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Supernatural experiences of relationality: shifts in the magical realism of twenty-first-century transnational literature

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**Supernatural experiences of relationality: shifts in the magical
realism of twenty-first-century transnational literature**

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King's College London

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Abstract

This project argues that twenty-first century transnational novelists have reconfigured magical realism in response to conditions of heightened migration in the first few decades of this century. The project demonstrates how contemporary magical realist techniques grow out of the methods developed in the twentieth century but diverge to reflect the different encounters the novels depict. The study examines four novels that chronicle transnational experiences: Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2006) combines the United Kingdom with Nigeria; Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) traverses an undefined region of the 'global south', the United Kingdom, the United States and other nations; Preeta Samarasan's *Evening is the Whole Day* (2009) incorporates Malaysia, India and the United States; Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008) brings together the United States and the Dominican Republic. These novels indicate explicit influences of the magical realism of the twentieth century and enable comparison to the changes the authors have made. They adopt those techniques, sources and themes but subvert, uproot, complicate and innovate them.

Since its first definition by Franz Roh in 1925 and Alejo Carpentier's classic 1949 essay that introduced the concept of *lo real maravilloso* to the Americas, and the 1960s boom of magical realist fiction from Central and South America, the mode has been adopted and transformed by practitioners worldwide. Notable examples include Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, Isabel Allende and Ben Okri. Since the 1980s and into the twenty-first century, it has remained one of the most popular modes of writing globally.

Scholars at the forefront of postcolonialism such as Fredric Jameson and Homi Bhabha note the rise of magical realism in postcolonial countries. They claimed it as a postcolonial mode, and subsequent critics continue to read it from this framework. As a result, much scholarship on magical realism has stagnated in its postcolonial formations, despite it having continued to evolve in more transnational examples. These have rendered certain influential critical definitions out of date.

Addressing the lack of consideration of the contemporary emergence of magical realism, this thesis traces a move towards the representation of, rather than resistance to, traumatic events. The project argues that authors deploying magical realism have reconfigured the mode to demonstrate an intensified correlation with

aesthetic magical realist tropes and the characters' transnational experiences. They reveal shifts towards interiority in their representations of the supernatural to capture the experiential tensions arising in the lives of migrants and their families.

Probing and building on definitions formulated by Amaryll Chanady (1985), Wendy Faris (2004) and Christopher Warnes (2009), this study develops a characterisation of magical realism that reflects its changes and evolution during the first decades of the twenty-first century. I identify it as a mode in which characters perceive the supernatural as impossible but pay little attention to the contradiction this implies.

This thesis then analyses how the selected authors differ in their uses of magical realism alongside their texts' increased transnationality. I argue scholars of transnationalism such as Alejandro Portes, Steve Vertovec and Deborah Bryceson reveal *relationality* as a key foundational component of the experiences of migrants. As the thesis will explore, the term *relationality* in psychoanalysis, as developed by Stephen Mitchell among others, depicts the self as dependent on a network of connections to others. In this model, aspects of the self such as identity and nationality become fluid and dynamic, shifting in their relationship to other people. Drawing on this framework, I compare the way the novelists adapt the techniques established by Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie to capture these transnational changes. I contend that the supernatural in these contemporary iterations resembles literalised metaphors of tensions between conflicting affective states for migrants and their descendants. In these texts, interconnected, interdependent and interpersonal qualities of nationality, identity, home, class and family distinguish the characters' transnationalities. The protagonists of the selected novels experience these categories as relational; however, the protagonists face entrenched notions of static, objective, mutually exclusive categories. The authors represent the resultant emotional tension and trauma through the emergence of the supernatural.

In *The Icarus Girl* (2006), Helen Oyeyemi reconfigures a prevalent magical realist technique of opposing two world views. As with texts of Carpentier, Asturias and Okri, one such world view is mapped onto a Eurocentric notion of rationality and another aligns with the supernatural beliefs of a colonised culture. Oyeyemi undermines this dichotomy to interrogate essentialised categories of identity that are tied to race and nation and which the protagonist's transnationality has rendered

relational. It therefore shows oppositional thinking as a cause of trauma in her transnational context. Oyeyemi uses the postcolonial notions of resistance to imagine the supernatural emerging from the cosmology of colonised people in West Africa; however, she uproots it and relocates it in British suburbia. She isolates the phenomenon to the interior perspective of the child protagonist. She thereby places the mythological in connection with the psychoanalytical by simultaneously representing an emerging understanding of trauma through the same supernatural trope.

Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) overlaps the supernatural and technological, bringing magical realism to a twenty-first-century milieu of intensified migration. He deterritorialises magical realism by rendering it intrinsically global, mirroring the increased connectivity that has been wrought by communication technology. He simultaneously represents these globalising influences in a portrayal of magical portals. Both portals and technology contribute to the disconnectedness and homelessness migrants may feel in Hamid's text; he likewise applies this experience of dislocation and disorientation to all individuals facing globalising processes of change and loss. Like Oyeyemi, he depicts the resistance of mutually exclusive ideologies, in his case of national borders, which collapse on account of the literalised metaphor of the portals. His novel argues that human relatedness is the only stable basis for establishing home in the twenty-first-century conditions of increased transnationality.

In *Evening is the Whole Day* (2009), Preeta Samarasan critiques a wealthy transnational family that dehumanises its servants. Complicating the postcolonial tendency to deploy ghosts as intrusions of the colonial past into the present, she combines this trope with a spirit that speaks of the perpetuity of classism in contemporary, transnational elites. The novel demonstrates further links between postcolonial magical realism and the contemporary turn which she exemplifies by making intertextual references to Rushdie. In this regard she demonstrates an increasing trend in the mode's self-referentiality. Like Oyeyemi, Samarasan's text directs focalisation of the supernatural towards the interior. She literalises the experience of perceived differences between the rich and poor simultaneously collapsing and being reinforced. The novel implicates the wealthy family's moral poverty and lack of ethical relationality as the cause of their prejudice towards, and exploitation of, the poor.

Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008) innovates magical realist techniques to focus on family and history connectedness. Taking inspiration from science fiction and fantasy, Díaz establishes several unprecedented alternative sources for the supernatural. He deploys these to relate the histories of colonialism, imperialism and extant neoliberalism. He intensifies the relationship between self-referentiality and magical realism by shifting the supernatural to the metafictional level of the text. His narrator claims the novel itself to be supernatural, furthering the metafictionality through intertextual references to postcolonial magical realism. He weaves magical-realist–science-fiction metaphors into the narrative structure, which allow him to creatively express the traumatic consequences of oppression from colonialism, totalitarianism and racism. These effects are borne out in the fragmentary and isolating experiences of an underprivileged migrant family. Díaz fixates on the value of family connectivity in maintaining emotional wellbeing in transnational circumstances. He emphasises, as do Oyeyemi, Hamid and Samarasan, that the relational aspects of transnationality need to be better understood and embraced as hallmarks of transnational experience. For migrants and their descendants, the denial of relationality in social contexts inspires disconnection and isolation, a contradiction to the increased connectivity manifesting in the twenty-first century. Magical realism thus embodies these transnational experiences of paradox, and their resolution, by blurring the distinction between the supernatural and the mundane.

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Introduction

The transnational origins of magical realism

Magical realism has remained a widely deployed device in anglophone literature since its formal inception in the mid-twentieth century. In this introduction, I argue that, despite vast social and cultural changes having taken place in the intervening years, much critical understanding of this mode of writing still relies on definitions and analyses based on its early forms. Twentieth-century magical realism is dominated by the theories and contestatory politics of postcolonialism, whereas many twenty-first-century texts turn more closely from the political towards the personal. They portray their characters experiencing and navigating an increasingly complex web of relations between nationalities and cultures.

To explore these changes, this introduction first outlines the origins of the mode in terms of its plurality of cultural influences. I then call attention to some of the problematic and anachronistic features of prevailing scholarship on the mode. I demonstrate where contemporary examples of literary magical realism diverge from these critical stances, particularly the oppositional concept of resistance. Many novelists in the twenty-first century depict experiences that are increasingly dynamic and complex, which make connections across numerous national borders. Transnationality, a term which this introduction explores in detail, exposes interrelated and interconnected sets of relationships between and across nations, cultures and communities. Categories such as nationalities are depicted not as discrete or mutually exclusive, but as qualities that inflect in relationship to one another. The introduction therefore sets out a framework of *relational* ways of experiencing these contemporary milieux, a term taken and adapted from psychoanalysis. While authors depict migrants and their children experiencing such categories as fluid, these experiences come under tension against entrenched, atomistic and solitary ideologies from different sources. The authors use the supernatural to capture a sense of disorientation, paradox and trauma resulting from these difficult and contradictory viewpoints.

Further, as a result of the unprecedented nature of these experiences, the themes, the sources of the supernatural and the literary techniques they deploy to envision them differ significantly from earlier iterations of the mode. I argue that the

selected authors deploy magical realist techniques built from the tropes developed in the twentieth century but reconfigured in crucial ways. This requires a re-evaluation of the mode to conceptualise how it can now be characterised, how its authors have changed its techniques and how they generate meanings differently. This thesis explores these shifts.

The term *magical realism* itself has travelled far from its origins. It was a label coined by Franz Roh in 1925, originally intended to define post-expressionist art.¹ His definition, and the art it purports to describe, is not bound to overtly supernatural elements. It instead expresses the mystery within the mundane: ‘mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it.’² Yet in its literary form, few definitions exclude incontrovertibly supernatural events as intrinsic to its deployment.

The literary version of magical realism has always betrayed such malleability, particularly in terms of its transnationality. This is despite efforts of some of its proponents to ground it in national or regional culture, or to *territorialise* the mode in the words of Amaryll Chanady.³ Most of the earliest authors to develop the literary style came from, or wrote about, Central or South America or the Caribbean islands. As such, its firmest association for many remains with Latin America.⁴ Many of its early authors, such as Alejo Carpentier from Cuba, Miguel Ángel Asturias from Guatemala, Juan Rulfo from Mexico and José María Arguedas from Peru, attempted to reinforce this association. It often depicted the beliefs of cultures that predated, and had been oppressed by, Western European colonial expansion into those regions. Consequently, it became associated with the land, the rural and the natural. These authors, and many critics supporting their positions, depict the magical realist

¹ Other critics such as Christopher Warnes locate it much earlier, crediting it to eighteenth-century philosopher Novalis (Christopher Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 19).

² Franz Roh, ‘Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, trans. by Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 15–32 (p. 16).

³ Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, ‘The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America: Self-Affirmation and Resistance to Metropolitan Paradigms’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 125–44.

⁴ I am using the term *Latin America* advisedly but reluctantly. The term, broad and inaccurate as it is, belies the multiple territories, ethnicities, cultures and nations it depicts. It betrays transnationality in its complex ties between Europe and the American continents and islands, figuratively reinforcing colonial imposition. Yet the UN continues to adopt the term, as do many inhabitants and critics, to discuss and unify this vast region. Therefore, despite its colonial implications, I will use the term where no alternative seems practicable.

writing of Latin America as specifically contingent on its territory.⁵ However, even in these early incarnations, narrative magical realism presented aspects of transnationality, despite these attempts to territorialise it. It took form as a relatively cohesive literary movement in large part through the work of Carpentier in the 1940s, who brought his style of writing to Cuba and Haiti after having spent years with the surrealists in Paris. The influence of the French movement is clear: like magical realism, surrealism claimed to ‘expose the falseness of rationality’ through depicting that which defies reason.⁶ Arguably as a result of this European influence, similarities between Carpentier’s efforts and German Expressionism and European modernism have come to the fore.⁷

Yet, despite this rich heritage of transnational influences, Carpentier attempted to claim that his narrative form, which he termed *lo real maravilloso* (the marvellous real), was an expression of wonder inherent in the Americas. In the prologue to *The Kingdom of this World* (1949), one of the earliest books to use this device self-consciously, he claims to have written his novel after being awed by a visit to Haiti.⁸ On his trip, he experienced the marvellous real when he saw the ruins of a palace built for King Henri Christophe, the first African-born leader of post-revolution Haiti.⁹ The wonder that the building inspired relied in part on the incongruence of the architecture, influenced by the palaces of France, in the jungle of Haiti. Despite this enmeshing of different cultures, which is reflected in the term *Latin America*, Carpentier claims that this quality is singularly constitutional of the territory: ‘The marvelous real is found at every stage in the lives of men who inscribed dates in the history of the continent and who left the names that we still

⁵ According to critics who support their views, these authors profess ‘the existence of a uniquely New World marvelous reality, characterized by an impressive geography, cultural and racial miscegenation, [which] legitimated and territorialized a literary marvelous’ (Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, ‘The Territorialization of the Imaginary in Latin America’, p. 133). Similarly, Fredric Jameson argues the mode delivers an ‘authentic Latin American’ narrative (Fredric Jameson, ‘On Magic Realism in Film’, *Critical Inquiry*, 12.2 (1986), 301–25 (p. 301)).

⁶ Ricardo Roque-Baldovinos, ‘The “Epic Novel”: Charismatic Nationalism and the Avant-Garde in Latin America’, *Cultural Critique*, 49.1 (2001), 58–83 (p. 64).

⁷ Warnes, among others, cites Kafka as an early proponent of a form of magical realism (Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, p. 28).

⁸ *El Reino de este Mundo* in the original. Although Carpentier does not mention C. L. R. James’s 1938 *The Black Jacobins* directly, the recent success of the Trinidadian’s text on the history of the Haitian rebellion had drawn attention to Haiti. It was a site of unique postcoloniality as it had successfully distanced itself from Europe by being the first nation in the region to achieve independence from colonial rule.

⁹ Alejo Carpentier, ‘On the Marvelous Real in America’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, trans. by Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 75–88 (p. 84).

carry.¹⁰ He also feels that it can be found across the entire region: ‘the presence and vitality of this marvelous real was not the unique privilege of Haiti but the heritage of all of America.’¹¹ The novel Carpentier writes to express this sense of the marvellous involves an Africa-born slave who is able to shape-shift into different animal forms. This ability, which Carpentier claims as inherently Latin American, takes its sources from voodoo, a religion characteristically influenced by African traditions. In his text, voodoo offers a form of resistance against French and wider colonial oppression, revealing even further ties across national boundaries. These interactions suggest that critics who confirm these claims towards the territorialisation of his nascent version of magical realism ignore the deterritorial and multinational nature of the wondrous reality he envisioned.

The peripatetic label has gained purchase where other labels for similar modes, including Carpentier’s own, have failed to take hold. The literary style he formulated would become openly deterritorial as it developed outside the Americas in the second half of the twentieth century in many other colonial and postcolonial contexts. Following an explosion in popularity of Latin American writing in the United States in the 1960s, the mode reached a wider audience. This was largely due to the global success of Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), which has reportedly sold fifty million copies across thirty languages.¹² By the 1980s, magical realism had begun to be developed to express a wide range of circumstances. This was particularly so in sites similar to Latin America where the influence of colonialism were still felt to differing degrees. Homi Bhabha even went so far as to say famously that magical realism was the ‘literary language of the emergent post-colonial world’.¹³ Some of these novels joined *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in becoming among the most critically acclaimed of the twentieth century. Salman Rushdie, for instance, deployed telepathy and supernatural powers to convey some of the difficulties following the independence of India from Britain in *Midnight’s Children* (1981). Toni Morrison communicated the enduring effects of

¹⁰ Carpentier, ‘On the Marvelous Real in America’, p. 87.

¹¹ Carpentier, ‘On the Marvelous Real in America’, p. 87.

¹² The Economist, ‘The Magician in His Labyrinth’, *The Economist* <<https://www.economist.com/obituary/2014/04/26/the-magician-in-his-labyrinth>> [accessed 5 August 2022].

¹³ *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 7.

post-independence slavery in the US with ghosts in *Beloved* (1987). By this stage, magical realism had developed into a global, rather than local, literary mode.

Magic vs Realism: Problematic cultural binaries in magical realist scholarship

Some of the most influential critical work conducted on magical realism arose during this period. Many of these studies draw attention to texts that have stimulated some of the most valid criticisms of the mode, while ignoring examples that diverge from the formulations those studies propose. This thesis contends that these postcolonial models are still being used as critical lenses for texts for which they are now unsuited: they are based on precepts of anti-colonial oppositionality that are overly reductive for many twenty-first-century magical realist novels. Amaryll Chanady's *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy* (1985) is one such work, which contains among the most enduring definitions of the mode. Chanady delineates a tripartite definition of magical realism: the presence of two opposing world views, the resolution of the antinomy between the two world views, and the use of authorial reticence to facilitate this resolution. The first criterion asserts that two binary, mutually exclusive cosmologies must be represented in the text: 'Magical realism is [...] characterized [...] by two conflicting, but autonomously coherent, perspectives, one based on an "enlightened" and rational view of reality, and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality.'¹⁴ Chanady elaborates that these two world views align with the cultures of the colonisers and colonised. The texts' 'realism', representing the reason and rationality of a 'Western' world view, is pitted against the 'magic' of myths and beliefs derived from an 'American Indian' cosmology.¹⁵ This depiction of a binary conflict between a cosmology grounded in 'realism' and another based on 'magic' has persisted throughout the decades of critical debate since.¹⁶

¹⁴ Amaryll Beatrice Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved versus Unresolved Antinomy* (New York: Garland, 1985), pp. 21–22.

¹⁵ Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*, pp. 21–23.

¹⁶ This characterisation is upheld in such critical works as: *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*; Eva Aldea, *Magical Realism and Deleuze: The Indiscernibility of Difference in Postcolonial Literature*, Continuum Literary Studies Series (London: Continuum, 2012); *The Palgrave Handbook of Magical Realism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Richard Perez and Victoria A. Chevalier (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2020).

However, as many opponents of magical realism have pointed out, the idea that the religious beliefs of certain cultures are ‘magical’ and are in contrast to the ‘real’ strongly implies that those beliefs are erroneous. Seen this way, the mode is rightly vulnerable to criticisms of primitivism and infantilising other cultures. This is exacerbated by the fact that the overall framing of most novels like Carpentier’s is realist, within which supernatural things occur. Maggie Ann Bowers rightly criticises literature modelled this way:

[it] places more value on realism and pragmatism than it does on the magical which it associates negatively with the irrational. It [...] reinforces the colonialist view that the colonized are like irrational children who need the guidance and superior knowledge of the colonial power in order to progress into modernity.¹⁷

When this ‘magical’ cosmology is set in opposition to a rational perspective, which Chanady calls ‘ours’, ‘educated’ and ‘Western’, it not only implies that ‘Western’ cultures are entirely secular but that their beliefs are true.¹⁸ A structure seen this way, as Kim Anderson Sasser points out, ‘supposes [...] that all formerly colonized peoples adhere to a supernatural worldview, and [...] that people from formerly colonizing nations (Anglo-Europeans) adhere to a rationalist, and conversely antismagicalist [...] worldview’.¹⁹ Additionally, this perspective clusters marginalised cultures and European ones into two homogeneous groups (‘the West and the rest’) without acknowledging differences within and between them.²⁰ This demeaning of the marginalised beliefs of the subjugated populations of colonial Latin America runs entirely counter to the stated goals of authors such as Carpentier and Asturias of positively raising the profiles of those cosmologies.

Carpentier’s execution scene in *The Kingdom of this World* exemplifies how this structural binary between ‘magic’ and ‘realism’ can be problematic. Despite the fact that it fails some of Chanady’s other criteria, the scene is repeatedly cited in

¹⁷ Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 119.

¹⁸ Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*, p. 27; p. 23; p. 22.

¹⁹ Kim Anderson Sasser, *Magical Realism and Cosmopolitanism: Strategizing Belonging*. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 23.

²⁰ Chanady does acknowledge that this ‘magical’ cosmology need not be a whole culture but the perspective of a ‘madman’ (Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*, p. 29). However, the outlook of someone with mental health issues cannot be equated to a cultural cosmology, resonant with a plurality of values and beliefs, but merely a matter of perception. Furthermore, almost all of the examples in her study are ones in which two cultural world views are represented by these two codes.

Chanady and elsewhere as a prototype of literary magical realism.²¹ As an early self-conscious usage of the mode, it additionally provides a perspective from which changes to this structure can be seen to have emerged. The novel narrates the story of Macandal, an insurgent who rises against French slave owners of colonial Haiti. Macandal is captured and condemned to public execution by burning. The scene depicts the French perceiving Macandal dying, while the slaves see him slip his bonds, turn into a mosquito and fly away.²² Carpentier describes the events from each perspective, shifting focalisation from one perspective to the other. In one paragraph Macandal is described as ‘a man chrismed by the great Loas [voodoo spirit]’, which demonstrates a knowledge exclusive to believers in voodoo.²³ The following paragraph then shifts focalisation, expressing knowledge belonging to the French perspective: ‘With a gesture rehearsed the evening before in front of the mirror [the slaves could not know this], the Governor unsheathed his dress sword’ (p. 45). The shifts in focalisation then become more frequent. A sentence describes Macandal ‘howling unknown spells’ as the fire starts to burn him, suggesting a European viewpoint which does not understand his language (p. 45). Then, the focus returns to the slaves: ‘The bonds fell off and the body of the Negro rose in the air, flying overhead’ (p. 45).

