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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

NOT THE WHOLE STORY:  
NARRATIVE RESPONSES TO CONTEMPORARY GLOBALIZATION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

BY

SEAN P. O'BRIEN

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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## INTRODUCTION

### NOT THE WHOLE STORY: AN INTRODUCTION TO INCOMPLETION

“Everywhere was now a part of everywhere else. Russia, America, London, Kashmir. Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another’s, were no longer our own, individual, discrete” (Rushdie 37). So thinks India Ophuls, protagonist of Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown*, even before she learns the extent of her connectedness to international politics, systematic oppression, and terrorism. Even without the deeply personal connections explored by the novel, India is acutely aware of complex connectivity and information overload as growing challenges in an age of accelerating globalization. With increased connectivity come proliferating contexts, and with rapidly developing communications media it becomes increasingly easy to explore multiple contexts in parallel, alternating, or sequential ways—in many cases directly from the smartphone in your pocket. To understand a world characterized by increasingly complex forces, structures, and experiences of globalization, we must inevitably simplify things into graspable forms.

The need to understand complexity is not new, but the scale of the simplifications necessary and the widespread awareness of the need for them are dramatically increased under accelerated globalization and intensified,

technologized connectivity.<sup>1</sup> What must I take into account? What can I safely ignore? What entities and relationships should structure my understanding of the world? Or my understanding of my place within these larger structures?

Today these questions are relevant everywhere, as local frames of reference and action become increasingly interwoven with the rest of the globe. Roland Robertson defines globalization as the “concrete global interdependence” and “compression of the world” as well as “the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole,” both accelerating in modern times (*Globalization* 8). He asserts that “as globalization proceeds, challenges are increasingly presented to the stability of particular perspectives on, and collective and individual participation in, the overall globalization process” (29). In this dissertation I will argue that people around the world are meeting the challenges of increased globalized connectivity and increased consciousness of it by constructing—in literary and everyday contexts—composite frameworks of understanding and narrative representation. Extending the media studies technical term “compositing” (combining discrete elements into integrated images) to narrative theory, I argue that narrative compositing—piecing together representations of self and world by selecting from an overwhelming quantity of relevant issues, approaches, contexts, representations,

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<sup>1</sup> *Too Much to Know*, Ann M. Blair’s study of early modern European scholarly information management, details, for instance, the long history of the perception of information overload, but also stresses unprecedented jumps in the severity of the challenge in both the Renaissance and our own time as a result of new technologies, increased global connectivity, and the prominence of cultural attitudes focused on collecting and managing information (3, 11, 12). Compositing, like globalization, has a long history but has entered a new contemporary stage of acceleration.

identities, and communities—helps make globalized connectivity comprehensible in narrative terms. Compositing simplifies without homogenizing and allows us to remain wary of the risks of oversimplification as we read, write, and simply lead our everyday lives.<sup>2</sup>

Compositing is not a cultural condition but a pervasive strategy that offers a new way of thinking about the challenges of globalization. Since at least 1979, when Jean-François Lyotard published *The Postmodern Condition*, cultural critics have been asserting that we live in a postmodern age while also paradoxically arguing against the universality of any cultural condition.<sup>3</sup> Fields like postcolonial studies and globalization studies have complicated contemporary periodization. No contemporary cultural condition claiming universality has gained critical or popular traction to nearly the degree that postmodernism did. Many critics continue to work under the rubric of postmodernism, while others wishing to break with or develop its tenets have instead adopted concepts like post-postmodernism or metamodernism to describe cultural conditions that have moved decisively beyond

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<sup>2</sup> Compositing thus addresses what Robertson sees as a “moral issue” of globalized complexity wherein “in order for one to have a ‘realistic’ view of the world as a whole” we must accept “the relative autonomy of each of the four main components” of the global field (individuals, nations, international relations and systems, and humankind as a whole) as well as their interconnection and mutual constraints (28). This is a moral issue because “overemphasis on one to the expense of attention to the other three constitutes a form of ‘fundamentalism’” (28).

<sup>3</sup> The concept of the “information society,” another response to increasing information overload stemming from accelerating globalization and advances in knowledge production and distribution technologies, originated perhaps twenty years earlier with the work of economist Fritz Machlup (Beniger 21).



postmodernism (Nealon; Timmer; Vermeulen and van den Akker).<sup>4</sup> Though it is tempting to see the era of globalization as a new period breaking with postmodernism, I argue that analysis of contemporary global fiction and new media literature suggests that globalization and increasing technological connectivity do not offer a universal cultural condition to replace postmodernism. What they do reveal is a cultural landscape in which multiple experiences and understandings of the world complement and contradict each other, one that benefits from an understanding of postmodernism. My project focuses on literary representations and enactments of these interactions between different experiences and models of the world, both within and among individuals, groups, and modern technological networks and media.

My dissertation will analyze the emergence of newly prominent, composite narrative structures responsive to contemporary globalization. These narrative composites require that we rethink how the postmodern condition and postmodern narratives accommodate the challenges of globalization. Robertson notes that amidst the accelerating connectivity of contemporary globalization, we are all engaged “in this ‘postmodern game’ of making histories and inventing traditions.

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<sup>4</sup> For Jeffrey T. Nealon, “post-postmodernism marks an intensification and mutation within postmodernism” that has reached a significant enough “tipping point” to require a new periodization (a new “post-”) (ix). Nicoline Timmer’s post-postmodernism focuses on literary and critical attempts “to ‘re-humanize subjectivity’” and better understand “the self . . . as a narrative construction, as a ‘self-narrative’” in the wake of poststructuralist repression of humanistic aspects of subjectivity (18, 27). Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker argue that postmodernism has been supplanted by a metamodernism “characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment.”

The world as a whole is, in a sense, a world of reflexive interlocutors. One of the major tasks of the contemporary sociologist is to make sense of this vast array of interlocutions,” a task that I argue is thrust upon all of us by globalization (*Globalization* 31).<sup>5</sup> The key move in understanding this situation, I argue, is shifting away from identifying a cultural condition, whose definitions, boundaries, membership, and meaning are problematically splintered and highly debatable. We can more productively focus on what people do, and increasingly, we use compositing to respond to local experiences of contemporary globalized life. Contemporary identity formation and worldview formation frequently involve “*reflexivity . . . and choice (increasingly global bricolage)*” (167). Not all who use these strategies admit to them. Even fundamentalism is born of the need to reduce overwhelming globalized complexity: “the increasing relativization of standpoints and proliferation of orientations to the global situation . . . encourage the rise of the discourse of fundamentals” (176). This search for a stable core is a response to how “[p]ostmodernism depicts a world of ‘small narratives’” (178). Fundamentalist compositing opts for severe reductiveness while denying that anything of worth has been omitted. More nuanced compositing processes enable us to connect

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<sup>5</sup> Robertson points out that “there are millions of people who remain relatively unaffected” by “the present sense of the world as a single place,” but even these “are certainly linked to the world economy,” and meanwhile, millions more are “more conscious of other places and of the world as a whole” thanks to new communication and travel technologies (184). Because “[c]ontemporary globalization involves considerable increase in global, including ‘local,’ complexity and density,” Robertson insists that “the way in which we think about it is crucial” and advocates “a fluid perspective . . . centered on the global variety” (188). Compositing strategies can help us respond fluidly and guard against oversimplification.

postmodernism's small narratives together in meaningful ways while remaining aware of the incompleteness and imperfections of our models.

I choose the terms "compositing" and "composite" rather than related, useful critical concepts such as relationality, network, cyborg, mangle, system, co-production, and agential realism for a number of reasons. Relationality emphasizes the relations over the elements in relation or the whole made up of related elements. Network theory and network science take a wide variety of forms, most of which share scientific (or social scientific) foundations not easily applied to, for instance, narrative representations of complex phenomena; furthermore, the term network slightly favors the noun over the verb form in ways that are unhelpful to my project. Second-order systems theory outlines the complex (yet necessarily reductive) relationships between "psychic systems (consciousness) and social systems (communication)" and their environments but, as Cary Wolfe notes, approaches such topics from the reconstructive rather than the deconstructive direction, whereas compositing and composites can speak to both (xx, 13, 23). Donna Haraway's cyborg manifesto focuses on significant combinations of human and machine and of fiction and reality, but they are somewhat tangential to my purposes. Andrew Pickering's "mangle" highlights unpredictable and shifting relationships and structures, and other similar concepts have comparably specific subjects and scopes that limit their usefulness to my exploration of worldviews and narrative representations in the age of accelerated globalization. Karen Barad's work on agential realism, intra-action, and onto-epistem-ology offers a theoretical

and philosophical foundation for privileging interactivity and points of intersection as a better way of understanding the components involved. These are all productive approaches to various complex entities, events, and relations. However, my project has a different, but related, goal.

I use the concept of compositing to tie together the complex relations and entities considered by these other approaches and to identify high-level connections between them as a major subject matter and structuring technique for contemporary global fiction. Rather than contest existing meanings in order to repurpose one of these concepts, I choose a concept whose current meanings are almost exclusively technical and limited to film and graphics production, leaving its figurative potential largely untapped. With compositing, I propose not One Term to Rule Them All or a better way to do the same work, but a complementary concept identifying broad connections between related studies of complex phenomena. Contemporary print and new media fiction regularly thematize and employ compositing strategies as responses to globalized complexity. Fiction authors around the world, from Hari Kunzru and Neal Stephenson to Zakes Mda and Jhumpa Lahiri, are addressing the kinds of complexity explored in various fields under the rubrics of relationality, co-production, posthumanism, etc. This literary attention emphasizes the prominence of complexity in many forms as a result of the intensified role of globalization and technology in contemporary life and culture.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For Robertson, “the rapidly spreading consciousness of the global world as such” is “greatly facilitated by recently developed rapid means of travel and communication”

Compositing analysis exposes differences in agency between interpretive and authorial compositing and connections between compositing agency and real-world power inequalities tied to globalization and contemporary technologies. A compositing approach to complexity allows comparisons of various strategies and of the structures and understandings they produce, including acts of compositing by readers, writers, and critics engaged with literature and the world.

Compositing has become a central narrative strategy in both global fiction and new media literature. It engages the increased need, in an era of accelerated globalization and technological change, for processes that reconcile separate concepts, ideologies, needs, and technological objects into complex wholes whose parts remain discrete but meaningfully connected. Lev Manovich discusses the narrow definition of digital compositing as a filmmaking process in *The Language of New Media* while acknowledging the potential for more figurative uses of the term—the general compositing approach that I intend to develop.<sup>7</sup> Manovich argues that the most important effect of the rise of computerized media is that computer logic (e.g., the coding of a file or program) and the cultural logic of media (e.g., cultural interpretations of a digital image as represented) are, “[t]o use another concept

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so that “events and circumstances previously segregated in space and time increasingly came to be considered as simultaneous” and related (179).

<sup>7</sup> The history of film compositing extends back beyond the advent of digital film technologies and involves any technique that combines visual elements from multiple sources into one onscreen image. Film compositing is nearly as old as cinema itself, dating back to the special effects films of Méliès in the 1890s and early 1900s. It has always been treated as a technical process rather than a theoretical concept, however.

from new media . . . being composited together. The result of this composite is a new computer culture—a blend of human and computer meanings” (45, 46). The origin of the concept of compositing in new media studies points to the importance of media technology for understanding the contemporary world and to the heightened need for ways of reconciling quantitative and procedural models of the world with cultural models. New technologies and media provide new ways of exploring the world, forging connections within it, and organizing understandings of it. New media is also an excellent example of a composite concept. As Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin point out in *Remediation*, “[w]hat is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media” (15). The “newness” of new media, in other words, draws on new technology yet is largely a matter of reconfiguring or compositing pre-existing media, techniques, and conventions. This provides a useful foundation for a general cultural concept of compositing as a strategy by which people mobilize their existing knowledge and beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the other concepts related to compositing discussed above, this project overlaps with a number of valuable new media theories and approaches, such as Ian Bogost’s discussion of unit operations as a form of videogame analysis and Noah Wardrip-Fruin’s exploration of operational logics that can serve as the subject of expressive (or literary) analysis of computational or procedural objects

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<sup>8</sup> The origins of the term compositing in film and other new media contexts is further discussed in chapters one and three.

and processes. We can productively view these new media analytical approaches as forms of critical compositing and view their objects of analysis as composites, highlighting the prominence of technological (as well as narrative) compositing in new medial authorial processes. Because of their narrower scopes (or greater specificity), both approaches stop short of thoroughly investigating similarities between various forms of compositing in analysis, authorship, user experiences, and everyday engagements with new media. Aiming for a complementary broader perspective, I argue that technological developments like those documented by new media theorists play a key role in the processes of accelerated globalization and suggest compositing models useful for understanding interactions within and among complex entities, models that are showing up not only in criticism but in contemporary print and new media literature and everyday experiences as well.

A narrow concept of compositeness in literary criticism was proposed by Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris in *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* (1995). Dunn and Morris use the language of compositing to define a genre: “*The composite novel is a literary work composed of shorter texts that—though individually complete and autonomous—are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles*” (2). Dunn and Morris’s composite novel is part of the array of general compositing processes that my project explores, and their formulation stresses the contemporary relevance of compositing when they call the “structural aesthetic” of the composite novel “‘user-friendly’ because it

reflects the complexity of contemporary life” (xiii, xiv).<sup>9</sup> The composite novel as genre definition focuses on connected text-pieces that can function autonomously (as short stories or poems, etc.). The organizing principles that connect the pieces of a composite novel are closely related to more general narrative composing processes. Common settings, collective protagonists, structural patterns, and thematization of storytelling all serve as axes of composing in other genres (like the “regular” novel) and other media (including new media works). It’s no surprise, therefore, that Julia Alvarez and Ana Castillo, two authors featured in my analysis of composing in novels that thematize globalization (in chapter one), also have (other) works featured in Dunn and Morris’s study of a specific subset of narrative composing practices.

Dunn and Morris’s composite novel focuses on the product—the integrated whole text composed of smaller parts (5). By attending to *compositing* I emphasize the processes of integration over whether unity is stronger than disunity (or the specific medium or genre). Even Dunn and Morris’s narrow composite-novel approach, however, points toward a larger related field of compositeness that

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<sup>9</sup> Dunn and Morris also note that the term “composite novel” had a different life prior to their genre definition: “*composite novel* traditionally means a collaborative work—a novel written by a number of authors,” a phenomena most common from 1880-1930 but retaining that meaning (in the absence of any contenders) into the late twentieth century (2). This earlier kind of “composite novel,” focused on composite authorship, is another manifestation of the variety of general composing processes (and products). For an even narrower (and briefer) definition of composite narrative form, see James Nagel’s discussion of *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle*, in which he argues that of Dunn and Morris’s composite novels, only those that include non-short-story elements should qualify “as a ‘composite narrative’” (5).



transcends genre or media, as they acknowledge by briefly noting the similarities between composite novels and the (then-emerging) new-media genre of hypertext fiction. As with hypertext fiction, “the readers of a composite novel face the same task of ‘mapping,’ that is, establishing connections between and among text-pieces . . . in fact, the composite novel reveals itself to be future-friendly—a print-medium analogue (whether collaborative or not) of hypertext” (18). Their mapping is a form of readerly compositing, and I concur that composite forms (and processes) are future-friendly as new media and globalization increasingly demand compositing skills.<sup>10</sup>

Dunn and Morris argue that identifying their late twentieth-century generic hybrids as composite novels marks a shift “away from product and toward process, away from narrow specialization and toward cross-disciplinary expertise, away from boundary making and toward networking” (115).<sup>11</sup> They assert that “the genre designation of ‘composite novel,’ in its embodied ‘expectations,’ reflects the diversity, multiplicity, and exhilaration of our fin de siècle era” (115). By citing

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<sup>10</sup> Dunn and Morris’s analysis of the key organizing principles of the composite novel draws on Wolfgang Iser’s “‘referential field’ upon which one can register meaning and establish connections during the act of reading (or rereading) the text” (Dunn and Morris 31) and emphasizes what I call readerly compositing processes. The organizing principle of place is “an essential field of reference for complex interconnections” and the interrelationships of collective protagonists are “as difficult and time-consuming as putting together a jigsaw puzzle” (46, 71). Both descriptions suggest the need for readerly compositing.

<sup>11</sup> I would argue, following Cary Wolfe’s work on systems theory, John Tomlinson’s on globalization and cultural identity, and Robertson’s on the four differently scaled components of the global field, that boundary making can increase alongside and even promote networking.

contemporary multicultural society as a major influence on this narrative form, Dunn and Morris point toward the connection between contemporary globalization and compositing that I analyze in this project. In their final chapter, Dunn and Morris go even further. Considering spatialization metaphors like palimpsests, quilts, webs, and borderlands, they emphasize the importance of readerly compositing to contemporary life:

[A] reader's perspective must shift from distance to depth, from the individual to the field, and back again, in a dynamic process. Again, in essence, the composite novel facilitates such a dynamic process because of its structural aesthetic—the fact that its text-pieces are both autonomous and interconnected. And this is, after all, a paradigm of how we live our lives: constantly shifting our focus from past to future to present, from others to ourselves and back again, with autonomy *and* interconnection, in fits and starts. (120)

The composite novel reflects everyday compositing, or as they put it, “the composite novel . . . fits our lives” (120). My project aims to demonstrate how the composite novel form is only one instance of a larger pattern increasing in significance with the acceleration of globalization.

In literature, compositing strategies are employed on many levels beyond narrative structure. We see them in individuals negotiating competing identity claims and beliefs as they struggle to understand who they are, how the world works, and how they fit into it. We see cultural and political groups use them to develop different understandings of history, interpretations of the present, and visions for the future. We see compositing strategies on the level of technology in computational works like videogames with separable components that can be flexibly plugged into larger programs or structures where and when needed. And we

see them in the way literary and cultural criticism combines theories, literary works, and real-world events to understand the world around us more generally. Narrative compositing frequently stresses generational relations, temporal relations beyond conventional linearity and unilateral history, place relations, and developments of postmodern attention to constructed perspectives. In contemporary global Anglophone literature we frequently see narratives composited around multiple focal points and characters dispersed across times, locations, ideologies, identities, geopolitical situations, and technological networks.<sup>12</sup>

The escalating importance of new technologies in the expressive arts and culture in general demands closer attention to compositing relationships. Compositing describes processes of creating and conceptualizing complex structures with diverse (cultural, material, technological, social, psychological) components. Offering a non-homogenizing relational understanding of complexity, compositing can describe identities, cultural interactions, expressive and technological objects and systems (or “situations,” as Johanna Drucker puts it), at many scales. The objects thus constituted or understood are composites. Compositing provides a way of speaking about such interrelations at many levels of specificity and of tying together disparate discourses to reveal meaningful similarities among different realms of contemporary experience. I propose

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<sup>12</sup> Patrick Jagoda’s “network aesthetics” explores narrative practices focused specifically on representing global networks. Jagoda’s article, which asserts the increased necessity of conceptualizing inevitably incomplete representations of such networks in our era of complex connectivity, constitutes a network-centric compositing analysis (66).

compositing as a form of interdisciplinary understanding (performed by artists, critics, and many of us in the course of our everyday lives), bringing conversations and concepts together without homogenizing their constituents into an undifferentiated whole. Forms of complexity best understood through compositing are present in a great deal of contemporary global fiction in English. My dissertation will demonstrate that a compositing analysis of these works deepens our understanding of the literary texts and the theoretical approaches used to study them.

Compositing analyses of the texts included in my study produce new understandings of novels and new media literatures. Compositing's emphasis on configurative process rather than on the contents of a given composite's theoretical foundation reminds us that all theories, approaches, and tools have weaknesses as well as strengths. Accordingly, these readings are meant to provide new perspectives on these texts and to use the texts to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of a compositing approach. The novels of Zadie Smith, Michael Ondaatje, Junot Díaz, and Neal Stephenson, among others, along with a new media work such as Atlus's videogame *Catherine*, explore interactions among different entities and ways of being in a globalized world. This project will help literary and cultural criticism catch up with and theorize the interactions, composites, and acts of compositing explored by contemporary literary works.

A key advantage of compositing is that its articulation of complex relationships does not blend the components of a composite into a homogeneous

end product. Many strands of literary criticism and theory point toward the conclusion that no single theoretical or critical (meta)narrative can tell the whole story of a theory, a history, or a culture.<sup>13</sup> Critics and theorists have largely accepted claims for the multiplicity and internal diversity of cultural conditions, but this very consensus has made it more difficult to convince scholars to rally around the epoch-defining significance of any one cultural condition. There were always multiplicities of experiences, of course, but accelerated globalization has made nearly every locality a site of idiosyncratic cultural exchange, resulting in a proliferation of such complexities. This has made cultural theory warier about glossing over cultural complications in the name of simplifying universalizations and periodizations.

Contemporary theory's internalization of postmodernist insights has spurred realizations that the concept of "postmodernism" is in many ways counterproductively universalizing. In this context, composing analysis helps address overlooked difference and complexity without attempting to redefine the contemporary period in order to displace the importance of the postmodern. My

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<sup>13</sup> In *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford argues that contemporary ethnographies "are perhaps condemned to oscillate between two metanarratives: one of homogenization, the other of emergence; one of loss, the other of invention. In most specific conjunctures both narratives are relevant, each undermining the other's claim to tell 'the whole story'" (17). Rita Felski similarly challenges monolithic or universalizing definitions of postmodernism, insisting that the postmodern condition is not coherent and universal, but rather descriptive of "the simultaneous existence of differing temporalities, worldviews, and modes of experience" (101). Theoretical understandings get complicated enough when a historical and cultural condition is (accurately) seen as being complex and multiple in this way, but they become even more challenging when we acknowledge that for all its internal multiplicities, this approach to the postmodern condition still does not tell the whole story.

project is focused on strategy and practice before period or genre. It does not assert a sharp demarcation between the emphasis on compositing in contemporary global fiction and other literary genres or periods—compositing as narrative strategy and content is perhaps nowhere more prominent than in Pynchon’s postmodernist classic, *Gravity’s Rainbow*. I argue instead that these narrative concerns have proliferated and intensified in contemporary global fiction and new media literature since Pynchon was writing. Similarly, I do not argue that compositing is irrelevant to analysis of, for instance, Joyce and Ireland or Faulkner and the American South, which emphasize unequal power dynamics at geopolitical scopes other than globalization (an issue explored in chapter two). Rather, I assert that globalization’s proliferating array of political, economic, cultural, and technological contexts has made compositing and composites particularly prominent in the experiences and work of those authors grouped together under the heading of contemporary global Anglophone fiction (itself an imperfect composite concept involving disparate authors, locations, experiences of globalization, and relationships to the English language, as discussed below). Compositing as a high-level concept offers an alternative to periodizing or universalizing postmodernisms. Rather than replacing them, it provides a context for understanding those approaches as inevitably partial. By treating periodizations and cultural conditions as composites, we can articulate their patterns of emphasis and marginalization while avoiding the blunt oppositional move of simply discarding the old framework entirely in favor of a new

one that, by wholly rejecting the old, dooms itself to the same kind of partiality it critiques.

While theory has been coming to terms with the failure of metanarratives like the postmodern condition to capture the full diversity of realities, the radically disruptive effects of globalization have been calling attention to such diversity in contemporary society and culture. In this project, I explore the challenges theory, global fiction, and new media face in representing contemporary realities defined by accelerating globalization and the increasing prominence of technology in our lives. This provides the foundation for arguing that we must go beyond “the postmodern condition” in describing how new narratives composite structures, perspectives, and experiences. Rather than more metadefinitions or metanarratives of our cultural condition, we need multiple definitions and narratives emphasizing the complexity of contemporary culture by analyzing cultural relations and strategies in addition to discrete cultural conditions. I propose compositing not as a universalizing replacement for periodization or postmodernism or globalization, but as a complementary concept, a non-exclusive metastrategy that offers a new perspective on how we can construct understandings of a complex world.

Critics must attend to the dynamics of interaction connecting cultures, cultural forces, ideological imperatives, personal desires, and world systems. As critics we need to foreground the ever-present social and cultural complexity that has been suppressed by simplifying metanarratives. Exploring how individuals, societies, and cultures deal with complexity is particularly necessary to

contemporary cultural criticism because accelerating globalization, powered by technology, has also increased the prominence of cognitive dissonance (inconsistent beliefs and actions) resulting from the oversimplifying, fundamentalist alternatives to careful compositing that Robertson warns against. With regional, national, and global connections—closely intertwined with new technologies and media and manifesting within individual localities—proliferating for so much of the world's population, contemporary literature increasingly emphasizes compositing, and cultural criticism will benefit from attending to how print and new media texts are grappling with these issues.

In addition to exploring synchronic and spatialized issues such as personal and group identity, globalized intercultural interactions, postcolonial postmodernity, and the various formulations attempting to replace postmodernity, compositing can effectively address diachronic or temporal complexity. How do we construct understandings of history by emphasizing some relationships between ideas, events, cultures, and related concepts across time and suppressing others? And how do people with conflicting historical experiences and interpretations relate to one another across cultural groups and family generations?<sup>14</sup> Literary and cultural analysis of these interactions—within a person, between individuals or between an individual and a group, and among groups—can improve our

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<sup>14</sup> Nancy Partner's "post-postmodern" (though I would argue it is more anti-postmodern) narrative analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict helpfully notes the crucial difference in the narrative contexts each side uses to frame its understanding of the conflict.



understanding of contemporary life and literature without reverting to simplistic attempts to force the present into a singular or prevailing cultural condition.

These dynamics are nowhere more apparent than in contemporary global Anglophone fiction. The linguistic composite of Anglophone fiction provides an interesting layer of diversity within similarity, allowing comparison of the different relationships of authors and texts to one globalizing language of expression and transmission. In addition to race, gender, sexuality, and class inequalities across a wide range of literatures, the cross-cultural focus of much global fiction in English highlights geopolitical and linguistic power structures and relations, demonstrating both the liberating and the oppressive potential of globalization and technological change. “Anglophone” is a function of the commercial power of English as a global language of communication and expression, the convenience of the English-speaking academy, and, not least, of the history of Anglo-American colonialism. Global Anglophone fiction thus offers an important microcosm of larger economic and political dynamics—as well as issues of convenience and information overload—that characterize our age of accelerating globalization. Categorizing texts for academic and/or commercial purposes is a messy, political, and inevitably imperfect task—like other acts of compositing. Two roundtables at the 2015 MLA Convention reinforced the fact that literary categorization is a fraught and ongoing process in which, as Jahan Ramazani argues, we must work for terminological pragmatism and pluralism, in the absence of perfect categories or terms that might avoid marginalizing texts (Dettmar, Ramazani, Walkowitz, Joshi; Brouillette, Robbins,

Vadde, Ngugi, Joshi). Particularly when addressing the complex realities of technologized, globalized connectivity, global Anglophone fiction provides a valuable venue for exploring how cultural theory can interrogate contemporary relationality, in part *because* of its own imperfection as a category. We must approach the categories we use to discuss literature as venues for reflection, recalibration, and multi-perspectival thinking. We can and should work to improve our terminology, but we must also recognize that no single perspective or system of terminology can completely avoid marginalizations and suppressions.

The works of literature considered here explore relationality through form as well as subject matter. Many works of contemporary global fiction use narrative structure to highlight creative acts of compositing incorporating generational and other temporal relations, place relations, cultural relations, and complex constructed perspectives. The emphasis on relational compositing in these four conceptual focal points suggests, I argue, that criticism of contemporary global Anglophone fiction ought to investigate processes of connecting and arranging what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls “chunks of the real,” processes by which we construct the identities, cultures, narratives, and understandings of time and place that allow us to function in the world (65). The salience of these topics in contemporary global fiction suggests the usefulness of compositing to literary and cultural criticism. The histories of colonialism and postcolonialism have ensured that cultures and individuals at the frontiers and margins of empires (as well as other cultural “contact zones,” in Mary Louise Pratt’s terms) have been forced to

deal with fraught intercultural exchanges for a long time. For nearly as long, reverse colonization has brought those exchanges back to the Western metropolitan centers as well. In both cases, those writing from and about cultural contact zones (or, in Gloria Anzaldúa's compelling formulation, the *Borderlands/La Frontera*) have been particularly effective at literary exploration of the dynamics of interacting cultural conditions, ideologies, histories, and conflicted personal values.

My project ties together and expands on existing cultural criticism on the importance of relationality and contextualization in an era of accelerated globalization. For example, Pratt's concept of contact zones reveals the importance of locations in which cultures abut and interact, helpfully emphasizing the dynamics of interaction rather than static portraits of individual cultures or cultural conditions. Paul Gilroy's attention to "routes" as well as "roots" and Clifford's insistence on "specific paths through modernity" rather than "endangered authenticities" similarly contribute to frameworks of cultural understanding focused on dynamism rather than stasis (Gilroy 19; Clifford 5). I build on these foundations, exploring dynamism in individual, familial, cultural, and historical interactions and developments. Recent work on globalization by Spivak, Paul Jay, and Mike Featherstone, among others, illuminates the role of increased global connectivity in expanding the prominence of relational identity formation in recent years, as intensified processes of cultural exchange force individuals and

communities to continually revise their sense of identity in relation to those around them.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to focusing on the formal use of composing and how it emerges as a topic in global fiction, I assert the significance of composing to contemporary life, culture, and criticism. Existing globalization, new media, and literary criticism can be newly productive when placed into composite frameworks for understanding contemporary culture through literature. Personal, close-to-the-ground literary representations of experiences of globalization and migration complement broader, more distant analyses of diasporas and migrations usually focused on politics and national affiliation. As Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc argue in *Nations Unbound*, fictional representations of identity construction (often via composing) are often articulated in response to real-world conditions before those involved in the real-world phenomena can clearly, consistently express that reality for themselves:

While we speak a great deal in this book about transnationalism as processes and of the construction of identities that reflect transnational experience, individuals, communities, or states rarely identify themselves as transnational. It is only in contemporary fiction (see Anzaldua 1987; Ghosh 1988; Marshall 1991; Rushdie 1988) that this state of 'in-betweenness,' [sic] has been fully voiced. Living in a world in which discourses about identity continue to be framed in terms of loyalty to nations and nation-states, most transmigrants have neither fully conceptualized nor articulated a form of transnational identity. (8)

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<sup>15</sup> Nancy Partner's analysis of the role of narrative in identity formation and maintenance in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict provides a useful case study.

Instead, Basch et al. argue, individuals often continue to root their identities primarily in nation-states, even when not living in the nation-state in question; articulated identities lag behind lived realities until fiction helps express complex new experiences of nation, community, belonging, and self (8).

I ground my argument in narrative analysis because narrative is perhaps the foremost method by which we both develop and articulate understandings of ourselves and our world. I chose the novels and videogame analyzed here because their breadth illustrates the globe-spanning prominence of authorial and everyday compositing strategies in recent decades as well as the diversity of material employed by compositing characters and authors. I consider these texts imperfectly representative of the problematic category known as global Anglophone literature (with the exception of the game *Catherine*, which was originally mostly in Japanese, with a spattering of English, and which is considered in translation). I support my observations about these primary texts with the work of globalization and new-media theorists who shed light on important kinds of and venues for compositing, because accelerating globalization and its driving technologies are primary causes of the complex connectivity and awareness of relevant contexts for understanding that increasingly characterize our daily lives.

I will explore compositing as a critical and readerly approach, as a formal process and structure in print and new-media literature, and as a process employed in everyday life. Each point of access into the concept of compositing explored in this project should help develop and complicate understanding of the others. Each

chapter will also stress the relational, distributed nature of composing analysis through comparative analysis of literary texts. Most chapters analyze two novels, with chapter one examining four novels and chapter three exploring one videogame alongside online player forums. Finally, the array of literary, narrative, cultural, globalization, and new media theory and criticism supporting my analysis can also be seen as an interdisciplinary analytical composite. The following chapter overviews indicate how these dynamics will play out as my argument unfolds.

### **Chapter Overviews**

In chapter one, I demonstrate how a focus on composing can deepen our understanding of both the subject matter and narrative structure of texts dealing with globalization. The chapter analyzes the significance of composing approaches to literary production in four novels in English from across the globe: Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness*, Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Julia Alvarez's *Saving the World*, and Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*. These novels grapple with contemporary globalized life through narrative compositing of multiple generations, focalizing characters, geopolitical settings, languages, communities, times, and invoked contexts. These narrative techniques mirror and supplement the compositing methods characters use to understand themselves, their experiences, and the world. Mda, Díaz, Alvarez, and Castillo use compositing interdependently at thematic and formal levels to express the possibilities for local agency in the context of the unavoidable complexity of influential global forces. Composite structures help prevent paralysis in the face of overwhelming complexity, allowing characters,

authors, and readers manageable simplifications that provide reminders that they *are* simplifications not to be mistaken for unproblematic representations of the global whole. These novels suggest through form and content that composing helps characters, authors, and readers better manage the overwhelming scope of a world of interconnected knowledge, people, and institutions. Rather than surrendering our agency, disengaging in the face of paralyzing complexity, or handicapping ourselves with simplistically coherent worldviews and narratives, developing a composite vision lets us engage the world while remembering that the version of it we're engaging is not the whole story.

Chapter one's particularly broad focus on four novels helps illustrate why I have chosen to focus on the literary category of global Anglophone fiction. The works of Díaz and Alvarez might be more specifically studied as Dominican-American Anglophone texts; adding Castillo requires a shift to, perhaps, Hispanic-American Anglophone literature. Adding Mda, however, moves us beyond a single region or ethnicity. The advantage of the larger, more general category of global Anglophone fiction is the ability to trace large patterns; the disadvantage, of course, is the loss of specificity. There is not a "right" choice: both general and specific analyses contribute to our understanding and should be composited together, either within or between analyses. The breadth of literary works considered in this chapter will illustrate the usefulness of composing criticism to establish broad patterns connecting large bodies of works, in contrast to later chapters' narrower focus on fewer novels, which will demonstrate the productivity of composing

criticism to engage in more detail the narrative structures of individual works.

Overall, this study could be usefully complemented by composing analyses focused on the specific uses and contexts of a particular region or ethnicity, etc.

Where chapter one analyzes novels in which globalization is central to the subject matter, chapter two focuses on narrative composing strategies in two novels where globalization is not the primary frame of reference but forms a subtly important context. Zadie Smith's *NW* and Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* employ composing as a narrative technique particularly suited to exploring the backgrounded yet paradoxically significant framing role of globalization and complex connectivity in the lives and stories of the novels' protagonists. *NW* focuses intently on the local and *Anil's Ghost* on the national, but in doing so they reveal the pervasiveness with which localities and nations have become interlaced with the global. Key composing strategies – shifting among multiple focalizing characters, disrupting linearity, attending to spatial and temporal relationships, and thematically and formally emphasizing constructed perspectives – inform the framework for these stories. Smith's and Ondaatje's composite narratives demonstrate that how central or emphatic a role a phenomenon like globalization plays in our lives is part of how we experience and understand it. The novels' lack of emphasis on globalization is counterintuitively significant: by keeping globalization out of the center of their narratives, Smith and Ondaatje represent a key aspect of it—the experience of globalization can be ubiquitous but largely unobtrusive—that is easily lost when it becomes the center of attention. Globalization as the center of



attention is more the exception than the rule, so narratives that represent its more characteristic background role help reveal the extent and nature of globalization's importance in our lives today. The ubiquitous yet narratively marginalized effects of accelerated globalization in *Anil's Ghost* and *NW* represent what these phenomena look and feel like in the lives of each novel's characters.

Chapter three explores compositing and new-media literature to demonstrate how literary analysis of new-media objects sheds light on cultural meanings of contemporary globalized technologies. This interdisciplinary chapter investigates technological as well as narrative and cultural compositing in expressive new-media objects and argues for their significance to contemporary technological and cultural globalization. The chapter first outlines new-media theoretical foundations for a generalized concept of compositing. New-media literature, like traditional literature, presents simplified, selective models of the world, with the additional twist that core aspects of new media models are explicit, procedural, quantitative, and responsive to user input. New-media literature thus offers opportunities to engage and reflect on compositing processes by which we make sense of a globalized world increasingly structured and interconnected by the same technologies used in these works. I then analyze the role of technological and narrative compositing in the 2011 videogame *Catherine* in globally disseminating modern, schematic concepts of identity. The chapter ends by exploring the role of online player communities and collective intelligence in developing composite understandings of new-media literature and furthering the globalization of

compositing processes and (in the case of *Catherine*) modern identity. Chapter three concludes that the limitations of new-media composites are strengths as much as drawbacks, because in necessarily excluding much that is meaningful in human experience, their models therefore include the critical experience of compositing understandings from an overwhelmingly complex world. Readers who would prefer to begin by establishing the origins of general compositing in new-media studies are invited to read chapter three first before returning to chapter one and reading the rest in order.

Chapter four returns to print fiction and the overlooked significance of technology in the literature of globalization and of globalization in the literature of technology (hard science fiction). The chapter explores the close ties between technology and globalization in Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* and Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age*. *Transmission* examines the transnational and *The Diamond Age* the (nearly) post-national experiences of multiple focalizing characters. Both use composite structures to create a posthuman "technology's-eye-view" of the world from which to narrate the global influence of technologies and provide a perspective on globalization unavailable in our everyday experience. These composite narratives of technology and globalization reflect on how globalizing media technologies (like those explored in chapter three) facilitate the global reach of influences distanced in or dispersed across time and space that are not always easily visible to those they affect—much as chapters one and two show narrative compositing being used to demonstrate other aspects of complex connectivity. In

each text, information is manipulated and moved at breakneck speeds, while the ability of embodied humans to traverse the globe remains tied up in complex ways with national borders. Kunzru's and Stephenson's narratives suggest that technological complexity is pushing us toward a posthumanism in which effective understandings of the world will be significantly mediated through technological ways of knowing and acting. These novels' narrative worldbuilding and posthuman, technology's-eye-view perspectives are composite responses to subject matter in which globalized technologies and technological events are at least as central as the human characters.

Chapter five draws on the postmemory and post-amnesia work of Marianne Hirsch and Ananya Jahanara Kabir to understand how Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* explore experiences of global migration across generational and historical time. Postmemory and post-amnesia function as forms of temporal compositing uniquely relevant to experiences of migration in an age of accelerating globalized connectivity. In these novels, daughters growing up in America and England (and their parents) are deeply affected by postmemories and post-amnesias of their parents' South Asian experiences. In both cases, hidden parentage mirrors suppressed heritages that challenge their identities and worldviews. Newly revealed connections to distant times and places demand that both characters and readers rethink historical narratives, responses to trauma, and perspectives complicated by error, suppression, simplification, omission, and ideological bias. Rushdie's and Lahiri's novels suggest that post-amnesia,

postmemory, historiography, and fictional focalization are related composing techniques that help us engage personal and political experiences and histories whose complexity is compounded by time as well as globalized space. Composing analysis of *Shalimar the Clown* and *The Lowland* demonstrates that experiences of globalized complexity are often complicated by the selective emphasis, suppression, and imperfect knowledge and understanding built into personal and institutionalized temporal composites of the past.

A brief conclusion extends consideration of composing to pedagogy in the global fiction and new media literature classroom. It outlines a classroom technique for promoting the understanding and use of composing strategies that I call “closer reading.” With closer reading, the goal—articulated in relative, student-centered terms—is to help students read more closely than they currently do by focusing on process, the frontier between ignorance and knowledge, and avoiding distorting new information to fit oversimplified frameworks of understanding. Instead, closer reading stresses revising our understandings to accommodate new knowledge. Closer readings are not a substitute for close readings but a process of getting closer to their meticulous detail while attending to how new knowledge fits or fails to fit with a reader’s existing understanding. This approach sees reading as an idiosyncratic composing process susceptible to standardization (for better or worse) by interpretive communities. When performing closer reading in the classroom, I have students choose what parts of a text to focus on based on their questions and points of confusions, so the reading that emerges feels less like a

monolithic preexisting scholarly interpretation and more like an understanding that emerges as we work together to engage the text. Emphasizing to students that reading is a composing process helps break down the counterproductive notion that there is only one right way to read and that students need to discount the perspectives and points of composite connection (or failure) that occur to them in favor of creating some definitive interpretation of a text. This closer reading composing approach can easily be scaled up from close reading within a text to apply to contextual and intertextual literary and cultural analysis, connecting it back to the broader concerns of this project.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “YOU HAVE TO IMAGINE A STORY BIGGER . . . THAN THE SUM OF YOUR PARTS”: COMPOSITING, CONTENT, AND FORM IN NARRATIVES OF GLOBALIZATION<sup>1</sup>

Among the effects of globalization are increased complexity in three key areas of contemporary life: identities, historical events, and world networks. John Tomlinson observes, “[t]he sheer scale and complexity of the empirical reality of global connectivity is something which defies attempts to encompass it: it is something we can only grasp by cutting into it in various ways” (*Globalization* 17). Tomlinson contends that we must pursue economic, political, and cultural analyses of globalization “whilst always denying them conceptual priority: pursuing one dimension in the self-conscious recognition of multidimensionality. This sort of deliberately anti-reductionist analysis should also make us sensitive to the points at which different dimensions interconnect and interact” (17). A key method for managing such complexity is what I call compositing: we construct narratives, interpretations, and worldviews from logics, ideologies, and experiential fragments whose connections are not seamless. Compositing aims to make sense of these pieces, their interconnections, and the piecemeal whole constituted by their arrangements, while emphasizing the contingency of both process and product. Composites are complex wholes whose parts remain discrete but meaningfully

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<sup>1</sup> Quotation from Julia Alvarez, *Saving the World* 328.

connected, and they help authors, readers, and characters navigate our era of accelerating globalization and technological change. A significant strand of contemporary global fiction features narrative content and structures centrally concerned with composite configurations and compositing processes as a means of exploring experiences of global connections that are increasingly familiar to many around the world today.<sup>2</sup>

Globalization scholarship is particularly sensitive to this state of affairs. In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Anthony Giddens stresses the separations and reassemblies in a way that essentially foregrounds what I call compositing processes:

The dynamism of modernity derives from the *separation of time and space* and their recombination in forms which permit the precise time-space 'zoning' of social life; the *disembedding* of social systems (a phenomenon which connects closely with the factors involved in time-space separation); and the *reflexive ordering and reordering* of social relations in the light of continual inputs of knowledge affecting the actions of individuals and groups. (Giddens 16-17)

Like Giddens's disembedding, Tomlinson's deterritorialization holds "that complex connectivity weakens the ties of culture to place" while extending cultural phenomena across networks spanning global distances (*Globalization* 30).

Tomlinson defines globalization as a modern condition of "*complex connectivity*" characterized by "the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependences that characterize modern social life" (2).

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<sup>2</sup> As should already be evident, talking about compositing lends itself to compound structures. These should be themselves be considered acts of compositing: as complex as such lists can sometimes be, they are not exhaustive, but rather attempts to express what I consider the most salient aspects of the subjects at hand.

These analyses of globalization complexity raise a follow-up question I will address here: how do individuals, societies, authors, and readers each *deal with* the overwhelming complexity of global connectivity?

In exploring the answer, I draw my central term, “compositing,” from the discourse of new media studies. As commonly used by media scholar Lev Manovich and the film industry, digital compositing “refers to the process of combining a number of moving image sequences, and possibly stills, into a single sequence with the help of special compositing software” (136-37). For Manovich, this media processing technique suggests and “exemplifies a more general operation of computer culture—assembling together a number of elements to create a single seamless object. . . . a typical operation in assembling any new media object” (139). Expanding on Manovich’s insight, I argue that this strategy of selection and assembly extends beyond the creation of new media objects to the creation of any expressive work and even the interpretation of any complex situation; I also contend that one need neither intend nor achieve seamless composites. A key advantage of borrowing the concept of compositing (rather than related concepts such as relationality, hybridity, networks, systems, multivocality, or simply complexity or “complex connectivity”) is the emphasis on compositing as a local strategy rather than an essentializing or given structure. In other words, “compositing” precedes “composites” both chronologically and conceptually. Compositing as a strategy responds to the overwhelming complexity of



contemporary media technologies and the globalized society they enable and pervade.

In this chapter, I analyze the significance of composing approaches to literary production in four novels in English: Zakes Mda's *Heart of Redness*, Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Julia Alvarez's *Saving the World*, and Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*. The chapter highlights these novels' use of similar composite structures to grapple with contemporary globalized life. This chapter, like its objects of analysis, is a composite produced by emphasizing some connections and letting others go. I concentrate on contemporary works (1993-2007) rather than presenting a historical overview of literary composites in order to focus on experiences of accelerating contemporary globalization, which I argue is accentuating the need for composing in society and literature. I bypass linguistic composing as a field already productively populated by critical analyses.<sup>3</sup> I focus on narrative works created with and for print text technologies, excluding for example the new media material and narrative technologies addressed in chapter three. I focus on novels set in and written by authors from multiple regions of the world (Africa, the Caribbean, and different parts of the United States) to recognize with Anthony D. King that the multicultural engagements that help complicate

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<sup>3</sup> Analyses of linguistic composites, such as Eugenia Casielles-Suárez's essay on radical Spanish/English code-switching in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Marie Chantale Mofin Noussi's essay on "the 'Xhosa-ification' of the English language" in *The Heart of Redness*, have already been productively applied to the texts considered here, however (Mofin Noussi 291).

worldviews and experiences tend to begin in the (post-)colonies and work their way from there to the centers of empire.<sup>4</sup>

These multiple-focalizer narratives provide clear examples of structure more approachable through the lens of compositing than concepts (useful elsewhere) like hybridity or network. Multiple focalizing characters do not mix together and become other, hybrid characters. Portions of their life experiences are selectively combined to create a narrative whose meaning comes from juxtaposition and order more than from hybridization or networked connectivity. While hybrids are more helpful in understanding cultures and identities, networks are useful to explain global flows of money, power, goods, cultural and media objects, etc. The concept of compositing helps us see the abstracted similarities among these different combinatory and connective processes. Whether at the levels of identity or community formation, worldview or historical construction or literary narration, or the development of political, economic, cultural, technological, or communication networks, compositing involves selecting from available ingredients, connecting them together (with or without a clear core or center), and investing the whole with new meaning derived from these processes of selection, creation, and representation.

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<sup>4</sup> King argues that globalization is central to modernity and that “the real emergence of ‘today’s’ modernity, as an ideology of beginning, of modernity as the new, is in colonial not metropolitan space” (114). King contends that the first “‘modern multicultural’ city” was “probably in ‘peripheral’ . . . Rio, Calcutta or Mombasa,” undermining the Eurocentric concept of core and periphery and suggesting that compositing as a response to transnational complexities would have been needed first in colonial space (114).

In literature we can observe many kinds of composing. Characters develop composite identities and worldviews to reconcile competing identity claims and beliefs without recourse to unworkable concepts of purity. Similar composing processes are employed by organizations and communities—culturally, politically, and economically engaged groups with different understandings of history, interpretations of the present, and visions for the future. Scholars composite theories, literary works, and historical events to understand the world. Print technologies encourage or, at least, have normalized narratives in which even non-linear stories have a single clear reading sequence—a pre-composited order—whereas in chapter three, we will analyze new media technologies offering multiple not-yet-composited sequences and narratives made available within one expressive object. The novels considered in this chapter explore globalized experiences through narrative composing of multiple generations, focalizing characters, geopolitical settings, languages, communities, times, and invoked contexts. These narrative techniques mirror and supplement the composing methods characters use to understand themselves, their experiences, and the world.

### ***The Heart of Redness***

Mda, Díaz, Alvarez, and Castillo use composing at two levels, thematic and formal, as a strategy for dealing with urgent, unavoidable complexity. Thematic composing tackles the complexities of globalization in everyday life, while formal composing (in static print texts) creates a single narrative picture of experience that incorporates multiple perspectives. My readings here explore how composing

operates interdependently at these two levels in these texts. I begin my literary analysis with Mda's *The Heart of Redness*, a 2000 novel structured around the philosophical, religious, and political conflicts between two branches of a South African family in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, featuring characters with both static and malleable composite identities and worldviews. In *The Heart of Redness*, composite narrative structures emphasizing juxtaposed subjects replace singularity of focus and traditional narrative connections like temporal linearity.

Temporal/generational relations serve as both content and formal structuring device in a narrative organized around two discrete time periods, the 1850s and the 1990s, between which lies an unnarrated generational gap including the whole of apartheid (marked in the family tree at the beginning of the text as "THE MIDDLE GENERATIONS"). Both periods' stories focus on the two branches of the family descended from Xikixa, with the contemporary narrative also emphasizing characters (Camagu and Dalton) whose relations to the central families are not (initially) familial. The twinning of families and temporal settings invites comparisons and contrasts of the globalized cultural, economic, and political engagements shaping Qolorha and their uneven effects.<sup>5</sup>

In *The Heart of Redness*, Mda frequently shifts between timelines within chapters without any demarcation clearer than a blank space between paragraphs

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<sup>5</sup> Jana Gohrisch characterizes *Heart of Redness's* "non-chronological stories with multiple focalizers" as "[r]epresenting history in the age of globalization" (232). The two Qolorha narratives, for Gohrisch, "have global connotations because they dramatize the connectedness of different racial and ethnic groups, classes and genders in the modern world" (243).

or sections in different timelines. Despite the hundred-year temporal disconnect, Mda composites the timelines into deeply intertwined strands producing a narrative sequence emphasizing thematic parallels over chronology. Mda uses this to stress similarities between the two periods, for example by leaving readers momentarily uncertain what time is being narrated when sections begin without clear temporal markers, as when a section begins, “It was the land of the prophets. Then the gospel people came” (47).

Mda’s temporal compositing strengthens thematic emphasis on the similarities between the central conflicts of the two time periods, most notably the conflict between Believers and Unbelievers (appellations drawn from the historical conflict). In the 1850s, this fictionalized conflict centers around the historical narrative of Believers who follow the young prophetess Nongqawuse in slaughtering all of their cattle and waiting for supernatural deliverance from the increasing oppression of white colonizers and, on the other hand, Unbelievers who find this faith in prophecy self-destructive, refuse to destroy their herds and crops, and instead try to negotiate a less oppressive relationship with the colonizers. The brothers Twin (a Believer) and Twin-Twin (“the original Unbeliever”) epitomize these two positions (62). In the 1990s, this tension, again embodied by the enduring split between the two branches of Xikixa’s descendants, manifests largely through attitudes toward preserving cultural traditions and engaging economic and cultural modernization at national and local levels. Mda refuses to give the Believer/Unbeliever dichotomy clean boundaries, sometimes tying the binary to a

preservation/modernization framework and at other times undermining the simple consistency of this connection. The Believers, for example, side with Camagu and Dalton to find sustainable ways of incorporating cultural traditions into economic modernization efforts, in opposition to the Unbelievers who naively wish to go along with exploitative modernization plans (centered around a casino complex) being pushed by the national government.

Mda uses temporal parallels in his narrative of these ongoing conflicts to demonstrate how basic tensions manifest in different ways at different times, showing a complex relationship between continuity across time (Believer/Unbeliever) and temporally specific phenomena (political dynamics and forms of modernization, for instance). This relationship is also reinforced by the comparisons and contrasts offered by the individual members of the family within and across the two timelines. Non-linear structure in *The Heart of Redness* develops a perspective on individual conflicts and enduring tensions, local particularity and global trends, and the traditional and the modern, as applied to both colonial and post-apartheid South Africa. Mda's temporal compositing provides a selectively contextualizing perspective on current and historical events, identities, and the world, highlighting points of view directly affected by transnational and globalized concerns.

Mda's narrative composites more than just time periods in its exploration of complex connectivity. In addition to the intergenerational and the historical/temporal, discussed above, the narratives of both time periods feature

intercultural exchanges and changing configurations of personal and group identity.<sup>6</sup> The Believer/Unbeliever dichotomy thematizes simultaneous, divergent, and ongoing (centuries-long, in fact) processes for developing worldviews grounded in a complex globalized locality—Qolorha—and for shaping the present and future of that community.<sup>7</sup> Over time, the Believer and Unbeliever worldviews shift to account for current events and new information, but the core structures change slowly and rarely; fundamental similarities are recognizable between 1850s and 1990s versions of (Un)Believing despite the temporal distance. In the 1850s, white colonial forces' increasing oppression of the native Xhosa culture is a primary catalyst for the appeal of Nongqawuse's apocalyptic message and the ensuing Believer/Unbeliever schism within the Xhosa. In the 1990s, the Believer/Unbeliever conflict regains relevance and prominence as the residents of Qolorha must determine a way forward in the new economic and political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>8</sup> This involves managing the village's relationship with a

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<sup>6</sup> As Hilary P. Dannenberg notes, "the novel is full of characters who are bound up in a process of making cultural choices and are part of a larger process of cultural intermingling and hybridisation, the inevitable result of contact between different cultures" (178).

<sup>7</sup> In Benita Parry's analysis, the novel "'foreground[s] the problems of recuperation," stressing "the need to understand cultural inheritance," and showcasing "oppressed peoples who . . . fashion new and historically informed forms of consciousness replete with reverberations of rediscovered histories" (21).

<sup>8</sup> Koyana Siphokazi argues that "Qolorha [sic] as place . . . [is] the continual reminder of both the separation and the hybrid interpenetration of the colonizer and the colonized. . . . the site which embodies a crucial meeting point between Western and African modes of thought, belief systems, economies, politics, and general mores" (52). Mda's focus on one location emphasizes the multiplicity of cultural, economic, ideological, and political influences and future possibilities in

national government that, if less brutal than the 1850s colonial powers, is not necessarily more concerned with what is best for the rural locals. Jana Gohrisch asserts, “[b]oth Believers and Unbelievers try to provide their lives with a pattern they can follow in the future,” and concludes that “[s]tory-line and plot suggest a compromise” between the Believer and Unbeliever worldviews (243). Each group strives to use ideological priorities (advocating progress, respecting tradition, maintaining economic independence, etc.) to help determine how new and old information from their environment should be incorporated into an understanding of the world. “‘The Unbelievers stand for progress,’ asserts Bhonco . . . . ‘We want to get rid of this bush which is a sign of our uncivilized state. We want developers to come and build the gambling city that will bring money to this community. That will bring modernity to our lives, and will rid us of our redness’” (92).

For example, Bhonco applies core values of his Unbeliever worldview, like progress, modernity, and wealth, to one of the novel’s central conflicts: a proposed casino complex that would drastically alter Qolorha’s economy and ecology. For Bhonco, the ecological damage resulting from construction and increased numbers of souvenir-greedy tourists is a small price to pay: “Yes, people have been caught smuggling cycads and reptiles out of Qolorha . . . . [but] they are ugly . . . these lizards. And these plants are of no use at all to the people” (93). This example demonstrates how composite worldviews like Unbelieving often incorporate new

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play in each time period that characters are faced with when compositing worldviews and proposals for their and Qolorha’s futures.



information haphazardly as the situation demands.<sup>9</sup> Bhonco only considers the ecological angle, for instance, because the Believer Zim stresses it as a concern. Accounting for ecology does not strain Bhonco's existing worldview; he quickly subordinates this new concern to his existing priorities, arguing, "Will progress and civilization stall because of such madness? . . . And when there is progress, who would need wood from the forest anyway?" (93). The core of Bhonco's composite worldview resists change throughout the novel and guides his efforts to lead his family and community toward his preferred future.

