since

the unnamed Middle Eastern city in which they live becomes embroiled in war, and after the loss of of some of their family members to the encroaching violence, they decide to trade the familiar and treacherous for the foreign and possible. Through the magic doors, the couple migrates to the Greek island of Mykonos, then the metropolis of London, England, and finally the Northern California city of Marin in the United States, at the same time as the sudden massive migrations made possible by the newly discovered doors creates conflict in nations and populations around the world. In each location, tensions between the natives and the newly arrived strain communities, redefine city identities, and in some cases cause mob protest and violence. Eventually, however, the population changes lead to paradigmatic changes in understanding place, kinship, and identity, opening up the potential for new ways of human collaboration, expression, and community.

Important to my analysis of the rising form of transposed fictions, the setting of *Exit West* is not just "a world" opened up by the appearance of magic doors but *our world* opened up by the appearance of magic doors. As explored in my introduction, *Exit West*, like the other contemporary novels of transposed fiction, avoids the worldbuilding that partly defines speculative genres like science fiction and fantasy. Like those other texts, Hamid's novel deploys speculative elements as components crucial to the plot and themes of the narrative, but those speculative elements work in an otherwise mimetic and contemporary setting, with an emphasis on the business of everyday life in our world. For Saeed and Nadia, "outsiders" to the safe and privileged life in wealthy nations they

eventually hope to reach, everyday life is defined by the necessities of migration and adaptation to new and different cultures.

In *Writing-Between-Worlds*, Ottmar Ette examines the particular migratory and transnational qualities in the fiction of our current age. Just as generic transposition defines the formal and thematic characteristics of the novels examined here, so does geographic transposition. Ette characterizes our present as the fourth "phase of accelerated globalization," on par with periods including the 15th century onset of European colonial expansion and the 18th century exploration that filled in the Western world's known map of the world. As major facets of the present, Ette points in part to increasing financial globalization and the development of planetary communication systems, and more broadly to "changes in people's mindset, resulting from a rapid multiplication of the rapid traffic in people, goods, and ideas and sped up through communications technology" which "occur in the context of a virtual public and find their expression in the new terminology of globalization" (26). It is these non-fictional thematic concerns that form the contextual backdrop for the events of *Exit West*.

In "The Doors of Posthuman Sensory Perception in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*" within her monograph *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels,* Claire Chambers identifies Hamid's self-aware "play with genre" that here "pushes into dystopian, postapocalyptic, speculative fiction, and magical realism" (234). In addition to examining other generic styles' effect within the novel, I also intend to examine those elements which might be termed "magical realism" as instead something different, exploring how characterizing the irreal elements of the plot as part of something new

generates new interpretations that reveal important underlying contexts about our 21st century geopolitical situation. This distinction is meaningful in part because as James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel assert in their introduction to *Feeling Very Strange: The Slipstream Anthology*, new and different narrative modes that make use of irrealist elements transcend "magic realism sliced away from its South American roots" (vii). As I argue throughout this dissertation, cultural and geographic roots are crucial context for the identity of new narrative modes – in fact, the questions of changing culture and geography are paramount in *Exit West*, and so there are interpretive lenses more productive than likening this transnational work from a transnational author – with ties to Pakistan, the U.K., and the U.S. – to a South American tradition. Even more relevant to the issues of genre at hand, the use of irrealist elements in *Exit West* functions through different formal methods and with different narrative effects than, say, the magical realism writing of Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Jorge Luis Borges. The transposed speculative elements of *Exit West* act as a direct reaction to the particularities of the social and political landscape of their present. Hamid is not creating an expanded version of a South American genre but rather deploying elements of genre in new ways in order to estrange the contemporary context of a globalized 21st century context.

One of the most striking examples of this estrangement, and an example that sheds light on how the narrative perspective and its relationship with the speculative works throughout the novel, occurs when the focus shifts to California. Here, in one of the places the author has called home, the emphasis on defamiliarization and estrangement becomes especially pronounced. In a formally curious section in the 10th

chapter, only a few dozen pages from the novel's end, the narrative departs from Nadia and Saeed to a broad perspective describing the new location of Marin, a city near San Francisco newly expanded with an influx of the world's magically mobile refugees, utilizing a narrator viewpoint whose scope operates on the level of continents instead of characters (197).

Expansive narrator omniscience is nothing new for this novel; in fact, the story begins at the level of the city – the phrase "In a city swollen by refugees" opens the novel just before Saeed and Nadia are introduced (3). Pensive generalizations on the nature of entire cities and countries continue throughout, as in the opening of the 2nd paragraph, which intimates that "it might seem odd that in cities teetering at the edge of the abyss young people still go to class" before providing specific examples in the form of the story's protagonist. A temporary shift in focus from Saeed and Nadia to new characters is also not unique; as examined above, the standalone vignettes of other global migrants' experience pepper the novel and bring attention to the interconnectedness of migrants worldwide. Even an introductory digression to set the stage of a new location is not in and of itself exceptional. The chapter actually opens with a typical description of setting: "In Marin, the higher up the hills one went, the fewer services there were, but the better the scenery" (193) and so on.

However, this chapter opening subtly signals the strangeness of the defamiliarizing section in question that comes just a few pages later, which also begins "In Marin" (197). Where the chapter opening's perspective narrows to the level of individual characters in its 2nd sentence, describing Saeed and Nadia claiming a living

space of their own on “a spot high up, with a view across and through the Golden Gate Bridge of San Francisco and the bay […] and a view of scattered islands floating on a sea of clouds, when the fog rolled in” (193), this new latter section remains broad in perspective, above the fog of limited individual humans’ perspectives, where the landscape appears different. This new section does not ground itself by re-focusing on the main characters just a sentence or two later like the novel opening and chapter opening do. It also does not turn a narrative eye to a new set of temporarily featured individual characters like the novel’s vignette sections do, capturing self-contained small moments that carry meaning in and of themselves. Instead, this section does something different: it maintains for an extended period a scope that is not only spatially global but temporally global.

In this section of the text, the formal quality of the narrator’s naming conventions and the context and perspective of the narrator’s descriptions become estranging in a way not seen elsewhere in the novel. The narrator begins with a matter-of-fact exploration of nativeness in the new setting: “In Marin there were almost no natives, these people having died out or been exterminated long ago, and one would see them only occasionally, at impromptu trading posts – or perhaps more often, but wrapped in clothes and guises and behaviors indistinguishable from anyone else” (197). At first glance, this opening appears to be a straightforward historical observation of the indigenous peoples of California – one that draws attention to the meaning of nativeness as contrasted with the natives and nativists in the previous settings of Mykonos and London, which will be

examined later. As the section continues, however, it becomes clear that a deliberate level of subtle obfuscation is at play.

As the description of indigenous peoples and communities goes on, the narrator's deliberate avoidance of specific naming conventions becomes more obvious – in fact, the narrator goes as far as to avoid naming the country of the United States, calling it "the strip of land that stretched from the mid-northern-Pacific to the mid-northern-Atlantic" (197-8) even though, for example, Britain is specifically named in the very next page. Examining the different criteria that can coalesce into different ideas of "nativeness," the narrator recognizes how "it seemed to Saeed that the people who advocated this position most strongly, who claimed the rights of nativeness most forcefully, tended to be drawn from the ranks of those with light skin who looked most like the natives of Britain," (198) avoiding the convenient term of "white" to describe them. Similarly, the narrator here avoids skin color and terms like African American when speaking of "the human beings who had been brought from Africa to this continent centuries ago as slaves" (198). Not only does this strangely worded perspective deterritorialize the content, it also estranges human beings, describing them disconnected from current cultural terminology and categories.

This defamiliarization goes far beyond naming conventions. Broad points of history are also described from a perspective outside the conventional knowledge of the United States that not only U.S. inhabitants would have but also most immigrants, and especially educated immigrants with college professor parents and regular internet access like Saeed and Nadia. This narrator's perspective is definitely not theirs. Therefore, the

anonymous third-person subject “one” being used is more important here is important: the narrator tells us that “one” would see natives of California occasionally, like the narrator declares at the beginning of the chapter that the higher up “one” goes in Marin, the better the scenery. But the “one” is not Saeed or Nadia as a stand-in for the narrator, since they have contextual knowledge and speak with conventional knowledge that the narrator is avoiding. The “one” is also not Saeed or Nadia as a figure-of-speech subject being observed by the narrator, which at times seems the most likely explanation; Saeed is named specifically twice in this section: once recognizing that white Californians make the most claims to nativeness, and once joining the communal prayer at a new place of worship.

This “one” is a temporary subject who either lacks the current geopolitical context, such as the name and delineation of the U.S. as a nation, or who deliberately ignores it in discourse. That deterritorialization and defamiliarization produces three effects relevant to my examination. Firstly, it calls into question the validity of the current geopolitical borders we know and even delegitimizes them to some degree. A description of the “strip of land” without language of governmental control or acknowledgment of the attendant power structures we automatically associate with the U.S. gives the lie to the idea of the current national order and its borders as natural, automatic, or unchangeable. This language in conjunction with the historical examination of the extermination of indigenous cultures reveals the transitory nature of borders themselves and the questionable nature of their authority.

Secondly, this perspective continues the trend throughout the novel of privileging the city as a discrete geographical and cultural unit, which interrogates and deprivileges the traditional importance of national borders as a way of understanding the world. As in the previous sections, where "Mykonos" and "London" are constantly named as sites for migration, without much mention of Greece or the UK, the emphasis on "Marin" as the site of this section not only establishes the scope of the setting as far as space is concerned, but scope as far as culture and population is concerned – the setting operates conceptually at the level of the city. Even the novel itself begins with the establishing phrase "In a city," after all, although neither the specific city or country are named[16]. In the sixth chapter Saeed and Nadia consider their "departure from the city" (101) – not a departure from the country – and although their destination is identified as "the Greek island of Mykonos" (106), Greece itself is rarely mentioned again. On Mykonos, Nadia and Saeed communicate with other travelers from their own city, "an acquaintance who had made it to Auckland and another who had reached Madrid" (108) as well as a young woman "leaving the contemporary art gallery she worked at in Vienna" (109). Sometimes countries are mentioned in the novel, of course, as in some examples of descriptions above, but clearly cities are privileged as the default identifier for place. The boundaries that usually define identity are called into question.

Often ignoring countries in favor of cities when it comes to setting naming and description creates an understanding of place less tethered to borders and the structural

[16] Most critics who ascribe a real setting assume Pakistan as the location, in part because Hamid has stated his own home city of Lahore in Pakistan served as inspiration for the deliberately unidentified city, but others draw parallels with Aleppo in Syria as well.

identity focalized around nations. This focus narrows perspective to neighbors, to those populations who interact with each other on a regular basis, and emphasizes local concerns: those issues that directly influence daily existence, such as local housing and food supplies. At times the cities – especially the shifting Greek island Mykonos, whose literal island identity also reflects its status as a temporary jumping-off point for many of the world's magical door migrants – seem to resemble city-states, with their own microcosmic political moods and changing populations. Rather than the expansive behemoths of entire nations as units for considering setting, an outlook from the level of the city highlights the connections between individuals more directly – a somewhat subversive examination of kinship I will examine later.

Thirdly, the defamiliarized perspective of this section has the effect of estranging the familiar world to which we are accustomed. This broad view observational narration, perhaps unfamiliar with the colloquial conventions of contemporary human naming and definition – or more to the point *unbeholden* to those conventions – evokes the perspective of an *alien* in every sense of the word.[17] An extraterrestrial, perhaps, would see the North American continent, and the United States specifically, as "the strip of land that stretched from the mid-northern-Pacific to the mid-northern-Atlantic" (197-8), disconnected from the historical, cultural, and governmental implications of place and power. The extraterrestrial is a meaningful connotation here, firmly in place alongside myriad examples of the narrator's science-fictional descriptions of contemporary Earthly

[17] In a more traditionalist paradigm one could also argue the perspective of a deity, but in this case a deity observing with such an unobtrusive lack of investment and such a detached denotational voice that a distinction from "alien" is hard to make.

reality, such as the robots in the middle eastern sky (military drones) and the antennae sniffing out invisible worlds (mobile devices) – even diet soda gets a strangely technical description as a "zero-calorie carbonated beverage" at one point (28)[18].

However, the alien, an extraterrestrial, alone is not enough to fully define or encapsulate this narration mode, of course. The other pertinent connotation here is the alien: an immigrant from a different nation or place. Few people worldwide are unaware of the identity of the North American territory known as the United States. However, the narrator's lack of contextual and colloquial knowledge of terms and general attitudes (such as referring denotatively to "the human beings who had been brought from Africa to this continent centuries ago as slaves" instead of using common terms like African American or engaging with more contemporary race relations issues regarding African Americans in the U.S.) in spite of the narrator's literal and denotative knowledge of history reflects the types of knowledge and lack of context common among immigrants to a new place.

Of course, it would be a unique "one" who brings such an accurate knowledge of global historical movements while lacking basic colloquial contextual knowledge – a perspective that does not align with any specific immigrant. Therefore, the perspective encapsulates the migratory alien and the extraterrestrially alien, an effect of alienness unembodied except perhaps by place or time itself. This effect is temporally global in that the narrative voice concerns itself as immediately with the migrations and populations of

[18] Although elsewhere throughout the novel those defamiliarizing descriptions are kept to a word or phrase, not a sustained historical description.

previous centuries as with those of today. Reminiscent of the narrator's claim at the end of this 10th chapter that "we are all migrants through time," this narrator's perspective is that of one that is alien temporally as well as spatially. This particular estrangement is characterized by its defamiliarization of the realities of the contemporary world. Rather than the "worldbuilding" of SF, the world in the story is our world and it is the perspective upon the world that creates the novel's unique effect, deploying speculative tropes to highlight what is speculative about the present, from the Middle East to Europe to North America.