This vacillation places the supernatural perspective of the slaves in opposition to the rationalist one of the slavers. However, there is a slip in the focalisation: the narrator explains that ‘very few saw that Macandal [...] had been thrust head first into the fire’ (p. 46). The phrase ‘very few saw’ defocalises the incident, shedding the subjectivity that circumscribes other parts of the narrative. This is suddenly an omniscient narrator directly addressing the reader above both European and slave perspectives, suggesting Macandal is actually killed. In casting doubt over the

²¹ Mariano Siskind recently classified the scene as the central conceptual source of postcolonial magical realism (Mariano Siskind, ‘The Global Life of Genres and the Material Travels of Magical Realism’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Magical Realism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Richard Perez and Victoria A. Chevalier (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2020), pp. 23–65 (p. 35)).

²² Carpentier narrates the real-world events of this scene as depicted in the journals of a resident of Haiti (then known as Saint-Domingue), Moreau de Saint-Méry, and other diaries and historical documents. These state that Macandal was executed by burning and that the slave population truly believed in the transformation that Carpentier depicts. They even mention that Macandal momentarily escaped, which caused great confusion and possibly explains why there are different recollections of the event (Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, pp. 64–71).

²³ Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World*, trans. by Harriet De Onís (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1949), p. 45. Further references to this text are provided in parenthesis after quotations.

ontological status of the fantastic elements, Carpentier allows the reader, as many critics have done, to read the magic as primitive superstition. This is compounded by the fact that this scene, the text's most prominent magical realist moment, is in the first few chapters of the novel. Many of the later episodes further denigrate the magical perspective by equating it with madness.²⁴ If the text demeans the transformation as merely an illusion believed by the slaves, then it inadvertently promotes rationalist forms of knowledge and denigrates voodoo beliefs. This is in direct contradiction to the more overt anti-colonial content of the novel. It validates the numerous critiques that Carpentier perpetuates primitivist representations of slave beliefs in order, as Frederick Aldama puts it, to 'serve up a consumable exotic'.²⁵

It is this model, which has now become outmoded, that has led to many of the most valid criticisms levelled at magical realism since then. Bill Ashcroft, among many others, contends that it condescendingly promotes primitive cultures in naïve longing for tradition: a 'limp and nostalgic romanticism.'²⁶ Michael Taussig describes the mode in this form as a 'neocolonial reworking of primitivism' for exhibiting these cultures in the Americas as curios for consumption in Europe and the United States.²⁷ Some critics like Sasser emphasise merely the dual code aspect of Chanady's definition rather than the emphasis on world views; this is in no real doubt as supernatural events are almost always separated from the mundane by differences in their characterisation.²⁸ It is when these differences are portrayed as mutually exclusive and attached to cultural cosmologies that the weakness in this model is exposed.

²⁴ The text is explicit that Ti Noël is becoming senile by the third section: 'He had long since acquired the art of talking with chairs, pots, a guitar, even a cow or his own shadow' (p. 102). Like Macandal, he changes into animals, but unlike in the execution scene, the focalisation is firmly Ti Noël's and there are no external witnesses: 'Once he had come to this decision, Ti Noël was astonished at how easy it is to turn into an animal when one has the necessary powers. In proof of this he climbed a tree' (p. 172). By homing in on Ti Noël's 'decision', the text delves into the mindset of Ti Noël; the reader is left with little doubt that Ti Noël's magic is imaginary.

²⁵ Frederick Luis Aldama, *Postethnic Narrative Criticism: Magicorealism in Oscar 'Zeta' Acosta, Ana Castillo, Julie Dash, Hanif Kureishi, and Salman Rushdie* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), p. 21.

²⁶ Bill Ashcroft, 'Chicano Transnation', in *Imagined Transnationalism: U.S. Latino/a Literature, Culture, and Identity*, ed. by Kevin Concannon, Francisco A. Lomelí, and Marc Priewe (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 13–28 (p. 18).

²⁷ Michael T. Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 172.

²⁸ Sasser, *Magical Realism and Cosmopolitanism*, p. 21. Asturias's *Men of Maize* (1949), for example, clearly distinguishes a shift in language styles between supernatural and mundane events, the mundane presented in short simple clauses, the supernatural in longer, more figurative sentences.

While the model Chanady proposes, whereby magical realism represents opposing world views, is problematic, I further argue it does not even account for much of the supernatural in the magical realism of the latter half of the twentieth century, let alone since then. Although some novels do follow this structure (like Oyeyemi's text in this project), it is reasonably rare for the supernatural events to be sourced exclusively from a single culture and thereby represent that culture in contrast to another. This is the case even in some of the most canonical texts that have remained the inspiration for subsequent generations of novelists where Carpentier's model has lost favour. García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, for example, contains an ascension to heaven, loaded with Catholic connotations; a magic carpet, as if taken from Middle Eastern folklore; and a pot of milk turning into worms, representative of no certain cosmology. Likewise, *Midnight's Children*'s most prominent supernatural element is a telepathic nose, which may obliquely relate to the mythology of Ganesh, but its clairvoyant powers are not manifestly related to the Hindu god. More essentially, in most cases these texts depict only one prevailing world view, which may (but most often does not) find the supernatural admissible. There is much less often two prevailing world views, and if there are, they are rarely in strict opposition. The supernatural typically coincides with the mundane not as oppositions but alongside one another: a single perspective containing both codes in complementary relationship.²⁹ In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the distinction between the responses of the magic carpet is not of differing cosmologies but different relationships with it: children look at it 'merrily' and 'enthusiastic', while José Arcadio Buendía is unconcerned because he believes they will 'do better flying' in the future.³⁰ Both perceive the same, supernatural event. It is their attitude, not their acknowledgement of the veracity of the event, that characterises the response. Likewise, in Morrison's *Beloved*, all characters witness the ghostly events at the start as supernatural: 'The women in the house knew it and

²⁹ Examples can be found in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* (*Como agua para chocolate*) (1992), or in more recent works, Syl Cheney-Coker's *Sacred River* (2013), Eka Kurniawan's *Beauty is a Wound* (2015) (*Cantik Itu Luka* (2002)), and Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017). All contain aspects of the supernatural within only one prevailing perspective which admits both the supernatural and the mundane.

³⁰ Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (London: Penguin, 1967), p. 32. Kindle ebook.

so did the children.’³¹ There is no clean dichotomy between the rational and the supernatural.

Chanady’s definition is therefore incomplete: it may effectively define works like Carpentier’s but not the large number whose magical realist structure differs. Chanady herself has since softened her position of being so definitive. She now acknowledges that ‘it is impossible to agree on a definitive meaning’ for the mode.³² It reveals the need, as this project does, to re-evaluate how contemporary authors have adopted the approach to evince increased levels of complexity and connectivity in twenty-first-century cross-cultural exchanges.

A ‘metaphysical clash’: Anachronistic oppositionality in postcolonial magical realism

Part of the attachment in literary criticism of magical realism to a binary of opposing views results from the combative frameworks of postcolonialism. Elleke Boehmer exemplifies this critical position: ‘Drawing on the special effects of magic realism, postcolonial writers in English are able to express their view of a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural clash and displacement.’³³ Asturias’s Mayan magic in *Men of Maize* (1949) and Rushdie’s irreverent *Satanic Verses* (1988) are such examples; both depict cultural hegemony and oppression of one culture by another, albeit very differently. Postcolonial readings have often focused on bicultural conflict, unidirectional resistance against othering and third spaces constructed from a prior binary of cultures.³⁴ The idea of cultural conflict is explored in detail in Stephen Slemon’s much-cited article ‘Magic realism as postcolonial

³¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 1987), p. 3.

³² Amaryll Chanady, ‘Magical Realism and the Marvelous Real in the Novel’, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Latin American Novel*, ed. by Juan E. de Castro and Ignacio López-Calvo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 2 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197541852.013.25>>, paragraph 2.

³³ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 229.

³⁴ For examples of explorations of binary conflict, see: Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*; Jameson, ‘On Magic Realism in Film’; Stephen Slemon, ‘Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse’, *Canadian Literature*, 116, 1988, 9–24. Analyses of resistance is prevalent in Theo L. D’Haen, ‘Magical Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 191–209. Third spaces are conceptualised in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, ‘Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(Ie)s’, in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 1–14; Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures, 1 (London: Routledge, 1998).

discourse' (1988). Slemon ascribes to a notion similar to Chanady's that the magical and non-magical elements represent two conflicting systems. As they are incompatible, they signify a battle between perspectives which neither side can fully win: 'This battle is represented in the language of narration by the foregrounding of two opposing discursive systems, with neither managing to subordinate or contain the other.'³⁵ This, Slemon argues, mirrors a process in the real-world circumstances of colonised populations:

The act of colonization, whatever its precise form, initiates a kind of double vision or 'metaphysical clash' within the colonial culture, a binary opposition within language that has its roots in the process of either transporting a language to a new land or imposing a foreign language on an indigenous population.³⁶

Through writing in this oppositional way, magical realism acts as 'a concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems', where cultural and philosophical hegemony can be challenged in a way not possible through realism.³⁷

In such texts, the supernatural is seen as a form of 'cultural corrective', in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris's words.³⁸ This forms the primary relationship between magical realism and postcolonial discourse. The supernatural may directly affect the outcomes of the plot by reimagining a historical context of oppression from which those having been colonised are liberated by the supernatural. In *Men of Maize*, the Mayan people use incantations to invoke powers to defeat Spanish corn farmers; in *The Kingdom of this World*, the slaves shape-shift to evade execution by slavers. At other times, the supernatural may foreground local or indigenous beliefs in order to revive cultures under threat: Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) characterises this type of discourse. Even Saleem Sinai's telepathic nose in *Midnight's Children* provides initial optimism in imagining the unification of a fragmenting nation.

³⁵ Slemon, 'Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse', p. 12.

³⁶ Slemon, 'Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse', p. 12.

³⁷ Slemon, 'Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse', p. 10.

³⁸ Zamora and Faris, 'Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(Ie)s', p. 3.

This combative line of enquiry develops but continues into the twenty-first century with Christopher Warnes's influential *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (2009). In order to account for and explore variances in the styles, contexts and sources of the supernatural in magical realist texts as the mode has developed, Warnes suggests that it can be divided into different types or strands.³⁹ He contrasts 'faith-based texts', in which supernatural events are drawn from belief systems (such as those of Carpentier, Asturias and Okri), with 'irreverent' forms that use postmodern techniques and literary experimentation to develop their supernatural elements.⁴⁰ However, for Warnes, who frames his work around postcolonial iterations of the mode, oppositionality is still evident. His faith-based magical realism 'represent[s] an attempt to supplement, extend or overwhelm' a rationalist paradigm, while the irreverent form 'seeks to critique the claims to truth and coherence of the modern, western world view by showing them up as culturally and historically contingent'.⁴¹

This model fits his selection of texts and provides a clear distinction between them. I contend, however, that these distinctions now struggle to account for changes made to the mode in its turn towards increased transnationality. In such examples, where cultures are increasingly fluid, a connection between supernatural experience and faith has become rare enough that Warnes's distinction is less useful.⁴² Even when a belief system is the source of the supernatural, it is increasingly the case that the texts are also irreverent, expressing a literary self-awareness less apparent in earlier twentieth-century magical realism. Furthermore, as the selected novels in this project evidence, a focus on oppositionality and postcoloniality is proving inadequate for reading more contemporary fiction where colonialism and cultural hegemony are less frequently the loci of thought.

³⁹ Other prominent taxonomies have been developed in: William Spindler, 'Magical Realism: A Typology', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 39.1 (1993), 75–85; Roberto González Echevarría, 'Isla a Su Vuelo Fugitiva: Carpentier y El Realismo Mágico', *Revista Iberoamericana*, 40.86 (1974), 9–63 <<https://doi.org/10.5195/REVIBEROAMER.1974.2549>>; Bowers; Jesús Benito, Ana Ma Manzananas, and Begoña Simal, *Uncertain Mirrors: Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures*, Critical Approaches to Ethnic American Literature, 3 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009); Sasser, *Magical Realism and Cosmopolitanism*, p.25.

⁴⁰ Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, p. 13.

⁴¹ Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, p. 11; p. 13.

⁴² Contemporary examples where the supernatural events have little or no relation to any organised belief system include Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Téa Obreht's *The Tiger's Wife* (2011), Porochista Khakpour's *The Last Illusion* (2014), and, as will be explored more fully in later chapters, Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) and Preeta Samarasan's *Evening is the Whole Day* (2009).

This oppositional perspective has not abated: in 2020, Mariano Siskind suggested versions of magical realism that involved themes disconnected from postcolonialism be labelled ‘post-magical realist’.⁴³ This type of reading of twenty-first-century criticism is still overly laden with references to Carpentier and the form of magical realism he helped to popularise.⁴⁴ Even the most up-to-date anthology on the subject, Richard Perez and Victoria A. Chevalier’s *The Palgrave Handbook of Magical Realism in the Twenty-First Century* (2020), is dominated by twenty-first-century critical analysis of twentieth-century fiction. These books are excellent resources for the study of postcolonial magical realist texts but the theories they posit are decreasingly relevant for studying more contemporary works. They do not account for the changes in the sources of the supernatural, the historical contexts, the themes or the ways the supernatural generates meaning relating to the circumstances the authors depict. How can studies from the twentieth century, for example, adequately describe the relationship between the supernatural, mass migrations in the mid-2010s and mobile phone technology? As global and transnational contexts have become increasingly fertile ground for authors adopting magical realism, reading these texts requires an appreciation of the modifications that have been made to it.

The shift towards transnational magical realism

This project seeks to understand the continued correlation between magical realism and experiences of migration and cultural exchange in the increased transnationality of the twenty-first century. Contemporary authors write with knowledge of, but much less emphasis on, postcolonial political and critical histories. They adopt techniques similar to those conducted by postcolonial writers but gear them towards heightened transnational circumstances. While there is no clean distinction between postcolonial and transnational approaches, the increased connectivity and complexity of ties in transnational contexts suggest a transformation in perceptions of cultural exchange. Likewise, this change does not imply that twentieth-century authors cannot be seen

⁴³ Siskind, ‘The Global Life of Genres’, p. 53.

⁴⁴ Other important works in this oppositional vein include: Wendy B. Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004); *A Companion to Magical Realism*, ed. by Stephen M. Hart and Wen-chin Ouyang, Colección Tàmesis. Serie A, Monografías, 220 (Rochester, NY: Tamesis, 2005); *Moments of Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures.*, ed. by Lyn Di Iorio Sandín and Richard Perez (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Aldea, *Magical Realism and Deleuze*.

as transnational: Rushdie in particular embodies aspects of transnationality. It is perhaps because of this that Rushdie's influence on the texts explored in this project is more visible than other novelists, as the following chapters outline. However, the selected texts move significantly further away from postcolonialism and towards exploring the ramifications of more intricate and interdependent national relationships. In the context of magical realism, this manifests in the distancing of combative and oppositional ways of thinking. These writers, many with connections to post-colonial sites in South and Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America, often focus their attention more keenly on the increased globalisation that has followed colonial expansions and withdrawals rather than critique colonialism itself.

The thesis focuses on four authors whose biographies reveal complex national configurations. Helen Oyeyemi was born in Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1984 and moved to London when she was four years old.⁴⁵ Since then, she has lived in New York, Paris, Budapest, Berlin and Prague. Her debut novel, *The Icarus Girl* (2006), was written when she was still in secondary school. It received much publicity as the publisher had reportedly offered a very large advance for her work. It received almost universal praise, the New York Times calling it a 'masterly first novel'.⁴⁶ Mohsin Hamid was born in Lahore, Pakistan. He was educated and partly raised in the US and gained citizenship in the UK, but returned to Lahore to continue his career. His novels have all received favourable reviews and his second novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), was made into a successful film. This thesis examines his fourth novel *Exit West* (2017), which was likewise very well-received and is also currently being adapted for the screen. Preeta Samarasan was born in Batu Gajah, Malaysia, and like Hamid, received her education in the US. She now lives in France. Her first novel, *Evening is the Whole Day* (2009), garnered comparisons to Rushdie, Arundhati Roy and Zadie Smith, being described as a 'promising and passionate new voice'.⁴⁷ Junot Díaz, born in 1968 in Santo Domingo, shares his time between the United States and

⁴⁵ Helen Oyeyemi and Liz Hoggard, 'Helen Oyeyemi: "I'm Interested in the Way Women Disappoint One Another"', *The Guardian*, 2 March 2014, section Books <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/mar/02/helen-oyeyemi-women-disappoint-one-another>> [accessed 4 November 2022].

⁴⁶ Lesley Downer, 'The Icarus Girl: The Play Date From Hell', *The New York Times*, 17 July 2005, section Books <<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/17/books/review/the-icarus-girl-the-play-date-from-hell.html>> [accessed 4 November 2022].

⁴⁷ Anonymous, 'Evening Is the Whole Day', *Belfast Telegraph*, 2009.

the Dominican Republic.⁴⁸ His only adult novel to date, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), was voted the best novel of the twenty-first century so far.⁴⁹

These authors have been selected because they demonstrate clear links between transnational and postcolonial magical realism. The texts deploy many related techniques, themes and sources, showcasing the innovations being made to the mode in the twenty-first century. They represent a wide variety of nationalities and transnationalities in order to explore not the experiences of a specific grouping arbitrarily based on location but what commonalities in experience may be identified. While many other texts also show some of these shifts, these four novels are vivid in the connections and distinctions between twentieth-century magical realism and the transnational forms dominating the twenty-first century. They therefore highlight how the mode has grown out of the models of the twentieth century and has been reconfigured to incorporate new, increasingly transnational dynamics.

This thesis centrally argues that transnational magical realism sees a shift away from the political and towards relational perspectives. All four authors show that while elements of postcolonialism remain in many transnational texts, they complicate ideas of cultural conflict: rather than critique domineering cultures, the texts recount the experiences of individuals of varying cultures negotiating between their differences and commonalities. Oppression and cultural tensions are still primary concerns but the texts are less polemic. The conflict between cosmologies and countries, religions or races plays a less frequent role than relationships within those groups. Oyeyemi adopts Yoruba and West African mythology as do Carpentier, Morrison and Okri, yet her interest lies in the relationships a young girl has with her society and family rather than the promotion of that mythology. Samarasan echoes Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in many ways by paralleling a national narrative with a family saga, but her focus is more on the interpersonal than the political. Díaz depicts Dominican migrants in the suburbs of New Jersey, but his text more keenly focuses on the effects of globalised neoliberalism on those families than colonial

⁴⁸ Adriana V. López, 'The Importance of Being Junot—A Pulitzer, Spanglish, and Oscar Wao', *Criticas*, 2008

<<https://web.archive.org/web/20100303132153/http://www.criticismagazine.com/article/CA6606942.html>> [accessed 4 November 2022].

⁴⁹ Alison Flood, 'The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao Declared 21st Century's Best Novel so Far', *The Guardian*, 20 January 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/20/brief-wondrous-life-of-oscar-wao-novel-21st-century-best-junot-diaz>> [accessed 19 November 2017].

oppression or xenophobia. Similarly, Hamid depicts a global pattern of migration that reinforces western Europe and the United States as centres of power. However, he pays closer attention to universal feelings of homelessness and loss of community brought about by technology and mass migration. Hamid even goes so far as to claim that his generation has ‘never had a colonial experience’ so does not ‘place a burden of guilt’ on colonising countries, hence its moderate influence in his and other younger writers’ texts.⁵⁰ These authors look beyond the former colonies and forwards to technical expansions, digital communities and contemporary political circumstances. There continues to be a relationship between magical realism and explorations of nation but where nations are complicated by transnationality. They depict aspects of cultures not in unidirectional opposition but in constant mediation. The supernatural elements, rather than stemming from a single side of an opposition of world views or asking questions of hegemonic stances on reality, now tend to erupt out of disconnections in those networks of affiliations. Their supernatural elements derive from these tensions, and sometimes from mythology, but not from faith, and they have little power to resist or oppose these hegemonies as they do in Slemon’s analysis. The ghosts and mythical creatures of twenty-first-century, transnational magical realism now symbolise these tensions rather than oppose them. Such shifts away from conflicts and binaries and towards interconnected and interpersonal relationships demand that the mode be analysed from a new focus on relatedness instead of postcolonial conflict.

Maintaining the antinomy: Developing a general characterisation of magical realism

Before articulating in more detail how relatedness manifests in transnational contexts, this introduction now reconceptualises magical realism, taking into account its long history and many adaptations. The label itself has contributed to an inaccurate assumption that these texts contain both *magic* and *realism* in opposition.⁵¹ I instead argue that the relationship being portrayed between

⁵⁰ Mushtaq Bilal, ‘Interview with Mohsin Hamid’, in *Writing Pakistan: Conversations on Identity, Nationhood and Fiction* (Noida, India: HarperCollins, 2016), pp. 153–73., cited in Mushtaq Bilal, ‘Reading Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* as a World Novel’, *Journal of World Literature*, 5.3 (2020), 410–27 (p. 416) <<https://doi.org/10.1163/24056480-00503006>>.

⁵¹ Maryam Ebadi Asayesh and Mehmet Fikret Arargüç, for example, argue that magical realism is defined according to ‘its oxymoronic characteristic, magic plus realism’ (Maryam Ebadi Asayesh and

supernatural and non-supernatural elements is more fluid. I adapt aspects of Chanady's and Faris's influential definitions of magical realism to construct a characterisation of the mode. Given how long it has been in use and the breadth of its applications globally, it is not possible to form an absolute and exclusive definition. There are prevalent traits, however, which have remained largely consistent throughout its iterations. I agree with many other critics in establishing the presence of the supernatural and real-world contexts as characteristic of the mode. However, I argue in this section that magical realism is most centrally typified by its characters and narrators tolerating phenomena that conflict with their beliefs. In transnational contexts, this acceptance of paradox iterates conflicting emotional states between the fluidity and stasis of transnationality and the atomised perception of difference saturating these experiences.