Camagu is more open to incorporating new information and perspectives into the heart of his composite worldview in ways that meaningfully change it. Though initially more partial to the Unbelievers' position, Camagu is skeptical of their idealistic faith in the benevolence of modernity and progress, which causes him to question their embrace of the casino project and ultimately side with the Believers in opposing it. Camagu's is not a simple binary choice, though, because *The Heart of Redness* does not present a narrative of globalized modernization in which Qolorha's options are to modernize or remain unchanged. Cultural, economic, and

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<sup>9</sup> Dannenberg notes, "Mda shows, sometimes ironically, the meeting of cultures as a mingling and sometimes bizarre misunderstanding and reassembling of narrative elements from other cultures and belief systems" (182). Through the Xhosa appropriation of the Russians after their Crimean victory over the British, for instance "Mda shows how cultural narratives grow dynamically out of incongruous and chance elements; he underlines the basic human need to construct vital narratives of belief, even if these belief systems are objectively untrue" (183). The source material for such narratives becomes even more jumbled—and the need to sort through it to decide if and how to incorporate it into one's composite worldview more acute—under the information overload of accelerating globalization.

political stasis is not an option, so the question facing the village is *how* to change and modernize. Different routes to and destinations for modernization, bringing with them different relationships with the rest of the country and the world, are proposed and advocated.<sup>10</sup> The national-government-sponsored, Unbeliever-backed option, a casino resort that would bring in money by steamrolling over local nature and culture, is ultimately prevented (by court order), and the end result is a combination of two more environmentally and culturally conscious Believer-backed modernization projects organized as cooperative societies: Camagu's holiday camp caters to hostel tourists by presenting local culture as it is today, and Dalton's cultural village caters to guests at the main hotel by presenting recreated versions of traditional products and cultural activities as they are supposed to have been at some more authentic or premodern point in the past. The casino, the holiday camp, and the cultural village approaches each emerge from a different composite of political, economic, cultural, and social priorities and attitudes about history, culture, progress, and other concepts and ideals.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gorän Therborn's historical analysis proposes "four major entries into modernity" – European, New Worlds, external threat, and colonial routes – while also noting that "individual societies may confront combinations and mutations of them" (131, 133). I would add that multiple forms of engagement with modernity are also available on subnational levels like that of Qolorha, though the range of options is bounded by the overall form of entry into modernity engaged by the larger nation or society.

<sup>11</sup> Gohrisch concludes that "[b]oth Believers and Unbelievers try to provide their lives with a pattern they can follow in the future. While the Believers cling to the sense of history as hope, Unbelievers read it as defeat. Story-line and plot suggest a compromise which is questioned and commented upon by magical-realist devices, hyperbolic irony, and metaphors and symbols" (243). The narrative compromise

*The Heart of Redness* does not present a fundamentally malleable composite worldview as necessarily good and a stable or rigid one as bad, however. The 1990s Believer Qukezwa (there is another in the 1850s) is centrally concerned with protecting the local ecology for both environmental and cultural reasons, and maintains this priority just as Bhonco sticks to his advocacy of the version of modernity approved by national political and economic leaders. Qukezwa's unchanging priorities are the foundation of a composite worldview that enables effective action to secure an acceptable future for her and Qolorha.<sup>12</sup> The shift in Camagu's worldview and priorities over the course of the novel bring his in alignment with hers, and the combination of her local knowledge and his organizational skills help them forge a future for Qolorha that better balances economic modernization with concern for the culture and ecology of Qolorha. *The Heart of Redness* suggests that more important than whether one's composite understanding of the world changes or not is how effectively it allows one to productively exercise agency in the world.

Camagu also highlights the contingent nature of the group that contests Qolorha's future; while the other members all have longstanding ties to the village

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Gohrisch highlights is an authorial composite, drawing on aspects of Believer and Unbeliever worldviews to present an understanding of the situation incorporating insights from both.

<sup>12</sup> For Dannenberg, "[a] key aspect of the figure of Qukezwa on both time levels is an affinity with and deep knowledge of the local environment, which are represented as the most positive forces in the novel because they provide a concrete framework for forms of action and orientation that stay true to the spirit – and needs – of the local community" (185).

and region, Camagu represents an unpredictable addition to the village's composite character, one who comes by chance but chooses to settle down and tie his future to that of this area, people, and culture.<sup>13</sup> Camagu's chance encounter with a beautiful woman, NomaRussia, at a wake in his apartment building— which leads him to Qolorha and helps determine the village's fate—is arbitrary: "Camagu himself is at the wake not because he has any connection with anyone here. He just found himself here" (26). Yet while his arrival in Qolorha is the result of a passing whim, his availability to pursue that whim at that moment is the result of global, national, and local political, economic, and cultural conditions.<sup>14</sup> Camagu's entrance into Qolorha's story is enabled by his years-long professional exclusion and underemployment and also his remaining economic mobility based on his relative success in America, and aside from the attraction of the pretty woman he met, Qolorha also interests Camagu because it represents a connection to his Xhosa heritage.

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<sup>13</sup> Gohrisch again on Mda's compromise/composite presentation of history: "History as it comes through . . . is neither a patterned series of events heading for progress nor a frustrating accumulation of disconnected incidents" but instead "merges both senses and comes up with a compromise that is based on cultural exchange. History emerges as 'shared' or 'connected'" (243-44).

<sup>14</sup> Camagu returns to South Africa in 1994 after nearly three decades in America and, "swept up by the euphoria of the time," decides to "stay and contribute to the development of his country" (29). Four hard years of chronic underemployment teach him that, in the new South African bureaucracy, returnees are discriminated against in favor of those who never left and can thus claim to have been fully committed to the work of overthrowing apartheid; furthermore, in the corporate world "qualified blacks" are bypassed in favor of "the inexperienced ones who were only too happy to be placed in some glass affirmative-action office where they were displayed as paragons of empowerment" (30).

Once there, Camagu chooses to remain involved in Qolorha because its people interest him (amorously, socially, culturally, and intellectually). He forms a sometimes contentious friendship with Dalton, a white store owner whose family has been in the area for many generations, founded on their concern for Qolorha's future and their interest in each other's complex composite identities: "Dalton is fascinated by an umXhosa man who has spent so many years living in America. He himself has never left South Africa and has spent most of his life in the Eastern Cape. Camagu cannot get over the fact that Dalton speaks much better isiXhosa than he'll ever be able to" (57).

*The Heart of Redness* includes many characters' perspectives on Qolorha's situation—just the 1990s timeline features Camagu, Qukezwa, Dalton, Bhonco, Zim, and Xoliswa Ximiya—without presenting any of these characters as a simple villain or hero whose perspective is to be unproblematically adopted or dismissed. In the 1850s narrative, the Believer Twin and the Unbeliever Twin-Twin both have sympathetic and unsympathetic sides, disrupting easy identification with one or the other as being "right." Rather than creating a spectrum from "right" to "wrong" positions, these multiple perspectives dispersed over two time periods form a composite narrative representation of available positions on issues of belief, cultural continuity, economic and political modernization, and social dynamics. The novel similarly refuses to establish a clear hierarchy along its other axes of composite structure. The 1850s and 1990s each receive considerable attention, as do the two major large group dynamics in play (Believers vs. Unbelievers, local interests vs.

distant corporate and government interests), the central interpersonal relationships (Bhonco and Zim; Twin and Twin-Twin; Camagu, Qukezwa, and Xoliswa Ximiya; Camagu and Dalton), and individual psychological tensions that cause characters to change or entrench themselves in their worldviews in the face of the changes around them.

Accelerating globalization influences each of these sites of compositing. The intergenerational and temporal composites highlight similarities that have persisted into the era of globalization but also the ways in which the density of globalized connections has increased. The colonial presence in the 1850s was certainly part of the long history of globalization with profound effects on the Xhosa, but by the 1990s the lines between Xhosa and non-Xhosa are complicated, with different individuals and groups relating to these cultural categories in different ways, as Camagu's and Dalton's (interest in each other's) cultural positions indicate. Similarly, Qolorha's ties to the outside world in the late 1990s go beyond having outsiders come in, settle there, and impose changes. Villagers leave (like 1990s Twin) and return (like NomaRussia); outsiders like Camagu with some cultural, ethnic, and national connections come and stay; tourists of various interests come to engage the local land and culture through the different manifestations of Qolorha's modernizing tourist industry; and one group of corporate and government officials attempts to push through the casino development while others help Dalton produce the national heritage site declaration that stops it. Camagu and Xoliswa Ximiya have each spent time in America, the former for thirty years and the latter for six months,

and they bring back diametrically opposed descriptions of a land where Camagu asserts, “[t]here is nothing wonderful,” but rather “racial prejudice and bully-boy tactics towards other countries,” but where Xoliswa Ximiya sees “a fairy-tale country, with beautiful people” (66, 64).

The village debate over modernization and the romantic relationships that comprise the central plots of the contemporary narrative both revolve around disagreements over the best relationships between locality and globality, traditional and global cultural influences, at the levels of the individual, the group, and the locality. These tensions are in many cases continuations of issues present in the 1850s narrative, but in the contemporary period they pervade all levels of life with an extensivity and an intensivity greatly increased during the intervening years. In the 1850s, globalization is represented almost exclusively by the single force of the colonial threat (though that force has political, economic, cultural, and social dimensions). In the 1990s, globalized influences include Xoliswa Ximiya’s education and Western travels, the national government’s casino plan for luring and cashing in on national and international tourists, policies for cultural and natural heritage protection and preservation, the political dynamics preventing the qualified Camagu from being hired by the new South African governmental and corporate powers, and the remnants of colonialism visible in the presence of Dalton (descendant of a colonizer of the same name present in the 1850s timeline) and his trading store in Qolorha, among others.

*The Heart of Redness* is a story about individuals, groups, localities, and a nation seeking to revise their identities through recombining and selecting pieces of the old and of the new. Mda structures this narrative by compositing fragments of these times, generations, individual and group perspectives, cultural positions, and tensions together into a story whose combinatory structure undermines attempts to read it as reductively representative of the whole of the Eastern Cape or South Africa. Instead, *The Heart of Redness* is aware of its own status as necessarily contingent but nevertheless valid and even urgent in a world whose inhabitants must similarly forge themselves a path forward from the material and conceptual resources at hand or be forced along a path toward the future chosen by “the powers that be or their proxies” with more regard for their profits than for what is truly “good for the people” (Mda 277). *The Heart of Redness* ends with Camagu’s holiday camp and Dalton’s cultural village, both run by local cooperative societies, leading an economic revitalization of Qolorha while managing to “preserve indigenous plants and birds” and to keep jobs livable and local through pragmatic compromises arrived at after extensive debate (277). But though the casino complex favored by national and international government and corporate powers is thwarted by Dalton’s national heritage site declaration, Mda makes clear that the struggle between local interests and larger globalized forces is not over. Local interests “have won the day,” Camagu reflects, “But for how long? The whole country is ruled by greed. Sooner or later the powers that be may decide, in the name of the people, that it is good for the people to have a gambling complex at



Qolorha-by-Sea" (277). Individuals successfully opposed the institutional powers through the use of the court and governmental heritage preservation systems and cooperatives succeeded in forging paths of economic modernization in ways that were not environmentally and culturally cataclysmic. These victories ensure a situation in which local forces and interests retain some agency as modernization and globalization move forward, but larger non-local forces also retain significant power that renders the future uncertain and beyond the full control of the local forces and the global networks they leverage. Agency in *The Heart of Redness*, like the narrative and the characters' various worldviews, is understood as something fragmented, combinatory, and exercised in a variety of composite forms.

### ***The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao***

For a book with a single name in the title, Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* devotes a great deal of focus and focalization to other characters. Of its 335 pages, only roughly 150 focus on Oscar de León—through the anything-but-transparent lens of his charismatic narrator—while the other chapters and sections focus on his sister Lola, his mother Beli, his grandfather Abelard, and his friend/college roommate and now narrator, Yunior.<sup>15</sup> Like *The Heart of Redness*, Díaz's novel is structured in part around intergenerational and interpersonal relations so as to explore matters of concern to contemporary individuals and societies. The life of Oscar Wao, the book suggests, cannot be properly understood

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<sup>15</sup> Oscar's sort-of-adoptive grandmother, La Inca, is also relatively well developed over the course of the novel, but the chapter and section focalization structures rarely privilege her in the way they do the others.

by attending to Oscar's experiences alone. Instead, Díaz's structure implies, understanding of Oscar (and/or of Yunior's need to tell Oscar's story) requires a composite story delving into the histories of Oscar's family, his friend Yunior, and the Dominican Republic. In addition to the character and authorial compositing analyzed in *The Heart of Redness*, *Oscar Wao* prominently features the issue of readerly compositing: the reading process of deciding which details to focus on and which unknown language and contexts to look up when organizing understandings and lingering uncertainties into an overall interpretation of a text.<sup>16</sup>

Díaz's metafictional character-narrator Yunior embodies and emphasizes compositing processes. As a character he tries to composite a worldview and historical narrative incorporating the relatively well known (Trujillo) and the overlooked (the street-level history of the de León family, the disrespected genres of sci-fi and fantasy), the widely accepted (importance of political players like dictators and agents of American influence) and the contested (*fukú americanus*). As a narrator, he presents to readers the composite narrative he uses to understand his world, bridging the realms of character compositing and authorial compositing through the middle position of narrator. The story he tells demonstrates that political networks like Trujillo's and the United States', economic networks like

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<sup>16</sup> In Monica Hanna's historiographic analysis of *Oscar Wao*, "the cornerstone of Yunior's narrative and historiographic stance" is the fact that he "adopts several narrative frames and examines the story from multiple perspectives," and that he "includes the reader in this process of reconstruction," which "emphasiz[es] the constructed nature of all histories and narratives" (500, 501). One significance of the similarity in the compositing tasks of narrators and readers emphasized by *Oscar Wao* is the critical importance of compositing skills to navigating a complex globalized world.

transnational diasporic money flows, cultural networks like the Dominican diasporic community, and media networks like genre fiction and games are developed, curated, consumed, inhabited, and given meaning in ways quite comparable to the acts of narrative and worldview compositing described above. Each kind of compositing involves processes of selection, construction, maintenance, and application that give the composite its function and meaning. The sheer quantity of similar processes visible in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* across all aspects of life, and across the roles of character, narrator, author, and reader, suggest that attending to compositing processes as such will help us better understand our world, our agency, and ourselves. These improved understandings could help ward off paralysis in the face of overwhelming globalized complexity, clarifying and even marginally increasing agency.

Each of the eight numbered chapters of Díaz's novel focuses primarily on one central character within Oscar's family: four on Oscar and one each on his sister Lola, his mother Beli, and his grandfather Abelard. The last numbered chapter is less devoted to a single character as Yunió, Lola, and Beli retrieve Oscar's body from the Dominican Republic and bury him in the States after his lover Ybón's jealous police captain boyfriend has Oscar murdered. Brief non-numbered sections of the book generally retain Yunió as narrator (though the section at the beginning of Part II, like Lola's chapter, is narrated by Lola). This structure grants different characters and generations centrality within their own sections and encourages readers to construct a composite understanding of the story by drawing connections between

these sections in order to understand the story and the life of Oscar. Through extended shifts of focalization to and chapters organized around characters besides Oscar, the narrative denies that Oscar's personal experiences comprise the main realm of knowledge needed to understand his life. Yuniór's consistent prominence and strong voice also highlight the importance of the narrator/compositor in piecing together Oscar's narrative. His semi-opaque narration highlights the mediating distance between Oscar and the reader, reminding us that we're reading neither Oscar's life nor Oscar's understanding of it, but Yuniór's version of Oscar's life. With the partial exception of Oscar's direct discourse (provided by Yuniór through reported dialogue and through free indirect reporting of Oscar's last letter), our access to Oscar's thoughts and experiences is heavily mediated through Yuniór's own emphatically idiosyncratic perspective on Oscar and on life (or perspectives: the Yuniór of the narrating moment seems somewhat more mature than the younger Yuniór of most of the narrated moments). Furthermore, by repeatedly connecting the de Léons' experiences to 20<sup>th</sup>-century Dominican politics, Yuniór encourages us to read the overall story in that context, further decentering the individuals' stories. The de Léons' experiences point to the long-lasting traumatic effects of Trujillo's political power even on those who leave the country and escape the direct influence of its authorities. Like Mda's Qolorha, Díaz's de Léons are indicative of a larger political reality but not simplistically representative—they participate in the fukú of the New World but theirs is not the only version of it. On the first page of the novel, Yuniór both differentiates between "little and large"

varieties of *fukú* and connects them to each other and to “the arrival of Europeans” in the Americas (1). The de Léons’ experience a little *fukú*, a personal curse that is one manifestation of the large *fukú* of Trujillo and Dominican politics, which is one instance of the *fukú americanus* initiated by Columbus. As formulated by Yunior, *fukú americanus* is a composite of discrete but related misfortunes, and the hemispheric appellation suggests that even *fukú americanus* is but part of a larger global *fukú*.

I argue that the distributed, composite nature of Yunior’s narrative, focalized through four de Léons (and apparently allowing his ex-girlfriend Lola to narrate her own sections in a way the deceased Oscar cannot), represents an attempt on Yunior’s part to mitigate the dictatorial power of the author/narrator, an issue Díaz sees as a central concern of the novel.<sup>17</sup> Yunior’s techniques also help to decenter Oscar or at least to decrease his dominance of the center, forcing his story and voice to share space and emphasis with those of his relatives and Yunior, creating a composite structure meaningfully engaged with multiple characters and generations. While their collection in one novel and the connective presence of Yunior’s narratorial voice (except in Lola’s first-person sections) bind the separate

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<sup>17</sup> In an interview with *Slate*, Díaz asserts that “This novel (I cannot say it enough) is all about the dangers of dictatorship . . . but the real dictatorship is in the book itself, in its telling; and that’s what I think is most disturbing: how deeply attached we all are to the institution of dictatorship. . . . We all dream dreams of unity, of purity; we all dream that there’s an authoritative voice out there that will explain things, including ourselves. If it wasn’t for our longing for these things, I doubt the novel or the short story would exist in its current form. . . . In dictatorships, only one person is really allowed to speak. And when I write a book or a story, I too am the only one speaking, no matter how I hide behind my characters” (Díaz, “Questions”).

chapters together, their different focalizations, the non-linear temporal sequence, and varying geographical and political settings insist that their differences be maintained and attended to as well. They are part of a composite—rather than hybrid or episodic—whole whose parts retain their distinctness alongside their connectedness.

The non-linear sequence of chapters in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* emphasizes the significance of the generational relations to Oscar's story. Instead of narrating the story of Oscar (and his family) chronologically, Yunion narrates Oscar's youth, then Lola's youth, Beli's youth, Oscar in college, Abelard's last years, and finally Oscar after college until his death, with some attention at the end to Yunion, Lola, and Lola's daughter Isis in later years (nearer the narrating moment). This presentation reflects Oscar's understanding of his own family history. As children, we tend to understand the world from our experiences outward before we organize it chronologically—we understand our time before our parents' and before our grandparents'. To understand Oscar, then, Yunion begins not with what happened first (Abelard's story), but with what Oscar knew first: his childhood, and then that of his sister. After that, as a maturing Oscar would gain perspective and see things from others' points of view, the previously unsympathetic character of the mother takes center stage and becomes more sympathetic, as parents often do when children grow up and learn to see them as people rather than just parents. From there, we move outward again to Beli's father Abelard, two generations removed from Oscar and thus the last to be understood by him and us, before returning to the

untimely conclusion of Oscar's story. This structure helps readers understand the experience of generational relations, as awareness of effects (Beli's somewhat tyrannical parenting, the absence of Abelard and the substitution of La Inca) precedes that of causes (Beli's own repeatedly traumatic childhood, the events surrounding Abelard's cataclysmic run-in with Trujillo) and of the causal relationships.

Yunior's narrative composite avoids linear structures more common in literature and history for an experiential order highlighting the pieces of the story as they might have come to Oscar's attention, mimicking the compositing process by which he gradually understood the world and suggesting that such a piecemeal narrative approach to understanding is as valid as more conventional approaches to history. Yunior's reworking of historical narrative structure is matched by his revisionary attitude toward appropriate historical subject matter. As Monica Hanna's historiographic analysis and José David Saldívar's world-systems-influenced analysis of the novel both contend, *Oscar Wao* presents an unusual mix of high profile historical material (Trujillo and related political people and events) and the unknown/everyday/factually unsupportable (the de Léons, fukú, and other subjects rarely captured in official histories). Yunior's (and Díaz's) composite narrative, then, combines atypical elements in nontraditional—but reasonable and effective—ways and, by providing an alternative, reveals the subjectivity of traditional historiography, a subjectivity too often suppressed by political powers or

overlooked due to the disinterest of historians, narrators, and other compositors in the experiences of people like Oscar and his family.<sup>18</sup>

Readers faced with *Oscar Wao's* structure of discrete, non-linear chapters about different characters must work to connect them into a composite whole by developing interpretations of their interrelations; as with *The Heart of Redness*, the narrative does not give explicit reasons for the temporal compositing, leaving it to the readers to decide how the different timelines inform each other thematically and causally. By challenging readers in this way, Díaz's and Mda's novels mirror similar acts of narrative compositing in which readers revise their understandings of the real world. As Tzvetan Todorov and Hayden White (among others) argue, historical and fictional narratives are constructed in similar, subjective ways. In the age of accelerating globalization, understandings of the world demand to be constructed from the many varied experiences and connections that confront individuals on a daily basis, experiences in which events and entities are able to exert significant

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<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Maria Mermann-Jozwiak points out that fictions like *Oscar Wao* can be particularly effective at "trac[ing] individual acts of meaning-making . . . with respect to transnational processes" and "depicting alternate, not necessarily nation-based forms of community and identity," concluding that "this affective dimension . . . is needed to complement a social science approach to migration and transnationalism" (18). Identity- and community-compositing along a transnational axis can incorporate individualized concerns to balance out or highlight the weaknesses of official history and large-scale politics that primarily value the collective, representative, and nation-centric. Whereas multiculturalism, for Mermann-Jozwiak, remains nation-centric (how does each culture fit into a pluralistic nation?), transnationalism revises the community composite to decenter the nation by focusing on individuals and their connections across nations, rather than seeing individuals primarily in terms of one nation. Similarly, the individualized focus of a narrative like Yunior's decenters official or authoritative histories, relegating Trujillo (and American intervention in the Dominican Republic) largely to the footnotes.



influence across great spatio-temporal distances.<sup>19</sup> As we start to recognize such globalized influences in our lives, however, and as authors start to recognize them in their narratives, it quickly becomes apparent that the number of connections affecting a given individual or situation far exceeds our ability to represent or comprehend. Díaz and Mda address this challenge in their narratives by picking and choosing a subset of connections across generations, time, space, cultures, worldviews, and individuals, a selection depicting the interplay of global and local influences. In both narratives, though, the work of drawing the connections and explaining how things affect and relate to each other is left in part to readers rather than wholly explicated by the novel.

Globalized and transnational political, economic, and social conflicts persist throughout the timeline of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The effects of the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic ripple through the generations of Oscar's family, following them to the United States in the form of psychological repercussions and socialized concepts of gender roles. Oscar, born in New Jersey, is painfully preoccupied by the extent to which he differs from ideals of Dominican masculinity, and Lola, also born in the States, scathingly asserts that "the perfect Dominican daughter . . . is just a nice way of saying a perfect Dominican slave" (56).

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<sup>19</sup> Giddens and Tomlinson, among others, theorize agency across distance. Giddens notes the influence of expert systems (such as our trust in the medical profession or the safety of airplanes, which is a trust in systems whose centers and authorities are, in almost every case, quite distant from us in space) and sees "four dimensions of globalisation": the "World capitalist economy," the "Nation-state system," the "World military order," and the "International division of labour," all of which act across vast distances to affect individuals and localities (70, 71).

The primary and footnoted texts about Dominican and American political history and incidents of national and international violence provide a composite political history interwoven with the family stories, providing opportunities for readers to see the events happening to the central characters as part of larger, historical patterns, but with the usual hierarchy of importance subverted by a focus on the individual, familial, and experiential.<sup>20</sup>

The generational relations that provide the chapter structure for *Oscar Wao* and the foundation for readers' understanding of Oscar's life are not the novel's only composite structures; they are layered on top of the Dominican/American historical and political connections described above as well as a globalized literature and media layer, expressed through both Oscar and Yunior's heavy dependence on the tropes and details of sci-fi/fantasy genre literature to describe and understand their lives. This literary connective structure involves American, Japanese, and other points of literary origin (as well as Oscar's ambition to further globalize the field by becoming "the Dominican Tolkien") and multiple mass media formats, from prose, TV, and film to comics and tabletop games (192). Yunior's narration reveals these

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<sup>20</sup> Hanna argues, for instance, that Díaz "underscores the importance of writing history in new ways with new—or newly combined—forms capable of including experiences usually unexplored in traditional history, all while insisting on the impossibility of telling the *whole* story" (516). Saldívar asserts that Yunior's "remarkable framing of the *fukú americanus* as an alternative unit of analysis beyond the unit of the nation-state" facilitates new insights into "the US and Eurocentric structures of hegemonic thought and representation that continue to dominate the globe today. It signals, too, the planetary networks within which *fukú* Americanness, globalization (capitalism), and modernity themselves all become possible" (133).

globalized and transnational influences on a linguistic level, too.<sup>21</sup> His Dominican background manifests in the frequent use of slang-filled Spanish-language words and sentences (“what every single Dominican, from the richest jabao in Mao to the poorest güey in El Buey, from the oldest anciano sanmacorisano to the littlest carajito in San Francisco, knew”), while his genre literature (and nerd community) fluency reveals itself, despite his preference for a less nerdy persona, through ubiquitous genre allusions and the use of (sometimes Anglicized or Dominicanized) Japanese vocabulary like “otakuness,” “gaijin,” “baká,” and “kaiju” (3, 21, 48, 139, 145). *Oscar Wao* consistently confronts readers with many of these cultural, geographical, historical, linguistic, and literary contexts at once: “before you could say *Oh Mighty Isis*, Maritza blew up into the flyest guapa in Paterson, one of the Queens of New Peru. . . . a ghetto Mary Jane . . . probably the only Peruvian girl on the planet with pelo curlier than his sister’s (he hadn’t heard of Afro-Peruvians yet, or of a town called Chincha)” (17-18).

Each structural axis informs the composite structures readers can discern (or must grapple with) in *Oscar Wao*. The generational manifests in the chapter structure, the generic and mass mediated manifest in allusions and vocabulary, and the historical and transnational manifest in characters’ senses and expressions of identity and the political history interwoven with the family saga. Each of these composites (but particularly history, Spanish language, and genre literature) is also

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<sup>21</sup> For more on the linguistic axis of compositing, see Casielles-Suárez’s study of Spanish/English code-switching in *Oscar Wao*, mentioned earlier. The concept of code-switching, rather than simply hybridized or mixed language, lends itself to a composite analysis of the novel’s language.

engaged in the novel's prominent footnotes. The presence of these thirty-three often-extensive footnotes prompts readers to consider the nature of the relationship between footnoted and non-footnoted text in the novel's structural composite, since a clear typographical distinction is being made. The history, language, media, and (to a lesser degree) familial/generational composites extend across both forms of text, suggesting that it is not simply one type of content or another that is being flagged as secondary by the footnote format. Rather, certain aspects or elements of each of these areas of interest are being placed in a typographically secondary role that paradoxically calls attention to itself (as an unusual structure in a novel), emphasizing the compositing problem of how we decide what is primary, secondary, and omittable in our own understandings of our lives and times.<sup>22</sup>

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* concludes with vignettes of the personal lives of the surviving characters—small triumphs snatched from the jaws of traumatic political history. Both ends of this family saga are open-ended, suggesting the semi-arbitrary borders of Yunior's narrative composite. The novel opens with a landmark moment in globalization history—Columbus's arrival in the New World (decentered here as the unnamed "Admiral")— and the concepts of fukú and zafa thus introduced become shorthand for the attempts of individuals, families, and societies to reestablish a more stable future in the wake of upheavals traced back to 1492. On the other end of the narrative, Yunior and Lola remain in the

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<sup>22</sup> Chapter two goes into the related idea of globalized-composites-as-background in more depth. For more on footnotes and intertexts in *Oscar Wao*, see also my "Some Assembly Required: Intertextuality, Marginalization, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*."

shadow of *fukú* but hope that Lola's daughter Isis will break the curse, protected from the *fukú* by inherited "barrier shields" that represent the cushioning effects of the family's incremental recovery from the forces of transnational political oppression. This recovery process is not yet over, though, and some day "for the first time she will hear the word *fukú*" and "come looking for answers" by researching her family's traumatic history (330). In doing so, Yuniór hopes that "maybe, just maybe," Isis will "take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and . . . put an end to it" (330-31). Like Camagu with his final question, "But for how long?," though, Yuniór follows this confessed hope with a fear that perhaps the tragic influence of history cannot be truly ended—that instead, as the only circled panel in Oscar's copy of *Watchmen* asserts, "Nothing ends . . . Nothing ever ends" (331). We see Yuniór's hope for a clean ending, but the compositor of Oscar's narrative knows better than to think the end of any narrative is real rather than imposed.

Instead of positing an end to the transnational and transgenerational reach of the trauma of political violence, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* ends not on Yuniór's musing over illusory endings, but with an assertion of the possibility of finding value within a life buffeted about by the forces of globalized history—of finding meaning in the composite rather than in escape from it. Though Oscar's stubborn refusal to stay away from Ybón gets him killed by the Dominican police captain dating her, as he knew it might after his first near-fatal beating, both Oscar's final letter and Díaz's novel conclude with a reversal of Kurtz's last words in

Conrad's classic novel of imperialism and turn-of-the-century colonial globalization, *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>23</sup> "The beauty! The beauty!" Oscar writes before his death, confident that this brief taste of happiness and human intimacy with Ybón is worth his life (335). The horrors of European imperialism, American collusion, and Dominican dictatorship are painfully present in Oscar's story, but they are refused the last word; Oscar's limited individual agency and Díaz's and Yunior's narratorial control (disturbingly authorial as it may be) wrest a redemptive, wondrous experience from those powerful globalized forces, acknowledging their power but denying its totality or centrality to their composite understanding of the life of Oscar de León.

### *Saving the World*

Late in Julia Alvarez's novel *Saving the World*, 19<sup>th</sup>-century protagonist Isabel comes across a book of Francisco de Goya prints depicting captioned allegorical scenes of ignorance, superstition, irrationality, and incompetence as manifested in Spain. Isabel, a fictionalized historical figure from the Balmis smallpox vaccination expedition (the world's first global healthcare venture), is so affected by these tableaux of visualized criticisms of human failings (marital, aristocratic, etc.) that the chapter, mimicking her processing of her experiences, takes on Goya's tableau

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<sup>23</sup>*Heart of Darkness* is, of course, also a prominent intertext in Mda's title and novel, as Gail Fincham (among others) has explored, concluding that *The Heart of Redness's* rich intertextuality "complicates the reader's response" and does not "allow . . . the reader to reach a centre," instead situating itself in an intertextual composite to be navigated idiosyncratically by the reader (193, 194).

structure by using vignettes depicting “moments in our human lives” (245).<sup>24</sup> For Isabel, while “the many ports of call . . . seemed to blur together into one great tapestry of the expedition. . . . what I remembered was a particular scene, a seemingly insignificant incident, a certain face such as an artist might draw” (245). Alma, the novel’s 21<sup>st</sup>-century protagonist whose story is told in alternation with Isabel’s, adopts Isabel (whom she is researching while procrastinating on writing a doomed novel) as her guardian angel and decides that “a story can take over your life. If you are desperate enough to let it happen,” and, later, that “she is also carrying a living story inside her, an antibody to the destruction she has seen” (243, 326). Here and elsewhere, Alvarez’s novel ties a thematic point about the power of narrative to the issue of narrative structure (vignettes, tableaux) in representing and perhaps changing understandings of the world in all its globalized complex connectivity.

*Saving the World* builds its two-stranded narrative of globalization, medicine, justice, and human frailty around several compositing methods also featured in *The Heart of Redness* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, while also offering contrasts. Like Mda’s, Alvarez’s narrative is a composite of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century stories, with characters in the later period reflecting on those in the former. Also like *The Heart of Redness*, *Saving the World*’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century story involves a personal narrative in the context of (Latin American) colonialism, and its 21<sup>st</sup>-century story deals to a significant degree with economic, political, and social developments in a

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<sup>24</sup> For more on the historical expedition, see Franco-Paredes, Lammoglia, Santos-Preciado.

nation whose people are trying to find acceptable paths through the uneven processes of modernization and accelerating globalization on a local level. Like *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, *Saving the World's* contemporary protagonist is an American citizen with Dominican heritage who returns to the Dominican Republic while working through personal, familial, and political conflicts. Shifts in time are marked, as in Díaz, by chapters, some but not all of which (in each) explicitly state the covered range of time. In both novels, characters traveling from the United States get inadvertently embroiled in Dominican political violence that they don't understand (or look into) in advance. Alvarez, like Díaz, goes back to the colonial Atlantic to begin to understand the world of her contemporary characters. Furthermore, both employ a diegetic author/narrator (Alma, paralleling Yunior) struggling with the ethics of narrativizing history humanely, to demonstrate how narration is similar to other, non-literary acts of piecing together an understanding of the world. "[W]e are getting so much information all the time and trying to integrate it and make meaning of it," Alvarez said in an interview preceding the release of *Saving the World*; "I don't want gated communities when I read novels," but worlds "almost as big and baffling as the one I live in. . . . We go to fiction that has that level of awareness in part to help us integrate things" (Alvarez, Interview).

The events of *Saving the World* are deeply influenced by globalized economic, political, cultural, and communication networks that the characters cannot completely comprehend. Instead, the characters assemble simplified composite structures meant to give a sense of the ungraspable whole. As the novel's title



suggests, Alma, her husband Richard, and Isabel each work in their own way to save the world and find themselves caught up in transnational cultural exchanges whose processes, effects and participants are not always clear or well thought out. Alvarez reinforces her own multi-stranded compositing technique by featuring it in Alma's experiences and writing career. Throughout the novel, Alma, like Alvarez, switches focus between writing and taking inspiration from Isabel's story and attending to her own 21<sup>st</sup> century crises with Richard and her neighbor Helen. As a writer, Alma conclusively switches focus from her long-overdue family saga novel to writing Isabel's story. Through her writing, Alma tries to spread awareness and ethically represent suffering, desperation, and courage ignored by the wider world (the story of Isabel and the young vaccine-carrying orphans, the vaccination expedition in general, the hostage-takers' impoverished lives). Richard's and Isabel's international medical projects are hampered by local political upheaval and by the failure of the would-be saviors to express the value of the service they offer and to listen to the potential beneficiaries' needs, desires, and concerns. Alma's elderly friend Helen, who is dying of cancer, presents a third variation on cultural conflict via well-intended medical intervention. Alma, other friends and family, and the U.S. medical system involve themselves in medical and personal decisions that often disregard or explicitly overrule Helen's own end-of-life wishes. Helen's story ends badly as her estranged son Mickey and his disturbed wife Hannah clash with the law while trying to help Helen and/or perform "ethical terroris[m]" meant to scare people into

personal reflection on diseases by making them think they have them (through deceitful claims and fake infectants)(59).

Richard's story, too, ends in tragedy due to conflicting priorities, misunderstandings of complex situations, and sets of priorities that fail to incorporate individual or local concerns. Richard is sent by his NGO, Help International, to manage "the first eco-agricultural center" in the Dominican Republic, funded by pharmaceutical company Swan as a public relations initiative to ingratiate their nearby clinic housing patients from elsewhere in the country undergoing experimental AIDS treatments, which "the locals aren't too happy about" (51, 92). An optimistic Richard overlooks the one-way nature of Swan's PR strategies, which disperse money and information to the locals but fail to meaningfully respond to local concerns or desires (92).<sup>25</sup>

Richard's project is one of the naïve, well-meaning, but often destructive acts of U.S. cultural imperialism about which Peter L. Berger says, "[c]ompared with earlier 'civilizing missions' (say the British or French ones, not to mention the unlamented Soviet one), this American cultural imperialism has about it a quality of (not necessarily endearing) innocence. It comes out clearly when these people are genuinely surprised by hostile reactions to their efforts" (25). It becomes painfully clear how insufficiently the clinic and green center have thought through and

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<sup>25</sup> Richard optimistically tells Alma that "everything's been smoothed out. The clinic sponsors have donated money to the locals, and they've also hired a communications-liaison person to explain to the community that they're not going to get AIDS just because the clinic is there. [Local coordinator] Bienvenido says there's been a complete turnaround" (92).

fostered their relationship to the local community when a group of local young men take the staff hostage in an ill-advised bid to leverage international political and corporate concern for the foreign staff to secure better futures (Alma sees them as “teenage boys in ski-resort masks . . . asking for a chance to be human beings”) (284). Governments, Swan and Help International (as well as from Alma and the distraught villagers) do pay attention to the hostage crisis, but of course the authorities deny the hostage-takers better lives or even amnesty, instead staging a raid that rescues most of the hostages but leaves Richard, along with most of the hostage-takers, dead. During the crisis, Alma sees organizations, authorities, and communities speaking past each other but rarely listening to each other, changing their tactics without revising their worldviews as events unfold. The hostage situation adds political, historical, socio-economic, and intercultural catalysts to Alma’s simmering identity crisis and ultimately helps spur her recommitment to the value of writing to responsibly express complex truths despite the inevitable simplifications of narrative.<sup>26</sup> It is unclear if Alma will structure her written narrative of Isabel as a composite. But with regard to her own experience, Alma, like Alvarez, concludes that understanding it requires incorporating the lives of many others: “Richard and Helen, Isabel and Balmis, the black-kerchief poet [and hostage-taker], Benito—they are inside her now, wanting her faith, needing her hope” (362-63).

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<sup>26</sup> Carmen Birkle writes, “Álvarez’s transatlantic novel, by focusing on two women writers who in the process of writing find their strength and meaning in life, shows its readers that the simple processes of reading and writing are acts of remembering, making that which is remembered . . . relevant for one’s life” (60).

Alma's self-questioning is spurred in part by her inability and/or unwillingness to produce the predictable, comfortable ethnic family saga novel she is under contract for with her publisher. Where *Oscar Wao's* Yunior reorders the family saga, Alma ultimately eschews it entirely in favor of a two-protagonist, two-era feedback loop. Alma imaginatively fills in the huge gaps in the story of Isabel's experiences with the Balmis vaccination expedition (only Isabel's first name and presence on the voyage have survived in the historical record), and that filled-in history profoundly changes Alma's sense of self. She channels her composited Isabel to get through her own challenges, "invoking Isabel" for strength and inspiration to remind her that, despite her grief over personal and large-scale tragedies, "[s]he has to make a bigger leap, into a story that is not just a story, her own and not her own" (237, 362). Her work reclaiming Isabel's story leads Alma to reconceive her own as a composite in which she is not always the center. Alma is in the business of communication, but has chafed against market forces trying to channel her production into commercially lucrative channels by presenting easily consumable portraits of exoticized ethnicity for an Anglo-American market. She seeks meaning and psychological refuge in researching and restoring Isabel's story, which has survived only in sparse fragments as a literal footnote in history, and ultimately reaffirms her desire to keep writing despite the exhausting task of balancing out the oversimplifying tendencies of the book business.

For Isabel and Richard, medical globalization is characterized by more overtly counterproductive tensions when projects of global scope undervalue the

need for intercultural communication and a flexible understanding of complex situations. In Alma's, Isabel's, Richard's, and Helen's parallel stories, it is difficult to separate the good from the bad, as Alma recognizes when she begins seeing the dysfunction and mixed motives beneath the utopian veneer of the humanitarian projects: "A clinic testing an experimental AIDS vaccine laying the gold egg of a green center? Boys infected with a virus to save the world from smallpox? Every good threaded through with, at best, dubious goods. Hope and history rhyming, but only by violence or sheer accident" (239).<sup>27</sup> After impulsively surrendering herself to the hostage-takers to reunite with Richard and see if she can do any good from the inside, Alma begins to sympathize with her young captors and urges them to surrender and let her try to help secure them a better outcome. "The point is not to trick the boy but to give him some narrative of hope. . . . she can't stop herself from imagining a way out for him because this is the way it has to begin, the story that is not a story, that might just happen if she gets him believing it can really happen to him" (292).

Alma is adopting the role she first imagined for Isabel, that of composing a narrative of hope (for the orphan vaccine carriers) from amongst the many often-unsettling facts of existence and planting seeds of better lives in their minds when they cannot imagine anything optimistic or grand in their futures. The

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<sup>27</sup> Alma echoes one of the novel's epigraphs, from Seamus Heaney's "Voices from Lemnos," part of *The Cure at Troy*, an adaptation of Sophocles's *Philoctetes* addressing issues of personal failure, political pragmatism, and poetry's role in expressing and working through tragic history: "History says, *Don't hope / On this side of the grave. / But then, once in a lifetime / The longed-for tidal wave / Of justice can rise up, / And hope and history rhyme.*"

counterintuitive parallel between vaccine carriers and hostage-takers is an important strand in the composite Alvarez wishes us to consider; both sets of young men are caught up in the currents of larger, global forces that are largely unconcerned with their desires or well-being, and both seize the only opportunity they see to change the course of their lives, albeit in different ways. At least in Alma's imaginatively reconstructed version, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century boys largely prosper by seizing on their rare opportunity to ally themselves with the well-funded global force of Spanish colonialism (and through Isabel's fierce advocacy). The 21<sup>st</sup>-century group, however, is annihilated for opposing the global political-economic-cultural apparatus of which the clinic and green center are a part, without ever having a peaceful opportunity to engage globalization on the more beneficial terms offered to the vaccine carriers (and having in Alma an advocate unable to convince the authorities to value their futures, at least not once they become hostage-takers).

Alvarez's novel does not end with a recipe for saving the world. The closest Alma gets to envisioning a productive life in an overwhelmingly large and interconnected world is a sense that one must retain hope oneself and kindle it in others. While seeking meaning in the lives and losses of Helen and Richard, Alma finds strength and purpose in "the story of Isabel, of how some people, real people, have kept faith no matter what, how she wishes that for all of them. But it feels as if the moment she says so, she will be closing down this baffling world with a homily soaked in her tears" (362). From the complexities of the stories of Isabel, Richard, Helen, the orphan vaccine carriers, the hostage-takers, and Alma herself, Alma

selects those aspects that she thinks will be most helpful to the construction of a livable worldview and future. But she is hesitant to present this as a homily and impose her own interpretation of events on others. Alma recognizes, in other words, that her understanding of the entire situation is only one contingent composite among many. Like Díaz, Alvarez emphasizes this by having her contemporary protagonist work through life- and narrative-compositing simultaneously. Alma seizes on the story of the first international healthcare project—its ambition, hope, and strength along with its challenges, arrogance, and failures—to serve as a framework for understanding her own even more globalized world, in which such projects have become much more common while retaining many of the same positive and negative characteristics of the prototype. Both healthcare projects are responses to pandemics spread by their eras' networks of globalization (Spanish colonialism in the first case and contemporary economic interdependence, uneven public health education, and ease of travel in the second case), further complicating the purity of their philanthropy. It is in this context that Alma decides that hers is “a story that is not just a story, her own and not her own” (362). It is not just a story but a gap-filled composite pointing to the innumerable possible events, people, and transnational contexts from which it selectively draws. It is not just hers because her understanding of the multitude of forces and agents in play prohibits her from seeing her own role as central.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This understanding is prefigured in embryonic form by Alma's early insight, during a disagreement with Richard about the viability of the DR project and his

Alma is only one part of a much larger, decentralized web of globalized connections that has no clear center. Like Mda and Díaz, Alvarez's response to this is to center a composite narrative around an arbitrary but instructive small group of individuals—in this case, Alma, Isabel, and company—while pointing to the larger, unnarratable whole, so readers do not forget that the composite is not itself the whole story. Mda highlighted a village whose residents try to find a livable relationship with the rest of the world. Díaz focused on a family and narrator/friend trying to overcome the traumas of history. Alvarez explores individuals and organizations trying to use medicine and narrative to make a positive impact on lives around the world and discovering how difficult it is to do so ethically with so much we don't know about other people and cultures. In each case, the individuals involved decide that conventional narratives of their situation fail to meet their needs, so they work to piece together composite alternatives mirrored by the stories in which they themselves are narrated.

### ***So Far from God***

Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* uses some of the compositing techniques discussed in the previous novels while adding stylistic and perspectival compositing methods of its own to depict the lives of its protagonists in their key local and global contexts. Like *The Heart of Redness*, *So Far from God* focuses on the implications of economic, environmental, political, and cultural globalization for one rural location—in this case, the unincorporated town of Tome, New Mexico. Like both

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involvement in it, that “[t]his is Richard's only life, too. Why should he be a minor character in hers?” (56).



Mda's and Díaz's novels, Castillo's narrative focuses on a family, showing the differentiated effects of globalization on individuals whose conditions of origin were much the same. Like *Saving the World* and *The Heart of Redness*, *So Far from God* is centrally concerned with the question of how individuals can have agency with regard to their own lives and their local and global communities in the face of the overwhelmingly large-scale forces and agents of globalization.

The story of *So Far from God* follows Sofi(a), a mother of four (with an undependable, often-estranged husband) in Tome, and her daughters Esperanza, Fe, Caridad, and La Loca (Santa), through a number of natural and supernatural experiences in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Many of these events are tragic, and indeed all four daughters die (or disappear from the earth) quite young, leaving their mother alone at the novel's end. The narrative does not shy away from the pain, loss, and anger at the unfairness of these women's lots in life, but responds with a spirited rallying cry to demand more from life and society, a cry Sofi acts upon on local and global levels. Castillo's diverse, episodically interwoven plots provide a composite of experiences of and responses to globalization on economic, environmental, cultural, and political levels.

The globalization-related content of Castillo's novel resonate with the novels considered earlier. So do aspects of the narrative structure of *So Far from God*, though some structures depart from the trends traced through the other three novels. Castillo's narrator, like Díaz's Yunior, is a strongly emphasized mediating presence that adds a voice to the overall focalizing composite. Unlike Yunior,

Castillo's narrator is given no name and does not appear as a character in the story, but the narrator does embody Yuniór's claim that a writer's or narrator's power is dictatorial ("Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers") (Díaz 97). Where the narrative structure of the other novels roughly mirrored the compositing work of their protagonists, though, *So Far from God's* narrative compositing is more independent of the logic used by the characters to understand the world. Castillo's novel focalizes less through its protagonists and maintains, even more consistently than Yuniór's narrative (which admits Lola as a secondary narrator), a single focalizing perspective on Sofi's family, that of a gossipy and self-admittedly "Highly Opinionated" local (238).

*So Far from God's* non-linearity involves a partial departure from the other novels. Where the others are structured around alternating timelines, Castillo's narrative proceeds chronologically through one narrating present, only occasionally jumping forward or backward for brief contextual explanations.<sup>29</sup> Like the other novels, Castillo's narrative alternates among multiple focalizing protagonists (albeit in the same time and place) but Castillo tells their stories chronologically—the novel could be described as multi-linear rather than non-linear. In addition to chapters focused on Sofi, Caridad, Fe, and La Loca (Esperanza is rarely as focal), other

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<sup>29</sup> For example, during the narration of La Loca's resurrection at age three, the narrator introduces the nickname La Loca and explains that "by the time she was twenty-one no one remembered her Christian name," and the narration of Sofi's establishment of Los Ganados y Lana Cooperative notes that "Years later, once Los Ganados y Lana was fairly secure, they also established a low-interest loan fund for their members, so that those who were motivated and willing could start up their own business" (25, 148).

chapters emphasize doña Felicia and—in a particularly convoluted storyline—Francisco, Maria (the future lover of Caridad’s crush, Esmeralda), and Maria’s girlfriend Helena. Until the end of the novel, when many of the characters have died or otherwise departed (leaving the focus on Sofi and La Loca), no two consecutive chapters focus on the same character. *So Far from God* focuses on one town at one point in time, but its narration of several characters’ disparate experiences within that frame produces a distinctly composite overall impression of Tome, New Mexico. In that narrative meaning within this structure springs in part from tying the disparate storylines together in meaningful ways, not just from understanding the internal dynamics of the various characters’ story arcs, *So Far from God* is much like the other, non-chronological novels. Caridad’s story, for example, plays out over the course of the first twelve (of sixteen) chapters, of which she is a primary focus in four (chapters two, four, seven, and twelve). Her story is interwoven with chapters advancing her siblings’ and mother’s stories as well as contextual chapters whose connection to hers are not always immediately obvious or crucial, but whose timelines are rarely disjunctive.

The novel’s chronological progress has only two substantial disruptions. In each case, it is not immediately clear how the interpolated narrative fragment relates to the other narrative strands, so these temporal disruptions also temporarily thwart readers’ ability to understand the overall narrative composite until their relevance is later revealed. The first disruption is chapter five’s biography of Francisco el Penitente, whose significance to Sofi’s family saga is not yet obvious.

At this point, we know him only as the godson of doña Felicia (a supernaturally old Christian curandera who becomes Caridad's landlady and teacher of the healing arts) who stumbles across Caridad living in a cave in the mountains and possibly falls in love with her. Until Francisco reappears several chapters later, Castillo's long analeptic biographical interlude about him is puzzling. A similar situation arises in chapter eight, whose title highlights the intentionality of the narrator's choice to leave readers temporarily in the dark: "What Appears to Be a Deviation of Our Story but Wherein, with Some Patience, the Reader Will Discover That There Is Always More Than the Eye Can See to Any Account" (120). The chapter is introduced as the "point of departure" of "[t]he sorrowful telling of Francisco's demise," yet readers still don't know how Francisco relates to the rest of the story, and Francisco himself doesn't even appear in this chapter (120). Francisco's connection to the larger story finally emerges in chapter twelve when his obsessed stalking drives Caridad and Esmeralda to leap from a mesa to escape him (though instead of being dashed upon the ground, the women are called to eternal life by the spirit god Tsichtinako), after which Francisco hangs himself. The events of chapters five and eight don't tie in to Caridad's story until chapter twelve, so Castillo's introduction of them earlier and without explicit explanation of their eventual relevance requires readers to deal with two interpolated stories "with Some Patience" and without sufficient knowledge of how to fit them into the overall composite of the narrative (120). Castillo's readers must accept information as it comes while keeping an eye out for relevance down the line – a compositing skill at least as relevant in the complex

arena of the contemporary globalized world as it is within the relatively tidy confines of a novel.<sup>30</sup>

Plot progression in *So Far from God* is also disrupted by lengthy treatments of cultural and political topics, unlike *The Heart of Redness* and *Saving the World* and to a greater degree than *Oscar Wao*'s often-footnoted forays into Dominican history and popular sci-fi/fantasy. Chapter three, "On the Subject of Doña Felicia's Remedios, Which in and of Themselves Are Worthless without Unwavering Faith; and a Brief Sampling of Common Ailments Along with Cures Which Have Earned Our Curandera Respect and Devotion throughout War and Peace," includes a pages-long list of ailments accompanied by doña Felicia's conversational treatment instructions (59, 65). Similarly, chapter ten includes a detailed step-by-step description of La Loca's cooking lessons for Fe interwoven with narrative developments (165-9). The title of chapter fifteen introduces another narrative digression: "La Loca Santa Returns to the World via Albuquerque Before Her Transcendental Departure; and a Few Random Political Remarks from the Highly Opinionated Narrator" (238). Much of the chapter is composed of these remarks on environmental, political, economic, medical, and cultural issues, worked into the plot as the words of various protest speakers, including Sofi. The remarks characterize these issues as global in scope but felt through local effects plaguing the people of Tome and other villages, including radioactive contamination and waste dumping, disproportionate poverty,

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<sup>30</sup> *So Far from God*'s technique of presenting fragmentary narratives whose connection to the main stories is only revealed much later reappears in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, discussed in chapter two.

AIDS, wartime suffering among Native American, Hispanic, and other minority communities, and contamination in local people's and livestock's food and water supplies (242-43).

These non-linear digressions help focus Castillo's novel less on individual characters and more on the networks of people and globalized agents that affect them and their town.<sup>31</sup> They encourage readers to understand Sofi's family story as part of a larger composite involving other aspects of the characters' lives and world such as cooking, alternative medicine, and globalized political issues with local consequences. Thematic digressions, interludes whose relation to the plotlines are not immediately clear, and episodes alternating among multiple protagonists produce a decentralized narrative composited from a constellation of events and experiences relevant to the concerns of a small, primarily Hispanic New Mexico town. Earlier analyses of the novel have noted this decentralization and composite structure on various thematic and structural levels, but I argue that, taken together, the whole is more than just the sum of its parts. Daniel Cooper Alarcón points out a mirroring between the story's prominent religious syncretism and a literary syncretism marked by the reworking of diverse source materials and forms (to disrupt mainstream views on politics, society, and identity). Magali Cornier Michael argues that social change achieved by characters in the novel is the result of

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<sup>31</sup> *Oscar Wao's* ubiquitous references to genre literature use a slightly different strategy for a similar purpose. Instead of being expounded on at length while the story grinds to a halt, the cultural context of genre literature is woven into the fabric of Yunior's descriptions of narrated events, emphasizing the importance of genre literature to the narrator's view of the world as a framework for understanding 20<sup>th</sup> century Dominican and American politics and everyday life.

syncretic synthesis, acceptance of constructive tension between differing concepts and perspectives, and a politically effective focus on the self-in-community. He concludes that just as the novel privileges overlapping non-hierarchical communities (like a local co-op and global mothers' organization called M.O.M.A.S. both started by Sofi), so does it present different forms of knowledge (spiritual, rational, etc.) as non-hierarchical and complementary. These analyses suggest composite structures of cultures, worldviews, identities, communities, and forms of knowledge. Castillo herself, in her essay collection *Massacre of the Dreamers*, articulates a poetics in which the Chicana writer chooses and revises received legacies to suit contemporary Chicana needs and situations and provide readers with tools/theories for identity analysis and social/political engagement.<sup>32</sup> Rather than being limited to the novel's form or its content, or to the arenas of religious practice or social change, thematic and formal compositing represents, in all four novels, a general strategy for engaging an immensely complex world. Significantly, whereas the other novels presented narrative composites that closely mirrored the characters' own compositing practices, Castillo's narrative presents overlapping but only generally analogous forms of compositing. The order of narration is not clearly linked to the logic of the (cultural, religious, social, etc.) compositing practices

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<sup>32</sup> Castillo writes, "Ours is a poetics . . . looking at what has been handed down to us by previous generations of poets and, in effect, rejecting, reshaping, restructuring, reconstructing that legacy and making language and structure ours, suitable to our moment in history. . . . As mestizas, we must take a critical look at language, *all* our languages and patois combinations, with the understanding that language is not something we adopt and that remains apart from us. Explicitly or implicitly, language is the vehicle by which we perceive ourselves in relation to the world" (*Massacre* 165, 167).

visible in the characters' lives except in the most general sense captured by the concept of compositing.

A brief but important digression from temporal linearity in the narration of Fe's death emphasizes the ties between *So Far from God's* composite narrative structures and aspects of globalization also highlighted in the other novels. Chapter eleven, which concludes Fe's story, stresses the failures and broken promises of economic, political, and environmental globalization. After announcing Fe's death, the narrator explains her cynically profit-driven, fatal exposure to an illegal chemical by her employers and the story of her incompetent, inhumane, unethical, and illegal treatment at the hands of modern medical professionals, government officials, and her employers. Fe's decline and death provide damning examples of the exploitative potential inherent in "the disembedding of social systems" theorized by Giddens and discussed early in this chapter, "the 'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space," a phenomenon Giddens associates with the global spread of modernity (21). Fe is affected by the disembedding mechanism of "*expert systems*" that "depend on trust. . . . vested, not in individuals, but in abstract capacities" such as "technical knowledge," systems that "remove social relations from the immediacies of context" (26, 34, 28). Among the novel's protagonists, Fe is the most devoted to both rationalism and a secular Western consumer lifestyle and the most resistant to anything spiritual or supernatural. Fe doubts her mother's story of La Loca's resurrection and flight, devotes herself to the pursuit of "the long-dreamed-of



automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart, and the VCR,” and focuses on being able to “buy her house, make car payments, have a baby, in other words, have a life like people do on T.V.” (171, 189). Accordingly, Fe’s name (“faith” in English) is often interpreted as ironic. Yet Giddens suggests a way in which her name is apt: for most of her life, Fe has been the member of her family most likely to place her faith in mainstream globalized political, economic, and cultural systems and institutions. Giddens argues, “[f]or the lay person . . . trust in expert systems depends neither upon a full initiation into these processes nor upon mastery of the knowledge they yield. Trust is inevitably in part an article of ‘faith’” (29). This faith is not entirely baseless or irrational: “There is a pragmatic element in ‘faith,’ based upon the experience that such systems generally work as they are supposed to do. In addition, there are often regulatory agencies over and above professional associations designed to protect the consumers of expert systems” (29).