An important facet of the function of these transposed speculative elements lies in the way *Exit West* defies borders when it comes to kinship. While on Mykonos, Nadia and Saeed live in a stasis of "waiting and false hopes" (113) as their funds and supplies shrink and anti-migrant sentiment grows on the island to the point where a mob chases them back to their dwelling and rumors abound that a the entire migrant settlement might be attacked. When rumors of a new door to a different location circulate, Nadia and Saeed first pin their hopes on an "acquaintance of Saeed's" from their home city who claims to be "a people smuggler," who they encounter in "an almost impossible and happy coincidence" (113). Their shared national history likens them to "two leaves blown from the same tree by a hurricane landing on top of each other far away" (113) and the reunion cheers Saeed in particular – an early sign of the way he will come to privilege and trust other migrants who are like him in geographic origin, culture, and religion. However, after this acquaintance on Mykonos accepts Nadia and Saeed's payment for

transport and promises “he would have them in Sweden by the following morning” (113) he disappears without a trace.

Even though they are only “acquaintances,” Saeed “trusted him and so they stayed where they were for a week” waiting for his return; their shared nationality alone motivates Saeed to believe that his acquaintance has his best interests at heart. While Saeed “preferred for a while to try to believe that something had happened to the man that had prevented him from returning, and when he prayed Saeed prayed not only for the man’s return but also for his safety, until it felt foolish to pray for this man any longer,” Nadia by contrast “knew they had been swindled” (114). When they are able to escape the island, their benefactor comes in the form of “a partly shaved-haired local girl […] a teenager with a kind disposition, not more than eighteen or nineteen years of age” (117) who volunteers at a clinic where Nadia has her arm examined after it’s wounded while fleeing from the anti-migrant mob. As she and Nadia get to know each other, “there was a connection between them, and the girl said she wanted to help Nadia and Saeed” (117-8) – although they don’t share nationality or culture, the connection between them develops more strongly than the connection between Saeed and his countryman: “each day Nadia visited the clinic and she and the girl spoke and sometimes had a coffee or a joint together and the girl seemed so happy to see her” (118). Nadia’s new friend – as unnamed as Saeed’s acquaintance – volunteers to help them leave the island and turns out “as good as her word,” not only finding a door for their escape, without any payment, but delivering them to the door herself.

When she leaves them, “Saeed was surprised to see what appeared to be tears in the girl’s eyes […] and Nadia hugged her too, and this hug lasted a long time, and the girl whispered something to her, whispered, and then she and Saeed turned and stepped through the door” (118). Saeed is both surprised that his own acquaintance would betray them, and surprised that a meaningful kinship could have developed between Nadia and the “local” woman, who is not only not from their country but not a migrant at all – he is deaf to the personal whisper that ties them together. This contrasting viewpoint on kinship between Saeed and Nadia continues into their migration to London, where in the house where they dwell, “Nigerians were initially the largest among many groups of residents” and Nadia becomes “the only obvious non-Nigerian” to attend the meetings of the “council” where the Nigerian residents plan and discuss how to care for the migrants and what actions to take (147). In that diverse group, where Nadia finds out “that the Nigerians were in fact not all Nigerians, some were half Nigerians, or from places that bordered Nigeria, from families that spanned both sides of a border, and further that there was perhaps no such thing as a Nigerian, or certainly no one common thing,” Nadia joins the conversation without “fear that her views could not be comprehended, for her English was like theirs, one among many” dialects and styles of communication. By contrast, Saeed is drawn to “a house known to be a house of people from his country,” where “the familiar languages and accents and the familiar smell of the cooking” as well as the familiar customs of religion make him feel “really accepted” there (151-2). When the migrants’ dwelling comes under siege from xenophobic nativists and even officials, however, it is other locals who protest in their defense and eventually “decency on this

occasion won out, and bravery, for courage is demanded not to attack when afraid" (166). At the same time that nativists threaten and attack the arrived migrants, other local natives feel a kinship to the migrants that motivates them to help and defend people like Nadia and Saeed. Geography and shared cultural history cannot establish a reliable sense of kinship, while personal connection between those with vastly different backgrounds can, calling the value of kinship based on national borders into question.

The speculative in the novel, estranged through the temporally broad viewpoint of the narrator voice, results in a hopeful futurity in part because of these new forms of border-defying kinship which develop over the course of the novel thanks to the magical doors. Near the end of the novel the narrator declares that "it has been said that depression is a failure to imagine a plausible desirable future for oneself" and applies that idea to the city as a character, describing how "the locality around Marin seemed to be rousing itself from a profound and collective low" (217). This characterization is then expanded even more broadly as "in the whole region, in the Bay Area, and in many other places too, places both near and far," the apocalypse is said "to have arrived" (217). In this omniscient overview within a temporally and spatially global perspective, where the novel engages directly with the speculative concerns of futurity and apocalypse, the narrator provides an optimistic gloss of *Exit West*'s narrative events and implications. The apocalypse, we are told, "was not apocalyptic, which is to say that while the changes were jarring they were not the end, and life went on" (217). That "the apocalypse was not apocalyptic" appears on one level a calmingly sententious platitude from a narrative

voice partly defined by longevity, but there is more optimism and potentiality here than simply acceptance.

In fact, not only does life go on but the massive changes wrought by the speculative elements in the otherwise mimetic world actually open possibilities for new and positive futurities: "people found things to do and ways to be and people to be with, and plausible desirable futures began to emerge, unimaginable previously, but not unimaginable now, and the result was something not unlike relief" (217). To the governmental authorities motivated by the enforcement of exclusionary borders and the power structures those borders protect, the appearance of the magic doors signifies a *failure of imagination* – an unforeseeable catastrophe, unpredictable due to its irrealist nature. But for those populations who would have been otherwise banned, suppressed, or nullified, the magic doors are the opposite: an opening of imagination. The unforeseen irrealist developments create new potential and futurity for them.

In *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, Peter Boxall identifies the concept of "futurity" at the heart of what contemporary fiction intends to reveal, as it seeks a new "critical principle" with which to reveal things (17), and devotes his conclusion to conceptions of the post-apocalyptic and decomposition ("no future"). Although he does not examine SF specifically here, my argument would be that SF elements provide the missing vocabulary with which to articulate the contemporary moment, as tropes and paradigms that capture and communicate what mimetic tropes and paradigms are unable to capture or communicate. Like a code-switching of genre, the contemporary works of this new transposed fiction sometimes pull a feature of SF and drop it in a stream of more realistic

narrative the way a bilingual speaker might drop a word or two from one language into another language's sentence when that language's own terms just won't quite do to convey the necessary idea.

In authors' efforts to capture the contemporary, however, speculative elements are deployed more deeply and complexly than simply being dropped in as formal novelties or convenient contrivances of plot. It is fundamental to the nature of these works that speculative elements do not form either a contextual backdrop or a complication only at the level of plot events – as is the case in many long-standing subgenres from throughout history. Instead, these contemporary works focus speculative elements as a way of understanding the social and cultural elements that uniquely define the 21st century reality. In *Exit West*, the deployment of speculative elements provides insight on issues of migration and definitions of territories and communities, but they also reveal the opportunity to progress our conceptions of those ideas.

Throughout the novel there are hints of new kinships and opportunities for populations previously disenfranchised. The very first vignette portraying the experience of a migrant crossing a magic door is a dark-skinned man who due to the "not infrequently perilous circumstances in which he had grown up," was "aware of the fragility of his body," of "how little it took to make a man into meat: the wrong blow, the wrong gunshot, the wrong flick of a blade" (9) who finds an opportunity to escape those perilous circumstances. His passage is portrayed like a birth, coming through with "a final push" and "trembling and sliding to the floor like a newborn foal" (9). This first birth of potential foreshadows the coming births of new futurities.

Chambers recognizes that these scenes "evoke a planetary snarl-up of lives" with a hopeful connective potentiality in a "mostly bleak novel about interactions between white, brown, and black people beyond twenty-first century imperialism" (237), examining how these scenes represent an "attempt to show a common humanity" through the shared experiences of migrancy common to human existence. These scenes add up to more than the sum of their parts. Not only is the connectivity between them the key to their import, but their meaning goes beyond that connectivity *per se*, as important as it is. The ways in which these scenes connect form an outline that reveals more specific concerns. Connecting the dots uncovers the deeper picture beyond the din, not unlike the artistically doctored photographs Hamid alludes to within the novel, in which the impossible transposition of nighttime starscapes over cities that would normally be unable to see stars due to light pollution exposes what is truly there. [19]

In addition to implicitly linking diverse experience with migrancy, these vignettes also hint at a much broader universal change: one focused around the increase in global migration and the shrinking world born of expanding communication technologies, but also one in which less easily concretized paradigms of human perception and behavior shift. There was a time when physical walls could control the flow of populations, more or less, and when the related still-extant policies of nationhood and citizenship made sense – at least as far as fulfilling the intent of the nations who created them. With the loss of those mechanisms' efficacy, however, the meaning and effectiveness of the

[19] Although unnamed in Hamid's novel, Chambers reproduces prints of these photos by Thierry Cohen in her monograph and examines them as a representation of the divided worlds of the global north and the global south.

underlying rules was also lost, and because of the loss of those structures and schemas of power and control, the way people think and act in response to borders, nations, and mobility has also changed. Works like Hamid are an attempt to represent the fundamental changes, which have caused the underlying reality to un-sync from the external rules and expectations.

During the summer in London when "it seemed to Saeed and Nadia that the whole planet was on the move" – immediately after "decency," "bravery," and "courage" wins out against the nativists contemplating an anti-migrant attack – Saeed and Nadia labor in a migrant worker camp, contributing to "clearing terrain and building infrastructure," developing and enhancing their new home city. In return for their work, migrants are promised "forty meters and a pipe" (166-70), a subtle allusion to the United States post-Civil War reconstruction-era promise of forty acres and a mule to freed slaves: a government order that would have provided former slaves with land and self-sufficiency but was never fulfilled. In *Exit West*, the promise refers to "a home on forty square meters of land and a connection to all the utilities of modernity" for migrants who complete enough work (170), and although the allusion calls to mind governmental dishonesty and disenfranchisement, the outlook here is more optimistic: the natives' and migrants' "conflict did not vanish overnight, it persisted and simmered, but reports of its persistence and simmering seemed less than apocalyptic […] Saeed and Nadia had the sense that overall, for most people, in Britain at least, existence went on in tolerable safety" (170). That promise and the establishment of practical plans such as a "time tax"

to reward migrants who had worked the longest with more income and opportunities evoke a hope for progress.

Part of the "great creative flowering" surrounding Marin as it recovers from its "collective low" includes the imagery of "all kinds of ensembles, humans with humans, humans with electronics, dark skin with light skin" – a "new jazz age" that gathers together "different tribes of people" including "tribes that had not existed before" (217-8). Ultimately, in the perspective of the novel's narrator, the world seems to be improving, for the migrants and for the cities, and even generating new forms of kinship and existence.

Although the temporal setting of the novel is never revealed with specific calendar years, the final chapter jumps ahead by "half a century" from the rest of the narrative's events, to a time when Nadia and Saeed are able to return to their home city. Here again the narrator's descriptions operate on the level of the city as a character, "the lives of cities being far more persistent and more gently cyclical than those of people" and the violence that ravaged the "familiar but also unfamiliar" site (229) has passed. They end their conversation by returning to the topic of the starscapes in Latin America they discussed traveling to early in the story, and wondering if "that evening would ever come" when they see those stars together (231). It is not only time that has cleared the way for this meeting in the formerly war-torn country, or for their potential future travel, but the doors; the possibilities made real by those speculative elements allowed refugees like them to escape death in tightly controlled warring nations and allowed populations all around the world to move, change, and grow as they did.

Chapter 4

"His World Now": Cultural Undeath and the Generative Moment in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*

In Colson Whitehead's 2011 novel *Zone One*, the future brings an end to contemporary culture and society as we know it, although some humans remain, seeking to birth new beginnings or reincarnate the lost structures of the past. New York City, the eponymous Zone One, provides the setting for the struggles of the story's survivors, its buildings and bridges still standing in a world largely overrun by the roving, rabid undead known as skels. The rise of the skels provides a straightforward catalyst for the fall of society at large in the novel's catastrophic future, but the truth behind the cultural collapse is more complex. Even ordinary denizens of the contemporary world who have survived into the extrapolated future, like protagonist Mark Spitz, can see the markers of "flatlined" culture that predated the disaster. Hopes for the reestablishment of human society as we know it, predicated on the reconstruction of Zone One and the American system it represents in a project entitled the "American Phoenix" not only fall apart but belie a more sinister ulterior motive. The efforts at reconstruction actually serve as a pretext for the ersatz political leadership in Buffalo, New York to consume surviving resources, exploiting the population at large and indulging in what luxuries and privilege remain.

The narrative of *Zone One* is not only post-apocalyptic but sustained-apocalyptic: the culture of the present was already undead and even where it survives in the future it stagnates. In the actions of its "mediocre" hero Mark Spitz (183), however, the narrative

illuminates a new way forward, which breaks free of the decayed and unjust structures of the past without succumbing to entropy and extinction. The key to this new way of life lies in Mark Spitz's ability to exist completely within the moment: as a free subject with agency, uncaged from the current hierarchies of order and power, Mark reconnects his immediate experience with history. Through this narrative arc, and the thematic valence of its conflict, *Zone One* provides a dynamic example of the way transposed fictions, contemporary narratives that employ the real-world contemporary setting as context while introducing speculative tropes and elements that are explicitly politically salient represent the alienating cultural tenor of the present, and introduce the potential of social change.