Firstly, narrative magical realism typically contains some aspects of the supernatural. Faris describes this as an 'irreducible element of magic'.⁵² As intimated earlier, however, applying the loose term *magic* to these aspects can be troublesome as it is loaded with connotations of opposition to the truth. For this reason, I distinguish between the *mundane* (as in earthly, everyday) and the *supernatural* (spiritual, exceptional). This is a separate distinction to what is real (ontologically valid) and unreal (fantastical, delusional or similar). The supernatural is not in opposition to the real. It does not imply that such events did not actually happen even while they defy science or normal expectations. Beliefs in otherworldly events, whether religious miracles, fate or ghosts, are endemic regardless of culture. However, how the supernatural is characterised is crucial as it raises questions about the notions of culturally contingent consensus reality. Kathryn Hume highlights a common critical perspective that fantasy is anything that 'violate[s] the laws of physics'.⁵³ This ambiguous definition assumes that witnesses to the supernatural understand, are aware of, or agree with those laws. W. R. Irwin prefers a more open definition of an 'overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility': the word 'generally', however, is left unqualified and does not explain who holds this general

Mehmet Fikret Arargüç, 'Magical Realism and Its European Essence', *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 6.2 (2017), 25–35 (p. 25) <<https://doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v6i2.847>>).

⁵² Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction', in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 163–90 (p. 167).

⁵³ Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 22.

perspective.⁵⁴ In magical realist depictions, the supernatural can more specifically be described, rather than a departure from consensus reality, as a departure from a consensual understanding of a rational view of reality. The texts establish an implied reader who views the events as supernatural, regardless of the actual reader's beliefs. Through the depiction of the recognisable and mundane, a perspective whereby the supernatural is seen as impossible (or at least beyond the bounds of normal experience), even while it may be happening, is instituted.

However, even though these events are portrayed as unequivocally supernatural, they are not necessarily ontologically sound as if they are happening for real: Faris's insistence that the supernatural element is 'irreducible' is too extreme and is becoming more so in the intervening period since her analysis. In fact, the blurring of distinctions between what is real and not is a key component of most, especially most contemporary, magical realism. This is explored in more detail in the chapters on Oyeyemi and Samarasan's texts. Tzvetan Todorov claims that in works of fantasy, these events must be taken literally: the reader must 'reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations' and read the events as actually occurring in the narrative.⁵⁵ Magical realist texts complicate these types of explanations by overlapping literal and metaphorical instances of the supernatural: Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, Samarasan's *Evening is the Whole Day* and Siddharth Dhanvant Shangvi's *The Last Song of Dusk* (2004) are vibrant examples of texts that ambiguously intertwine literal and metaphorical manifestations of the supernatural. Many, though by no means all, of these equivocations are augmented by what Chanady recognises as the third criterion of her definition: 'authorial reticence', whereby narrators decline to comment on the ontological legitimacy of the events.⁵⁶ Storytelling and rumour often shroud the veracity of the supernatural.⁵⁷ Texts sometimes adopt literalised exaggerations or metaphors, a technique prominent in Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and revisited by Samarasan's text in this study. The reducibility of the supernatural is further connected with the interpersonal quality of

⁵⁴ W. R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 13, cited in Hume, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), p. 33.

⁵⁶ Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*, p. 30.

⁵⁷ Daniel Wallace's *Big Fish* (1998) and Obrecht's *The Tiger's Wife*, for example, relate all of their supernatural through stories told to the narrator, so it is impossible to establish whether the events are truth, lies or exaggerations.

the mode, in that the events are almost always witnessed or experienced by someone. How they are experienced has bearing on the relationships developed in the novel: disagreements about interpretation of the incidents may cause dramatic tensions between family members or social groups (as in Oyeyemi), or those events may metaphorically literalise the feelings of relational tensions in real-world situations of migrancy and cultural exchange.⁵⁸

The emphasis on such real-world contexts and details, historically or geographically, features in many novels incorporating magical realism. This is Faris's second criterion and likewise forms my second primary characteristic.⁵⁹ *Midnight's Children* depicts Bombay at the time of India's independence in 1947 and *The Kingdom of this World* describes Haiti's revolution at the turn of the eighteenth century. Likewise, Samarasan contextualises her novel around the racial tensions of 1980s Malaysia, and Díaz explores the specifics of the Dominican Republic under dictatorial regime. When authors use fictional or unnamed locations (such as Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or Hamid's unnamed country in *Exit West*), they nevertheless resemble recognisable locations.⁶⁰ While Faris claims this trait represents the 'realism' section of the mode, I suggest the focus on real-world contexts emphasises the supernatural rather than conform to the tenets of realism. Those contexts bring into stark relief the divergence from the real world when characters experience the supernatural.

This experiential aspect – how characters and narrators respond unusually to the perception of the supernatural – forms my third key characteristic of magical realism. It distinguishes the mode from other forms of literature where supernatural events elicit more realistic and concrete responses from its characters. However, much scholarship about characters' response in such texts overstates this difference from other literary styles. As the second criterion of her definition, Chanady argues the mode is differentiated from the fantastic because in magical realism the 'antinomy' between the supernatural and the real is 'resolved'.⁶¹ That is, by using realist techniques to portray the supernatural, authors make it equivalent to the

⁵⁸ The romantic relationships in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* and Ward's *Sing Unburied*, *Sing* exemplify this near-universal trait whereby the perception of the supernatural affects the relationship between parties. All four selected texts in this study follow this dynamic.

⁵⁹ Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction', p. 169.

⁶⁰ Columbia and Pakistan, respectively, are potential interpretations of the locations.

⁶¹ Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*, p. 30.

mundane, an everyday occurrence. This characterisation is supported by Rushdie, who states of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* that ‘impossible things happen constantly and quite plausibly, out in the open under the midday sun’.⁶² García Márquez even stated he intended this effect to suggest that the ‘magical’ was more real than the ‘real’.⁶³ Warnes paraphrases these to mean that magical realism is ‘a mode of narration that naturalises or normalises the supernatural’.⁶⁴ However, I argue this full normalisation of the supernatural is rare.⁶⁵ While the two codes may be brought more in line than in other forms of supernatural literature, they are usually not made fully equivalent. Narrators and the linguistic choices made by the authors clearly distinguish between the two codes. Responses to supernatural events may be less dramatic than in other types of texts. Characters very often show little surprise at such occurrences. But they rarely respond as if the supernatural is entirely normal or possible. *Midnight’s Children*’s protagonist Saleem Sinai is endowed with a telepathic gift that is not believed by his parents. His father punishes him for claiming it: ‘Let him enjoy his joke on an empty stomach!’⁶⁶ Likewise, Díaz’s narrator couches his novel’s supernatural elements with scepticism. Shock and disbelief are just as common in magical realist presentations of the supernatural as more matter-of-fact responses.

Even though characters may begin with surprise, the shock at this violation of the rules of the world they perceive is usually less dramatic than readers may expect. The event is experienced as impossible and often surprising, but characters’ responses are at odds with a realistic representation. They often disregard the events or fail to question their significance as impossible incidents. This distances the mode from being characterised as ‘realism’ infused with ‘magic’ to a fundamental degree. In literary realism an expected response would conform to how people may normally behave in the presence of something viewed as impossible.⁶⁷ This is the usual portrayal of response in horror and many other genres of fantasy: the supernatural invades a mundane milieu, characters typically react strongly to it, and a major

⁶² Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), p. 302.

⁶³ Siskind, ‘The Global Life of Genres’, p. 45.

⁶⁴ Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, p. 3.

⁶⁵ Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006) is an example where the supernatural is treated almost exactly as if it were mundane.

⁶⁶ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* (London: Vintage, 1981), pp. 164–65.

⁶⁷ John Mullan, ‘Realism’, *The British Library* (The British Library, 2014)

<<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/realism>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

change in their perspectives occurs. They either dismiss the event as delusion or else re-adjust their world view to accommodate this as now possible. In this regard a realistic response is to resolve the antinomy, to normalise the supernatural.⁶⁸ In magical realism, however, characters typically make little effort to reconcile the impossibility of the event with their own world view, focusing instead on more pressing aspects of their own lives. The group of amazed onlookers at the Ascension of Remedios the Beauty in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* immediately go back to their lives as if nothing has happened; the belly without a naval in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) is curious but receives little attention; the sudden appearance of teleportation portals in Hamid's *Exit West* are at first surprising and disbelieved, but they soon take a subservient importance to the terror and xenophobia the characters face. Cognitive dissonance is permitted and the antinomy between the supernatural and the mundane is maintained. As is argued in the following section and throughout this thesis, the response of accepting contradiction parallels many descriptions of some of the difficult experiences of migrancy. Migrants and their children must face and absorb conflicting ideologies and conceptions in the ways nationalities and identities are formed and viewed. The blurred line between the natural and supernatural that characterises magical realism proves an apt metaphor, therefore, for transnational experiences.

'You pluck a thread and it leads to . . . everywhere': Relationality in transnational experiences

This section sets out the transnational framework that guides this thesis, focusing on the relational aspects of transnationality that are brought to bear through the magical realist interventions of the selected authors. A transnational perspective connects the mode to its colonial and postcolonial, nascent forms in 1940s Latin America and its global expansion into the twenty-first century. The crossovers between transnational and postcolonial approaches allow comparison of texts across these two centuries. Studying magical realism through the lens of transnationality can therefore illuminate why it continues to be frequently and effectively deployed to express tensions relating to experiences of cultural oppression and exchange.

⁶⁸ Harry Potter's magical abilities in J. K. Rowling's series (1997–2007) become normalised when it is revealed that magic is permissible within the world view that emerges. It therefore ceases to be impossible as Harry's *weltanschauung* is updated.

I draw particular attention to *fluid* and *interpersonal* features of transnationality, aspects that are repeatedly cited in scholarship on migration and transnationalism. The term *transnational* concerns many different practices. It can refer to political relations; the activities, conglomerates and organisations that power globalisation and capitalism; and the individuals whose lives are affected by these processes. It is succinctly defined by Thomas Faist as referring to ‘ties reaching beyond and across borders of sovereign states’.⁶⁹ While there may be no clear separation between many of these practices, literary critics tend to look at transnationality ‘from below’. This perspective centres on the individuals and the flows of migration that they inhabit.⁷⁰ This thesis takes the same, personal perspective, while keeping the larger social, political and economic forces in mind. An influential definition of transnationality was made in 1994 by Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Blanc-Szanton: ‘the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multistranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and of settlement.’⁷¹ This position highlights the dynamic qualities of transnationality, characterised by fluid processes rather than discrete states of being. Paolo Boccagni’s definition of transnationality instead focuses on the interpersonal, on migrants’ ‘attachments at distance in the affective and the emotional realms’.⁷² Transnationality in migrants can therefore be further characterised by complex, communicative and reciprocal ties across boundaries; it relates to the communication and fluid relationships which migrants and their descendants maintain. These connections are made between cultures rather than within the cultures themselves. Transnationality manifests most clearly in emotions, relationships and experiences in migrant individuals and communities as they maintain or negotiate these connections. Díaz, Oyeyemi, Samarasan and Hamid all epitomise this sense of transnationality, as do their novels and characters.

⁶⁹ Thomas Faist, ‘Diaspora and Transnationalism: What Kind of Dance Partners?’, in *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, ed. by Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), pp. 9–34 (p. 13).

⁷⁰ Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 2.

⁷¹ Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Amsterdam: Gordon & Breach, 1994), p. 6.

⁷² Paolo Boccagni, ‘Private, Public or Both? On the Scope and Impact of Transnationalism in Immigrants’ Everyday Lives’, in *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, ed. by Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), pp. 185–204 (p. 186).

Transnationality distances itself from related terms but in ways that allow it a more inclusive perspective on the wide heterogeneity in migrants. It can be distinguished from the term *diaspora* as it focuses on the relationships between cultures, whereas diaspora concentrates on a notion of a united community within another country.⁷³ Similarly, transnationality avoids pitfalls encountered by terms often given to children whose parent(s) migrated, such as *post-migrant* or *second-/third-generation migrant*. These signify the differences in experiences between parents and their children in terms of assimilation, social groups within the ‘host’ nation and sense of identification with their parents’ country.⁷⁴ However, while many children of migrants may maintain relatively firm connections with the cultures in which their parents were raised, this cannot be assumed to be universal.⁷⁵ More harmfully, the labelling of people as partly migrants can be, and is, weaponised as a means of discrimination. Even if they share perfectly equal citizenship, right-wing factions may, and do, treat individuals as intrinsically different, by yoking children to their parents’ backgrounds.⁷⁶ It manacles those children to their parents’ nationality and history of migration, no matter how problematic this may be. Terms like these inhibit allowing such individuals to seek new ways to form identity that do not rely on essentialised national categories. The term *transnational*, on the other hand, suggests a more simultaneous connection between and beyond national boundaries and allows the potential for transcendence from them. It also bridges the experiences of migrants, their children, and those whose cultures fluctuate through globalisation. It imagines in a continuum of transnationality that does not distinguish migrants as others.

⁷³ Faist, ‘What Kind of Dance Partners?’, p. 9.

⁷⁴ Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, p. 256.

⁷⁵ As Portes and Rumbaut find in their study of second-generation migrants, numerous factors can have a vast impact on the relationship between the children’s and their parents’ view of both cultures. (Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001)).

⁷⁶ The racism the children of migrants suffer is reported across numerous cultures: Deb F. Mahabir and others, ‘Classism and Everyday Racism as Experienced by Racialized Health Care Users: A Concept Mapping Study’, *International Journal of Health Services*, 51.3 (2021), 350–63 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/00207314211014782>>; Michaela M. Bucchianeri, Marla E. Eisenberg, and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, ‘Weightism, Racism, Classism, and Sexism: Shared Forms of Harassment in Adolescents’, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 53.1 (2013), 47–53 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2013.01.006>>; Barbara Yngvesson, *Belonging in an Adopted World: Race, Identity, and Transnational Adoption*, The Chicago Series in Law and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

The selected novels in this study were all written after the turn of the century, and as such their authors and their publishers are engaged in contemporary transnational and global developments. The first three decades of the twenty-first century embody the most intense transnationality to date in the long history of globalisation and cultural exchange. Paul Jay takes a long view of globalisation across many centuries: he argues that ‘globalization in our own time will appear to be the extension of relationships with a long and complex history both within and outside the West’.⁷⁷ From the perspective of transnationality, viewed as a process rather than a state, globalisation is likewise an ongoing transition towards increased connectivity. As it progresses, it brings about as many disadvantages as it does bestow benefits. Technological advances throughout countless centuries have all had expansive influence on globalisation and transnationality. However, no prior technological advancement has had such a dramatic effect on maintaining fluid, connected ties between nations and countries and other globalising forces than the internet. The international explosion in popularity and usage of email, e-commerce and social media, which began in the last few years of the 1990s but became fully ubiquitous shortly afterwards, is a critical point in the development of globalisation. Therefore, while it can be viewed in terms of millennia of development, a heightened sense of transnationality more fully took place when the internet transformed communication into a multifaceted and instantaneous part of social and economic existence. This connection between technology and transnationality is seen throughout literary expressions of modernity, including in Hamid’s *Exit West*.

In defining transnationality as the fluid and interconnected cultural and national relationships between individuals, I bring particular attention to relationality as one of its key features. It is also the one that frames this study. As will be seen, it is particularly the tensions surrounding relatedness that are captured by magical realism in the selected texts. The term *relationality* has emerged from psychoanalysis but has expanded into other aspects of social sciences, philosophy and literature. Charles Taylor summarises the fundamental tenet of relational approaches: ‘one cannot be a self on one’s own. I am a self only in relation to certain

⁷⁷ Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 34. Kindle ebook.

interlocutors.⁷⁸ From this view, all facets of experience are set in a dynamic relation to one another, so that each affects, and is affected by, changes in those connections. Formulated most comprehensively by psychologist Stephen Mitchell, psychoanalytical relational-model theory proposes a fundamental form of being that differs from Freud's drive theory, which Mitchell claims is inaccurately atomistic. In Freud's analysis, 'We are portrayed as a conglomeration of asocial, physical tensions represented in the mind by urgent sexual and aggressive wishes pushing for expression'.⁷⁹ The asocial element seems most important for Mitchell: Freud's view sees us trapped within our own worlds, fundamentally disconnected from the people and the outside world with which we interact. Relational-model theories, however, take a different approach, where we are instead:

shaped by and inevitably embedded within a matrix of relationships with other people, struggling both to maintain our ties to others and to differentiate ourselves from them. [...] The basic unit of study is not the individual as a separate entity [...], but an interactional field within which the individual arises and struggles to make contact and to articulate himself. [...] Mind is composed of relational configurations.⁸⁰

We thus experience the world relationally. From this springboard, it can be seen that relational qualities are critical for how a subject may build a notion of self: nationality, ethnicity, ethics, family and history are all conceptualisable as relational. As Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru exemplify with a quotation from Bharati Mukherjee's novel *The Tree Bride* (2004): 'If everyone and everything in the world is intimately related.... You pluck a thread and it leads to ... everywhere.'⁸¹ As an ideological concept it is particularly visible in the transnational experiences the authors of twenty-first-century magical realism often convey. They depict attempts to negotiate senses of self surrounding these categories, complicated by fluid relationships between nations and cultures.

⁷⁸ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 36.

⁷⁹ Stephen A. Mitchell, *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis: An Integration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 2.

⁸⁰ Mitchell, *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis*, p. 3.

⁸¹ Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru, 'Introduction: The Planetary Condition', in *The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), pp. xi–xxxvii. (xxiii).

I identify relationality manifesting in three key ways in the transnational magical realism presented in this thesis: authors describe relationships to people and ideas in ways that are first, interconnected; second, interdependent; and third, interpersonal. These relational qualities of transnationality are borne out throughout critical analysis of migration. In terms of interconnectivity, the notion that we are not totally independent, discrete entities can be counterintuitive. Mitchell explains the difficulty when thinking about the self:

One of the chief impediments to our self-understanding [...] is our tendency to think of ourselves in concrete, reified terms. People 'have' a personality, this way of thinking goes, they 'are' a collection of traits or characteristics which they carry around, as if actually located inside them, from situation to situation—like a door-to-door salesman revealing the same product at one home after the next.⁸²

Transnational narratives likewise show people and the categories of nationality and culture they embody to be all connected. Connectedness applies as much to cultures and countries as to the self. Antje Flüchter and Jivanta Schöttli expand on the concept that past and present societies and cultures are interconnected and deeply intertwined:

This concept is [...] built upon a processual understanding of culture and thus challenges the traditional idea that cultures are internally cohesive, homogenous, self-contained, or hermitically sealed against external influences.⁸³

The rhizomatic connections between cultures is demonstrated in such novels as *Evening is the Whole Day*, which links British colonial influence, Indian migration, Chinese economics and Malaysian geography.

Because each node in this network is interconnected, it also changes as it is influenced by other nodes, which are influenced in turn by the interaction. The self and the categories through which it is constructed are therefore not just related to all

⁸² Mitchell, *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis*, p. 25.

⁸³ Antje Flüchter and Jivanta Schöttli, 'Introduction', in *The Dynamics of Transculturality: Concepts and Institutions in Motion*, ed. by Antje Flüchter and Jivanta Schöttli (London: Springer, 2015), pp. 1–23 (p. 2).

others but relative to all others. It is fluid, ever-changing and dynamic. Authors depicting this characteristic of self show how conceptions such as nationality may fluctuate in relation to social group. Migrants find themselves being categorised by, and conforming to expectations of, one epithet within a diaspora community or when visiting relatives 'back home', and a different one when dealing with a 'native' social group. This dynamic is elaborated in Oyeyemi's and Díaz's books in this study.

The final and most fundamental aspect of object-relational theory in literary representations of transnational experiences relates to interpersonal relationships as the agents of these dynamic connections. It also provides a link to how magical realist devices have shifted into a more interior plane to elaborate on the emotional states that such relationships are engendering. Mitchell states that 'The person is comprehensible only within the tapestry of relationships, past and present. [...] The figure is always *in* the tapestry, and the threads of the tapestry [...] are always in the figure'.⁸⁴ Studies depict transnationality as being intrinsically concerned with social relations with the territory from which someone comes, the territory they are in, and the self-identification within those two.⁸⁵ As all four novels in this study explore, human relationships, between family and peers in particular, remain crucial in formations of the self; transnationality is likewise formed through these human connections. The human aspect accentuates the points in relational models of ethics that behaviour can only be measured in relation to others, not in abstracts. Therefore, the underlying common relatedness and humanity we all share must guide morality. In transnational experiences, this relational ethical framework is brought into conflict with racism, classism, sexism and other forms of bigotry that engender perceptions of inaccurate strict demarcations between certain groups seen as 'other'.

The selected authors manipulate magical realist tropes to capture these facets of transnationality. These aspects reveal the divergences between contemporary texts and the less transnational examples of the mode found in the twentieth century. Appropriately, magical realism displays a concurrent relationality in revealing the fluidity of borders of world views and of fantasy and reality in a way that other supernatural fiction does not. Barbara Schapiro compares object-relations theory

⁸⁴ Mitchell, *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis*, p. 3. Italics within quotations are in originals unless otherwise stated.