With Fe, Castillo reminds us that these complex national and global systems are not perfect, nor do they always have all citizens’, consumers’ and employees’ best interests in mind. We see Fe systematically betrayed by the expert medical, corporate, regulatory, and justice systems in which she places her faith. Fe’s doctors arrogantly and mistakenly discount her report that something has gone wrong with their treatment and keep “insisting that it was all due to stress” (Castillo 187). Acme, the multinational corporation that tricked her into using chemicals that caused “cancer on the outside and all over the inside . . . . eating her insides like acid” exploit a legal loophole and get off scot-free (186). Fe’s willingness to work with this

dangerous chemical without asking questions is based not only on her faith in the expert corporate industrial system but also on her deep involvement in consumerism; in the debt-ridden Fe, Acme has something very close to a captive employee (187). When the expert system of government regulators appears (the FBI and Attorney General's Office), they quickly call off their investigation, stymied by the fatal loophole between different states' laws that a multistate, multinational corporation like Acme is so well-positioned to exploit (187).

Ultimately, to cover their tracks even better in the future, Acme sections off all work areas, leaving "[n]obody and nothing able to know what was going on around them no more" (189). Large national and global expert systems learn from their experiences with Fe, not how to better serve and protect, but how to better avoid responsibility for the systematic ways in which they abuse people's faith—a faith based in part on the impossibility for consumers and employees to investigate all possible dangers and manipulations themselves. Increasing global connectivity is manipulated by those in power to increase profits and exploit the weaknesses in regulatory systems, while on a local level, they use that power to compartmentalize knowledge for their own benefit. Giddens's analysis of faith in expert systems does not explore its potential for systematic abuse by powerful national and globalized forces and institutions. Instead, Giddens focuses on ways in which, via expert systems, "a specific set of dangers is counteracted or minimised" (36). Fe's story, though, points out that in many cases dangers are also delegated to those segments of a globalized society least able to report on, fight back against, or draw the

attention of the powerful to the inequitable share of the burden they are being tricked, forced, or coerced by necessity into bearing. Abandonment or exploitation of the world's most vulnerable populations is a structural danger of globalization emphasized by all four novels in their various ways. The casino project that will help the rich outsiders but not the people of Qolorha; the terrorizing of Dominicans by political dictators and complicit or negligent superpowers and international authorities; Swan's pharmaceutical exploitation of poor Dominicans for AIDS drug testing and their placement of their testing center in a community that neither understands nor wants it there; and Fe's death at the hands of Acme all demonstrate the urgency of developing composite understandings that can recognize complex, globalized dangers with deadly serious consequences. By adopting a composite narrative structure in which Fe's story is only one of many, Castillo shows how Fe's experiences of such dangers are one piece of a much larger set of experiences of globalization in which a staggering variety of such forces and institutions impact nearly everyone's lives, and not nearly always for the better.

There are far too many such forces to grasp singly, so both the authors and characters in these novels seek to forge composite visions of global forces and the possibilities for local agency—to do the best they can with an unmanageably complex challenge. In considering the complexity of globalization, these novels map out terrains of possible agency in which globalized institutional forces hold powerful sway over the conditions of local life, but they also outline ways in which people can, individually or cooperatively, still influence their economic,

environmental, medical, cultural, political, and social landscapes. A summary of the fates of *So Far from God's* protagonists makes for dire reading: La Loca dies and is resurrected; Esperanza is killed covering the first American war in Iraq and essentially abandoned by the American government; Fe is killed by unethical, illegal corporate abuse of employees' trust; Caridad is driven by a disturbed stalker to disappear into the earth; and La Loca dies of mysteriously contracted AIDS, leaving their mother the sole survivor. But the novel leavens these tragedies with hope and determination to make the future better than the past, positive forces that must, however, vie with the power-consolidating efforts of corporations, institutions, and cultures.

We have seen that compositing, as a way to manage overwhelming globalized complexity, also raises the issue of agency. With our identities, communities, and environments so multiple, interconnected, and multifaceted, how much control can an individual or small group really have over the shape of the present or future? And how does compositing help maximize that control? Mda, Díaz, Alvarez, and Castillo each examine characters powerfully and tragically affected by global forces unconcerned with their wellbeing, and they explore the ways these characters find to exert control over the conditions of their participation in local and global society. That partial agency, and these authors' novelistic representations of it, both depend on composite structures to grapple with the complexity of an increasingly globalized world. These structures help prevent paralysis in the face of overwhelming complexity, allowing characters, authors, and readers manageable simplifications

that provide reminders that they *are* simplifications not to be mistaken for unproblematic representations of the global whole. The final chapter of Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* engages this problem of agency as it traces protagonist Sofia's founding of a global organization of bereaved parents (M.O.M.A.S.) whose engagement with each other and (supernaturally) their dead children is designed to use their experiences (and posthumous wisdom) to make the world a better place. Sofi and the other members of M.O.M.A.S. articulate a worldview wherein "life itself [is] defined as a state of courage and wisdom and not an uncontrollable participation in society, as many people experienced their lives" (250). This is not a simplistic statement of full individual control over one's engagement with the world—a state of fully controlled participation. Nor is this understanding of life and societal engagement presented as a fixed, static worldview; it is not even attributed directly to Sofi, arising instead in the description of the Fool card in a bootleg Tarot deck (featuring Sofi and her dead daughters) that is part of the unofficial souvenir economy that sprung up around the annual M.O.M.A.S. conference (in an example of something of value emerging from a globalized consumerist phenomena initially characterized as likely worthless).

M.O.M.A.S. functions as a metaphor for reclaiming agency from apparent powerlessness in the face of global forces and reclaiming something of value from tragedy. It offers "reunions" with those who were lost but also a way of learning from their tragic lives and putting that new knowledge and wisdom to work toward positive change in individual, community, NGO, and governmental venues (251). But

M.O.M.A.S. is not presented as an unrealistically perfect global institution. *So Far from God* ends with the narrator dispelling the rumor that, in a prejudiced policy mirroring the (Pope Joan) story of popes having to prove their biological maleness, M.O.M.A.S. applicants must prove their femaleness. The anecdote is meant to emphasize that this new institution is more egalitarian than the old (though it still excludes fathers). It offers hope for incremental progress in making institutions better serve the people to offset the story of Acme learning how better to exploit them. As in *The Heart of Redness*, globalization in *So Far from God* cannot be avoided, so it needs to be better managed – engaged and invested in but also carefully watched for signs of oppressiveness or inequality.

The novels of Mda, Díaz, Alvarez, and Castillo all employ multiple focalization (interpersonal compositing), spatial and/or temporal composites, and intergenerational comparisons (usually within families). By compositing together these various fragments, each novel highlights the key forces of globalization influencing their central characters, who are themselves employing compositing processes to understand, influence, and live in the midst of complex globalized networks. These thematic concerns are mirrored by the novels' narrative compositing of focalizers, times, places, cultural groups, and contexts in static print texts. Characters, authors, and readers are all pushed to develop a composite point of view to cope with globalized complexity without wrestling it into a false coherence of worldview, narrative, or interpretation. There are always pieces left out, tensions within the composite, perspectives unaccounted for. These novels

suggest at the levels of form and content that compositing allows characters, authors, and readers to better manage the overwhelming scope of a world of interconnected knowledge, people, and institutions. Of course this is only the first step of a meaningful engagement with the forces of globalization—the nature of our specific actions must spring from the situation at hand—but it is a first step that we must consistently employ to avoid slipping into either paralysis or overconfidence. Rather than surrendering our agency or disengaging in the face of paralyzing complexity, or handicapping ourselves with simplistically coherent worldviews and narratives, developing a composite vision lets us engage the world while remembering that the version of it we're engaging is not the whole story.

## CHAPTER TWO

### DECENTERING GLOBALIZATION: THE PARADOXICAL IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING COMPLEX CONNECTIVITY ON NARRATIVES' MARGINS

In *Globalization and Culture* John Tomlinson emphasizes the “*complex connectivity*” at the core of contemporary globalization, its “rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependences that characterize modern social life” (2). In the previous chapter, I analyzed how such complex connectivity functions as a central concern of one strand of contemporary global fiction. In this chapter, I consider representations of globalization’s complex connectivity in novels where it is on the margins of the narrative rather than the center of attention.<sup>1</sup> Zadie Smith’s *NW* and Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* employ compositing as a narrative structure particularly suited to exploring the significant yet paradoxically backgrounded—contextual rather than central, framing rather than framed—role of globalization and its accompanying technologies in the lives and stories of these novels’ protagonists. In these novels, the role of globalization in

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<sup>1</sup> The ability to define globalization with any confidence as a central concern as in the novels in chapter one or as a marginal(ized) factor as in the novels in this chapter is enabled in part by these works’ use of the print text as a static medium of expression. The relatively static nature of a print text ensures that the centrality or marginalization of subject matter may vary according to interpretation, but not generally according to differences in actual content between one experience or version of the text and another, as is often the case in new media works such as videogames. The implications of dynamic textual technologies on narrative and cultural compositing will be considered in the next chapter.



shaping characters, communities, and events could be easily overlooked, but when one does ask how globalization fits in, it becomes evident that these texts represent a web of complex connectivity surrounding and influencing the central agents and events in subtle but significant ways. *NW*, a novel named after the postcode prefix for northwest London, focuses intently on the local, but in doing so reveals the pervasiveness with which locality has become interlaced with the global. *Anil's Ghost's* scope is national, but demonstrates a similar intertwining of scales and influences that goes well beyond Anil's transnationalism.

This chapter will analyze *NW's* and *Anil's Ghost's* literary representations of globalization's paradoxically marginal but extensive and important role in our lives. Globalization meaningfully influences the structure of both novels and forms a significant context for central characters and events. Key elements of what I'm calling composite form – shifts among multiple focalizing characters, disrupted linearity, attention to spatial and temporal relationships, and thematic and formal emphasis on constructed perspectives – inform the framework for these stories. Such frameworks are inherently decentralized in comparison with a linear story attending to one place and time and one focalizing character whose perspective is not emphasized as limited or constructed. Authors of composite narratives are attuned to the fact that how central or emphatic a role something plays in our lives is part of how we experience and understand it. Globalization hovers in the background of these narratives as a major framework of connectivity along which the central interactions are enabled.

Counterintuitively, this lack of emphasis on globalization is itself significant: literary representations of globalization that place it front and center risk overlooking or overshadowing the many situations in which its role in our lives is unemphatic but not unimportant. By keeping globalization out of the center of their narratives, Smith and Ondaatje represent a key aspect of it—the experience of globalization as ubiquitous but largely unobtrusive—that is easily lost when it becomes the center of attention. Globalization as the center of attention is more the exception than the rule, so narratives that represent its more characteristic background role help reveal the extent of globalization’s importance in our lives today in the many situations in which it is present and impactful in a supporting role.

Critical analyses of globalization have noted both its breadth and its often understated role in our lives, but literary criticism has not investigated how the combination of these key characteristics of globalization are represented structurally and thematically in narrative fiction. Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr. stress that globalization “refers to networks of connections (multiple relationships), not to single linkages” (75).<sup>2</sup> They note that in terms of both intensity and extensity, the “[s]heer magnitude, complexity, and speed distinguish contemporary globalization from earlier periods” (79). This vastness, which analysts frequently cite as the essence of contemporary globalization, defies

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<sup>2</sup> To be precise, Keohane and Nye are speaking here of globalism, “a state of the world involving networks of interdependence at multicontinental distances,” which they distinguish from globalization, a situation in which globalism is increasing (whose opposite trend is deglobalization) (75).

placement at the center of any manageable narrative, and thus raises the question of how such vastness can be narratively represented.

A novel that focuses on globalization in its background roles can also emphasize the frequent banality of globalization's impacts without making the center of its narrative banal. Tomlinson stresses "the *mundane* nature of [the] experience" of deterritorialization (in which "complex connectivity weakens the ties of culture to place") (*Globalization* 128, 29).<sup>3</sup> As my analysis of *NW* and *Anil's Ghost* will demonstrate, narratives are increasingly enmeshed in globalization rather than the other way around. Compositing as literary form is particularly suited to texts dealing with this aspect of globalization and its accompanying technologies, in so far as it mirrors the experiences of piecing together an understanding of self, locality, and narrative experience by picking and choosing focal points from amongst the overwhelming multitude of connections, events, and interactions we experience in our age of accelerated globalization.

### **The Local (and the Global) in *NW***

*NW* explores what globalization means for a novelistic representation of the local. Smith's narrative maintains a strictly local scope. It tells the stories of three focalizing protagonists, Leah Hanwell, Natalie De Angelis (née Keisha Blake), and Felix Cooper, as well as the non-focalizing Nathan Bogle. All four grew up in public

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<sup>3</sup> Tomlinson argues that experiences of cultures not intrinsically linked to the place in which they are experienced "are not, typically, experienced as dramatic upheavals but are, on the contrary, rapidly assimilated to normality and grasped – however precariously – as 'the way life is' rather than as a series of deviations from the way life has been or ought to be" (*Globalization* 128).

housing projects—Felix in the Holloway district of north London and the other three in the Caldwell council estate in Willesden, northwest London. The events of the novel take place during one spring and summer (most likely 2010) when the characters are in their mid-thirties, though part three, “Host” (focalized through Natalie), begins thirty-one years earlier when Keisha (not yet Natalie) and Leah meet as four-year-olds. It then progresses, in chronological fits and starts, through those thirty-one years until it arrives in 2010 to overlap the previous parts and be continued by parts four and five (with part five ending only hours after part one). In part one, Leah (the focalizing character) struggles against feeling trapped in a job and marriage not going quite how she would like them to, especially when compared to her childhood best friend Natalie’s seemingly idyllic life, career, and family. In part two, Felix visits his father in NW6, attends to business and personal errands in central London, and has a chance encounter on the tube back to NW6 that leads to a mugging ending in his murder. In part three, Natalie’s history from age four to thirty-five (almost exclusively in London) is recounted in fragments revealing her identity crisis and feelings of inauthenticity. In part four, with her marriage collapsing, Natalie walks out and chances across childhood acquaintance Nathan, who accompanies her on a walk from the northwest to the north side to a bridge she opts not to jump off. And in part five, Natalie is distracted from her own problems by having to talk Leah through a meltdown in which she is lying in her back garden refusing to move. Natalie succeeds by interesting her in the likelihood that Natalie has correctly realized that Nathan was one of Felix’s murderers; the

novel ends with “Keisha Blake” (Natalie’s childhood name) calling in an anonymous tip to the police as Leah listens.

As this synopsis indicates, very little about *NW*’s plot or setting suggests that globalization has any relevance (though it provides appropriately cosmopolitan conversation topic at Natalie’s dinner parties) (97-99). The novel’s presentation of a complex narrative with multiple focalizers calls our attention to local neighborhood connections in northwest London rather than to global connections. Nevertheless, Natalie’s story is especially revealing of the extent to which these local (or glocal) experiences and their literary representation are unobtrusively structured by globalization. Smith’s (and Ondaatje)’s strategies for compositing a narrative through multiple focalizers, non-linear temporality and fragmented narrative flow, spatial relations, and intercultural relations are representative of the ways in which contemporary fiction writers are adopting postmodern narrative techniques to represent the unique challenges and contexts of accelerated globalization. Tomlinson argues that “[m]odern culture is less determined by location because location is increasingly penetrated by ‘distance’” and that “[w]hat is at stake . . . is a transformation in our routine pattern of cultural existence which brings globalized influences, forces, experiences and outlooks into the core of our locally situated lifeworld” (“Globalization” 273).

*NW* emphasizes that the experience of such an influx of globalized influences does not completely overwhelm the local, but engages it in an interdependent relationship. Indeed, as Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake assert, “[g]lobalization,

paradoxically, has led to a strengthening of local ties, allegiances, and identity politics . . . [leading to] that more ‘tricky version of “the local” which operates within, and has been thoroughly reshaped by “the global” and operates largely within its logic” (5). *NW* demonstrates that the experience of this trickier version of the local need involve neither attention to nor understanding of complicating global influences. These influences include increasingly prominent everyday use of global telecom devices, international business connections, multicultural identities, neighborhoods, relationships, and hiring policies, globally hybrid cultural consumerism. The protagonists enmeshed in these globalized networks and dynamics realize that their local concerns are complicated, but the role of globalization is revealed more by the author and narrator than by the characters, whose preoccupations on and insights into identity, family, and careers glance against awareness of global contexts and influences, but who rarely pause to consider them.

The protagonists of *NW* rarely leave London (exceptions include Leah and Natalie’s out-of-town college educations and Natalie’s Italian honeymoon); Natalie tries to avoid even leaving the northwest side. A Black British thirty-something barrister when we meet her in part one, Natalie grew up as Keisha Blake in the Caldwell council estate alongside Leah and Nathan. Felix “grew up in the notorious Garvey House project in Holloway” but has moved to Kilburn “in search of a better

life” by the time we meet him (104).<sup>4</sup> Natalie, the focalizer of the latter half of *NW*, wants to concentrate on herself, her family, and her neighborhood, and she tries to bracket off even the greater context of London, not to mention the globe. She feels more at home in the northwest, using an inconvenient commute as “the premise for a return to NW (despite the difficult commute that foists on her husband Frank) ” after a few years living across town with Leah and then Frank and at one point protesting to Leah, “I don’t go south,” when asked to travel across the Thames on a single occasion for a charity speaking engagement (292, 344). Natalie’s attachment to NW springs in part from her ongoing sense of panic about an identity she sees as hollow and in which neighborhood belonging is one of the few solid foundations.

The combination of influences, people, and dynamics that make up the neighborhood remain distinctive for Natalie even as the global permeates this locality and its residents’ lives. These neighborhood dynamics are most obvious in Natalie’s part three (“Host”), both because it is the longest of the book’s parts, and also because Natalie’s higher economic, professional, and social status enmesh her in a thicker web of economic, technological, consumer, and social connections to people, corporations, and cultural entities both local and global, connections she has greater agency over and correspondingly greater (if still inconsistent) awareness of. Though frequently encountered, Natalie’s networks remains fragmented and hard to organize into comprehensive patterns. Natalie’s awareness of being immersed in complex mediascapes and ideoscapes leaves her overwhelmed and unsure how to

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<sup>4</sup> We are informed of this by a news report of his murder in part one before he becomes a focalizing character in the analeptic part two.

construct an identity and life from such a complexly networked existence, and consideration of the global aspects of this situation are low on her priority list.<sup>5</sup> Natalie would agree with Anthony Giddens that “[t]he disorientation which expresses itself in the feeling that systematic knowledge about social organisation cannot be obtained . . . results primarily from the sense many of us have of being caught up in a universe of events we do not fully understand, and which seems in large part outside of our control” (2-3). In part as a consequence of this thicker web of connectivity, Natalie’s sense of identity and relation to the world is fragile and a source of great anxiety.

Natalie is consistently aware of the variety of relationships to her own and others’ race, socio-economic status, and (trans)national affiliations that she experiences and sees in her neighborhood. Many aspects of these local relationships involve global connections. For example, in sections 134-35 of part three, Natalie and Frank are having brunch at a northwest London café with their Indian friend Ameeta and her Pakistani husband Imran, about whose minor spat over organic ketchup Frank jokes, “India versus Pakistan . . . better pray it doesn’t go nuclear” in an indelicate joke reducing their transnational friends to the single identifying factor of their countries of origin (Smith 297). During the course of the brunch, Frank affects a connection with the waiter based on racial history and socio-

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<sup>5</sup> Arjun Appadurai conceives of mediascapes as “the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information . . . and . . . the images of the world created by these media. . . . image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality” and defines ideoscapes as “also concatenations of images, but they are often directly political and frequently have to do with . . . ideologies . . . and . . . counter-ideologies” (“Disjuncture” 298-99).



economic camaraderie, in order to get a late-arriving item off the bill, “[a]t one point employing the phrase: ‘Look, we’re both educated brothers’” (298). Despite his own complex transnational heritage, more sincere connections do not appeal to Frank, such as:

any real cultural interests, aside from the old, nostalgic affection for 90s hip hop. The idea of the Caribbean bored him. When thinking of the souls of black folks he preferred to think of Africa—‘Ethiopia the Shadowy and Egypt the Sphinx’—where the two strains of his DNA did noble battle in ancient stories. (He knew these stories only in vague, biblical outline.) (298)

As Natalie discontentedly notes the superficiality of her husband’s chosen connections to the world, history, and society, along with the general triviality of the brunch conversation topics, the narrator (perhaps still focalizing through Natalie) writes, “Global consciousness. Local consciousness. Consciousness. And lo they saw their nakedness and were not ashamed” (300). The inconsequentiality of their conversation topics, tabloid choices, and cultural interests and interest levels are exposed in the context of postmodern reflexivity, but, at least on the surface, they react by presenting themselves ironically rather than by attempting any self-improvement. This complacent, superficial engagement with their web of globalized heritages and influences is enabled in part by their racial and ethnic identities in the context of their neighborhood: “They were all four of them providing a service for the rest of the people in the café, simply by being here. They were the ‘local vibrancy’ to which the estate agents referred. For this reason, too, they needn’t concern themselves too much with politics. They simply *were* political facts, in their very persons” (300). Natalie’s identity and the choices she makes (such as this

instance of political indifference) are influenced by her awareness of how she is perceived in an era (and area) of multiculturalism. Because her community is aware that her presence among them as a middle-class black British woman has a long, complex, globe-spanning political history, Natalie feels she need not concern herself too much with understanding that history or its current state. Multiculturalism as a response to globalized cultural exchange is not a central, consistent topic of the novel, or even of part three; instead, Smith lets it come up now and then as Natalie thinks of it, mixed in with the many other concerns that more successfully demand Natalie's attention and influence her work-in-progress composite identity. Natalie is more concerned with the fact of Frank's superficiality than with the global dynamics that affect it, more focused on the social capital derived from her absent friend Polly's "good works—police inquests and civil litigation and international arbitration for underdog nations" than in the fates (or names) of those nations, and on properly embodying adult life via homeownership and secure, upper-middle-class employment than on how such lifestyles are intertwined with local, national, and global economic systems involving, for example the jailed Caribbean clients for who she does pro bono legal work (301).

Taking its place alongside forms of identity and relationality such as race, ethnicity, geography, and socio-economic status that Natalie anxiously monitors and manages is the connectivity facilitated by global communications technology. In response to an absent friend, "[a]ll four checked their phones for news. . . . A blinking envelope with the promise of external connection, work, engagement. . . . If

only [Natalie] could go to the bathroom and spend the next hour alone with her e-mail" (300). Most of the attended-to connections are local, but the means of connection are globalized, even if that's not how Natalie thinks of them. Natalie prefers work to leisure and the self-reflection it brings; technological connectedness offers an escape from uncomfortable observations about herself and her face-to-face relationships with husband and friends. But while her own sense of self is intertwined with the use of technology such as the Internet and her smart phone that connect her to other people and to information about the world, the technological mediation of her young children's self-identities alarm her. This is because she sees their technological engagement as stemming from her lax, ambivalent parenting: "It filled her with panic and rage to see her spoiled children sat upon the floor, flicking through past images, moving images, of themselves, on their father's phone, an experience of self-awareness literally unknown in the history of human existence—outside dream and miracle—until very recently. Until just before now" (328).

Technological connectedness also complicate Natalie's pointed preference for the local by highlighting her preference for distanced, technologically mediated connection over face-to-face interaction, a conflict that she tries to explain away. Section 142, "*Technology*," lists four excuses for ownership of a mobile phone based around the core idea that "It's for work—I don't pay for it" (304). Natalie's excuses aim to deflect criticism that paying for such technology is embarrassingly luxurious and that ignoring the people around you in favor of mobile electronic connectedness

is rude, detached or gauche. (304). Section 143, "*The Present*," reveals a contradictory reality beneath 142's excuses: "Natalie Blake, who told people she abhorred expensive gadgets and detested the Internet, adored her phone and was helplessly, compulsively, adverbly addicted to the Internet. Though incredibly fast, her phone was still too slow" (305). Section 144 concludes with Natalie "once again check[ing] the listings" on a website facilitating erotic liaisons among strangers; "By this point she was checking them two or three times a day, though still as a voyeur" (305). Despite her voiced preference for the local and her loyalty to NW, Natalie's connections, even to those in her neighborhood and city, are increasingly routed through the Internet and global telecom. Natalie's experiences on the website (where she communicates using the email address KeishaNW@gmail.com) further emphasize the tension between her focus on the local and her preference for the technologically mediated: she obsessively scrutinizes the website listings but the face-to-face meetings she arranges through it are always disappointing, usually failing to lead to the implicitly agreed-upon intercourse. Even the one encounter that does lead to intercourse is found wanting in comparison to distanced, mediated eroticism, either through in-person or web-mediated voyeurism.<sup>6</sup> The website's value to her thus seems to reside more in the ability to consider and select liaisons

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<sup>6</sup> Natalie has arranged for a "double team" with two young men, but despite her coaxing them away from an erotic voyeurism website, "they kept on with the Internet. . . . maybe they couldn't do anything without the Net somewhere in the mix" (351). When she finally gets one to have sex with her, he has "no useful rhythm," so she does all the work and "[f]inishe[s] very quickly, though not as quickly as his circumcised friend on the other side of the bed" who is enjoying watching, and Natalie's partner doesn't come at all (351).

from the privacy of her computer rather than on the satisfaction of the liaisons once chosen and embarked upon. The globalized aspect of these connections is rarely emphasized, but they are consistently present, enabling Natalie to live what she understands to be a life focused on the local (her website liaisons, like her less secret activities, remain confined to London) by means of cheap, widely accessible global telecommunications networks.

Natalie's globalized connections pervade every aspect of her life, if only for the few seconds it takes to check a website or entertain a passing thought about her presence at a café providing the multicultural "'local vibrancy'" that real estate agents happily sell (300). In section 145, "*Perfection*," she orders supplies for a picnic online and videoconferences into a meeting "between a Chinese tech company and its British distributor" (306). She bakes a Jamaican ginger cake for the picnic and chooses an outfit in which "[s]he felt African . . . although nothing she wore came from Africa except perhaps the earrings and bangles, conceptually" (306). Later, with her mother Marcia, Natalie "watch[es] the poor . . . . A reality show set on a council estate" like the one where Natalie grew up; "In the show poverty was understood as a personality trait" (317). Mid-viewing, Marcia criticizes Natalie's multitasking: "'All you do is check that phone. Did you come round to see me or check that phone?'" (317). In these examples, Natalie sources consumer purchases for a local outing through Internet commerce, uses communications technology in her work as a barrister to facilitate global business, expresses her Caribbean and African heritage conceptually, if not with rigorous authenticity, through her choice

of apparel and cuisine, and watches (while keeping one eye on her smartphone) a nationally broadcast reality TV version of her childhood whose reductive spin on difficult socio-economic problems is meant to allow middle-class viewers to believe that the poor (like her family, who are still “Living like that. Living like this.”) are wholly responsibly for their own plight (296).

These connections to economic, cultural, political, and technological globalization are constituent, if mundane, threads in the fabric of Natalie’s local existence. Natalie is intensely absorbed in the difficult task of constructing a coherent composite understanding of her life, identity, and neighborhood, because each aspect, when examined, connects to so many other things—Chinese business, African culture, British attitudes toward poverty—that extend well beyond her expertise, comfort zone, or sense of easily comprehensible connectedness. Her identity crisis springs in part from the complexities of this global/local problematic – as may her strong loyalty to the local. Mike Featherstone suggests, “the difficulty of handling increasing levels of cultural complexity, and the doubts and anxieties they often engender, are reasons why ‘localism,’ or the desire to return home, becomes an important theme” (47). Featherstone also theorizes the kind of identity management that Natalie struggles so much to achieve in terms of globalization: “it is the capacity to shift the frame and move between varying range of foci, the capacity to handle a range of symbolic material out of which various identities can be formed and reformed in different situations, which is relevant in the contemporary global situation” (55).

Natalie is a clear example of the challenges accompanying an understanding of global culture featuring “the sense of heaps, congeries, and aggregates of cultural particularities juxtaposed together on the same field, the same bounded space, in which the fact that they are different and do not fit together, or want to fit together, becomes noticeable and a source of practical problems” (Featherstone 70). Facing this problem, Natalie tends to overlook the global scale of connectivity and fragmentation in favor of attention to local belonging based on lifelong residence, which offers her a rare feeling of authenticity. If neither Natalie nor Smith explicitly place globalization at the heart of this identity crisis, it’s because doing so would misrepresent globalization’s role in it. The global connections that complicate identity facilitate, but are rarely at the core of, Natalie’s identity and community; in most cases, they snake their way in toward the center from the edges, changing the center without displacing or dominating it. Smith’s narrative representation of Natalie’s local experiences (as well as those of Leah, Felix, and Nathan) reveals how involvement in networks across time, space, and technological media are often felt, remembered, and noticed in passing, or not noticed at all—Smith’s descriptions often exceed Natalie’s own observations and reflections to highlight aspects of situations, like globalized connectivity, that Natalie overlooks. These glancing references to the globalized networks connecting people, places, cultures, and economies across time, space, and technology reflect the composite, networked, and backgrounded nature of contemporary globalized experience.

These hints at larger contexts also touch on the limited but not insignificant agency the novel's protagonists have within globalized networks, and the role that agency in the world has on their identity formation. *NW* opens with Leah thinking through the talk radio pronouncement, "I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me," a refrain on the theme of "self-invention" emphasized again later in Natalie's focalization in part three (3, 247). Smith undermines Leah's claims to (or wish for) sole authorship, in part by narrating her characters' convictions about the conditionality of their self-construction: "'Really good to see you,' said Leah. 'You're the only person I can be all of myself with.' Which comment made Natalie begin to cry . . . out of a fearful knowledge that if reversed the statement would be rendered practically meaningless, Ms. Blake having no self to be" (246). Smith also undermines sole self-authorship by demonstrating the ways in which identities and narrative understandings exceed and in many cases suppress an individual's desired versions. In section two of part one, Leah meets Shar, who rings her doorbell and successfully peddles a story that convinces Leah to "loan" her some cash. The story of this encounter is quickly co-opted by Leah's husband Michel and mother Pauline, who define it and Leah as hopelessly "soft" and naïve (18). And in further refutation of Leah's aspirations to sole authorship, "[n]o matter where Leah attempts to begin, Pauline returns to" Leah's status as only child, which is central to the mother's definition of the daughter (19). Pauline's undermining of the sole authorship ideal extends to issues of race, language, and nationality, as when Leah finds it "[e]asier, finally, to permit *Michael* than to hear *Meee-Shell* swirl round the mouth like the



taste of something dubious,” and when Pauline conflates all blacks into “*his people*” since “[a]ll of them are Nigerian, all of them, even if they are French, or Algerian, they are Nigerian, the whole of Africa being, for Pauline, essentially Nigeria, and the Nigerians wily, owning those things in Kilburn that once were Irish” (18, 19).

Neither Leah nor Michel are sole authors of the identities used to define them; even within their own family, acts of identifying others do not always coincide with chosen (self-)identifications, including along lines of class, race, ethnicity, nationality, and language (19). The concept of Nigerians is useful to Pauline’s understanding of the-world-as-it-affects-Kilburn, and she will adjust her local connections, like her son-in-law, to fit that concept, rather than altering the concept to fit the fact of her non-Nigerian son-in-law.

Tensions between self-identification and imposed identities are emphasized from the beginning of *NW*. Fluidity of identity is depicted as virtually ubiquitous (if partial) and includes (but is not limited to) transnational identities. Natalie and Leah’s husbands, Frank and Michel, are clearly transnational. Frank ironically self-identifies as decadent “Eurotrash,” while his attempt to lump Michel into the same worldly, affluent category is refuted by Leah’s version of Michel’s transnational and socio-economic identity: “He’s from Guadeloupe! . . . His dad’s a school janitor in Marseilles now. His mum’s Algerian. She can’t read or write” (265). These transnational characters are important to the novel but are not in the centermost group of focalizing characters. Leah’s mother’s Irishness is mentioned but is not central to Leah’s preoccupations (202). Keisha/Natalie’s national identity is raised

primarily in relation to the transnational identities of other kids at her church, “most of whom were Nigerian or otherwise African,” though her first boyfriend Rodney is, like her, “one of the few Caribbean children in the church” (224, 225). Additionally, in the Blake household, the phrase “our people” refers to race rather than (trans)nationality (235).

Yet we do see snippets of an inconsistently emphasized and embraced transnational cultural heritage in Natalie. We learn, as she arrives at a social appointment fifteen minutes late, “that ‘Jamaican Time’ had not quite died out” in her, and later that she thinks of herself as “sadly ‘margar,’ as the Jamaicans say,” meaning “ultimately shapeless, a blank,” rather than the positive interpretation of “‘skinny’ or ‘athletic’” more common “[t]o white people” (283, 289). As a barrister she does “pro bono death row cases in the Caribbean islands of her ancestry,” but this has less to do with a felt connection than with, she suspects, looking good and “the assuaging of conscience” (303).

Partly because she seems uncertain how to authentically relate to it, Natalie’s consciousness of being transnational makes up only a small part of her sense of self, certainly less prominent in the narrative than her attachment to neighborhood, which proves at least as central to both Natalie and Leah’s identities as more widely politicized aspects of identity. Natalie uses neighborhood, on the specific level of the Caldwell council estate, to categorize visiting advice-givers after her first child is born, as “Caldwell people felt” one way about childrearing and “[n]on-Caldwell people felt” another way (324). Despite her self-transformations, including the

switch from Keisha to Natalie (which occurs in a narrative gap between sections 56 and 60 of “Host”), neighborhood in its socio-economic and cultural senses resides in the hidden core that Natalie sometimes doubts she has: “she was still an NW girl at heart” (259). She shapes her identity by both embracing her neighborhood and attempting to draw contrasts between herself and the rest of it. “On a good day Natalie prided herself on small differences, between past residents, present neighbors and herself. Look at these African masks. Abstract of a Kingston alleyway. Minimalist table with four throne-like chairs. At other times . . . she had the defeating sense that her own shadow was identical to all the rest” (325-26).<sup>7</sup> In addition to including an artistic abstraction of Jamaica, the land of her transnational parental heritage, Natalie’s sketch of her identity here involves globalized influences such as Africa (which, as we’ll see, represents to her a more primitive time rather than contemporary places, nations, and cultures), and a Western decorative arts aesthetic – all used to define her identity within and against her neighborhood, but this do-it-yourself patchwork identity-through-things fails to provide the desired sense of solidity and authenticity.

The experiences, characteristics, and connections that Natalie draws upon to form a composite identity are enmeshed in thick globalized networks whose complexity contributes to what Smith consistently thematizes as a fraught and ongoing process of identity construction that allows agency but not sole authorship.

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, some time later, when Natalie goes to the home of an “unmistakeably African” couple she has met online through the liaison website, the description of their home is nearly identical: “African wall sculpture. Modern minimalist pieces. . . . A picture of Marley framed” (346-47).

Natalie identifies herself in terms of race and nationality (and occasionally as transnational), but also in terms of components involved in other aspects of globalization, such as socio-economic and cultural upbringing, home environment (decor, neighborhood, immigrant maids from Poland and then Brazil), and work (where at one point she “was busy with the Kashmiri border dispute, at least as far as it related to importing stereos into India through Dubai on behalf of her giant Japanese electronics manufacturing client”) (319).<sup>8</sup> She is painfully anxious about the authenticity and solidity of the components from which she constructs her identity. When, for instance, she considers:

the things she and Frank had bought and placed in this house, Natalie liked to think they told a story about their lives, in which the reality of the house itself was incidental, but it was also of course quite possible that it was the house that was the unimpeachable reality and Natalie, Frank and their daughter just a lot of human shadow-play. (325)

Natalie does not just like to think her home décor tells a story about her – she has selected items piece-by-piece in order to tell a carefully controlled story, a composite narrative about her authentic local and worldly global connections.

Natalie’s insecure sense of self can be traced to her (Keisha’s) childhood experience of being frequently praised for her “inability to start something without finishing it,” a “compulsion” that in some fields of application such as vocabulary and reading “manifested itself as ‘intelligence’” (207). Because Keisha experiences

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<sup>8</sup> Kashmir as an example of one of Natalie’s many mundane, passing globalized connections stands in stark contrast to Salman Rushdie’s extended examination of the complex global network of events and agents affecting the 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century Kashmiri political situation, which constitutes the central subject of *Shalimar the Clown* (examined in chapter five).

this less as virtue than as compulsion, “[i]n the child’s mind a breach now appeared: between what she believed she knew of herself, *essentially*, and her essence as others seemed to understand it. She began to exist for other people” (208). Over the years this develops into a sense of disconnection between an unclear sense of essential self and an increasingly difficult to maintain presentation of coherent identity. As an adult, when Natalie is accused by her old acquaintance Layla of “[s]howing off. False. Fake. Signaling,” rather than living an authentic identity, Natalie follows her voiced denial with an internalized moment of doubt: “Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. . . . when considering these various attitudes she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or perhaps the least inauthentic” (333). Overwhelmed by crippling doubt about the authenticity of any of her relations to other people, nationalities, and other identity statuses, Natalie is expressing a sense of composite, globalized pieced together (like her home décor) from local and global connections, from face-to-face and technologically mediated encounters, and from aspects of nationality, race, and language as well as of consumerism, socio-economic migration, and global consciousness. But she is also expressing a distinct attitude toward that identity—authenticity anxiety often verging on panic—that keeps her focus on the need to feel secure, at nearly any cost, and off the global scope of the relations and positions that together make up her identity.

Central for Natalie is the sense that these connections are all to greater or lesser degrees false, which marginalizes other aspects of the connections’ natures.

So while this composite identity is perhaps the most prominent theme of her story arc (and the second half of the novel), as she struggles to find in it a foundation for making the choices that direct her life and impact others' lives, its globalized elements remain on the margins of the narrative, sometimes penetrating Natalie's awareness and sometimes overlooked by her and revealed only by the narrator.

The role of globalization in her process of identity construction remains marginal throughout the novel. It is not directly articulated in the terms of Natalie's list of "drag" roles, though it is suggested by the transnational combination of Jamaican and British drag. And yet globalization penetrates the list, through her work at court, her role as rich Brit in the globalized economy, her transnational nation-state affiliations, etc. This is representative of the depiction of globalization throughout the novel – always present but usually in the background, more implicit than explicit, more commonly a network facilitating connections important for identity formation than itself an articulated aspect of identity. A major challenge in understanding globalization and the influence of technology on contemporary life is, as Natalie's examples show, navigating the terrain of self and environment in an age when even the most doggedly local experience is pervaded by the easily overlooked influence of myriad global networks. This understanding is not a top priority for Natalie, who is more concerned about the authenticity of her identity components than their global scope, but it certainly adds to the complexity that overwhelms her and provides routes through which she seeks identity (as in her African cultural décor and technologically mediated personal interactions). In their novels, Smith

and Ondaatje engage those challenges in part by backgrounding them, focusing on characters affected by them but unaware of or largely unconcerned with them, thus representing in narrative form not only the topic of globalization but also the frequent subtlety of its nevertheless consequential role in our everyday lives.

Though focused on one locality, *NW* is structured in part around characters connected only indirectly in a way that demonstrates the penetration of the local by mass media. The relationship between Felix and the other focalizing characters in *NW*, Leah and Natalie, consists initially of the two women's distracted awareness of a news report of his murder, a connection eventually strengthened in the book's conclusion when Natalie realizes that their childhood acquaintance Nathan is probably Felix's murderer and she and Leah alert the police. Yet all they know of Felix himself comes from what they see or read in the news – Leah, Natalie, and Felix all live in the same neighborhood, but are only connected indirectly, tragically by Nathan and belatedly by the news (though from his photo in the paper Natalie thinks she vaguely recognizes him from around the neighborhood) (394). This pair of second-degree connections, local-by-means-of-mass-media-news, nevertheless provides the sole hope of justice for Felix at the novel's end. Throughout the narrative, Smith represents the technological, global, and social networks that similarly permeate *NW*, demonstrating the widespread supporting role of global networks in local life. The day-to-day lives of these characters consist in no small part of connections both intended and uncalculated, one-to-one and dispersed, face-to-face and mediated. The speed and density of these connections and networks and

the parties involved in them reveal a globalized world visible even within Smith's local frame. *NW* experiments with different ways to structure these overwhelming webs of connectivity, including by movement in space ("Guest," "Crossing") and in time (the gappy chronology of "Host" and the non-linearity across parts), in the overall structure of focalization through Leah, Natalie, and Felix, and by direct and indirect social and neighborhood relations, whose importance is stressed from the outset: "Leah is as faithful in her allegiance to this two-mile square of the city as other people are to their families, or their countries" (6). As much as Smith's narrative is about Natalie, Leah, Felix, and Nathan, it is equally about the northwest London neighborhood that connects them and that emerges as a locality intersected by a network of forces related to globalization, whether or not its residents ever notice.

The local provides an organizational frame for Smith's story, but locality is a compositing logic rather than the only or the definitive way to understand the significance of and connections among the novel's characters and events. For Tomlinson, it is crucial that we understand "how globalization alters the context of meaning construction: how it affects people's sense of identity, the experience of place and of the self in relation to place, how it impacts on the shared understandings, values, desires, myths, hopes and fears that have developed around locally situated life" (*Globalization* 20). The complex connectivity of globalization, in other words, requires that we account for global connections and contexts in order to understand local occurrences and construct meaning and identity effectively. But



it is impossible, on an everyday basis, or even in an academic argument, to comprehensively account for all the connections across, for instance, Arjun Appadurai's five dimensions of cultural flow in any given situation. Without a perfect model of any globalized situation, we must turn instead to composite models, choosing to take into account, from among the vast array of connections, those that seem most appropriate to understanding the situation and task at hand. William H. Mott IV calls these combinations of knowledge and values "narrow, functional, perspectives on social reality" that are particularly "useful in situations with less than complete information, since they narrow the scope of the relevant and allow experience, precedent, and prejudice to influence decisions" (4). I find calling them composites useful in that it emphasizes the process of piecing them together from separate and often somewhat incompatible parts.

Composites (or perspectives) are also invaluable for understanding situations with overwhelming amounts of information that must be simplified as well as for describing reductive perspectives such as Pauline's take on "Nigerians." "*Time speeds up*," section 160 of part three, focalizes through Natalie to declare, "There is an image system at work in the world" that no experience is "large or brutal enough to disturb . . . or break . . . open" (322). Natalie believes that, in contrast, "[i]n Africa, presumably, the images that give shape and meaning to a life, and into whose dimensions a person pours themselves . . . are drawn from the natural world and the collective imagination of the people," though the narrator informs us, "(When Natalie Blake said 'In Africa' what she meant was 'at an earlier

point in time.}') (322). This idealized pre-modern "Africa" contrasts with the postmodern, globalized image system that Natalie experiences: "only more broken images from the great mass of cultural detritus she took in every day on a number of different devices, some handheld, some not," images connected to experiences that, even in the case of childbirth, fail to provide "the brutal awareness of the real that she had so hoped for and desired" (322-23). Access to the elusive "real," connected by implication to "an earlier point in time," "the natural world," and "the collective imagination of the people," is for Natalie a casualty of the acceleration of time and the proliferation of fragmented images and technologies for accessing them. The real is implicitly contrasted with the experience of compositing – constructing meaning by choosing which connections are most appropriate to a meaningful concept or understanding of an identity, community, situation, or network. The real, for Natalie, would require no decision-making. It simply is, and its limits are self-evident, the points at which connections are no longer pursued are not arbitrary. The act of compositing to understand and engage the complexity of a globalized world (in contrast to Natalie's romanticized pre-modern "Africa") is for Natalie regrettably necessary and highly anxiety-producing. The advantages of choice and agency are, for her, heavily outweighed by the accompanying sense of inauthenticity, incoherence, and indecision.

The formal structures of "Host," the third part of the novel (but the first to focalize through Natalie), reflect and develop Natalie's hurried and fragmented experience of the world. Unlike the other four parts, which span a day or, in the case

of part one, a number of weeks, “Host” covers thirty-one years (the end of which overlaps the time period narrated by parts one and two). Two related claims about time are made in “Host.” In section 160 Natalie asserts an acceleration of phenomenological (experienced) time over the course of history; in section 166—also titled “*Time speeds up*”—she makes the same claim for the course of a human life cycle from childhood to maturity, lamenting, “If only she could slow the whole thing down! She had been eight for a hundred years. She was thirty-four for seven minutes” (329). Natalie articulates her insights about time in vague and overlapping terms (as her categorizing both historical and individual experiences of accelerated time as ‘time speeding up’ suggests), reflecting her feeling of being overwhelmed by the attempt to come to meaningful terms with the contemporary world image system through which she interprets her experiences. Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc argue in *Nations Unbound* that vague and simplistic understandings of self and world are common in everyday experiences of transnationality, saying, “[t]here is currently a gap between the daily practices of transmigrants and the ways both transmigrants and academics represent these practices” (8-9). Fiction, on the other hand, often leads the way in articulating such experiences more precisely: “individuals, communities, or states rarely identify themselves as transnational. It is only in contemporary fiction . . . that this state of ‘in-betweenness,’ has been fully voiced” (8). Transnational in-betweenness is one form of complex connectivity, and Natalie’s sense of struggling to navigate the mediascapes and ideoscapes in which she is enmeshed is another. I argue that

globalization, like transnationality, confronts individuals and communities with complex composites of self and world that those individuals and communities often reduce into simpler composites for everyday living because of the difficulty (or impossibility) of grasping all relevant contexts for and influences on an individual, community, or situation. In this context, it is, among other things, the white-noise-like ubiquity of the forces of globalization that makes it so difficult for people to grasp these phenomena and that makes the role of fiction valuable in exploring the complexities of self and world that we simplify in the course of our everyday lives.

Smith's depiction in *NW* of Natalie's experiences exceeds Natalie's understanding of them. Smith uses form, content, and context to stress the intricacy of experiences of complex connectivity and represent not only the anxiety and confusion of the experiences but also other aspects of their nature. Part three represents Natalie's story from age four to age thirty-five in 184 short sections that reflect Natalie's experience of life as fragmented and difficult to organize coherently. The fragments, each headed by a number and a title and averaging less than a page in length, center on events, themes, character sketches, passing thoughts, narratorial asides, and additional perspectives on all of the above, making it difficult to predict what the next piece will add to the existing composite. Section titles offer the reader a microcosm of the task overwhelming Natalie: evaluating an onslaught of broken images to determine how (and how meaningfully) they relate to the section and to Natalie's story more generally. While part three constitutes the narrator's composite narrative representation of Natalie's life to date, readers also function as

composers here, in that interpreting this deluge of fragments inevitably involves identifying meaningful patterns that will make some sections or details more central to a reader's understanding and marginalizing (or forgetting about) others.

Reader compositing is complicated by the chaotic multiplicity of topics covered. Titles relate, for example, to issues of race (1. *These red pigtails*), differing cultural knowledge bases (2. *Kiwi fruit*), character sketches (12. *Portrait*), consumer products (14. *That obscure object of desire*, 23. *Spectrum 128k*), phenomenological time (26. *Relative time*, 89. *Time slows down*), narratorial designations (19. *Detour into the perfect past tense*, 41. *Parenthetical*, 46. *Pause for an abstract idea*), and connections (99. *Frank seeks Leah*, 100. *Natalie seeks Elena*, 126. *Tonya seeks Keisha*). These different titling patterns, along with others (emotional states, events, imperatives) are unmanageably prolific for the reader who, like Natalie, is seeking meaningful forms – let alone one coherent overall pattern – as a foundation for understanding. As a result, this narrative approach to representing complex connectivity matches Natalie's fragmented sense of identity and understanding of the world and of her place in it, putting readers in a compositing dilemma similar to Natalie's.

The narrative forms of the novel's other four parts are all different, with the structure of each reflecting some aspect of how its focalizer organizes their world and experiences. In part one, "Visitation," focalized through Leah, a standard, impersonal numerical structure (without titles, unlike part three) is broken up by idiosyncratic, subjectively meaningful interludes, suggesting an institutional system

and brief interstitial moments of personal expression, mirroring this aspect of Leah's experience. The three sections of part two, "Guest," focalized through Felix Cooper, emphasize the locally significant geographic differentiation of the London postcode areas where they are primarily set: NW6, (W1), and NW6. (The W1 title is perhaps in parentheses because Felix perceives this posh West End district as culturally distant from his home in northwest London.) Though parts four and five are, like part three, focalized through Natalie, their structural logics are distinct. The sections of part four, "Crossing," are named (like part two) according to local geography, in this case after the routes or locations traversed by Natalie and Nathan Bogle during each section. The titles constitute a route map of Natalie and Nathan's walk from "[t]he world of council flats" in Willesden Lane (NW6) "up into money" in Hornsey Lane (N6) (372). The brief, fourteen-page part five has no major section designations, only minor organizational features found in all parts, such as occasional blank lines or triple dot breaks. As a result, the reader now cued to attend to structuring principles might notice other levels of organization instead, such as part five's repetition of part one's title, "Visitation," the repetition between part two's opening lines ("The man [Felix] was naked, the woman [his girlfriend Grace] dressed" (113)) and part five's ("The woman [Natalie] was naked, the man [her emotionally estranged husband Frank] dressed" (389)), and other connections among as well as within the parts. This emphasizes for the reader yet another layer of multiplicity—different scales of organization and structure operating simultaneously.

These narrative structures bear no explicit relationship to globalization. The geographical structures of parts two and four feature local routes and postal codes, while part one focuses on an abstract institutional system of chronological numbering and part three delves into the mess of broken images plaguing Natalie. The last of these comes closest, but none are organized across countries, distant time periods, or distant cultures<sup>9</sup> as were most of the novels considered in chapter one (*The Heart of Redness*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and *Saving the World*).<sup>10</sup> Instead, as I have been arguing, globalized connections, objects, and influences on identities and communities, etc., supplement and pour in to help fill these structures, even at the local level, so that a focus on the local cannot help but reveal the ways in which the global is not discrete from and opposed to the local or

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<sup>9</sup> By now it may be apparent that my analysis, by focusing on the narrative structures involved in these representations of globalization, has little room left for attention to many other pressing considerations relevant to globalization, such as nation of origin, cultural upbringing, economic systems, etc. For example, the different political milieus of *NW*'s London and *Anil's Ghost*'s Sri Lanka are important to the meaning of globalization in these two novels, and not addressing this in depth is a significant omission on my part. As Tomlinson notes, "[t]he sheer scale and complexity of the empirical reality of global connectivity is . . . something we can only grasp by cutting into it in various ways. . . . to try to draw out an understanding of globalization within these terms, whilst always denying them conceptual priority: pursuing one dimension in the self-conscious recognition of multidimensionality" (*Globalization* 17). The narrative structures used to represent globalization in these novels are important and central to my analytical approach here, but they are not to be interpreted as the central aspect or master discourse of globalization.

<sup>10</sup> *So Far from God* stakes out an interesting middle ground between the structural principles of those novels and *NW*. Like the other works in chapter one, it emphasizes globalization, but as that chapter noted, it does so with a somewhat different set of narrative compositing techniques that are, in fact, more akin to those of *NW*: multiple central characters, one location and community whose entanglement with globalized and multicultural influences is nevertheless visible, and one time period.

to individuals like Natalie and Leah whose self-definitions depend on neighborhood identity. The global is consistently visible in *NW*, but the characters rarely notice it *as* globalized—the global pervades their lives in multitudinous if often mundane ways, but it remains marginalized in their understandings of those lives. Wilson and Dissanayake theorized such global/local dynamics in *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (1996), arguing that contemporary society exists in “a new world-space of cultural production and national representation which is simultaneously becoming more *globalized* (unified around dynamics of capital logic moving across borders) and more *localized* (fragmented into contestatory enclaves of difference, coalition, and resistance) in everyday texture and composition” (1). *NW* represents this “everyday texture and composition” with a structure demonstrating both its characters’ attention to the local and also a subtle, pervasive connectedness to the culturally, politically, and economically global. Part of what distinguishes one locality from another today is the particular makeup of its inevitable complex global connectivity (and the forms of “glocalization,” or localization as part of a global marketing strategy, that manifest there) (Robertson, “Glocalization” 28). And part of what gives shape to the everyday texture of a place is the acts of interpretive composition that individuals like Natalie undertake in their efforts to make sense of themselves and their neighborhoods, as well as of the place of both with regard to the larger world. In incorporating but not emphasizing the forces of globalization (Natalie and the others focus on local issues of identity, family, work, and neighborhood), the narrative structures of *NW*’s five



parts reflect composing approaches adopted by their characters as a response to complex connectivity.

### **The National (and the Global) in *Anil's Ghost***

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, like Smith's *NW*, approaches globalization as a topic whose narrative exploration requires the composing of multiple protagonists and contexts into one narrative work. *Anil's Ghost* does not stress globalization thematically or structurally, but again represents it as a pervasive but paradoxically easily overlooked web of connectivity within a frame whose focus is placed elsewhere – in this case largely on the forensic and interpersonal ramifications of a three-way national civil war. Ondaatje's novel focuses almost exclusively on Sri Lanka, but the characters and narrative structure are influenced by complex global forces. The narrative centers around the efforts of Anil Tissera, a Sri Lankan who emigrated to the U.K. and U.S. for schooling and a career as a forensic pathologist, and Sri Lankan archaeologist Sarath Diyasena to conduct a human rights investigation under the joint supervision of the United Nations and the Sri Lankan government in the early 1990s. Their task becomes identifying the skeleton of a man likely murdered and disposed of by the government during the ongoing three-sided conflict with northern Tamil separatists and southern insurgents. The skeleton is eventually identified, but by the end of the novel, the narrative focus has shifted away from the investigation to the point that Ondaatje does not narrate how the international community responds once Anil leaves Sri Lanka with her evidence. Instead, the latter portions of the book delve into the

protagonists' personal histories, strained personal relationships, and mechanisms for coping with the trauma of the violence that surrounds them and struggling on with their personal and professional lives. In addition to Anil and Sarath, other central characters include Sarath's brother Gamini, an emergency room doctor left emotionally numbed and addicted to speed by the consequences of the devolving political violence; Palipana, an epigraphist and former mentor to Sarath who became a hermit after his fall from academic grace; Ananda, a sculptor, ritual painter of sacred eyes on Buddha statues, and (since the disappearance of his wife during the violence) alcoholic; and, tangentially, Anil's fellow forensic scientist Leaf (who has early-onset Alzheimer's) and married ex-lover Cullis.

*Anil's Ghost* is divided into eight parts whose focalization alternates, both within and between parts, primarily among Anil, Sarath, and Gamini. Unlike the novels in chapter one, *Anil's Ghost* does not interweave parallel narratives that jump from country to country or decade to decade to create its globalized composite narrative. Instead, it utilizes a center/margin binary. The central narrative remains focused on the forensic investigation in Sri Lanka. Woven into this larger structure are brief narrative fragments that at first seem only tenuously related to the main story and characters, fragments formally distinguished from the main text by italics and page breaks. These marginal elements take place in other countries, or directly impact major political figures (as in the narration of a presidential assassination featuring no main characters, though bombing victims later show up in Gamini's emergency room), or share abstracted scientific data about Sri Lanka from the

National Atlas that place the nation within global environmental and geographical contexts. (Another set of non-typographically distinguished marginal fragments digress analeptically a few months or years to narrate portions of Anil's variously strained relationships with Leaf and Cullis in America.)