In *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present,* Theodore Martin examines a related narrative mode that can help to shed light on how *Zone One* in particular works with both the mundane and the apocalyptically speculative. Martin argues that works that do take place within a science fictional setting subvert the conventions of genre in part by emphasizing those elements still mimetic and recognizable within our current world – those things that have stayed the same. These two modes, stories with speculative elements in a setting that is mundane and contemporary, and stories that take place in a broadly changed science fictional future but defy generic conventions to examine the everyday elements that remain of the present, serve as two sides of the same coin. They provide two ways to estrange contemporary culture by contrasting the absurdity of reality with the strange elements of speculative fiction, rather than entering a fully genre-fied world. However, these modes of

speculative fiction do not only reflect the current situation; they also generate a potentiality for change, highlighting not only the strange in contemporary experience but more acutely the *wrongly* strange: those elements of contemporary culture that work unjustly to exclude, expediently to exploit, disingenuously to deceive, and machine-like to maintain counterproductive structures of power.

In a chapter devoted to postapocalyptic narratives within *Contemporary Drift*, Martin argues that novels like *Zone One* emphasize the mundanity of personal daily experience instead of the jarring world changes that form the context and most of the plot. "The sameness at the heart of survival complicates the speculative power usually accorded to the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction" Martin opines, arguing that "what changes in post-apocalyptic stories is less significant than what stays the same" (162). Resultingly, the "banal regimens of survival" make narratives such as *Zone One*'s "a certain kind of narrative, one committed to endurance and routine – the most basic and repeatable gestures of daily existence – rather than to change" (162). The premise of this formulation makes a lot of sense, and I expand this idea to examine the additional point that those slipstream narratives in which the everyday ostensibly forms the context are best understood by those elements which do *not* stay the same. Subtly, the contexts of both types of story draw attention to those elements that break with expectations, not eliding but finely highlighting juxtaposed aspects.

However, Martin's corollary, that because postapocalyptic narratives like *Zone One* emphasize what has not changed they are not "about" broad change, ignores a key way subtle lack of focus can actually draw attention rather than elide. Martin emphasizes

the way *sameness* in postapocalyptic narratives can sidestep the concerns of social change. By contrast, I argue that foregrounding trappings of commonplace reality – abandoned office equipment, apartment building routines, business casual attire on the undead – creates a strange, alienating, uncanny effect that alludes to just such a potentiality of change. Emphasis of the mundane is not a comfort here but a disconcerting sensation: things are the way we are used to things being, but things are not quite right. Those insights open us to perceive the discomfiting elements in our present, pre-apocalyptic world.

The strangeness that these works invoke revolves around particular concerns of the present: the acceleration of technological development, the increased massification of media and cultural messaging, the encroaching apocalyptic possibilities of climate change, and the relationship of technology and media to ongoing political projects of exploitation and exclusion, especially the efforts to control economic resources and power. Just as drone warfare or military invasion all but demands science-fictional representation and frames of reference, late capitalism and mass culture creates an estranging effect in domestic daily experience within the United States that is subtler but no less encompassing, and that subtlety itself acts as a defining characteristic of the effect, requiring a subtle deployment of generic tropes to evoke. As Fredric Jameson has outlined in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, mass culture and the underlying motivations of the apparatuses of political power result in individual alienation, a disconnection with history, and an inability to exercise personal agency. Exclusion, exploitation, and deceit characterize political motivations and policies within

Zone One, while alienation, demoralization, and disconnection from the processes of power characterize the daily experience of contemporary culture's inhabitants – realities portrayed by the skels, the stragglers, the sweepers, and the representatives in Buffalo within *Zone One*.

Whereas New York City in *Zone One* has been cleared of most "standard-issue skels," those undead which are motivated to move and attack actively, the strange and particular breed of undead known as stragglers remain (Whitehead 60). Mostly immobile, an "army of mannequins," the "malfunctioning stragglers" stand in the poses of ordinary citizens from before the apocalypse, stuck permanently in "a succession of imponderable tableaux" that often involve repetitive gestures from former-world work: a therapist with a "blank attentive face waiting for the patient who was late, ever late," a shoe-store manager "crouched before the foot measuring instrument, frozen, sans customers," a vitamin-store clerk "stalled out among the aisles, depleted among the plenty" (60). In this way, the new world incarnates the concerns that characterize contemporary social and cultural absurdity through its characters (living, dead, and undead), and instantiates the underlying paradigm as a contextual setting to match the speculative elements of its plot. The shoe-store manager and vitamin-store clerk, in their repetitive daily chores peddling the packaged inventory of their employers may have always been professional cogs in a system designed to benefit and empower only those higher in the corporate food chain, but literalizing the zombie-like reality of that soporific, mechanistic behavior reveals its absurdity within the real world devoid of literal zombies. Where slipstream works align less neatly with particular genres, bringing contemporary cultural absurdity to light

through disconcerting estrangement of ordinary daily experience, *Zone One* as a postapocalyptic narrative leverages the tropes and generic conventions Whitehead deploys and repurposes in order to reveal absurd aspects of contemporary culture as postapocalyptic themselves.

This absurdity creates alienation and estrangement for all American subjects but alienation is particularly acute for those who are most excluded from structures of power, including by race and economics, as African American Mark Spitz is, devoid of economic and social privilege. The symbols of borders and boundaries recur within the novel, capturing anxieties of race, class, migration, and invasion as well as the incentivization of exclusion, segregation, prohibition, and omission, both when it comes to resources and people – both of which Buffalo hoards within its borders and keeps away from outsiders relegated to their own Zones. Mark Spitz serves as a tool of the political authority in Buffalo himself, serving as a "sweeper": part of military team made up of former civilians, who patrol the areas of Manhattan more elite teams have already reclaimed from the undead, cleaning up by killing any remaining undiscovered skels and appropriating the economic resources of the area for Buffalo.

When Mark Spitz wonders near the novel's end, "Would the old bigotries be reborn as well, when they cleared out this Zone, and the next, and so on, and they were packed together again, tight and suffocating on top of each other" (288) he recognizes the way the old world's structures created artificial divisions and systems of marginalization, and attributes the (also often artificial) scarcity of space and resources as at least one cause. In fact, he asks outright "Or was that particular bramble of animosities, fears, and

envies impossible to re-create?" (288), evidencing an understanding that the "bramble" was deliberately created by the same powers that "could bring back paperwork" along with "prejudice, parking tickets, and reruns" (288). Not only does Mark recognize the incentivized deployment of racism, he also links it to the mundane realities of the contemporary world's bureaucracy and mass media. Mark was already aware of insidious old world structures and their alienating effect on him, even while in the old world. As Sherryl Vint points out in "Nostalgia Factories for the Human," the characteristics of a massified culture in which "commodity exchange replaced other forms of social interaction" (3) have already alienated Mark to the point of an inability to forge personal relationships and find connection with other subjects. Furthermore, it is inherent in this colonization of the mind that even the most alienated subjects within contemporary structures cling to those structures, searching for stability and protection from the unknown within the structure's walls and borders. Mark Spitz's declaration that "the barricade is the only metaphor left in this mess" speaks in part to his "middle-class inability to believe that he is not exempt from the crisis, to shake the feeling that 'an invisible barrier surrounded his zip code…'" (Vint 5). Even to Mark, when he was part of those structures, claiming and parceling territory and resources was the default mode of thinking. Manhattan's renaming as Zone One only makes overt the domestic segregation that predates the crisis, literalizing the divisions that make different sections of the United States vastly different to live in, zoned out by economics, race, and political leanings among many other factors. The metaphor of barriers also evokes exclusionary policies in immigration and the rejection of international cooperation, even in areas where

cooperation would stave off disaster, such as climate change mitigation. In *Zone One*, continuing to follow that mindset, the government's expediency and selfishness dooms even Buffalo itself. Borders also provide a sense of tangible definition for the dichotomies that drive the deeper conflict within *Zone One*: insider or outsider, believer in the American Phoenix ideology or cynical fatalist, struggling Zone One scavenger or privileged Buffalo citizen, black or white, casualty or survivor. These binaries, however, hide the possibility of other paths: something new can also be forged within the tension between boundaries, and that something new comes from Mark's action and response to the forces acting upon him.

Two primary forces create the new world in which Mark Spitz, the other sweepers, and the myriad ordinary survivors struggle to live their lives, largely powerless and awaiting the end – or in the case of pheenies, as true believers of the American Phoenix mindset are disparagingly called, awaiting the glorious rebirth of the former system of things. The skels make up the defining context of the setting, a force of change so broad and poorly understood that to survivors like Mark the skels may as well be a force of nature itself. In fact, they may be just that since their underlying causes, natural or unnatural, cannot be determined. Even in the ruins, however, human society continues to assert itself and attempt to rise, to "sweep" away the new and recover the resources and structures of the old. That small-scale work is performed in service of a larger ambition, which defines the second major force at play: the government-in-hiding and the privileged population residing in relative comfort within Buffalo – a very different Zone from Zone One, wherein food, drink, and luxuries are available only to those approved by

the governmental authority, even if those luxuries are as simple as the ability to take a shower. In the novel's final acts, representatives from Buffalo arrive in Manhattan to prepare for a world summit of survivors, having successfully lobbied for the opportunity "to show the world the progress made in the mission to rebuild, and revive the systems, standards, and habits of pre-apocalyptic America. "New York City is the greatest city in the world," Buffalo representative Ms. Macy tells Mark Spitz's sweeper team. "Imagine what all those heads of state and ambassadors will feel when they see what we've accomplished. You've accomplished. We brought this place back from the dead. The symbolism alone" (208). Just as these ambitions for the growth of the American Phoenix ramp up, however – "We might even be in Zone Two at that point" (208) – disaster strikes for the reclamation efforts. The formerly harmless stragglers, themselves trapped in the repetition of those routines that the American Phoenix seeks to revive, are themselves revived, leading to an uprising of skels that overruns Manhattan again; Zone One falls. In the wake of this re-apocalyptic wave, Ms. Macy reveals the purely "symbolic" nature of the American Phoenix itself: "They're not going to send out a gunship to clean up a public relations stunt," she admits (311). "This is PR […] It'll be years before we're able to resettle this island. We don't even have food for the winter" (311). For all of its posturing, and all of its demands for resources, the government and its back-looking project of rebirth always lacked the actual progress to back up its propaganda.

Where the skels symbolize a variety of social forces coming to fruition (or necrosis) in daily experience, including the stagnation of purposeless toil in corporate

America, the retaliatory consequences of excluding Othered persons from places of consideration and definitions of the human, and the omnipresent alienation of accepting an absurd 21st century status quo, the self-serving paper tiger of Buffalo represents those agents in positions of power who knowingly and deliberately exploit the majority for short-lived personal power and gain. The paradigms of economic greed, exploitation, and exclusion are too difficult for those in positions of power to abandon even when self-defeating in a post-apocalyptic future. In fact, the truth about Buffalo and the American Phoenix reaches deeper than individual venal motivations: it is *impossible* for those who represent the last vestiges of American power to act in any way different because the structures of American power have evolved to carry out those exploitative purposes, and the only way to access those structures is to pursue those goals, harvesting wealth and excluding others from it.

The tension between these forces is illustrated in the novel's first portrayal of encounter between human and skel. Mark Spitz lets down his guard while carrying out his sweeper duty, cleaning up after more elite military teams' actions, searching and patrolling the city's territory, killing what skels may remain there. Lulled into routine calm by the environment of an ordinary office building – a multivalent symbol of 21st century cultural mundanity – as well as by "pheenie optimism" (Whitehead 16), Mark is ambushed by the skel-converted employees of the corporation's Human Resources department (themselves now appropriated human resources). Described as grotesque and mutated symbols of corporate banality, with the "dark jackets of their sensible dress suits" now "made darker still, and stiffened , by jagged arterial splashes and kernels of

gore" from their previous victims, the "ladies of HR" have not shed the markers of ordinary 21st century life even as they've become monstrous incarnations of the very force that brought that life to an end (Whitehead 16). "The townspeople, of course, were the real monsters," Mark realizes[20] later in his story (245). "It was the business of the plague to reveal our family members, friends, and neighbors as the creatures they had always been" (245). Human culture as we know it was always the largest threat to human society at large. In the skels he combats, Mark Spitz sees beings of his own creation, envisioning "his neighbors, the people he saw every day" within the monsters, all now equalized as they would on a subway ride, "the Wall Street titans" with "junior IT guys," the "executive vice presidents in charge of new product marketing" pressed close "with the luckless and the dreamers" (266-7). The everyday segregation of present-day America, driven by separations of class and economic power, characterizes the monstrosity Mark sees in the vestiges of the past.

As the novel approaches its climax and resolution, the underlying tension between both apocalyptic forces increases and crescendos: just as the skels are about to mount an unexpected, reinforced resurgence, so too are the reinvigorated remnants of the American government. It is no random coincidence that Buffalo's representatives tour the city of New York just as the previously inert contingent of skels known as stragglers rise up to initiate an unstoppable new wave of attack. The constricting presence of Buffalo and its objective to reinstate the fallen structures of the previous world, which dishonestly

[20] A sentiment alluding to the conclusion of Rod Serling's 1960 *The Twilight Zone* episode "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street," in which townspeople suspicious of secret alien infiltration descend into violent chaos, attacking and murdering each other, becoming monstrous even though none of them are actually doppelgangers.

proclaims itself as savior and authority to serve the selfish interests of those safe within the enclaves, and the entropic stream of skels who act as a force of nature to tear it all down, highlight the possibilities of past and future. Neither force acts in the best interests of the human population overall, and neither the *skels* that make up the denotative speculative plot's action nor the insidiously absurd social and political environment in which they arise would function as generators of meaning or as consistent elements of the narrative without each other. They catalyze each other and although they seem initially self-contained, they sustain each other.