⁸⁵ Vertovec, *Transnationalism*, p. 4.

with contemporary science, stating that physics ‘has broken down the strict Cartesian division between mind and matter’ in the so far inexplicable observer effects in quantum physics.⁸⁶ A relational model likewise ‘loosen[s] rigid distinctions between the subjective internal world and the external world’.⁸⁷ This directly mirrors magical realist depictions of experience: artificial, hard barriers between phenomenological perceptions of the world are blurred and subverted. Schapiro elaborates by highlighting the use of fantasy or ‘illusion’ in children’s play not as delusion but the construction of meaning to the external world.⁸⁸ Magical realism in twenty-first-century transnational literature replicates this process, where the supernatural takes on meaning in relation to the values and experiences of its transnational subjects.

Experiences of tension in transnational magical realism

The consequences of relationality played out in these works can range from cordial, multicultural harmony, to disturbed emotional well-being and trauma.⁸⁹ However, it is the terse and discordant aspects that usually drive the narratives of transnational magical realism. As the following chapters explore, tensions arise in different facets of transnational experience, as the relational features of the novels’ characters come into conflict with static conceptions impressed upon them by peers and by themselves. This study focuses on four dynamics where such tensions emerge, both in the selected novels and in scholarship on transnationality: identity, home, class and family. From these tensions the supernatural emerges, literalising the experiences of disorientation and isolation. It is from these dynamics that authors demonstrate shifts in magical realist tropes as they seek to capture these experiences.

Identity

The negation of a sense of self can be one of the most problematic transnational experiences, especially for the children of migrants. This may often result from an expectation that the self is formed largely in terms of a national identity. As Steven Vertovec explains, such children are often classified with hyphenated nationalities, their identities applied to ‘notions of translation, creolization, crossover, cut ‘n’ mix

⁸⁶ Barbara Ann Schapiro, *Literature and the Relational Self*, Literature and Psychoanalysis, 3 (New York: New York University Press, 1994), p. 20.

⁸⁷ Schapiro, *Literature and the Relational Self*, p. 20.

⁸⁸ Schapiro, *Literature and the Relational Self*, p. 21.

⁸⁹ Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*, p. 19.

[...], bricolage, hybridity, syncretism, third space, multicultural, multiple cultural competence, transculturation and diasporic consciousness'.⁹⁰ Research suggests that the children of migrants often feel like outsiders on both sides of such hyphens, neither fully one nor the other. They may struggle to formulate their identities when they are depicted differently by different groups.⁹¹ Identity is often regarded in relational models of psychology as the 'primary superordinate human motivation'.⁹² If a coherent sense of self is so critical, this difficulty in finding an identity, particularly when belonging to social groups relies on these identities, is a source of disorientation at best and trauma at worst. This lack of coherent identity is viewed in contrast to the unhyphenated majority, who unproblematically relate their identity to their nationality.

Chapter One examines these tensions between the fluidity of transnational identities and entrenched notions of static nationalities in Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*. The novel portrays conflicts between a relational identity and the expectations of family and peers for a child with a migrant mother growing up in the UK. Oyeyemi imagines these discordant pressures splitting the girl into a spirit double that ruptures her sense of self. The child is pressurised into taking an essentialised, reductive approach to her own identity as exclusively Nigerian or British. The chapter argues that Oyeyemi's techniques literalise a feeling of split identity, allowing her to envision the trauma of non-belonging in a way that realism cannot. The novel demonstrates a clear link to Carpentier's magical realism by depicting the perspectives of two cultures in opposition; however, Oyeyemi reconfigures the technique to highlight the harmful emotional consequences of such oppositional framing to a young person's transnational identity. Oyeyemi's magical realism also displays a shift towards interiority by portraying this experience as entirely personal and isolating. The paradoxical sense of being doubled and halved by these social pressures is augmented through language and motifs of continued splitting and collapsing. Oyeyemi adopts and subverts Carpentier's model by assigning two culturally connected, mutually exclusive interpretations of the spirit. Her text refuses to prioritise either of the two interpretations, instead requiring both to be true, despite being incompatible. Through this technique, Oyeyemi depicts a thoroughly

⁹⁰ Vertovec, *Transnationalism*, p. 72.

⁹¹ Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*, p. 5.

⁹² Mitchell, *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis*, p. 30.

transnational circumstance where cultural aspects of identity and world view are exposed as relational rather than essential or binary. Instead of emerging to promote or defend a threatened culture against oppression as it had in postcolonial variants, the magical realism of *The Icarus Girl* symbolises feelings of non-belonging, in-betweenness and being torn in two. This is a condition for trauma in the children of migrants that until recently had been overlooked by psychoanalysis. It shows the damaging consequences of parents enforcing opposing cosmologies and cultural beliefs on the psyches of their children who are caught in negotiation between them. Oyeyemi's spirit double reveals the tensions arising from entrenched ideas of stable identity that cannot account for the relational identities of transnational children. Magical realism is especially empowering to convey this conflict of ideologies.

Home

Transnational fluidity further complicates identity by eroding normative views of a home or homeland. For those who migrate, ambivalence can occur regarding which country is seen as home. Some may retain strong emotional ties to the nation from which they came, while others look towards the language and culture of the 'host' nation. A conception of home may shift dramatically when war strips a region of safety, or gradually as migrants slowly increase feeling at home in their place of migration. For those who regard the nation-state as a purified conception, increased migration and the subsequent blurring of national boundaries can threaten their sense of home. As a result, an assumed stable tie between nationality and home can precipitate nativist backlashes against immigrants and refugees. This can provoke impulses towards xenophobia and racism, as Graham Huggan explains:

While globalization has led to the restructuring of social relations across geographical and cultural borders, it has not led to a diminishment of racism, which has frequently needed such physical and ideational borders to justify its own existence and to explain its practitioners' acts.⁹³

Transnationality perforates these ideological borders, revealing a fluidity that undermines the stable nationalistic ideology.

⁹³ Graham Huggan, *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 14.

Hamid's *Exit West* depicts this scenario by exaggerating migration through the emergence of portals across the globe. Chapter Two expands *The Icarus Girl's* introspective crisis of identity to look outward at populations of people in transit. The chapter argues that the text interrogates how, as national borders collapse, migrants may construct a sense of home in the contemporary climate of increased migration and social media. Yet the novel retains Oyeyemi's emphasis on the emotional impact of the tensions between transnational relatedness and persistent notions of hard national and cultural boundaries. Hamid's primary interventions to magical realist techniques relate to increasingly global and future-oriented forms rather than the dominant postcolonial interest in with localised, past injustices. His text concerns the real-world influx of migrants arriving in Europe in the mid-2010s, which was ongoing during publication. *Exit West* explores the concept of home as defined by refuge, nation and community. However, the increased connectivity brought about by technology and globalisation undermines these conceptions. This same process is enhanced and mirrored in his deployment of portals; both magic and technology render his characters homeless. Hamid emphasises, as does Oyeyemi, a sense of paradox in this aspect of transnationality. For him, his characters' emotional well-being depends on accepting the antinomy between conflicting conceptions of home. They are required to negotiate envisioning home as a stable and clearly demarcated category alongside its apparent fluidity and dependence on the dynamic relationships within it. Hamid's portals exaggerate the effects of how those who view their nation as home feel it being threatened by outsiders. In a thinly veiled reference to Brexit, *Exit West* depicts violent nativist reactions to immigrants in London. Hamid's supernatural migrations thus expose the restricted borders of nation as insufficient for home-building. The novel juxtaposes mobile phones and social media with the portals as metaphorical, supernatural representations of increased connectivity. By these means Hamid joins much contemporary magical realism in tightening the relationship between the manifestation of the supernatural and the novel's overarching motifs. Thanks to technology, Hamid's migrants establish a conception of home founded on community. However, the technology of connectivity simultaneously causes a further sense of homelessness. It engenders a disjunctive sense that despite being able to find belonging in this global community, Hamid's characters also lose home because of it. Hamid's language underscores these paradoxes through a characteristic use of drifting sentences filled with

contradictions. The noncommittal responses of characters to the supernatural portals corresponds to this acceptance of the paradox of disconnected connectivity. The differences between his two protagonists, progressive Nadia and conservative Saeed, suggests that emotional well-being in this hyper-mobile context depends on accepting its fluidity. It promotes a relational construction of home, built on positive relationships rather than cold earth. His text suggests, as Oyeyemi's does, that this seeming paradox between hyperconnectivity and disconnection can be reconciled only by accepting that the pinning of identity, home and history within fixed boundaries is a persistent but outdated world view.

Class

The porousness of national borders depicted by Hamid and the connectivity of globalisation have brought about advantages to certain groups, even while generating disharmony and trauma. These beneficiaries likewise suffer from resultant tensions of their own. Critics have brought to light the vast wealth divide between transnational executives and professionals and other unskilled migrants and refugees.⁹⁴ Both categories embody transnationality, yet mobility, agency and relationships with 'host' countries vary significantly thanks to the wealth inequality between them.⁹⁵ The relative freedom of movement that transnational professionals exhibit, demonstrating fluid relationships between countries, underscores in relief the lack of mobility and agency of lower-class migrants. Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut highlight this variance in migrants' economic prospects:

Some [...] groups [...] are in a clearly upward path, moving into society's mainstream in record time and enriching it in the process with their culture and energies. Others, on the contrary, seem poised for a path of blocked aspirations and downward mobility, reproducing the plight of today's impoverished domestic minorities.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Leslie Sklair, 'The Transnational Capitalist Class and Global Politics: Deconstructing the Corporate-State Connection', *International Political Science Review*, 23.2 (2002), 159–74 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512102023002003>>; Vertovec, *Transnationalism*.

⁹⁵ Sklair, 'The Transnational Capitalist Class'; Steven Vertovec, 'Transnational Networks and Skilled Labour Migration' (presented at the Ladenburger Diskurs "Migration" Gottlieb Daimler- und Karl Benz-Stiftung, Ladenburg, 2002).

⁹⁶ Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*, p. xviii.

Chapter Three analyses Samarasan's *Evening is the Whole Day*, which envisions the dynamics between Tamil Malaysians at both ends of this spectrum and the trauma both suffer because of the attitudes of the rich. Her novel exemplifies how economic differences can cause a sense of near total difference between the groups. It reverses the predominant trait within magical realism to present the supernatural arising from the perspectives of victims of oppression. Her novel turns a critical eye towards transnational elites and the contributions they make to the trauma and hardships of the less wealthy. The chapter argues that Samarasan deploys mainstays of classical magical realist fiction; however, she gears them towards envisioning a collapse in the false distinctions between rich and poor that transnational elites attempt to uphold. Uneven conditions in the lives of migrants therefore expose the tensions between perception of class difference and relational connections between the rich and poor. In her portrayal of these supernatural events, mostly focalised through a child's perspective, Samarasan furthers the relationships between the supernatural and the interior and experiential in transnational magical realism. The relationship of the gothic with borders, and tensions between the interior and exterior, aligns with the relational exploration of transnationality in Samarasan's novel. It engages in a little-studied connection between magical realism and the gothic in imagining a mansion that is replete with magical realist and gothic imagery and tropes. The depiction reflects attempts to reinforce distinctions between the interior and exterior, us and them. The connection of the present owners to the colonial past is made through a conventional usage of the mode in the form of a ghost of a victim of colonial sexual oppression. However, Samarasan upends the postcolonial usage by also depicting a perpetrator of present-day classism as a ghost, which testifies to the indefeasibility of such oppression. The relationship between both ghosts reveals the shift of moral abhorrence towards the transnational elites. It shows their moral code fragmenting, demonstrating a need for a relational form of ethics to eradicate these hard borders between classes. This transnational, gothic magical realism, and its interplay between interconnectivity and division, reflects similar collapses of category and border that Oyeyemi and Hamid describe. Further, the text recalls Julia Kristeva's analysis of abjection in this gothic context by exploring the immorality of the transnational, cosmopolitan elite. Samarasan adopts an enduring magical realist technique of depicting prophecies but alters it to reflect the lack of mobility of the underprivileged. This reiterates the motif of tensions between stasis and movement

in transnational experience. It directly implicates the beneficiaries of transnational globalisation in constructing barriers that immobilise the poor, even while they claim to transcend postcolonial concerns with nationality and race. Samarasan also contributes to a shift in contemporary magical realism whereby intertextual allusions to other magical realist texts are made. In Samarasan's case, parallels with *Midnight's Children* contribute to her critique of elitism in Malaysia. She crosses the boundary between reality and fantasy by literalising metaphors and exaggerations of emotions. As with *Icarus Girl* and *Exit West*, in *Evening is the Whole Day*, the transgression between fantasy and reality coincides with these emotional impacts.

Family

In transnational families such as those fictionalised in these texts, problematical generational differences arise. Relationships deteriorate because of economic or cultural changes between parents and children whose backgrounds are so unlike. These strains may be exacerbated by migration and the increased transnationality of later generations of those who have migrated. The relationships between the members of a family who migrate and those they leave behind may also suffer as their experiences diverge. Transnationality can thus threaten the stability of families, echoing the fragility of nation and identity. Deborah Fahy Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela sum up this pattern of tension in their anthology on such families:

Intergenerational lifestyle conflict common to families everywhere may be more marked in transnational families where cultural and generational divides combine. [...] Intra-familial struggles can be extremely fractious and seemingly unresolvable.⁹⁷

One of the most consistent sources of this conflict, which appears in studies covering many different configurations of migration, is that parents who migrate often have a tenuous connection to the 'host' nation compared to their children. The opposite can be true for the children, who frequently, though not always, lose affiliation with their parents' country of birth. Data suggests parents often attempt to impose their 'home' culture on to children who have a much more fluid relationship with both. Children

⁹⁷ Deborah Fahy Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela, 'Transnational Families in the Twenty-First Century', in *The Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks*, ed. by Deborah Fahy Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela, *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women*, v. 25 (Oxford: Berg, 2002), pp. 3–30 (p. 13).

may lose the ability to speak the native language of their parents or reject their culture as unfashionable and thus lose connection with family members who did not migrate. When migration is to wealthy countries, children tend to achieve better socioeconomic status, which again can cause disconnection and tension. These affect the emotional well-being of the children to differing degrees.⁹⁸ Many transnational families suffer no such conflict: Portes and Rumbaut's research implies that most are reasonably harmonious.⁹⁹ Yet familial relationships are critical as a grounding in an often difficult environment for the children of immigrants. The potential trauma is heightened when the pressures of living transnationally negatively influence the family dynamic.

This portrayal of generational differences and familial tensions corresponds to that in Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Chapter Four explores how Díaz's novel presents these tensions as a curse that disconnects family members from one another. The novel relates this fragmentation of familial connectedness through the story of a family of migrants from the Dominican Republic developing and breaking down in the US. Díaz experiments with magical realist tropes in ways that stretch its definition. He depicts the curse literally existing in the real-world history of the Dominican Republic and migrant families. His technique alters the typical trait of inserting the supernatural into real-world contexts, instead redefining historical injustices as supernatural. Like Samarasan's text, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* shows the continuous relationships between colonialism and twentieth-century neoliberalism. It focuses on low-income immigrants to the US. It underscores the transnationality of the novel itself by blending magical realism and dictator fiction tropes, which are typically perceived as Latin America styles, with US and British science fiction and fantasy. Díaz applies this incongruous blend to his protagonist Oscar and his family, who struggle to find belonging because of their transnational cultural affiliations. The references to science fiction and comic books blur the boundaries between literary styles and between fantasy and history: while Oscar dreams about being a superhero, the narrator applies these fantasies to Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, reimagined as a comic book supervillain. Trujillo embodies Díaz's curse by terrorising Oscar's mother and the Dominican people of her generation. He epitomises the disconnections that Dominicans and Oscar's family

⁹⁸ Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*, pp. 199–202.

⁹⁹ Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*, p. 38.

suffer, causing ‘blank pages’, or conspicuous gaps, in personal narratives. These omissions damage the family’s relationships with one another and wider society. Reimagining magical realism through references to North and Latin American styles allows Díaz to explore this interplay of cultural connections and disconnections. As with Samarasan’s text, Díaz’s displays a self-conscious indebtedness to the work of prior magical realist authors, particularly those of Rushdie and García Márquez. Díaz’s narrator, Yunió, echoes Rushdie’s Saleem Sinai in *Midnight’s Children*, yet through metafiction Yunió evokes the supernatural by contributing to the curse. Through this technique, Díaz intertwines the mode with metafictionality more closely than Rushdie does. The novel finally implies that a mitigation of sorts to some of these emotional hardships is possible. It may be achieved through embracing, rather than resisting, the inherent relatedness of such transnational experiences. Díaz imagines the power of connectivity within a family as a counter curse that can help to ameliorate some of these experiences of dislocation and disconnection.

As the chapters elucidate in more detail, the authors of the selected texts subvert, uproot, complicate and innovate the magical realism of the twentieth century. The novels indicate several significant, collective shifts in the techniques deployed, which underscore their transnational differences in theme. While the supernatural has become further disconnected from specific locations than in the twentieth century, I argue the manifestations of these elements and the thematic content have become even more closely intertwined. Sasser typifies a critical standpoint that magical realism should be defined and read fundamentally according to its aesthetic and ‘formal features’ to account for many of its wide differences.¹⁰⁰ She contends that though it may have been, so far, most successful in postcolonial forms, it can and should be understood in isolation from the motifs, politics and social commentary found alongside it. Warnes, on the other hand, takes the view that doing so devalues the mode and its analysis: ‘Magical realism’s greatest claim to usefulness is that it enables comparison of texts across periods, languages and regions, but when this comparison forgoes engagement with the specifics of history, the critical context is

¹⁰⁰ Sasser, *Magical Realism and Cosmopolitanism*, p. 24. Other critical work that expresses this stance includes: Aldama, p. 8; Maria Takolander, ‘Magical Realism and Irony’s “Edge”: Rereading Magical Realism and Kim Scott’s *Benang*’, *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, 14.5, 1–11 (p. 2).

impoverished accordingly.¹⁰¹ I argue the supernatural elements have, in fact, rarely been arbitrary to the political or thematic context of the novels in successful works of magical realism. Reviews such as A. O. Scott's of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* that relegate the use of the supernatural to 'allegorical pixie dust' miss the meanings generated by the specific choice of manifestations in the texts.¹⁰² The twenty-first-century examples in this project suggest that the thematic contexts are crucial for understanding the mode as they display an increased connection between aesthetic representations of the supernatural and political or social themes. The discourse has altered, but the relationship between theme and manifestation of the supernatural has tightened so that magical realist moments more directly align with the experiences the characters face. The supernatural elements act as literalised metaphors of the emotional states resulting from the transnational characters' relationships with family, peers and society. As a result, they often echo an existing strain of oppression rather than envision some amelioration of it as was commonly the case in postcolonial iterations. Authors often also augment this bond between the supernatural and theme by replicating the effects that the supernatural events induce in the narrative and linguistic techniques of the novel: these effects are explored in Chapters One and Two of this thesis. Some of these configurations are by no means unprecedented: Rushdie adopted a similar technique in literalising the fragmentation of India with his narrator breaking into pieces. However, as novels turn towards greater transnationality, it is increasingly the case that *emotional* states are literalised. Oyeyemi's spirit double in *The Icarus Girl* directly reproduces the feelings of being torn apart by national essentialism; Hamid's portals in *Exit West* function in the same way as mobile phones in contributing to a sense of homelessness; Samarasan's prophecies in *Evening is the Whole Day* reiterate the deterministic lack of agency that the poor feel; Díaz's curse in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* represents the emotional impacts of real-world inequality and oppression.

To further this alignment with the emotional experiences of transnational tensions, a shift is observable towards interiority, as supernatural elements are now more often witnessed or experienced alone. This shift brings into focus the

¹⁰¹ Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, p. 18.

¹⁰² A. O. Scott, 'Dreaming In Spanglish', *The New York Times*, 30 September 2007 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/30/books/review/Scott-t.html>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

interpersonal aspect of relationality. To this end, child perspectives have become increasingly adopted as children can withstand the illogicality of the paradoxes they seem to suffer better than adults.¹⁰³ In being isolated to the subjective perspective of a single character, the supernatural events are also better suited to symbolise the emotional ramifications of the difficulties that the characters face rather than attempt to make more objective claims about the wider social or political ramifications of transnationality.

The emotional states that the supernatural literalise are often additionally reflected through paradoxes or near paradoxes in the language and content. The contradictions are characteristically accepted or overlooked by some or all of the characters. Rather than resolve the antinomies made apparent in the presence of the supernatural in the mundane world, transnational magical realist novelists accentuate these contradictions. They are exhibited in recurrent themes of blurring and collapsing boundaries (elaborated in Oyeyemi's and Samarasan's texts), or simultaneous connections and disconnections (furthered in Hamid and Díaz), which the supernatural elements bring into effect. Transnational magical realists depict a cosmology in which such paradoxes are an uncomfortable but accepted part of everyday life. Migrants feel both at home and away in more than one location, feeling foreign in all of them; communication technology disconnects while it connects; life can be more fantastical than fantasy. Even though these experiences seem impossible, the sensations nevertheless occur. This acceptance aligns with the characteristic quality of magical realism; people respond to the supernatural in the same way as they do these paradoxes.

As we will see, all four texts illustrate tensions between solid and porous boundaries, fluidity and stasis, connectivity and disconnection, atomisation and interdependence. These tensions appear in varying transnational contexts for migrants and their children. The texts call for a need to embrace the relational qualities of transnationality. They depict prior, static models of identity, nation, class and family as idealistic, atomised, mutually exclusive and fixed. These notions are becoming decreasingly meaningful, particularly to transnational populations whose relationships intersect different cultures and ideologies. They suggest that appreciation of the importance of human connectedness for emotional well-being

¹⁰³ Three of the four selected novels feature children experiencing the supernatural alone.

can help heal some of the trauma resulting from these tensions. Yet these entrenched ideas are resistant, leaving people in transnational contexts caught between an interplay of conflicting ideologies, both within society and within themselves. The authors have recast magical realism to capture this transnational experience of paradox, imagined in the complex relationships between the mundane and the supernatural.