In the first fragment, which precedes part one, Anil digs for bodies in Guatemala, while in another, an assassin kills a government official (5-6, 31-32).<sup>11</sup> Some provide alternate perspectives on places or events: "*The National Atlas of Sri Lanka has seventy-three versions of the island—each template revealing only one aspect, one obsession: rainfall, winds, surface waters of lakes, rarer bodies of water locked deep within the earth. . . . There are no city names. . . . There are no river names. No depiction of human life*" (39-40). One italicized section lists the names, ages, dates, and locations of disappearances of individuals between November 1989 and January 1990, before switching (without a page break) to non-italicized narration of Anil reading these victim reports (41). This dissolution of the page-break barrier between italicized and non-italicized sections emphasizes connections rather than distinctions between central and marginal narrative events as well as the subjective nature of the central/marginal distinction. The next italicized section (also lacking a page break) also undermines the initially simple typographically signaled distinction. In it, Anil remembers or fever-dreams Sarath tracing her nude outline

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<sup>11</sup> It can be inferred from corresponding details of a train trip featured in a later italicized fragment narrating a discussion between Anil and Gamini that this assassination is occurring on the same train at the same time, though no characters ever realize this (251-53). This is the only apparent connection between the assassination and the central story.

onto newspapers along with those of the four skeletons they are working with (61-62). This scene is not obviously less central than other brief vignettes of Anil and Sarath's work unless it is taken as a fever dream (and Anil herself is unclear of the status of this memory: "Had he done that?") (62). Similarly, later sections portray events whose only indications of being somehow separate from the rest of the text are italics and page breaks, including a conversation between main characters, the introduction of soon-to-be-central character Ananda Udugama, and Ananda's wife's traumatic encounter with political violence that may be "the story [Ananda] invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance" (251-53, 91-93, 175, 307).

*Anil's Ghost* does not explicitly foreground the shift toward a more central role for the globalized contexts and networks often featured in the italicized sections. Its abandonment of the initial separation of non-italicized central narrative sections and italicized marginal sections, however, subtly and implicitly critiques the clean separation of local story and wider, often global, influences and connections. The italics and page breaks at first mark these interludes as something separate, and the lack of immediately obvious or strong connections to the main story encourages readers to see them as less significant than the central narrative. But by the end, they cannot be neatly categorized or separated from the non-italicized bulk of the novel. With the center-margin binary undermined, the logic behind the typographic distinction appears obscure rather than obvious. This ambiguity suggests that Ondaatje's structural distinction emphasizes the challenges of narrative compositing, of creating order from the mess of human experiences in a

story grappling with multiple protagonists, their present interactions, and personally meaningful moments in their pasts. Their lives and contexts are too complex for a completely clear, orderly, and objective division of main and secondary narrative, but some attempt at this must nevertheless be made for a narrative to take shape, even if initially distinct narratives later blend together. The italicized digressions into daily lives, representative events, atlases, and lists form one layer of the novel's larger project of compositing together personalized experiences as well as a wider view of the bloody Sri Lankan conflict.

In her analysis of the dispersed, composite structure of *Anil's Ghost*, Margaret Scanlan sees "a narrative structure that replicates the experience of terror" (302). *Anil's Ghost* depicts globalized networks of violence and terror (with "backers on the sidelines in safe countries, a war sponsored by gun- and drug-runners"), but it also depicts professional, educational, consumer, and cultural networks, sometimes all at once, as when Anil helps a trainee researcher in Colombo improve her funding request and CV before going out for Chinese food and American soda (and asking her for help with the Sailor investigation) (*Anil's Ghost* 43, 71-72). The novel explores violence and terror in the context of other aspects of life, such as Palipana's desire for a fuller historical narrative than surviving facts can provide, literary and journalistic depictions of conflict and culture, and Gamini and Sarath's doomed love triangle. Scanlan herself observes, "[w]hile some of [the characters'] losses and separations are a direct result of civil war and terrorism, others have no political content at all" (311). Engagements in globalized social, economic, cultural, and

political networks continue despite the civil war (and in some cases are even intensified by it). Rather than abandoning all other aspects of their local and global identities and lives, Ondaatje's characters turn to them to cope with, understand, and respond to violence and trauma. After a long day at the lab, Anil and Leaf relax by forensically analyzing old Hollywood westerns and noir thrillers. Anil's prize-winning swimming achievements as a teen earn her social recognition from multiple people even years later upon her return to war-torn Sri Lanka – in part because it's a safe topic of conversation in a dangerous environment. Ananda's work to repair a vandalized Buddha statue occurs under the auspices of the national government's Archaeological Department and is later approvingly analyzed by specialists and experts (who nevertheless decline to assist the project in person for fear of the ongoing violence). Scanlan notes that Ondaatje's fragmented novel "asks the reader to engage in an act of reconstruction, piecing together stories and psychologies as . . . Ananda . . . will piece together the ruined Buddha," but this need for reconstructive compositing is a product not only of terror and violence but also of characters' and readers' need to come to terms with non-violent forms of complex connectivity (302).

Ondaatje may seek less to represent the Sri Lankan civil war than to represent the idiosyncrasy and subjectivity inherent in any understanding of life amidst such conflicts and the complex networks of involvement that pervade (and outlast) them. David Farrier explains, "Ondaatje has denied that the book was meant to be read as representative of the Sri Lankan situation . . . he refuses to take 'the

pulse of the ex-colony' (*Anil's Ghost* 79), instead engaging with concepts of truth from the localized perspective of the individual" (84). Ondaatje describes this narrative structure by "repeat[ing] the quote from John Berger with which he prefaced *In the Skin of a Lion*: "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one" (Jaggi 6)" (Farrier 84).<sup>12</sup> Ondaatje insists on a composite understanding of the larger picture—a subjective, cobbled-together narrative that cannot speak for everyone—rather than an understanding in which the parts of a few individuals can be taken as satisfactorily representative of the whole in any secure way. The novel digresses not only from the central characters to others affected by the war but also from the war to other kinds of networked influences, such as the mass media (the Hollywood movies and Western novels whose selective foci Anil and Gamini critique in their different ways) and the international communities of archaeological experts (who influence Palipana's, Sarath's, and Ananda's attempts to piece together physical and conceptual reconstructions of the past and the truth).

In the end, *Anil's Ghost* decisively shifts focus from Anil toward the survivors who remain in Sri Lanka when she leaves and toward the "ghost" of Sarath, murdered for helping Anil get evidence implicating the government out of the country. When Anil exits the novel, twenty pages before its end, she asks herself how her experiences in Sri Lanka will follow her out of the country: "If she were to

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<sup>12</sup> Anil originally intends to use Sailor's skeleton "as a metonym of the national trauma: 'To give him a name would name the rest' (56)," but she soon finds that "[t]ruth, in the sphere of the local, becomes an infinitely nuanced affair, at odds with the metonymic" (Farrier 84, 85).

step into another life now, back to the adopted country of her choice, how much would Gamini and the memory of Sarath be a part of her life?" (285). She then remembers a conversation in which the brothers discuss their love of country and their need to remain there, in spite of the violence, "[i]n spite of everything. No Westerner would understand" (285). Gamini had pointed out that Western literature always ends with the Western hero's clean homeward exit from the messy non-Western locale and the feeling that "the war, to all purposes, is over. That's enough reality for the West" (286). Though it is implied that Anil makes the same choice, *Anil's Ghost* does not; instead of ending with Anil on a plane seeing Colombo as "someplace now [s]he can look at through the clouds," the novel remains behind in Sri Lanka with Gamini and Ananda, ending as Ananda pauses to think of his long-missing wife while finishing the sacred painting of eyes on a new Buddha statue (286). *Anil's Ghost* does not treat Anil's story as the only one; when she leaves Sri Lanka the story continues without her. This both reinforces the national frame of the narrative and, through the early exit of such a prominent character, suggests that even a narrative so framed cannot help but have messy borders where agents and forces beyond the nation come in and out of play. Ondaatje's novel is composited from many stories, individuals, perspectives, events, and networks, and Anil's departure reminds us that the connections among them extend beyond the scope of any one narrative to fully express, emphasizing both the importance and the inevitable limitations of composite understandings of complex globalized experiences.



*Anil's Ghost's* composite structure facilitates understanding of complex situations and events like civil war and the less prominent but nevertheless critical conditions of globalization. Globalized cultural, political, academic, and economic networks complicate narrative representation of war and its aftermath; the need to include such networks (to not let any one story be the only story) and the impossibility of comprehensively exploring them motivate the narrative structures discussed above. Compositing challenges also feature thematically: until his fall from grace, Palipana is influential in international archaeology because he is a master of contexts, someone "deeply knowledgeable about the context of the ancient cultures" who "knew the languages and the techniques of research better" than anyone and who could thus assemble meaningful composite understandings of the past (79, 80). Characters in and readers of *Anil's Ghost* face the related challenge of determining which of the proliferating historical, religious, mythical, cultural, and legal frameworks for understanding the world should be tapped to make sense of violence alongside memories and experiences of life beyond war. The forensic response to war and justice is prominent in *Anil's Ghost*, but the resolution suggested by the forensic detective structure is not delivered. The sufficiency of forensic science is not self-evident. Sailor can be identified, and is, but even if his killers were, improbably, brought to justice by the international community, that would only be the barest start to understanding such violence.

The search for meaning amidst such conditions is deeply personal and involves cultural and spiritual as well as political and legal frameworks that, in the

contemporary world, are connected to global networks of meaning-making and cultural exchange that ensure multiple interpretive contexts. Gamini experiences such interpretive opportunities with regularity. When he is placed on leave from his hospital after collapsing from exhaustion, he walks to the house he had abandoned after his wife left him (he had started sleeping at the hospital between shifts) and finds that a family has moved in. Rather than choosing to approach the situation in terms of property by asserting his rights of ownership, he realizes that “[h]e didn’t want the house, he wanted a home-cooked meal,” which they provide, along with his back mail (216). He then gives them a couple of his paychecks and hires a cab to drive him across the country to a resort in the dangerously insurgent northeast. Gamini’s actions here are probably surprising to most readers, but money and ownership are not important to him and so count for less in his interpretation of the situation than in most readers’. A week after he arrives at the beach resort, Gamini is kidnapped by insurgents (for a day or so) to care for their wounded. This presents him with another interpretive quandary. He is angry at the leaders of these wounded fighters: “Who sent a thirteen-year-old to fight, and for what furious cause? For an old leader? For some pale flag?” (220). Then he sees his new patients in relation to his old ones, recalling that “[b]ombs on crowded streets . . . had been set by people like this. Hundreds of victims had died under Gamini’s care” (220). Finally, he seizes on what, for him, is the most pertinent interpretive framework for his dilemma, and he settles in to work: “Still. He was a doctor. In a week he would be back working in Colombo” (220).

It is unclear to what extent his decision to provide the medical care demanded by his captors is motivated by the doctor's imperative to care for the wounded or spurred by the calculus of wagering that the good he can do back in Colombo if he doesn't make trouble here outweighs the potentially counterproductive consequences of healing this batch of insurgents. What is clear is that Gamini moves from one situation of ambiguity and interpretive multiplicity to the next—what is moral and what is meaningful are not self-evident in the world he lives in.<sup>13</sup> Gamini and the other characters of *Anil's Ghost* repeatedly face situations that complicate attempts to meaningfully account for them, disjointed experiences of violence, disappearance, uncertainty, and multicultural encounter, and Ondaatje similarly challenges readers to interpret a fragmented narrative (though the literary encounter has significantly lower stakes than the characters' need to deal with violence and trauma). Individuals and groups in *Anil's Ghost* employ configurations of evidence, causal logics, and involved parties that are not always systematic or consistent. Ondaatje writes of the Sri Lankan conflict, "It was a Hundred Years' War

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<sup>13</sup> Gunesena's crucifixion on the road provides another example of a situation denying an obvious primary interpretation. Jon Kertzer holds that the symbolic meanings of this act are unmoored from their Christian context, but Sam Knowles argues against assuming that Christianity is the appropriate primary context for understanding this act at all, emphasizing that readers or characters with non-Western or mixed contexts for signification may interpret this in non-Christian ways (Kertzer 127; Knowles 434). There is no one best interpretation of Gunesena's crucifixion, just as Ondaatje does not give us only one focalization or one unfragmented story. Knowles's analysis focuses on the role of the transnational as he calls on readers of *Anil's Ghost* to account for complexities of identity and location and to explore "questions of division, boundary and integration" (439). But the questions raised by Knowles exceed what transnationality or any one analytical framework can address.

with modern weaponry, and backers on the sidelines in safe countries, a war sponsored by gun- and drug-runners. It became evident that political enemies were secretly joined in financial arms deals. *'The reason for war was war.'*" (43). This succinctly highlights connections between factions, events, and facts that are complicated, surreal, and politically, technologically, and financially globalized. Political enemies secretly subvert their asserted allegiances to make money on weapons deals fueling conflicts, sometimes in distant parts of the globe, deals that likely involve legitimate as well as covert economic networks.

Ondaatje's characters each grapple with and interpret their experiences of the civil war in their own way. Like the novel's composite structure built from both tightly and loosely connected events and characters, character perspectives in *Anil's Ghost* are informed by the varied impact of globalization even as characters primarily understand their experiences in local and national terms. Anil's perspective and experiences are the most dramatically affected by globalization, but complex issues of displacement, disjuncture, syncretism, and mutability driven by globalization also apply to characters who never leave Sri Lanka.<sup>14</sup> The international project forces the reluctant Sarath to carefully navigate his relationship with Anil

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<sup>14</sup> Both Knowles's and Victoria Cook analyze Anil in terms of transnationality. Cook argues, "Ondaatje reveals Anil's transnational nature as being a continually changing mixture of a variety of cultures, which incorporates, encompasses, and contains various fragments in one unified being" along axes such as name, nationality, family, language, and culture. For Cook, "Ondaatje focuses in his work on the complications that arise from just such a multicultural reality" as that faced by Anil in her emigration to the West and return to Sri Lanka as an outside expert, "exposing the gaps, but also providing structures of contact and exchange that confront the interwoven nature of an increasingly syncretized and hybridized global community."

and the global institutions she represents to minimize his vulnerability to the Sri Lankan governmental forces threatened by his and Anil's work, for instance.

Another example arises in the final chapter, as Ananda works on two statues of Buddha. One is new and destined (according to tradition) to become a god once Ananda performs the ritual of painting its eyes. The other is old and no longer a god since its destruction by treasure-seeking vandals, but its reconstruction is funded according to an unarticulated logic that seems to value the statue's history or the symbolism of its reconstruction. This more secular project is international in scope and interest, and Ananda only becomes the project leader by default: "It was assumed that Ananda would be working under the authority and guidance of foreign specialists but in the end these celebrities never came. There was too much political turmoil, and it was unsafe" (*Anil's Ghost* 301). Instead of foreign specialists, Ananda rounds out the work force with local villagers, forming a team from local and national rather than national and international sources, though evidently the absent experts still keep an eye on the project, as "[l]ater it came to be seen that the work done by Ananda was complex and innovative," implicitly adding to the knowledge base of this global community of experts rather than simply drawing from it (301).

Before the Buddha projects recounted in the novel's final part, Ananda is brought on by Anil and Sarath to reconstruct the face of the Sailor skeleton. The forensic team finds Ananda via Sarath's (and then Palipana's) academic and professional archaeological networks. Both Anil's and Sarath's forensic project and the similarly internationally sponsored Buddha statue projects give Ananda a non-

retaliatory outlet for the mental and emotional energy generated by the experience of violence. The novel ends on the image of Ananda being called back from reminiscence of his wife's death by the touch of his young assistant, which functions synecdochically to remind Ananda, and readers, of all the other connections that, despite the violence and trauma that pervade the novel, do not exhaust the potential of engagement in the world: "He felt the boy's concerned hand on his. This sweet touch from the world" (307). These last lines also resonate with the fact that Ananda's return from grueling, dangerous pit work to sculpting, ritual painting, and statue reconstruction is enabled by the government's desire to remain connected to globalized cultural projects and organizations by funding projects like his (if only to support their claims to legitimacy in the midst of civil war). It is a sad irony that Ananda's halting recovery from despair and trauma is facilitated by the grudging understanding of a culpable government that supporting cultural projects and going through the motions of an independent investigation buttress their international credibility. It speaks, however, to the power of the world to reach in and make a small but meaningful difference in one man's life amidst the nightmare of civil war.

The life of the archaeologist Palipana is also deeply affected by the context of globalized professional networks and value systems. Palipana is introduced as having been "for a number of years at the centre of a nationalistic group that eventually wrested archaeological authority in Sri Lanka away from the Europeans," a well-known scholar with no time for self-congratulatory international conferences who countered the Western view of "Asian history as a faint horizon where Europe

joined the East” with knowledgeable, expert analyses from a reversed center-periphery perspective in which Europe was merely “a landmass on the end of the peninsula of Asia” (79). Palipana’s archaeological work (including his forgeries) aim to undo the effacements of not only “kings and state and priests” but also, as Scanlan puts it, “the depredations of [his archaeological] Japanese and European predecessors” (*Anil’s Ghost* 105; Scanlan 308). An early italicized interlude, presented far before Palipana is properly introduced into the story, stresses his engagement with global academic, cultural, economic and political networks:

*Cave 14 was once the most beautiful site in a series of Buddhist cave temples in Shanxi province. . . . The panorama of Bodhisattvas . . . were cut out of the walls with axes and saws, the edges red, suggesting the wound’s incision.*

*‘Nothing lasts,’ Palipana told them. . . . This was the place of a complete crime. Heads separated from bodies. . . . None of the bodies remained—all the statuary had been removed in the few years following its discovery by Japanese archaeologists in 1918, the Bodhisattvas quickly bought up by museums in the West. Three torsos in a museum in California. A head lost in a river south of the Sind desert, adjacent to the pilgrim routes.*

*The Royal Afterlife. (12).<sup>15</sup>*

When Anil and Sarath find him he is a hermit living in the jungle with only a single human companion—the virtual limit case of removal from the networks and influence of globalization. Yet Palipana turns out to be significantly influenced by such networks, his hermitic lifestyle the direct result of his and the international

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<sup>15</sup> This early description of archaeological ransacking joins the late narration of the pulverized Buddha statue reconstructed by Ananda as stone counterparts to the human victims of dismemberment, decapitation, explosive disintegration, and medical amputation whose stories they bookend. I lack the space to address this theme properly here, but it is yet another level on which Ondaatje explores issues of wholeness, fragmentation, disconnection, and composite reconstruction.

academy's ultimate mutual rejection, and he himself stresses that even hermits are partially determined by society: "you cannot survive as a monk if society does not exist. You renounce society, but to do so you must first be a part of it, learn your decision from it. This is the paradox of retreat" (103). Nor is Palipana's retreat absolute, as Anil and Sarath's visit in search of advice from Sarath's former mentor draws Palipana briefly back into contact with society and the UN-sponsored investigation.

Palipana's drastic shift from renowned expert to outcast comes about when tension arises between his reliance on furthering his nationalist agenda through academic communication and his investment in a historical truth unsupported by evidence sufficient to gain archaeological acceptance. It is a tension between competing worldviews, one empirical and tied to global professional standards and the other leaning controversially on intuition and creative extrapolation. Palipana buttresses empirical evidence with intuition and inference (based on deep contextual knowledge) to articulate a historical truth he believes but cannot prove. But because he recognizes that the academic community will reject this method, he conceals his intuitive leaps behind fictive evidence. This composite stems from Palipana's overall understanding of history, but its heavy dependence on inference (and deceptive presentation as empirically founded fact) is incompatible with professional standards of historical truth. When his deception is revealed and he becomes an academic pariah, he cuts off nearly all ties with the world. He understands that he can no longer effectively advocate for Sri Lanka's proper place



in the cultural world after decades, if not centuries, of neglect, appropriation, or disdain by the international archaeological community. Since he can no longer affect the global knowledge network (or society more generally) as he desires, he has no further use for it, and disconnects himself as completely as he can.

In one sense, *Anil's Ghost* narrates the formation of a temporary node—the team assembled for the international forensic project—interconnected with other global, national, and local individuals, forces, and agencies. The investigation represents a global force—international pressure to investigate the violence of the civil war—reaching in to affect the characters' lives. Ultimately, it leads to Sarath's torture and murder when, knowing the risks, he calls down the wrath of the government by illicitly returning Sailor's skeleton to Anil so she can recreate her confiscated research data before leaving the country to report to the UN, thus intervening in the relationship between the Sri Lankan government and the international community. On the day Sarath makes his fateful decision, we are told, "now, this afternoon, he had returned to the intricacies of the public world, with its various truths. He had acted in such a light. He knew he would not be forgiven that" (279). Listening to Anil's report to an unfriendly audience of government anti-terrorism personnel in Colombo, Sarath thinks, "[i]t was a lawyer's argument and, more important, a citizen's evidence; she was no longer just a foreign authority. Then he heard her say, 'I think you murdered hundreds of us.' *Hundreds of us*. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally *us*" (271-72).

Anil's reclaimed Sri Lankan identity helps make her an emissary to the international community Sarath is willing to risk his life to assist. He wants to get both the report and the newly "one of us" Anil back out into the international community, where they can, possibly, make the dearly bought truth about Sailor mean something. Whether that happens is never revealed—this global connection is not pursued, with the novel instead exploring the personal trajectories of Gamini and Ananda in the aftermath of Sarath's death—but Sarath considers the chance to bringing international political and legal pressure to bear on the agents of violence in Sri Lanka worth his life. In this sense, too, global networks like the political, legal, and economic matrices of the United Nations play a critical role in the stories braided into *Anil's Ghost*, their relevance and connection to this national frame asserted even as the eventual result of the Sailor investigation remains uncertain and unnarrated.

### **Margins, Intertexts, and Complex Connectivity**

Ondaatje and Smith both structure their narratives around composites of multiple focalizers and around local or national frames that reveal but rarely emphasize the influence of globalization on their settings, characters, and plots, instead representing its paradoxical yet commonplace role as an influential factor that remains on the margins of both awareness and narrative. One final way that Smith and Ondaatje develop this idea is by briefly outlining globalized networks through subtle intertextual connections to their earlier novels. In *NW*, we hear a snippet of Natalie's friend's mobile phone conversation: "But Irie was always going

to be that kind of mother,' said Ameeta, 'I could have told you that five years ago'" (299). This probably refers to the Irie who was a protagonist of Smith's *White Teeth* (given the unusual name, the same setting in northwest London, and the fact that the Irie of *White Teeth* also has a child). This brief connection reveals that Natalie and Irie's experiences and social networks are set apart by only two degrees of separation, encouraging the reader familiar with both novels to think of the narrative composite that is *White Teeth* as intersecting and overlapping that of *NW*. The passing references to Ameeta and Imran's "countries of origin," facetiously presented by Frank as "India versus Pakistan'," recall the deeper exploration of Samad, Alsana, Magid, and Millat Iqbal's complex ties to both India and northwest London (as well as Irie's own complicated relationship with both England and Jamaica) in the earlier novel's more explicit examination of globalization, suggesting through intertextual allusion a similar subtext to Ameeta and Imran's national and transnational identities (and Frank's own) in contrast to Frank's flippant, simplistic treatment of them (297). This social and cultural proximity to the *White Teeth* Iqbals was first suggested a few pages earlier when Natalie was caught up by her mother on various NW happenings, including the illness of a Mrs. Iqbal: "Small woman, always a bit snooty with me. Breast cancer" (294).

Ondaatje makes a similarly oblique connection to a setting from *Anil's Ghost* in *The Cat's Table*, though the novels are set nearly forty years apart. In *Anil's Ghost*, Anil and Sarath set up their forensic lab in the Colombo harbor onboard:

"[t]he *Oronsay*, a passenger liner in the old days of the Orient Line, [which] had been gutted of all valuable machinery and luxury

furnishings. It had once travelled between Asia and England—from Colombo to Port Said, sliding through the narrow-gauge waters of the Suez Canal and journeying on to Tilbury Docks. . . . For the last three years the *Oronsay* had been berthed permanently in an unused quay at the north end of Colombo harbour. The grand ship had now become essentially part of the land and was being used by Kynsey Road Hospital as a storage and work area. . . . a section of the transformed liner was to be Sarath and Anil’s base.” (18)

The Asia-England trip described in passing in *Anil’s Ghost* prefigures the narrative framework of *The Cat’s Table*, a coming-of-age tale about Michael, a young boy from Colombo making the journey on the *Oronsay* to England in 1954. Early in the novel, Ondaatje narrates Michael’s realization that, like a ship he once saw being scrapped at the far end of Colombo harbor, “the ship I was now on could also be cut into pieces,” foreshadowing the days when the *Oronsay* will come to permanent rest in Colombo and serve as Anil and Sarath’s lab (*The Cat’s Table* 34). The ship ties together two sets of transnational experiences in two different eras, juxtaposing the continuities of place and vessel with the contrasts in political climate, social context, and the meaning of the ship to the novels’ protagonists.

These intertextual moves call attention to the ways in which texts participate in complex connectivity much like individuals in a globalized world.<sup>16</sup> The edges of a given narrative of globalized life, in other words, do not only trail off where the book falls silent (e.g., the unnarrated conclusion of the Sailor investigation in *Anil’s Ghost*), but also pass the baton to other texts, in a never-ending intertextual network. Smith

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<sup>16</sup> Intertextuality becomes even more direct in many new media literary genres. Hypertext fiction, for example, can use the web technology of hyperlinks not only internally but also to offer readers a direct portal to a designated web-based intertext.

briefly thematizes this phenomenon in *NW* when a young Keisha (not yet Natalie) considers her relationship to the inexhaustible textual universe: “Every unknown word sent her to a dictionary—in search of something like ‘completion’—and every book led to another book, a process which of course could never be completed” (207-08). Intertextual connections in *NW* and *Anil’s Ghost* are brief and unemphatic, further situating the social, technological, political, cultural, and commercial networks in which they participate as omnipresent but paradoxically easy to overlook, both in the novels and in the contemporary world they represent. The people, places, events, and connections central to these novels are surrounded by other influences connecting them to other people, places, and events. As the web of interacting forces gets more extensive and intensive in our age of accelerated globalization, the contingent nature of any narrative configuration of human experience (which can highlight only a finite number of subjects and contexts) becomes increasingly evident. Authors like Smith and Ondaatje represent this increasing cultural awareness by incorporating outward-extending points of connection into their novels without focusing attention on them, thus preserving the sense that this condition has, in many ways, become a taken-for-granted part of everyday life. In *NW* and *Anil’s Ghost*, the intensified global networks, connections not pursued, and dwindling degrees of separation between characters like Irie and Natalie, or Michael and Anil, are not part of a separate, globalized way of understanding the world. Rather, they are globalized parts of the local, the national, and the unremarkable—or at least the unremarked on.

The ubiquitous yet narratively marginalized effects of accelerated globalization in *Anil's Ghost* and *NW* represent what these phenomena look and feel like in the lives of each novel's characters. Globalization in Ondaatje's novel is not significant solely in terms of Anil's oft-analyzed transnationalism or her role as representative of the United Nations; the narrative belongs to several focalizers, each engaged in their experiences of complex connectivity. These novels' characters and events are grounded in Sri Lanka and northwest London's involvement in global networks of science, culture, history, politics, justice, technology, and business, pointing to each locality's deep and widespread interdependence with the international community. The next chapter will build on this understanding of the role of globalization in shaping narrative structure by exploring the relationships between globalization, compositing, and new media literature. Chapter three will analyze another text where globalization is thematically peripheral, but one whose foundation of new media technologies make it an active participant in the globalization of composite understandings of identity, culture, and narrative.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “A BLEND OF HUMAN AND COMPUTER MEANINGS”:

#### NEW-MEDIA LITERATURE AND THE GLOBALIZATION OF MODERN IDENTITIES

In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich declares, “today we have too much information and too few narratives that can tie it all together” (217). In response, Manovich calls for an “*info-aesthetics*” of new-media objects to deal with an era in which information processing is “a new key category of culture” (217).<sup>1</sup> The technological compositeness of new-media literature interacts with the narrative, cultural, and identity compositing studied in the previous two chapters, affecting the structure, content, and dissemination of works. Manovich explains that “new media in general can be thought of as consisting of two distinct layers—the ‘cultural layer’ and the ‘computer layer,’” whose interactions and logics affect each other (46). To explain this interaction, Manovich turns to a familiar term: “we can say that they are being composited together. The result of this composite is a new computer culture—a blend of human and computer meanings, of traditional ways in which human culture modeled the world and the computer’s own means of

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<sup>1</sup> Manovich “use[s] the term *new media object* rather than *product*, *artwork*, *interactive media* or other possible terms” to focus on “the culture at large rather than . . . new media art alone”; since this chapter focuses on new-media objects responsive to literary analysis as (incorporating) narrative fiction, I speak both about “new-media objects” and works of “new-media literature” (14).

representing it" (46).<sup>2</sup> Technological compositing is nearly ubiquitous in an age of accelerating globalization, as computer media technologies become ever more prominent. Works of new-media literature participate in the globalization of concepts of identity compatible with the quantitative, procedural manipulations of their computerized media.

The previous two chapters focused on narrative structures developed for print technologies. This chapter explores how interactions between the narrative, ludic (game-oriented), and procedural levels of new media like videogames lead to narrative meanings significantly different from traditional print literature (and reveal the cultural significance of these technologies).<sup>3</sup> New-media technologies allow and encourage new narrative and cultural composites that constitute a key force of globalization changing cultural compositing around the world. Analysis of the relationship between technology and literature in expressive new-media objects

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<sup>2</sup> I would stress that this "new computer culture" is an extension of human cultural expression rather than the opposite of "human" meanings (46).

<sup>3</sup> Take for example, the significance of a game engine, "a database interface, a mechanism through which a predetermined, relatively constrained collection of procedures and protocols are used to render a world and make it navigable in context" (Nideffer 219). For Bogost, "[t]he game engine dramatically increases the scope of unit-based abstraction compared to other forms of cultural production," offering "component-based software systems useful not only for rendering background effects like physics, but also for orchestrating the crucial functions of the gameplay itself" (*Unit Operations* 55). The capabilities and limitations of game engines affect "the kind of discourse the works can create, the ways they create them, and the ways users interact with them" (Bogost 64). In a game where the player-character can only move around and attack non-player characters, players quickly learn every challenge is solved by attack or avoidance. In a game like *Catherine*, which focuses on modeling emotional and psychological states and development, the game engine technology (Gamebryo, by Gamebase USA) enables different ludic strategies and different literary experiences (*Gamebryo*).



has flourished in the past twenty years, as has analysis of the relationship between technology and globalization. However, these discussions have remained too separate. This chapter examines narrative and cultural compositing in relation to the narrower field in which it originated: processes of technological (traditionally visual) combination.<sup>4</sup>

The videogame analyzed in this chapter, Atlus's *Catherine*, does not make globalization central to its subject matter. Like the novels in chapter two, globalization is instead an atmospheric background presence permeating the narrative and its key contexts. This chapter extends that analysis of backgrounded globalization to the role of new-media technologies both in narrative compositing processes and in the dissemination of modern concepts of procedurally tractable identities. Like both previous chapters, this chapter investigates how identities are understood and lived with the help of compositing processes.

New media like videogames expressively employ the computing technologies driving the acceleration of globalization. Terhi Rantanen's definition of globalization in *The Media and Globalization* highlights this role of communications media:

"Globalization is a process in which worldwide economic, political, cultural and social relations have become increasingly mediated across time and space" (8). As

Manovich also reminds us, the use of any technology has cultural effects. Here, we will examine how the procedurality of *Catherine* advances the global dissemination

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<sup>4</sup> This extended discussion of origins has been delayed until chapter three because, while relevant to the new-media analysis in this chapter, I wished to stress the general applicability of a compositing approach to literary analysis over its technological origins.

of modernized identities. For John Tomlinson “globalization is really the globalization of modernity,” where modernity “means, above all, the *abstraction* of social and cultural practices from contexts of local particularity, and their *institutionalization and regulation* across time and space (Giddens 1990)” (Tomlinson, “Globalization” 271, 272). Tomlinson further argues for globalized modernity as “the harbinger of identity” in that “[w]hat could be a much looser, contingent, particular and tacit sense of belonging becomes structured into an array of identities, each with implications for our material and psychological well-being, each, thus, with a ‘politics’” (273).<sup>5</sup> Modern identities based on categories of race, gender, ethnicity, nation, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status (for instance) are disseminated and regulated by modern institutions such as tax codes, civil rights laws, and censuses. Viable identity traits are often non salient in the absence of awareness or institutionalization of an alternative: very few people identify as cisgendered prior to an understanding of transgendered identity—and indeed, both concepts rest on the modern identity practice of binary, unambiguous sex *assignment*. When institutions and communities articulate modern identities, vague awareness of a difference between individuals can become schematic and culturally significant.

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<sup>5</sup> The rise of globalized modern identities need not occur at the expense of local identities, however. Arjun Appadurai stresses that “the production of local subjects” often occurs in intentional contrast with the non-local: “I view locality as primarily relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial. I see it as a complex phenomenological quality” (*Modernity* 179, 178). Identities are frequently composite, with globalized and localized aspects existing in harmony, tension, and interdependence.

Categorical identities are reinforced and disseminated by cultural institutions as well as by governments. In February 2014, Facebook took an active role in gender institutionalization by expanding the list of genders available to Facebook users from two (male, female) to at least fifty-eight, adding categories such as agender, cisgender, gender fluid, intersex, transfeminine, and Two-Spirit (Oremus; Dewey). The official Facebook Diversity page explained this “new custom gender option” as an effort to allow “you to feel comfortable being your true, authentic self” and to give “people the ability to express themselves in an authentic way” . . . if, that is, they are using Facebook in U.S. (and later U.K.) English, the only language in which the custom gender option was initially offered (Facebook Diversity). The repetition of “authentic” indicates Facebook’s paradoxical hope that this revised list will be the definitive one—that sufficiently expanding the array of institutionalized identity options will eliminate all tension between such an array and the “authentic” lived experience of its billion users around the globe.

The flurry of journalistic coverage of this change underlines how powerful cultural institutions can affect public perception of identity, reflecting changes taking place in cultural discussions about identity and broadcasting (or limiting) those changes to designated public. The title of one article, “Here Are All the Different Genders You Can Be on Facebook,” makes explicit the process by which what “you can be” is influenced by institutions like Facebook (Oremus). Another title offered those “Confused by Facebook’s new gender options” a glossary of the new options, aiming to bring many readers their first awareness of themselves or

others in relation to these identity categories (Dewey). Facebook's change is a limited example of Tomlinson's globalization of modern (and postmodern) identities.<sup>6</sup> An institutional change in identity affordances spurred discussion of that change among journalists and Facebook users, impacting how many understand and articulate their own and others' identities.

New-media literature participates in the globalization of identity by providing a popular, widely accessible medium for thinking about the world via particular models of identity arrays programmed into games. Games like *Catherine* model meaningful aspects of identity in quantifiable, schematic terms. Imprecise, contingent identities are in conflict not only with modern institutions in general but also with specific procedural objects like videogames. Videogame critic Ian Bogost offers an explanation of how videogames participate in this globalization of regulated identity with his concept of procedural rhetoric, "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures. . . . a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created" (*Persuasive Games* ix, 3). Analysis of interactive identity arrays in *Catherine* will demonstrate that videogames globally disseminate procedural arguments for

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<sup>6</sup> Four months after launching expanded gender options in U.S. English, Facebook extended the options to U.K. English after efforts "to make sure the list is appropriate and relevant for people in the United Kingdom" (van Dijke). This both suggests the possibility of further global rollouts and emphasizes Facebook's intention of strategically limiting the range of users to whom they will offer these identity representation options.

schematic understandings of identity, making videogames a significant agent of cultural globalization.

This chapter constitutes the most composite argument of the dissertation. I first outline theoretical foundations for a generalized concept of compositing as it springs from and pertains to new-media technologies. I then apply compositing analysis to a new-media object, the 2011 videogame *Catherine*, to explore the role of the game's technological and narrative compositing in globally disseminating modern, schematic concepts of identity demanded by its underlying technologies. The technological foundations of new-media literature give rise to new kinds of authorial and player compositing. In this way, new-media literature participates in the larger contemporary endeavor to make sense of an overwhelmingly complex and information-rich world. Finally, this chapter demonstrates how the use of collective intelligence in online player communities to understand complex new-media literature epitomizes global development and dissemination of successful user compositing processes.

This three-part structure moves from extensive new-media theoretical foundations to narrative, media, and globalization analysis of *Catherine* to media, cultural, and globalization analysis of the social-media-based player community surrounding the game. The chapter's many footnotes point to the wide range of background knowledge, contexts, and examples necessary when making an interdisciplinary argument to a general audience but defying full development if the chapter is to be kept focused even on its wide-ranging three-part structure. The

argument may at times seem very technical to readers less familiar with new-media studies, yet I do not even touch on, for example, code-level analysis of *Catherine* or its fan wiki, restricting myself to higher-level media analysis tied to narrative and cultural analyses rather than digging into code. Similar compositing choices about what to explore, what to note in passing, and what to omit occur in any act of writing, but they are more evident in an interdisciplinary analysis, where the complex connections, contexts, and vocabularies proliferate and the sense of roads left untraveled is potent.

### **Compositing and New Media**

The media we use in our lives and our expressive works affect how we think, identify, and communicate, while remaining far from fully determinant. Marshall McLuhan declares that every medium has “personal and social consequences” that follow “from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs . . . by any new technology” (7). For Lev Manovich, “modern media” including TV and radio “follows the logic of the factory,” while late twentieth-century “new media follows, or actually runs ahead of, a quite different logic of post-industrial society—that of individual customization, rather than mass standardization” (29, 30). These modular “[m]edia elements, be they images, sounds, shapes, or behaviors, are . . . discrete samples . . . assembled into larger-scale objects but continu[ing] to maintain their separate identities. . . . In short, a new media object consists of independent parts, each of which consists of smaller independent parts, and so on,” enabling a modular media landscape in which authors give users customization

options (30-31). Customizability is becoming prominent and even taken for granted with new-media users around the world.

Modular production and end-user customization of new-media literature leads to compositing experiences that bear expressive meaning. Take Daniel Punday's examples that "[i]n a video game we might decrease graphics resolution to improve performance, on a website we might mute background music to avoid irritating the people around us, and so on" (21). Such customization does not always take on literary significance because videogames are not always played for literary satisfaction. The online multiplayer mode of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, for instance, is almost purely ludic, offering an arena for competition but no overt narrative or scripted characters and few occasions for literary analysis (though players could always fit the game scenario into an imagined narrative or into the background of the campaign mode's narrative). Changing the background music can have little literary effect on this game mode. On the other hand, the game's campaign mode has a compelling and disturbing narrative whose experience would be changed if the volume or the level of detail of the unsettlingly realistic graphics were dialed down. Like most contemporary videogames, *Modern Warfare 2* is intrinsically composite, consisting of multiple game modes and discrete sound, video, gameplay, and even narrative aspects (like optional missions) that can be customized independently.<sup>7</sup> The wide range of literarily significant customization experiences

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<sup>7</sup> A "Disturbing Content Notice" prefaces *Modern Warfare 2*'s campaign mode: "Some players may find one of the missions disturbing or offensive. Would you like to have the option to skip this mission? (You will not be penalized in terms of game

available to the users of expressive new-media objects has prompted critical efforts to analyze the range of literary interactivity, such as Espen Aarseth's array of "user functions."<sup>8</sup> The customization (or configurative) agency that videogames offer players explores and propagates compositing processes used to respond to the information overload of life in an age of accelerating globalization. New-media literature offers opportunities for reflecting on compositing in games and in everyday life.

New-media studies also provide, in compositing, a technical analytical concept ripe with the potential for fruitful generalization that I explore throughout this project. While new-media studies tends to stop short of pursuing the concept of compositing as a broadly applicable process due to its disciplinary focus on culture specifically as it relates to media, new-media analysis frequently points toward such

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completion.) –Yes, ask me later - No, I will not be offended." While not penalized in game terms, skipping this mission (also possible from the pause menu at any point during the mission), in which the player controls an undercover U.S. operative taking part in a terrorist group's slaughter of civilians at a Russian airport, significantly affects the narrative experience and players' relationship to the player-character actions they are directing. Publisher Activision revised the mission during the "localization" process for some countries: it was completely removed for Russian copies of the game, and in Japanese and German copies, players must restart from a checkpoint if they kill a civilian, whereas in the standard version, actively participating in the slaughter is neither encouraged nor penalized (Shaer; Warmoth).

<sup>8</sup> In addition to "the interpretative function of the user, which is present in all texts," Aarseth's other user functions in cybertextual experiences include "the explorative function, in which the user must decide which path to take, and the configurative function, in which scriptons [strings of signs "as they appear to readers" (62)] are in part chosen or created by the user. If textons ["strings as they exist in the text" (62)] or traversal functions can be (permanently) added to the text, the user function is textonic" (64).



generalizability. Manovich does so in his discussions of filmic compositing and of the relationship between old and new media. The technological foundations of new media structure the meanings expressible through those media, but new-media technologies are not wholly discontinuous with older technologies, cultural meanings, and identities. Manovich asserts, “[n]ew media does not radically break with the past; rather, it distributes weight differently between the categories that hold culture together” (229). Old and new are represented by “the ‘cultural layer’ and the ‘computer layer,’” which “are being composited together. . . [into] a new computer culture—a blend of human and computer meanings” (Manovich 46). Manovich focuses primarily on the technical meaning of compositing in relation to digital filmmaking,<sup>9</sup> but he posits, in passing, “a more general operation of computer culture—assembling together a number of elements to create a single seamless object” common to various new-media forms (139).

Bogost also suggests a generalizability from technical analysis to larger (encompassing rather than separate) cultural analysis in terms of procedural rhetoric. He argues, “procedural literacy entails the ability to reconfigure concepts and rules to understand processes, not just on the computer, but in general . . . . procedural literacy is not just a practice of technical mastery, but one of technical-cultural mastery” (*Persuasive Games* 245). For Bogost, games work through

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<sup>9</sup> In “new media, the term ‘digital compositing’ has a particular and well-defined meaning. It refers to the process of combining a number of moving image sequences, and possibly stills, into a single sequence with the help of special compositing software such as After Effects (Adobe), Compositor (Alias|Wavefront), or Cineon (Kodak)” (Manovich 136-37). The end goal is the creation of a virtual space from existing footage and special effects work (138).

procedures (as well as narrative and cultural content, in another form of compositing) to make arguments about the world, so that “[p]rocedural rhetorics afford a new and promising way to make claims about *how things work*” (29).<sup>10</sup> Videogames and user experiences of them are, for Bogost, well in keeping with humanities traditions of cultural and literary criticism:

The humanities attempt to get to the bottom of human experience in specific situations, to expose their structures. Procedural media like videogames get to the heart of things by mounting arguments about the processes inherent in them. When we create videogames, we are making claims about these processes, which ones we celebrate, which ones we ignore, which ones we want to question. When we play these games, we interrogate those claims, we consider them, incorporate them into our lives, and carry them forward into our future experiences. (*Persuasive Games* 339)

Game critic Jesper Juul similarly notes that “[a] game is a frame in which we see things differently. Literature can make us focus on the words themselves. In the game, we can seek the beauty of the activity itself” (201). The expressivity of videogames is the result of a composite of activity and procedural rhetoric alongside textual, audio, and video components.

Procedural media not only attempt to reveal how things work but, sometimes, change how things like identity work. Software operations like “copy, cut, paste, search, composite, transform, filter” are, for Manovich, “employed not only within the computer but also in the social world outside it” (118). Such

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<sup>10</sup> A year earlier, in *Unit Operations*, Bogost had argued, “any medium—poetic, literary, cinematic, computational—can be read as a configurative system, an arrangement of discrete, interlocking units of expressing meaning. I call these general instances of procedural expression *unit operations*” (ix). Unit analysis, like procedural rhetoric, examines a specific subfield of the larger cultural concept of compositing.

analyses that describe particular authorial and interpretive processes and suggest their productive interpretability through general compositing can be found throughout new-media criticism. Together, they emphatically demonstrate the impact of globalized new-media technologies on “general ways of working, ways of thinking, and ways of existing in a computer age” (Manovich 118).<sup>11</sup> Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s conceptions of new media and new-media users also lend themselves to general compositing analysis. “[M]edia technologies,” they explain, “constitute networks or hybrids that can be expressed in physical, social, aesthetic, and economic terms” and that can be refashioned into new media through addition, subtraction and reconfiguration (19). Bolter and Grusin further assert that new-media technological composites change user identities (which will become relevant in our analysis of *Catherine*), since “we employ media as vehicles for defining both personal and cultural identity” (231).

Users with combinatory identities engage expressive new-media objects through acts of interpretive and interactive compositing. Contesting the popular

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<sup>11</sup> Manovich gives the example of a (metarealist) “oscillation between illusion and its destruction” via interactivity and direct address: “The oscillation . . . is not an artifact of computer technology but a structural feature of modern society, present not just in interactive media but in numerous other social realms and on many different levels. . . . The oscillation between illusionary segments and interactive segments forces the user to switch between different mental sets—different kinds of cognitive activity. These switches are typical of modern computer usage in general” (209-210). In everyday life, too, we take action as well as observing and interpreting. New-media objects that combine agency with interpretation engage this aspect of everyday compositing that interpretation-only media cannot. In another example, Juul insists “that *a game changes the player that plays it*,” in that good games force players to improve method repertoires rather than rely on old routines, developing task chunking and methodizing skills applicable to everyday life (96).

concept of immersion, Gordon Calleja argues that players aren't "being poured into the containing vessel of the game," they're selectively compositing new experiences into existing (albeit potentially dynamic) worldviews and organizing techniques:

Our awareness of the game world, much like our awareness of our everyday surroundings, is better understood as an absorption into our mind of external stimuli that are organized according to existing experiential gestalts. . . . As the complexity and sophistication of game environments increase, the metaphors of everyday life become more easily adaptable to experiences within them. By *everyday life*, I am here referring to the composite nature of contemporary being, in its social and media-saturated cultural dimensions. The appeal of otherness that these environments promise is organized by the same structuring principles of the everyday world. This is the power of the composite phenomenon that *presence* and *immersion* allude to: a process of internalization and experiential structuring that is compelling precisely because it draws so strongly from everyday lived experience. (167-68)

Calleja's substitution of a theory of incorporation for presence or immersion is founded on the idea that people regularly use compositing processes in everyday life and in the engagement of expressive works. Our "mode of being in the everyday world" does not consist of "a physical reality that is replaced with a virtual world in a here/there dichotomy" when we play a videogame (or read a book) (183). Players, in other words, do not either consider themselves to be in a real world (wholly disconnected from the game they're playing) or else fully immersed in a virtual world (that drowns out the real world completely). Instead "the physical and the virtual are both aspects of what we perceive as real" in a world consisting of both material and virtual stimuli (183).<sup>12</sup> Calleja concludes, "[w]hen our concern is the

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<sup>12</sup> This veers toward a separate debate that I don't time to engage here, but critics of the dangers of media for impressionable audiences would point out that the

human perception of reality . . . we should not take the physical real as the stable point of comparison to which virtual phenomena are measured up. The virtual is, rather, a crucial aspect of contemporary reality” (183).<sup>13</sup>

Calleja’s theory of the incorporation of both virtual and everyday experiences into the mind according to existing gestalts or processes is a crucial example of general compositing. He replaces a simplistic metaphor of player encapsulation in virtuality (immersion) with a more nuanced accounting of how players can composite the real and the virtual in their minds without forgetting either one or the difference between them.<sup>14</sup>

Calleja’s mental compositing processes are adaptable to material, conceptual, and virtual experiences because “the emphasis is placed on the internally constructed consciousness of the individual” and virtual environments function as “domains continuous with the media-saturated reality of everyday life” (179). As Calleja suggests, engagement with new-media technologies ranks among the most common experiences of globalization. Calleja, like Bogost, Manovich, and Bolter and

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sustained connection between the physical and the virtual posited by Calleja might well involve blurring of boundaries (such as the appropriateness of violence in physical and/or virtual scenarios) instead of (or as well as) successful compositing.

<sup>13</sup> For Bogost, too, “technologies serve as structures that frame our experiences of the material world, while offering representations that cause us to think critically about those experiences. In other words, unit operations can help us expose and interrogate the ways we engage the world in general, not just the ways that computational systems structure or limit that experience” (*Unit Operations* 40).

<sup>14</sup> This is one half of Calleja’s theory of incorporation in which “the player incorporates (in the sense of internalizing or assimilating) the game environment into consciousness while *simultaneously* being incorporated through the avatar into that environment (169).

Grusin, suggests specific ways that composing analysis is instrumental to the creation and use of new-media literature. Collectively, these theorists' work indicates the necessity of a more general analysis of the role of composing in dealing with the challenges of new-media technologies and literatures and of globalization more broadly.

New-media literature, like traditional literature, presents simplified, selective models of the world, with the additional twist that core aspects of new-media models are explicit (if not always visible to the end user), procedural, quantitative, and responsive to user input. New-media literature thus offers opportunities to engage and reflect on composing processes by which we make sense of a globalized world pervaded by the same technologies used in these works. Players composite together input from the virtual and the physical as they focus on a videogame within a material environment. They manage the complexities of the game with composing techniques also applicable in their everyday lives. Some of these composing techniques relate to understandings of identity. Multifaceted modern identities are heavily influenced by globalizing modern institutions and, increasingly, by our engagement with expressive new-media works that normalize quantitative, categorical models of identity. The narrative structures used by the novels in chapters one and two for exploring composite identities, communities, and worldviews within globalized contexts were based on the affordances and limitations of print technology (such as the availability of character interiority to textual narration). When new-media objects like the videogame *Catherine* examine

composite understandings of our identities and world, their new-media technologies have major effects on the structure and experience of their narratives. The procedural, quantitative, and networked properties of videogames allow games to both reflect on and participate in the globalization of modernized concepts of identity.

### **New-Media Narrative Compositing**

The previous section of this chapter briefly analyzed the need for a general theory of compositing expanding on technical new-media definitions and applicable to literature and culture as well as media. This section explores the intersection of media, literary, and cultural compositing in and around the videogame *Catherine*, particularly with regard to identity modeling. The following analysis of the implications of new-media technologies for narrative compositing complements the previous chapters' analyses of print-based narrative compositing. This joint media-and-narrative compositing analysis will provide the foundation for a broader cultural analysis of the role of new-media narratives in the globalization of modern identities.

In calling for a robust aesthetics of databases, Victoria Vesna holds that “the development of context in the age of information overload is the art of the day,” in part because “societies are defined by the way we organize our information” (xiii, xiv). For Grahame Weinbren, narratives are even more complex than the databases they draw from: “[c]onstituted of texts, real-world entities, and interpretation, a narrative is more complex than a database, which is composed of nothing more than

its data. . . . A database, in itself, does not *present* data: it *contains* data. The data must always be in an arrangement in order to be read” (67).<sup>15</sup> Particularly with new-media literature allowing users variable experiences of databases, “[w]hen we access the database, we are well aware that our experience is a path through it—exactly that, *one* single path. This knowledge that we are getting a partial, though ordered, view conveys the idea of a larger meaning contained in the database as a whole, a meaning that we can never comprehend” (68). Database-reliant new-media literature, in other words, stresses to users the contingent, partial nature of their understanding of a whole while insisting that such partial experiences can nevertheless be sufficient and meaningful. This tension between the partial and the complete can be a significant part of the experience of new-media literature—as, more generally, of life in the age of accelerating globalization.

The 2011 videogame *Catherine*, developed and published by the Japanese company Atlus for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, provides an excellent example of the role of new-media literature in exploring and furthering the globalization of schematic identities. *Catherine*’s storyline does not overtly emphasize globalization, though like the novels in chapter two, *Catherine*’s narrative draws on a variety of global contexts and cultural traditions.<sup>16</sup> *Catherine*’s narrative comprises an

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<sup>15</sup> While I would argue that a database, which necessarily involves some structure, does constitute a fundamental and non-trivial level of arrangement of data, Weinbren’s larger point—that narrative (or other) progression through a database constitutes a higher, more complex level of structure—stands.

<sup>16</sup> Alongside Western character names, appearances, and in-game signage, the characters and locales also feature Japanese cultural traits and knowledge bases. For



intertextual and multicultural as well as technological composite, and players must develop an understanding of the game within their existing knowledge of these global contexts and/or seek to add to their knowledge in order to better understand the game (often by turning to the collective intelligence of the online fan forums discussed later in this chapter). More important than an analysis of the role of globalization in understanding *Catherine*, however, is an analysis of how the game's procedural identity modeling participates in the globalization of modern modes of identity.

*Catherine's* protagonist and player-character is Vincent, a 32-year-old systems engineer. The plot centers on Vincent's dramatic romantic life, in turmoil due to pressure from Katherine (his girlfriend of five years) to get married and his developing affair with another woman (actually a succubus), Catherine.<sup>17</sup> The story of Vincent's romantic life is split into two parts. While awake, Vincent spends his evenings at a bar, The Stray Sheep, where the player controls his conversations and text messages with his friends, the staff (the Boss and Erica), other patrons, and Catherine. His conversations with bar goers can help resolve their personal crises if

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instance, the characters' familiarity with the Japanese mythological creatures know as kappa is taken for granted, as it would be in Japan but not elsewhere. The story draws from both European (Rapunzel) and Middle Eastern (Ishtar, etc.) mythology.

<sup>17</sup> The Katherine/Catherine spelling difference is much more prominent in the English-language North American localization – in Japanese, the names are spelled identically ( キャサリン ). The Japanese game's box, webpage, and in-game phone mail, among other things, include the different English spellings at times alongside the ambiguous Japanese spelling, but due to the language difference, ambiguity as to which woman is meant is much more prominent in the Japanese original.

he consistently checks in with them and chooses the correct pre-scripted dialogue options. In the bar, Vincent can also use the jukebox and play a retro arcade game, *Rapunzel*, which riffs on *Catherine's* story and block-tower-puzzle gameplay. In addition, frequent cutscenes portray non-interactive segments of Vincent's story (during which portions of his inner monologue are nevertheless impacted by decisions the player has made).

While asleep, Vincent navigates a recurring nightmare where, in his underwear and bearing ram's horns, he must climb block towers before the lower levels tumble into the void. Also climbing are numerous sheep—other men who, like him, are cheating on their female romantic partners.<sup>18</sup> Each climber perceives himself as human and other climbers as sheep. At safe landings, an unseen questioner (Astaroth) in a confessional booth asks Vincent binary philosophical questions like “Does life begin or end at marriage?,” “Which is more cheating? An emotional tryst [or] A physical fling,” and “Do you wish for a peaceful life?” Each

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<sup>18</sup> The game is consistently heteronormative with the peripheral exception of Erica's story. It is hinted at (though only explicitly revealed in the true Katherine ending) that when Erica was in school with Vincent and his friends Jonny and Orlando, she was a man named Eric but later had sex reassignment surgery. Erica and Toby begin a sexual relationship on Day 6, and in the true Katherine ending, Toby's feelings upon later discovering Erica's sex reassignment history include some discomfort and regret alongside the continuation of their mild public displays of physical affection. Orlando and Jonny seem uncomfortable with the idea of Toby and Erica's relationship, but Vincent doesn't treat it as anything out of the ordinary. Critiques that the game veers into misogyny are certainly true at least to the extent that it participates in the visual objectification of female characters and focalizes through Vincent's male gaze. The game's treatment of female characters leaves much to be desired, though male and female characters alike partake in flaws, sometimes simplistic characterization, and bids for player sympathy. A full gender-oriented analysis of the game would certainly be worthwhile.

night's "end boss" is a giant nightmare embodiment of one of Vincent's waking anxieties, such as a zombie-like baby (while he thinks Katherine is pregnant); a knife-wielding Katherine-like bride; and ultimately Boss from *The Stray Sheep*, revealed as Dumuzid the Shepherd from Sumerian mythology, deified by Ishtar (*Catherine's* ultimate power-wielder) (Mark). Dumuzid and Ishtar (via her avatar Astaroth) preside over the block-tower trials of the cheating 'stray sheep'. Vincent and the other men (mostly *Stray Sheep* regulars) can't quite remember their nightmares, but news reports confirm for the player that those failing at the block towers are found dead in their beds in the morning.

While the player guides Vincent through the block towers, his relationship with Katherine deteriorates as he sidesteps permanent commitment. His panic increases as his relationship with Catherine progresses inexorably—whether the player has Vincent pursue Catherine or not, he wakes up next to her each morning without remembering taking her home. His frantic attempts to keep the two women from finding out about each other fill him with stress (and guilt, to a degree partly determined by player choices). Though Vincent tries to break up with Catherine, Katherine infers that he is cheating and breaks up with him. Vincent discovers that Boss is behind the Nightmares, defeats him, and ends the Nightmares for everyone. Vincent then experiences one of eight possible endings determined by the dialogue choices and confessional responses the player selected throughout the game. These endings are divided into three paths – Lover (stick with Katherine), Cheater (opt for Catherine), and Freedom (reject both and pursue space tourism). Endings are also

divided into three levels of quality based on Vincent's commitment to his selected path: there are true (excellent), normal (good), and bad Katherine and Catherine endings as well as true and normal Freedom endings.