The symbols of undead contemporary culture most laden with meaning spend the majority of the story inert: the skels known as "stragglers," who stand non-threateningly in place, repeating a single former-world action typical of their previous lives in the human world, as if stuck within a tableau or a diorama. Entirely frozen or carrying out a brief set of frames indicative of generic existence, they remind the survivors of the human nature that underlies the skel apocalypse, making the mundane strange in the setting of the future just as many slipstream stories do in the setting of the present. Reminiscent of the earlier Human Resources skels, the sweepers later encounter a straggler standing at a copy machine "in the back room of an empty office" so non-descript that there was "no telling what the former enterprise had been" (Whitehead 99). The straggler peers "into the glassed-off guts of the machine, as still as the dust, bent paper clips, overnight-mail packaging, and other assorted leavings in the room," unsettling the sweepers to where they comfort each other by mocking the straggler's disturbing existence, shouting comments like "More toner, stat!" (100). Despite the

"meager amusements" and "vein of humor" in the situation, the sweepers are upset by the sight of stragglers, and seek "mastery over a small corner of the disaster, the cruel enigma that had decimated their lives," represented by these strange subjects.

The undead have often represented the concerns of consumerism and excess in the 20th century vernacular of horror and science fiction[21], mutating the cultural drive to materially consume into personified avatars of ravenous physical consumption, but Whitehead's stragglers complicate that traditional genre signification. The stragglers do not threaten, much less attack, but instead spend the majority of the narrative arc in immobile positions, acting out abject living-dead routines of common work. Rather than instantiated consumption, they suggest a mindless drive to *production*, but a production without aim, self-interest, or self-awareness. Unlike the active skels, which Mark Spitz can imagine as former vice presidents of business, the stragglers live out the daily experience of dreary low-level employees, roles whose tedious efforts are intended to serve corporate interests and profits the employees would never see – at most, the role of a shoe-store "assistant manager" waiting on customers to serve. The stragglers while staying in their roles lack literal mobility, just as in their former lives they labored without with little access to economic mobility. In fact, the stragglers' signaling of immobility marks them as non-threatening, evidenced by the ease with which the sweepers mock their plights. Because of that assumption of docility, the government in Buffalo is surprised and overcome by their surprising revival and uprising. Where zombie attacks often signify the way consumption run amok can lead to the downfall of a society

[21] A trope popularized at least as early as George Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead.*

predicated on excess, the rise of the stragglers implies the way a reliance on a certain oppressed segment of the population for production can lead to as complete a collapse, if the exploited abandon the stasis of their assigned positions.

The fact that the stragglers spend the majority of the narrative frozen in place, also raises the question: stragglers to where? What is the place from which their immobility has kept them back, the place others have potentially reached? The fates of others, death or undeath, provide a surface-level answer. If death or infection were the only ends of importance, however, all of the humans still struggling to survive, fighting the war as Mark Spitz is, would also be "stragglers," holding off their arrival at that destination as long as possible.

The more meaningful destination towards which the frozen are "straggling" is quite simply the end of the world. The end of the world has come, came at least many years before the setting of the novel and its events, and even though the human characters of the narrative did not realize it at the time, they experienced the end and were changed by it. By pantomiming the processes of life that characterized the former world, the stragglers are holding on to the former structures, much like Mark still holds on at this point in the story. Only through the speculative lens of the collapsed world and its strange new inhabitants can the truth of our living-dead culture be made visible with such immediacy.

Mark, however, shows signs of his eventual awakening. Even without consciously drawing the conclusion that the world as it was had ended, Mark knew and contemplated the way he was more at home in the new system of things than he had ever been in the

old one. Mark Spitz "was a mediocre man. He had led a mediocre life exceptional only in the magnitude of its unexceptionality. Now the world was mediocre, rendering him perfect" (Whitehead 183). Whether or not it is truly because of his "mediocrity," those who like Mark Spitz are able to survive within the new world do so because they are "perfect" for it. "And what had the plague exposed him to be?" Marks Spitz asks himself (Whitehead 245). "Mark Spitz endured as the race was killed off one by one. A part of him thrived on the end of the world. How else to explain it: He had a knack for apocalypse [….] I've always been like this. Now I'm more me" (245). After the skel disaster, Mark Spitz and those like him enter a world they are better equipped for precisely because they were never included in the upper levels of the former world's hierarchies of power, never profited greatly from the supporting structures of exploitation.

Not only have the straggler skels not been awake to experience what came after the world's end, the very actions and environments within which they are frozen characterize as perfectly as a portrait the processes, people, and paradigms that characterized the previous world. They are literally stuck in a tableau from the past, subjects (or objects) in a historical diorama maintained unchanged like a time capsule sent forward: a naturally occurring museum exhibit of the past, curated by the infection. When the stragglers begin to awaken, the last remnants of the previous world come to an end – perhaps only reminders and not even remnants, since without taking any action, they could only evoke memories of the former things and not provide them with substance, life, or durability.

In the presence of stragglers, Mark and the other sweepers can't help but contemplate, "How did the copy boy, or copy repairman, or toner fetishist end up here?" (101). It frightens Mark most of all to consider that the copy boy could have "no connection to this place, that this fourth-floor office was simply where he broke down," and "if his presence here was random, then why not an entire world governed by randomness, with all that implied?" (101). Even as the "assorted leavings" of the cultural system previously in place loom over the skel disaster hauntingly, they also tellingly provide a sense of order and meaning to which the human survivors can't help but cling, since the idea that the stragglers could come to signify a complete anarchic breakdown and overthrow of human cultural systems is more terrifying – a possibility that eventually turns out to come true. Even though the stragglers represent the repetitive labor of the American working class in a system designed to exploit their work with little reward, an obviously unproductive state of affairs for all those not positioned at the top of the hierarchy, the possibility of having no structure at all – the idea that the stragglers are not serving any goal, even an exploitative one – is too frightening for Mark to bear. The familiarity and stability of an abusive system is still more desirable than chaos or radical change to Mark at this point, and that clinging to the past is what holds Mark Spitz back from the potentiality of a new way and a new world – for the time being. Mark's aversion to the stragglers illustrates his commitment to that "sameness" in the apocalyptic that Martin examines in *Contemporary Drift*, but his arc as a dynamic character comes to its conclusion when at the novel's conclusion Mark not only abandons a desire for the sameness of the old structures but also enthusiastically commits to the creation of the new

– even though it means diving into that randomness he has been conditioned to fear through his lifetime in contemporary pre-apocalyptic culture.

Not all humans – or even most humans – are able to eventually make that leap. Notably, many characters who are unable to separate their own lives from the structures of the past and the ways of the old world were not profiting greatly from those structures, and are not seeking to exploit others for their own gain. Their acculturation was simply too strongly internalized to allow them to imagine a new future – in a way, they are evidence that the processes of control leveraged against them were working as advertised. As reflected in Mark's terror at the idea that the stragglers could work untethered to the familiar, exploitative system, the humans unable to believe in a different future are evidencing the "self-fulfilling prophecy" of "reflexive impotence" (21) that Mark Fisher describes as a key ingredient of contemporary capitalism and neoliberalism in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* That members of an exploited and disenfranchised element of the population "appear to eb politically disengaged" and "resigned to their fate," Fisher posits, is "a matter not of apathy, nor of cynicism" but rather a certain belief in their own powerlessness, which leads to an "immobility" that reinforces that powerlessness (21). Those people "know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it" (21). Even if they are too canny to believe in the American Phoenix, the resigned in *Zone One* can't believe in anything else either. Mark Spitz's Lieutenant, who appears to be most insightfully attuned to the "absurdity" with

which China Miéville defines the sociopolitical tenor of the present,[22] provides an example of just such a subject, and his paradigm brings into relief those subtle differences that do allow Mark Spitz to imagine the new.

Throughout the novel, the Lieutenant expresses a yearning to belong within the former world as the straggler skels do. The stragglers "know what they're doing," the Lieutenant declares, admiring their "verve" and "sense of purpose" (Whitehead 196) – statements with irony, certainly, but belying truthful sadness and envy as well. By contrast, the living humans are plagued by "fear and danger" and "the memories of all the ones you've lost" (196). The Lieutenant does not appear ignorant of the fact that fear serves as evidence of the desire to survive, that the motivation to escape from danger is a marker of hope for survival. Lacking feelings of fear and danger would be an indication of surrender in the postapocalyptic situation of the novel. Considering the Lieutenant's end, his envy of the stragglers belies just such a surrender: not all humans have the drive to forge a new path, as Mark Spitz eventually does. At least in part, it is Mark Spitz's "mediocre" and alienated position in the old world that allows him to bring that new path to fruition. Unlike those in positions of wealth or power, whose investment in the social and economic structures that supported their success would lead to an investment in those structures' reconstruction, Mark's distance from wealth and power forges the ambivalence towards the old world that eventually empowers his movement forward.

[22] I provide a contextual framing for this quote from Miéville in the introduction, and a further discussion of absurdity using Mark Bould's related analyses in the following chapter on *Oscar Wao*.

The fate of a regular skel is no better than the fate of humanity in the Lieutenant's view: "they're all messed up," he comments, but by contrast "your straggler doesn't have any of that. It's always inhabiting its perfect moment. They've found it – where they belong" (196). The place they belong is encapsulated in that frozen tableau which each straggler repeats, but more importantly the place they belong is the old world, and without the wherewithal to realize the situation around them has changed, the stragglers get to remain. Although wistful for that old world, the Lieutenant either recognizes that most humans didn't doesn't seem to truly belong even there, or he believes that humans were generally fated to follow the comfort of the old world's self-defeating cultural habits and systems, gradually falling prey to environmental collapse or the eventually disastrous effects of resource exploitation and economic inequality rather than the terror of radical change.

After the Lieutenant commits suicide, Mark recalls the last conversation they shared, in which the Lieutenant revealed his belief in the inevitability, and even justice, of the skel plague. "Nature, if you have to call it something," the Lieutenant explains (Whitehead 270). The plague is "correcting an imbalance. It kicks us out of our robotic routine, what they called my dad before we pulled the plug: persistent vegetative state. Comeuppance for a flatlined culture" (270). The Lieutenant recognizes the dead state of the old world, and makes explicit here his cognizance that the old world's death came before the skel plague. Although its external appearances remained, like the physical body of a comatose person, and the daily routines remained, like the autonomic processes of a body without conscious direction, the cultural system was already internally

flatlined, vegetative. Rather than arriving only to "pull the plug," however, the Lieutenant's words imply the potential of revival or at least the creation of something new in the arrival of the skels: they kick the population from its routine, diction with the connotation of awakening and reanimation.

The Lieutenant himself, however, never carried that idea to a generative conclusion. It may be the sweepers are carrying out a "vital enterprise," he allows, but it may also be their work is only that of "butchers scraping off the gone-bad bits off the meat and putting it back under the glass" (Whitehead 270). Implying a similarity between skels and humans, the Lieutenant asks, "You know why they walk around? They walk around because they're too stupid to know they're dead" (270). Mark Spitz counters, "I'm here because there's something worth bringing back" (270), which the Lieutenant interprets as a regressive desire to re-establish that very vegetative culture which nature had corrected. "That's straggler thinking," is the Lieutenant's only rejoinder before changing the subject (271). Although he envies straggler thinking, the Lieutenant knows there is no path forward in it. Just as the stragglers while remaining in the tableaux of their monotonous labor have no path forward, the systems and positions of the old world contained no potential of growth, liberation, or progress for those who, like Mark, inhabited a marginalized position due to factors of class, race, or upbringing. The old world is worth bringing back only for those who the old world was designed to benefit – such as the privileged leaders in Buffalo. Ultimately, the Lieutenant is correct in this conclusion; only when Mark abandons a desire to bring something back, at the novel's end, is he able to find something new.

It is never clear if the Lieutenant was aware that the authorities in Buffalo were lying about the level of progress and control they claimed to have, and the productive plans of hopeful reconstruction they espoused to soldiers like Mark and the regular population, but even in their promises he never saw the inspiration of real hope. In terms of the negative effect on the human survivors, the farce of fake hope and leadership – the "American Phoenix" ideology – is an absurdity just as harmful as the encroaching threat of the rising skels. Suicide is logical for this world in the Lieutenant's thinking, even as it is an affront to the American Phoenix. When the Lieutenant ends his life, he is refusing to continue being a part of the new world but he is just as strongly rejecting the possibility of returning to the old – he turns his back on the American Phoenix as much as he does the skels. To affront the American Phoenix is logical for this world, which has shed the sociopolitical structures that the ideology of the American Phoenix supported. In spite of the de facto authority's attempt to exercise the same strategies of power, deception, and control that were successful in the previous world, the American Phoenix ends in failure. Not only does the American Phoenix lack the structures of the old world that would facilitate the government's reclamation and continued hold on power, but in the ideologically blanker slate that the apocalypse has wrought, the American Phoenix is revealed plainly as untenable: the absurdity privileging of corporate sponsorship and public relations over human survival is laid bare. In the clarity of the final estimation, Mark Spitz comes to the realization that the world isn't ending – it ended long ago. He and the rest of the population are beyond the end of the world. The only meaningful

struggle was never about preservation or recovery, but about what could be imagined past the end.