Chapter One: Trauma and the abiku: Literalising the collapse of national identity in the relationality and essentialism of Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*

Introduction

This chapter argues that Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2006) reconfigures techniques of twentieth-century magical realism to engage with transnational experiences surrounding the formation of national identity. As outlined in the introduction of this thesis, many postcolonial iterations of the mode present two world views in opposition in order to critique cultural oppression. In novels like Asturias's *Men of Maize*, for example, Mayans use incantations, curses and shape-shifting, derived from a Mayan cosmology, to thwart the advancement of Spanish farmers who believe in rationality, profit and 'progress' (industrialisation).¹ Oyeyemi, however, reframes the supernatural to show that it is the opposition itself which causes tensions and trauma. This chapter first demonstrates how Oyeyemi portrays a girl of mixed Nigerian and British parents feeling figuratively torn in two by her separate heritages and the expectations to conform to each of them exclusively. She internalises this pressure to refute her own relational identity. The chapter then explores how these conflicting pulls are literalised by a magical realist spirit. The supernatural being attempts to overtake the girl's body and steal her sense of self, overturning the prior magical realist tendency to use the supernatural to imagine a liberation from harm. Oyeyemi reinforces this loss of self in her linguistic style, binding it to the experiences of her protagonist and the supernatural, as has become increasingly paradigmatic in transnational magical realism. The chapter contends that Oyeyemi invites oppositional interpretations of the spirit girl, as Carpentier does, according to two mutually exclusive interpretations. She thus engages with twentieth-century examples of the mode by sourcing the spirit double from the mythology of Yoruba culture. At the same time, she looks towards contemporary, emerging theories in psychoanalysis about the trauma that the children of migrants may suffer. However, her text highlights the harm of this mutual exclusivity by

¹ Other novels in this vein include Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2011), Cheney-Coker's *Sacred River* and Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1997). All depict an opposition of cultures and beliefs and interrogate a dominant, colonising cosmology.

requiring both interpretations to be valid but reliant on one another. Her novel argues for a need to view transnational identities, no matter how counterintuitively, as fluid and relational processes.

Like the other authors in this study, Oyeyemi's own nationality reveals how identification to nationality can be fluid, and what tensions can arise when labels are assigned according to fixed or hybridised categories. Straddling identifications with both her birthplace, Nigeria, and England where she was raised, Oyeyemi describes this configuration as 'a mix of first- and second-generation Nigerian'.² But she adds a convolution: 'I was born "back home"'.³ Critics and reviewers exhibit a divergence of opinions and confusions settling on a stable term to describe Oyeyemi's (trans)national status; however, they seem unwilling to discount nationality as a vital factor in categorising her work. In 2005, *The Guardian* called her a 'Nigerian novelist', whereas others report her as 'Nigerian-British', 'Nigerian-born British', simply 'British' or a 'British wom[a]n of Nigerian descent'.⁴ This disparity in categorisation and the unsatisfactory hyphenations illuminate the difficulties encountered by those who exist within single national boundaries when they try to grasp transnational identities. These confusions also affect those individuals themselves: Nigeria, the place Oyeyemi describes as home and thereby central to her sense of national identity, is a place she hardly understands. 'I feel more comfortable in my skin' in Nigeria, she says, but 'I am still often baffled by certain Nigerian ways'; 'when it comes to Africa, I just don't get it.'⁵ Vijay Mishra suggests this split, of 'a fissured, hyphenated, contradictory, abject self' brought about by external and internal impulses, can result in a traumatic loss of self.⁶ *The Icarus Girl* substantiates

² Helen Oyeyemi, 'Home, Strange Home', *The Guardian*, 2 February 2005 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/feb/02/hearafrica05.development2>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

³ Oyeyemi, 'Home, Strange Home'.

⁴ Oyeyemi, 'Home, Strange Home'; David Austen, Jasmin Souesi, and Daniel Smith, 'Author Helen Oyeyemi Reveals Her Top Criteria for a Great Read', *BBC News*, 2018 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/entertainment-arts-43996591>> [accessed 16 November 2022]; Anonymous, 'Helen Oyeyemi', *Waterstones*, n. d. <<https://www.waterstones.com/author/helen-oyeyemi/329056>> [accessed 16 November 2022]; Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, 'Double Consciousness in the Work of Helen Oyeyemi and Diana Evans', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 20.3 (2009), 277–86 (p. 277) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09574040903285735>>.

⁵ Oyeyemi, 'Home, Strange Home'.

⁶ Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p. 171.

Mishra's position, representing this collapse of transnational identity through its magical realist interventions.

The novel's plot, and the supernatural element Oyeyemi deploys, reveals the adversity that can result from an ambivalent relationship with identity. *The Icarus Girl* follows its protagonist Jessamy Harrison (or Jess) as she suffers the same social and internal pressures as Mishra foregrounds. Jess's upbringing is characteristically transnational. She grows up in London in the mid-1990s, with a British father and a mother from Nigeria who holds on strongly to her own culture. Seeing herself as a 'half-and-half child', Jess struggles to identify with those around her in London and as such she makes few friends.⁷ She equally struggles to relate to her mother's family when she is taken to Ibadan in south-west Nigeria, which feels alien to her. Her mother, Sarah, and her Nigerian family attempt to excise the British part of Jess's hyphen by essentialising her Nigerianness. The resultant alienation, isolation and social pressure Jess feels erupt in the form of fits, tantrums and episodes of dissociation, the apparent symptoms of a personality disorder. At the same time, in Nigeria she makes friends with a mysterious girl with supernatural powers called Titiola, whom she renames TillyTilly (or simply Tilly). Tilly is believed by Jess's Nigerian family to be an abiku,⁸ a spirit child from the mythology of the Yoruba.⁹ The abiku possessively demands Jess's sole attention, ultimately invading her body and sending Jess into the wilderness, a nowhere place in Yoruba mythology between life and death.

Jess's issues find parallels in numerous studies on migrant and transnational identities. They thereby set the scene for Oyeyemi to narrate these struggles through her magical realist interventions. According to large-scale research carried out by the Pew Research Center in 2017, generational and political differences account for some of the divergences in the way national identity is perceived. Younger people have shifted to see customs as decreasingly important while older people hold more

⁷ Helen Oyeyemi, *The Icarus Girl* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 13. Further references to this text are provided in parenthesis after quotations.

⁸ I have not italicised non-English words in this thesis. Junot Díaz openly refuses to follow this writing convention and I have followed his lead.

⁹ Yoruba is a large cultural/ethnic group, language and religion predominantly from the south-western region of Nigeria.

conservative views over these traditions.¹⁰ Alternatively, right-leaning and left-leaning individuals are divided in seeing birthplace and religion as critical for national identity. This broad study across different countries, however, does not make any distinction between the opinions of different ethnic groups, or how migrants or their children may view national identity differently. *The Icarus Girl* highlights these factors as additional complications, further adding to the notion that static conceptions of identities are imprecise and impractical in transnational contexts. The heightened fluidity of transnationalities clashes with how individuals and their peers regard national identity, giving rise to numerous tensions.

For the children of migrants, as Oyeyemi depicts in her novel, a cause of major tension rests in generational differences in identifications with 'host' and 'home' nations. Studies suggest that parents usually have closer ties to what they may regard the 'homeland' and more ambivalent relationship with the culture in which they currently live. Rohit Barot elaborates this distinction with stories of migrants from India to the UK:

The distance between parents, children and grandchildren is marked by tension as cultural differences grow between the primary and secondary generations who are experiencing less conventional Indian socialization. When such cultural differences manifest themselves within the family, they can create a communication hiatus and misunderstanding. Such changes can create solidarity for the achievement of goals but they can also create tensions that threaten the unity of the family.¹¹

These dynamics suggest that parents attempt to impose a purer version of their own national identities, derived from 'back home', on to their children. These often contrast with the children's perspectives, whose identities connect to the different

¹⁰ Bruce Stokes, 'What It Takes to Truly Be "One of Us"', 2017 <<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/02/01/what-it-takes-to-truly-be-one-of-us/>> [accessed 18 June 2022]. One important consistency, however, appears to be widespread agreement across countries, generations and political alignments that the ability to speak the national language is the most definitive attribute of national identity.

¹¹ Rohit Barot, 'Religion, Migration and Wealth Creation in the Swaminarayan Movement', in *The Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks*, ed. by Deborah Fahy Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela, Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women, v. 25 (Oxford: Berg, 2002), p. 198. While this dynamic differs from Oyeyemi's inasmuch as it depicts Indian rather than Nigerian families, the parallels strongly suggest that this kind of dynamic can be seen, albeit in differing ways, regardless of nation of origin.

sites more relatively.¹² Thus, tensions arise in those whose identifications align more relatively with both locations. Karis Campion outlines cases in the UK that support Oyeyemi's fictionalised account. Her study finds that such social rejections can have detrimental effects on mixed-race individuals. She notes that those who 'framed their Black identities through discourse of solidarity and unity' often found that their 'Black identities have been rejected or contested by other Black people'.¹³ She adds that 'Black mixed-race people can feel positions as inauthentic Black people' and that the hostility they may receive has 'transformative impacts on identity formation'.¹⁴ This dynamic is explicitly portrayed in *The Icarus Girl*: Jess's family members pressurise her to attempt to form an essence of her identity: she should be Nigerian or British, but certainly not a negotiation of the two, despite the actual duality of her nationality.

At the same time, external social pressures may cause further tensions. Children of migrants are often essentialised as belonging entirely to their parents' cultures. Subsequently, they may find themselves discriminated against, racially and culturally, by the majority. Oyeyemi's depiction supports Mishra's analysis that mixed-nationality people are seen as impure. He summarises this sense of difference in the majority population through the metaphor of the hyphen:

In a nation-state the 'citizen' is offered as being generically pure, he/she is always unhyphenated, if we are to believe what our passports have to say about us. In actual practice the pure, unhyphenated generic category is only

¹² While the dominant trend appears to be that later generations have more nebulous, ambivalent or fluid relationships with national identity, there are instances in which later generations have a stronger sense of identity to what they perceive as the mother land. This can 'foster controversial or even destructive forms of political mobilization, such as radicalization' in certain contexts, as Bernd Simon, Frank Reichert and Olga Grabow's study found of Turkish and Russian migrant groups in Germany (Bernd Simon, Frank Reichert, and Olga Grabow, 'When Dual Identity Becomes a Liability: Identity and Political Radicalism Among Migrants', *Psychological Science*, 24.3 (2013), 251–57 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612450889>>). This may especially be the case when identities are further complicated by religious or ethnic identities, and within groups that form their identity among other migrants. In such circumstances 'home' may attain a mythic quality, as S. Behnaz Hosseini explores with Iranian ethnic groups in Sweden (S. Behnaz Hosseini, *Yārsān of Iran, Socio-Political Changes and Migration* (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2020), pp. 46–52). However, even within these emboldened cultural forms, dual identities are often 'conflict-ridden' (Simon, Reichert, and Grabow, p. 252).

¹³ Karis Campion, *Making Mixed Race: A Study of Time, Place and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 99–100 <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003027935>>.

¹⁴ Campion, *Making Mixed Race*, p. 100.

applicable to those citizens whose bodies signify an unproblematic identity of selves with nations.¹⁵

Jess is othered by her unhyphenated schoolmates' failure to account for her transnationality. Consuela Wagner's studies agree with this fictionalised account: 'people with *hybrid or cosmopolitan identity* have to face more discrimination and social disadvantages because they do not match the homogeneous cultural mass group.'¹⁶ Essentialised views of race and nation are the predominant factors that engender this discrimination.¹⁷ In a more anecdotal description, Andrea Fiss echoes this sense of in-betweenness. She highlights the feeling of being alienated by both sides and the need to shift identities according to the social context:

I am Indian and I am white, yet often I am forced to choose.[...] I am not sure if it is a true choice because I cannot be one without the other. I am Indian and I am white. [...] At different times, in different places and with different people, I may feel more connected to one side but both sides are always there. I do not think that I could cut out half of who I am.¹⁸

These challenges seem to be unrelated to any particular group of nations or locations, which implies that this is a fully transnational condition.¹⁹ Nor is this a phenomenon wholly restricted to ethnic mixing: even individuals seen as racially similar (such as

¹⁵ Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, p. 184.

¹⁶ Consuela Wagner, 'Migration and the Creation of Hybrid Identity: Chances and Challenges', *Harvard Square Symposium*, 2 (2016), 237–55 (p. 249).

¹⁷ In an Israeli context, Gil Diesendruck and Roni Mehamem cite numerous studies that corroborate this explanation. They state 'people believe that certain social categories capture objective partitions of reality, are composed of homogenous members who share inherent and unique characteristics, and that membership in the category is biologically determined and developmentally stable'; they argue 'such a construal of social categories likely underlies, and promotes, intergroup prejudice. In fact, numerous studies have documented that social essentialism is linked to adults' tendencies to hold stereotypes, prejudice, and negative attitudes towards essentialized groups' (Gil Diesendruck and Roni Menahem, 'Essentialism Promotes Children's Inter-Ethnic Bias', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6 (2015), 1–8 (p. 1) <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01180>>).

¹⁸ Andrea Fiss, 'Who Are You? On Being Half Indian and Half White', *LEARNing Landscapes*, 7.2 (2014), 125–37 (p. 134) <<https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v7i2.655>>.

¹⁹ While it is not possible to account for every combination of countries that report similar experiences, it certainly seems to resonate with any individual, particularly those in an ethnic minority, who grow up in the wealthy anglophone nations. For anecdotal explorations of double non-belonging in a Pakistan–UK and a Pacific-Island–Australia context, see: Rohan Banerjee, 'Why, as a British Asian, Calling Me a "Coconut" Hurts as Much as the P-Word', *The New Statesman*, 2016 <<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/11/why-british-asian-calling-me-coconut-hurts-much-p-word>> [accessed 16 November 2022]; Michelle James, 'Why Being Called a Coconut Is the Worst Insult', *SBS*, 2019 <<https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/voices/culture/article/2019/01/10/why-being-called-coconut-worst-insult>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

British and Polish) face comparable questions over identity and national identification.²⁰ They are by no means phenomena new to the twenty-first century: Carlos Poston cites numerous sources from the twentieth century where 'confusion [...] at having to choose one identity that is not fully expressive of one's background' leads to some people 'experience[ing] feelings of guilt, self-hatred, and lack of acceptance from one or more groups'.²¹ Yet, in countries like the UK, thanks to increases in transnationality and the long history of immigration, individuals combining ethnic identities are among the fastest-growing populations.²²

Even before the additional complexity of transnationality, identities are complicated and relational formulations. Theorists tend to divide, as William Cross does, between a personal, individual form of identity and a social formation.²³ These kinds of divisions are useful for analysis of experience but risk overstating the distinction between the two forms and overlooking the intertwined relatedness between interior and exterior identity formations. Mitchell, a foundational thinker of the self in terms of a relational model, states:

It is often assumed that a sense of self is easy to come by [...]. But psychoanalysts have come to regard the development of a sense of self as a complex process, an intricate and multifaceted construction, that is a central motivational concern throughout life and for which we are deeply dependent on other people.²⁴

²⁰ Emilia Lewandowska, 'More Polish or More British? Identity of The Second Generation of Poles Born in Great Britain', in *Perspectives and Progress in Contemporary Cross-Cultural Psychology: Proceedings from the 17th International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology*, ed. by G. Zheng, K. Leung, and J. G. Adair, 2008, pp. 211–24.

²¹ W. S. Carlos Poston, 'The Biracial Identity Development Model: A Needed Addition', *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 69.2 (1990), 152–55 (p. 154) <<https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1990.tb01477.x>>.

²² Mark Easton, 'Mixed Race UK Population Double Official Figure, Says New Report', *BBC News*, 6 October 2011 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-15205803>> [accessed 6 November 2022].

²³ William E. Cross, 'A Two-Factor Theory of Black Identity: Implications for the Study of Identity Development in Minority Children', in *Children's Ethnic Socialization: Pluralism and Development*, ed. by Jean S. Phinney and M. J. Rotherham, SAGE Focus Editions (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987), LXXXI, 117–33, cited in Poston, p. 153. Consuela Wagner summarises the findings of social scientists which divide identity into a narrative form, 'the way in which a person interprets [...] life events'; and a collective type, 'the basis of socialization' generated through 'general similarities as nation, language or skin color' and through which 'a collective set of experiences and attitudes, norms and social convention are transmitted' (Wagner, 'Migration and the Creation of Hybrid Identity', pp. 238–39).

²⁴ Mitchell, *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis*, p. 30.

A relational model, in which these individual and social aspects reciprocally influence one another, corresponds more closely with the characterisation of identity in *The Icarus Girl*. Through this fluidity and interdependency of social and personal components, however, relational models of the self still regard a coherent, 'patterned, structured self, forged in the relational matrix' as the characterisation of a healthy psyche.²⁵

It is this notion of a coherent sense of self, when tied to nationality, that globalisation and migration burden. Regionalist and nationalist conceptions of identity are interrelated and multifaceted before taking into consideration migration. When such identities migrate and intermingle with other cultures through partial and contested integration and assimilation, the fluidity and complexity is intensified. Amin Maalouf writes:

When one sees one's own identity as made up of a number of allegiances, some linked to an ethnic past and others not, some linked to a religious tradition and others not; when one observes in oneself, in one's origins and in the course one's life has taken, a number of different confluences and contributions [...]; then one enters into a different relationship both with other people and with one's own 'tribe.'²⁶

Sana Fatouhi cites a poem written by Ceylonese-Malaysian poet Charlene Rajendran that, with a simple pun, succinctly sums up the confusion resulting from these negotiations of nations: 'So *mush* of me is—muddled.'²⁷

These intricate, relational identities come into conflict with more absolutist notions by those who do not share this national fluidity or whose political leanings turn them towards essentialised or purist conceptions of race or nation. Writers such as Bhabha and Kwame Anthony Appiah have emphasised the enabling aspects of hybrid identities. Bhabha, celebrating his notion of hybridity, suggests that this third space, may help us 'elude the politics of polarity' and 'open the way to

²⁵ Schapiro, *Literature and the Relational Self*, p. 4.

²⁶ Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, trans. by Barbara Bray (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 31.

²⁷ Sanaz Fotouhi, 'Diasporic Iranian Writing in English', in *Transnational Narratives in Englishes of Exile*, ed. by Catalina Florina Florescu and Sheng-mei Ma (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), pp. 61–78 (p. 61).

conceptualizing an *international* culture'.²⁸ Appiah similarly claimed that plural influences on West African identity may be unproblematically multi-layered. As Stephanie Newell explains, Appiah sees an identity built upon multiple sources from family, regional, national, continental and global factors as celebratory: 'It is impossible to see [...] "alienation" [...] at work in a world where such harmony exists between one persons' disparate identities.'²⁹ However, this notion is complicated and even refuted in Oyeyemi's text and much scholarship about the real-world issues of identity migrants and their children face. The dynamic is one of the primary tensions that novels like Oyeyemi's, Díaz's and Hamid's explore in detail.

Although this is a fictional, supernatural account of these negotiations of identity, these anxieties are not abstract existential issues. They can have real-world effects on the well-being of people in Jess's transnational circumstances. Studies routinely find that prejudices are often involved in systemic racism that stratifies immigrants into lower paid and dangerous work.³⁰ In addition, mental health, particularly self-esteem, is negatively affected by racism and essentialising.³¹ Depression and anxiety are widespread in the children of migrants, as are symptoms of traumatic experiences. These are borne out of neighbourhood and domestic violence, poverty, systemic racism, bullying and overt discrimination.³²

Oyeyemi deploys a spirit double to characterise this sense of confusion around identity. A trope found throughout gothic and magical realist fiction, Oyeyemi utilises the spirit to articulate her protagonist's transnational experience. She uses it to envision a split between a relational form of identity that has been formed organically and this awkward social construction. Because of her use of devices like these, Oyeyemi's writing is often labelled magical realism, although she has expressed frustration at this ('It's not what I write').³³ Her objection to the label is valid in general as it is arguably overprescribed, pasted on to any text containing any

²⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Commitment to Theory', *New Formations*, 5 (1998), 5–23 (p. 22).

²⁹ Stephanie Newell, *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading*, Oxford Studies in Postcolonial Literatures in English (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 8.

³⁰ Mahabir and others, 'Classism and Everyday Racism', p. 350.

³¹ Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*, pp. 207–11.

³² For an example from Latino communities in the US, see: Sean D. Cleary and others, 'Immigrant Trauma and Mental Health Outcomes Among Latino Youth', *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 20.5 (2018), 1053–59 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-017-0673-6>>.