*Catherine's* narrative composite makes use of the interactive, procedural affordances of its videogame medium. Like most videogames, *Catherine* outlines a large possibility space that few players will fully explore. Vincent's eight mutually exclusive endings ensure that no player can experience the entirety of *Catherine* within a single playthrough. The different endings represent the consequences of the player's choices on Vincent's identity, not in terms of common sociopolitically salient factors like race or gender, but in terms that we're less used to modeling schematically (romantic attitude and commitment to that attitude, as will be discussed shortly). Employing a common videogame narrative structure known as a forking-path approach, in which the player navigates along narrative paths prescribed by the developers via explorative and configurative in-game actions (in Aarseth's user function terms). *Catherine's* possibility space for narrative and gameplay combines this forking-path narrative structure with the traditional block puzzle game genre and emotionally and psychologically mature (if sometimes simplistic) narrative content. This creates a possibility space of narrative experiences that are sometimes clunky but always illuminating and ambitious. Juul asserts that "[g]ames resist many of the more complex themes we can imagine, such as love, ambition, and social conflict, because they are not easily implemented in rules" (189). Those games that do attempt such themes, notes Juul, usually offer

players only simple interactions that cue more complex, non-interactive narrative presentations (189). *Catherine* represents an incremental development from this scenario, offering simple interactions that combine to create something more complex, while still relying on non-interactive cinematic cutscene presentations for the majority of narrative progression. This design makes *Catherine* an effective example of an expressive work tackling meaningful questions of identity through new-media narrative and ludic (gameplay) structures.

Though *Catherine* is sometimes called a relationship or dating simulation (a genre popular in Japan), it is less a simulation of relationships (of which we see little) than of the attitudes toward them of (eight versions of) one character at one juncture in his life.<sup>19</sup> All simulations and models are simplifications of reality, and

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<sup>19</sup> Willard McCarty describes both simulation and modeling as “rather ill-defined terms [that] share a common epistemological sense: use of a likeness to gain knowledge of its original.” He distinguishes two types: a “model *of* something [as] an exploratory device, a more or less ‘poor substitute’ for the real thing . . . [which] is inaccessible or intractable, like poetry or subatomic whatever-they-are. In contrast a model *for* something is a design, exemplary ideal, archetype or other guiding preconception. Thus we construct a model *of* an airplane in order to see how it works; we design a model *for* an airplane to guide its construction. A crucial point is that both kinds are *imagined*, the former out of a pre-existing reality, the latter into a world that doesn't yet exist, as a plan for its realization.” *Catherine* is a very basic simulation or “model of” in that it reflects real relationships, and a “model for” to the extent that it might influence player’s future relationships., *Catherine* fits basic definitions of a simulation, such as Bogost’s “*representation of a source system via a less complex system that informs the user’s understanding of the source system in a subjective way*” or Salen and Zimmerman’s “*procedural representation of aspects of ‘reality’*” (Bogost, *Unit Operations* 98; Salen and Zimmerman 457). But while *Catherine* simulates or models a romantic situation, its core gameplay is based on block puzzle and social role-playing within a scripted narrative. *Catherine* is not open-ended enough to fit the somewhat stricter parameters of the simulation game genre (featuring games like *SimCity*, *The Sims*, and *Agricultural Simulator 2013*), which Bogost notes “begin not by identifying the narrative output of an individual

many critical observations about traditional simulation games like *SimCity* or *The Sims* apply to *Catherine*, even though narrative-focused, pre-scripted configurable works like *Catherine* present a more limited—or more directed—possibility space. For Juul, “[a] game does not as much attempt to implement the real world activity as it attempts to implement a specific stylized *concept* of a real-world activity. . . . games are often *stylized simulations*; developed not just for fidelity to their source domain, but for aesthetic purposes. These are *adaptations* of elements of the real world” (172). *Catherine* presents a stylized simulation of a character’s romantic attitude (akin to what might be found in the social or dating simulation subgenres) within a pre-scripted forking-path narrative, rather than offering an open-ended simulation scenario. The severe limitations of *Catherine*’s model are not simply—or even primarily—drawbacks, however. Abstraction and reduction are critical compositing skills in a globalized world, and models like *Catherine*’s provide useful opportunities for engaging and reflecting on models as compositing tools.

*Catherine* composites a modestly scaled interactive relationship simulation with a set of narratives that both limit and are limited by the desire to give players meaningful agency centered on the romantic identity of the player-character Vincent. Compositing narrative and game elements produces tensions and limitations that can be quite productive. Salen and Zimmerman assert, “[s]imulations are a powerful way of thinking about narrative because procedural representation is an approach to storytelling that directly emphasizes the player’s  

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game session, but by defining the rule-units that underpin such individual experiences” (Bogost, *Unit Operations* 97).

experience” (457). N. Katherine Hayles notes that contemporary literature is predominantly narrative, while simulations are fundamentally quantitative, so that “[t]he dynamic tensions between simulation and narrative thus involve a dialectic between the human lifeworld and the (relatively) inhuman world of massive numerical calculations” (*My Mother* 6). This tension in videogames usefully mirrors a tension present in the everyday experience of globalization and proliferating media. Contingent, pre-scripted qualitative narrative accounts and “abstract, numerical, limited, and systemic” quantitative simulations alone are each insufficient at representing the contemporary experience, making compositing the two helpful (Salen and Zimmerman 457).<sup>20</sup> “It is not the triumph of the Regime of Computation that can best explain the complexities of the world and, especially, of human cultures,” Hayles argues, “but its interactions with the stories we tell and the media technologies instrumental in making, storing, and transmitting” (*My Mother* 55). *Catherine’s* insights into identity are founded on both narrative and procedural simulation technologies, just as our experience of identity in the world develops both from human interactions and narrative understandings of our past and also from our interactions with arrays of institutionalized modern identity such as Facebook’s options for what genders you can be. Identities that could be more fluid are defined and analyzed by modern—and increasingly computerized—systems in precise terms amenable to categorization and data processing. Experiencing this

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<sup>20</sup> Qualitative and quantitative structures have commonalities, too. As Calleja (and Foucault) insists, everyday life is experienced and interpreted through gestalts and discourses that can lend it a flavor of configuration rather than open-ended agency.

tension in a videogame encourages reflection on it in our own experiences of globalized modernity.

*Catherine* provides the player with partial control over the direction of its forking-path narrative about eight days in Vincent's romantic life. Player choices are processed by a quantitative two-axis model of Vincent's romantic identity. Opportunities for player input are numerous and somewhat varied, but all are translated into movement along these two axes. The primary axis is represented to the player as a spectrum whose poles are Order and Chaos.<sup>21</sup> Order is represented in the game by Vincent's girlfriend Katherine, who wants a traditional, orderly, monogamous relationship progressing from dating to marriage. When Vincent

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<sup>21</sup> The official names for the two poles are slightly unclear. The game and accompanying materials are coy about articulating the meaning of this core system, with the manual referring only to a "strange red-and-blue meter [that] will appear when you direct Vincent to make particular decisions or actions throughout the game. Whatever you do will have an effect on... something..." (ellipses in original). On Day 5, halfway through the game, Vincent and (metaleptically) the player receive a text from Midnight Venus (Trisha/Ishtar) titled "The Mysterious Meter" stating that "Vincent's values are always being tested" and that his decisions can change both his inner monologue and the plot's ending, but the poles remain unnamed. The metagame achievements/trophies rewarded to the player for accomplishing certain tasks in *Catherine* (and most other current videogames) refer to Katherine's as "Lover" endings, Catherine's as "Cheater" endings, and the middle option as "Freedom" endings. Yet when, in a didactic epilogue, Trisha analyzes the "central conflict that this game's masterful creators placed at its core" between "a comfortable and steady life" and "a free life full of excitement," the meter appears on-screen with the poles labeled "Freedom" and "Order," in contradiction of the achievement's designation of the middle ground as "Freedom." Online fan sites thus use variable terminology when referring to the karma system, often invoking *Dungeons & Dragons*-derived character alignment terminology to replace "Order" with "Law" and introduce "Chaos" (a term also used in one of the game's climactic questions to players) for the opposite pole. I have chosen to retain "Order" but replace the opposite pole's "Freedom" with "Chaos" to clarify the game's conflicting designations of both a pole and the middle as "Freedom."



chooses dialogue leaning toward this sort of future, he shifts toward the Order (blue) end of a red-to-blue spectrum bar (framed by a red devilish and a blue angelic cherub) that appears on screen during key choices. The Order-Chaos meter also appears in non-interactive cutscenes to indicate that choices the player has already made are being used by the game to determine Vincent's inner monologue. This spectrum-based model of character identity development, often called a karma system, is a familiar mechanic in forking-path narrative videogames (and in their tabletop predecessors like *Dungeons & Dragons* that relied on human procedural computation to explore similar combinations of narrative and game). Early, simplistic karma systems tended to process choices as Good or Evil, whereas recent karma systems generally offer less heavy-handed and more complex identity spectrums.<sup>22</sup> Though investing in a relatively simple dichotomy, *Catherine* avoids valorizing either pole, instead offering "True" (maximally positive for Vincent and,

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<sup>22</sup> Karma systems have been developed in many ways. BioWare's *Mass Effect* series of space opera action-RPGs (role-playing games) uses a Paragon-Renegade binary, but unlike *Catherine*, the player-character accumulates points toward each end independently and so can finish a game with strong paragon *and* renegade credentials. Rockstar's Western-themed *Red Dead Redemption* uses an Honor system (from Hero to Desperado) to model the player-character's social reputation based on his actions. *Fallout: New Vegas* uses a complex reputation system where the player-character has separate (but interrelated) reputations with any or all of eight factions and five towns. Town reputations are basically positive or negative, but faction reputations are modeled on a 4x4 grid where both positive and negative actions are remembered (like *Mass Effect*) so that in addition to the all-positive (Idolized) and all-negative (Vilified) reputations, there are an array of intermediate options such as the mostly negative Merciful Thug, the more positive-than-negative Smiling Troublemaker, and Wild Child, which denotes maximum positive and negative reputation. Karma systems provide an intriguing, interactive system for modeling identity and relationality in terms of ethics, morality, and social reputation.

by proxy, the player) endings at each pole as well as in the absolute middle (True Freedom).

The player choices used to process Vincent's identity always take the form of dialogue. (The procedural rhetoric of this suggests that, whereas survival or death in the block puzzles is a matter of action against obstacles placed by an adversary, identity formation is a matter of social relationships.) Vincent's playable dialogue takes place in person and via phone mail at The Stray Sheep and in person with other sheep and the confessional inquisitor in Vincent's nightmares. For instance, when Vincent reveals his first encounter and apparent indiscretion with Catherine to his friend Orlando, Orlando responds "But if she's that cute a girl, maybe it's a lucky 'accident,' huh?" Vincent can then say, "Don't say that...," pushing the scale toward Order, or "That's only if I don't get caught," pushing things toward Chaos. Very occasionally, there are three dialogue options, but most conversations, whether with humans during the day or sheep at night, present binary Order-or-Chaos options.

Confessional questions present order-or-chaos choices related to general rather than Vincent-specific topics. Questions include "How do you end a relationship? Say it flat out / Let it die down" and "If you get a call from someone you hate, do you... Answer it / Straight to voicemail." The game connects confessional answers to real-world player identities as well as to Vincent by providing the player with a pie graph showing "Other players' first time data" (if the player is online) or "the results of a survey" (if offline). This prompts players to

decide whether to answer questions as themselves, by role-playing Vincent, or with some of combination of the two. It also encourages players to consider their own identities in a schematic form similar to that being applied to Vincent. In addition to the large set of available questions during each night's nightmare (only a randomized portion of which are presented in one playthrough), the final stage of the game asks four climactic, non-randomized Order/Chaos questions that (in coordination with the player's order-chaos karma prior to the final questions) have a major effect on Vincent's identity and the ending.<sup>23</sup>

Phone mail conversations have more variables that are, however, similarly translated into movement along the Order-Chaos spectrum. When Katherine or Catherine text Vincent, the player has multiple options for each of his response's several lines.<sup>24</sup> As a result of the much greater array of dialogue options resulting from the mix-and-match phone mail format, phone mail conversations can push Vincent strongly toward order or chaos (or back toward the freedom-oriented center of the karma spectrum), or choices from different lines can cancel each other

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<sup>23</sup> The questions are 1) "Are you prepared to risk your life to get back together with a former lover?," 2) "Do you wish for a peaceful life?," 3) "Do you wish for the excitement of Chaos?," and 4) a variable final question asking the player/Vincent to confirm or second-guess the Order/Chaos/Freedom path their previous answers and actions point toward.

<sup>24</sup> During Day 3, for instance, Katherine texts Vincent to ask if he's out drinking despite having claimed to have a stomachache (and to passive-aggressively scold him if he is out). If the player chooses to have Vincent respond at all, his reply can be up to six lines. His Line 1 choices are "Sorry..." (Order +0.5), "I'm not drinking" (Chaos +0.5), or "I'll do what I feel like" (Chaos +1), from which point his options form a forking-path dialogue tree (i.e., not all Line 2 or 3 options are always available to add to all Line 1 choices). Some line options ("I'll talk to you later") are neutral rather than order- or chaos-oriented.

out. Furthermore, the choice to not respond to a text sometimes prompts an additional response from the sender, and a response to Katherine with a sufficiently high Order 'score', or to Catherine with a high Chaos score, will often spur additional messages, texted photos, or (non-interactive) phone calls.

The game processes player choices into short-, mid-, and long-term effects on Vincent's identity and on plot outcomes. Dialogue and phone mail choices usually elicit an immediate reaction from Vincent's conversation partner attuned to their attitude toward the Order/Chaos valence of Vincent's choice and (for bar goers and sheep) to their own problems. In the confessional booth, Astaroth consistently expresses non-evaluative interest in Vincent's answer. Responses in phone mail help determine how long the text (and photo and phone call) exchange will last, but don't have any direct effect on later narrative cutscenes and mid-game plot progression beyond the brief moments within cutscenes when Vincent's behavior is affected by his current Order/Chaos status. Player choices and Vincent's Order/Chaos status don't affect the overall narrative direction until the ending(s)—no single choice mid-game can ensure or rule out a given ending. The cumulative effects of Vincent's actions on his Order/Chaos status determine which subset of endings are available at the end of a playthrough, and Vincent's answers to the last four confessional questions determine which ending is selected from these options. Vincent's interactions with bar goers have mid-term effects in addition to the short- and long-term effects shared with his Catherine/Katherine interactions. At multiple points in each relationship, Vincent must choose the dialogue option that most

resonates for the bar goer in order for that person to survive the nightmares and resolve his personal crisis.<sup>25</sup> These mid-term consequences have no effect on which ending Vincent receives, however; nor does failing to save a character have a direct Order/Chaos consequence. In essence, the player engages in two interdependent sets of narrative-influencing choices: saving bar goers (or not), which affects the player's experience of those side plots as well as Order/Chaos status, and interacting with Katherine/Catherine and Vincent's close friends, which affects Order/Chaos status and short-term dialogue. The cumulative procedural rhetoric of this axis of Vincent's romantic identity models how a person's words reveal a core (Order-Freedom-Chaos) attitude toward romantic involvement and how this affects the resolution of their personal crises and those of others (bar goers) around them.

*Catherine* also models Vincent's romantic identity along a second axis measuring commitment or consistency. The commitment axis is interdependent with the Order/Chaos axis. *Catherine* does not valorize loyalty (to Katherine) and demonize attraction to an affair with Catherine or the desire to be free of both relationships. Instead, the schema of "true," "normal," and "bad" endings depends on the level of commitment a player's choices demonstrate toward the attitude those choices suggest. "True" Order, Chaos, and Freedom endings trigger when the player's position on the Order/Chaos spectrum leans heavily toward the end (or, in

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<sup>25</sup> The successful response is not always obvious, so without consulting a walkthrough guide (representing online collective intelligence), it is not likely that a player will save all bar goers in a first playthrough. Even time management mistakes at The Stray Sheep can result in a bar goer leaving for the night before Vincent speaks with him, so that the successful dialogue is missed by default, dooming that character.

the case of Freedom, the middle) that also matches their responses to the final questions. Any mixed messages in the final questions downgrade the player to a normal ending, which involves the same basic outcome (marriage to Katherine or a deepened relationship with Catherine), but with more uncertainty and mixed feelings on Vincent's part.<sup>26</sup> The bad endings occur when Vincent's karma meter and his answers to the final questions are strongly opposed and involve Vincent desperately deciding to pursue either Katherine or Catherine but being rebuffed. The game's order-freedom-chaos axis is non-evaluative, while the true-normal-bad axis modeling commitment to one's romantic attitude is treated evaluatively. Through this two-axis system for offering and responding to player choices with a forking-path narrative, *Catherine's* procedural rhetoric about romantic identity identifies attitudes toward romantic involvement and commitment to such attitudes as the two key factors in romantic identity. The game then proceeds to reward not

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<sup>26</sup> For example, after Vincent and Katherine's reconciliation meeting (present in all Katherine endings), the true Katherine ending proceeds to still shots and a cutscene of happy and comic moments from their wedding reception. The normal Katherine ending proceeds from reconciliation to wedding planning, with a cutscene of Katherine sitting on Vincent's chest in bed looking through bridal magazines and chiding him good-naturedly for falling behind on planning (seemingly more out of laziness than ambivalence), after which he asks her to get off because she's crushing him, and they go out to eat. The ending still shots are of Vincent and Katherine shopping, drinking with friends, and riding a scooter, and in each case Katherine looks happier than Vincent. In the normal Catherine ending, Vincent is similarly less completely happy living in the demonic underworld with the succubus Catherine, whereas in the true ending he and their relationship thrive, and he even takes on demonic physical features like horns and red eyes (along with other demon lovers/admirers). The normal Freedom ending is the exception, drastically differing from the true Freedom ending in that Vincent's gambling fails to pay off so he isn't able to become a space tourist.

commitment to one's partner but to one's attitude or approach, while depicting moderation and mixed feelings as leading to less happiness.

The aspects of romantic identity explored by *Catherine's* interactive model are not the typical identity categories of institutional modernity (race, gender, socioeconomic bracket, etc.). As such, the global availability of the game extends the globalization of modern modes of identity conceptualization onto relatively new ground. Tomlinson asserts that "in so far as globalization distributes the institutional features of modernity across all cultures, globalization produces 'identity' where none existed—where before there were perhaps more particular, more inchoate, less socially policed belongings" ("Globalization" 273). I argue that the rise of new-media literature featuring procedural identity models has become a new widespread force for the globalization of identities, structuring and schematizing in the public imagination even aspects of (relatively) unpoliticized identity largely ignored by sociopolitical institutions of modernity. New-media literature is increasing the globalization of rationalized identities not along lines particularly useful to sociopolitical institutions but according to the expressive interests of the authors and the rational requirements of the procedural modeling of interactive new-media works. The 2010 U.S. Census gathered data on marital status (never married, married, widowed, divorced) and compared results by gender, race, and age (U.S. Census Bureau). Facebook adds the categories of "In a relationship," "Engaged," "In a civil union," "In a domestic partnership," "In an open relationship," "Separated," and "It's complicated," but remains similarly focused on relationship

status rather than romantic attitude or level of commitment/consistency (“About: Relationship”). These influential institutions don’t particularly care how orderly or chaotic you prefer your romantic life, or how committed to that romantic tone you are. Regardless of the degree to which they thematize globalization, games that, like *Catherine*, feature schematized, procedurally manipulable identities participate meaningfully in the globalization of a modern mode of articulating cultural identities.

Driving the schematic conceptualization of the identity model being globally disseminated is the technological framework of *Catherine*’s videogame medium. As a stylized simulation of romantic identity, *Catherine* extracts two aspects of its complex and hard-to-quantify topic, simplifies each to a three-position axis (order, freedom, chaos; true, normal, bad commitment), and accepts input through (typically binary) questions whose answers are quantified by pushing the player an arbitrary but consistent distance along a quantified Order/Chaos axis. The game’s procedural rhetoric thus asserts that certain aspects of romance can be usefully extracted and considered in isolation. It reduces the field of potential romantic partners to two (or three, counting “no partner”), each aligned with an attitude toward romance in general. This can be a particularly frustrating simplification, in that Katherine and Catherine are presented as extreme, pushy avatars of their “orderly” and “chaotic” attitudes (in contrast to Vincent, who takes listlessness and passivity to a similar extreme), potentially souring players toward these options (or Vincent) on the basis of their avatars rather than their inherent attractions or weaknesses.



Yet despite the flaws and frustrations of simplification, *Catherine's* reductive, gappy exploration of romantic identity is a thought-provoking new-media composite of procedural design, narrative presentation, player interaction, and puzzle gameplay addressing a key aspect of human identity and relationships (and presenting its model to a global audience). The complexity of any one playthrough's narrative and character development suffers in comparison to a (good) novel or film. But in exchange, the videogame gains the ability to let players actively respond to (as well as passively reflect on) topical prompts and the consequences (for plot and character identity) tailored to those responses. All this occurs within *Catherine's* larger composite game framework that cues players to split attention between the narrative/thematic and ludic concerns, most obviously through the two-part structure of daytime conversations and nighttime block puzzles. The block puzzles feature thematic environment and boss designs, but these essentially comprise an audio-visual "skin" wrapped around a neutral, unthematic block puzzle game mechanic.<sup>27</sup>

The separations between various components of *Catherine's* composite are highlighted by the fact that many player actions in *Catherine* have no impact on the narrative or the model of Vincent's romantic identity. The block puzzle gameplay serves as a blunt metaphor for conquering Vincent's insecurities but does not affect his outcome other than presenting obstacles to narrative progression: no actions

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<sup>27</sup> For example, the fourth nightmare stage, Inquisition, bears (segregated) astrological male and female symbols on its side walls and a giant statue of a hooded gavel-wielding figure to the rear, and the end boss of the stage is a zombie-like giant baby representing Vincent's fear of fatherhood.

taken during puzzles (including pushing other climbers off the towers to make the ascent easier) affect how things progress (though it may affect how the player perceives Vincent). Nor do avoided conversations affect the forking path aside from limiting opportunities to adjust the karma meter. Drinking in the bar only affects Vincent's speed in the block puzzles, watching TV only causes time to pass (and provides narrative context), using the jukebox affects only atmosphere, and playing the arcade game, *Rapunzel*, at The Stray Sheep provides a narrative and gameplay parallel to the main experience without directly affecting the main narrative or gameplay. None of these player actions affect the programmed course of narrative or character development, but they may still have effects on the player's experience of the game and narrative.

Within the composite of the game, then, narratively decisive choices are one subset of player actions and only one way to analyze the game's compositeness, alongside the bar/block tower split, the different modes of gameplay (of which the campaign mode discussed so far is only one) and the split between narrative worlds (to be discussed shortly), among others. Many choices ignored by the game's narrative and romantic identity processing systems, such as heavy drinking, cutthroat block tower climbing, or musical preferences, could be interpreted as narratively meaningful. But the game's procedural rhetoric implies that these are irrelevant to his romantic identity and the plot. These areas of player agency are part of the same game but not procedurally connected to each other, and through them *Catherine* explores complex experiences made up of multiple discrete but

meaningfully interrelated parts. *Catherine* presents an experience in which narrative configuration, thematic development, puzzle-solving, and possibility-space exploration overlap but can be separated from one another to a considerable degree, and their points of intersection and non-intersection can be clearly marked. Teasing out the distinctions and points of overlap in this composite model is one of the attractions of a game like *Catherine*. It also provides a skill set adaptable to real-world scenarios in which individuals can analyze and respond to complex situations by separating out key lines of action and consequence and by identifying which elements are most and least relevant to a particular concern.<sup>28</sup> As a game widely distributed internationally, *Catherine's* helps globalize the promulgation of this compositing skill set as well as the modern, computationally processable concepts of identity at its core.

So far, my discussion of *Catherine* has been limited to Vincent's fictional world, though altogether the game features four worlds or narrative levels. These present another layer of narrative compositing and another suggestion that real-world and fictional identities can be similarly modeled. Vincent's story is surrounded by a frame tale in which a narrator comments on Vincent's situation. This frame tale presents "Catherine" as one episode of a television show (or TV-game hybrid) called Golden Playhouse (in the main menu, the single-player

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<sup>28</sup> A player of *Catherine* soon develops the habit of interpreting all opportunities for player agency in terms of how the dialogue options will affect their Order/Chaos positioning. Whether or not a player makes a given choice based on the desire to move along the spectrum in a given direction, it is nearly impossible not to get used to interpreting situations in *Catherine* in terms of Order and Chaos (and Freedom).

campaign mode is called Golden Theater). A new campaign playthrough begins with the Golden Playhouse intro title sequence, a faithful homage to the 1971-2003 weekly Japanese television program ゴールデン洋画劇場 (Golden Western Theater/Playhouse, later renamed ゴールデンシアター, a phonetic rendition of the English words “Golden Theater”). Golden Western Theater showed mainstream Western (mainly American) movies like *Back to the Future*, *Mad Max*, and *Titanic*. After the title sequence, *Catherine’s* virtual camera zooms out to reveal the Golden Playhouse logo on a TV set on a bar next to Trisha, “The Midnight Venus,” who introduces herself as our host and “Catherine” as today’s episode to “viewers” (though she later refers to “players”). The camera then zooms into the television screen. An introductory cutscene of Vincent and Katherine begins, with a Golden Playhouse logo visible at the top left of the screen, a recurring feature in cutscenes that reminds players of the frame narrative and reinforces *Catherine’s* connection to the real-world context of localized global entertainment media.

This frame narrative is a source of metalepsis (breaching of the boundaries between separate narrative “worlds” such as that between a storyteller and the story they tell) in two directions, with Trisha intruding into both Vincent’s and the player’s worlds (and bringing the player into Vincent’s world). As Midnight Venus, Trisha sends texts to Vincent’s phone with information for players about their level of performance in recent nightmare stages. Vincent has no memory of these performances, and the scoring elements and gold prizes discussed are meaningless in his world, but the metaleptic contradiction of the player accessing this

information by having Vincent look at his phone without Vincent responding to this puzzling information is not addressed until the player unlocks the Axis Mundi level of the Babel block tower challenge mode. Babel at first seems separate, per gaming convention, from Vincent's narrative in the Golden Theater campaign (though the way to unlock Axis Mundi is to get gold prizes on each of the nine Golden Theater stages). Yet when the player reaches Axis Mundi (the last Babel level), an introductory cutscene reveals a wealth of information relevant to both Trisha's and Vincent's narrative worlds. Trisha reveals herself as Ishtar, "the goddess of fertility, governing the world's love," and further reveals that the antagonistic Astaroth in the Golden Playhouse story was one of her avatars, "another side of me." Moreover, Ishtar asserts that the rationale given to Vincent for Astaroth's deadly trials was false.<sup>29</sup> Directly addressing the player, Ishtar explains, "You have caught the eye of the goddess of fertility... ...And don't misunderstand. I don't mean 'Vincent.' I'm talking about you, the one who borrowed his form to make it here." As an image of Vincent's texts from Midnight Venus appears on the TV screen, she continues, "Vincent thought it was just spam, but I'm sure you figured it out." After the player beats Axis Mundi, a cutscene portrays Ishtar entering what is supposed to be the player's apartment, from which they have been watching/playing the Golden Playhouse, in order to make the player her lover and "co-deity of love."

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<sup>29</sup> "[A]ll that other stuff with the 'prosperity of the race' was a facade. I just thought that I'd seek out a new... partner" in the wake of disappointment with a cheating consort, Dumuzid (Boss from The Stray Sheep, who helped Astaroth run the block tower trials).

Through these cutscenes framing the particularly punishing block tower gameplay of Babel mode, *Catherine* unconventionally distributes its primary narrative across two modes of gameplay and three narrative levels (the player's, Trisha's, and Vincent's). In this composite, major narrative revelations are available only through the second mode, whose narrative importance is not stressed until it is discovered (and only then by players with excellent skills or a walkthrough, or those watching cutscenes online, as both unlocking and beating Axis Mundi are quite difficult). Those who unlock it will realize that this additional narrative material radically alters the story by revising understandings of Ishtar, Astaroth, and the meaning of Vincent's block tower challenges. Those who don't unlock Axis Mundi will be aware that there are portions of the game of which they remain ignorant, but are unlikely to guess how narratively important they are, since the campaign mode's endings seem conclusive and *Catherine's* distributed narrative and significant revision of a previous narrative assertion are so unconventional. The result is a composite in which, on both narrative and gameplay levels, component parts have clear separations as well as meaningful connections. *Catherine's* structural rhetoric demands that players engage in compositing meaningful ludic and narrative experiences. The form of this structural rhetoric is specific to the medium of videogames, but the compositing skills involved are adaptable to a wide variety of new-media encounters (such as pursuing a trail of associations across the web through hyperlinks and targeted searches) that are proliferating as globalization accelerates.

A final level of narrative and gameplay in *Catherine* deepens both metaleptic and narrative/ludic compositeness. In addition to the intertwined narrative worlds of Vincent, Trisha/Ishtar, and the player (whose real world is fictionally represented), *Catherine* features an innermost fourth narrative world through the minigame (simple game-within-a-game) *Rapunzel*, an arcade game at The Stray Sheep. Described by *Catherine's* manual as “retro-style,” *Rapunzel's* narrative, block puzzle gameplay, graphics, and music are all simplified versions of *Catherine's*, but they introduce new elements that deepen the overall gameplay and narrative experiences.<sup>30</sup> The story of *Rapunzel*, in which the Prince climbs box towers to save Rapunzel from a witch while Rapunzel tells him her backstory, parallels Vincent's narrative as well as the metaleptic connections among Ishtar, Vincent, and the player. If the player beats level 64 without the four collectible rosaries, the witch blinds the prince, with the conclusion's only hope being that “if one will cry for you, You may yet find salvation. . . .” With the rosaries, the prince deflects the witch's spell and achieves a happy ending “For forever anon,” though the narrator suggests a new truth is beginning to surface and the game notifies the player of “a new story” available upon a second playthrough.

The 64 challenging extra levels of the second playthrough feature new cutscenes in which Rapunzel narrates the (real-world) myth of Ishtar's descent to the netherworld, during which the queen is resurrected from death by a “young

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<sup>30</sup> For example, instead of the challenges of racing against time and dealing with other climbers, *Rapunzel* features a limit on the number of moves the player can use to reach the top of each tower (while also trying to reach collectible items strewn about the towers).

rogue” and trades the underworld ruler the life of her unscrupulous, inattentive husband in exchange for her own freedom.<sup>31</sup> Like Catherine and Ishtar in Vincent’s narrative, *Rapunzel*’s version of the myth emphasizes the gender dynamics of a powerful woman for and by whom men are “sent to their doom!” This is reinforced by the “true” ending to the extra stages of *Rapunzel*, in which “[t]he witch and the girl [are] traded,” with the princess (blond like Catherine) being replaced by the witch (whose afro matches Trisha’s) before the witch possesses Rapunzel’s body, chants in Akkadian about the beloved of Ishtar, and asks “Will you take me as your wife?” Then, both the witch-Rapunzel and prince look out of the screen at Vincent and the player (metaleptically) as the *Rapunzel* narrator says the player may yet reach the truth of the great lady’s curse on “[t]he worlds of men.”<sup>32</sup> This ending

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<sup>31</sup> Historical information about the Ishtar underworld myth not included in *Catherine* reveals additional parallels to the game’s narrative. The name of the unsavory king/lover is Tammuz in the Babylonian and Dumuzi(d) in the Sumerian versions of the myth, matching Dumuzid and Thomas (Tammuz) Mutton, the names of Ishtar’s consort in *Catherine* whose infidelity causes a similar loss of patience (Mark; “Tammuz”). The Babylonian connection also suggests an additional reason (beyond the tower theme and the fact that players completing the ascent are “deified” by Ishtar) for the name of Babel mode.

<sup>32</sup> The connection between the primary Vincent and optional *Rapunzel* narrative levels is elaborated on only in the two Freedom endings, where Boss explains that he uses the *Rapunzel* game as “a machine ‘that makes it easier to enter the nightmare’,” implying that the *Rapunzel* story’s parallels are intended by characters within the fictional game world, not only by *Catherine*’s designers and authors. Considering that Dumuzid (or possibly Ishtar) is thus the originating force behind *Rapunzel*’s design, the metaleptic final outward gaze of the prince and witch/princess could be aimed, within the fiction, at Vincent and other nightmare-suffering players (the targets identified by Boss) and/or at *Catherine*’s player (who is also metaleptically roped into the game by Ishtar through the Midnight Venus text messages, the Trisha/Golden Playhouse frame, and the end of Babel mode). This final gaze is the culmination of a long pattern of *Rapunzel* breaking the fourth wall at



resonates with the True Catherine ending, in which Vincent stays with (the succubus) Catherine, and the Babel mode ending, where Ishtar calls the player her beloved and takes him/her as her new consort. The four endings of *Rapunzel* (two each for regular and extra stages) also mirror the narrative structure of the larger game with its eight seemingly conclusive Golden Theater endings followed by a secret Babel ending that supplements and partially undoes the original endings. The implication is that tidy conclusions are suspect and that additional contextualization and exploration of possibility space and game modes—further compositing—will reveal relevant information about selective narratives, the events they attempt to represent, and the connections among those narratives and events. In a print text, such additional exploration requires a reader-initiated leap to disconnected intertexts. The technological affordances of a videogame, however, offer more flexible forms of connection between text and context (as when online games can link to related online materials, such as poll results of other players' confessional answers) as well as between primary and optional material (e.g., Golden Theater vs. *Rapunzel* and Babel).<sup>33</sup>

*Rapunzel's* emphasis on the technological nature of its storytelling medium encourages players to reflect on the larger experience of *Catherine*. While *Rapunzel*

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the end of cutscenes where the prince says he can't wait to continue the story and faces the screen, encouraging Vincent and other players to continue this nightmare-facilitating game.

<sup>33</sup> *Catherine* even extends the forking-path phone mail dialogue game mechanic to its (Japanese and English) websites, offering a six-day, five-choice, eleven-outcome text exchange with Catherine about scheduling a date (for the game's local release date) (*Catherinethegame.com*; *Cathy.atlus.co.jp*).

is played, the action is visually framed by the arcade console sideboards, which feature illustrations, information about the “story” or “goal,”<sup>34</sup> gameplay, and scoring. This framing and the retro graphics and sound stress that *Rapunzel* is a simulation of a specific medium. The level structure of *Rapunzel* also features binary multiples of four and eight, subtly emphasizing the base-2 binary underpinnings of the technological medium.<sup>35</sup> Finally, the bad ending of the extra stages (without all four rosaries) punishes the player with an apparent (or simulated) technological glitch. The ending cutscene is accompanied by scrambled text identified as such on screen: “I] % &[\*%&\*% &\*+ &%&T &/%\*&%, &\*%&\*%&L, /& %\*%&! (The text isn't being properly displayed...) +\*& %= &\*%\*&&N \*&% &&%& %&&%&+ %&D \*%& &%&Y \*%&%& %/&&! (The scene is continuing with scrambled text...)” The narrator then explains that the prince was incapable of discovering the truth and that “Your fate is DEATH.”

*Rapunzel*'s thematization of its technological medium is another minigame simplification of its parent game. Similar thematizations of medium in *Catherine* include the *Golden Playhouse* frame (and the GP logo during cutscenes), Trisha's references to viewers and players, and the presence of the *Rapunzel* arcade game in the bar. With these reminders, *Catherine* encourages reflection on the significance of

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<sup>34</sup> The wording of this header varies in screenshots online, but I haven't been able to determine whether this intriguing story/goal split is a product of localization differences, different platform versions, or something else.

<sup>35</sup> Not only are there 64 regular and 64 extra stages, but the cutscenes come every four levels, and at the beginning of the game, *Rapunzel* tasks the prince with “Bring[ing] me threads of silk, For eight nights, eight times Over . . . 64 in total. . . ,” stressing the 8 x 8 structure.

*Catherine's* and *Rapunzel's* medium-specific compositing techniques to their story and game experiences. In juxtaposition with the more complex, up-to-date experience of the rest of *Catherine*, *Rapunzel's* simplifications are obvious: retro graphics and sound, simplified game mechanics and (rhyming couplet) dialogue, and only one form of agency over the narrative's direction (collect the rosaries or don't). The use of scrambled text for one of *Rapunzel's* "bad" endings bluntly emphasizes that narrative payoff in games is dependent on skillful play, while also suggesting the common experience of hitting technological barriers at the edges of a game's possibility space, places where players might expect more game but instead find an arbitrary limit to a game's meaningful responsiveness to player input (such as *Catherine's* narrative non-reaction to a player's decision to kill sheep or not during block tower puzzles or the inability to control Vincent's dialogue beyond pre-scripted choices during limited portions of conversations).

Simplifying *Catherine* into *Rapunzel* both reminds players of the weaknesses of games as a narrative medium and also points out how far the medium has come since its early days. It demonstrates how a compelling story can overcome considerable technological limitations even as it highlights the extent to which experiences of expressive works (videogames, but traditional media as well) result from players mentally expanding on the more limited narrative framework a work provides. *Catherine's* exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of its medium emphasizes the influence of medium on authorial compositing practices and works' formal structures. Our understandings of the world are shaped in part by the ways

in which information about the world is packaged and presented to us in fictional and non-fictional sources. Nowhere is this more apparent than in new media with their breathtaking rate of change and development; while it is easy to take print for granted and look through it as a transparent technology due to our centuries of cultural familiarity with it, the newness of new media brings to our attention the shaping effect of any medium on the content being expressed. The proliferation of computer-based technologies has made ever-growing user bases familiar with responsive, procedural, quantitative models of aspects of the world such as identity. New-media technologies forge connections across the world and enable expressions of our understandings of the world, and in the process these technologies and media change the world and the ways we perceive it. *Catherine* applies—and globally disseminates—modern schematization of identity, such as that applied institutionally to demographically conventional identity categories like race and gender, to aspects of identity usually left more nebulous by major institutions (attitude toward romantic involvement and commitment to that attitude). A videogame can present extensive forking-path narratives more easily and extensively than a print text due to the nature of the different media involved.<sup>36</sup> Players of *Catherine* can experiment with the forking-path consequences of their applied agency and reflect on the model of romantic identity on which *Catherine's*

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<sup>36</sup> The concept of a forking-path narrative owes a great deal to Jorge Luis Borges's 1941 short story "The Garden of Forking Paths," in which an encyclopedic print forking-path narrative is described. Yet Borges did not attempt to actually create a forking-path narrative in print, only to describe one, illustrating the greater suitability of programmable media for presenting working forking-path narratives.

interactive narrative experience is based. That quantified, procedural, two-axis model participates in the globalization of a modern, categorical identity schema (applied to an infrequently schematized aspect of identity) as it engages players in thinking about identity on its terms.

This does not mean, of course, that all players accept or exclusively employ modern concepts of identity simply because they engage works of new-media literature like *Catherine* that model and disseminate such identities. Few players are likely to be fully satisfied with *Catherine's* simplified two-axis model of romance, but in thinking through their dissatisfaction to determine what's missing, some may start by adding to that model's simple composite. Such a reaction to dissatisfaction with this model entails accepting Order/Freedom/Chaos and Commitment/Second-Guessing as starting points for thinking about one's attitudes toward romance, contributing to the global dissemination of *Catherine's* abstracted model of this social and cultural practice along the lines suggested by Tomlinson. Even rejecting *Catherine's* computerized model of romantic identity involves familiarizing oneself with it. The logic of compositing so prevalent in a new-media work like *Catherine*, though, encourages players not to fully reject or even to fully accept its clearly simplified simulation of romantic identity, but rather to composite useful aspects of it into a larger understanding of identity (itself largely amenable to computer modeling, and thus to global dissemination via interactive new-media works). Expressive videogames propagate composite understandings of identity, cultural

positioning, political engagements, and relationships modeled on spectrums, in category arrays, and with point values and the potential to level up.<sup>37</sup>

All of these structures for the schematic categorization and manipulation of multifaceted, composite identities are not all present in all models—the U.S. census uses arrays but not point values, and *Catherine* uses quantitative spectrums but not achievement levels. But the global propagation of new-media works featuring identity models based on such structures disseminates a modern concept of identities. Globalization is not a particularly important theme in *Catherine* (though global mythological and cultural contexts do appear in the background). But *Catherine* plays a significant role in the globalization of modern identities, engaging hundreds of thousands of players worldwide in modeling a novel aspect of identity in an institutionally and procedurally tractable form.

Tomlinson argues that “what we call ‘identity’ may not be a universal, but just one particular, modern, way of socially organizing – and indeed regulating – cultural experience” (“Globalization” 272). Loose, contingent, imprecise identities (how cisgender individuals think of themselves in the absence of an awareness of transgender identity; how individuals think of themselves and others with regard to home language in the absence of a concept of a modern nation bound together in part by a shared language; how individuals think their attitude toward romantic

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<sup>37</sup> It is important to remember that leveling up, character identity grids, and other aspects of role-playing videogames discussed here are inheritances from tabletop RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* and predate the rise of videogames (though new media allow greater computational complexity). Their influence as concepts and perspectives, however, has greatly increased with the much greater cultural saturation of videogames.

involvement in the absence of *Catherine's* precise two-axis model; etc.) conflict not only with modernity in general but also with specific quantitative procedural objects like videogames. But videogames do not simply advance the obliteration or suppression of loosely defined identities or senses of self in non-modern terms. On the contrary, the obvious weaknesses of videogame models of human experience encourage reflection on what procedural, quantitative modeling struggles to accommodate—and, for that matter, on the weaknesses of discourse models like humanism or modern identity (see chapter four's discussion of posthumanism).<sup>38</sup> Just as *Rapunzel* both makes *Catherine* look sophisticated by comparison and suggests the larger game's similar fallibility, *Catherine* highlights the comparative strengths of other investigations of romantic attitudes while suggesting that no discourse or expressive work can avoid simplifications. *Catherine* is a stylized simulation quite limited in its scope. Even as they disseminate concepts of modern,

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<sup>38</sup> We can see a similar productivity arising from imperfection in the relationship Cary Wolfe outlines between his posthumanism and Luhmann's second-order systems theory. For Wolfe, "functional differentiation itself determines the posthumanist *form* of meaning," which "now becomes a specifically modern form of self-referential recursivity that is used by both psychic systems (consciousness) and social systems (communication) to handle overwhelming environmental complexity" (xx). The closure of a system, in this compositing-friendly model, is a self-referential designation rather than a cutting off of environmental connections; by making elements in the system more determinable and functional, it allows for more complex system-environment interactions (xxi). As a response to overwhelming complexity, "systems theory doesn't desire the reduction of difference and complexity . . . it only describes how difference and complexity have to be handled by systems that hope to continue their autopoiesis" (14). Wolfe would likely see *Catherine's* failure to adequately model the psychic systems of romantic attitudes as a disarticulation of psychic and social systems, with the social systems of communication in this case encompassing the technological (and labor) limitations of *Catherine's* game engine, forking paths, and identity schema.

array-ready identities, videogames highlight the tensions surrounding the mismatch between these composite abstractions and the real-world experiences they represent in expressive works and political arenas. *Catherine* may argue that new-media expressive works using computational modeling can improve our understanding of ourselves and the world, but like composing more generally, the game explores its weaknesses rather than claiming that its models are capable of telling the whole story. It does so in part by requiring players to engage in individual and collective acts of composing in order to meaningfully explore its gameplay and narrative.

### **Collective Intelligence, Online Player Communities, and Compositing**

*Catherine* prompts player compositing with its two-axis romantic identity model, narrative distributed across game modes, multiple narrative worlds, and forking-path interactive narrative structure. To understand *Catherine's* story, players must explore across game modes, reflect on the links among narrative worlds, and consider the two-axis romantic identity model and its relationship to the forking-path narrative structure. All these things can be achieved individually, though in many cases players consult with friends or online player communities when the game or narrative confuse them or impede their progress. The most immediately obvious way that the videogame medium impedes player access to *Catherine's* narrative is through the game's crushing difficulty. *Catherine* is widely considered one of the most difficult games to be released in years (or ever)



(Lincoln).<sup>39</sup> Videogames in general, and *Catherine* in particular, are examples of what Aarseth calls “ergodic literature,” in which “nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (1). A game as difficult as *Catherine* raises the possibility and even extreme likelihood that parts of the game and story will remain inaccessible for any given player, at least within the game itself, though it is easy to look up most narrative cutscenes on the internet to fill in blanks—if you know what you’re looking for.<sup>40</sup> For Aarseth, such inaccessibility is different than traditional literary uncertainties (such as the challenges of interpreting Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*): “inaccessibility, it must be noted, does not imply ambiguity but, rather, an absence of possibility—an aporia” (3). Rather than not knowing what parts of *Catherine*’s narrative mean or how they fit together, the player who fails to unlock narrative content simply doesn’t know what (or how much) is missing without seeking outside help.

The typical response to the difficulty, inaccessibility, and complexity of videogames is twofold. Players work to improve the necessary skills to access the rest of the game, which include the interpretive skills necessary for reading texts as well as reflexes, strategizing, exploration, and other game-, cybertext-, and

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<sup>39</sup> Atlus scrambled to release a patch with a “Super Easy” setting only a few weeks after the initial Japanese launch because so many players were struggling to progress through the game even on “Easy” difficulty, which reviewer Stephen Johnson notes “is harder than many games’ most difficult settings” (Johnson; Wu).

<sup>40</sup> For instance, I am a competent puzzle gamer who has spent over 50 hours playing *Catherine*, but I have yet to unlock (let alone beat) the upper levels of Babel mode to reveal the Trisha-is-Ishtar narrative revelation, which I have instead been forced to research secondhand.

compositing-oriented skills. Many players concurrently and/or subsequently reach out to the gaming community for assistance (which might be sold in the form of an official strategy guide or given away in a fan forum or online video).<sup>41</sup> This is a variation on a simpler dynamic occurring in non-ergodic literature. Interpretive discussion groups and forums are nothing new, but game communities add new areas of discussion—strategic and technological analyses as well as reports and recordings of gameplay, narrative, and technological occurrences inaccessible to (or simply unexperienced by) some players.<sup>42</sup> Game and fan culture analyst Henry Jenkins argues that a “new participatory culture” is being fostered by “[n]ew tools and technologies [that] enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content” as well as by Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media subcultures and economic developments that “encourage the flow of images, ideas, and narratives across multiple media channels and demand more active modes of spectatorship” (135-36). For Jenkins, online fan communities are “expansive self-organizing groups focused around the collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings,

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<sup>41</sup> Most of these player responses have print corollaries like study guides, CliffsNotes, or online resources such as Kim Flournoy’s *The Annotated Oscar Wao: Notes and translations for The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Díaz*. The key difference is that for traditional print texts, collective intelligence is more narrowly aimed at interpretation.

<sup>42</sup> In addition to inaccessibility due to gameplay difficulty, some portions of composite game narratives may be inaccessible due to commercial factors such as the pervasiveness in the online gaming era of downloadable content (DLC), sold separately, including extra chapters of a game designed to be supplementary rather than narratively essential. Platform exclusivity also makes certain entries in a game series unavailable to players who don’t have, for instance, a PlayStation Portable on which to play *Assassin’s Creed: Bloodlines* to follow the expanded narrative of Altaïr, the protagonist of the original (multiplatform) *Assassin’s Creed* game.

interpretations, and fantasies” that exemplify Pierre Levy’s concept of “collective intelligence” or “knowledge available to all members of community” by virtue of their connectedness that “enables the group to act upon a broader range of expertise” than any member has on their own (137, 139). Jenkins’s description of collective intelligence clearly suggests a kind of compositing: “If old forms of expertise operated through isolated disciplines, the new collective intelligence is a patchwork woven together,” or composited, “from many sources as members pool what they know, creating something much more powerful than the sum of its parts” (140). Collective intelligence has become increasingly influential and prominent since the widespread adoption of networked computing (140).

The expertise of online communities, such as the main fan-run *Catherine* wiki (catherinethegame.wikia.com), adds another layer of globalized technological, social, and narrative compositing to the experience of a game like *Catherine*.<sup>43</sup> Videogame-oriented online collective intelligence hubs have proven particularly abundant (“Media kit”), but wikis on all subjects, both general (*Wikipedia*) and specific (*wikiFeet*) mark the migration of annotation, assistance, and discussion texts to globalized online social media homes. Whereas annotated guides like CliffsNotes once started in print before migrating online, the current dominance of online social media collective intelligence is emblemized by *A Wiki of Ice and Fire* (the premier wiki for the elaborately detailed and popular transmedia *Game of Thrones* universe), which gathered steam online in the 2000s before spawning a print text (*The World*

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<sup>43</sup> A wiki is a website (like *Wikipedia*) whose content is collaboratively organized and edited by users.

of *Ice and Fire*) in October 2014 (“A Wiki of Ice and Fire:About”; “Revision history of ‘A Game of Thrones’”; “The World of Ice and Fire”). *A Wiki of Ice and Fire* is also linked to sister sites in French, Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Turkish, Thai, Persian, and Polish. Collective intelligence is not new, but it is increasingly networked, global, and founded on social media.

With collective intelligence, as elsewhere, the range of user functions presents a key difference between new and old media. Videogame wikis feature strategies, cheat codes, Easter egg and exploration information, video and/or text walkthroughs, and explanations of the procedural systems underlying the gameplay. These offerings help players with configuration, exploration, and skilled play as well as the interpretation and contextual and intertextual backgrounds featured on wikis about novels or television shows. Game wikis (and more limited online forums like discussion boards and blog comment sections) offer players a place to benefit from and contribute to the collective intelligence of the game’s fan community in an ongoing process of personal and collective compositing that enhances diverse aspects of the game experience. A crucial reason for the particular popularity of game wikis is their ability to assist players in determining how game systems work.<sup>44</sup> Videogames are complex objects, and understanding them even at a

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<sup>44</sup> The wiki hosting service Wikia divides its sites (more pragmatically than logically) into three categories. “Lifestyle” includes “Books,” “Fashion and Beauty,” “Food,” and “Drink” and features 150,000 sites/communities, sixteen million monthly visitors, and seventy-two million monthly page views. “Entertainment” includes “Comics,” “Movies,” “TV,” and “Music,” which combine for over 170,000 sites, sixty-eight million monthly visitors, and 552 million monthly page views. “Video Games” is given its own category, for its 90,000 sites draw in forty-seven

procedural rather than a coding level requires significant time, the application of collective intelligence, or usually both. Videogames therefore provide an excellent arena for exploring contemporary globalization and complex technological connectivity and for employing and analyzing the compositing processes that help us make sense of it all. Players quickly learn that a successful game experience depends on learning how to identify, work within, and manipulate the affordances and limitations of a game's engine (see footnote three) and design in order to achieve their goals and to enjoy the beauty of the game design.<sup>45</sup> The collective intelligence of game community forums like the *Catherine* wiki assist these processes and clarify the outlines of world models built on procedural design, literary writing, production design, and traditional cinematic performances.

Online forums offer players a technologically supported response to the technologically supported scope and accessibility challenges of many videogame narratives. The understandings drawn from game experiences are composite by necessity, because wikis have made it abundantly clear—both to gaming communities and to society at large—that there is always more text and especially

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million monthly visitors and a massive one billion monthly page views (“Media kit”; *Wikia*).

<sup>45</sup> In his landmark analysis of player types, Richard Bartle identifies “explorers” seeking to understand the game design as one of his four core types. Explorers “delight in having the game expose its internal machinations to them. They try progressively esoteric actions in wild, out-of-the-way places, looking for interesting features (i.e. bugs) and figuring out how things work” (Bartle). See, for example, “Breaking Madden,” Jon Bois’s ongoing explorer’s experiment with tweaking settings in the *Madden* football videogame franchise.

context than we can hope to know what to do with.<sup>46</sup> A trip through the *Catherine* wiki offers, among other things, background information on Babylonian and Sumerian mythology and Golden Western Theater; block puzzle techniques and maps; and descriptions, analyses, transcriptions, and video links to narrative content that a player may not have been able to access in-game. Any part of this might spur further searches on the wiki or elsewhere, and such research is helpful to almost any player, as full knowledge of all contexts and intertexts is highly unlikely.

The commonness of such game-extending research is illustrated by the online *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. I first came across the AHE while looking up background information on the Ishtar mythology in *Catherine* (Joshua J. Mark's AHE article about this is cited earlier in this chapter). The AHE was created by Jan van der Crabben, a designer of historical videogames, to fill an online need by game designers and fans (among others) for "reliable and comprehensive resource for ancient history information" ("About"). Van der Crabben also wanted to present history non-linearly to demonstrate the prolific interconnections elided by linear historical narratives ("About"). Everything about the AHE, in other words, reinforces the importance of compositing to the design and appreciation of videogames—and

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<sup>46</sup> There are several terms for the new-media user tendency to get online to look up one thing only to compulsively follow link after link into tangential inquiries. *Urban Dictionary* suggests "wiki-hole," *McSweeney's* proposes "internet tunnel [or 'internet k-hole'," *Thought Catalog* cites "Wikipedia Black Holes" as well as "k-holes," and *xkcd* simply calls it "The Problem With Wikipedia" (Noe and Ohrtman; Gorrell; Stockton; Munroe). The concept is widely understood, but no one term for it seems to have gained predominance yet.

to knowledge in and of a globalized world more generally, knowledge increasingly structured for global access and dissemination via new media like videogames and web encyclopedias.

Experiences of complex connectivity in contemporary globalized life are both manifested and reflected in players' self-directed compositing of information from games and online sources. Videogames also explore complex connectivity via in-game experiences of loosely structured quests and activities, game mechanics in complex interplay, and extensive, ergodic narrative encounters. As Jill Walker notes of "clusters of quests" in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft*, "[t]his semi-structured organization through a network of quests and always-available self-selected activities within set boundaries matches the way we read and experience the world today" (308-09). According to Walker, more and more expressive works are designed to account for the fact that "[t]hese days, we do things in fragments . . . [but] return to things again and again," facilitating experiences in which "the accumulation of fragmentary experiences may be as deep or deeper as a single, but lengthier, exposure to a work" (309). In games comprised of "a network of fragments, most of which are not necessary to experience the game fully, and yet which cumulate into a rich experience of a storied world," fan sites like the *Catherine* wiki form an important part of the context-rich

mediascape on which draw when compositing to engage games (as designers and players) and the globalized world (as complexly connected individuals) (310).<sup>47</sup>

In-game and contextual compositing techniques are increasingly useful on and in new-media platforms and expressive works. The global reach of media like videogames increase the dispersion of modern schematic understandings of the self and world based on compositing processes compatible with Tomlinson's globalized modern identity and on the computer-intelligible models of human experience necessitated by the media involved. Where *Catherine* leaves the precise workings of its two-axis identity model enigmatic (a mystery to be solved by players), players responded on the *Catherine* wiki with a schematic grid of Vincent's potential romantic identities and endings. This online supplement further clarifies and disseminates *Catherine's* modern, procedure-friendly model of identity and encourages the players around the world who created and who access it to think about identity in those terms. The videogame medium encourages the designers to use a quantitatively tractable identity model and the online wiki medium allows players to apply collective intelligence to that model's analysis. In this way, while many other discourses may be equally or more enlightening as to the textual or narrative content of a videogame like *Catherine*, a combination of new-media and

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<sup>47</sup> Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin address the many forms of fragmentation in new-media and transmedia narratives in their call to "move beyond understanding continuity as a defining element of vast narratives" and to "begin to appreciate other organizing techniques as well," like "[t]onal and thematic shifts," "multiple reversionings," and a "lack of canonical integration" that, far from crude blemishes, can function as interrogations of contemporary fragmented and inconsistent experiences (Introduction 8).



globalization analysis such as that applied here demonstrates the importance of the global proliferation of new-media literature (and the collective intelligence apparatuses that spring up around them) to the promulgation of modern identities and compositing skills.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored how technological compositing adds complexity and amplifies the global reach of composite narratives, cultural objects, identities, and experiences. Technological composites are important to an understanding of compositeness not only because new-media studies provides the origin of the discourse of compositing but also because in technological composites the discrete units (programming objects, modes, scoring systems, narrative tracks), and interactions among those units within an object, have been intentionally designed and can be precisely identified and analyzed (which is why, I suspect, the discourse of compositeness sprung up here first). Technology's role in globalization is not purely functional but also inseparably cultural, and the global reach of communication and media technologies give their procedural and structural rhetorics global cultural significance. The "subtle example of deterritorialization" that Tomlinson finds in "the reach of the institutional-modern form of identity into cultural life" has become more prominent with the rise of new-media literature, in particular the widely popular medium of videogames ("Globalization" 274). Technology is increasingly integral to the ways that we engage, model, and understand ourselves and our world. Analysis of new-media literature productively

enriches our understanding of globalization and of contemporary life, even as new-media literature globally disseminates and normalizes composite, technologically tractable models of human experience.