On the surface, post-apocalypse appears to restrict potentialities for futurity. In "Against the Post-Apocalyptic: Narrative Closure in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*," Leif Sorensen frames the novel itself as "a metafictional reflection on apocalyptic narrative conventions, particularly the question of ending," pointing to "the pervasiveness of futurism in political and economic discourses and a heightened sense of the precariousness of human existence" as the dual issues that infuse the issue of ending with such "fraught" importance in contemporary American literature (559). Ultimately, Sorensen argues, the contemporary context of *Zone One*'s publication sheds light on how the narrative explores "the unthinkable possibility of a crisis so severe that it might not have a future at all" (560). It is precisely the case that these dual issues come to a head at the ending of the novel; however, I would argue that it is the explicit crisis of the plot – the rise of the skels – which at the end, combined with the fall of the American Phoenix, create the conditions for a new kind of future. Sorensen posits incisively that "the question at the forefront of the narrative is, Can the survivors succeed in their efforts to banish the zombie plague and clear the ground for a return to normalcy, or is coexistence with the zombie plague the new normal?" where "the return to normalcy is the promise of the American Phoenix," but neglects the possibility of a third result: neither the acceptance of the way things are (contemporaneity), nor a return to the way things were (history), but the embrace of a wholly new way (futurity).

Similarly contemplating the potential of a crisis with no future that Sorensen describes, Kate Marshall addresses the "alternative form of historical periodization" that *Zone One* proposes, including "an alternative to the ecological narrative set instead within a vision of the only recently available conceptual apparatus of the Anthropocene" in her article "What are the Novels of the Anthropocene?: American Fiction in Geological Time" (530). Through the possibility of a futurity without humans, Marshall describes, the novel "requires thinking proleptically, or registering a future point of view in which the material stratum of the human is no longer that which is the most recent" (532).

The structures of organized human government have collapsed, the leaders and soldiers of New York killed or scattered, and with them the paradigm of progress and reconstruction has its fake premise revealed and demolished. A new world is generated as the old one ends, this time one in which "the dead" form with their violently reanimated bodies an "invisible current" in the streams of New York's thoroughfares, a unified emblematic image of forward movement, of geological features become urban, dead and alive at once in multiple ways. "This time we cannot delude ourselves that we will make it out alive," Mark thinks in the tension of the moment; now "it was happening again: the end of the world" (318). Yet, as he did the previous times the world came to an end, Mark Spitz comes alive. Post-apocalyptic conditions obviously reduce the odds of individual survival, but they also open avenues for creation, removing the structures that contained and restricted divergent thinking.

In fact, Mark Spitz not only survives – at least temporarily – he is reborn, and pioneers a new paradigm. The first time Mark Spitz faced a great river, he earned his name: the identity and version of himself which has fought and survived in the new world all these years. His trapped group overwhelmed by the approaching skels on a highway bridge, the other members of Mark's group dive into the water to escape – a relatively safe 20-foot drop from which they all emerge alive. Only Mark refuses to take advantage of this escape route, posting up instead on the hood of a station wagon and performing the violently virtuosic feat of single-handedly holding off the entire encroaching wave: "He could not die" (Whitehead 182). In that moment, his acuity for survival within the new world becomes known to him. "This was his world now, in all its sublime crumminess, where intellect and ingenuity and talent were as equally meaningless as stubbornness, cowardice, and stupidity" (182). The characteristics of "mediocrity" in the particular skills that separated the successful from the unsuccessful in the previous world here make him the paragon of human success, in the world created new. He is so well outfitted for survival in this world that the truth of which he once only "had suspicions" is now confidently asserted three times: "He could not die" (183). He was "always like this," has not changed, but the world has changed, and because of external change he knows, "Now I am more me" (183). It was in this situation that "I was finally complete, in a way," Mark describes at the beginning of telling the story (Whitehead 177). Though Mark did nothing but act as he always would have acted, the environment had become one in which Mark was exactly who he needed to be.

The name of Mark Spitz – the only one by which he is identified throughout the novel – is assigned both in admiration and in irony. The original Mark Spitz, a champion swimmer with multiple world records and Olympic gold medal wins in the 1960s and 1970s, makes for a poor literal analogue to *Zone One*'s Mark Spitz. In the attribution, sweeper Mark Spitz becomes a black man with a white man's name, someone who refuses to take a leap into the water at a crucial moment hailed as an accomplished swimmer, both of which he references when he explains his name to Gary in the novel's final chapter: "Plus the black-people-can't-swim thing [….] I can. A lot of us can. Could. It's a stereotype" (287). In those contradictions, Mark Spitz is eventually able to forge his own identity, embracing a new role and position with neither the familiarity of his former self nor a surrender to the chaos around him. Just as neither the solid foundation of mimetic realism nor submersion in a fully realized new world of fantasy or science fiction capture contemporary experience alone, the most revelatory conclusions are born of holding the incompatible dichotomies in tension.

Faced at the end of the novel with the seemingly unending river of skels, he cannot post up on a station wagon and pick them off. Instead, the enaction of his personality this time is to enter the river. With relative calm, he thinks, "You have to learn how to swim sometime" before opening the door and walking "into the sea of the dead" (Whitehead 322). Mark Spitz's decision to "swim" through the mass of skels is not a choice likely to sustain long-term survival, but it is a choice wholly unlike that of the Lieutenant's suicide. Mark Spitz does not turn his back on anything; he faces the new world head-on and dives. If it is inherent in the reality of the new world that humans like

Mark Spitz, or humans in general, cannot survive, then those new rules will assert themselves on him as they must, but he does not seek to run or hide. Mark is not surrendering himself to death, even as he is willing to accept it, and his action – at least momentarily – is not fatalistic but generative. When he considers the possibility of swimming through the river of "creatures," he thinks of it as "a funny notion, the most ridiculous idea" but not one of capitulation. Mark earnestly intends to attempt the feat. "He needed every second, regardless of his unrivaled mediocrity and the advantages this adaptation conferred in a mediocre world" (322). The same way that survival seems impossible here, it seemed impossible the first time Mark Spitz faced the river, when he earned his name: "No way Mark Spitz was going to be able to get past them" then; in fact, "It was impossible" (182). It is in just such an impossible situation that Mark discovers the way he is outfitted for the world he inhabits, that it becomes "his world" (182).

The "future point of view that by its very constitution must be nonhuman, or at least postterrestrial" which Marshall elucidates (533) is not newly engendered at the end of the novel, with its reanimation of the Stragglers and overrun of New York. This point of view came about, made sense, and was necessary at least as far back as the spread of the original contagion and rise of the skels in the first place. Arguably it was already the point of view that made sense before the skels arrived at all, in the period of comatose culture when humans walked around like skels because they had not yet realized how dead they were, as the Lieutenant describes. In the words of Gary, one of the other sweepers under the Lieutenant,

> The dead had paid their mortgages on time, and placed the well-promoted breakfast cereals on the table [….] The dead had graduated with admirable GPAs configured monthly contributions to worthy causes, judiciously apportioned their 401(k)s across diverse sectors according to the wisdom of their dead licensed financial advisers, and superimposed the broders of the good school districts on mental maps of the neighborhoods. (31)

Their only reward for their assiduous assent to the way things were was more of the same, the paperwork, parking tickets, and prejudice which they were used to (288). Always in these periods, the conditions for the possibility of change were present – the processes of the end of the world lay in wait, and along with them the ingredients and characteristics of the birth of the next world. Undeniably, this progression has led to worlds progressively less hospitable to the continued existence of humans. However, each progression of the world has also dismantled those structures that made up the "flatlined" culture, inherently making space for the rise of a different and potentially less moribund and restricted culture, the way controlled and uncontrolled burns both make space for new vegetation and wildlife.

As for the stragglers, they were not merely straggling behind on the way to death after all, and the end of the world towards which they were straggling was also a radical shift that to skels like them would mean reanimation. Terms like rejuvenation or reinvigoration come to mind, although they also seem inappropriate in connotation given the undead nature of the subjects. However, their unified action and vitality, and the description of their flowing movement as a river connote liveliness in the text: the

stragglers “bobbed in their invisible current,” the “ruthless chaos of existence made flesh” (321). The undead are far from dead. “These were not the Lietuenant’s stragglers, transfixed by their perfect moments, clawing through to some long-gone version of themselves that existed only as its ghost” (321). Like they characterized the elements of the former human world which by “nature” needed changing when they stood frozen in their diorama incarnations, the stragglers now illustrate the shift that has occurred, the next incarnation of the world as a whole, which is one without those trappings of human culture from before. However, that does not necessarily preclude humans from entering the next iteration.

What is that iteration when it comes to Mark Spitz, when it comes to the humans who survive? What is the new way - what is the next thing? At the story’s end, Mark Spitz stands poised between society and skel, ready to dive in and swim without an obvious long-term goal. He has neither adopted the mindset of pheenie optimism or similar idealism, nor surrendered to apathy or hopelessness towards the way things are. Rather, he girds himself for the swim itself, for the action, for the moment – for life, as he did on the bridge, and this instinct is what has made him the ideal new human for the far-from-ideal new world. Holding on to the old – as the doomed representatives of Buffalo intended – is a fruitless endeavor. Something new must be created if survival will be tenable – even if the new is left undefined, the necessity of the new is made undeniable.

Neither binary choices of the dichotomies will do. Those who hoped to rebuild civilization as it was believed in the phoenix rising from ashes, and many – unlike those in Buffalo’s highest positions of power – held this hope sincerely. But the dominant

image of the world as it has been reshaped is not of fire and ashes; to Mark Spitz, it is water. His nickname, in absence of the given names of the past world which no longer carry any importance or supporting structures, and in his case is never revealed, has become his identity. Ultimately this characterizes the way Mark Spitz moves through the world: he is ready at the conclusion of the novel to breach the waves, to address what exists in the moment and fight in that visceral ongoing moment for survival and self-definition.

The world has become fluid, liquid now, lacking the solid and ossified structures of the former sociopolitical landscape. In that ocean the American Phoenix was a false start: it cannot rise from water; it was always already extinguished in the material of the new world, where even its ashes don't have the scaffolds to cohere. Although Mark dismisses him at the time, a fellow survivor's declaration that "the dead came to scrub the Earth of capitalism and the vast bourgeois superstructure, with its doilies, helicopter parenting, and streaming video" (Whitehead 153) is technically correct: the dead may not have had a deliberate purpose, but they certainly accomplished this goal. The world is fluid, liquid, because the end has already occurred, whether or not it was noticed at the time. Entropy and chaos, although by themselves no more conducive to the survival of ordinary subjects like Mark Spitz, have done away with the longstanding hierarchies and mechanisms of power. Notably, however, Mark Spitz came alive not in the water itself but on the bridge – his refusal to jump into the water led to his ironic renaming. By refusing to give in to the water of the new completely, Mark overcame the overwhelming

odds and became himself. The new way of being is neither the phoenix nor the ocean, but the relentless action on the bridge.

At the novel's end, Mark has no choice but to swim. The new has become too overwhelming to remain on the bridge. Even the previously powerless and stagnant – the force of the stragglers – has been mobilized. It is *action* once more, however, agency of the moment, that lights the way forward. Action on a daily basis – on a minute basis, on a second basis – had grown alienating, disconnected from broader realities. The stragglers with their frozen positions at trappings of stagnant modern life, such as office equipment and party favors, served as warning but so did the active skels, ravenous and relentless in similar trappings – such as the ladies of the office, which Mark encounters at the novel's beginning. The movement of the skels and the physical realities of the offices and the city itself, including the exploitation of resources by Buffalo, drive home the importance of materiality and embodiment. Embodiment and materiality does not matter only in spaces, however, but also in *time*: it is the action of instants, of moment-to-moment reality that will make the difference in forging the new world. For human of the future Mark Spitz as he stood on the bridge, and for him as he ultimately dives into the onslaught of the skels, daily reality is no longer disconnected from history. The alienating structures of our contemporary reality, with all their broad stratified and ossified systems and apparatuses, have crumbled beneath the water line. It is also no coincidence that Mark Spitz symbolically defies the artificial stereotypes assigned to his racial identity when he decides to swim. Explaining the irony of his name near the conclusion of the novel, Mark explains he "was anything but an Olympian" like his namesake, "plus the black-people-

can't swim thing" (287). "You have to learn how to swim sometimes," he is told, and replies at the time "I tread water perfectly" (287) – but this attitude is shed.

Rather than only emphasizing what stays the same as Martin argues regarding post-apocalyptic narratives in *Contemporary Drift*, the immediate reality of survival and action within *Zone One* forms the basis of what can change – of the conditions necessary for change. The Lieutenant envied the straggler, who was "always inhabiting its perfect moment," always present where it belongs, but he could not conceptualize the same existence for himself. Mark Spitz does. He finds the way to inhabit his moment. Mark Fisher in *Capitalist Realism* expands on the idea "that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" by noting that "once, dystopian films and novels were exercises in such acts of imagination" (2) but that in the "deeper, far more pervasive, sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility" (7) these acts of imagination grow rarer. Mark Spitz's truly transformative and generative achievement lies in his eventual ability to dive into just such an imagination of the moment, overcoming exhaustion with action. For the first time in modernity, the ordinary and perfectly average human subject is completely aware of, and exactly in sync with, the realities of his own existence in society, culture, and the world – freed from the structures of control intended to restrict subjective agency at large. Daily reality has been recaptured and, whether it means life or death, that realignment means that however different, strange, outlandish the experience is compared to what came before, daily experience is no longer absurd. It is in the possibility of dismantling those artificial constructs which uphold structures of power exclusion that works which bring the speculative into a

mimetic setting, or the mundane into a divergent future, like *Zone One,* show what has stayed the same in a wildly different future in order to highlight how change is possible in our present. The bridge was a site for Mark Spitz to recognize and inhabit the contradictions that made him the ideal candidate for survival in the interim period between the old world was a new, and forays into the new style that *Zone One* exemplifies, which transposes the futurist and fabulist into the routine, and emphasize the familiar in the apocalyptic, similarly serve as a bridge between speculative fiction and realistic mainstream fiction. Their perspective makes visible the potential for diving into a new mode, formally and generically, as well as the potential for setting out towards new social, political, and cultural configurations.