³³ Annalisa Quinn, 'The Professionally Haunted Life of Helen Oyeyemi', *NPR*, 2014 <<https://www.npr.org/2014/03/07/282065410/the-professionally-haunted-life-of-helen-oyeyemi>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

divergence from realism. Many of her other novels, including *The Opposite House* (2007), *White is for Witching* (2009), *Mr Fox* (2011) and *Gingerbread* (2019), contain elements of surrealism, gothic overtones and the fantastic, but there is little else in them that resembles more familiar versions of magical realism. However, *The Icarus Girl*, her first novel, corresponds more clearly thanks to this engagement with culturally opposing cosmologies and to the casual way Jess responds to the overtly impossible aspects of Tilly. She narrates Jess being split into two as the stronger, Nigerian spirit attempts to swallow up her more complex, more fluid sense of national identity. This supernatural characterisation mirrors W. E. B. Du Bois's depiction, in his own context, of a double consciousness formed from his being an African American: 'a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals.'³⁴

Through its revised magical realist tropes, *The Icarus Girl* vividly depicts the detrimental effect of these social tensions on a child's children's mental. Oyeyemi introduces Tilly into Jess's narrative, a girl whom Jess meets on her trip to Nigeria but whom nobody else can see. Oyeyemi closely binds the supernatural elements of her text with her character's experience, as contemporary authors more often do: Tilly literalises Mishra's view that individuals with mixed identification of nationalities 'would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia'.³⁵ Tilly represents this split, when transnational fluidity contrasts with nationalistic essentialism. She gradually exerts further pressure on Jess, finally invading her body, thereby collapsing the distinction between the two girls in a rupture of identity. Oyeyemi demonstrates the interplay of simultaneity and rupture through language and references to splitting, melding and doubling. These are concentrated around Tilly and in particular to the senses. Oyeyemi thus shifts the supernatural into an interior space of Jess's perspective, which has become more paradigmatic in recent examples of the mode.

Magical realism therefore allows Oyeyemi to create, explore and rupture the interconnection between two culturally contingent beliefs. This brings the text into

³⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 136.

³⁵ Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, p. 1.

dialogue with magical realist depictions such as Carpentier's where the world views of a culture undergoing oppression bring about a supernatural intervention that questions the opposing, rationalist cosmology. Tilly presents as an abiku, a trope found throughout much magical realist writing of the twentieth and twenty-first century that engages with some beliefs of Yoruba culture. Through this trope, Oyeyemi participates in postcolonial discourse surrounding the oppression of epistemological paradigms. However, Oyeyemi's transnational update to the trope makes clear distinctions to many postcolonial authors such as Okri and Isidore Okpewho: rather than embed the abiku within West Africa as a cultural counterpoint to European and American cosmologies, she uproots the myth, just as Jess is dislocated from her cultural heritage.

A key argument of this thesis is that twenty-first-century iterations of magical realism focus on the interior, affective realm of people's experiences. As such, we see an intersection between magical realist tropes and cultural trauma to a heightened degree. In addition to interpreting the spirit double according to Yoruba folklore about the abiku, Oyeyemi simultaneously reverses this trend towards the supernatural stemming from the world of 'magic' and instead from the beliefs and findings of psychoanalysis. From the perspective of her atheist father and her British psychologist, Tilly is a delusion, an alter-ego symptomising a personality disorder that often results from trauma. Some critics, particularly Eugene Arva, have analysed the relationship between trauma and magical realism in detail. However, I argue that Oyeyemi nuances how trauma literature usually relies on depictions of catastrophic events.³⁶ She pre-emptively presents a developmental version of trauma as outlined by psychologist Bessel van der Kolk some years later, which is of particular salience for the children of migrants.

Regarding identity formation, Oyeyemi interrogates both the psychoanalytical construal and the abiku interpretation as guilty of mutual exclusivity. Oyeyemi portrays both interpretations of the spirit double as equivocal but ultimately ontologically sound, thereby critiquing both perspectives as representative of cultural exclusivism. Both interpretations contribute to Jess's collapse. This manipulation of the tenet in Carpentier's execution scene epitomises a relational rather than direct

³⁶ Eugene L. Arva, *The Traumatic Imagination: Histories of Violence in Magical Realist Fiction* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2011).

relationship between trauma and the supernatural. Oyeyemi accuses this tension between rooted notions of culture of causing the breakdown of boundaries between the self and the other. Her text therefore contrasts with postcolonial works which often feature two cultures in opposition and which highlight the hierarchical pressure of a dominant culture over another. Carine Mardorossian suggests that this shift away from oppositionality is increasingly prevalent with 'migrant' authors: 'The shift from exile to migrant challenges this binary logic by emphasizing movement, rootlessness, and the mixing of cultures, races, and languages.'³⁷ For the descendants of those who migrated, including all the authors in this study, this is particularly true. In fact, in Oyeyemi's case it is the competition itself that is the primary target of her critique. Tilly's relational connection between trauma symptomatology and the spiritual Yoruba beliefs results in her blurring the distinctions between the two, representing a concretised metaphor for a transnational trauma. It indicts nationalism and essentialist configuration of national identities as traumatically misrepresentative of the complex and relational connections that children of migrants maintain to nation and culture.

Becoming Wuraola: Relational national identity and the pressures of essentialism

This section analyses Oyeyemi's portrayal of national identity, the stage on which her magical realist interventions will be played. I first argue that *The Icarus Girl* establishes Jess's transnational identity as dynamic and interdependent, before exploring how the ascriptions of nation and ethnicity are forced upon her. The section then draws attention to the dual pressures Jess endures from within her family and social circles, and the feelings of being torn in two by these pulls. As will be seen, the text adopts a long-established trait of foreshadowing the supernatural with a language shift that evokes the strange and monstrous. This anticipates the culmination of the social pressures on Jess during a visit to Nigeria. Thus, she sets the scene for an expected standard version of magical realism, which she then upends.

³⁷ Carine M. Mardorossian, 'From Literature of Exile to Migrant Literature', *Modern Language Studies*, 32.2 (2002), 15–33 (p. 16) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3252040>>.

The first page of *The Icarus Girl* invokes identity as a pivotal theme. The protagonist reminds herself who she is: '*My name is Jessamy. I am eight years old*' (p. 3). A corresponding link between name and location proves critical for generating a sense of rootedness, while foreshadowing some of Jess's already unusual behaviour: Jess continues, '*I am in the cupboard. [...] If she reminded herself that she was in the cupboard, she would know exactly where she was, something that was increasingly difficult each day*' (p. 3). Jess's early focus on, and instability regarding, name and place extrapolates to a wider ambivalence about these as metonyms for identity and nationality. Her conduct is accorded with values that regard nationality and national character as central to behaviour. Jess recalls her parents inspecting her solitary, pensive behaviour in light of her dual nationalities:

In Nigeria, her mother had said, children were always getting themselves into mischief, and surely that was better than sitting inside reading and staring into space all day. But her father, who was English and insisted that things were different here, said it was more or less normal behaviour. (p. 5)

Jess's response illustrates the tension that these conversations evince as she cannot settle on either interpretation: she 'didn't know who was right' (p. 6). This embodies Jess's typical responses to the way her national identity is buffeted by those around her. It typifies the internal conflict that can arise when an identity is pinned to culture and nation: Jess's relational identity causes her only the feeling of being lost.

Yet despite her national and racial fluidity, the identity to which she is ascribed by others around her is one of difference. Like her nationality, she is assigned identity according to racial categories, about which she is also ambivalent. Her mixed heritage and the social pressures it inspires recalls Du Bois's notion of double consciousness: 'this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.'³⁸ People like Jess to whom national and ethnic boundaries do not exclusively apply often find difficulty in seeking approval. Jess quietly absorbs this tension: in school, she is taunted by class bully Colleen McLain, who pins identity to race by telling the class Jess 'can't make up her mind whether she's black

³⁸ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p.xiii.

or white!' (p. 86). Jess's response is as ambivalent as when her parents ascribe her national characteristics: 'Jess hadn't known what to think about what Colleen had just said, (*I mean, is it true?*)' (p. 86).³⁹ *The Icarus Girl* depicts London's 'multicultural' communities continuing to reinforce binaries of 'us' and 'them' around national and ethnic lines, no matter the arbitrariness and outdatedness of such categories.

In a concurrent strain, and, consistent with studies of the children of migrants, Jess's immigrant parent attempts to essentialise Jess as overly Nigerian. Her mother, Sarah, is instrumental in encouraging Jess to take sides in the matter of race since she imposes her own conception of racial identity on to Jess's mixed one: Sarah bans Jess from owning Barbie dolls because they 'represent the white idea of beauty' (p. 126). Jess undercuts Sarah's racial politics by responding with a simplistic, childlike desire for the same toys as her friend: 'I don't know ... They're only dolls, I s'pose. I wouldn't mind one' (p. 126). Jess's transnational configuration positions her as rejecting nationality and race as critical for identity formulation, even while peers and family continuously exert these pressures on her.⁴⁰ This is why Jess takes an ambivalent stance on any sense of identification to racial or national categories since her position continues to shift according to the expectations of others. As a child she struggles to accommodate this relationality and so attempts to shrug it off. Paul Gilroy suggests that 'modern black political culture' overly focuses on absolutist notions of roots, when it is more fruitfully understood as 'a process of movement and mediation'.⁴¹ Likewise, Sarah imposes her own full Nigerianness, convoluted through race, on Jess by claiming a white representation of Jesus entirely excludes Jess:

³⁹ Oyeyemi notes elsewhere that the bullying racial discrimination that Jess experiences remains an endemic problem for minority groups: 'There are still lots of ways in which it is horrific not to be the norm' (Quinn, 'The Professionally Haunted Life of Helen Oyeyemi').

⁴⁰ Throughout her other work, Oyeyemi explores the pull between societal racism and the reality of categorisations of race being overly prescribed. In an interview regarding her later novel *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014), Oyeyemi summarises:

I'm interested in any scenario in which something you think you know about someone, based on his or her appearance, turns out to be utterly wrong. [...] It makes a bit of a mockery of a few artificial categorizations that we cling to. A black person who looks white forces both 'sides,' as it were, to deal with the fact that the other is one of us. (Helen Oyeyemi, 'Artificial Categorizations: PW Talks with Helen Oyeyemi', *Publishers Weekly*, 261.4 (2014), n. p.)

⁴¹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 19.

Sometimes it can be hard to really love someone or something when you can't see anything of yourself in them. [...] Jesus doesn't have lips as big as yours, and his skin is fair. How can you ever be as good as him on the outside when there's nothing of him in your face? (p. 228)

By claiming there is 'nothing' of the white Jesus in Jess, Sarah excises her daughter's non-Nigerian self, preventing her from identifying with her peers.

The pressure of her mother trying to corral Jess towards an absolute Nigerianness dominates the text as a main cause of tension; it is from this stressor that the supernatural will emerge. Her mother's influence in Jess's feeling of being othered is underscored throughout the text: Jess is taken to a psychologist, Dr McKenzie, on account of the emotional difficulties she appears to be suffering. She vacillates between a binary, feeling that her mother insists on viewing her as essentially Nigerian:

'Sometimes I feel like she wants me to . . . I don't know. She wants me to be Nigerian or something. And I don't want to be changed that way; I can't be. It might hurt.'

'Hurt?' said Dr. McKenzie.

'Yeah, like . . . being stretched.'

'Jess, it's not a matter of my wanting you to be Nigerian—you are, you just are!' her mother said. When Jess looked at her, she continued, 'You're English too, duh. And it's OK.'

It wasn't. She just didn't know [...] —she'd be English. No— she couldn't, though. She'd be Nigerian. No— (p. 257)

Sarah's half-hearted 'duh' betrays her dismissive attitude to hybridity. Jess slips nebulously between the two concepts, mediated by the expectations of others, so that the idea of her being both nationalities, or exclusively either, seem equally absurd. The resulting dilemma echoes Du Bois's double consciousness: the centripetal pull of race and nation emanating from her mother is of equal or greater force to Jess's transnationality. As such, while Jess's identity shows itself to be relational, external forces cause her emotional distress as they push Jess to categories that cannot contain her.

The tensions surrounding Jess's fluid identity culminate in an episode in Nigeria. Oyeyemi deploys the supernatural as a metaphor of this impossible and intolerable strain on Jess's young psyche. The event is foreshadowed with a portrayal of Nigeria in gothic, monstrous terms. In this instance, Oyeyemi's technique self-consciously and ironically reiterates the postcolonial critique of texts such as *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Heart of Darkness* (1899) that depict the other as exotic and strange. It also conforms to a trait found throughout magical realism in auguring the supernatural with a shift to language and imagery that prepare the reader for the change in tone the supernatural often demands. At the same time, this technique reverses one of Márquez's signature techniques of defamiliarising the familiar as a critique of novels like Conrad's: in Oyeyemi's transnational context, everywhere is strange and nowhere is home. Partly in response to her apparent mental health issues, Jess's family take her to her mother's ancestral home, Ibadan. Just as London is denied as a place of belonging given Jess's fluid identity, Oyeyemi underlines that Ibadan is just as alien and alienating. Imagery evoking fear, strangeness and danger permeate this first depiction of Nigeria. It appears from the plane's descent as a beast intent on her destruction, 'looming out from across all the water and land [...], reaching out for her with spindly arms made of dry, crackling grass like straw, wanting to pull her down against its beating heart, to the centre of the heat, so she would pop and crackle like marshmallow' (p. 9). Upon arrival she is 'frightened' by the exaggerated image of an 'immense woman wearing the most fantastical traditional dress' imbued with monstrous 'Yellow snakes, coiled up' with 'small eyes squinting' (pp. 8–9). Vampiric, 'almost impossibly tall' people, ripe with the smells of 'sweaty bodies', with 'loose, flapping gowns' of clothing, threaten her security by 'descending upon her father as if they wished to swallow him up' (pp. 14–15). This imagined threat to her father suggests she feels her non-Nigerian side is in danger.

Jess's Nigerian grandfather, Gbenga Oyegbebi, represents absolutist nationalism and social pressure even more forcefully than Sarah. He is partly responsible for Jess's collapse of self. Although Jess is welcomed into the Nigerian family, she feels no more at home there than in England: 'Here she was, half a world away, still feeling alien' (p. 30). When Jess initially meets Gbenga, he criticises Sarah for entirely abandoning her Nigerian roots by leaving for England and marrying an English man: 'She didn't just take her body away from this place', he explains, 'she

took everything. Nothing of her is left here' (p. 28). Gbenga suggests that such lifestyle choices are binary, that Sarah cannot be Nigerian without marrying and living there.⁴² His refusal to acknowledge that his daughter has a more fluid relationship between her Nigerianness and her life in England results in him seeing Sarah as split in two: an indicator of the fate which he helps bestow on Jess. 'Sometimes I think that she doesn't know what she's doing at all, at all, but she follows some other person inside her that tells her to do things that make no sense' (p. 26). If mere migration causes such a rupture between his traditionalism and more fluid connections to nation, then Jess's transnational relationship with Nigeria is intolerable for him.

Oyeyemi presages Jess's split and the eruption of Tilly with a metaphorical fissure through the power of naming. Name and rootedness are synonymous for Gbenga, and he partly attributes his criticism of Sarah's betrayal to losing her Yoruba family name:

Oyegbebi—it means 'kingship lives here.' He tapped his breastbone. 'Here. Here is where kingship lives. I am a princely man, and my children therefore should be proud and strong. [...] I don't know your father, I don't know his father, or what his people have done. It is something about your mother that made her do this, marry a man that she didn't know.' (p. 28)

However, Jess, who has previously had no direct access to Yoruba culture, does not understand: 'It was so breathtakingly obvious that knowing someone's name didn't mean that you knew them that she didn't even attempt to protest' (p. 28). Gbenga then abandons Jess's English name in favour of Wuraola, a name given to her as a baby but which she had never heard before (p. 19). She tries to resist this power: 'He thought her name was Wuraola, but he was wrong.' (p. 28).⁴³ However, it proves

⁴² Such an absolutism relies on a concept of a cohesive and coherent nation, which contradicts the multiple cultures, religions and languages of Nigeria: Oyeyemi foregrounds this incongruity in Gbenga's ideology. He embraces both Baptist prayer and folkloric Yoruba practices as fully compatible when he turns to Christian prayer and a traditional 'medicine woman' to attempt to resolve Jess's emotional difficulties, much to the consternation of Jess's atheist father (p. 313).

⁴³ Regarding the power of naming in West African cultures, Isidore Diala explains that as 'abuse, subterfuge, camouflage, or incantation, names embody powers that can procure desired palpable physical results because, though they derive from the supernatural, they nonetheless retain the capability to influence the supernatural'; Oyeyemi's portrayal of Gbenga conforms to this understanding of this power. It also resonates in Jessamy/Jess's half name and when Jess renames

disastrously effective. As soon as she is renamed, Jess, who is already struggling with a modulating, doubled sense of identity, begins to dissociate from her English name as if naming her Wuraola splits her:

Wuraola sounded like another person. Not her at all.

Should she answer to this name, and by doing so steal the identity of someone who belonged here?

Should she . . . become Wuraola?

But how? (p. 20)

Jess's transnationality complicates the idea of national identities, showing their nebulousness coming into conflict with older, more nationalistic thinking. Through techniques like defamiliarisation, the power of naming and foreshadowing of the supernatural, Oyeyemi produces similar effects to older magical realists but adjusts them for these unique transnational circumstances. It sets the scene for the conflict between these relational aspects of her identity and the fixed, absolutist conceptions that her peers and families possess and attempt to bestow upon her. On this canvas Oyeyemi features her supernatural intervention, which literalises the rupture to Jess's mental well-being and the trauma present in the neglect and discrimination that these pressures cause.

Jess-who-wasn't-Jess', 'Tilly-who-was-Jess': Oyeyemi's reconfigured abiku and literalising transnational identity crisis

In this section I assert that Oyeyemi symbolises these feelings of being split in two with an adjusted trope of a spirit child. This adaptation demonstrates the move in transnational magical realist fiction towards representing tensions in migrant experiences through literalising those feelings in supernatural forms. The section analyses how Oyeyemi deterritorialises the trope of the abiku, a common resource in postcolonial magical realism that has emanated from West Africa. Yet Oyeyemi's spirit child is unlike the supernatural experiences in those texts that foregrounded or

Titola the half/double name TillyTilly in return. The power of naming is more fully present in other magical realist texts such as Okpewho's *Call Me by My Rightful Name* (2004) and throughout Toni Morrison's work (Isidore Diala, 'Colonial Mimicry and Postcolonial Re-Membering in Isidore Okpewho's *Call Me by My Rightful Name*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 36.4 (2013), 77–95 (p. 80) <<https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.36.4.77>>).

resisted hegemonies. It differs from depictions by authors who, as Brenda Cooper suggests, use magical realism to expose 'systems of oppression' or describe 'the disillusionments of post-independence African politic'.⁴⁴ I argue Oyeyemi corroborates this thesis's identification of magical realist tropes being shifted to represent rather than oppose these emotional struggles. She focalises Jess's eight-year-old perspective of Tilly, interiorising the supernatural as a literalised metaphor of the emotional impact of challenges within transnationality. Tilly collapses the distinction between herself and Jess, rupturing the unity of the self. The split echoes the breakdown of division between nationalities that Jess's transnationality embodies. The section finally argues that Oyeyemi represents this collapse not only through the narrative of Tilly, but also through multiple stylistic and linguistic allusions to splitting and collapsing.

When Jess's behaviour begins to deteriorate thanks to Tilly, the interpretation Jess's mother and grandfather make is that Jess is, or has been possessed by, an abiku (p. 174). The lack of clarity about whether Tilly or Jess should be considered the abiku is indicative of the myth itself. Its ambiguity reveals its value as a transnational trope. The abiku myth enables Oyeyemi to reinforce the theme of unstable identity as it resounds with associations of blurred distinctions. An early English-language text by A. B. Ellis describing West African religion depicts it as contradictorily both the perpetrator and the victim, both the cause and the effect of a child's death in Yoruba belief. Abiku is:

a word used to mean the spirits of children who die before reaching puberty, and also a class of evil spirits who cause children to die; a child who dies before twelve years of age being called an Abiku, and the spirit, or spirits, who caused the death being also called Abiku.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, p. 3; p. 61.

⁴⁵ A. B. Ellis, *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa: Their Religion, Manners, Customs, Laws, Language, Etc: With an Appendix Containing a Comparison of the Tshi, Gã, Èwe, and Yoruba Languages* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1894), pp. 111–12 <<http://archive.org/details/b21781370>> [accessed 31 October 2022]. The fact that this description is more than a century old renders it potentially somewhat ill-informed or outdated. Yet the blurring of the boundary between the child and the spirit possessing the child abounds in creative depictions of the myth throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, as Oyeyemi's, Okri's, Morrison's and Okpewho's novels testify.

This portrayal of the blurred boundaries that the abiku evokes aligns with Cooper's argument that certain West African beliefs feature a concurrent blurring, 'in the crossovers between humans and animals, spirits and people, the animate and inanimate, the dead and the live'.⁴⁶ Oyeyemi is one of many authors that have used the abiku myth as inspiration for magical realist aspects of their fiction, including Okri with his character Azaro in *Famished Road*, Morrison's eponymous character in *Beloved* and Okpewho's Otis Hampton in *Call Me By My Rightful Name* (2004). These usages generally correspond to Warnes's faith-based categorisation of postcolonial magical realism, foregrounding a mythological cosmology being oppressed by colonial and imperial forces.

Yet Oyeyemi departs from these precursors by deconstructing the abiku as a postcolonial trope. Oyeyemi disconnects the abiku from the notion of an ancestral home. Okri's abiku in *Famished Road*, for example, depends on his connection to the land around him for his existence and access to the spirit world; the forest and the devouring road of the title bind him to his nationhood. Okpewho's abiku draws the American protagonist back to the African village from which his ancestor had been abducted as a slave. Oyeyemi, however, aims for a more interpersonal than territorialised approach. Like Morrison and Okpewho, Oyeyemi relocates the abiku, in her case to a British suburban setting. If postcolonial scholarship of identity in West Africa has tended to homogenise its multifaceted cultures and cultures, as Newell argues, then Oyeyemi complicates this further by blending it with an equivalently heterogeneous British culture.⁴⁷ Her abiku reinforces rootlessness and reiterates a transnational alienation. When Jess comes back to London following her trip to Nigeria, Tilly follows her. There, she is depicted wearing the 'black buckled shoes' of a typical English schoolchild (p. 90). She tames her 'enormous puffs of hair' into 'thick, stubby plaits', and adopts the parlance of a young Londoner (she calls someone a 'pain in the bum', for example (p. 91; p. 101)). Oyeyemi shows that magical realist tropes travel alongside their authors, so that in Oyeyemi's case, her own parents' connection to Nigeria but lived experience in Britain inflects her depiction of the abiku. It reimagines its traditional rootedness in a localised mythology as a more global, transnational rootlessness.