*Catherine's* model of romantic identities fits its protagonist into a census-like grid of discrete potential identities (though addressing aspects of identity censuses rarely concern themselves with). *Catherine* composites its narrative from modern and ancient Japanese, Middle Eastern, and Western cultural contexts and explicitly suggests that the psychological tensions modeled by its identity matrix remain relevant across ages and global cultures. Juul argues that when videogames depart from the (pre-computing) classic game model by eschewing "a clear valorized outcome. . . . removing or weakening the game goal accommodates a wider range of player types and game experiences" (199). *Catherine* demonstrates a middle ground to this proposition, valorizing one diverse set of outcomes (the "true" endings in which Vincent's conviction in any of the three available paths is strong) at the expense of another set (the "bad" endings where Vincent lacks conviction in anything). *Catherine* is awkward along the many edges of its patchwork, composite form, such as where block puzzles and psychological journeys meet, and in the threadbare development of Vincent's supporting cast. Nevertheless, the game reveals the vast potential of new-media objects as, on the one hand, playable, goal-oriented/winnable and quantitative and, on the other, expressive, reflective/aesthetic, and rhetorical/persuasive.

Marie-Laure Ryan asserted in 2011 that “[g]ames won’t be worth playing for the sake of the story until they introduce possibilities for action that engage the player in strategic relations with other characters and require a construction of their minds” that can dramatize “the mainspring of narrative interest: the evolution of a network of human relations” (“The Interactive Onion” 47-48). *Catherine*, published that same year, pushes the expressive potential of the videogame medium in working toward meaningful procedural models of human minds and interpersonal relations. Like the print works considered in chapters one and two, *Catherine* explores the network of relations among people, in part through the use of globalized contexts (primarily mythological contexts in *Catherine*). Whereas the novels in chapter two skillfully represent globalization in the background of their narratives, *Catherine*’s global mythological and cultural foundations extend outward from layered allusions (Ishtar, Rapunzel, Babel, etc.) into contexts that, along with the difficulty of accessing all narrative content, encourage players to supplement in-game experiences with outside research and collaboration. The importance of globalization to understanding *Catherine* is not primarily based on the game being *about* globalization; it is based on the extent to which playing *Catherine* and engaging the player communities surrounding the game involve players in new-media-aided processes of the globalization of modern identities and collective intelligence systems. *Catherine* illustrates how even new-media works that aren’t “about” globalization and don’t feel like particularly global experiences on the surface can be meaningfully participating in globalization.

*Catherine* also offers a variation on the interplay of thematized and formal compositing considered in chapter one. Like those novels, *Catherine* draws parallels among the manageable simplified composites used by authors, characters, and audiences. Atlus's game illustrates how procedural and schematic new-media formal techniques for representing romantic identity participate in the global technological dissemination of modern concepts of identity. *Catherine* uses its new-media-dependent forking-path narrative structure to explore the network of relations among eight possible versions of its protagonist based on a simplified model of aspects of human identity. Its technologies require *Catherine* to model identity in procedurally manipulable ways conducive to the globalization of modern identity proposed by Tomlinson. This contrasts with the technology of print, which is more forgiving of vaguely defined identities—though it is easy to see how many of the salient modern identities in chapter one's novels (race, gender, nationality, urban/rural, Believer/Unbeliever) could be easily adapted for procedurally tractable schemas.<sup>48</sup> *Catherine's* interactive identity model demands that players grasp it well enough to be able to manipulate it to achieve a desired ending for Vincent. As a result, players get used to thinking about identity in computer-friendly ways, so that the game globally disseminates modern identity concepts as it represents them.

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<sup>48</sup> Indeed, popular role-playing games (RPGs) like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* often begin by having the player configure a player-character by selecting their race and gender and letting them determine the character's sexual orientation more fluidly as possible romantic encounters arise. Race, gender, and sexual orientation choices can all (in various games and game situations) affect how non-player characters relate to the player-character.

As the limited nature of *Catherine's* model suggests, the method by which designers must engage human identity and experience is compositing—choosing a subset of elements of complex identities and interactions to model in acknowledgment of the futility of fully recreating the whole of any experience being examined.<sup>49</sup> Players then engage in compositing both in-game, by deciding which portions of the possibility space to explore, and also outside the game, by engaging in the collective intelligence of the game's player community. The limitations of new-media composites are strengths as much as drawbacks (a feature, not just a bug), because in necessarily excluding much that is meaningful in real-world experiences, they thereby include in their models the critical experience of compositing understandings from an overwhelmingly complex world.

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<sup>49</sup> This is not to imply that human identity transcends or pre-dates our composite articulations of it as opposed to being built from them. Tomlinson stresses, for instance, that “that cultural identity, properly understood, is much more the *product* of globalization than its victim” (“Globalization” 269). Cultural identity, for Tomlinson, “is not in fact merely some fragile communal-psychic attachment, but a considerable dimension of *institutionalized* social life in modernity,” structured by law, education, and media institutions among others (270-71).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### POSTHUMAN TECHNOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON A GLOBALIZED WORLD

Building on chapter three's analysis of new media, narrative compositing, and global cultural networks, this chapter considers depictions of the dynamics of globalization and technology in global literary fiction (literature of globalization) and science fiction (literature of technology), both of which have their own investments in decentering the human. Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2004) is typically read as (satirical) literary fiction examining contemporary technologies, cultures, and globalization (Chaudhuri; Hart; Kirn; Spinella), while Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age: Or, a Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* (1995) is read as science fiction or (post-)cyberpunk exploring an imagined future (Carroll; Jonas; McClellan; Rogers and Tanaka). Yet Stephenson's novel set late in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and Kunzru's novel set early in that century share a fundamental interest in the posthuman global interactions of technology, society, and individual lives.

*Transmission* narrates the global effects of a computer virus in the early 2000s, and *The Diamond Age* traces the global repercussions of nanotechnology, computer networking, and new media in the mid-to-late 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Both novels explore

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<sup>1</sup> Notably, the plot of Stephenson's earlier novel *Snow Crash* (likely set in the same world as *The Diamond Age*, but around 50-60 years earlier) is focused on stopping a (titular) virus with the cataclysmic capability of infecting both computer systems and the human brain.

these developments in part through the transnational (*Transmission*) and nearly post-national (*The Diamond Age*) experiences of multiple interrelated focalizing characters whose posthuman experiences emphasize the different meanings of borders for embodied humans and technologically embodied information and agency.

The novels share both subject matter and the device of using composite structures to tell their stories—stories of the spread of technology and the simultaneous intensification of posthumanist conditions for agency. No character in these stories has full knowledge of the narratives of technology that Stephenson and Kunzru offer readers. This is a primary reason that these novels exist: to provide perspectives missing in our everyday experience of technological globalization, those of an information flow, or a computer, or a technological network. These narrative composites focalize through both technologies and individual humans, allowing us to understand complex phenomena from more than just human perspectives. *Transmission* and *The Diamond Age* both explore posthumanist technological points of view on the world and the connections among characters who never interact in person.

Kunzru and Stephenson offer posthuman narrative composites of technological and human perspectives that outline the complexity of our technological connectedness. These narratives reveal how global technological forces that are hard to trace in the world (particularly in the moment) affect subjectivity, agency, and community. Both novels examine overwhelming aspects of

globalized experiences such as the scope of a computer virus or immigration sting and the long-term effects of key technologies on global society, geopolitics, and individual agency. In this chapter I turn my attention to how posthuman narrative compositing helps us understand technological entities whose global scale makes them difficult to grasp. This argument will build on earlier chapters' analyses of narrative compositing, complex connectivity, and new media technologies.

*Transmission* and *The Diamond Age* foreground technologized global complexity and the challenges of representing and understanding it. I argue that narrative compositing is critical to the work of managing the overwhelming scale of posthuman human-machine interactions and of highlighting rather than obscuring the incompleteness of narrative understandings of a complex globalized world.

Both Kunzru and Stephenson decenter their human characters by requiring them to share focus with impersonal global technologies: an evolving computer virus and a series of futuristic nano- and networking technologies, respectively. In this way both authors attempt to represent posthumanism through narrative compositing featuring what I call a technology's-eye-view—a narrative that tracks technological development and agency at least as much as it tracks human individuals' development and agency. Pramod K. Nayar defines (critical) posthumanism as “the *radical decentering of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines*” (11). Autonomous human individuals are not the undisputed center of Kunzru's and



Stephenson's stories, but share agency with environmental and technological entities from which they are not always clearly separable. *Transmission* and *The Diamond Age* sketch out characters but often abandon them partway through the text, leave their stories ambiguous or unresolved, or devote little time to them compared to their co-protagonist technologies. In Kunzru and Stephenson, as in Nayar, "critical posthumanism does not see the human as the centre of all things: it sees the human as an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages and crossings with all forms of life" (Nayar 14). Nayar argues that globalized technologies and new understandings of non-human species have forced us to recognize that humanism privileges and naturalizes "the composite features we now recognize as the human" and "treats the human subject as the centre of the world," when in reality "the human" is simply another analytical composite beset by gaps, simplifications, and missed contexts (15). N. Katherine Hayles also suggests the role of compositing in understanding with what she calls seriation, or the tracking of how an entity develops and changes (*How We Became* 14). Seriation explains how "[s]ome elements of the liberal humanist subject," such as agency, "are rewritten into the posthuman, whereas others, particularly the identification of self with the conscious mind, are substantially changed" (279). The posthumanist narrative composites of *Transmission* and *The Diamond Age* accord with Nayar's and Hayles's assertions that humans are not the natural, unproblematic center of agency and global developments.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Critical posthumanism does not mean the end of embodiment or of human agency,

Nayar's posthumanist vision of "embodied but distributed subjectivity" suggests the centrality of composing as a response to the complex relations between embodied individuals, technologies, and global social and information environments (90). Nayar sees "the body . . . less as a bounded entity than as a network or assemblage, evolving with technology and then [*sic*] environment, where identity emerges as a consequence of the layered flows of information across multiple routes and channels, and of course subject to social pressures and power relations" (90). Humans are not the sole, discrete center of agency and subjectivity in posthumanism; neither are they the sole center of Kunzru's and Stephenson's narrative composites. *Transmission* and *The Diamond Age* represent posthumanist visions in which "will, agency and subjectivity are emergent conditions . . . the consequence of relations and dynamics that cut across organic and non-organic actors, machines and humans – in other words, between the human and the environment" (Nayar 91).<sup>3</sup> As Hayles puts it, "[t]he computer molds the human even

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rather revealing the complexities of embodiment, agency, and contexts. For Nayar, "embodiment is *embedded* embodiment, in which the human body is located in an environment that consists of plants, animals and machines" (20). As a result, "the complexity of the human system, with its 'unique' consciousness of cognitive/perceptual processes . . . with all its internal organization and operations, is a *consequence of its openness to the environment*. . . . Systems, including human ones, are in a state of emergence rather than in a state of being when the system is constantly traversed by information flows from the environment" (20).

<sup>3</sup> Hayles, too, characterizes "[t]he posthuman subject [as] an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction," arguing that "the posthuman's collective heterogeneous quality implies a distributed cognition located in disparate parts that may be in only tenuous communication with one another" (*How We Became* 3-4). In her "Cyborg Manifesto," Donna J. Haraway

as the human builds the computer,” and innovations in narrative structures lead to “a new kind of reader . . . produced by the text” (*How We Became* 47). By structuring their narratives to track technologies as well as humans, Kunzru and Stephenson introduce readers to posthumanist understandings of present and future globalized, technologized complexity and distributed agency and embodiment.<sup>4</sup>

Donna J. Haraway also anticipates Kunzru’s and Stephenson’s turn toward narrative structures featuring both technological and human perspectives and agency. Insisting that “[t]he only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular,” Haraway calls for “*situated knowledges*” that evade crippling postmodernist relativism through commitment to incomplete but helpful particular perspectives and the knowledge they afford—including technological and mediated perspectives (196, 188). The technology’s-eye-views explored in *Transmission* and *The Diamond Age*, we must keep in mind, are not disembodied, free-floating, and transcendent, but the perspectives of non-human but technologically embodied

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similarly asserts that “[b]y the late twentieth century . . . we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machines and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. . . . a condensed image of both imagination and material reality . . . . The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code” (150, 163). On the level of theory, too, Haraway insists on piecemeal structures rather than metanarratives that assert their mastery of the whole story (181).

<sup>4</sup> Antonio R. Damasio’s consciousness studies offer another perspective on distributed cognition and embodiment. For Damasio, “Life regulation, a dynamic process known as *homeostasis* for short, begins in unicellular living creatures” and gains in complexity with more complex organisms, with humans adding a layer he calls the “autobiographical self” (25, 26). Human consciousness extends homeostasis to social and cultural levels and includes complex institutions and technological systems, and this “sociocultural homeostasis” is another of the many layers or levels of consciousness (27).

focalizers—a virus, an information network, a nanotech utility grid. Kunzru’s and Stephenson’s narrative composites explore the distributed cognition and agency of intertwined human and technological entities and help us see how the our knowledge is in many ways mediated through, expanded by, and even exceeded by the perspectives and knowledge of our technologies.

***Transmission: Brewing a Maximal Compositing Crisis from Signals, Noise, and Gaps***

From its first lines to its last, Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission* explores the challenges of narrating the posthuman entanglement of contemporary technology with individuals and society. The opening paragraphs describe, in second person, the individual human actions that helped the spread of the evolving Leela computer virus (named, by starstruck, naïve co-protagonist and virus creator Arjun Mehta, after Bollywood star and focalizing character Leela Zahir). The virus, which plays havoc with digitized data and computer networks in numerous ways as it develops, is as central to Kunzru’s story as any human character: “There you were, doing whatever you normally do online: filling in form fields, downloading porn, *interacting*, when suddenly up she flounced and everything went to pieces” (3). Kunzru then zooms out to consider the contrast between the “surface effect” or individual experience of the virus and “[t]he real action . . . taking place in the guts of the code . . . an invisible contagion” (4). Analysis of code-level action takes expertise and time, but is a relatively standard process. What is harder, Kunzru’s introduction suggests, is identifying, understanding, and narrating the points of interaction

between intelligible (if invisible) code and the less rational, less consistently recorded world of human society: “A chain of cause and effect? Nothing so simple in Leela’s summer. It was a time of topological curiosities . . . so thoroughly confused that identifying a point of origin becomes almost impossible” (4). Kunzru echoes Hayles here, who asserts that “modern humans . . . every day . . . participate in systems whose total cognitive capacity exceeds our individual knowledge” (*How We Became* 289).

The unattainable simplicity of clear causality and reliable points of origin is contrasted with the fragmentary, bewildering nature of actual experience in a series of enigmatic shards drawn from the typical experiences of the novel’s yet-to-be-introduced focalizing protagonists Arjun, Leela, Guy Swift, and Gabriella (Gaby)

Caro:

Morning through venetian blinds.  
A cinema crowd watches a tear roll down a giant face.  
The beep of an alarm. Groans and slow disengagement of limbs.  
She shuts down her machine and  
They sit together in a taxi  
A curvature. A stoop. (4)

None of these fragments offers a strong point of origin for the narrative being begun. Instead, Kunzru must continue his composite narrative through “[a]n arbitrary leap into the system” by focusing on Arjun’s situation (previewed in some fragments) (5). From the outset Kunzru thus encourages readers to recognize the inescapably arbitrary nature of his narrative understanding of events given the complexity and informational gappiness of technological globalization as embodied in the Leela virus.

Having leapt arbitrarily into Arjun's story, Kunzru opens with a metaphor of dysfunctional globalization. Arjun enters a New Delhi office building for a job interview (as a computer programmer in America) and notices at the front desk "a row of clocks, relics of the optimistic 1960s" that have been allowed to lose track of time so that "New Delhi seemed to be only two hours ahead of New York, and one behind Tokyo," suggesting a "shrinkage in the world . . . the globe contracting like a deflating beach ball" (6). Arjun's expectations will be similarly deflated by his experiences with the globalized labor market and the globalized networks destabilized by his virus. Arjun's problems spring in part from his spectacularly poor social understanding. In contrast with the compositing characters of chapter one, Arjun ineffectively models the human world in the rationalized, conventionalized terms of computer programming, videogames, and especially Indian cinema.<sup>5</sup> He alternately fails to understand the gross simplifications of his compositing methods and rejects the social complexities that exceed them.

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<sup>5</sup> Before his life of despairing subsistence there, Arjun visualizes Silicon Valley as "so exciting that like Lara Croft you had to rappel down a cliff-face to get in. One up. Player Mehta, proceed" (22). When his life begins falling apart, "[it] felt like the floor of a gameworld dungeon, shifting, full of traps. . . . His life was malfunctioning" (98). Arjun prefers identity grids (like those in chapter three), where one is "safe in the knowledge that you are engaged with a system that runs according to potentially knowable rules," and he despairs that "the real world possesses the paradoxical quality of not feeling real enough. Surely, of all things, reality ought to be transparent, logical" (97). He and his co-workers seek self-knowledge in (Facebook-style) identity questionnaires and quizzes, because "[s]omething about multiple-choice tests chimed with the R&D personality . . . . Week by week, Arjun learned more about himself. His Dungeons & Dragons alignment turned out to be Lawful Good" (55). Arjun prefers rationalized identities like Non-Resident Indian status and "H1B migrant status" to murky non-rational relationships and identities (8, 22).

Kunzru's virus narrative stresses that a world of information overload does not necessarily mean that the most *pertinent* information is available to individuals. Arjun understands virus and anti-virus code exceptionally well. But at no point does he predict or understand how his Leela virus will take the world hostage once he releases its evolving code into the social environment of people using the internet irrationally and carelessly. No character adequately understands the story of the Leela virus, because they must piece it together from a variety of symptoms and imperfect reports. People trying to understand the virus wreaking havoc on systems worldwide must sift through a barrage of unhelpful explanations often based on simplistic, readymade worldviews. As the virus hits branding consultant Guy Swift's London office, the information that trickles down to him is distorted beyond recognition: "Apparently everyone had this thing. Possibly it was some kind of Muslim fundamentalist attack" (131). With little solid information, the mass media meet the needs of the 24-hour news cycle with counterproductive conjecture, with one journalist "theoriz[ing] that it might be some kind of promotional stunt" (132).

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Most often, Arjun prefers to understand life according to simplistic Bollywood cinematic conventions. His decision to seek his fortune abroad is "a major life decision" made "on the basis of a movie. . . . an entertainment so light as to be almost gaseous," making his decision "the mark of a true devotee of popular cinema" (33). Arjun's only friend in America, Chris(tine) Schnorr, notices his "habit of comparing events in his life with scenes in Indian movies" and his escapist retreat to "a swashbuckling world" of cinematic tropes and plotlines (64-65). Linda Krämer suggests the relevance of thematized compositing, noting that "All of the cases in which characters in *Transmission* relate to fictional texts or create stories in this way are presented as attempts to make sense of and impose order and stability onto their world" and concluding that Kunzru's narrative techniques focus attention on "the politics of storytelling in a globalized world" (89).

Guy's cabdriver's take on the Leela chaos "fold[s] in his own theories about cybercrime and 'the Al Qaedas'" (208).

*Transmission* is a narrative of the transmission of the Leela virus but also of the transmission of awareness and understandings that follow belatedly in the virus's wake. The novel highlights the disparity of information available to experts, journalists, and the public at large as the virus progresses. Information about the virus comes from multiple, often dubious sources in fragmentary and inconsistent forms, and some sources (like the U.S. government) even contradict themselves (145). With so many involved parties and the added distortions of human biases, the transmission of information about the virus is even more convoluted than the transmission of the virus itself. As the examples above indicate, the popular causal analyses that emerge are derived as much from theorists' preferred narratives as from the evidence that emerges too slowly for impatient audiences.

*Transmission* emphasizes the unavoidable difficulty of constructing understandings from multiple information sources in a globalized, technological world:

At the boundaries of any complex event, unity starts to break down. Recollections differ. Fact shades irretrievably into interpretation. How many people must be involved for certainty to dissipate? The answer, according to information theorists, is two. As soon as there is a sender, a receiver, a transmission medium and a message, there is a chance for noise to corrupt the signal. (Kunzru 146)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This articulation of complexity is itself a simplification. As Cary Wolfe notes, both Jacques Derrida's analysis of communication and Niklas Luhmann's second-order systems theory see transmission as a simplistic first-order systems theory metaphor too accepting of both message and subject (sender/receiver) as stable givens (Wolfe



The massive volume of transmissions across global information networks and the uncertainty of each transmission severely impede human knowledge. Kunzru reminds us that information transmission is central to our ability to understand the world yet inherently imperfect. Real information is lost and false information propagates, as Kunzru reveals by offering readers technology-based perspectives on the action unavailable to human characters. People blame the virus for burst light bulbs even as “other events that may be attributable to Leela have dropped through the cracks. To this day much remains invisible to the counters and chroniclers, those whose function it is to announce what happened, to come to some conclusion about how it must have been” (147). The origin of “several Leela variants that have never been conclusively linked to Arjun Mehta” presents “a gap in the record that opens up vertiginous and troubling possibilities” (147). Arjun himself “step[s] into legend” and into the gaps in the story after disappearing from his hotel near the Mexican border as Part I, “Signal,” ends (249).

Kunzru’s transition late in the novel from Part I, “Signal,” to Part II, “Noise,” uses content and form to emphasize the virus-induced global compositing crisis at the center of his novel. The narrative focuses increasingly on noise and uncertainty. The narratorial voice switches from focalizing through the protagonists and technologies to an objective third-person perspective confined to what an

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13). In place of transmission, Derrida and Luhmann focus on difference and see the subject as a function of the communicative operation rather than a controlling force outside of it (13).

enterprising (diegetic) researcher could learn about events.<sup>7</sup> In Part II's gappier perspective, the reader is excluded from the protagonists' thoughts and forced to turn to the commercial media for information: "Arjun Mehta, the 'evil scientist' (*New York Post*) whose 'twisted genius' (*London Evening Standard*) threatened the world with 'techno meltdown' (*Sydney Daily Telegraph*) has rarely been out of the headlines since the last confirmed sighting" (265).

The reader's exclusion from authoritative information occurs as the world endures a maximal compositing crisis called Grayday, which designates "the period when there was most noise in the global system" (253). This period of "informational disaster" and crashed computer systems and networks lasted much longer than a day:

[T]he name captures a certain cybernetic gloom that hung about the time, the communal depression of network administrators yearning for perfection while faced with appalling losses, drop-outs, crashes and absences of every kind. . . . Grayday names a moment of maximal uncertainty, a time of peaking doubt. We have records of events that may not have taken place. Other events took place but left no record. All that can be said with honesty is that afterward there were absences, gaps that have never been filled. (254)

Grayday is contrasted with the pursuit of knowledge enabled, in large part, by posthuman technological entanglement. Kunzru stresses that more information does not relieve us from the necessity of compositing information into knowledge:

"We want to abolish the unknown," writes one Leela researcher. It is a common enough desire. As humans, we want to know what is lurking

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<sup>7</sup> For example, "[r]esearch confirms that a Battersea estate agency handled the sale" of Guy's apartment and "[d]etermined digging will finally lead up a long rutted farm track" to Guy's new hermit-like accommodations in the North Pennines (Kunzru 257).

outside our perimeter . . . . We have built lenses and Geiger counters and mass spectrometers and solar probes and listening stations on remote Antarctic islands. We have drenched the world in information in the hope that the unknown will finally and definitively go away. But information is not the same as knowledge. To extract one from the other you must, as the word suggests, inform. You must transmit. Perfect information is sometimes defined as a signal transmitted from a sender to a receiver without loss, without the introduction of the smallest uncertainty or confusion. (253)

Kunzru's treatment of massive amounts of globalized, technologically facilitated information identifies imperfect transmission as a source of uncertainty that necessitates compositing: "In the real world . . . there is always noise" (253). Noise, *Transmission* argues, is a communicational challenge heightened by global complexity. Noise hinders the compositing of information into useful, accurate knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Kunzru tells us that information transmission requires "a vocabulary of imperfection, of error correction and density estimation . . . of indefinite knowledge and losses due to entropy. . . . Certainty backslides into probability" (253). Like compositing more generally, information transmission is about making do (253). Kunzru's characters must deal not only with "[t]he details of those events . . . in the public domain" and gaps where the truth is unknown to all, but also with gaps created for the public by "military, corporate, or governmental" authorities suppressing information for their own reasons (254). And then there is the crucial

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<sup>8</sup> Haraway, on the other hand, sees noise as good for knowledge in that any claim to perfect, noiseless communication could only be an oppressive simplification: "Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism. That is why cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine" (176). Haraway's argument resonates with compositing's reflexive insistence that no narrative can tell the whole story.

problem of globalized scale, where with Leela's more individualized impacts, "the problem becomes one of counting" (254). Readers get a better sense of the scale of the impact than characters because of Kunzru's inclusion of multiple human and technological perspectives on the virus and Grayday, but even this improved understanding is necessarily composite and representative rather than comprehensive.

Part II stresses that in addition to dealing with gaps, compositing a narrative of events requires analyzing the glut of false positives and exploring the meaning of the data that inundate us. The dual challenges of noise and gaps present a paradox: in a world of overwhelming amounts of data, the situational irrelevance of most of this data means that the few shreds of apparently relevant information are often submitted to unhelpfully excessive analysis. The posthuman proliferation of technologically produced and stored information may enable improved knowledge about the world, but it may also produce debilitating amounts of noise. For instance, when investigation photos of the hotel room where Arjun disappeared are leaked online, these fragments of direct photographic evidence are rampantly overanalyzed in the absence of more meaningful data (256). They "spawn detailed speculation about (among other things) the brands of packaging in the wastepaper basket [and] the crumpled Oakland Raiders shirt in the bathroom," and conspiracy theorists get to work turning real but inconsequential data into farfetched theories (256). Mall surveillance footage of Arjun shortly before his disappearance is exhaustively analyzed "[l]ike the Zapruder footage or the Watergate tapes" by "Leela researchers

try[ing] to forge connections, reaching into ever more recondite areas of speculation,” until every passerby on the tape gets investigated and, “[a]s time passes and the volume of secondary material increases, the true meaning of the Leela occlusions is becoming, if anything, more obscure” (265). The intensive scrutiny of small amounts of information, in other words, confuses rather than clarifies.

Intensive analysis of tiny fragments of dubiously meaningful data creates more noise rather than fewer gaps. Our access to Arjun’s thoughts through Part I’s focalized narration refutes and renders ridiculous the conspiracy theories described in Part II. Nevertheless, as various groups claim Arjun as a symbol of their own various political causes, “Arjun Mehta, Gap loyalty card holder and habitué of Seattle Niketown, is rapidly changing shape” and the truth is drowned in noise (267). The novel closes with one last thematization of injudicious compositing based on scanty, overanalyzed information. *Transmission*’s final line addresses persistent sightings of Arjun and Leela along the Pacific Rim: “According to conspiracy theorists, there is only one possible explanation, only one pattern that makes sense” (276). Kunzru pointedly doesn’t tell us *what* this One True Explanation is, because that’s not the point. By withholding the definitive explanation and instead concluding with the satirical, vague assertion of it—particularly since the narrative has in fact indicated multiple conspiracy theorists with multiple pet explanations—Kunzru highlights how noisy phenomena defy explanation and give rise to a great deal of faulty compositing. The conspiracy theorists deny all rivals, though there are many

versions of their erroneous certainty about the truth beneath the uncertainty of Grayday.

The reader, on the other hand, is left to composite an understanding of the same events with a more sophisticated awareness of the gappiness, uncertainty, and provisionality of our narratives.<sup>9</sup> For Linda Krämer, this is a doubling of Kunzru's noise theme: "the transmission of signals in the system of literary communication, too, is disturbed by 'noise', and it is precisely the mixture of cultural references and codes typical of globalization novels that may cause disorientation or alienation on the part of the reader," mirroring characters' predicament (90). Philip Leonard also hints at the importance of compositing analysis for understanding what

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<sup>9</sup> William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003) offers another contemporary take on obsessive compositing and analysis of fragments in the information age. The novel marks William Gibson's increased interest in "the *eversion* of cyberspace" that Steven E. Jones connects to a renewed emphasis (in society and literature) on "the combination of digital and physical dimensions of experience, what has been called AR or mixed reality. . . . the social, locative, embodied, and object-oriented nature of our experience in the networked world" (Jones 13, 14). Like *Transmission*, *Pattern Recognition* is set in the present day and thematizes online theorizing of fragmentary information hidden in a sea of noise. Gibson's characters are connected through their interest in a series of anonymously released video fragments analyzed ad infinitum, "having been endlessly collated, broken down, reassembled, by whole armies of the most fanatical investigators," after which they "have yielded no period and no particular narrative direction," so that "Zaprudered into surreal dimensions of purest speculation, ghost-narratives have emerged and taken on shadowy but determined lives of their own" (Gibson 24). Like *The Diamond Age*, *Pattern Recognition* forms part of its author's shift from cyberpunk toward technology in relation to geopolitics and globalization. Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) also thematizes compositing in response to noisy, gappy data, featuring scrutiny of text and video fragments "[a]s diligent as any close analysis of the Zapruder film . . . carried out countless times by too many critics to name" in a text more rooted in postmodernism than in globalization (Danielewski 193). All three novels use Zapruder as a touchstone for this newly prominent form of obsessive overanalysis of fragments.

*Transmission* has to say about literature. Leonard sees in Arjun's eventual disappearance from the narrative's view the suggestion "that the realist novel is incapable of capturing the actuality that it has historically sought to convey. Ultimately, generically as well as thematically, representation fails in *Transmission* because what happens in this novel becomes lost or erased, as though by a virus" (140). Bidhan Chandra Roy sees Arjun's disappearance as "eras[ing] Arjun's subjectivity from the narrative: Arjun ceases to be a fully defined character and instead becomes a myth, a 'legend'" that readers and characters must piece together from the available information according to our own biased perspectives (93). The gaps and noise of the virus and its aftermath (including Arjun's disappearance) are a thematic mirror of the narrative structure of gaps in the novel. Both prompt readers to composite to understand a narrative that denies them the whole story. *Transmission* suggests that in constructing and interpreting fictional narratives, as in constructing understandings of the real world, we cannot grasp entireties, but must composite workable stand-ins.

Kunzru emphasizes both the human interpretive challenges of information overload and also technological perspectives unavailable to human actors. Kunzru shows technologies both aiding and overwhelming human attempts at interpretation. He represents information available only to technological perspectives never shared by humans. For example, Kunzru narrates the infection of Guy's laptop by the virus (called Leela and gendered female by a narrator adopting Arjun's anthropomorphization of this key technology): "Leela found Guy Swift at

thirty-five thousand feet as he was traveling back to London from New York . . . She had been batched with other messages, compressed and trickled down from a satellite to a computer onboard the Airbus A300 in whose first-class section Guy was reclining, drowsily checking e-mail on the airphone,” and downloading his e-mail, and the virus, to his laptop (109). This virus-centered technology’s-eye-view narration offers a perspective no human character has access to. Kunzru’s virus focalization and the narrator’s sexist anthropomorphizations of the virus (which characterize it like an objectified human female, as also with the virus’s ‘flouncing’ earlier) are attempts to represent the posthuman agency of a technological entity as important to *Transmission*’s structure and plot as the human focalizers (3).

Kunzru further explores the posthuman implications of his story by examining global pathways of transmission and the borders and barriers that affect the movement of people and information in different ways according to their different forms of embodiment. In Krämer’s analysis, Kunzru “[p]laces the transfer of people, signs, and texts in the globalized world at the centre of his novel and emphasizes the mechanisms by which they are interlinked” yet “insists on the ambivalence of global interconnectedness,” by thematizing noise as well as “isolation, dislocation, and/or alienation” (77-78). Krämer identifies “the inevitable noise in the transmission process as an important reason for, and effect of, the continuing presence of borders” (86). Krämer’s formulation echoes posthumanist insistence on the mutual co-evolution of human and technological entities and the importance of embodiment to the mobility of humans and technologies (and



attempts to restrict that mobility). For Leonard, too, *Transmission* rejects the notion that political and cultural forces have simply transcended borders. Instead, “Kunzru’s text endorses the idea that the information age has redefined, rather than renounced, the relationship between space and culture” (Leonard 120). Information and technological objects like the Leela virus variants enjoy freer movement than humans across political borders because of their digital embodiment and the ubiquity of information networks facilitating their international mobility. As the first version of the virus spreads, Kunzru again adopts a technology’s-eye-view to follow its path:

Packets of data streamed through the wires, through [Internet exchange points] MAE-West and East, into hubs and rings in Chicago and Atlanta and Dallas and New York, out of others in London and Tokyo, through the vast SEA-ME-WE 3 cable under the Pacific and its siblings on the seabed of the Atlantic. Data streamed up to communication satellites, or was converted into radio waves to be spat out of transmitters, passing through people and buildings, traveling away into space. (109)<sup>10</sup>

Largely unhampered by borders, the virus is able to replicate itself a quarter of a million times within the first five hours and millions or billions of times within days

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<sup>10</sup> Like the novels in chapter two, *Transmission* also sketches a wide array of globalized events and forces in the background. For example, while Arjun waits for the unleashed Leela virus to surface, Kunzru briefly glosses other globalized events in progress: “Around the world, Thursday the twelfth of June was a quiet day. Bombs went off in Jakarta, Jenin and Tashkent. An old single-hulled tanker sank off Manila, releasing its load of crude oil into the South China Sea. In Malawi a man was diagnosed with a previously unknown retroviral infection. At London’s Heathrow Airport, two Ghanean boys were found frozen to death in the undercarriage of a Boeing 747” (119). Meanwhile, Arjun commutes to work while “listening to the soundtrack from *Crisis Kashmir*,” a Bollywood film whose “web of terrorism and international intrigue” provides a loose a metaphor for the central romance, with Leela singing, “*O my love, o my darling / I’ve crossed the line of no control*” (119, 120).

(108). This demonstrates the posthuman potential for technologies to enable the global transmission of influence and knowledge despite national borders. Kunzru's narrative also shows that these technological developments can be either positive or negative (from a given human perspective) and driven by various combinations of human and technological agency.

Though the Leela virus and information about it move relatively freely around the globe, national borders in *Transmission* remain potent gateways managing people and national and regional identities (or brands). Though emphatically posthuman in their imbrication with technological agents and ways of knowing, the humans in Kunzru's novel are still defined in critical ways by their embodiment and its effects on mobility. Both before and after becoming a fugitive, Arjun is preoccupied with his right of access to nations. H-1B visa status in the U.S. and Non-Resident Indian status in relation to India are central to his desired identity, because for him they are the clearest markers of the cosmopolitanism he loves about contemporary Bollywood heroes (8, 22, 34). The transnational mobility indicated by a specialty visa to America confers an elite status that appeals to Arjun in the absence of any real knowledge of what working and living abroad will be like. In many ways, advanced technology make borders more effective at policing human bodies. After the virus makes him a high-profile fugitive, Arjun faces the prospect of trying to sneak across the U.S.-Mexico border, "one of the most tightly controlled in the world" due to an intimidating array of high- and low-tech monitoring control

mechanisms and “technologies intended to prevent (or at least minimize) the unauthorized crossing of goods, vehicles and people” (247).

As with Arjun’s experiences of privilege and then desperation at the U.S. border, Kunzru uses Guy’s European story to explore the meanings of borders in an age of accelerating, technologized globalization. Guy’s story builds to his branding pitch to the directors of the fictitious (but Frontex-like) Pan-European Border Authority (PEBA), with whom he brainstorms about managing the symbolism of Europe’s borders. PEBA’s Bocca asserts, “[t]he question of the border is a question of information” (234), and Guy couldn’t agree more:

“the border is not just a line on the earth anymore. . . . It’s about status. It’s about opportunity. Sure you’re either inside or outside, but you can be on the inside and still be outside, right? . . . ‘the border is everywhere. The border,’ and this is key, ‘is in your mind.’ . . . a mental border is a value and a value is something we can promote. . . . we have to promote Europe as somewhere you want to go, but somewhere that’s not for everyone. . . . An exclusive continent. An *upscale* continent. . . . Club Europa—the world’s VIP room.” (235, 239)

The bureaucrats and marketers are working to cultivate desires like Arjun’s for elite transnational mobility, to drive up the market demand for access to European places and opportunities. But their ability to exclude and deport the “right” people is undermined by the Leela-induced compositing crisis.<sup>11</sup> In parallel to Arjun, and without leaving Brussels, Guy is picked up by a PEBA immigration sweep without any personal identification and mistakenly deported to Albania due to a Leela virus system error, highlighting the posthuman entanglement of identity with technology.

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<sup>11</sup> As Liam Connell puts it, “Mehta’s virus, launched in an attempt to prevent his own disgraced return to India, works to destabilize the privileges of First World citizenship by reconfiguring the instruments of authoritarian surveillance” (286).

Mere days after his smug discussions about border branding and triumphant rich-European elitism, Guy is forced to sell his watch to human traffickers to be smuggled into Italy, only to be dumped into the ocean along with a Bangladeshi family when a customs boat draws near. Guy washes ashore (alone) in Italy and returns to England and a life and career in shambles.

Guy's and Arjun's stories suggest that borders' meanings are multiplying as a result of globalization, posthumanist technological developments, and virus-induced chaos. Their stories also stress that borders' power to separate the excluded from the privileged elite (even if both groups exist on both sides of the border) remains formidable. The lines on the earth are still major barriers to Arjun's flight to Mexico and Guy's clandestine approach to Italy. These borders also have powerful social and political meanings, as PEBA's branding push and Arjun's daydreams about the Bollywood-like privileges of H-1B-holding Non-Resident Indians attest. The interplay of borders, individuals' understandings of them, and the role of technologies in maintaining and subverting them are crucial parts of *Transmission's* investigations into globalized posthumanism and attempts to understand it through compositing. The obsessive analysis of the sparse details of Arjun's disappearance at the Mexican border and the viral corruption of data leading to Guy's deportation both develop Kunzru's attention to the global distribution of agency and knowledge amongst human and technological entities. Technology adds to the sophistication of border control, but also undermines it when the internet, "the technology which is often regarded as the very quintessence of globalization comes to be associated with

the threat of otherness as it is transformed into a conduit for an attack on the very institutions of globalization as neoliberalism,” as through a virus like Arjun’s (Connell 280-81). While limited in their ability to impede the flow of information and viruses, borders still exert powerful authority on people within and without, as Arjun’s and Guy’s experiences demonstrate.

The exercise of power at borders is most effective when authorities can identify the individuals and groups they wish to target. This ability is contingent on the kind of specific, accurate information that *Transmission* suggests is often hard to come by in the noisy global information environment, and on posthuman processes that define identity in terms of technologically managed information about human bodies. The multiplicity and fluidity of many kinds of identities make information about them particularly tricky. We can see this slipperiness in “*Transmission’s* refusal to distinguish Mehta the author of viruses from Mehta the hacker (or, indeed, from Mehta the author of virus protection software or Mehta the elite programmer valued by corporate organizations)” (Leonard 131). Arjun Appadurai argues that the globalized economy further “create[s] unprecedented tensions between identities of origin, identities of residence, and identities of aspiration for many migrants in the world labor market” similar to those that Arjun grapples with (*Fear* 37). Not all such identities can be confirmed by authorities, nor can shifting identities or the bodies that bear them be constantly tracked. Border authorities and the institutionalization of certain identities (as discussed in chapter three) bring physical and conceptual force as well as a posthuman mix of human and machine attention to bear on the

management of identities and the bodies they are applied to, but *Transmission* reveals how these efforts remain pitted against a world of noise and gaps.

In *Transmission*'s fanciful, satirical ending, two of the four protagonists, Arjun and Leela, disappear for good.<sup>12</sup> A third, Guy, recedes slightly more conventionally from his former hectically networked existence by going "underground" and becoming a hermit in a stone cottage in Northumbria (257-58). The world continues to piece together composite narratives of their experiences, but they withdraw from participation in that process. The fourth protagonist, Guy's ex-girlfriend Gabriella Caro, has a more tragic conclusion. Her inability to meaningfully composite knowledge of herself and the world into an acceptable worldview predates the Leela virus. We learn that "Gaby mistrusted snapshots. She possessed very few of her own, perhaps a dozen recorded instants of time that she could not fit together to make a pattern, let alone a life" (69). Rich but listless, she has let the money of others take her "to various places in which had existed various versions of herself" that refuse to cohere into a meaningful whole (69). When her sister overdoses on sleeping pills (possibly intentionally), "[l]ike so many events in Gaby's life, Caroline's death made no particular sense. It was just a thing," in the absence of a framework for relating it meaningfully to other things. (70). Gaby's parents "spent the funeral politely convincing each other the death was accidental . . . . Watching the two of them edit

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<sup>12</sup> Arjun and Leela remain romantically on the run from Arjun's legal (and illegal) pursuers, strobe lit by occasional supposed sightings around the Pacific Rim, much like a Bollywood masala (genre-mashup) romantic thriller (275-76). In fact, this is basically the ending of the real film *Ek Tha Tiger* (released years after *Transmission* in 2012), starring Salman Khan, the stated rival to Leela's fictional co-star Rajiv Rana (195).

the story to suit themselves made them so terrible in her eyes that she left” her current life behind and started over, as had become her habit (70).

Gaby’s story ends when, while embarked upon “a glittering eastward path across the globe” with her new rich husband, she leaps to her death from a yacht in front of a jet ski that “[i]t seemed impossible that she had not seen” (273). She leaves behind a computer disk with “a single document, an erratic and rambling narrative that is part autobiography, part diary of the first year of her marriage” (274). Her lifelong access to the elite transnational mobility that Guy and Arjun long aspired to brings her only restlessness, disconnection, and a habit of fleeing discomfort and dissatisfaction. Hers is the bleakest story, a sketch of quietly desperate disconnection, abhorrence of self-serving simplifications, and the inability to come up with a viable alternative to knitting together fragmentary experiences and events. Disgusted by the distortions those around her use to render their lives justifiable and meaningful, she rejects compositing altogether, experiences each event in her life as “just a thing” that makes “no particular sense,” and sees no way out but death (70).

*Transmission* doesn’t dwell on Gaby’s fate but quickly moves on to the eventual quelling of the Leela virus—the resolution of the novel’s technological fifth protagonist—and the sporadic Arjun and Leela sightings before closing with its line about the conspiracy theorists. Here as ever, Kunzru’s focus is less on his characters than on what their stories can tell us about the ways we try to make sense of our technologized, global experiences through compositing. *Transmission* emphasizes

the challenges of contemporary technologized globalization by distributing its composite narrative across four human protagonists and one viral protagonist whose identities and agency are complexly and (to them) often opaquely interconnected. Narratorial attention in *Transmission* is no longer fully centered on human beings and human ways of knowing. Instead, Kunzru reveals a world of humans and technologies deeply linked to each other and driving each other's mutual development.

### **Worldbuilding as Globalized Science Fiction Compositing**

As we turn from *Transmission* to the science fiction (SF) novel *The Diamond Age*, we should consider the link between narrative compositing and worldbuilding, an authorial practice that is a hallmark of SF writing (and other speculative genres). Walter Jon Williams explains, “[t]he writers of science fiction and fantasy are required to make decisions about their work that are unique to their genre, and . . . almost entirely concerned with the setting” (25). Since these genres are not confined to the present or past of our reality, these authors “must, quite literally, decide in what universe the story takes place” (25). Thus, “[a]n author will engage in ‘worldbuilding,’ ideally a careful and meticulous construction of a fictional reality in which the writer does not live” based, in science fiction, on “temporal or technological” differences (25).<sup>13</sup> The unique considerations of SF and fantasy

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<sup>13</sup> SF author Poul Anderson’s 1974 “The Creation of Imaginary Worlds: The World Builder’s Handbook and Pocket Companion,” offers planet building guidelines based on the scientific knowledge needed to make them physically plausible according to the laws of nature, but this literal worldbuilding is only one aspect of the more general process known as worldbuilding. For example, in the 1991 edited collection



worldbuilding are important generic variations on the basic task of fiction, which is combining aspects of the real world with invented characters, settings, events, and other phenomena. Viewed in terms of compositing, realistic and speculative fictional worldbuilding have as many similarities as differences.

Like the characters in *Transmission* struggling to make sense of Grayday, authors and readers of fiction are always engaging in varying degrees of worldbuilding, as narrative theorist Marie-Laure Ryan makes clear. Ryan notes that what sticks out most in fiction is not correspondence with the real world but departures from it, according to a critical law of reading:

This law—to which I shall refer as the principle of minimal departure—states that we reconstrue the central world of a textual universe in the same way we reconstrue the alternate possible worlds of nonfactual statements: as conforming as far as possible to our representation of AW [the actual world]. We will project upon these worlds everything we know about reality, and we will make only the adjustments dictated by the text. . . . It is by virtue of the principle of minimal departure that readers are able to form reasonably comprehensive representations of the foreign worlds created through discourse, even though the verbal representation of these worlds is

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*Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Anderson's guide sits alongside essays on creating imaginary species, futures, characters, and dialogue. Also included is Gardner Dozois's "Living the Future: You Are What You Eat," featuring worldbuilding guidelines for creating a fictional society that feels like "a *real, self-consistent, and organic thing*" based on "change, with all its subtle causes and consequences" (14, 16). Dozois highlights the complex, composite nature of real—and well-written fictional—societies: "You live in an organic surround, an interlocking and interdependent gestalt made up of thousands of factors and combinations thereof: cultural, technological, biological, psychological, historical, environmental. . . . One must have the vision to see the connections, and the sense to make them consistent. . . . If everything connects, then no social change, no technological innovation, takes place in tidy isolation" (17). Like compositing more generally, the goal of SF narrative worldbuilding is, for Dozois, to attempt "a vision that is at least somewhat as complex as reality. We shall fail, inevitably, but perhaps in time we shall learn how to fail somewhat less totally" (27).

always incomplete. (*Possible Worlds* 51-2)

A fictional world (or universe) may differ from the actual world according to Williams's SF worldbuilding criteria of divergent histories, technologies, politics, laws of (meta)physics, and/or speculative futures and aliens. More realistic fiction may differ from our world only in the characters who populate it and the personal events of their lives. Regardless, readers are primed by the conventions of fiction, including the principle of minimal departure, to expect that the author's narrative composite of real and fictional elements will provide a rewarding if clearly selective perspective on a world related to ours in meaningful ways.

Fredric Jameson's analysis of science fiction likewise holds that the genre can "shed some light on the process of world construction in fictional narratives in general" (267). In addition to the commonly cited SF narrative techniques of analogy and extrapolation, Jameson identifies a third, "a principle of systematic exclusion, a kind of surgical excision of empirical reality . . . in which the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists . . . is deliberately thinned and weeded out through an operation of radical abstraction and simplification which I will henceforth term *world reduction*" (271). World reduction involves selecting an aspect of human experience, such as capitalism or sexual desire, and creating a world in which it "can be completely removed from other human activities, allowing us to see them in some more fundamental, unmixed fashion" (274). World reduction is (roughly) distinguished from SF extrapolation, "in which heterogenous or contradictory elements of the empirical real world are juxtaposed and recombined

into piquant montages,” in that world reduction “tends to emphasize not so much what happens when we thus combine or amalgamate different historical stages of our own empirical Earth history, but rather precisely *what does not happen*” (276). Taken together, Jameson’s extrapolation as combination and world reduction as paring away suggest an SF compositing method for drawing selectively on the real world to explore key aspects of it.

For Jameson, these developments in SF narrative structure are directly related to globalization. He argues that “[t]he consolidation of the emergent world market – for this is really what is at stake in so-called globalization – can eventually be expected to allow new forms of political agency to develop” (xii).<sup>14</sup> He asserts of world reduction, “[i]t seems possible, indeed, that it is the massive commodity environment of late capitalism that has called up this particular literary and imaginative strategy, which would then amount to a political stance as well” (278). In other words, the overwhelming complexity of globalized late capitalism drive the need for world reduction as a narrative compositing method. Jameson concludes

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<sup>14</sup> Jameson is particularly interested in Utopian forms of compositing, and Utopia as “a socio-economic sub-genre of that broader literary form” of science fiction “devoted to the imagination of alternative social and economic forms” (xiv). SF Utopian works must address “the great empiricist maxim, nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses,” which insists “that even our wildest imaginings are all collages of experience, constructs made up of bits and pieces of the here and now” (xiii). “It is not only the social and historical raw materials of the Utopian construct which are of interest” from a “Utopian formalism” perspective, “but also the representational relations established between them – such as closure, narrative and exclusion or inversion. Here as elsewhere in narrative analysis what is most revealing is not what is said, but what cannot be said, what does not register on the narrative apparatus” (xiii). Jameson thus suggests the usefulness of narrative compositing and analysis as Utopian political tools. The political significance of SF narrative compositing is similarly apparent throughout Jameson’s discussion.

that when world reduction serves to imagine utopia, “such ‘no-places’ offer little more than a breathing space, a momentary relief from the overwhelming presence of late capitalism” (279). I argue that world reduction as SF compositing is not limited to the creation of a breathing space for imagining utopia; it can also create a space of critique by focusing attention on aspects of our world and its developmental processes. The line between utopian imaginings and those within the realm of possibility is not clearly defined. This is particularly the case when both kinds of narrative fictions are composites emphasizing aspects of reality rather than attempting to capture the whole.

Like Jameson, N. Katherine Hayles links contemporary science fiction to the complexity of globalization. Her analysis of *The Diamond Age* grapples with the reality within the speculative fiction by turning from utopia to Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr’s *mutopia* to understand the complexity of Stephenson’s worldbuilding (“Is Utopia” 95). In Hayles’s definition, “[m]utopia differs from utopia not primarily in its mutability . . . but in its increased complexity and especially in the recursive loops connecting it to reality. Mutopia is the hybrid offspring of utopia and a reality too complex to fit into utopian formulae of whatever kind” (96). This formulation responds to the challenging global scope of Stephenson’s SF novel with a compositing model that acknowledges—even if it cannot wholly master—hybridity, recursive connectivity, and overwhelming complexity. Concluding that “[t]he utopian ideal may be fading . . . because the conditions in which we live make the isolationist premise of utopian spaces appear increasingly untenable,” Hayles calls

for understandings that acknowledge connections and interdependencies rather than utopian isolation (110).

Jameson and Hayles are not alone in linking contemporary SF to globalization. Eric D. Smith argues that “SF’s unique generic tendency to replicate at the level of form as well as content the constitutive contradictions of empire and imperialist culture (including its more recent phase of globalization)” is adept at “exposing the apparently unassailable whole as an uneasy unity of antagonistic forces or tendencies” (2). Like Jameson, Smith refers to SF as “an aesthetic and political model for imagining otherwise in the moment of globalization” (12).<sup>15</sup> According to Gary Westfahl, “science fiction has not only served as one engine of globalization, but it has also provided a mirror for human responses to globalization and a means for contemplating its possible future effects,” as when, “[h]aving previously probed into facets of globalization such as urbanization, colonialism, and militarism, science fiction now took on the task of exploring how the cybernetic revolution might transform the world” (3). I argue that *The Diamond Age’s* SF

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<sup>15</sup> For Smith (also following Csicsery-Ronay Jr.), SF is born of imperialist technology-based expansion imaginatively transcoded into popular culture (2). Mostly created and received in imperial centers, SF speculations on new world orders were generally the projections of the dominant parties until the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when texts like Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan’s anthology *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy* increasingly “address the exigencies of postcoloniality and globalization in a way that challenges the hegemonic order” (5). With such challenges, SF can, “in its deployment of the globalizing models of Empire, provide the means for us to detect and decipher the ideological mystifications of global capital, the unique manifestations of globalization in particular national cultures, the emergence of technology as a cognitive mode of awareness, and the processes whereby individual national cultures exist alongside and engage the polymorphous *bad infinity* of the new global habitus” (2). Science fiction, in other words, has a key role to play in the development of globalization studies.

worldbuilding, like *Transmission's* realistic (if satirical) worldbuilding, uses narrative compositing to emphasize the global, posthumanist distribution of agency and focus across intricately connected human and technological entities.

***The Diamond Age: Building a Future World with History and Technology***

Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age: Or, a Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* epitomizes science fiction's use of worldbuilding to think through real-world compositing challenges in an era of accelerating globalization and posthuman entanglement of humans and advanced technologies. Like Kunzru, whose title announces his interest in processes of *Transmission*, Stephenson emphasizes world over both character and plot from the very beginning with a title about an era, *The Diamond Age*, defined by new technologies. John Johnston notes the prominence of worldbuilding in his complexity theory analysis of *The Diamond Age*, arguing that while "the novel's multiple and highly detailed plots . . . maintain a certain degree of independent narrative interest, they constitute a series of thematic contrasts greatly magnified by the larger social events in which they are caught up" (227).<sup>16</sup> *The Diamond Age* does develop its characters and plot, but as in *Transmission*, ambiguity about the fates of the human protagonists suggests that the emphasis lies elsewhere. More central to Johnston's reading of *The Diamond Age* is the tension between centralized systems and non-hierarchical swarm systems, as seen in the Feed vs.

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<sup>16</sup> Complexity theory lends itself to both compositing and posthumanist analyses in that it "draws from both computer science . . . and biology" to analyze "complex adaptive systems' . . . the behavior that distinguishes these systems is complex in that it cannot be analyzed as the sum or totality of isolated parts, but occurs only at the level of the system as a whole, as a result of the *interactions* among its constituent parts" (Johnston 224).

Seed conflict and the contrast between individual autonomy and the Drummers' collective semi-consciousness (both described below) (Johnston 228). The focus, in other words, is shifted toward the world and the aspects of it stressed by the narrative process of worldbuilding as compositing. *The Diamond Age* (like *Transmission*) foregrounds technologies, globalization, and the effects of each on individuals and cultures, and posthuman human-machine interactions. Stephenson does this to help readers explore the challenges of understanding the posthuman complexities of our mutual development with technologies on scales from the individual to the global.

*The Diamond Age* focuses on a balanced composite of humans, technologies, the world, and the relationships among them. Technologies and their effects are developed more fully and the humans who use them less fully than usual. Throughout *The Diamond Age*, the reader is consistently introduced to new manifestations and repercussions of core technologies like nanotechnology, computer viruses or "smart" clothing (Stephenson 413-14). Stephenson features technologies in elaborate (neo-)Victorian headings such as "*noteworthy features of modern armaments*" (3); the nanotech power station "*Source Victoria; description of its environs*" (7); "*the matter compiler*" (43); "*the Design Works*" (47); "*Security measures adopted by Atlantis/Shanghai*" (55); "*the Young Lady's Illustrated Primer; particulars of the underlying technology*" (62); "*the media system*" (268); "*CryptNet*" (375), and "*Carl Hollywood's hack*" (432). The emphasis on world-changing technologies is equally prominent in the text proper. Stephenson spends a great deal

of time, for instance, narrating Nell's instruction in computer programming and nanotech engineering (in the hundred pages or so starting on page 340) and to developing the geopolitics, technologies, and philosophies of his world. The characters frequently read like vehicles for Stephenson's heavy investment in describing global systems. Stephenson's extensive attention to technological developments marks his approach as posthumanist and these technologies as main characters alongside their human co-protagonists. In the case of the Drummers' organic-mechanical computing network, described in a footnote above, the lines between one human and another and between humans and machines are sharply undermined by an SF vision of a speculative posthumanist scenario.