Chapter 5

"An Extraordinary Tolerance for Extreme Phenomena": The Speculative as Voice and Resistance in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Junot Diaz's 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* recounts the story of three generations of the Cabral family, from Dr. Abelard Cabral and his wife Socorro in the Dominican Republic in the middle of the 20th century to their orphaned daughter Belicia, raised by her aunt La Inca, to Belicia's children Lola and Oscar (nicknamed "Oscar Wao" for a supposed resemblance to Oscar Wilde), who are both raised in Paterson, New Jersey in a time period close to the novel's publication date. All three generations are decimated and traumatized by the violence of Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo's regime, known as the Trujillato, and by the corrupt government engendered by his rule and left in his wake. Their story is told by Yunior, a sometimes love interest of Lola's, and a friend and roommate to Oscar at Rutgers University in the 1980s, who shares with Oscar a love for creative writing and speculative fiction as well as sharing the Cabral family's Dominican heritage; eventually, he is motivated to tell the tale out of guilt for failing to prevent Oscar's death. Yunior as a meta-aware and self-inserting narrator crafts a sweeping narrative that not only covers generations of the Cabral family's history but also major parts of the tumultuous and authoritarian history of the Dominican Republic, and inserts into both the elements and tropes of speculative fiction.

As Yunior explains the corrupt and violent political context in which these three generations of Cabral lived, the senselessness of their their tragedies and deaths becomes clearer and clearer. Although the Cabrals themselves never insert themselves in political causes – in fact, Abelard makes deliberate attempts to avoid overtly political conversation in order to protect his family from retribution - they are ultimately doomed by the whims and totalitarian power of politically connected figures. This power is directly tied to the influence of wealthy nations in the Global North, and explicitly to the military intervention of the United States. Yunior engages with this real-world history in footnotes, allusions, and the insertion of historical figures within the narrative, but his transpositions of the speculative serve as an attempt to make sense of the tragedies of the Trujillo regime and its successors, as its unjustifiable, sometimes inexplicable violence and strange, haunting qualities are revealed throughout the novel.

In part, Yunior is motivated by the desire to provide meaning and heroic purpose to the sacrifice of his friend, Oscar. In the final movement of the novel, Oscar – the youngest Cabral in the novel, and a character constantly defined by his failure in romantic relationships, finally finds love but falls into the familiar family pattern of conflict with powerful figures of the Dominican government: although his feelings are reciprocated by his love interest, Ybón, whom he meets while visiting the Dominican Republic, she is trapped in an abusive relationship with a politically-connected police captain known as the Capitán who has Oscar beaten and forces his separation from Ybón and from the Dominican Republic back to the United States, driving Oscar to depression and a suicide attempt. Eventually, Oscar decides to return to the Dominican Republic and

continue his relationship with Ybón, well aware of the consequences, and he is killed by the Capitán's men. This event traumatizes Yunior, who sometimes supported but sometimes ignored and belittled his friend Oscar out of self-interest and the erstwhile desire to distance himself from his own "geeky" interests, which he saw reflected in Oscar, in favor of more normative machismo. Yunior hopes in the act of storytelling to recover a connection with Oscar and to affirm meaning in the loss of his friend. However, Yunior's regular engagement with a history of far-reaching political corruption and foreign interventionism go far beyond his personal narrative – they illuminate the potentiality of imagination and writing for revolution and optimistic futurity in a much broader scope.

The cultural reception that surrounded the release of the novel emphasized its engagement with generic boundaries and tropes while avoiding specificity, praising the novel's approach to a variety of conventions without yet identifying quite what that approach exactly was. "Diaz's acrobatic prose toggles artfully between realities," declared Adam Mansbach in his *Boston Globe* review, tellingly titled "World of 'Wao' Contains Multitudes." *Oscar Wao* is "drenched" in the "rhythms of the real world" and also "laced with magical realism and classic fantasy stories," recognized Carol Memmott in *USA Today* while Bill Broun in *The Times Literary Supplement* acknowledged its "variety of polyglot discourses and jumbled geographies," all correctly recognizing the way a dissolution of boundaries broadly drove the unique energy of the novel's themes. Generally, these early popular reviews' scope understandably sidesteps the intent or detailed qualities of this jumbling of realities and discourses. In her *LA Times* review, "A

Love Supreme," Susan Straight does pronounce the novel "impossible to categorize, which is a good thing," declaring forms like "the epic novel, the domestic novel, the social novel, the historical novel and the 'language novel'" as well as "the Great American Novel and the immigrant novel" all "pretty reductive." The novel, instead, is "a hell of a book" because it "doesn't care about categories." In the years since *Oscar Wao*'s release, analyses of these forms, traditions, and the perforated boundaries between them have explored strategies of subversion and control toward history, storytelling, and identity within the larger contexts of postmodern structure, political resistance, and genre, but consistently characterize the novel as engaging with discrete traditions and forms at different times, rather than as a new and generative combination unique to the contemporary moment.

Although the novel maintains a plausibly real-world setting in the majority of its storytelling, and especially at the beginning of the narrative, before the tragic conflicts that befall Oscar's family take center stage within the story, the introduction of the novel highlights the themes of the speculative mode which will underpin the story as it goes on. Immediately, the novel presents a context of reality that combines Dominican folk beliefs with speculative imagination. The very first subject at the opening of the novel is the fukú, or curse – a "Curse and the Doom of the New World" that looms over the entirety of the Dominican Republic and its people - a curse that Yunior theorizes might have brought the fear and death of the Trujillato into being (1).

The fukú is personal as well as national, however, and in the words of Yunior, "the fukú ain't just ancient history, a ghost story from the past with no power to scare"

(Diaz 2). Rather, “in my parents’ day the *fukú* was real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in” and “everybody knew someone who’d been eaten by a *fukú*” (2). The epicenter of *fukú*, at least in the time period with which the novel concerns itself, lay in Trujillo himself, whose oppressive and violent rule serves as the everyday incarnation of the supernatural curse - or alternately, the curse serves as a supernatural incarnation of his rule: “If you even thought a bad thing about Trujillo, *fua*, a hurricane would sweep your family out to sea” (3). This superstition turns out to be true, whether by supernatural means or not, as the members of Oscar’s family, along with a long list of those in the general population who oppose Trujillo’s rule, or are merely deemed an inconvenience to it, are scattered, hurt, or killed. Fukú in general is tied to a variety of historical contexts related to European colonization and subjugation: “They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles” (1). Fukú was born when “the Doom of the New World” arrived, and “the Admiral [Christopher Columbus] was both its midwife and one of its great European victims” (1). Therefore, fukú “was in the air” but during Trujillo’s regime the fukú found in the Dominican Republic “a high priest, you could say” – in fact “no one [knew] whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master, its agent or its principal, so that “anyone who plotted against Trujillo would incur a fukú most powerful, down to the seventh generation and beyond” (1-3). In historical sidenotes, Yunior provides the real-world context that precipitated this belief.

"The Reign of Trujillo was not the best time to be a lover of Ideas, not the best time to be engaging in partlor debate, to be hosting tertulias, to be doing anything out of the ordinary" (214) because of the totalitarian repression that characterized his rule. Trujillo "came to control nearly every aspect of the DR's political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror; treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master" (2fn), but his rule was strange as well as terrible. In Yunior's words he was "so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up" (2fn) – one of the early indications of the way that only the speculative will serve to capture the extent of the surreality of life within the story. The outlandish doings attributed to Trujillo include renaming all of the nation's landmarks to honor himself, sex with the wives and daughters of his subordinates, with or without their consent, and large-scale atrocities including "the 1937 genocide" perpetrated on Haitians, all – importantly – as "one of the longest, most damaging U.S.-backed dictatorships in the Western Hemisphere" (2fn). In this aside and many others, the strangeness and outlandishness of Trujillo's atrocities – the qualities that invoke the speculative – are linked with his connections to the United States.

This strangeness, and the importance of U.S. backing, is reflected in the suffering of the novel's fictional main characters. "It's a well-documented fact," Yunior explains, "that in Trujillo's DR [Dominican Republic] if you were of a certain class and you put your cute daughter anywhere near El Jefe," it was accepted even by "hombres de calidad y posición [men of quality and high position]" that they could be raped at the dictator's

whim (216-9). Abelard's attempts to shield his daughter from these dangers lead to his death and the death of his wife – a wildly unnecessary set of deaths born from the capriciousness of one man's sexual whims.[23] Due to the dystopian surveillance, corruption, and fear of violence in the everyday life of the Trujillo regime, Abelard confides in only his closest friends and families his fears – in one instance, to his friend Marcus while relatively safe in a car, "cruising back to La Vega on one of the old Marine Occupation roads" (220): a casual reference to the multiple occupations of the Dominican Republic by United States Marines throughout the 20th century. Abelard's actions and death begin the manifestation of fukú for the Cabral family in specific, and the violence that befalls them, both in the Dominican Republic and the United States, is often tied to the political entanglements between the two nations. Beli Cabral's Trujillo-aligned enforcer boyfriend the Gangster harbors love for Miami and often visits; Oscar's antagonist the Capitán, like Oscar, is a United States citizen – a symbol of power and a tool of convenience for his violence and retribution against the regime. This international collusion forms a background for much of the strange and surreal qualities of the political violence and repression that underpins the story – a well-worn system of roads down which the characters travel.

As the second half of this chapter explores, Yunior shares the senseless deaths of real-life figures who crossed the Trujillo regime like journalist Orlando Martínez Howley and scholar Jesús de Galíndez throughout the novel alongside the account of the Cabral

[23] Within the narrative, rumor has it that it was an ill-conceived joke Abelard made which offended Trujillo that led to Abelard's death. This "explanation" for Abelard's murder is unlikely, but if anything would highlight the absurdity of Trujillo's capricious violence even more.

family. Notably, Yunior also detours to explore the antagonists of this historical story: high-ranking Trujillo lieutenants like Johnny Abbes, Joaquín Balaguer, and Felix Bernardino. He pays particular attention to Balaguer, whom he often refers to by the nickname "Demon" Balaguer – immediately linking Balaguer to both the extreme nature of the regime's atrocities and also to irreal power. In a historical footnote, Yunior describes that Balaguer is "not essential to our tale" but "is essential to the Dominican one," as the successor to Trujillo - one who began as a Trujillo "ringwraith," and then during his own period of rule "unleashed a wave of violence against the Dominican left, deathsquading hundreds and driving thousands more out of the country," instigating a diaspora (89fn). Again, a label that invokes the speculative – in this case "ringwraith," a reference to powerful antagonists in the *Lord of the Rings* novels – accompanies a description of expansive government corruption and violence, and revealing the way Yunior's conception of history has become tied to the speculative genre. The speculative becomes not only as a framework of allusions but a lens for understanding the political climate and its resulting daily reality under the regime, a world that does not have to be created with its own

The opposite of *fukú*, Yunior explains, is "zafa," a "surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe" from disaster (6). This idea is so attractive – a panacea Yunior claims to pursue through his writing – because it is impossible within the unpredictability and brutality of the Trujillo regime and its successor governments. While these protagonists of the Cabral family find opportunities to assert their agency and to use their voices, all three generations ultimately suffer violence and death in the inescapable

reality of the corrupt political reality: Dr. Abelard is killed for offending the dictator, his wife dies of suicide, Belicia is beaten to near death by henchmen of the regime and her unborn child is forced to miscarry, and Oscar loses his life for pursuing love with the girlfriend of a Balaguer-connected official. Safety is the true fantasy, which Yunior can make real only within his speculative telling of the story. However, a straightforward curse, or a dialectic between curse and counter-curse, proves too simple an explanation for the meaning of the Cabral family's tragedy, however. As the novel continues it becomes clear that Yunior and Oscar's knowledge and preoccupation with speculative fiction leads Yunior to apply complex and multifaceted elements of science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, and other genres in a unique solution to make sense of personal and political tragedies, and that this new mode is generated through a contemporary perspective as Yunior reflects on these occurrences of the past.

Ellen Jones, in "The Pagina is Still Blanca: Reading the Blanks in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" positions *Oscar Wao* as part of a recent category of "dictatorship novels" by U.S. authors that focus on "repressive Latin American regimes" from a second-generation perspective (282). While it may be that "Díaz has explicitly aligned himself with Caribbean literary models rather than U.S. ones" (284) as Jones states, I would argue that the transposition of these models' features creates a new mode - not just a hybridic straddler of traditions, but rather a new mixture that cannot be decocted in parts into discrete forms. By applying these features to a novel focused on the United States as much as the Dominican Republic, and utilizing methods and styles from

both traditions, the novel itself is no longer "aligned" with one model against another but rather represents its own generative model.[24]

As outlined in my introduction, this new form is defined by a constellation of features, including generically by the insertion of the speculative into a real-world setting, as contrasted with the "worldbuilding" of most speculative fiction that defines a setting and its rules as different from our own; as well as an explicit engagement with real-world political realities, and a self-aware context of migration or marginalization within a mundane daily reality. This is not simply an arrangement of certain criteria but a trend born of increased global transition and increasingly self-aware engagement with contemporary issues of globalization, information technology, economic disparity, and ever-growing popular awareness of the "absurdities" of international histories of colonization, resource exploitation, and corrupt interventionism.