⁴⁶ Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, p. 39.

⁴⁷ Newell, *West African Literatures*, p. 7.

Adopting a child as primary focaliser enables Oyeyemi to introduce the supernatural without the shock of destabilising her protagonist's world view. Children are uniquely fitting as magical realist focalisers: as described in the introduction to this thesis, one of the mode's most prominent characteristics relies on a character witnessing the impossible but taking few measures to reconcile the experience with their own cosmology. Jess is much less likely than an adult to ponder the impossibility of the supernatural because children are routinely exposed to newness and strangeness. Her transnationality has already exposed her to multiple contradictions, so the distinction between the real and unreal is already blurred.⁴⁸ Similarly, Oyeyemi mentions in an interview that she maintains a more attenuated relationship between fantasy and reality than most adults: 'I would be that kind of psychologist who says "You're absolutely right — there are monsters under the bed."' ⁴⁹ She bestows this outlook on Jess, who at one stage realises 'with stunning clarity that she was the only person who saw TillyTilly' (p. 158). However, she continues conversations with her about her impossibility, accepting the paradox that Tilly is both real and unreal at the same time: 'I can see you, though, and you're not really here. That's weird, isn't it?' (p. 190). She even decides Tilly's dubious ontological status is less important than their relationship: 'even if TillyTilly wasn't real, if it was a choice between there being just her and Tilly or her and real people, she'd much, much rather have Tilly' (p. 158). For Jess, the central contradiction of a stable sense of national identity being exerted on her is no more impossible to comprehend.

Oyeyemi shifts the experience of Tilly almost exclusively to the internal landscape of the child. This indicates a contemporary turn towards the interiorisation of supernatural experiences, in contrast to the much more public perceptions in the works of Okri, Morrison, Carpentier, García Márquez and Rushdie. Jess's encounters are suffered almost entirely in isolation. Her classmates see her talking to herself (p. 159) and her parents describe her as 'hysterical' (p. 202) when Tilly is present. Others ignore, miss or rationalise those experiences, an echo of

⁴⁸ Child psychologist Eileen Kennedy-Moore suggests that real-world children's perception of imaginary friends is rarely confused as real. They exist in a liminal state between belief and imagination, in what she calls 'bemagination' (Eileen Kennedy-Moore, 'Imaginary Friends', *Psychology Today*, 2013 <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/growing-friendships/201301/imaginary-friends>> [accessed 19 November 2022]).

⁴⁹ Quinn, 'The Professionally Haunted Life of Helen Oyeyemi'.

Jess's feelings of isolation from family and peers.⁵⁰ The solitariness of this supernatural experience reiterates the gap between the children of migrants and their parents. It suggests that transnational children like Jess increasingly experience their unique transnational situations alone. Jess suffers from numerous isolating experiences: the disconnection from her peers to whom she cannot relate; the essentialising expectation that Jess be nationalities she is not; and her immigrant parent who does not share or understand the dynamic of her transnationality. It is from the depths of such internal, lonely trauma that the supernatural now erupts.

The novel's adapted magical realist trope captures Jess's in-betweenness and double consciousness. It envisions Tilly trying to steal Jess's body from her, literalising Jess's feeling of being torn between expectations of her Britishness and Nigerianness, rupturing her sense of self. Tilly is able to do exciting, impossible things such as become invisible (p. 99). This friend fills the social lacuna for Jess. She initially appears as a curative for Jess's trauma and isolation while manifesting as a double by supernaturally impersonating her. She first appears in an abandoned building in Nigeria. When they first meet, Tilly mimics Jess weakly, as if English is alien to her: "Hello, Jessy," said the girl. Her voice was heavily accented' (p. 44). The next time she speaks, she copies Jess's English accent and intonation with supernatural precision: "D'you speak English?" the girl said, perfectly naturally'; she swiftly becomes a 'veritable Jessamy-echo' (p. 45). Over time in the early stages of the narrative, Tilly befriends Jess. She feeds off her social awkwardness and inability to relate to anyone else on account of her mixed heritage and erratic behaviour. Tilly thus appears at first to offer Jess belonging through friendship, from which she has been starved: '*O God, please help me to stay friends with TillyTilly, please, please, please. Let me keep her. She is my only friend; I have had no one else*' (pp. 71–72). As Oyeyemi's narrative progresses, however, the destructive nature of Tilly's machinations exacerbates Jess's emotional problems. She offers Jess powers ('d'you

⁵⁰ Young people and children feature prominently throughout literary works that deploy aspects of magical realism, including Ti Noël in Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World*, Ernesto in José María Arguedas's *Deep Rivers* (1958), Azaro in Okri's *Famished Road*, Saleem in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Denver in Morrison's *Beloved*, Lakshmi in Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother*, Clara and Blanca in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1982), and Tita in Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992). *The Icarus Girl* exemplifies a trend in more contemporary usages of the mode in adopting a young protagonist who experiences supernatural moments as solitary experiences. As well as the children in the selected texts, this feature characterises Asiya in Khakpour's *The Last Illusion* (2014), Aruna in Pia Chaudhuri's *A Hungry God* (2015) and Ava in Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!* (2011).

still want to be able to do the things I can?'), and she light-heartedly suggests they swap consciousnesses: 'you'll be me for a little bit, Jessy, and I'm going to be you!' (p. 199). Jess is tricked into thinking this will be fun, but it proves painful. When her power increases, Tilly attempts to eradicate Jess. Jess looks in a mirror but Tilly controls her movement and expresses her intent of making their transition permanent:

She leaned closer, squinting, then gasped aloud as her reflection spoke to her.

'I want to swap places, Jessy.'

It was Tilly's voice, but Jess's mirrored mouth moving. (p. 241)

Tilly progressively enforces and represents a more total annihilation of Jess's selfhood: 'It was as if TillyTilly had a special sharp knife that cut people on the inside so that they collapsed into themselves and couldn't ever get back out' (p. 284). Oyeyemi emphasises this collapse through the doubling, negating and reversing of Jess and Tilly's names. When Tilly takes over Jess's body, the narrator fluctuates configurations between 'Tilly-who-was-Jess' and 'Jess-who-wasn't-Jess', nullifying Jess's wholeness at each turn (pp. 201–204). Oyeyemi's narrative outlines the need for a cohesive sense of self that relational models typically depict as necessary for well-being. It highlights the denial of relational aspects of the self as potentially traumatic.

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Oyeyemi typifies a stylistic trait being increasingly adopted in transnational magical realism whereby linguistic elements and narrative structure accentuate the same thematic effect as the supernatural. The third-person narrator almost entirely focalises Jess's perspective, but once Tilly takes control and Jess loses her sense of self, other characters briefly take focus (p. 273; p. 310). Oyeyemi underscores the collapse through a range of references to doubling, halving and splitting, all surrounding Tilly and her insidious influences. Jess, for example, converts Tilly's name from the unpronounceable Yoruba name of Titola into a double name:

'Well, Titi doesn't sound that much like Tilly. Tilly has all L's and not enough T's...'

The girl watched her, the corners of her eyes wrinkled up as if she was about to smile again.

'TillyTilly? Can I call you that? TillyTilly, I mean? It has two T's . . . and I don't want to get your real name wrong.' (pp. 46–47)

Conversely, Tilly halves Jess's full name, Jessamy, into Jessy: Jess had 'always been Jess or Jessamy, never a halfway thing like Jessy' (p. 41). As Tilly turns more malevolent, Jess and the narrator highlight the aptness of her double name: 'She'd changed again: two Tillys, nice Tilly, nasty Tilly, TillyTilly' (p. 242). Fragmentation and the contradictory similarity between 'half' and 'double', and concomitant allusions to splitting, betweenness, blurring and contradiction run through the text's motifs as well as its language.⁵¹ References to twins and mirrors proliferate the text, and Jess feels as if 'Everything [is] tearing her apart' (p. 204); she is often caught between emotions and concepts, 'sandwiching her between solids and colour' (p. 200). These are reinforced by allusions to cutting, abrasiveness and chaos resulting from representatives of her opposing cultures. Jess's cousin Dulcie, whose Englishness is predominant as it brings into focus Jess's difference, is given characteristics that emphasise weapon-like qualities; her metallic 'sharp chin and silver-blond hair' corresponds to her 'smashing a hole through Jess's fragile peace' (p. 4). A chaotic scene outside the Nigerian airport is filled with abrasive sensations ('bouncing ultra-shiny colours', 'scream, 'darted', 'outshout', 'broken' (p. 14–15)). Jess is also depicted as precocious, torn between adulthood and childhood. She additionally embraces contradiction in emotions: when asked if Tilly still scares her, she characteristically responds that 'In some ways it was an enormous yes, in others, no' (p. 267). Her desires are also contradictory: '*I don't want you to come [...], but I do, but I don't*' (p. 286). Tilly likewise embraces the contradiction of splitting, doubling and halving: 'And now her thoughts turned to TillyTilly, who was fragmenting and becoming double' (p. 251). Thus, when Tilly performs her takeover, Jess's sense of self shatters in both metaphorical and literal ways: 'She felt as if she were – *being flung*, scattered in steady handfuls' (p. 200).

⁵¹ Madelaine Hron draws attention to many examples where the word 'half' is used, 'stylistically intimating Jess's sense of incompleteness'. Yet, linguistic references to 'half' accounts for only a proportion of the wider set of allusions to halves, splitting and doubles (Madelaine Hron, 'Ora Na-Azu Nwa: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels', *Research in African Literatures*, 39.2 (2008), 27–48 (p. 12) <<https://doi.org/10.2979/RAL.2008.39.2.27>>).

In concord with the multiple layers of linguistic and thematic doubling, splitting, blurring and halving, Oyeyemi modulates her use of senses by collapsing them into synaesthesia. Jess experiences senses as if they overlap one another: the 'sound' of her mother's voice 'almost had a smell' (p. 3); she is woken up by something but is not sure 'whether it was a sound or a smell or an abrupt sight' (p. 50); she can feel 'the fuzzy light disappear' when she first meets Tilly (p. 43); she sees a balloon whose colour she can feel, a 'stinging yellow' (p. 304); and her father's tiredness mingles multiple senses as it is 'tangible to Jess. It tasted . . . brown' (p. 204). Jess's senses no longer operate as discrete faculties, in much the same way as Jess can no longer disentangle herself from Tilly, or her Nigerian self from her British self. Oyeyemi adopts a similar technique but in reverse as Tilly's control over Jess's sanity increases. Just as Tilly fragments Jess when she initially takes over Jess's body, the reversal of the mingling of senses occurs as Tilly causes Jess to see a baby under her bed, which she claims is Jess's dead twin sister. At this point, colours fragment into 'a moment of pointillism, her vision swimming out of clarity and into a group of coloured dots, then reforming again' (p. 167). Oyeyemi's literary symbolisms thus mirror the supernatural portrayal of transnational identities being fragmented under traumatic tension by static, essentialised conceptions of race and nationality.

Relationality between magical realism and developmental trauma in transnational experiences

This section articulates the thesis's overarching establishment of a move towards representation of relational rather than oppositional cosmologies and a shift towards psychoanalysis as a source of the supernatural. I present models of psychological trauma that encapsulate Oyeyemi's portrayal of Jess's emotional dysregulation, examining how *The Icarus Girl* presages emerging understanding of complex trauma resulting from racial abuse and neglect. I suggest Oyeyemi takes a different path to authors who adopt more standard tropes of trauma such as fragmented narratives. Oyeyemi instead narrows in on heightened senses to externalise traumatic experience. I argue Oyeyemi's play on a magical realist depiction of trauma interrogates the hierarchical cultural cosmologies of 'rationalism' and 'mysticism'. She deploys techniques similar to those of Carpentier, Okri and Morrison in deriving supernatural events from a literary transformation of mythologies of Yoruba culture;

these events contradict conceptions of rationalism, which are typically associated explicitly with Euro-American thinking in postcolonial narratives. Oyeyemi avoids the pitfalls of primitivising these beliefs as folkloric superstitions: she adjusts the paradigmatic pairing of myth or religion and rationalism to the cultures of the oppressed and the oppressor. In doing so she highlights the tenuous cultural dependence on such beliefs. She subverts and collapses any hierarchy between both cultural cosmologies so that both world views are relationally dependent and cannot operate in isolation. This erosion of the border between fantasy and reality echoes the relationality of Jess's identity. In modifying magical realist tenets in this manner, I argue Oyeyemi fictionalises the real-world psychological damage that can occur in the children of migrants when they are faced with the conflicting pulls of nationalism and racism.

While Oyeyemi presents Tilly as a form of abiku from the perspective of Gbenga and Sara, she also offers an opposing psychoanalytical explanation. This other interpretation is initially established when Jess is taken to see a therapist in Britain, who tells her mother:

It's possible that TillyTilly is an alter ego, although she could also be an internalised imaginary companion. It seems as if we have a situation where Jess has discovered a need of an outlet for emotions that she doesn't want to show. She may have kind of ... created, for lack of a better word, a personality that is very markedly different from her own. (p. 276)

The text does not affix any label to Jess's condition from this psychoanalytical perspective. However, critics have ascribed her mental state according to contemporary, American psychoanalytical models. She has been variously labelled as having a 'personality disorder', 'bipolar disorder', and most commonly, 'dissociative identity disorder'.⁵² The latter is most appropriate as the therapist's explanation closely aligns with the diagnostic criteria presented in the American Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals of Mental Disorders (DSM), the default manual for

⁵² Hron, 'Ora Na-Azu Nwa', p. 38; Dave Gunning, 'Dissociation, Spirit Possession, and the Languages of Trauma in Some Recent African-British Novels', *Research in African Literatures*, 46.4 (2015), 119–32 (p. 119) <<https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafritlite.46.4.119>>; Christopher Ouma, 'Reading the Diasporic Abiku in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*', *Research in African Literatures*, 45.3 (2014), 188–205 (p. 188) <<https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafritlite.45.3.188>>.

psychoanalysis.⁵³ It describes the condition as the 'Disruption of identity characterised by two or more distinct personality states, which may be described in some cultures as an experience of possession'.⁵⁴ Such a condition supports the text's depiction of Jess's fragmentation, her coherent and relational sense of self ruptured into a delusion of an alter-ego.

Oyeyemi's portrayal reassesses how contemporary psychoanalysis and magical realism as narrative devices can be modified to account for transnational versions of trauma emerging from the loss of, and attacks on, fluid transnational identities. While the understanding of the cause of such illnesses is minimal, dissociative identity disorder often appears to correlate with traumatic experiences.⁵⁵ The novel highlights a deficit in standard psychological wisdom, which overlooks a great number of individuals. Migrants and their children are particularly vulnerable to this oversight. Oyeyemi's portrayal suggests an argument similar to that made in numerous critiques of psychoanalysis: understanding of trauma has historically been centred around America and Europe and is ignorant of cultural contingencies. Stef Craps parallels other critics such as Ethan Watters in claiming that psychologists risk repeating the mistakes of colonialism when they attempt to diagnose the responses of people universally according to a Eurocentric model of trauma: 'the uncritical cross-cultural application of psychological concepts developed in the West amounts to a form of cultural imperialism.'⁵⁶ Oyeyemi's protagonist is a fictionalised case in point for this argument. Jess straddles both a European and non-European heritage, while the diagnosis she receives from her psychologist ignores the influence of her partly Yoruba upbringing.

⁵³ Oyeyemi's novel was published several years before the term was first used in the DSM. In prior versions of the manual the term Multiple Personality Disorder was used.

⁵⁴ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*, ed. by American Psychiatric Association, 5th edn (Washington, D.C: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), p. 292. Dave Gunning highlights the DSM's attempt at cultural inclusivity in its comment on possession, explaining, 'The relative clause here is telling: it reveals a willingness to acknowledge cultural difference in the experiences of atypical mental states, yet stops short of accepting an ontological difference between such experiences, instead suggesting that the distinction is perhaps no more than linguistic' (Gunning, 'Dissociation, Spirit Possession, and the Languages of Trauma', p. 120). In fact, although such a description moves towards simultaneity in the experience of dissociation and spirit possession, the othering wording 'in some cultures' establishes a hierarchy, privileging the understanding of modern psychology to explain the symptomatology Jess undergoes.

⁵⁵ American Psychiatric Association, *DSM-5*, pp. 294–95.

⁵⁶ Ethan Watters, *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche* (New York: Free Press, 2010); Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 22.

Jess's circumstances also diverge from standard models of trauma but conform to van der Kolk's notion of 'developmental trauma disorder'.⁵⁷ Van der Kolk's research corroborates Craps's contention that current understanding is largely based on Freudian frameworks of single, large-scale catastrophic experiences.⁵⁸ This model, he argues, fails to account for the trauma suffered from persistent, smaller upheavals. Migrants' children are often particularly vulnerable to this kind of treatment given the racial and socioeconomic inequalities to which children of migrants are exposed. Even those of moderately affluent means such as Jess suffer from assimilation difficulties, microaggressions, discrimination and systemic racism; at the same time family and economic strains exert pronounced additional effects on children's mental well-being.⁵⁹ They may also go unnoticed by social services or health authorities as they may not have been registered, or language barriers may make assessing their mental health problematic.⁶⁰ Oyeyemi's novel highlights the need for trauma to be better understood in this wider framework.⁶¹ Van der Kolk suggests that the psychoanalytical establishment's refusal to acknowledge this distinction risks many traumatised individuals being overlooked, subsumed by the standard view of trauma:

The consensus [of the subcommittee that rejected his study] was that no new diagnosis was required to fill a 'missing diagnostic niche.' One million children who are abused and neglected every year in the United States a 'diagnostic niche'?⁶²

Oyeyemi's novel was published a decade before van der Kolk's research was popularised. However, it corroborates how neglect, not being accepted and losing

⁵⁷ Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014), p. 149.

⁵⁸ Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing*, p. 31.

⁵⁹ Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*, pp. 131–33.

⁶⁰ Emily Y. Y. Chan and others, 'Mental Health of Migrant Children: An Overview of the Literature', *International Journal of Mental Health*, 38.3 (2009), 44–52 (p. 45).

⁶¹ For studies that draw attention to these issues, see: Steven E. Mock and Susan M. Arai, 'Childhood Trauma and Chronic Illness in Adulthood: Mental Health and Socioeconomic Status as Explanatory Factors and Buffers', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 1 (2011), 1–6; Matthew Peverill and others, 'Socioeconomic Status and Child Psychopathology in the United States: A Meta-Analysis of Population-Based Studies', *Clinical Psychology Review*, 83 (2021), 1–15 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2020.101933>>.

⁶² van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, p. 159.

identity may give rise to Jess's experience of Tilly, without any large-scale event.⁶³ In *The Icarus Girl*, many minor abuses result from her mother's mild but persistent physical and mental abuse. Sarah responds to Jess's tantrums by 'slapp[ing] her hard' (p. 10) and shaking her violently (p. 202). Oyeyemi additionally frames these aggressions around cultural differences, so that abuse and Jess's identity crisis are never totally separate. Jess's father Daniel disagrees with Sarah's way of physically admonishing Jess's misbehaviour, and Sarah, seemingly unprovoked, racialises his criticism: 'now you're implying that my father's some kind of savage! It's just ... it's just DISCIPLINE! Maybe you just don't understand that! You're turning this into some kind of ... some kind of European versus African thing that's all in my mind' (p. 198).⁶⁴

These aggressions manifest in Jess's traumatised psyche as a personality disorder remarkably consistent with van der Kolk's findings. He outlines 'a consistent profile' in patients who endure these kinds of abuse and Jess suffers from all of them.⁶⁵ She exhibits a 'pervasive pattern of dysregulation' when she loses her temper at school: 'Jess lashed out and hit Colleen square in the face [...]. She couldn't stop there; [...] she grabbed Andrea's struggling arm and stuffed four fingers into her mouth and BIT her, and bit and bit, and even chomped (tried to eat her up), snarling' (p. 106). She encounters 'problems with attention and concentration' when she cuts up books in a dissociative state: 'She hadn't realised, somehow, what she had been doing. No, that was wrong—she'd known that she'd been cutting the pictures out, but only on a detached level, like someone within a dream' (pp. 178–179). She also shifts

⁶³ Van der Kolk was by no means the first to highlight the possibility of trauma such as this, and his work more keenly focuses on childhood neglect rather than racial abuse. Earlier studies have brought attention to the influence of repeated racism in trauma (for example, Thema Bryant-Davis, 'Healing Requires Recognition: The Case for Race-Based Traumatic Stress', *The Counseling Psychologist*, 35.1 (2007), 135–43 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000006295152>>). Nevertheless, van der Kolk appears to be one of the first practitioners to attempt to ratify the phenomenon as a related but distinct type of trauma in the official literature of American psychoanalysis. The type of abuse depicted in *The Icarus Girl* intersects social and domestic, familial and racial abuse, which suggests why Oyeyemi's depictions presciently depicts the type of trauma van der Kolk outlines.