*The Diamond Age* divides its narrative attention among plot, characters, technologies, and geopolitical arrangements. The narrative follows Nell, a poor white girl in Shanghai, during a twelve-year period (likely occurring sometime between the 2050s and the 2070s) when her life is changed by a smart book (the Primer) that educates her and primes her to become a major political player (with the eventual help of a more traditional neo-Victorian education). The Primer is designed for the granddaughter of a lord by John Hackworth, a neo-Victorian nanotech engineer, and a copy falls into Nell's hands by mistake. Stephenson's future Shanghai features pronounced echoes of its 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonial history. The city is caught up in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century iteration of the Boxer Rebellion, in which the Fists of Righteous Harmony (guided by the mandarin Dr. X, aided by the justice official Judge Fang) seek to reclaim Shanghai for the Middle Kingdom years after the



Chinese Coastal Republic (CCR) took control of it in a civil war. The CCR had made territorial concessions to powerful global “phyles” (socio-political formations, often featuring distributed territorial holdings, that have replaced nation-states), primarily New Atlantis (the neo-colonialist “neo-Victorians”), Nippon, and Hindustan. Meanwhile, an army of young Han girls—raised by altered, mass-produced versions of the Primer to pledge their allegiance and considerable intelligence and skills to Nell—reappear in the narrative just in time to enable Nell to found a new phyle and protect the escaping foreign refugees as the Fists retake Shanghai. Nell also recovers Miranda, the mother figure and ractor (interactive media actor) who provided the voice of her Primer, from an enclave of half-conscious Drummers. The finale reveals that the Drummers are being used in a hybrid human-nanotech computing network to develop the Seed technology that will eventually upend the Diamond Age’s world order by displacing hierarchical Feed-based nanotech (which depends on resources from an authority-controlled Feed).

Readers of *The Diamond Age* must keep track of a wide array of human characters, technologies, political dynamics, and events in a future world different than our own. The convoluted narrative immerses readers in the complexities of globalized, posthuman experience. Stephenson’s narrative is less concerned with the fates of individual humans than with evolution of the five technologies that structure the human characters’ experiences and drive geopolitical developments. The media net or “dry Net,” a more opaque version of the Internet, toppled the

nation-state system by making financial transactions nearly impossible to monitor and tax (495, 273). The novel also tracks nanotechnology based on the Feed, a hierarchical system of creating material objects from food to skyscrapers on demand (not without socio-economic and political inequities), often using artificial diamonds as building materials.<sup>17</sup> Stephenson's novel is also about the three technologies that will spell the end of the Diamond Age: the Book, the Seed, and the Drummers' wet Net. The Book is the immensely (unrealistically) powerful smart book known as the Young Lady's Illustrated Primer, which finds its way to the protagonist Nell, who is a four-year-old thete (a lower-class, uneducated person with no phyle affiliation).<sup>18</sup> The most salient point about the Primer (addressed later) is that it is an incredibly effective educational tool because it is implausibly good at compositing just those strands of knowledge, experience, and style most necessary for its particular owner/pupil to engage effectively (perhaps subversively) in global society. The wet Net, a development of nanotechnology and

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<sup>17</sup> The mid-21<sup>st</sup> century is known as the Diamond Age, based on the use of diamonds as building materials during the "nanotechnological revolution" that finished off the old world order of nation-states. In their place arose globally distributed phyles, loosely coordinated by a Common Economic Protocol (21, 405). Nanotechnology made material objects trivial to produce for the dominant nanotech producers (New Atlantis, Nippon, Hindustan) but left other groups vulnerable to renewed colonialism and civil war.

<sup>18</sup> Originally designed for Equity Lord Finkle-McGraw's granddaughter Elizabeth, another illicit copy goes to Hackworth's daughter Fiona, and altered, mass-produced copies go to hundreds of thousands of abandoned Han girls cared for by Dr. X as part of a plan to revive the Middle Kingdom. Elizabeth's and Fiona's Primers have minimal effects on their privileged lives, but the copies given to Nell and the young Han girls have significant socio-political effects, spurring them to start a new phyle ruled by Nell.

the dry Net, is a network of nanosites (tiny nanotech devices) in the bodies of human hosts (called Drummers as they frequently drum on the walls and floor in a dreamlike state) in whom they form “[a] second brain intermingled with [one’s] own” (250).<sup>19</sup> Being connected to this posthuman wet Net undermines the individual autonomy of its human components, who remain in a semi-conscious, non-individualistic state for years, with few ever regaining consciousness. The wet Net is primarily significant in the novel as an agent for the creation of the Seed. The Seed is a nanotechnology based not on a Feed from a centralized Source, but on a Seed placed in the ground (and somehow pulling all necessary power and materials from itself and its environment). Hackworth, the nanotech expert, believes in the inevitability of “the coming Age of the Seed,” which will “dissolve the foundations of New Atlantis and Nippon and all of the societies that had grown up around the concept of a centralized, hierarchical Feed” (458, 498).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Each Drummer has millions of nanosites in their brain that “can monitor activity . . . or trigger it,” and that can talk to each other within a brain or to nanosites in nearby brains, “forming a network. . . . a gestalt society” whose human hosts are “no longer acting of [their] own free will” (337, 338). This network of Drummer sites “formed a vast system of communication, parallel to and probably linked with the dry Net of optical lines and copper wires. Like the dry Net, the wet Net could be used for doing computations—for running programs” like Hackworth’s “vast distributed program” for Seed development, only at levels of speed and complexity unmatched by traditional processing (with the unemphasized exception of the Primer) (495).

<sup>20</sup> When Nell and Carl Hollywood disrupt a Drummer conclave in the novel’s finale by extracting a participant, we are told that the development of the Seed by the wet Net is postponed but not prevented: “the Drummers all sat impassively, clearly content to wait—for years if necessary—for a woman who could take Miranda’s place” (458, 499).

I have dwelt on this complexity confronting the reader of *The Diamond Age* in order to stress the challenges involved in narrating its technologies. Stephenson devotes a great deal of time to exploring the intricacy of technologies and their massive global effects. The key point is that Stephenson is at least as interested in the challenges of understanding complex, world-changing technologies—and their effects on our own posthumanity—as he is in the technologies themselves. In *The Diamond Age*, politics is crucially shaped by technology. Phyles with revolutionary Seed ambitions are those marginalized by the current world order—the Middle Kingdom and “second-tier phyles like Israel, Armenia, and Greater Serbia” (454).<sup>21</sup> They hope Seed technology will shake up this world order.

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<sup>21</sup> Dr. X, mandarin and Chinese nationalist, claims that the Middle Kingdom’s interest in the Seed is motivated by cultural and philosophical concerns about technology, though the potential to regain top-tier geopolitical prominence is probably also attractive. His assertion of a fundamental East/West philosophical difference on technology ignores that two of three Feed-based powers, Nippon and Hindustan, are Eastern. Dr. X interprets fear of the Seed in cultural terms: “Your cultures . . . are poorly organized. There is no respect for order. . . . Order must be enforced from above . . . You are afraid to give the Seed to your people because they can use it to make weapons, viruses, drugs of their own design, and destroy order. . . . But in the Celestial Kingdom, we are disciplined, we revere authority, we have order within our own minds . . . In our hands the Seed would be harmless. . . . We must have technology to live,’ Dr. X said, ‘but we must have it with our own *ti*. . . . *Yong* is the outer manifestation of something. *Ti* is the underlying essence. . . . we have struggled to absorb the *yong* of technology without importing the Western *ti*. But it has been impossible. . . . we could not open our lives to Western technology without taking in the Western ideas, which have been as a plague on our society. (456-57).

The novel implies its skepticism of Dr. X’s cultural purity arguments. For instance, Nell’s torture and rape at the hands of her Chinese co-workers and Fist captors undermines the claim of universal discipline among the Han (468-71). Also demonstrating differences within Han culture are the civil war that led to the formation of the Chinese Coastal Republic and the formation of the hybrid culture of Nell’s “Mouse Army,” who greet her “not with a Chinese bow or a Victorian one but something they’d come up with that was in between” and who “constitut[e] a new

Stephenson's novel, like Kunzru's, develops a narrative model of a world to demonstrate the ways in which technology can affect globalized society. Stephenson shifts attention toward technologies as forces of global change and away from character and plot development by leaving human characters' fates even more wide open than in *Transmission*. *The Diamond Age* ends with Carl, Miranda, and Nell (re)uniting, but it's unclear what they will do next, how Dr. X and a reunified China will proceed, or what Hackworth and the other neo-Victorians will do. Other character arcs are even more unresolved, with both Judge Fang and Lord Finkle-McGraw disappearing from the narrative by the halfway mark. Jan Berrien Berends attributes Stephenson's habit of "provid[ing] rich and elaborate histories for his characters and paint[ing] them in bold, dazzling strokes" before leaving their stories unfinished to his desire to use "the eyes of fascinating characters . . . [to] show us about, say, the workings of a high-tech, old-fashioned tea house in future China" rather than to develop the characters for their own sake (18). Where Berends sees this as evidence that "the story itself is flawed" and that "Stephenson rushed the ending of the book," I see this technique supporting a narrative composite focused less on characters than on worldbuilding to explore the posthumanist interactions of humans, technologies, and geopolitics. The narrative's emphasis is on the Diamond Age—the system and era—more than on Judge Fang or Lord Finkle-McGraw, and where other novels might only sketch out technologies or explain them before letting them fade out of the narrative spotlight, *The Diamond Age* treats

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phyle unto themselves" (489, 478, 488). We are told "that they did, in fact, constitute a new ethnic group of sorts" (489).

characters in a utilitarian fashion in order to redistribute attention toward the complex relations between human and technological entities.<sup>22</sup>

Stephenson imagines a world order whose technologies have increased both globalization and localization. Information transmission is highly globalized, but the ability to create goods on demand anywhere there is a Feed localizes major aspects of economies. The geopolitical order of Stephenson's world is similarly both globalized and localized. Many of the phyles that have replaced nation-states have transitioned from territorial contiguity to distributed territorial systems (include colonial systems) with large or small holdings in cities around the world, leading to newly localized experiences of group belonging in multicultural urban settings. In Vancouver, for instance, "[t]he city itself was a sprawling bazaar of clones. . . . generously supplied with agoras, owned and managed by Protocol, where citizens and subjects of different phyles could convene on neutral ground" in managed contact zones and, in an extreme version of localization, "each person [is] seemingly an ethnic group of one, each with his or her own costume, dialect, sect, and pedigree" (Stephenson 228, 246). This hyperlocalization of individual identity is posthuman in that it is enabled by the customizable affiliation possibilities and the

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<sup>22</sup> Berends's analysis of sexism and Orientalism in *The Diamond Age* is apt, however. *The Diamond Age* problematically presents neo-Victorian and white characters as individuals and Asian characters as faceless members of hordes, armies, or purportedly monolithic cultures. Most women in the novel are either implausibly maternal, repressed by neo-Victorian gender roles, or otherwise carefully managed and guided by strong male characters (as Nell and her army of Han girls are through their Primers and other interventions). Greta Aiyu Niu's article on techno-Orientalism provides further insight into Stephenson's troublesome cultural depictions in terms of the relationships posited between particular cultures and technology.

distributed territory dynamics of the phyle system brought to life by Diamond Age technologies. Ethnicity is also complicated on global scales, as evidenced by the ongoing prominence of inter-ethnic tensions, a multicultural imperative in advertising, and powerful ethnic monocultures like Han and Nippon (10, 11, 321). Ethnicity in *The Diamond Age* illustrates that posthumanity complicates rather than negates human identity.

Ethnicity is indeed only one strand of the complex system of phyles and tribes that have replaced traditional nation-states in the Diamond Age. These phyles represent Stephenson's speculation about the future effects of economic and technological globalization on nations and states. The most obvious effect is a fracturing of political and social structures into an overwhelming multiplicity of forms (mirrored by the novel's challenging composite structure). This profusion of forms of affiliation is reflected in the Common Economic Protocol's future version of Miranda rights, which begins, "Are you a member of any signatory tribe, phyle, registered diaspora, franchise-organized quasi-national entity, sovereign polity, or any other form of dynamic security collective claiming status under the CEP?" (33). The New Atlantan phyle is based on a mixture of rationalism, historical heritage, and Anglo-American ethnic tradition, while other phyles are founded on ethnic, racial, religious, nationalist, or ideological bonds (30, 34). The newest geopolitical innovation is synthetic phyles based on shared skills or on rituals that build trust as "an artificial absolute" for people "whose view of the universe contains no

absolutes” (378). Finally, there are thetes (individuals without tribes).<sup>23</sup> This speculative geopolitical order of phyles with distributed territories is presented as the result of technologies that change the terms of global societal interactions. Increased flow of information and resources and the breakdown of many nation-states’ ability to maintain control over large contiguous territories led to a wave of colonialism and distributed territories. This in turn, combined with the dangers of nanotech weapons, led to defensive interdependence so small clones could remain (seemingly) secure by piggybacking on the security systems of the clones of larger, more dominant phyles.<sup>24</sup>

Like Kunzru, Stephenson explores the interaction of territory, technology, economics, and embodiment with borders designed to regulate global flows. Phyles’ varying nanotech engineering expertise manifests geographically through nano-defensible borders. These borders’ geographical arrangement has evolved in

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<sup>23</sup> More secret society than phyle, CryptNet is a collection of largely independent nodes collectively aiming to undermine the world order through technological research into the Seed. They believe, according to Hackworth, “that information has an almost mystical power of free flow and self-replication . . . and lacking any moral code, they confuse inevitability with Right” (384).

<sup>24</sup> *The Diamond Age* does not explicitly critique its neo-colonial world order, in contrast with the postcolonial SF described by Smith: “as the literary and cultural expression of the habitus of globalization, postcolonial SF is formally equipped to offer critical mappings of its geospatial structures” and to reveal “the deep, material interdependencies” of “the first world and the third” (16-17). *The Diamond Age* reminds us that while “SF writers of the ‘developing nations’ of the third world occupy a unique position at the interstices of dramatic social, political, and economic transformation,” even projects with more imperial—even neo-Victorian—perspectives can offer insightful, if problematic, explorations of globalized politics, economics, culture, and technology (Smith 16).<sup>24</sup> Ongoing literary production of both postcolonial and neo-colonial perspectives highlights the importance of science fictions of globalization in thinking through contemporary issues.



response to nanotechnological dangers and defenses and the changing resource environment (and highlights the fact that our borders are also the product of our technologies and political and economic systems). The fall of nation-states and the rise of nanotech warfare have changed the politics, economics, and shapes of territories, but borders in *The Diamond Age*, like those in *Transmission*, remain potent, high profile, and high tech.<sup>25</sup> Stephenson's twenty-kilometer-deep nanotech borders depend not just on nanosite immunocules, but also on the disadvantaged thetes and minor-phyle members who live there and serve, willingly or not, as the canary in the coal mine. Human bodies are thus part of the Diamond Age's posthuman border technologies. Greta Aiyu Niu stresses that, despite the globalized flow of "products and capital" and networked information in *The Diamond Age*, "the geography of this space still relies on physical bodies and physical spaces, particularly on locations where labor has been cheapened and in areas that offer

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<sup>25</sup> The powerful nanotech phyles take their Shanghai territorial concessions in the form of artificial islands off the coast. New Atlantis's clave is at the center of its island, surrounded by a ring of Leased Territories used by other phyles and thetes. The ability to construct foods and other resources from nano-materials has decreased the need for New Atlantans to control large rural hinterlands, and as Miss Matheson further explains "[i]nformation technology has freed cultures from the necessity of owning particular bits of land in order to propagate; now we can live anywhere" (321). Territories can be small and distributed around the world while maintaining a high level of day-to-day security via nanotech defenses (until the Fists arrive, that is). The New Chusan border is protected by a hemisphere of floating pods providing macroscopic security by zapping intruders (55-56). But "[m]icroscopic invaders were more of the threat nowadays" so "[t]he impregnable-shield paradigm didn't work at the nano level; one needed to hack the mean free path. A well-defended clave was surrounded by an aerial buffer zone infested with immunocules—microscopic aerostats designed to seek and destroy invaders," in a zone "never shallower than twenty kilometers. The innermost ring was a greenbelt lying on both sides of the dog pod grid, and the outer ring was called the Leased Territories" (57, 59).

financial incentives” (88). Stephenson is emphasizing the real-world dynamic by which the socio-economically disadvantaged are clustered where they are most of use (or least in the way) to the powerful. The rich enjoy the increased mobility of futuristic advanced globalization, but the poor remain bound to spaces where the rich want them, their movements regulated by powerful borders. This exploration of globalization, borders, technology, and society is complex on its own and even more so when interwoven with the many other strands of Stephenson’s narrative. It is no accident that the worldbuilding devoted to borders, like so many other aspects of *The Diamond Age’s* future world, is incredibly detailed yet incomplete. For as we have seen, the complexity of the interactions of globalization, technology, and society and the necessity of using composite narrative structures to understand them are central concerns of the novel.

Stephenson ties his imagined future to real-world concerns through a complex mix of real times, places, and dynamics. *The Diamond Age* studies contemporary globalization by changing a few key ingredients like nanotechnology to see how they might affect the rest. For example, the novel’s exploration of pendulum patterns in history encourages readers to place current events and globalization trends in historical perspective.<sup>26</sup> 21<sup>st</sup>-century neo-Victorian and Chinese cultures both react against late 20<sup>th</sup>-century cultural and political structures

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<sup>26</sup> Stephenson’s interest in the relationship between the Diamond Age and previous eras is clear from the opening epigraph, which quotes Sir Charles Petrie’s *The Victorians* to assert a pendulum pattern to large-scale “[m]oral reforms and deteriorations” over historical time (qtd. in Stephenson 1). This assertion is central to the neo-Victorians’ worldview, with Finkle-McGraw and Hackworth airing similar convictions (20, 24).

(the context of Stephenson's writing) by reinstating 19<sup>th</sup>-century structures (including colonialism). These narrative strands explore the effects of technological dominance on global economic, political, and social structures, making arguments about the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as well as the 21<sup>st</sup>. In this way, Stephenson's narrative composite uses the past as well as the future to explore the present. Peter Brigg sees *The Diamond Age* as characteristic of much speculative fiction in that "the future can be used to comment on the present by means of the elements of the past that are selected for projection into it and the attitudes toward those elements demonstrated in the texts" (117). He concludes that the multidirectional judgments of 19<sup>th</sup>-, 20<sup>th</sup>-, and late 21<sup>st</sup>-century societies "establish an effective relativism all round" so that readers may "step away from the attitudes of the present in order to gain a perspective understanding of our own reality against the background of history" (121). *The Diamond Age's* attention to past, present, and future societies encourages composite understandings of social issues and perspectives spanning centuries and the globe, rather than validating one perspective over others. This contributes to Stephenson's overall interest in complex posthuman developments over individual human characters.

Stephenson's treatment of education thematizes compositing itself as central to present-day challenges that will only grow in importance as globalization continues to accelerate. The strict orderliness of neo-Victorianism and (simplified) Victorianism as well as the relative directionlessness posited for late 20<sup>th</sup>-century public education are compared with the idealistically perfect compositing of the

near-magical Primer (122). But in this case, Nell's Primer functions not as the likely future of education (the neo-Victorian preparatory school and, arguably, the mass-produced Primers of the young Han girls fit that bill better), but as an improbable stand-in for perfection—nowhere else in the novel do we see artificial intelligence even approaching the level required by the Primer's hyperadaptive complete education in a book, and it seems unlikely that neither Equity Lord Finkle-McGraw nor engineer Hackworth would commodify this revolutionary advance in some way. The discordant inclusion of one isolated superintelligent computer provokes the question of how such an education could realistically be accomplished, since the Primer itself is so clearly unrealistic in its ability to determine exactly what a young mind needs at any and every given moment and to adjust accordingly and instantaneously. In this and many other cases, Stephenson's desire to build a world that reflects key aspects of our own overpowers his interest in the internal consistency of his speculative future. Take for example, a pair of scenes set in US-based fast food franchises (KFC and McDonalds).<sup>27</sup> In both cases, American fast food

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<sup>27</sup> For example, Stephenson sets a key mid-revolution meeting at a "lightly sacked" McDonald's outside Suzhou "decorated in a *Silk Road* motif" (453). Earlier in the novel, Judge Fang and his judicial assistants consult over a difficult case at Kentucky Fried Chicken (102-03). For Stephenson, these scenes usefully show the changing social capital of franchises, which outweighs fast food's ill fit in the Diamond Age economy (where basic meals are free of charge to all). Colonel Sanders connects *The Diamond Age* to *Transmission* both thematically and in detail. In Kunzru's novel, Pan-European Border Authority Director Becker declares that to compete with the U.S., "Europe needs its own factory for dreaming! . . . [f]or economic reasons. . . . I recently circulated a document urging the creation and promotion of a community hero. They have Captain America and Colonel Sanders and so on. What have we?" (238). Colonel Sanders appears in both novels as an emblem of American capitalist

is an element of contemporary globalization that Stephenson wants to explore—corporate franchises incongruously set amidst a culture distant in space, time, and economic environment from their points of origin—rather than a logical aspect of the nanotechnological world Stephenson has developed. Indeed, issues of economics and energy are largely elided from the novel, probably to prevent logistical problems from getting in the way of the globalized cultural and technological developments that the novel is interested in. Stephenson’s worldbuilding privileges the inclusion of interesting contemporary elements over the strict coherence of his speculative future. This allows the novel to explore both contemporary issues and projections of their future consequences in an increasingly technologized and globalized world.

Stephenson’s examination of past and present reality through speculative future worldbuilding demonstrates the viability of science fiction for literary exploration of globalization and of compositing as a response to it; nowhere is this clearer than with the titular Primer, the smart book included for its insights into compositing rather than for its technological credibility. Nell’s Primer is arguably the co-protagonist of this posthumanist novel, as it receives more attention than any character but Nell. The Primer successfully educates Nell because it can teach the compositing skills necessary in a globalized, technologized world. As we learn from Hackworth, once a copy of the Primer bonds with a little girl, “thenceforth it will see all events and persons in relation to that girl, using her as a datum from which to

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globalization, indicating the authors’ shared interest in how this aspect of globalization affects worldviews, decision-making, and social change.

chart a psychological terrain . . . it will perform a sort of dynamic mapping from the database onto her particular terrain” (106). In other words, it constructs a story from its database to serve as an overall structure for the girl’s education, and its development is inseparable from hers.<sup>28</sup> The result is an education adapted to the girl’s specific situation, needs, and input, composited together fluidly according to the Primer’s sense of effective instruction and Nell’s own questions and interests: “They’d work on letters for a while and then wander off into more stories about Princess Nell, stop in the middle for a quick practical demonstration of basic math, return to the story, and then get sidetracked with an endless chain of ‘why this?’ and ‘why that?’” (135). Examples like this one illustrate the Primer’s ability to analyze and adapt to its human subject, matching its pedagogy to her developmental state on a moment-by-moment basis. Since the Primer’s database also includes networked knowledge and direct sensory input, the smart book reacts to (and incorporates into its educational offerings) Nell’s immediate environment as well as the larger global context.<sup>29</sup> Nell’s Primer thus deeply envelops her in posthuman co-evolution with the technologies and global developments around her.

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<sup>28</sup> The database is “a catalogue of the collective unconscious,” archetypes and situations (think Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*) not given cultural specificity until the Primer “map[s] the universals onto the unique psychological terrain of one child—even as that terrain changes over time” (Stephenson 107).

<sup>29</sup> For Hayles, the Primer embodies a mutopian impulse at the center of the text, connecting Nell “to the world through complex feedback loops” rather than building utopian barriers (as in the virtual reality of cyberspace in Stephenson’s earlier *Snow Crash*) against the messy, imperfect world (“Is Utopia” 99). The tasks set for Nell by the Primer develop the composing skills “that let her successfully reveal the recursive loops connecting inside with outside, artifex with artifact, human with

To educate Nell, the Primer engages in technological, visual, and narrative compositing. The Primer often rapidly shifts scales (visual and narrative) to develop relevant contexts and understandings or to allow Nell to explore related topics. Nell's Primer education is entirely incorporated into a fairy tale told to her quickly in overview. Then, over the next twelve years, Nell experiences "the same story, except that it was longer and more involved, and it kept backtracking and focusing in on tiny little bits of itself, which then expanded into stories in their own right" (135). The Primer's narrative compositing reflects its own educational goals and its user's input: the order in which Nell gets the story is affected by the questions she asks along the way, while the Primer decides how to respond to those questions and when to try to coax her back on topic. The Primer's openness to user-directed inquiry provides Nell with her first lessons in self-directed thinking, a trend that increases as Nell gets older and the Primer progressively curtails passive consumption of narrative. After several years, Nell finds that "the character of the Primer had changed": it pares away its assertive, story-driving non-player characters and offers instead "a place with few human beings, albeit filled with fascinating places and situations" as her education focuses in on programming and nanotechnology—on understanding and building agency in her posthuman interactions with the technologies around her (387). Throughout this process, the

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machine" (104). The theatrical experiences designed by *Dramatis Personae* serve as "enactments of an individual's relation to the global information flow—not in any simple one-to-one correspondence but in complex feedback loops whereby one both acts and is acted upon" (106).

Primer, like *The Diamond Age*, emphasizes worldbuilding and technology as key skills for thinking through and engaging in a complex globalized world.

Nell applies her narrative compositing lessons in the real world when she gets a job scripting fantasies at a bordello by trying to deduce and narratively accommodate the fantasies of individuals and groups. The preferred scenario she develops for one client, Colonel Napier of New Atlantis, does not directly reflect his life, she realizes, but is “more like a composite of many similar events, perhaps with a dollop of fantasy thrown in” (396). Nell tweaks this narrative from week to week to keep Napier excited, and in doing so learns what makes him, and the New Atlantan phyle more generally, tick. She realizes, too, that “[h]er stories were . . . becoming a part of that person’s mind,” even though “[a]ll of the intercourse between him and Nell had been mediated through the actress . . . and through various technological systems,” similar to the way she has been greatly influenced, via the technological intermediary of the Primer, by Hackworth (the Primer’s designer) and Miranda (the ractor voicing her Primer who becomes, rather implausibly, a surrogate mother figure) (402-03). These experiences provide Nell with a smooth transition from compositing lessons within the artificial world of the Primer to application of compositing skills to understanding and managing her own life in a complex and changing world.

The Primer is in this way a surrogate for *The Diamond Age* and literature more generally, suggesting to Stephenson’s readers how we might apply the artificial perspectives of a fictional narrative to our own lives in a complex



globalized world. Stephenson uses the science fiction technology of the Primer while Kunzru uses a maximal compositing crisis based on contemporary technology, but both stress that judicious narrative compositing is crucial to navigating the globalized complexity characteristic of contemporary experience. Stephenson's science fiction is no less relevant than Kunzru's present-day novel for understanding the challenges of globalization and technology, particularly the posthumanist implications of the distribution of agency and understanding across both human and technological entities. Kunzru's virus and Stephenson's Primer are as much characters, and enjoy as much development over the course of the novels' plots, as their human co-protagonists. *The Diamond Age* exports key strands of contemporary globalization and posthumanism to a speculative future world where he can explore responses to selected problems of globalized, technologized complexity. We can compare that world to our own to see key challenges from the remove of temporal and technological difference. *The Diamond Age* focuses on the highly unrealistic Primer as the ultimate compositor to stress the urgent need for compositing to understand the world. Like Stephenson's science fiction, Kunzru's contemporary satire engages globalization by featuring worldbuilding and global systems alongside the stories of human protagonists. Worldbuilding thus serves as a posthumanist narrative compositing tool that emphasizes, for readers, the complex co-development of human and technological entities on scales both local and global. These novels argue that new (and future) technologies are, for reasons of scale and technological opacity, difficult to understand and engage. Kunzru and Stephenson

use literature to explore globalized posthuman connections unavailable or belatedly available to real-world analysis. Each novel offers a posthumanist composite of a technology's-eye-view of the world and human experiences of global technological connectivity. In doing so, both authors suggest that narrative composing skills are indispensable for effective agency in a globalized and posthuman world. Kunzru and Stephenson turn to narrative composing to address posthumanism because this narrative technique, like the concept they express with it, insists not that the human is irrelevant or outdated, but that the human does not tell the whole story.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“THERE ARE THINGS THAT MUST BE LOOKED AT INDIRECTLY”:

POSTMEMORY, POST-AMNESIA, AND SPATIO-TEMPORAL COMPOSITING<sup>1</sup>

As Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* opens, co-protagonist India Ophuls is not sleeping well. In her sleep, she has been told, “she cried out in a language she did not speak. . . . guttural, glottal-stoppy,” in a voice of “death’s-head ugliness, which was somehow both familiar and alien” (3). After this, “abruptly she would awake,” certain “that there was an intruder in her bedroom. There was no intruder. The intruder was an absence, a negative space in the darkness. She had no mother. . . . Her mother had been Kashmiri, and was lost to her, like paradise, like Kashmir, in a time before memory” (4). The metaphors of sleeptalking and absent intruders emphasize the suppressed personal and political histories central to India’s story and to the novel’s structure. India knows little of her birth mother Boonyi Noman, of Boonyi’s marriage to Shalimar and affair with Maximilian Ophuls (India’s father), or of the complex political repercussions of this love triangle. India’s adoptive mother, Margaret “Peggy” Ophuls, née Rhodes, carefully hid this information behind an edifice of silence and lies. Later, when Peggy grudgingly admits Max into India’s life, she insists that he maintain the charade, and he “had his own reasons for confirming

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<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown* 309

his ex-wife's untruth," including the shame of the international scandal of India's conception while he was U.S. ambassador to India (349).

Fed a mix of truth and lies, India "was trapped inside a lie, far away from the truth, held captive in a fiction; and within her the turbulence grew, an unquiet spirit moved. . . . These were the confusions inside which India Ophuls grew up in the 1970s," a system of lies about her past that only comes completely undone in the early 1990s (346, 349). Peggy and Max lie to India about her origins to suppress information about rival parents, including their continuing survival, as long as possible. These personal relations evoke the larger political dynamics of powerful historical claims cloaking others in amnesia. "*You have no other mother or father, there's just me, I'm afraid, and I will not have these blasted questions,*" Peggy tells six-year-old India (346). And so India enters adulthood with only a vague, sleep-disturbing awareness of how incomplete and unreliable her understanding of her family and world is.

India's shadowy awareness of absence recalls what Ananya Jahanara Kabir calls post-amnesia, the experience of living, often unwittingly, with voids surrounding traumatic histories suppressed by a parental generation. This chapter will analyze how Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013) explore the roles of postmemory and post-amnesia in structuring experiences of global migration across generational time. My analyses of *The Heart of Redness*, *Saving the World*, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in chapter one and *The Diamond Age* in chapter four have considered depictions of

globalization spanning the 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and multiple generations of families, but always through primarily synchronic arguments about narrative compositing and globalization. Here, I analyze Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory and Kabir's post-amnesia as forms of temporal compositing uniquely relevant to experiences of migration in an age of accelerating globalization and global connectivity. Rushdie's and Lahiri's novels show how post-amnesia, postmemory, historiography, and fictional focalization—understood as compositing techniques—are useful for engaging experiences and histories whose complexity is compounded by time as well as globalized space. *Shalimar the Clown* and *The Lowland* reveal how experiences of globalized connectivity are complicated by individual and generational memory processes. The historical narratives produced by these processes are characterized by selective emphasis, suppression, and imperfect knowledge and understanding.

### **Postmemory and Post-Amnesia as Spatio-Temporal Compositing Processes**

Hirsch uses “postmemory” to describe the “secondary, or second-generation, memory” characteristic of the children of Holocaust survivors and other second-generation groups and individuals whose lives are powerfully “shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor re-created” (“Past Lives” 662).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Both *Shalimar the Clown* and *The Lowland* briefly touch on memory and postmemory of the Holocaust while focusing more on other contexts for postmemory and post-amnesia. *Shalimar* includes the disappearance and (unnarrated) murder of Max's Jewish parents during the occupation of France. In *The Lowland*, co-protagonist Gauri is mentored by Professor Otto Weiss, a Holocaust survivor who avoids thinking about those experiences. These inclusions in novels

Hirsch suggests postmemory's relevance to general compositing when she calls it "a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (662). The second generation, Hirsch explains, "'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" ("Generation" 106). Hirsch stresses "that postmemory is not an *identity* position but a *generational* structure of transmission deeply embedded in such forms of mediation" ("Generation" 114). Postmemory describes a relational process of information transmission between generations followed by a creative process of piecing together an understanding of past events central to one's heritage. But what happens when crucial memories are distorted or suppressed—when noise and gaps are brought into play?

Kabir applies postmemory analysis to South Asian partition events and concludes that in contrast to the Holocaust contexts studied by Hirsch, "the politics of memory regarding 1947 and 1971 are characterized by an intergenerational movement from amnesia to a retrieval of those affective and cultural connections that amnesia denied" (*Partition's* 26). Kabir calls this reclamation of suppressed memory "post-amnesia, or the attempt to remember after amnesia" initiated by the previous generation's "psychological and political imperatives" (232, 26).<sup>3</sup> Active

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focused on other places and times suggest the ongoing power of the Holocaust as a point of reference for this kind of postmemory.

<sup>3</sup> Hirsch notes that the many forms of postmemory can include "*absent memory*," where traumatic memories are repressed rather than transmitted to the next

and belated engagement with past events is in fact also characteristic of “regular” memory, which is separate from its subject in the past. Like history, memory is always a selective representation rather than the thing remembered or the event historicized.<sup>4</sup> Understanding memory, postmemory, post-amnesia, and history as temporal compositing processes allows us to consider how they interact with spatial processes to form spatio-temporal compositing processes.

Postmemory and post-amnesia often add a globalized spatial element to their temporal compositing processes. In contexts like the Holocaust, war, partition, and other communal violence, “‘Home’ is always elsewhere” for survivors and their children, “because even the homeland is no longer what it was—the place and time of whole identity have been destroyed,” creating a diasporic experience characteristic of postmemory and exacerbated by actual spatial displacement (Hirsch, “Past Lives” 662). While diaspora and migration analyses tend to emphasize

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generation, much like what Kabir presents as post-amnesia, but Hirsch does not follow up on this avenue of analysis (“Past Lives” 663). I follow Kabir’s more elaborated analysis and terminology of post-amnesia, which suggests that the memories in question tend to be suppressed or lost rather than neutrally absent. For example, “[t]he post-Partition generation was involved in creating national pedagogies and institutions for India and Pakistan after 1947. It participated in a tacit, widespread forgetting of the immediate past to forge a viable present tense for the post-Partition nation. Yet amnesia generates its own ghosts . . . . Skipping a generation, they reappear as post-amnesia: the urge to excavate, to join the dots. Some connections are forever lost; the burden of post-amnesia then is simply to commemorate the traces” (Kabir, *Partition’s* 118).

<sup>4</sup> Julia Creet explains, “the manner in which memory travels is a quality of memory itself, not a flaw, not a lessening, not a shift in category, but constitutional. . . . Memory is where we have arrived rather than where we have left. What’s forgotten is not an absence, but a movement of disintegration that produces an object of origin. In other words, memory is produced over time and under erasure” (6).

nationality and ethnicity, postmemory and post-amnesia offer insight into the influence of migration on other aspects of identity as well.<sup>5</sup> Kabir ties post-amnesia to contingent “geographies of the mind,” our relationships with places meaningful to us, focusing on connections to places that no longer exist (like East Pakistan) or that are inaccessible due to new national borders or political situations (*Partition’s* 165).<sup>6</sup> My analysis of *Shalimar the Clown* and *The Lowland* focuses on the effects of the spatial distance of global migration and the temporal distance of postmemory and post-amnesia that separate people from the things their parents remember or suppress.

Temporal distance is constitutive of memory itself—it is what separates an experience in progress from a memory (though experiences are gappy and subjective, too). The conscious and unconscious processes of memory add a layer of selection and editing. This is further complicated, as with postmemory and post-amnesia, by spatial distance and trauma. As Anh Hua asserts, “[f]orgetting is an act, a creative invention, a performance, a selective loss” (198). For Julia Creet, migration intensifies this process: “If memories of trauma drive a migrant from one

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Sandhya Shukla focuses on conceptualizing Indianness in the context of the Indian diaspora but notes in passing, “Essentially formed by the logics of movement and memory, diasporas simultaneously illumine and recreate vectors of time and space. . . . the time-space compression of the Indian diaspora has a special form that can be indexed to processes of globalization” (213).

<sup>6</sup> Kabir argues that the desire for inaccessible or irretrievable places engendered by Partition leads to amnesias: “The longing for pre-Partition places and times was displaced, went underground, found other objects, but never disappeared” (*Partition’s* 217). Post-amnesias then followed as “[s]ubsequent generations grappled with the urge to long as a necessary complication to the need to belong” (217).



place to another, forgetting may be an essential phase of testimony. . . . place matters with respect to memory . . . because displacement is more likely to produce immobile memories and radical forgetting” (10). Global migration also affects memory through the introduction of new social and cultural influences on (and rules for) individual and collective memory.<sup>7</sup> Powerful memories and amnesias are passed on to the second generation of migrant families through postmemories and post-amnesias complicated by spatial as well as temporal distances.

All memories are composites. Pamela Sugiman describes memories, particularly traumatic ones, as “the product of the intermingling of past and present lives, the creation of a complex dynamic between the individual and the collective, recalling and forgetting, trauma and nostalgia” (52). This process of shaping memory by inclusion and exclusion, by forging selective connections between past events and present contexts, makes the acts of remembering and of transmitting memory forms of compositing. In the context of global migration and intercultural pressures on memory, these processes are deeply tied to cultural and political globalization. Identity—for those who remember and for the next generation—is

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<sup>7</sup> Pamela Sugiman explains that, “as a society, we have social rules that tell us what we should remember and what we must forget, how far back to remember (what to put behind us and how to ‘socially partition’ the past into recorded ‘discoveries’ and forgettable ‘prehistory’), how deeply to remember, and the ways in which we should ‘narrate the past’ (that is, the ‘conventional plot structure’ [Zerubavel 1996, 286-88]). As a social process, memory then is selective. We remember what we need to remember, what is safe to remember, and what we have the cultural tools to express. Memory is shaped by its audience . . . . In each of these ways, memory is also a political project” (51-52).

profoundly shaped by these acts of memory and forgetting.<sup>8</sup> For Hirsch, “[p]ostmodern subjectivity is shaped in this temporal/spatial diaspora” by the postrememberer’s need “to re-member, to re-build, to re-incarnate, to replace and repair. . . . to recall an irrecoverable past in the absence of precise, totalizing knowledge” (“Past Lives” 684, 661, 681). Postmemory and post-amnesia serve as spatio-temporal compositing processes responding to transgenerational traumas and connectivity across globalized dislocations. Postmemory is characterized by the paradoxical combination of gappiness and information overload discussed in chapter four: “I’ve sometimes felt that there were too many stories, too much affect, even as at other times I’ve been unable to fill in the gaps and absences” (Hirsch, “Past Lives” 664). In response to these challenges, postmemory “creates where it cannot recover. It imagines where it cannot recall” (664).<sup>9</sup> Postmemory describes

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<sup>8</sup> Interviewing immigrant teenagers in Berlin, Josefine Raasch found that some identified most with Germany, while others identified more with parents’ or even grandparents’ homelands. This emphasizes how deeply personal experiences of intergenerational memory and history affect worldviews, particularly in the context of global migration, where spatial distance and multiple affinities add complexity to creative acts of postmemory and post-amnesia. Raasch noted of one interviewee that “[c]entral to the way Hassan approached time is the family and the performance of it” through which “a certain historical time is constructed. The time Hassan related to when talking about historical knowledge is not a chronological time that is measured in numbers, but in personal relationships and places” (73). Raasch’s interviewees “used history unconventionally and creatively . . . their incoherent statements about history were part of the process they used to deal with the complexity of the past” and to “use history to relate to new realities” (70). Such cases highlight the need for analysis of personal experiences of history and migration to complement collective history and global migration studies.

<sup>9</sup> As a result, postmemory, like all creative compositing processes, “risks falling back on familiar, and unexamined, cultural images,” pre-existing templates for understanding and expression (Hirsch, “Generation” 108).

compositing techniques that have arisen in response to conditions underlying many migrant and diasporic experiences.

Postmemory and post-amnesia processes are frequently, though not exclusively, narrative. Kabir's exploration of novels that engage post-amnesia emphasizes their use of non-linear narrative techniques to engage the complexity of the relationships between times in post-amnesiac experiences (*Partition's* 62-63).<sup>10</sup> Composite narratives of postmemory and post-amnesia, like Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* and Lahiri's *The Lowland*, reflect Kabir's concern with the simplifications of narrative perspective and closure (*Partition's*; "Musical Recall"). Narratives are selective and subjective, and they are central to how we understand and engage the world around us, so we must consider how narratives represent complexities such as those introduced by migration and globalization. This chapter will explore how postmemory and post-amnesia narratives engage traumas passed down to generations across distances of space and time.

Postmemory and post-amnesia are spatio-temporal compositing processes through which members of one generation either pass on (typically traumatic) memories about the past to the next generation or else withhold those memories. The younger generation of postmemory or post-amnesia combines these memories with contexts and pre-existing ways of thinking to understand both self and history. Post-amnesiacs aware of suppressed histories may work to turn post-amnesia into postmemory. These processes of suppression and reconstruction are often activated

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<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere Kabir compares narrative and musical responses to the challenges of post-amnesia and traumatic memory ("Musical Recall").

by migration and by ongoing connectivity to the places of emigration that is increasing with globalization. Compositing analysis reveals the role of narrative representation in understanding postmemory and post-amnesia.

Literature offers personal, close-to-the-ground representations of experiences of globalization, migration, and postmemory to complement broader, more distant analyses of diasporas and migrations usually focused on politics and national affiliation. Analysis of memory, postmemory and post-amnesia as spatio-temporal compositing in *Shalimar the Clown* and *The Lowland* reveals a continuum of memory compositing practices tying together political and personal traumas and collective and individual histories. Hirsch and Kabir identified postmemory and post-amnesia processes in the context of collective trauma. My readings of Rushdie's and Lahiri's novels suggest that the boundaries between this context and the adjoining realms of personal memory on the one side and general history on the other are not hard and fast. Postmemory and post-amnesia may be most emphatically present in the wake of collective trauma, but their processes are also recognizable elsewhere. *Shalimar the Clown* and *The Lowland* demonstrate that memories of personal trauma, collective trauma, and general history all involve selective transmission and suppression, and we should consider these similarities alongside their differences. In the last chapter, I looked at dynamics of transmission and compositing in synchronic globalized networks. Here I focus on how the combined distance of global space and generational time necessitates memory compositing and how accelerating globalization increases the resources for

reconstructing such understandings of distant places and times. This analysis adds a temporal dynamic to our understanding of composing processes and a spatial dynamic to our understandings of postmemory and post-amnesia. Literary representations of postmemory and post-amnesia also illustrate how globalization affects spatio-temporal memory. On the one hand, globalization facilitates migration, making the production of familial amnesias easier. On the other hand, globalized information networks also make it easier to bridge distances in time and space to turn post-amnesia into postmemory, and increasing global connectivity makes it likelier that distant times and places may again affect migrant families even thousands of miles away and decades later.

### **From Post-Amnesia to Postmemory in *Shalimar the Clown***

Opening with a description of India Ophuls's post-amnesiac ignorance of her birth mother, *Shalimar the Clown*'s five-part structure reflects India's efforts to turn post-amnesia of the previous two generations of her family into postmemory in order to better understand her heritage, herself, and her situation.<sup>11</sup> Part one introduces India as a post-amnesiac twenty-four-year-old in L.A. in the early 1990s just before her father Max's murder by her mother Boonyi's husband, Shalimar the Clown. In the aftermath, India constructs postmemory by investigating the lies, gaps, and suppressed history narrated analeptically in parts two through four. Part two narrates Boonyi and Shalimar's teen love in Pachigam, Kashmir, in the early 1960s, the Partition tensions surrounding their births in October 1947, and personal and

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<sup>11</sup> *Shalimar* also employs multiple focalizer composing as discussed in chapter one, bookended by India/Kashmira's focalization in parts one and five.

political histories from the early 1960s through Boonyi and Max's meeting in 1965.<sup>12</sup> Part three covers Max's youth in Strasbourg in the late 1930s, his Resistance years in occupied France, his move with his wife Peggy to the U.S. in 1944, his affair with Boonyi and India's birth in 1967, Peggy taking India from Boonyi, and Max's transition from ambassador to counterterrorism chief. In part four, Boonyi returns to Kashmir in 1967, Shalimar (now an international terrorist) murders Boonyi and prepares to murder Max, and the Indian army obliterates Pachigam. In part five we rejoin India after the murder of her father as she isolates herself and pours her rage into combat training. The story rewinds to her dysfunctional childhood with Peggy in England and young adulthood with Max in L.A. After Max's murder, India learns of and adopts Boonyi's preferred name for her, Kashmira, and visits Kashmir to learn about her mother and Pachigam.<sup>13</sup> Shalimar is jailed in L.A. and Kashmira sends him hate letters and chafes at the Americanization of Max's murder, which she now feels is "a Kashmiri story" (372). Her life approaches normalcy until Shalimar escapes from death row and comes after her. The novel concludes with Kashmira firing an arrow at Shalimar as he invades her home.

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<sup>12</sup> The second analeptic jump—to 1947 after only seven pages of 1961-62—suggests the endless rabbit hole of historical contextualization that confronts any trip into the past to explain the present: if 1962 helps explain 1990, what helps explain 1962? And then what helps explain 1947? How much context is enough? This is, of course, a compositing question. Rushdie chooses to stop with the grandparental generation.

<sup>13</sup> India/Kashmira's relationship to her names is an important theme in *Shalimar the Clown*. To reflect the distinction that she insists on, I will refer to her as India when discussing portions of the novel when she uses that name and as Kashmira when she uses that name.

Rushdie starts where the past catches up to India's present through Max's murder, works backward into her unknown heritage, and returns to a present changed by her discoveries. This structure stresses the influence of the journey from post-amnesia to postmemory on Kashmira's identity and worldview. Her many names offer one way to track this journey. The name given by Boonyi, Kashmira Noman, is suppressed by Peggy:

*"Noman, indeed!—That's not her name. And what did you say? Kashmira? No, no, darling. That can't be her future" . . . . "Ophuls,"* said Peggy-Mata. *"That's her father's name. And India's a nice name, a name containing, as it does, the truth. The question of origins is [alongside ethics] one of the two great questions. India Ophuls is an answer."* (210-11)

*An answer, not the answer:* Peggy shapes the heritages and historical contexts that will inform her adopted daughter's future, using her name (now India Rhodes, with Max suppressed as well) to emphasize some truths and suppress others. As soon as Peggy reveals her father's existence, India begins to reverse these post-amnesias: "If I'm his daughter I should have his name, the girl said that night, and Peggy Rhodes didn't know how to refuse, and India Ophuls was born" (348). Decades later, when Peggy makes the "world-altering" revelation of Boonyi's desired name, India feels, "[t]he weight of the word was too much for her to bear. Kashmira. Her mother was calling to her from the far side of the globe" (354).

Kashmira Noman, India Ophuls, India Rhodes, India Ophuls again, and finally Kashmira Ophuls: her five names mirror attempts to suppress and reengage her heritages and the novel's postmemorial narrative structure. The suppressions are not all parental. "There is no India, she thought. There is only Kashmira. There is

only Kashmir,” Kashmira thinks, flying to Kashmir to learn about Boonyi and Shalimar and Pachigam, the absent intruders that woke her in the night and that explain the murder of her father (356). The transformation of post-amnesia into postmemory involves, for Kashmira, rejection of other heritages and contexts, at least temporarily. Since the names India and Kashmira represent geopolitical as well as familial heritages, only-Kashmir briefly accompanies only-Kashmira until, having intensively explored Kashmir, Kashmira feels that “[s]he did not need to be here anymore, the uses of the place had been exhausted. . . . she needed to return home” to confront Shalimar in L.A. armed with her new understanding (369).

Postmemory and global politics intersect in India/Kashmira. “Everywhere was now a part of everywhere else. Russia, America, London, Kashmir. Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another’s, were no longer our own, individual, discrete,” she thinks before Max’s murder (37). India feels her synchronic globalized connectedness but no diachronic roots, only their absent nocturnal intrusion. Lacking a connection to her motherland, India feels that unlike the poet A. E. Housman, she has no recourse to the past as “*the land of lost content*” but is marooned in time, a post-amnesiac in “that disenchanting after-land . . . where she had lived all her life” (37). For her, the name India bears upsetting geopolitical meanings tied to her feelings of disconnectedness: she “did not like this name”; it felt “exoticist, colonial, suggesting the appropriation of a reality that was not hers to own” (5).<sup>14</sup> As

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<sup>14</sup> Other characters also present intersections of globalized connectivity with heritages passed down through time. Since the adults of Pachigam share their family stories with “all the children it was as though everyone belonged to everyone else”



Kashmira departs for Kashmir in April 1992, California executes Robert Alton Harris and L.A. explodes into violence after the Rodney King verdict. In this way, too, “[e]verywhere was a mirror of everywhere else. Executions, police brutality, explosions, riots: Los Angeles was beginning to look like wartime Strasbourg; like Kashmir” (355). Through personal and village heritages; economic, political, and paramilitary networks; state-sponsored and rebellious violence; and historical resonances from World War II through Partition to U.S. civil unrest, Rushdie insists that investigating the transmitted, lost, and suppressed connections between places and times is necessary for Kashmira (and readers) to undo post-amnesia by recompositing her understanding of her life, history, and the present world to account for new information.<sup>15</sup>

*Shalimar the Clown* requires an approach that attends to the relationship between globalization and the historical forces that shape individual experience. Critics like Florian Stadler, Marianne Corrigan, and Sucheta M. Choudhuri have noted Rushdie’s thematic emphasis on globalization in the novel and tied it to the contexts of terrorism, economics, postcoloniality, consumerism, migration, and

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until this “magic circle” is “broken forever” when Boonyi and Max’s affair brings more international political turmoil to the village (236). At the camp where Shalimar is trained in guerilla tactics alongside fighters from around the world, “[e]veryone’s story was a part of everyone else’s,” with Afghani, Soviet, Philippine and American interests all intersecting (269).

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Morton interprets the novel’s 20<sup>th</sup>-century Kashmiri “historical and geopolitical backdrop” as emphasizing “a failure in US foreign policy to either comprehend or influence the ongoing conflict in Kashmir,” in parallel to India’s initial ignorance (341).

interconnected histories.<sup>16</sup> Corrigan argues that *Shalimar* develops *Midnight's Children's* interest in "felt history" in the context of "rhizomatic narratives of globalization" (41, 35). For Choudhuri, "[t]he perception of, involvement in and inscription of both past and contemporary history is intensely personal in *Shalimar the Clown*. And just as the lives of the characters are intertwined, so are the interconnection of seemingly different histories revealed in the narrative," histories "reimagined as constructed and multivalent." Their analyses suggest the need for closer examination of the relationship between globalized connectivity and personal understandings of history while stopping short of investigating the generational dynamics addressed by postmemory and post-amnesia. *Shalimar the Clown* emphasizes the experiential journey from post-amnesia to postmemory in the context of globalization, emphasizing this key interpersonal context for the construction of felt histories.

India's post-amnesia has both visible and invisible repercussions. Her first meeting with Shalimar in part one, when he is Max's driver, presents a post-

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<sup>16</sup> For Stadtler, *Shalimar the Clown* is an "act of narratorial globalization" that "moves over the globe effortlessly" even as "it collapses time, bridges different timelines" (191-92). The novel is Rushdie's "most detailed response to date" to "[t]error and globalization" as well as "the social and political fallout from economic globalization" and "the nexus of the postcolonial and the global," all "suggesting that in a narrative of globalization and international terrorism characters must think of their existence in relation to each other" (191-92). Corrigan explains that "through an examination of globalization and cultural connectivity, Rushdie explores the long and often complex history of migrancy and the cultural encounters which have helped to shape contemporary notions of self and citizenship in the twenty-first century," with treatment of "subject identity, citizenship, migrancy and belonging" retaining postcolonial resonance while functioning primarily as "global concerns" (44).

amnesiac “before” to part five’s confrontational “after.” India fails to realize Shalimar’s importance or connection to her, brushing off her passing curiosity about him and the powerful undercurrent in his reaction to her because “[s]he didn’t need to know his story. Not today. Another time” (11). Like her attempts at sleep, her waking desires are jumbled by post-amnesia: “She wanted her father to tell her about her mother . . . . She wanted her lost story to be found. She didn’t know what she wanted. She wanted lunch” (12). India’s conviction that surfaces hide deeper truths is connected to the post-amnesia of the mother she can’t reach or adequately research (5, 338). Making things worse, India has adopted Max and Peggy’s habit of not speaking of important, suppressed histories, so “[s]he mentioned nothing that mattered or rankled,” particularly not the mother “of whom it was forbidden to speak” (15). At the same time, India mourns “[t]he deadness of India’s mother” even to memory, since “[t]he ambassador had entombed her memory under a pyramid of silence” that India can’t bring herself to breach, leaving Boonyi “lost in the ambassador’s silence . . . erased by it” (18). Even in her own voice “she failed to hear her other inheritance . . . and heard only her father’s voice,” and in her mirror “she blinded herself to the shadow of the unknown and saw only Max’s face” (15). Max and Shalimar both see Boonyi in her, though, which colors their interactions in ways India fails to understand (13, 15, 323). Not until Max’s murder does she begin piecing together “what [Shalimar] had been staring at” when he looked at her, “what she herself could not see, what her survival instincts, her private defense mechanisms, had made her block out . . . . He had found her mother in her” (340).

These lines reveal the active processes by which Max and Peggy have excised Boonyi from India's understanding of herself and her world. They highlight the misunderstandings into which India is thus led. And they point out India's complicity in this process, agreeing not to talk of forbidden things and not only failing but refusing to see Boonyi in herself, in order to survive in her vehemently amnesiac family. For Max and Peggy, amnesia is mainly consciously produced. India experiences a more complex mixture of active and passive post-amnesia, of avoiding what is known but forbidden and overlooking what is unknown.

Part five narrates both Kashmira's grieving process for her remembered father and her postmemorial process for her obliterated mother, processes sparked by Shalimar's murder of both parents. Taken symbolically, the encroachment of global unrest in the form of a fundamentalist-funded terrorist with a personal agenda disturbs India's comfortable (but post-amnesiac) life by striking at her cosmopolitan, powerful, Western father and her isolated, suppressed, Kashmiri mother. This forces India to seek understanding of their startling connectedness and of the complexity of her heritage. Before she knows enough to head to Kashmir, she looks more closely at her own body, "straining to look beyond the echoes of her father and find the woman she had never been able to see. Slowly her mother's face began to form in her mind's eye, blurry, out of focus, vague. . . . A gift from a killer. He had taken her father but her mother was being given to her" (341). Terrible as the murder is, it has the silver lining of spurring India to postmemorial exploration and

recompositing of her ignored and suppressed connectedness to other times and places.

When the media discover that Max's killer was a jilted husband, they concur that "[t]he crime, which had at first looked political, turned out to be a personal matter, insofar as anything was personal anymore" (338). Their clear personal/political dichotomy oversimplifies the matter, as Rushdie's qualifying final phrase suggests. In fact, Shalimar's personal vendetta was enabled by political terrorism networks, and the affair that provoked it was enabled by (and entwined with) Max's ambassadorial work. Back from Kashmir, Kashmiri insists on her own simplification: "[s]he no longer saw this [murder] as an American story. It was a Kashmiri story" (372). Kashmiri champions the newly discovered Kashmiri connections in a simplistic America/Kashmir dichotomy that displaces the situation's American contexts. As she and the novel move forward, however, she composites these Kashmiri and American contexts together rather than wholly rejecting or ignoring America. The personal and the political overlap time and again, as do here and there and then and now. Recompositing her identity and worldview requires of Kashmiri an investigation spanning space as well as time, politics as well as family history. Temporal distance produces major gaps, as Yuvraj Singh points out when she presses him for information about Pachigam and her heritage:

'If my father were still with us he could answer all your questions. But maybe the truth is that, as he used to say, our human tragedy is that we are unable to comprehend our experience, it slips through our fingers, we can't hold on to it, and the more time passes, the harder it gets. Maybe too much time has passed for you and you will have to accept, I'm sorry to say it, that there are things about your experience

you will never understand. . . . We are given life but must accept that it is unattainable and rejoice in what can be held in the eye, the memory, the mind.' (358)

Post-amnesia presents Kashmirira with an exacerbated form of the more general compositing problem of information lost to time. She does her best to overcome this by connecting to her dead mother through place, though this too is difficult. Her mother's village and its inhabitants have been wholly destroyed, but she visits surrounding communities and the remains of Pachigam to learn as much as she can.