Within *Oscar Wao*, these realities reverberate beneath the surface, in the United States and Dominican settings between which the characters migrate, and in the personal conflicts and tragedies they encounter, from Beli's abuse at the hands of the Trujillo family that forces her emigration to the U.S., to Oscar's abuse at the hands of regime officials when he returns to the Dominican Republic. The extent of the capriciousness and brutality of these personal attacks, aligned with the broad capriciousness and brutality of mundane life in the Dominican Republic under a violent dictatorship in general, become unfathomable in Yunior's mind, and catalyze his storytelling

[24] In general, Jones's analysis of these models focuses on lexis and syntactic structure rather than the thematic concerns my own argument focuses on.

explanation of fukú and zafa, and the fantasy elements of the Mongoose and the Faceless One, explored in the second half of this chapter. Yunior's direct, explicit engagement with issues of political corruption and the United States' interventionist past within the Dominican Republic while narrating this story – from Abelard's fearful confidences while driving on the old "Marine Occupation" roads to the Capitán bragging about his own purchased U.S. citizenship before his men attack Oscar – highlight how these concerns form not only a part of the background setting but a consistent perspective from which Yunior sees the world.

His generic turn, his insertion of the fantastic, serves as a premeditated attempt to use the perspective and tools of speculative fiction to communicate the bizarreness and tragedy of life within these realities: both the broad experience of living within such a political context on a daily basis, and the unique experience of individual suffering within that context as lived by the characters. Speculative transposition provides the opportunity of "cognitive estrangement," to use Darko Suvin's commonly-used description of science fiction's effects on the reader, discomfiting the reader and creating an effect of strangeness in order to capture the sensations of life within the strange circumstances of the real world in which the characters exist – circumstances the strangeness of which didactic description and mimetic representation would not adequately convey.

Specifically, through deliberate creation of speculative underpinnings for the tale, Yunior undertakes what China Miéville describes as the link between fantasy and imagination, quoted in Mark Bould's "The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things": "the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of

every labour process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose of his own" (77). Yunior's purpose, as both character and narrator, is to communicate his own experience and that of the other characters, in an estranging form in order to capture the unique absurdities of history and the manifestation of that history in a mundane contemporary world, regularly interrupted by the absurd, and the transposition of genre makes that possible.

While Diaz might or might not be concerned with the boundaries of genre, I argue Yunior's entire project is predicated on deliberately crossing that border: on smuggling speculative fiction elements into the realities of the history he himself has lived, applying them to create a tale more meaningful than the chaotic and often senseless suffering he witnessed. Perhaps no one would mistake *Oscar Wao* for a science fiction novel but often Yunior and Oscar mistake their entire world for a science fiction novel. As they both seem to agree in the oft-cited quote: "What [is] more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?" (Diaz 6), the true scope of daily realities of political corruption, global-scale exploitation, and normalized oppression can only be conceptualized through that lens. Abelard's death, Beli's exile, and Oscar's journey do not require the original creation of powerful, capricious villains brough to power by a complex historical web of corruption, nepotism, and interventionism – and establishing a setting of genocide and class disparity does not require imagination. All that is required is Yunior's recounting of historical figures and regimes. *Oscar Wao* does not perform the contextual work of worldbuilding that speculative fiction novels often

undertake. On the contrary, it makes the claim that the speculative fiction world is already built, surrounding us.

In "Comic Book Realism: Form and Genre in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," Daniel Bautista alludes to the history of fabulation in Latin American fiction: "From the marvelous accounts of first encounters between European explorers and the peoples of the 'New World' to the spectacular success of writers like Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez closer to our own time, Latin America has long been associated with a rich tradition of fantastic literature" and *Oscar Wao* "clearly picks up on this tradition" (41). I argue that *Oscar Wao* does indeed pick up on this tradition as Bautista aptly summarizes, but that the novel does not only enter this tradition - it transposes and transmutates elements to serve a contemporary purpose, capturing and elucidating the new by incorporating something new, mixing the elements of Latin American magical realism with North American 20th and 21st century speculative fiction the way that Oscar's own personal history combines his family's heritage in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillato with his interest in North American nerd culture in the 20th century.[25] The result is not only hybridity, or juxtaposition. Much like the Cabral family's migration results not in a juxtaposition of starkly disparate Dominican and North American cultural elements within Oscar and his sister Lola, but rather a new cultural identity born from an immigration experience, the transposition of literary traditions within the novel generates something new.

[25] While Oscar's own story takes place in the latter decades of the 20th century and especially the 1980s, Yunior's frame tale looks back on that period reflectively, from a time it seems reasonable to assume is roughly contemporaneous with the turn of the 21st century.

To understand the specific deployment of these methods, it is meaningful to differentiate between two kinds of generic incursion within *Oscar Wao*: allusive and diegetic. Allusions to speculative fiction works abound in the novel, and intertwine with Spanish language use and North American slang as a distinctive characteristic of Yunior's voice as narrator, revealing both his and Oscar's transnational identities along with their broad awareness and knowledge in speculative fiction genres. These generic incursions are discursive, and reflect upon the characters, and this interesting element of form is obviously related to the themes of the story being told. However, the other type of generic incursion is most relevant to my analysis, defining *Oscar Wao* as an example of the transposed fiction that I examine throughout this dissertation. Yunior as narrator does not only allude to speculative fiction works: he inserts speculative elements into the story itself, diegetically, presenting them as real occurrences in the narrative. As a writer and self-aware storyteller, he uses these elements to make sense of the sociopolitically motivated tragedies and absurdities that befall Oscar and his family.

The mysterious figures of the Faceless One and the Mongoose represent the most direct and explicit transposition of speculative elements in the events of the story itself, as opposed to discursive references and allusions. Never seen very clearly or portrayed with much definition, the former appears in many fleetingly-viewed roles and guises, a man missing facial features who appears just before one of the Cabrals suffers a violent attack; the latter, a creature of magical power sometimes described as golden or lion-like, appears providing strength or support in the wake of these violent attacks, and sometimes draws the attention of passerby who are able to render aid. The Mongoose and the

Faceless One are not presented as analogies or figurative symbols; rather, they appear, part of the world within the story.

While it's easy to see the Mongoose and the Faceless One as good and evil, dualistic opposites like *fukú* and *zafa* - and that parallel is present - their qualities and behavior present something more complex in addition. The Faceless One never participates in the actions of the story's villains; in fact, he is always glimpsed only momentarily and then is gone. He acts as an omen - from one perspective, he could be seen as a warning or a side effect. Similarly, the Mongoose does not act to rescue the story's protagonists. Sometimes its words or songs provide inner strength and determination and sometimes its very presence causes good Samaritans to stop and notice the protagonist is in need of help, but the Mongoose does not prevent the violence that causes the protagonists to need help in the first place. Rather than simple incarnations of good and evil, these insertions of the speculative are multivalent.

The victims of the Faceless One, like the victims of *fukú* that Yunior describes in the epigraph, are always victims of real-world political violence - a political violence that at its root is also the violence of global exploitation, manipulation, and neglect. Although Trujillo serves as the primary antagonist and perhaps the personification of *fukú*, Yunior is also acutely aware of the way wealthy nations, and the United States in particular, have pulled strings abetting the politically corrupt regimes of the Dominican Republic and other Latin American nations, and maintaining those regimes' power. For example, Oscar's antagonist and the ultimate cause of Oscar's death, the Capitán is described as "one of those very bad men that not even postmodernism can explain away" (294), the

Capitán had "supported the U.S. Invaders" and "earned his stripes" during "the North American Invasion" in which "he was methodical and showed absolutely no mercy to the leftists," working under high-ranking Trujillo lieutenant "Demon Balaguer" by carrying out political retaliations and massacres (294-5).

Postmodernism's rejection of metanarratives and rejection of absolute judgments in favor of relative perspectives and individual affirmations of truth, for Yunior, are insufficient to understand the level of "badness" that the Capitán embodies. The absurdity of this extreme level of unjust violence and brutality, in the Capitán as in the Trujillato and as in U.S.-backed despotism writ large and as in the colonial history that brought fukú requires a paradigm beyond the postmodern: it requires speculative transposition. The Capitán's close connection with Balaguer, who rose up as one of Trujillo's most important leaders, ties the Capitán to the long-lasting nepotistic tradition of political corruption and violence in the Dominican Republic under Trujillo that continues even after Trujillo, and the Capitán's close allyship with the United States illustrates the way foreign influence was always part and parcel of that regime. In fact, not only does the Capitán have "family in Queens and every Christmas he brings his cousins bottles of Johnnie Walker Black," but when Oscar believes that he'll gain some kind of protection from the Capitán's violence by declaring himself an American citizen, the Capitán waves this supposed separation from Dominican political violence away as nothing, revealing about himself: "I'm an American Citizen too. I was naturalized in the city of Buffalo, in the state of New York" (295). Even the two relatively unimportant henchmen the Capitán brings along to brutalize Oscar declare themselves Americanized: "I bought mine in

Miami," one of them says of his own U.S. citizenship (295). Ironically, the other henchman "lament[s]" that he only has U.S. residency (295) - a humorous irony born from the contrast between Oscar's naivete assuming the U.S.'s separation from Dominican corruption and the Dominican government agents' close and casual American relations. The Capitán even has "First World teeth" (295), emphasizing the daily reality of American support for his ilk - the beneficiaries of interventionism.

Oscar and his family enjoy relative safety when they live in the United States; they become part of the population that receives some of the benefits of the exploitation and fighting that make American comfort possible. For them, however, the veneer of a comfortable world in which safety and security are generally the expectation cannot hold up. Because of their past - and because of their choices exercising agency against the status quo, such as Oscar's travel to visit Ybón in defiance of the politically connected Capitán - they have seen behind the curtain of false reality, and they move back and forth between both sides. Alluding to the "iron curtain" between East and West during the Cold War, Yunior refers to the isolation of the Dominican Republic as the "Plátano Curtain" (224), or, translated, the "plantain curtain": a joke that draws on plantains as a symbol of Dominican culture and the idea of "banana republic" nations exploited for resources by wealthy nations like the United States. From the very beginning in the epigraph, after all, Yunior connects the arrival of fukú to the arrival of "the Admiral," Christopher Columbus – the harbinger of colonialism – whose very name it invites bad luck to say (1). Even if the Dominican Republic serves as the site of danger for Oscar's family, the "First World" in Yunior's language, and often throughout the novel the

United States in specific, serve as a fundamental source of political corruption and violence, and a fundamental source of the political absurdity that Yunior uses the speculative to address.

The Mongoose and the Faceless One are not simply good and evil, curse and counter-curse, but manifestations in whose dialectical tension the absurdity of political relations in the Dominican Republic and in the United States appear as ominous figures, looming, threatening and confusing - the effect that an unpredictable, often capricious totalitarian regime would have on a vulnerable population. In this context, the power of writing and imagination for an optimistic futurity - for revolution of one form of another - cannot be understated. An important facet of the Faceless Man is that whereas he himself is described lacking features, his effect on others is a silencing: seeing the man without a face causes one to lose one's voice. Losing the ability to speak, or scream, is described through the lens of nightmare or horror - a mode that ties back to the direct address in the epigraph, where Yunior invokes this kind of genre as he also denies it: "the fukú ain't just ancient history, a ghost story from the past with no power to scare" (2). At first, the Faceless One's appearance might seem to be only a folk tale intended to frighten.[26]

Belicia, or Beli, witnesses the Faceless One when it is revealed in her youth that her lover, known as the Gangster, was always secretly married to Trujillo himself's sister. Pregnant with the Gangster's child, Beli is captured by police officers who serve the

[26] For the sake of thoroughness, it is worth mentioning that Diaz in interviews has connected fukú and the evil in the novel with the trauma of childhood sexual abuse – an important register whose signs can also be seen throughout the novel, and one also associated with silencing and with threatening, faceless offenders. Clearly, the novels' themes and symbols are multivalent and carry meaning that is both personal and cultural, private and political, engaging at different times with individual trauma as well as the broader political oppression my analysis addresses.

Trujillo regime and intend to end her pregnancy by either forced medical intervention or, failing her consent, violent brutalization. As the police officers force her into their vehicle, “she saw that there was one more cop sitting in the car, and when he turned toward her she saw that he didn’t have a face. All the strength fell right out of her” (141). Strength and voice are tied in this passage: she sights her former employer and friend José Then who happens to be walking down the street and “tried to say his name, but like in those bad dreams we all have there was no air in her lungs” (141). When her hand brushes the hot chrome of the police car she finally “found her tongue” and “whispered, please save me” (141). Through this speech “the spell was broken” and José comes to her aid, along with several of his friends (141). The fact that her plea for help was a “whisper,” which ostensibly would not even be loud enough for José to hear from a distance, underscores the symbolic importance of voice - any voice - to counteract the power of the Faceless One. When later, with no one around to rescue Beli, the government police do succeed in kidnapping and beating her, “all that can be said is that it was the end of language, the end of hope” (147), emphasizing how the presence of language was the presence of hope. Beli’s mother, Socorro, many years before, had similarly dreamed when her family was in danger from the Trujillato “that the faceless man was standing over her husband’s bed, and she could not scream, could not say anything, and then the next night she dreamed that he was standing over her children too” (236) - a premonition of the silencing that would haunt her family over generations.