Rushdie links Kashmirira's personal journey from post-amnesia to postmemory to broader, more overtly political processes of historiography. As Choudhuri notes, "[t]he shifting, kaleidoscopic perspectives on personal narratives contribute to and are replicated in the production of history in *Shalimar the Clown*" in a "reconfiguration of history" that is "both postmodernist and postcolonial" in its "skepticism about the univalence and unilinearity of history" and its "critique of the monolithic discourse of the nation and its imagined history." *Shalimar* develops connections between individual, communal, and historical understandings of history and traumatic events. For instance, selective heritages are integral to the identities of many characters, not just Kashmirira. These heritages are a mix of proud (often rose-tinted or partially fictive) and traumatic postmemories and heritages as well as post-amnesias of things previous generations have preferred to forget. The added distance of old global migrations allow certain aspects of the past to be forgotten and others to be remembered as desired without contradiction.

Over time, these postmemories and post-amnesias become history's narratives and gaps. Shalimar's mother Firdaus Noman has an "Alexandrian fantasy" of being descended from Alexander the Great, but Rushdie presents a competing narrative of her ancestral migration to Kashmir suggesting a history of banditry—a version Firdaus's family uses their intimidating social capital to suppress (73, 74-75). Her husband Abdullah "opined that conquering foreign monarchs were pestilences" while hypocritically "reveling in . . . the arriviste pre-Mughal and Mughal rulers of Kashmir" whom he admires (73). The Indian Army commander in the area, Colonel Hammirdev Suryavans Kachhwaha, claims to be "a spiritual descendant" of the Rajput military tradition, yet he is "England-returned" and sports "a barking British-style military voice," indicating his less-acknowledged alternate globalized military heritage (94). We meet a tribal leader, Ahmed Hanji, who "believed that his people were the descendants of Noah," and a prophetess, Nazarébadloor, whose felt connection to the Gujar migration from Georgia 1,500 years earlier is central to her identity (256, 64). Kashmira's lover Yuvraj Singh is proud of the ancient globalized heritage behind the Kashmiri crafts he exports: "He spoke about the origins of the craft of numdah rug making in Central Asia, in Yarkand and Sinkiang, in the days of the old Silk Route, and the words *Samarkand* and *Tashkent* made his eyes shine with ancient glory, even though Tashkent and Samarkand, these days, were faded, down-at-heel dumps" (358-59).

Each character composites historical and global elements into a desired identity based on a selective heritage. Similar processes shape the communal

identities that are tearing Kashmir apart, as partisans manipulate knowledge of historical and contemporary violence to their own ends. An “iron mullah” arrives preaching fundamentalist “hellfire and damnation” and linking himself to a 14<sup>th</sup>-century period of Muslim ascendancy even as he “never spoke of his origins,” obscuring his personal history in favor of a useful historical heritage (115-17). Similarly, Hindu pandit organizations distribute political tracts focused on tales of Muslim barbarity toward Hindus in Kashmir “that went back many hundreds of years. . . . The crimes of the fourteenth century needed to be avenged in the twentieth” (239). Each group selects those portions of history that support their agenda. The Indian army applies the same goal-oriented revisionism to current events, distorting awareness of state violence by working, for instance, through “renegade militants” whose “extrajudicial activity” can’t be pinned on the army itself (298). In this way, the Indian army’s reputation is not marred by their more unsavory actions.

Pachigam offers a beleaguered tolerance-focused counterpoint to these polarizing historiographies. The village’s bhand performers celebrate Kashmiriyat, a communal identity based on multicultural tolerance, through the 15<sup>th</sup>-century story of Budshah Zain, who represents a heritage of Kashmiri “tolerance” and “merging of faiths” (83). But as Kashmir descends into polarized violence in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the bhand’s performances about Zain-ul-abidin and “old-time tolerance and hope” have become “a story which nobody wanted to hear” anymore (281-82). Theirs is a losing battle for Kashmiri historical memory. The aspects of the past they



treasure are those most around them would now prefer to ignore or suppress, as the Indian army does by destroying Pachigam.

Rushdie's narration of the destruction of Pachigam emphasizes both its terrible human cost and its symbolism in the context of the conflict between tolerance and hatred. After Shalimar's militant brother Anees is captured, the Indian army wipes Pachigam and its residents from the face of the earth. Rushdie describes it thus:

The village of Pachigam still exists on the official maps of Kashmir . . . This official existence, this paper self is its only memorial, for where Pachigam once stood by the blithe Muskadoon . . . nothing resembling a human habitation remains. What happened that day in Pachigam need not be set down here in full detail, because brutality is brutality and excess is excess and that's all there is to it. There are things that must be looked at indirectly because they would blind you if you looked them in the face, like the fire of the sun. So, to repeat: there was no Pachigam anymore. Pachigam was destroyed. Imagine it for yourself.

Second attempt: The village of Pachigam still existed on maps of Kashmir, but that day it ceased to exist anywhere else, except in memory.

Third and final attempt: The beautiful village of Pachigam still exists. (308-09)

In this passage, Rushdie's narrator refuses to contemplate directly the sadistic destruction of an entire village. That the traumas motivating amnesia (and then post-amnesias) affect the narrator as well as the characters connects personal and historical acts of forgetting and selective narration. The contrasting third rendition of Pachigam's fate insists that it still exists because of the power of memory and symbolism. Pachigam stood—for the Kashmiri people as for the readers—for Kashmiriyat, tolerance and cooperation, and, like hatred and

divisiveness, these can never be wholly destroyed. The authorities suppressed Pachigami ideals with official amnesia, but they failed to make that amnesia definitive, so Pachigam still exists. Kashmira (and the reader) is able to construct postmemories of Pachigam and her mother because Kashmir secretly remembers. As militant zealots and the Indian army destroy Kashmir, “[t]hey want us to forget but we remember,” Yuvraj explains (361). Asked about Pachigam, he says, “It is hard to speak of such things,” but he helps Kashmira discover the truth (361). So Pachigam lives on beneath amnesias and post-amnesias, awaiting (partial) restoration. Official amnesia keeps the memory of Pachigam spatio-temporally localized, however, so postmemory of Pachigam and of Boonyi are things Kashmira must go to Kashmir to construct—while those who remember still live.

Through Kashmira’s parallel reconstructions of Boonyi and Pachigam, Rushdie again connects the personal and the political. Rushdie’s narrator treats Boonyi’s murder like Pachigam’s destruction, by fretting around the edges rather than engaging the messy details. When Kashmira asks Hasina Yambarzal of neighboring Shirmal about Boonyi’s fate, she tells of Boonyi’s horrific murder at Shalimar’s hands, how “the putrescent, fly-blown reality of the world possessed a horrific force far in excess of any dream” (366). Yet as with Pachigam, Rushdie’s narrator stops there, eliding the awful details (though a few specifics later emerge) (366, 368, 386). The narrative impulse, however, is to amnesia (and readerly post-amnesia), showing the narrator’s sympathy with the need to leave past traumas

alone and connecting personal amnesias to those built into (fictional or non-fictional) writings.

Alongside traumatic amnesias and post-amnesias Rushdie depicts more strategic omissions. When Shalimar joins fundamentalist militants, he is reeducated to erase his personal history and make room for a strictly regulated communal identity and heritage. "Ideology was primary. . . . The new recruits . . . felt their old lives shrivel in the flame of [the mullah's] certainty" (265-66). The ideal recruit is "young enough to make himself a blank sheet upon which another man could write," but Shalimar preserves his personal agenda by concealing it (267). In the camp, Shalimar's personal story is suppressed by the militant authorities rather than preserved. As the narrator notes: "in the murmurous night it was just one of many stories, one small particular untold tale in a crowd of such tales, one minuscule portion of the unwritten history of Kashmir" (259). The fundamentalist brainwashing presents an extreme version of the selective heritage compositing engaged in (less violently) by many other characters like Firdaus, Yuvraj, and the Pachigami bhandis celebrating Kashmiriyat. Max's counterterrorism work requires similar secrecy, if less self-abnegation. India does not know about this work until "death restored Max to something like full visibility, declassifying many details of his life" (334). As a counterterrorism chief he had for years "slipped across the globe like a shadow, his presence detectable only by its influence on the actions of others" (335). "[F]alling . . . out of history," Max's story suggests, need not mean ceasing to affect events; it can mean keeping one's role off the record (212). For India, who

considered herself close to her father, this is a traumatic post-amnesiac discovery “of another Max, about whom the Max she knew had never spoken, Max the occult servant of American geopolitical interest . . . Invisible Max, on whose invisible hands . . . there had to be, didn’t there, a quantity of the world’s visible and invisible blood” (335). In this last act of his engagement with politics and history, Max embodies a U.S. version of the Indian army’s unacknowledged renegade militants exerting state authority invisibly.

We can try to divide these historiographic omissions by motivation into personal, traumatic amnesias and political, strategic manipulations, but in practice the categories consistently intersect. Political violence spurs personal trauma, as with India’s distress at learning of Max’s double life and the plights of nearly all the Kashmiri characters. The political has personal costs for Shalimar and Max, whose parallel stories are hidden from the world for most of their lives, and for Colonel Kachhwaha, the Indian commander who destroys Pachigam. Kachhwaha, like the fundamentalist militants he loathes, adheres to a simple doctrine (national integrity over all, including the truth) with brutal stringency (96). The necessity of suppressing anything that threatens the national integrity manifests as a first-generation amnesiac’s “problem of the accumulating detritus of quotidian memories” (97). Kachhwaha can manipulate the official narrative but is unable to forget the atrocities he oversees and suppresses; the clean narrative composite he provides for others is beyond his own reach. His problem grows as the violence of his command increases until “[t]here was nothing he needed to witness in person

anymore. He knew everything and forgot nothing. . . . He felt the bloat of memory expanding his body . . . stuffed full of the babel of the unforgotten, and the confusion of his senses grew ever more extreme. The idea of violence had a velvet softness now” (291). The compositing strain of suppressing truth in favor of a distorted (nationalist) narrative is here presented in extremity. Kachhwaha need witness nothing because the facts have no bearing on the narrative he will construct—the rift between reality and report is enormous, and the details lost between the two gather in his overcrowded and increasingly disturbed mind.

Rushdie stresses the complex interactions of the personal and the political, the past and present, and the historical and the global. Daniel O’Gorman argues that the dense connectivity of past and present terror in *Shalimar* results in “a fictional blurring of the borderlines both within and between space and time, creating a narrative frontier zone in which parallel, seemingly incommensurable worlds are allowed to weave freely into one another” (82). This “weaving’ of worlds” gives contemporary concerns like post-9/11 terror “a rich sense of historicity (that is, of its existence within a broad, complex historical context)” (82). Rushdie structures *Shalimar the Clown* according to the logic of the journey from post-amnesia to postmemory by which India/Kashmira is able to achieve just such historical—and global—context for her father’s murder. Along the way, she and the reader are presented with the related processes of amnesia, postmemory, and selective historiography outlined above by which the world is understood and engaged. Just as Rushdie presents postmemory as a compositing process that addresses spatio-

temporal complexities like the global and historical contexts of Max's murder and Kashmira's identity. *Shalimar* also shows postmemory engaging the gaps, overload, and the necessity for subjective selection that challenge all acts of composing.

Shalimar's capture provides momentum that helps drive these overlapping complexities toward the novel's conclusion. Kashmira, with the new perspective of postmemory, is angered by the media's Americanization of Max's murder, whose Kashmiri roots she now recognizes (372). From jail, Shalimar writes, "*Your father deserves to die, and your mother is a whore*" (392). Trying to shrug off the letter, Yuvraj notes that "[h]e puts the past into the present tense" (392). This observation reveals the extent to which past trauma still consumes Shalimar, overpowering the present and distorting his engagement with the world. The past that Kashmira attempts to reclaim from beneath post-amnesia has, for Shalimar, long been the most painfully visible and present thing in his life.

Kashmira moves into her father's empty house and, in an echo of her initial post-amnesiac insomnia, finds her sleep again symbolically disturbed. This time the culprit is not the absence of her mother—that post-amnesia has been largely laid to rest. Instead, "[s]ometimes in the middle of the night she awoke to the sound of a man's voice singing a woman's song and it took her a few moments to realize that she was listening to a memory" of Yuvraj singing to her of Kashmiri history and legend (381).<sup>17</sup> The problem now is not a lost heritage but a valued one from which she is estranged by her need to achieve closure for her parents' murders, a need that

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<sup>17</sup> As this quotation suggests, gender analysis could productively add to our understanding of the history, memory, and global dynamics considered here.

took her away from Yuvraj and Kashmir and makes her feel that “I’m in a kind of prison too” (382). Postmemory has replaced absence, but until she faces Shalimar—the embodiment of her postmemorial trauma—her estrangement from her restored heritage haunts her like post-amnesiac absence used to.

The novel’s final pages bring one last nocturnal intruder: Shalimar himself, the trauma of the past come to reclaim (and kill) her. But Kashmira knows about Shalimar now and is prepared for and unafraid of him, even though his appearance is sudden and unexpected. This contrasts sharply to the predictable but poorly understood post-amnesiac absence that disturbed her in the book’s opening. Kashmira’s refusal to increase her security after Shalimar’s jailbreak is symbolically resonant: “Shalimar the clown was yesterday’s man. She had already killed him and she wasn’t afraid of ghosts” (396). When he comes for her, instead of hiding in her panic room she grabs her night-vision goggles, bow, and arrows because “something got into her at her mother’s grave and that was the thing in charge now” (397). Knowing the stakes and the context, Kashmira needs to engage rather than hide from even the ugly sides of her heritage—and she has the tools at hand to do so, forcing Shalimar “from attack to defense” (398).

In the final lines, Kashmira fires an arrow at Shalimar: “There was no possibility that she would miss. There was no second chance. There was no India. There was only Kashmira, and Shalimar the clown” (398). The encounter is distilled, for Kashmira, down to her parents’ two legacies: their child and their killer. The encounter, and not the outcome, is the focal point—the long preparation and the

moment itself. We see Kashmira's certainty of the outcome and the clear terms in which she frames the confrontation, but Rushdie denies us the moment after, because his interest is in how we prepare to confront the past, not in what happens after we do. *Shalimar the Clown* narrates the journey from the disturbing absence of post-amnesia to a calm and clear-sighted confrontation with a difficult but known past, armed with postmemory. Both Kashmira and Shalimar are a long way from the places of their birth, but they have brought those heritages with them, as Kashmira's name symbolizes. Globalized migration and politics are present in that final encounter, but the reader, like Kashmira, must composite an (inevitably subjective and imperfect) history of this globe-spanning duel in order to recognize how.

### **The Life Cycle of (Post-)Amnesia in *The Lowland***

The treatment of postmemory and globalization in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* contrasts markedly with that in *Shalimar the Clown*. While the long repercussions of globalized migrations and geopolitics from Partition onward are central to the plot of *Shalimar the Clown*, *The Lowland* portrays globalization in a background role that remains paradoxically important (like the novels discussed in chapter two). *Shalimar* featured a woman born in Delhi and raised in England and the U.S. returning to Kashmir to understand her life and world, a French World War Two hero turned American ambassador to India, and a Kashmiri performer turned international combatant. *The Lowland* features one family migration from Calcutta to America and a few brief return visits amidst lives increasingly rooted in the U.S. *Shalimar* begins with India's post-amnesiac perspective, dips into the past to



contextualize her present, and returns to India (now Kashmir) as she uses postmemory to confronts the newly understood specter of her past. After a one-page opening in the narrative present (2010s), *The Lowland* begins with the brothers Subhash and Udayan Mitra as children in the 1950s and works forward to the 2010s with only a few brief analepses before concluding with Udayan's focalization of his execution by police in 1971, a major focal point of this family saga and trauma. Where the narrative structure of *Shalimar* adopts the perspective of the post-amnesiac, *The Lowland* favors the perspective of the generation that constructs amnesia for themselves and post-amnesia for their children. Lahiri tracks the cycle of amnesia, post-amnesia, and postmemory from the beginning, focalizing through both the amnesiac and post-amnesiac generations of the family along the way.

Lahiri's approach complements Rushdie's handling of the synchronic and diachronic compositing demands of (post-)amnesia complicated by global migration. *The Lowland's* intimate family saga emphasizes the role of spatial distance, achieved through intercontinental migration, in making amnesia and post-amnesia viable, and the role of global travel and modern information technology in helping undo those suppressions later. Lahiri also stresses how family relationships provide emotional foundations that influence what individuals choose to suppress, maintain, and (re)create when compositing amnesiac and postmemorial understandings of history and the globalized present. Lahiri's characters understand spatial and temporal distance and connectivity in relation to their prioritized family bonds. Their experiences of global distances and of past events

shrouded in amnesia and post-amnesia reveal contrasting ways of engaging a complex past while moving forward into a world whose globalized complexity only continues to increase.

By narrating *The Lowland* essentially chronologically, we meet Udayan as a co-protagonist, not a subject of post-amnesia. We feel the shock of his death with Subhash (the primary focalizing character at that point) and see Subhash and Gauri construct amnesia and Bela's post-amnesia, and then we see the transition to postmemory—the entire process from start to finish. Because of this narrative structure, Bela's journey from post-amnesia to postmemory is not central to *The Lowland* as India/Kashmira's is to *Shalimar*. Lahiri's attention is rather on the repercussions of suppressing Udayan's memory on all three focalizers/family members: Subhash, Gauri, and Bela. *The Lowland* starts with Subhash, then adds Gauri, showing both their reactions to Udayan's execution (and, for thirteen pages, Subhash's mother Bijoli's); not until halfway through the text does Lahiri focalize through the next generation, Bela, as she first visits India and her grandmother as a twelve year old and learns of Udayan's existence (misrepresented as her father's brother who died of an illness). Bela's post-amnesia isn't revealed to her until three-quarters of the way through the novel, and her coming to terms with her suppressed father is dealt with in six pages, four of which are focalized through Subhash rather than Bela. The process of turning post-amnesia to postmemory, which gives *Shalimar the Clown* its narrative structure, is an important but brief dramatic beat in *The Lowland*. *The Lowland* emphasizes instead a decentered composite perspective

on three characters' diversity of experiences of the same cycle of amnesia, post-amnesia, and postmemory without definitively favoring any one perspective.

The first page of *The Lowland* describes a marshy lowland in Tollygunge (a quiet area of Calcutta) that, built over by new housing developments, no longer exists in the 2010s and so is lost except to memory. The narrative then turns to the Mitra brothers—cautious, studious Subhash and rash, idealistic Udayan—as young men in Tollygunge from the mid-1950s. In college in the 1960s Udayan joins the Naxalite movement (rallying around the peasants of Naxalbari village) to foment Maoist revolution, and he marries Gauri, a philosophy student. As we learn later, he also helps organize the murder of a policeman (with Gauri's semi-unwitting assistance). Amidst escalating violence, the police arrest and execute Udayan in the lowland in front of a pregnant Gauri and his parents. Subhash is called home from Rhode Island, where he is pursuing a doctorate in marine chemistry. Subhash convinces Gauri, virtually trapped by social and economic circumstances in the cold environment of his parents' home, to marry him and raise the baby, Bela, in America as their own. Gauri's traumatized inability to care deeply for anyone but Udayan makes her relationships with her husband and child difficult. When Subhash and twelve-year-old Bela return from Bela's first trip to Calcutta, Gauri has left them for a philosophy professorship in California and an emotionally unattached life. Bela distances herself from Subhash, who constantly worries about the deception about being Bela's (non-biological) father, and she pours herself into a nomadic career in sustainable farming and gardening. In her thirties she returns home pregnant to live

with Subhash and raise her daughter, Meghna. Subhash reveals the truth about Udayan and Bela declares her disinterest in Udayan (except as an explanation for Gauri leaving them) and her commitment to Subhash. Gauri shows up to learn about Bela, who is furious and wants nothing to do with Gauri but doesn't rule out allowing Meghna to have a relationship with Gauri. After a contemplative narration of Subhash's thoughts while on honeymoon with his new wife Elise in Ireland, the novel ends with Udayan's focalization leading up to his execution, a perspective unavailable to anyone living.

*The Lowland* contrasts with *Shalimar the Clown* in its treatment of globalization and global distance. Rushdie's novel emphasized the globalized connectivity of distant places, as through Kashmira's discovery of the Kashmiri context behind Max's murder in Los Angeles. Lahiri, on the other hand, emphasizes how global distances enable amnesia and post-amnesia (and distance from former contexts more generally). The first amnesia in *The Lowland* is not temporal but global, as Subhash finds the distance of Rhode Island freeing:

He had stepped out of [Tollygunge] as he had stepped so many mornings out of dreams, its reality and its particular logic rendered meaningless . . . The difference was so extreme that he could not accommodate the two places together in his mind. In this enormous new country, there seemed to be nowhere for the old to reside. There was nothing to link them; he was the sole link. (34)

After Udayan's death, Subhash realizes that this spatial distance has also allowed his family (and U.S. media disinterest) to conceal how bad the Naxalite conflict had gotten (87). Subhash pitches life in America to Gauri on the advantages of this global distance: "in American no one knew about the movement, no one would bother her. .

.. It would be an opportunity to begin again. . . . In America [Bela] could be raised without the burden of what had happened. . . . it would all cease to matter” (119). American news “was always the news of America . . . . There was nothing about Calcutta. What had consumed the city, what had altered the course of her life and shattered it, was not reported here” (130-31). Spatial distance enables Gauri’s amnesia: “What she’d seen from the terrace, the evening the police came for Udayan, now formed a hole in her vision. Space shielded her more effectively than time: the great distance between Rhode Island and Tollygunge. . . . It had caused those moments to recede, to turn less and less visible, then invisible. But she knew they were there” (152). Similarly, Subhash avoids returning to Calcutta because “[h]e didn’t want to be around the only other people in the world who knew that he was not Bela’s father” (155). He prefers a social network where the (post-)amnesia he’s co-constructed remains intact. But while spatial and temporal separation from Udayan’s contexts enable Subhash and Gauri to hide him from Bela, the trauma of his death still affects Bela through its continued influence on her parents.

When Bela first visits Calcutta over her twelfth birthday, post-amnesia undermines her ability to connect to the people and places of her parents’ past. To Bela, Udayan’s death portrait is simply “a photo of an older boy, a smiling teenager, in a dirty frame of pale wood” (193). Her grandmother Bijoli’s occasional references to her father (meaning Udayan) also go unnoticed by Bela (197, 198). Nevertheless, the reminders of Udayan that pervade Bijoli’s home and daily routine force Subhash to explain to Bela that he once had a brother, whose death he attributes to illness

(204-05). Meanwhile, Bela learns about her mother's past literally in passing when Subhash points out Gauri's old university as they pass by in a taxi (206). In Calcutta, places evoke the past—Bela seeks explanations she would not otherwise know to ask for. Spatial proximity chips away at the post-amnesia enabled by global distance, but Subhash is able to maintain the overall integrity of Bela's post-amnesia through deception and by limiting their visit to only six weeks. When Gauri finally returns to Kolkata, nearly three decades after Subhash and Bela's visit, the place has altered so much that it no longer aids memory: "She was unprepared for the landscape to be so altered. For there to be no trace of that evening, forty autumns ago" (320). The lowland (and probably Udayan's memorial tablet) has vanished beneath a housing development (320). Spatial distance can be manipulated either to aid or to suppress memory, while the movement of time only adds to the distances that memory must bridge.

Spatial and then temporal distance enable Subhash and Gauri to build and maintain their amnesias and Bela's post-amnesia about Udayan, but the process drastically affects their relations to the people and places around them. Even while Bela is an infant, Gauri imagines that she is aware of their suppression: "When she was awake, she would slowly twist her neck and her cloudy eyes would intently search the corners of the room, as if already she knew that something was missing" (145). More often, though, Gauri and Subhash's keen awareness of the situation focuses on themselves, as when Subhash notes, "[a]lready, she seemed to be recognizing him. To accept him, and to allow him to ignore the reality that he was an

uncle, an imposter" (146). Creating post-amnesia for Bela enables Subhash to ignore painful realities, but not to forget or feel comfortable with deceiving the person he cares for most.

Maintaining post-amnesia forces Gauri to misdirect her emotions about Udayan and their Naxalite involvement. When six-year-old Bela is upset by hundreds of dying earthworms after a downpour, she asks Gauri to carry her across them (169). Gauri considers that other mothers might grant this wish. "Then she remembered another thing. How, at the height of the crackdown, the bodies of party members were left in streams, in fields close to Tollygunge. . . . by the police, to shock people" (169). An upset Gauri drags a sobbing Bela through the worms for reasons that remain inexplicable to Bela (170). Gauri seems driven by the relative mundanity of Bela's worm crisis compared to her own trauma, which she must bottle up: "I watched your father killed before my eyes, she might have said" (170). The connections to another time and place are invisible to Bela, but Gauri's trauma is nevertheless central to their troubled relationship. That evening, she tells Subhash that they should tell Bela about Udayan: "She saw fear in his eyes. She remembered when Udayan was hidden behind the water hyacinth, and the gun was at her throat. She realized the weapon was in her hands now. Everything that mattered to him, she could take away" (170). Emotions and relationships for Gauri are consistently translated in this way through her traumatic experiences at the time of Udayan's death.

Spatial and temporal distance make it easy to create Bela's post-amnesia but not to deal with it psychologically. Gauri suffers under "the weight of maintaining the illusion that he was Bela's father" while remaining closer to Udayan than to anyone living (171). Neither parent seems to consider ways of working through Gauri's trauma that don't involve telling Bela, perhaps because the deception seems inextricably caught up in the trauma. Bela's parents don't plan to end her post-amnesia until she reaches adulthood and can better process the information. Instead, Gauri increasingly distances herself from Bela, who reminds her so much of Udayan, and she eventually leaves Bela and Subhash for good when Bela is twelve. In the note she leaves behind, Gauri says that as Subhash is a better parent than either Gauri or Udayan could have been and, "[g]iven what I'm doing, it makes no sense for her connection with you to undergo any change" (211, emphasis in original). Subhash feels the need to reveal the suppressed truth but remains afraid to well into Bela's thirties: "because she was all he loved, he could not muster the strength" (252). Subhash fears that the revelation of the past may invalidate the relationship built atop the suppressed truth. Imagining Bela's transition from post-amnesia to postmemory, Subhash thinks of an anecdote of a young Bela asking him how binocular vision results in one perceived image. When undoing post-amnesia, he thinks, just as when seeing with two eyes, "the brain fused the separate images together. Matching up what was the same, adding in what was different. Making the best of both" (265). Coming to terms with the truth behind a post-amnesia means "[s]he would have to see with her mind now" (265). Subhash's compositing



metaphor emphasizes the challenges of radical revising understanding in the wake of a revealed post-amnesia.

In the event, Bela's transition to postmemory is relatively quick and easy. She reacts initially with disbelief, anger, and tears, but "[a]s the night wore on and the information settled over her, she asked a few questions about the circumstances of Udayan's death. She asked a bit about the movement, of which she was ignorant, and was now curious; this was all" (267). The political aspect of the suppressed tragedy is of much less interest to her than the personal. Was Udayan guilty? Did he know about me? Her emotional bond with Subhash trumps the revelation of biological distance: "Her father remained her father, even as he'd told her he wasn't. As he'd told her that Udayan was" (268). The "third parent, pointed out to her like a new star" feels like something "[t]hat had both made her and made no difference" (268). Bela's postmemory work focuses on "an explanation for why her mother had gone" rather than on Udayan or Naxalbari, from which she feels spatially, temporally, and emotionally distant (268).<sup>18</sup> Udayan matters to Bela mainly because of his effects on her family rather than for himself. Postmemory improves her understanding of old

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<sup>18</sup> Bela creates a post-amnesia about Gauri for her own daughter, Meghna, but intends to tell her the truth when she's old enough and allow her a relationship with her grandmother (324-25). In this way Lahiri suggests a gradual lessening of the chain of post-amnesias. A generation removed from the original, fatal, political trauma, Bela has a greater foundation in familial love and experience of the pain of post-amnesia and familial voids. Bela's greater emotional health (compared to Gauri) and the less central role of Meghna's post-amnesia (grandmother rather than father) make credible her intention not to perpetuate post-amnesia past Meghna's early childhood. The less political nature of Bela's trauma about Gauri and the fact that Gauri lives and can eventually relate to her grandchild directly both suggest that Meghna's post-amnesia will be less extreme than Bela's.

parental dynamics, allowing her to let go of the centrality of her mother's abandonment to her life (269). Within a few days she reaffirms Subhash as her father and disavows further interest in Udayan, saying, "[s]he'd heard what was necessary; she didn't need him to tell her anything more" (271). When Gauri shows up decades after leaving, a furious Bela tells her, "I've known for years about Udayan . . . . I know who I am. . . . And it doesn't matter. Nothing excuses what you did" (312). Bela's life is built around her relationships with Subhash and her daughter Meghna, and she has little desire to fit Udayan or Gauri back in. In this dismantling of Bela's post-amnesia, Lahiri suggests there can be limits to how much of the past a post-amnesiac may wish to reengage. Bela's strong bond with Subhash has largely displaced any need or desire to know a dead biological father whose existence seems to affect her only through his effects on Subhash and Gauri.<sup>19</sup>

Naxalbari and the political contexts of Udayan's death seem even more irrelevant to Bela's American life. In *Shalimar*, ambassadors, terrorists, and counterterrorists carry past personal and political conflicts into Kashmir's present with fatal consequences. Bela's political heritage is more disconnected in time and especially in space. Udayan was a local revolutionary who died young, not an international assassin with a lasting grudge. The Naxalite conflict is largely regional, unlike the international politics and global war on terror entangling Kashmir's family. Max and Shalimar never step away from politics, whereas political, economic, and institutional connectivity enable the Mitras to flee the regional

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<sup>19</sup> Offering a pointed counter-Freudian complement to *Shalimar the Clown*.

Naxalite conflict and memory of it relatively successfully. Because all of Bela's parents were from Calcutta, Udayan, unlike Boonyi, offers his daughter no lost cultural and geographical heritage. Neither Naxalbari nor Udayan offer Bela compelling new avenues of identity formation, so Bela's journey beyond post-amnesia is less about postmemory of Udayan than about revising her understandings of Gauri, Subhash, and herself. Globalized connections make postmemorial composites available to Bela that strongly incorporate Udayan and Naxalbari, but this rediscovered heritage feels spatially and temporally distant and un compelling for Bela. Her existing emotional, geographic, and cultural bonds, which predate the end of post-amnesia, are more powerful, and her previous composite identity and worldview remain largely intact.

The conditions of accelerating globalization aided the Mitras' escape from the geographical and cultural contexts of their family trauma and enabled Bela's post-amnesia. Globalization later facilitates reconnections to that heritage through visits and calls to Calcutta/Kolkata and via the internet. In the U.S., inadvertent reminders of the Naxalite conflict rarely occur, though "[o]nce in a while Gauri notices a piece in American papers mentioning Naxalite activity in various parts of India, or in Nepal. Short pieces" (275).<sup>20</sup> Gauri occasionally glances over these articles intended for the uninformed, marveling at how easily the events that upended her life are

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<sup>20</sup> However, even early Indian media reports of the Naxalite conflict were quite gappy since, having declared Emergency, Indira Gandhi began "[c]ensuring the press, so that what was happening was not being told" (Lahiri 154). This public work of amnesia and suppression of the larger conflict parallels Gauri and Subhash's personal suppression of Udayan (and U.S. and Indian government propaganda and secrecy in *Shalimar the Clown*).

summarized as “a doomed critique of postcolonial Bengal” (275). Upon the advent of the internet, however, “[t]oo much is within her grasp now. . . . Glowing screens . . . anticipating any possible question the human brain might generate. Containing more information than anyone has need for” (275). The internet also uncannily reduces the distance between the past and the present, so that “[a] click can take her from breaking news to articles archived years ago. At every moment the past is there, appended to the present” (275).

The increased connectivity of “the virtual world . . . the new sea that has come to dominate the earth’s surface” is overwhelming and unavoidable and forces Gauri to reappraise how she connects to or maintains her distance from the context of her traumatic past (276). Gauri grapples with the two-pronged compositing problem of noise and gaps (also discussed in chapter four), with “[t]oo much information, and yet, in her case, not enough. In a world of diminishing mystery, the unknown persists” (277). Though it’s easy to check up on Subhash online, the people she cares more about, Udayan and Bela, remain invisible to her. She looks up Udayan but, “as she might have predicted, in spite of all the [Naxalite-related] information and opinion, there was no trace of his participation, no mention of the things he’d done. There had been hundreds like him in Calcutta at that time . . . anonymously dedicated, anonymously executed” (277). Suppressed by personal amnesia and his off-the-record police execution, he has been ignored by the public record. Bela is also unlocatable online, but the reason for this is less clear and “Gauri wonders if the refusal is intentional” (277). The baseline problems faced by all acts

of compositing—gaps and noise—are intensified by globalization, personal and public suppression of memory, and the increasing challenges of understanding as time passes (as Yuvraj noted in *Shalimar*). Global networking technologies bridge spatial distances, provide easy access to archives, and partially circumvent the news blackouts and American disinterest that allowed migration to effectively remove the Mitras from the Naxalite context. But web connectivity can't overcome the lack of records about Udayan and his execution or Bela's choice to remain disconnected. These outline limits to the connective power of global networks, showing the agency of authorities and individuals to affect the terms of that connectivity.

*The Lowland*, like *Shalimar the Clown*, explores the porous boundary between memory and historiography. In the early 2010s, a former student turned political science professor, Dipankar Biswas, seeks to interview Gauri for his history of the Naxalite movement at her alma mater; Gauri claims ignorance while thinking that “[t]here was so much she might have said” (279). Dipankar's history is a postmemory project originating in his interest in the involvement of his revolutionary uncle, who survived imprisonment and fled to London. Gauri realizes that “[h]er impressions were flickering, from a lifetime ago. But they were vivid inside Dipankar. All the names, the events of those years, were at his fingertips. . . . He'd understood, without ever having been a part of things, far better than Gauri, why it had surged and failed” (280). History, the narrative organization and understanding of past events, is changing hands from the generation of memory to that of postmemory. Dipankar's generation will only know what can be researched

and what those involved pass on. He is unaware of all that Gauri hides from him, of the extent and meaning of many of the gaps in his history. His distance grants him, in Gauri's eyes, a superior understanding of the historical meaning of Naxalbari, but his history is poorer for lacking Gauri's experiences and observations.

Where Gauri's internet research and discussion with Dipankar explore the interrelatedness of (post-)amnesia and historiography, Subhash's experiences demonstrate the influence of personal values on how we fit the past and present into our worldviews. In the course of his solitary walks through a nearby wetland, Subhash learns of "an atrocity" committed there by colonial militia against the local Native Americans in 1675, researches it online, and seeks out its commemorative marker (244). Yet he does not connect this tragedy to Udayan's wetland execution and commemorative marker. Instead Subhash remembers, "[w]hen he was younger he had loved nothing more than to wander like this, with Bela" (244). Nearly any stimulus reminds him first of Bela, whereas Gauri always thinks of Udayan and of having abandoned Bela and Subhash. Historical parallels to Udayan and Naxalbari are not primary contexts for Subhash now that Bela's post-amnesia is over, but neither does he suppress thoughts of Udayan. Near the end of the novel, while sexagenarian Subhash honeymoones with his second wife Elise in Ireland, an Ogham stone reminds him of Udayan, but without major trauma. The memory of Udayan sits in Subhash's mind alongside new knowledge of Ogham stone memorial traditions, so that as he watches the Irish sunset, "Udayan is beside him. They are walking together in Tollygunge, across the lowland" as children (332). For Subhash,

who has largely overcome the trauma of Udayan's death, that part of his life can connect to and inform his understanding of an ancient tradition (and medium) in a foreign place and culture, outlining another way in which the personal can merge with the historical and the global.

*Shalimar the Clown* narrates Kashmira's aggressive showdown with the suppressed past; *The Lowland* narrates Subhash and Bela's turn away from distant times and places in favor of new bonds in the here and now and Gauri's (and Bijoli's) inability to create such bonds after losing Udayan. Lahiri examines the distancing effects of global migration and passing time on a range of characters who develop identities and worldviews by emphasizing some memories and connections and ignoring or suppressing others. Lahiri surrounds Subhash, Gauri, and Bela's experiences with brief explorations of memory and amnesia in contrasting characters like Dipankar, Bijoli, and Otto Weiss (Gauri's professor and mentor). Bijoli's remembrance of Udayan is obsessive and inward-turned rather than amnesiac. Her life after Udayan's death revolves around taking flowers to his memorial stone daily and dwelling on the circumstances of his execution (180-81). Bijoli is unable "to abandon the house where Udayan had lived since birth, the neighborhood where he died" (182). She is tied to places of remembrance, unlike Subhash and Gauri, whom migration to America helps to move on or at least to suppress the trauma. The centrality of Udayan's memory to her life ruins her relationships with the living, as through her great "[r]age at Subhash for reminding her so strongly of Udayan" (186).

Professor Weiss has an apparent amnesiac relationship with his memories as a Holocaust survivor. “I never think of it, he told the class, speaking briefly of this experience, after one of the students asked him when he had left Europe. As if to say, Do not pity me, though the rest of his family had perished. . . . He would never return to Germany, he said” (165). Only with Weiss is Gauri able to talk about Udayan’s death and having married Subhash to escape, at which point “[s]he knew she’d told him enough” despite having left Bela’s parentage unrevealed (166). The amnesiac kinship they share helps her open up and know he’ll understand her not revealing everything. Learning that Gauri is a mother, Weiss shows her a photo of his family, saying, “With children the clock is reset. We forget what came before” (167). In his reliance on the healing, and perhaps substitutive, power of parent-child relationships, Weiss’s reaction to trauma resembles Subhash’s more than Gauri’s. The relationships of secondary characters like Weiss to trauma, memory, and spatial and temporal distance help form a wider composite portrait of responses to personal and political trauma.

*The Lowland’s* narrative composite of memory and distance concludes with Udayan’s experience on the day of his death in 1971 (seen earlier through Gauri’s recollections), the day that so influenced the lives narrated in the rest of the novel. This final chapter, the only one focalized through Udayan, offers a perspective no living character has access to. Lahiri presents this perspective analeptically, after following forty years of the other characters’ post-execution trajectories. This makes the primary context for reading Udayan’s last thoughts our knowledge of how this



day will affect his family. In this context, what is most striking about Udayan's experience is its brevity. His abrupt death sharply contrasts the ongoing traumas and coping processes of those who survive him. This brief moment that lies at the center of so many obsessions, memories, postmemories, amnesias, and post-amnesias is an experience not fundamentally different than the others portrayed in the novel except that it is Udayan's last. He thinks about his injuries, realizes that his capture constitutes inadvertent abandonment of Gauri, and worries about the futility of the revolution and the possibility of losing Gauri (339). In the moments of his death and the novel's last lines, he thinks of Gauri on a day they met at the movies and remembers "[t]he sunlight on her hair" (340). Lahiri's ending shifts from decades of memory and amnesia about Udayan to his in-the-moment experiences (and his acts of remembering). These constitute a post-amnesia constructed by state-sponsored anti-revolutionary violence and unrecoverable by the living—except through fiction.

Rushdie and Lahiri both offer visions of migrant families dealing (in different ways) with personal and political trauma over several decades. But *Shalimar* and *The Lowland* take different approaches to narrating a complex, spatio-temporally distanced past alongside a contemporary world of increasing globalized complexity. *Shalimar's* narrative structure emphasizes India/Kashmir's post-amnesiac migrant's journey to globalized postmemory. *The Lowland* emphasizes the effects of memory, amnesia, postmemory, and post-amnesia on multiple characters across generations and psychological contexts. Rushdie ends with a former post-amnesiac

confronting the past; Lahiri ends with an unrecoverable perspective and piece of the past available only through fiction.

*The Lowland's* only-in-fiction ending connects postmemory and post-amnesia to fiction's usefulness as a related process of constructing understandings of self and world. Fiction and memory both offer ways of responding to the compositing challenges outlined in these chapters: the overwhelming multiplicity of globalized connectivity (both center stage and in the background), the rhetoric of globalizing new media, posthuman interactions of bodies and technologies in globalized geopolitical spaces, and the intertwined roles of global and temporal distances in managing personal and political trauma. By ending with a perspective the real world cannot provide, Lahiri compares the gaps created via amnesiac suppression of one's own memories to the gaps created by silencing and killing others, and she compares the compositing processes of memory to those of fiction. *The Lowland* presents post-amnesia, postmemory, historiography, and fictional focalization as related techniques for compositing understandings of our and others' experiences. Lahiri contextualizes these techniques in the complexities of globalization and history. Both novels exemplify the potential for postmemory and post-amnesia analysis as it intersects with the personal and the global.

Both novels also demonstrate the prevalence of compositing as a response to temporal as well as global complexity. This chapter's analysis of the intersection of postmemory and post-amnesia with global migration is, like this project as a whole, a limited rather than comprehensive expedition into the expanding terrain of

globalization studies, an attempt to outline a widespread technique for managing (rather than covering) the overwhelming whole of globalized connectivity. As globalization accelerates, composing techniques like those analyzed here become increasingly vital for understanding the ways in which our lives are connected to events, people, and technologies in other places and times. General composing is premised on the insight that the narratives we use to grasp the world—our histories, fiction, and memories—are necessary but inevitably incomplete foundations for identity, understanding, and agency. Accelerating globalization makes our inability to master all relevant knowledge and contexts for understanding more acute, and more obvious, than ever. The literary works analyzed here explore composing as a way of creating narratives that, while not the whole story, can help us engage the world more thoughtfully, effectively, and responsibly.

## CONCLUSION

### COMPOSITING IN THE CLASSROOM

I have argued throughout this dissertation that the chief value of composing analysis stems from the fact that no narrative can encompass the whole of the subject matter it represents. The world has always exceeded narration, but never so much as now, when increased globalized connectivity calls attention to all that we fail to fit in our narratives. I have been arguing that composing helps characters, authors, and readers grapple with a world of overwhelming scope and connectivity while acknowledging the partiality of our perspectives. Compositing can help us coordinate the different scopes (e.g., local, national, global) with which we frame our experiences and actions, and help us recognize the subtle influence globalization often exerts from the background. We have seen that composing helps explain the role that media and technologies play in shaping our identities, interactions, and understandings through their interrelated structure, content, and dissemination and reception networks. It also helps us understand the extensive posthumanist entanglement of humans and technologies as intimately coevolving agents of change affecting each other and the world at large. Narrative composing analysis also enables us to better understand the close relationships among (post)memory, historiography, and fictional narrative strategies as well as how they are affected by the challenges of accelerating globalization.

At stake in these arguments is the effectiveness of our attempts to understand ourselves, our world, and the factors affecting our agency in it. As globalization overloads us with information without fully plugging the gaps in our individual and collective knowledge, the need for strategies that help us arrange incomplete information into effective if admittedly incomplete knowledge frameworks is greater than ever. I have approached this problem primarily within the field of literary and cultural analysis, but given this shared concern, composing and pedagogy are also natural partners. Education, too, is a process of constructing frameworks of knowledge while recognizing that we can never fully eliminate our ignorance; there is simply too much to know and too much that is unknowable (like Udayan's final thoughts in *The Lowland*, available only through fiction). In this conclusion I will briefly explore one composing-based classroom strategy, "reading closer," to illustrate the potential of composing for pedagogy. Characteristically for composing, this conclusion will outline one application of pedagogical composing analysis while leaving much of its pedagogical potential unaddressed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For instance, constructing a course is a form of composing that raises questions about how we choose what to include and exclude according to what pedagogical agenda—the core of the canon wars. Roland Robertson argued in 1992 that "[c]urrent controversies about the teaching canon are thus significant manifestations of globalization" and its challenges to "the concept of the homogeneous national society" (*Globalization* 30). Composing can inform how we explain such controversies to students. Articulating our pedagogical composing practices can help students emerge from our courses with new perspectives and understandings on literature and culture as well as skills for recognizing and consciously engaging the constructed nature of courses, theoretical approaches, bodies of literature, and worldviews.

Let me begin by distinguishing between close reading and reading closer.

Close reading, as developed in the early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century by literary critics like I. A. Richards, William Empson, and Cleanth Brooks, refers generally to sustained critical attention to brief sections and small details of text. More specifically, it identifies specific scholarly reading practices originated by the critics named here and carried on by the New Critics and many later scholars and teachers. In “Close Reading in 2009,” Jane Gallop argues that close reading is as relevant as ever today because of its emphasis on the pesky details that are “the best safeguard against projection” in that “[t]he main idea or general shape of a book is likely to correspond to our preconceptions, but we cannot so easily predict the . . . surprising or insistent details” (16). As Jonathan Culler points out, though, precise definitions of close reading can be surprisingly elusive, leading him to assert that close reading is a heterogeneous category encompassing “different modes” and “all sorts of ways of achieving closeness in reading” (24, 23).<sup>2</sup> In Culler’s view, “[w]e want to believe that close reading is something more basic” that “can occur without explicit instruction” in particular practices, “[b]ut responding to language and textual details is not something that takes place automatically or necessarily” (22). Close reading consists

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, Culler suggests Barthes’s paranoid, obsessional, and fetishist reading practices, the ideological and psychological diagnostic work of symptomatic reading, and even memorization as forms of close reading (22-24). John Guillory notes that both early and current discussions of close reading often situate it in opposition to sloppier kinds of attention supposedly encouraged by new media (e.g., film in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, web browsing in the early 21<sup>st</sup>) (13-14). Even an overview of studies of the relationship between specific media forms and reader habits (and, more recently, cognition patterns) is beyond the scope of this conclusion, however.

of techniques that must be taught and that can take a variety of forms, prompting Culler to call for better typologies of the modes of close and symptomatic reading.

What I mean by reading closer is characterized by what I call pedagogical compositing. We can identify reading as a process of extending familiar frameworks to manage and navigate what we do not yet know or understand. This perspective on reading emphasizes the frontier between ignorance and knowledge and, like Gallop, warns against distorting new knowledge to fit oversimplified worldviews. Instead, compositing stresses revising our worldviews to accommodate new knowledge. Throughout this dissertation, I have emphasized the verb form, compositing, over the noun, composites, in order to call attention to compositing as a strategy more than to the differentiated products of that strategy. I argued in the Introduction that attention to (meta)strategies is a needed complement to existing debates about contemporary cultural conditions (like postmodernism). I believe that a similar move can be pedagogically productive. What I am calling reading closer incorporates the kind of self-reflexivity I have been associating with compositing. The phrase “close reading” is often used today to refer to the product of a completed performance, much like a work of art being unveiled at a gallery. It is a noun, an object to be published, disseminated, and discussed. There is nothing wrong with this—these close readings are often insightful and productive. But there is room—and, indeed, a need—for a complementary process-focused approach, and it is for this that I suggest the process-focused term “reading closer” to highlight the

difference in approach and goals, even as the two remain considerably overlapping processes.

The comparative form in reading closer highlights the shift from close reading as a fixed, absolute process or even product toward seeing the “closeness” of a reading relative to a reader’s prior degree of understanding. Reading closer emphasizes the relationship between the reader and the act of reading rather than the reading (noun) ultimately produced. The level of granularity achieved when reading closer may fall short of, for instance, Cleanth Brooks’s close readings of irony, and the topics explored may be less organized (87-89). Reading closer does not reject close readings but emphasize a process of approaching their meticulous detail while paying attention to how new knowledge fits or fails to fit with a reader’s existing understanding. (For this reason, if one wanted to stress reflexivity over the relationship to a reader’s prior understanding, one could swap out “closer” for “reflexive” and talk about “reflexive reading.”) Reading closer should be stressed in the classroom in tandem with close readings, and attention to both can be productive in either order. The goal is to focus (student) readers’ attention on their existing reading strategies and ways that they can make them more intentional (or self-reflexive) and thus more rigorous and thoughtful. In the spirit of composing, I ask students to read more closely than they currently are by considering and building on their current state of knowledge, understanding, and ignorance. Reading closer takes readers’ existing frameworks of understanding into account and attempts to expand those frameworks to incorporate close reading skills and textual



information. This both gets students moving toward the kinds of close readings we ultimately want them to be capable of and, by taking as a starting point their individualized existing knowledge frameworks, also stresses the composing skills that I argue are essential in our age of accelerating globalization. What do I know that is relevant as I read this text? What am I confused about? And how are those two—my knowledge and my ignorance—related? How do I build on the one to manage the other?

This description suggests that, just as reading closer overlaps with close reading in meaningful ways, so too does it overlap with feminist reflexivity. I suggest a new term not to disguise or minimize such overlaps but to stress how reading closer arises from the particular problems of globalized connectivity. While related to key feminist concerns of reflexivity, the questions above also speak to problems of globalized composing—problems of overwhelming scope, connectivity, and the necessity of reductive narrativization. In a sense, I insist on the usefulness of the distinction between reading closer and reflexive reading in order to reflexively point out how similar processes have developed from different analytical points of origin. Reading closer asks students to ask and answer questions about their situatedness in relation to knowledge and ignorance in the context of overwhelming globalization, while reflexive reading has in recent decades developed as a similar practice grounded in important feminist concerns with the gendered biases systemically built into claims to objective analytical practices.

So what does reading closer look like in the classroom? As an example, when I ask a college literature class for non-majors to read closer while discussing a course text, rather than choosing a section I consider important, I ask students where they felt most confused or unsure in their textual interpretation. We then read those sections of text closely for helpful textual clues overlooked the first time through. Students' own insights upon an additional reading, the perspectives of other students, and my suggestions all provide new entry points to textual interpretation. While these content-related outcomes are significant, an equally important goal of the exercise is for students to focus on how they use close textual attention to effectively respond to their own concerns (within our overall course topics), not just as the route to a definitive or preferred reading of the text. To put this another way, reading closer is not just about getting from uncertainty to a desired understanding, but about plotting this path *from* one's current state of understanding: it emphasizes knowing where *here* is as important to getting from here to there.

Reading closer can be particularly helpful when addressing challenging narrative structures or literary language, as in Zadie Smith's *NW*, analyzed in chapter two. Smith's language often gets at ideas obliquely and the organizational structures of the book can be overwhelming, as in part three, "Host," which narrates thirty years of Keisha/Natalie's life through 185 short, oddly titled fragments. When reading closer, I start class discussion of this section of *NW* by asking students to identify points in the text that confused them, raised questions, or resisted

interpretation in relation to the rest of the text. This gives students an initial opportunity to read closer on their own. Then I have students form small groups and discuss one or two sticking points in the text together, looking to the text once more for sources of clarification. Finally, we come together as a whole class and I ask students to share both instances where they were able to clarify an issue somewhat (alone or with their group) and also instances where they remain baffled. In the former case, I ask them to describe the helpful process of reading closer, and in the latter, we reexamine the relevant section of the text as a whole group to address question at hand. Though the mixture of topics addressed are, of course, unique to each group of students, many students use this exercise to clarify the novel's subtly implied overlapping timelines—identifying “The Crash” as the 2008 recession and Natalie and Frank’s falling out in part three as occurring a day or two before the carnival scenes from the end of part one (Smith 326, 355). Reading closer into topics like Natalie’s ideas about “an image system at work in the world” that is always crumbling but never gone, on the other hand, often gives rise to productive conversations that resist easy answers or consensus due to their thematic rather than logistical nature (322).

Reading closer, like close reading in general, can help readers develop habits of slowing down, rereading, and looking to textual details for overlooked connections, connotations, and interpretations. The focus on process—on adding new information to their existing frameworks for interpretation—is responsive to a reader’s or class’s current state of understanding and presents methods for

identifying and addressing gaps in understanding. Reading closer is also helpful because, when the students choose the textual passages to investigate, rather than the professor, the reading that emerges may feel less like a monolithic, preexisting scholarly interpretation, and more like a process of (in this case, collaborative) engagement with the text. Because the professor didn't plan this discussion of this page of text, it feels like a discovery, a reader (or student)-centered process that we are experiencing and practicing together, not a prefabricated *deus ex machina* here to save them from interpretive confusion. The exploratory dynamic of reading closer can also encourage students to feel they don't have to have all the answers (especially not right away) or have the "right" answer in order to contribute in class and that questions and confusion can be as productive as insights and coherent interpretations. Reading closer helps bridge the gap between confusion and polished, satisfying interpretations by emphasizing the process of incremental textual analysis that gets us from their questions to enlightening interpretations like the ones I model in lectures. Reading closer emphasizes the process of delving into inexhaustible contexts and lines of inquiry, and thus complements exemplary close readings by illuminating where they come from.

Reading closer is a practice rooted in readerly compositing as applied to students. At any point while reading, one could easily ask thousands of different questions of a text depending on the contexts of interest, one's existing knowledge (of allusions, character psychology, etc.), and one's goals (since why we read affects how we read). Deciding what questions to ask and what knowledge to construct is a

compositing process. Reading closer approaches education through the revision of current understandings—the recompositing of existing knowledge and interpretive frameworks by means of addition, substitution, connection, and rearrangement. The emphasis on process and on building upon existing understandings makes reading closer an analytical skill relevant in a variety of situations in and beyond the classroom—anywhere that “texts,” in the most expansive sense of the word, can be read. Compositing informs my pedagogy through its insistence that we must revise our understandings—of ourselves, each other, and the world—to account for new experiences and perspectives. By modeling and encouraging effective compositing techniques for textual analysis we can help students develop greater awareness of and control over their learning processes in the classroom and beyond. Revision and developing initial insights and questions by reading closer emphasizes the idiosyncratic nature of each reader’s compositing process. It also provides opportunities for exploring standardization of practices by interpretive communities and for applying collective intelligence to a textual problem as a class and through research. In this way, it is an avenue for responding to Culler’s call for investigation of the different modes of close reading and ways of achieving closeness and understanding how individual processes are shaped into more standardized forms—how a process becomes a product (23-24).

Processes of reading closer can easily be scaled up from close reading within a text to contextual and intertextual analyses of literature and culture. This connects reading closer to the broader concerns of this project since, as I’ve argued

throughout this dissertation, such composing skills are increasingly necessary in our age of accelerating globalization. Reading closer and my overall exploration of general composing share a fundamental insistence on the importance of each individual's unique location within a globalized web of complex connectivity. With reading closer, this is the web of the text in itself and as a nexus linked to endless intertexts and contexts. With the globalized world, the formulation is the same, with "text" construed figuratively rather than literally to describe whatever an individual seeks to interpret and incorporate into his or her existing understanding. In every case, the ultimate goal of composing is to expand our capacity for knowledge of and participation in the many forms of complex connectivity that link us to the world with increasing and often overwhelming intensity.

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## VITA

Sean P. O'Brien's research applies narrative, globalization, and media theory to contemporary global Anglophone fiction and new media literature in order to better understand our age of accelerating globalization. This dissertation furthers those research interests by exploring how literary narratives employ newly prominent composite narrative structures to represent and enact key methods of managing overwhelming globalized connectivity in our lives and narratives. O'Brien graduated from Truman State University with a Bachelor of Arts in English, studied at Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen in Germany on a Fulbright student grant, earned a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) at National-Louis University, and taught high school literature and composition before beginning his graduate study at Loyola University Chicago. At Loyola, he received his Master of Arts in English and his Ph.D. in English. O'Brien has published on globalization and narrative in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* and the *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, game studies in *paj: The Journal of the Initiative for Digital Humanities, Media, and Culture* (forthcoming), and narrative analysis in *Victorians: A Journal of Culture and Literature*.