In counterpoint to the silencing and dooming power of the Faceless One stand the vocalization and arguable salvation that come from the Mongoose. Its arrival, Yunior

warns, forms “the strangest part of our tale” (148). As Beli lies, “a broken girl, atop broken stalks of cane” (148), barely alive after her assault at the police’s hands, “there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt” (148-9). Presented without the usual quotation punctuation that is used for all other dialogue in the novel, the Mongoose appears to speak directly into Beli’s mind, in italics: “*You have to rise*” (149). After encouraging Beli to survive so that she will live to have her future children, the Mongoose “rivered into the cane” and “before Beli lost hope she heard the creature’s voice. She (for it had a woman’s lilt) was singing!” (149-150). Beli follows the Mongoose’s singing to escape the maze of the sugar cane, and “each time she thought she would fall she concentrated on the faces of her promised future - her promised children - and from that obtained the strength she needed to continue” (150). When she finally collapses, there is a strong burst of wind, and then a truck whose driver “later swore he saw something lion-like in the gloom, with eyes like terrible amber lamps” arrives in time to help her (151). Oscar’s own rescue from the cane fields, in the most chronologically recent Cabral story, contains singing as well. After he is left unconscious in the fields, beaten near death by the Capitán’s men, Oscar’s friend Clives who is about to abandon the search for Oscar, hears singing: the voice he hears is “a nice voice too, and Clives, who sang for his congregation, knew the difference” (300). When he reaches the source, “ a tremendous wind ripped through the cane, nearly blew him off his feet […] like the blast an angel might lay down on takeoff” (300), revealing Oscar. Once again singing and

the power of the voice - emphasized by powerful wind - defines the positive and beneficent, against the silence of death and hopelessness.

The thematic register of silencing and voicing goes far deeper than a ghost story. Silencing resistance against political oppression forms a constant theme in the historical references and stories Yunior focuses on throughout the narrative. Notable examples include the assassination of left-wing journalists like Orlando Martínez Howley (89fn) who criticized the Trujillo lieutenant Balaguer, and the recurring story of Jesús de Galíndez, a "Basque supernerd and a Columbia University grad student" who had lived in the Dominican Republic and "could conceive for himself no higher duty than to expose the blight that was [Trujillo's] regime" (97fn). Yunior places particular emphasis on writing as resistance: it is Galíndez's doctoral dissertation that Yunior blames for the man's assassination, asking "What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway?" and concluding that "Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers" (97fn). By asserting writers are competition to dictators, he asserts that those with the capacity to speak out against authoritarians have a viable power to depose them. At the same time, by stating that dictators are competition to writers, he implies that writers seek to assert control over reality - a trait that he clearly applies to himself as a meta-narrator who often alludes to his own writing process while creating the story told in the novel, and another subtle indication that Yunior is the one knowingly transposing the speculative into the narrative, modifying its reality deliberately.

For Yunior, these transpositions of the fantastic actually make more sense than accepting the corruption and oppressive falsehoods in language and paradigm which

defined the Trujillato. As he begins to describe the appearance of the Mongoose to assist Beli, Yunior states that he cannot say for sure the creature is real or not, but "remember: Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena. How else could we have survived what we have survived?" (149). Yunior and Oscar's assertions that only a fantastical paradigm can successfully encapsulate the surreal occurrences of 20th century Caribbean history – "What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?" (6) – can be seen as cynical or tongue-in-cheek but are not self-contradictory, fundamentally unserious, or intended to subtly convey a different meaning. Oscar was "hardcore" in his belief in the truth-telling potential of speculative genres, "believed that that was the kind of story we were all living in" (6), and Yunior ends up agreeing. Referring to the popular concept of the supernatural Dominican fukú curse, he follows up on "what more sci-fi" and "what more fantasy" by asking, "now that I know how it all turns out, I have to ask, in turn: What more fukú?" (6). The narrative perspective of the novel, aligned with Yunior's first person point of view, presents in earnest the importance of the speculative to make sense of historical events.

Notably, Yunior describes the Mongoose in overtly and undeniably science-fictional terms. In a discursive footnote, Yunior waxes the Mongoose as "one of the great unstable particles of the Universe and also one of its greatest travelers [....] Believed to be an ally of Man. Many Watchers suspect that the Mongoose arrived to our world from another, but to date no evidence of such a migration has been unearthed" (151fn). Right before a heartbroken Oscar, separated from love by the threat of political violence, makes

a suicide attempt from a bridge - an attempt that fails due to a fluke landing on a divider with foliage and loam - Oscar sees "something straight out of Ursula Le Guin standing by his side," that he would later call "the Golden Mongoose, but even he knew wasn't what it was" (190). The Mongoose is not (only) straight out of Marquez, Allende, or Borges, not (only) part of an already established tradition of Latin American magical realism - although all of these authors have clearly, sometimes explicitly, influenced its creation and identity. It is (also) straight out of Le Guin - simultaneously part of a tradition of 20th century North American speculative fiction, simultaneously. This manifestation is syncretic, something old as well as something new, generative, transposed. Furthermore, in Yunior's note, the "Mongoose has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies" (151fn) - reiterating the importance of this transposition for political representation and resistance.

Richard Patteson notes in "Textual Territory and Narrative Power in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,*" the way Yunior himself is central within "the act of telling" that is "itself an exercise of power" in "the deepest design of the novel" (5). As storyteller, he shares responsibility for the "narrative's genesis within the totalitarian history written by the Dominican Galactus, Rafael Trujillo" (6), recalling Yunior's own comparison of writers with dictators. I would posit the generative potential between all of these forces works through a dialectic give and take, a shifting spectrum of power. Trujillo held unquestionable levels of power in the empirical world of historical record. Individuals like those in the Cabral family, Abelard and Belicia and La Inca, could not escape his reaches or defy his will – they were like "brief, nameless lives" of

little import “to Galactus” within the science-fictional allusion of the novel’s first epigraph, which Patteson recognizes as reflecting Yunior’s “own ambivalence toward authority,” framing the story “in an historical, and quasi-mythic, context” (Patteson 5). The power Trujillo applied, affecting intertwining webs of family as well as lasting myth and story – since “dictators in the real world can be highly accomplished storytellers,” after all (6) – extends to hold sway even over later generations in the 21st century, in the United States, in Oscar and Lola and Yunior himself. However, Yunior - and Oscar – have power too, a power that within its own domain can exceed Trujillo’s: the power to fashion the tale . Yunior’s self aware references to writing early drafts of the novel itself highlights his ability as author of the tale to decide the narrative presented as well as plan and implement changes, determining the story as it becomes recorded.

Both Yunior and Oscar define themselves in part and forge the relationship between each other, in part, based on their identities as writers: not only is Oscar described as consistently at work on his writing, but he and Yunior share stories back and forth, and Yunior ends the novel as a college composition instructor. Patteson goes as far as to claim that *Oscar Wao* is “three novels in one,” of which “a novel about writing and its power to construct and shape an alternative reality” is as principal as “the story of Oscar” and “a tale of immigration to America against a backdrop of tyranny” (8). *Oscar Wao* is indeed those things, but it is not only three different already-existing categorizations; it is also a new solution.

Patteson emphasizes the way “Yunior implicitly reasserts his authority every time he refers to the writing process” and the ways Yunior “has exercised his power as

narrator to make alterations," but these alterations extend beyond self-admitted artistic license regarding anachronistic cultural references or recast locations for the settings of narrative events (Patteson 11). They also go beyond the ostensible fictionalization of "information that he could hardly have gleaned from" in-story sources, such as events that befall isolated characters, including Abelard in prison, or occur in private, including unspoken dreams (Patteson 11). However, Yunior's truly defining insertions are those which manifest his retrospective desire to have been more active in the lives of his friends and their family during their times of need. When unseen angel wing winds reveal Oscar's location so that he can be rescued in the cane field, when the Golden Mongoose comforts lost members of the Cabral family and its singing calls them to helpers, these literalizations enact the interventions Yunior himself wishes he could have performed. Though he is a "Watcher" that in actual history acted little in the interests of his heroes, in the continuity of the tale as told through his words, he now acts, performatively, dispatching instantiations of his retroactive care and admiration. From this perspective, Yunior the narrator is the Mongoose.

When Yunior says "I know I've thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix" (285) he does not mean merely that he's included the plethora of allusions, references, quotes, and secondhand folk tale possibilities which make the voice and form of the story unique, discursively. He is admitting that he has embedded the potentialities of the fantastic in the events of the plot itself, diegetically: he has thrown into the narrative itself speculative content which both provides a more coherent frame of storytelling and assuages his guilt at inaction, since at least in the telling of the tale he can create helpful

interventions, invoking manifestations of zafa – a beneficial or protecting counterspell – to counteract the fukú real or imagined that he was impotent to counteract during the actual occurrence. Writing - his voice - offers Yunior the chance for resistance against the wrongs that decimated Oscar's family.

Oscar's final manifestation, in Yunior's dreams, centers on themes of writing, and of speculative manifestation. Yunior dreams of Oscar himself "holding up a book, waving for me to take a closer look […] It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar's hands are seamless and the book's pages are blank. And that behind his mask his eyes are smiling. *Zafa*" (325). This image, positive, protective, appears to fulfill the goal Yunior pursued in his writing, the thing he "almost had" (320), the creation through that act of inscription of a magical, beneficent counter-narrative to *fukú*. Yunior describes, however: "Sometimes, though, I look up at him and he has no face and I wake up screaming" (325). The potential appearance of the Faceless One might reflect Yunior's own uncertainty about his worthiness to complete his own objective of memorializing and following Oscar's legacy – an omen of failure, after which it is unknown if the Mongoose will provide salvation.

The symbolic importance of the blank-paged book, however, acts as a reiteration of a constantly arising image and motif. Yunior's allusions to "paginas en blanco," or blank pages, recur at multiple sites of oppression and potential resistance. After Trujillo loyalist Balaguer orders the death of journalist Orlando Martínez Howley, he writes memoirs claiming "he knew who had done the foul deed (not him, of course) and left a blank page, a pagina en blanco, in the text to be filled in with the truth upon his death"

(Diaz 90 fn). When Beli's father Abelard is killed by the Trujillato, all of his writing is destroyed, leaving a blank where his thoughts and revelations would have been, including a book that is rumored to have researched and revealed the demonic or extraterrestrial origins of Trujillo himself (146). Reflecting on the sadness in his own life, "Even your Watcher [Yunior himself] has his silences, his paginas en blanco," Yunior admits (149). Explicitly, the blank pages not only speak to history but offer the potential for futurity.

Referring to that "Lost Final Book of Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral" whose myth he himself has built up within the text, Yunior says "I'm sure that this is nothing more than a figment of our Island's hypertrophied voodoo imagination. And nothing less" (246). This legend, a story combining the blank pages symbolism with the drive to make rational sense of occurrences that defy rationality, appeals to "the deep structures in [Oscar's] nerd brain," and it is implied, since Yunior consistently projects his own "nerd" knowledge and proclivities on Oscar while subtly revealing them to those in the know, that this legend appeals to Yunior as well (246). The "New Age Lovecraft shit" version of the Fall, wherein "a supernatural, or perhaps alien, dictator" had "installed himself on the first Island of the New World and then cut it off from everything else, who could send a curse to destroy his enemies" (246) actually fulfills the requirements of a coherent narrative more aptly than the mundane venality and senseless violence that characterizes the actual history.

In storytelling, Yunior finds an opportunity to inscribe new meaning and possibilities applying the subversive potentiality of the speculative. Lauren Jean Gantz examines this potential in "'Nothing Ever Ends': Archives of Written and Graphic

Testimony in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." Gantz situates Oscar Wao within the genre of metatestimonio [literally translatable as meta-testimony], a term Gantz borrows from Nereida Segura-Rico for novels concerned with "victims' experiences" as well as the way their own identity and form "[blur] the division between fiction and reality" (126). Metatestimonio novels are further classified into testimonials "told from the perspective of victims (real or imagined)" or into "dictator novels," which concern themselves with "the corrupt inner workings of regimes" (126). To apply Gantz and Segura-Rico's categories directly, Oscar Wao mostly fits into the testimonial model, while the footnotes and asides, elements separate and meta-textual from the primary mode, enter the realm of the dictator novel, following historical figures, events, and considerations that outline the progression and situation of the Trujillato itself. By offering the possibility that a writer could create something powerful enough to destroy, depose, demask, or even just threaten the power of a figure like Trujillo, *Oscar Wao* provides the possibility that the testimonial form of metatestimonio can enact change, can be a weapon, or even a zafa.

As Patteson declares, "the dialectic of narrative, erasure, and counter-narrative informs Oscar Wao on the novel's deepest levels, and nobody knows better than its narrator how important it is who tells the story" (14). By creating fantastic intervention through the tropes, forms, and insertion of plot points relying on the speculative, Yunior as an authorial force counteracts not only fukú but also erasure itself. Where previously Trujillo was able to erase the work of Abelard Cabral, the doctoral research of Columbia scholars like Jesús de Galíndez and the exposés of journalists like Orlando Martínez

Howley, the narrative of *Oscar Wao* itself draws attention to the truth as well as the attempts to silence the truth. Where Patteson identifies "Galindez's dissertation, Abelard's rumored book, and Oscar Wao itself" as elements of the "counter-narrative" to the narrative of Trujillo, I would point specifically to the infusion of the speculative as the form and strategy of the counter-narrative. The speculative elements of the story provide an instantiation in the re-telling of the tale of Yunior's desire to act, to intervene on behalf of his friends, and more broadly to capture and communicate the truth of global realities in the most impactful way possible: by generating a new form that reveals the underlying truth, defying death and silence, and in its new qualities creates possibilities for new resistance through new voices.

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