⁶⁴ In line with van der Kolk's research, Jess's tumultuous relationship with her mother plays a key role in Jess's breakdown, the principal factor in the development of behavioural issues in children:

Neither the mother's personality, nor the infant's neurological anomalies at birth, nor its IQ, nor its temperament—including its activity level and reactivity to stress—predicted whether a child would develop serious behavioral problems in adolescence. The key issue, rather, was the nature of the parent-child relationship: how parents felt about and interacted with their kids. (van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, p. 160)

⁶⁵ van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, p. 158.

'from temper tantrums and panic to detachment' on a plane, first 'begin[ning] to struggle and thrash, screaming, half dangling headfirst out of the seat, nearly choking on her seat belt, fighting off her mother's hands' but then 'stopped struggling and hung limp from the side of her seat, her mouth a small, open O' (p. 10). Finally, Jess's lack of friends demonstrates 'difficulties getting along with [herself] and others', as shown in her fractious logic:

They should leave me alone and let me read my books, let me think my thoughts. If they pushed her too far with their requests for her to open up, interact more, make friends, she would scream. They knew it. She'd done it before. (p. 82)

None of these have any direct involvement from Tilly, suggesting that they are caused concurrently with, not by, her.

Oyeyemi deploys heightened senses to evoke the experience of such trauma rather than resort to more conventional literary techniques such as fragmented narratives. Anne Whitehead is an early critic who drew attention to the specific devices authors use to represent trauma. She claims that writers 'have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse'.⁶⁶ This explanation also relies on Freudian, catastrophic trauma, as outlined by Cathy Caruth, who suggests that traumatic experience is so overwhelming that it cannot be recreated using normal narratorial, chronological memory.⁶⁷ The alignment of trauma and magical realism has been explored under a similar rationale of the ineffectuality of realism. As Arva contends: 'When the violence of an event prevents it from being rationalized in the subject's consciousness as it occurs, the traumatic time-space [...] is so shaky that making it artistically visible [...] requires an act of imagination.'⁶⁸

Oyeyemi's usage seems more closely grounded in more nuanced understanding of traumatic experience. When memories of traumatic incidents are relayed by those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, senses are often

⁶⁶ Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 3.

⁶⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 11.

⁶⁸ Arva, *The Traumatic Imagination*, p. 5.

intensified so that the experience is relived in far more vivid sensory detail than normal memory. These create 'sensory-rich intrusions' into otherwise normal situations.⁶⁹ Oyeyemi likewise exaggerates Jess's senses to foreshadow critical narrative points when exclusive nationalistic categories are traumatically imposed on Jess's transnational identity. Shortly before meeting her grandfather, Oyeyemi litters her text with an overabundance of bright colour that adds to the chaotic feelings overwhelming Jess. Men dressed in 'striped red-and-white' bear 'flashing white smiles' and the whites of their eyes are 'luminous'; in the street the sun is 'bouncing ultra-shiny colours' from 'white paving'; intrusive smells of 'ironed clothes and sweaty bodies' are prominent, 'heat' is 'intensifying', and sounds are sensorily confusing: 'mysterious laughter, like a liquid' (p. 14–15). The heightened senses during this turbulent moment precede the traumatic rift when Jess splits and Tilly appears. Later, in the psychologist's sitting room upon their first meeting, warm colours invade almost every line; he wears a 'white-gold band' and has 'ruddy' cheeks that are a 'peculiar sort of red' 'like orange paint', softened with 'faded blue eyes' (p. 122). The room has 'lilac' walls and 'black-and-silver' photographs that depict a 'red plastic spade' and 'blue swimsuit' (pp. 123–124). Rather than present this warmth as a comfort, they enclose and smother Jess, in a room that is 'too warm', 'like being in a carpeted box' (p. 123). Jess's experience mirrors a picture on the wall that has 'fierce, clashing daubs and waves of colour trapped behind glass' (p. 123). This scene progresses to a traumatic climax in which a Jungian word association test results in Jess discovering she has lost her identity:

'Mummy.'
'Um. Big. No—'
'Daddy.'
'Small. Smaller, I mean, than—'
'School.'
'Nobody.'
'Jess.'
'Gone?'

⁶⁹ Kevin J. Clancy and others, 'Intrinsic Sensory Disinhibition Contributes to Intrusive Re-Experiencing in Combat Veterans', *Scientific Reports*, 10.936 (2020), 1–11 (p. 1) <<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-57963-2>>.

‘Where have you gone, Jess?’

She had no idea. (p. 130)

Oyeyemi further breaks new ground in subverting the technique commonly adopted in postcolonial magical realism of undermining post-Enlightenment ‘reason’. This enables her to critique cultural assumptions made in psychoanalysis as well as in Yoruba myths. While a psychological understanding of manifestations like Tilly is by no means the exclusive domain of a European perspective, Oyeyemi explicitly sets up the abiku and dissociative identity disorder as mutually exclusive and in opposition. She then binds these to Jess’s binary cultural heritages, before exposing the frailty of this distinction. Although the two interpretations contradict, they are not necessarily bound to culture until Sarah sets them in stark opposition. When she hears the therapist’s diagnosis of Jess’s behaviour, she says ‘My father would die laughing’ (p. 277): Gbenga would mock the misunderstanding of science to comprehend the abiku. Oyeyemi enhances the antinomy by emphasising the psychologist’s whiteness through Jess fixating on his paleness and red hair (p. 122). Jess’s father, adopting the psychoanalytical paradigm, returns this opposition: while Gbenga and Sarah attempt to help Jess through prayer and the wisdom of a local elder, Jess’s father accuses them of resorting to a ‘witch doctor’ (p. 313).

In polarising cultural perspectives, Oyeyemi toys with a dynamic that earned Carpentier, and magical realism in general, valid criticism for infantilising marginalised cultures and setting a Eurocentric perspective as the default paradigm. However, Oyeyemi’s intervention interrogates both perspectives, highlighting the limitations of culturally limited cosmologies. It exposes the oppositionality itself as faulty rather than either culture or the dominance of one over the other. This portrayal mirrors the flaws in mutually exclusive national identities that Jess’s transnational status brings to light. As with Carpentier, Oyeyemi’s narrative initially invites the reader to speculate over which interpretation of events is correct. Sasser, for example, argues that Tilly’s ‘ontological status shifts depending on which of the two provided rubrics for understanding her is applied’.⁷⁰ Yet she later suggests that some details slightly ‘tip the scales’ in favour of the abiku explanation.⁷¹ Pilar Cuder-

⁷⁰ Sasser, *Magical Realism and Cosmopolitanism*, p. 189.

⁷¹ Sasser, *Magical Realism and Cosmopolitanism*, p. 192.

Domínguez also asserts that the abiku is the true interpretation, which 'Only the traditional wisdom of her grandfather allows him to recognise'.⁷² Dave Gunning is more ambivalent, suggesting that the text 'is reluctant to commit to the authenticity of either' explanation.⁷³

However, it more precisely privileges both. Oyeyemi renders Tilly and dissociative identity disorder as related but independently ontologically sound, validating a relational rather than oppositional view of their cosmologies. Oyeyemi first establishes Tilly as real by punctuating the text with events and language that preclude the possibility that Tilly is imaginary. In the few instances where focalisation slips from Jess, her cousin Dulcie and babysitter Lidia corroborate Tilly's existence when they 'hear' her moving 'somewhere above their heads' (p. 142). Similarly, Jess's only other friend, Siobhan, briefly takes over the focalisation and validates Tilly's ontological status: 'something *swung* in Siobhan's sight, and she immediately saw that Jess was not standing on the top step after all; there was another girl behind her' (p. 289). Tilly additionally provides information to Jess which Jess could not have known and for which the text gives no alternative explanation. Jess and Tilly visit the house of the bully Colleen, and here the magical realist ambivalence over the ontological status of the event is stretched beyond plausibility as the girls become invisible:

Jess turned to TillyTilly to see if the enormity of Mrs. McLain's somehow not-seeing them had sunk in with her as well. TillyTilly shrugged, then began to laugh her gasping laugh. [...] 'You're . . . magic, aren't you?' she asked TillyTilly, anxious not to sound silly, but also anxious for confirmation. TillyTilly smiled. 'Nope.' (p. 98–99)

The novel eliminates the possibility that this event is somehow delusional as Jess discovers, correctly, that Colleen is derided by her mother for wetting herself (p. 101). It would require a line of reasoning entirely absent from the text to justify this acquisition of knowledge without Tilly being ontologically real and able to perform supernatural feats. From this perspective, Oyeyemi's portrayal of the abiku breaks

⁷² Cuder-Domínguez, 'Double Consciousness', p. 283.

⁷³ Gunning, 'Dissociation, Spirit Possession, and the Languages of Trauma', p. 126.

from Carpentier's depiction of shape-shifting inasmuch as these aspects cannot be explained according to a separate 'rational' paradigm.

At the same time, Oyeyemi also substantiates the psychoanalytical model of Jess's behaviour, not as an opposing explanation but as a separate yet concomitant truth. Long before Tilly arrives, Jess displays symptoms of a mental disorder. She begins the narrative in a lethargic state: 'she wasn't sad, just tired, though how she could be so tired in the middle of the day with the sun shining and everything, she didn't know' (p. 7). She also suffers episodes of dissociation:

Her parents, looking in on her and seeing her with her cheek pressed against the floor, thought that she had fallen asleep, and her father tiptoed into the room to lift her into bed, only to be disconcerted by the gleam of her wide-open eyes over the top of her arm. (p. 7)

Furthermore, she sometimes falls into screaming fits: 'Inside her head, she could hear the skin blistering, could almost feel it, and she tried to outscreech the sound' (p. 10). The fact that these symptoms pre-exist Tilly suggests that Jess's emotional dysregulation is not caused by the spirit, instead implying that Tilly is caused by some pre-existing mental condition. As a result, Oyeyemi's text flouts this magical realist convention by toying with similar premises but constructing a plot which cannot be explained through either the folkloric framework of the Yoruba abiku or psychoanalytic diagnosis alone. The seeming paradox resulting from Jess's rupturing identity is mirrored in this awkward relationship between these two conceptions which otherwise seem mutually exclusive. Oyeyemi underlines the arbitrariness of perspectives constrained by delimited cultural categories, particularly those which atomise fluid cultural identities. She instead focuses on the experiences facing individuals such as Jess who evade such categorisations. By using these subverted magical realist tropes, Oyeyemi's text indicts culture's absolutism for its traumatic consequences on children like Jess, whose transnationality threatens those boundaries.

Oyeyemi's narrative effectively characterises the transnational scenario faced by many children of migrants. As with the other novels explored in this study, *The Icarus Girl* demonstrates a tendency towards a more intimate relationship between

the supernatural and the experience of the characters. Children are told they are from 'back home' regardless of their own feelings towards, or identification with, that nation. As a result, tensions form between children and parents. At the same time, because of the cultural and ethnic differences of one or both parents, children may be made to feel alienated in the country in which they have spent most of their lives. Connections to both countries may shift depending on social groups, time and locations. This fluid relationship between identities is a major factor in that stress. Oyeyemi uses the resources of magical realism to illustrate this situation, but she reconfigures them to represent the experience of categories of nationality and national identities collapsing. In doing so she highlights the emotional stress this collapse instigates. Shifting magical realism into the interior space of an eight-year-old's consciousness, *The Icarus Girl's* supernatural alter-ego splits, doubles and halves Jess's identity. Oyeyemi collapses the Carpentierian dichotomy between cultures and cosmologies, alongside language and a narrative structure that reiterate this collapse of self. Contemporary transnational contexts differ from Carpentier's colonial one: cultures, ethnicities and nationalities transcend boundaries more fluidly, as identities present a greater relatedness, a reciprocal modulation between cultures. However, rather than these connectivities resulting in celebratory and stable hybrid multicultural conceptions of self, they end in dislocation and loss. The supernatural in Oyeyemi's transnational magical realism has shifted from the role of resistance it played in early iterations, instead being symptomatic of the hardships the characters face in such contexts. Oyeyemi offers no solution to this transnational predicament. However, the text does not suggest a pessimistic futility, as if societies are necessarily bound to pathologise otherness as inherently traumatic. It suggests that communities, and in particular families, are proving slow to adjust to the circumstances of the children of migrants. It requires a change in global consciousness to accept that national boundaries are not only permeable and fluid, but that reinforcing them severs individuals that have transnational identities. This is becoming increasingly a cause for concern as transnationality constitutes a cultural configuration that continues to expand as globalisation progresses. Without such a change, children of migrants like Jess will continue to suffer from traumatic disconnection from family and peers. This particularly twenty-first-century

predicament is a paradox fittingly and creatively expressed through the infusion of the supernatural into the mundane.

Chapter Two: Homelessness, supernatural migrations and disconnected connectivity in the deterritorialised magical realism of Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*

Introduction

For those like Jess's grandfather who maintain a cherished association with nationality, migrants, and the changes that globalisation enacts, may threaten a stable sense of home. While Oyeyemi presented the tensions between relational transnational identities and absolutist views, Mohsin Hamid's fourth novel *Exit West* (2017) extends this same deconstruction of static categories to conceptions of the nation. This chapter argues that to tell this story, Hamid develops magical realist techniques towards deterritorialisation and future-orientation rather than the dominant postcolonial interests in local and past injustices.

His novel concerns the so-called 'migrant crisis' in the mid-2010s, the effects of which are fictionally exaggerated by the emergence of supernatural portals. These gateways allow instantaneous teleportation across the globe, free from border constraints. This chapter of the thesis first outlines how Hamid initially establishes magical realism according to relatively conventional concepts by emphasising location. However, he then exposes the mode's burgeoning transnationality by rendering the supernatural a global manifestation. He depicts the portals enabling refugees to escape a war that destabilises the notion of city or country as a safe or familiar home. In doing so, he mimics postcolonial magical realism's tendency to envision resistance to trauma, which he will later undermine by delivering the refugees into further danger. The precarious destinations where the portals take the refugees is the focus of the second section of this chapter. Moving away from historical representation in much magical realism, Hamid fictionalises contemporaneous events of the twenty-first century. He depicts the influx of migration into Europe and the resistance to it in the UK that partially resulted in Brexit. In a key shift of magical realism, I argue Hamid's portals exaggerate rather than envision change to these circumstances. They exacerbate the rise of xenophobia that results from the threat to the perceived sanctity of nation, as the portals and increased migration erode national borders. I contend that, similarly to Oyeyemi, Hamid's metaphor undermines the binary of home/abroad to critique right-wing

thinking that reinforces 'them/us' ideologies around nation and identity. Hamid likewise shows the oppositional thinking often seen as integral to magical realism as the root of the feeling of homelessness in migrants and non-migrants alike. In addition to representing increased physical migration, Hamid's portals symbolise digital migrations in terms of communities formed through communication technology. The chapter next explores this future-oriented magical realist shift and the effects it generates. I argue Hamid demonstrates the move Oyeyemi also made towards literalising transnational experiences through his alignment of the supernatural with technology. Like the portals, technology connects while it disconnects, forming communities while destroying them; Hamid's language underscores these paradoxes. The chapter then expands on the contrasts between relational and static ways of thinking, which Hamid personifies through his two main characters. The portrayal of the divergent ways in which they respond to the dramatic social changes taking place explores how migrants can construct homes amid collapsing borders. Like Oyeyemi, Hamid focuses on the emotional impact of these concerns. Finally, the chapter investigates how Hamid presents a unifying statement that homelessness, as a result of globalisation, migration and technology, is an experience facing everyone. In his allegory of the portals, he suggests that the collapse of borders exposes a common humanity. This represents a total re-envisioning of the mythical, past-oriented, rural, territorialised magical realism of the twentieth century. It furthers my thesis that emotional struggles and disorientation caused by upholding barriers of perceived difference are literalised by transnational examples of the mode.

While *The Icarus Girl's* exploration of transnationality through magical realism relates to events of the late twentieth century, *Exit West* directs focus at technologically contemporary and specifically twenty-first-century phenomena. It was published in 2017 and centres on the cultural and political environment of the mid-2010s. During this time, European and American media was flooded with news and imagery of vast numbers of refugees pouring into Europe and affluent nations worldwide. At its peak in 2015, over a million people arrived in Europe from Syria,

Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as western Africa and South Asia.¹ Many were seeking refuge from terrorism and violence in their home regions. News cycles from wealthy nations became dominated with harrowing imagery of perilous journeys refugees made across the Mediterranean, managed by unscrupulous smugglers who often robbed or abandoned them. The plight of these migrants was crystallised in the tragedy of two-year-old Alan Kurdi, who was found drowned on a Turkish beach.² The media labelled this phenomenon not a humanitarian problem but a 'migrant crisis'. It heightened public anxiety for many native citizens of Europe over the damaging effect of this influx of outsiders.³ Immigration control became a primary concern, and at least in partial response, the UK voted to leave the European Union to 'regain control' of its borders.⁴ Shortly after, a parallel restriction took place in the US when President Trump banned all Muslims from entering the country. The administration thus denied thousands of legal immigrants and Muslim asylum seekers the right to call the US home.⁵ Few news agencies, however, highlighted the appalling way asylum seekers were treated after reaching these wealthy countries, where they were forced to live in squalid camps and endure bigotry from right-wing factions. It is this maelstrom of war and nationalist resistance that Hamid replicates in *Exit West*, altered singly but significantly by the deployment of supernatural doors that appear throughout that world. His portals exaggerate the porousness of national borders, as refugees search for a home and conflict grows between the migrants and those who seek to reinforce those borders.

¹ Anonymous, 'Record Number of over 1.2 Million First Time Asylum Seekers Registered in 2015', *Eurostat*, 2016 <<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7203832/3-04032016-AP-EN.pdf/790eba01-381c-4163-bcd2-a54959b99ed6>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

² Helena Smith, 'Shocking Images of Drowned Syrian Boy Show Tragic Plight of Refugees', *The Guardian*, 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows-tragic-plight-of-refugees>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

³ Mark Townsend, 'Revealed: The Squalor inside Ex-MoD Camps Being Used to House Refugees', *The Guardian*, 11 October 2020, section UK news <<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/oct/11/revealed-the-squalor-inside-ex-mod-camps-being-used-to-house-refugees>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

⁴ Alberto Nardelli, 'The Media Needs to Tell the Truth on Migration, Not Peddle Myths', *The Guardian*, 11 December 2015, section Opinion <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/11/the-media-needs-to-tell-the-truth-on-migration-not-peddle-myths>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

⁵ Steve Almasy and Darran Simon, 'A Timeline of President Trump's Travel Bans', *CNN*, 30 March 2017 <<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/02/10/us/trump-travel-ban-timeline/index.html>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

Hamid directs his main attention towards such refugees.⁶ *Exit West* follows two characters, Nadia and Saeed, who meet and fall in love in an unnamed city of 'the global south'.⁷ The city is made uninhabitable by the violence of militants who take control for an unstated purpose. In this city, several mysterious portals begin appearing without explanation. They connect to other cities worldwide, allowing instantaneous and unregulated travel to seemingly random locations across the globe. Subsequently, Nadia and Saeed escape through one of these supernatural gateways. The couple travel to Greece, and then to London; there they are confronted with a native populace, supported by its government, that dehumanises those that seek refuge there. The people and the state attack the refugees and deny them access to essential amenities. Nadia and Saeed later travel to California and find moderately more tolerable living conditions there but the couple split up and seek new relationships. Within these relationships both reach a closer sense of home than their prior migrations through several nations had allowed.

Hamid's decision to focus on the 'migrant crisis' of 2015 reflects the unprecedented levels of awareness of the human aspects of such migrations that information technology has enabled. Anecdotes of people leaving and seeking home are vividly expressed by the wealth of video and photos on social media. The same technology has assisted migration by providing the means of communication to organise such journeys and to share information on how to manage these passages and avoid immigration restrictions.⁸ Despite its global and political scope, therefore, Hamid's novel shares Oyeyemi's focus on the personal and experiential factors created by transnationality.

In collapsing space between migratory locations through the use of portals, Hamid, like Oyeyemi, employs aspects of magical realism built on the techniques of the twentieth century but reconfigured to convey features of contemporary transnational experience. Hamid shares Oyeyemi's revision of deploying the supernatural to represent a metaphorical symptom of a contemporary, and

⁶ The media has largely lost interest in these stories of migration in the proceeding years. While the numbers have decreased, and the crisis has been declared officially over, refugees seeking asylum continue to attempt entry into Europe. Nationalist resistance remains a fervent political issue.

⁷ Mohsin Hamid, *Exit West* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017), p. 167. Kindle ebook. Further references to this text are provided in parenthesis after quotations.

⁸ Amanda Alencar, Katerina Kondova, and Wannes Ribbens, 'The Smartphone as a Lifeline: An Exploration of Refugees' Use of Mobile Communication Technologies during Their Flight', *Media, Culture & Society*, 41.6 (2019), 828–44 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718813486>>.

seemingly paradoxical, condition of transnationality. *Exit West*'s magical realism differs from the style of his previous texts, which experimented more with formal aspects, especially narrators, than with conventions of realism.⁹ Hamid has claimed that the novel was originally conceived around the portals for rather mundane, pragmatic narratorial reasons: 'I wanted to write a very large book about the entire world on a very small scale, so I needed to find some way of covering a lot of ground.'¹⁰ At other times, he has suggested that the supernatural is a representation of the real, recalling the marvellousness Carpentier found in Latin America: 'Well, I think the doors sort of already exist. [...] We can travel by stepping into an airplane, as I did coming from Pakistan to America. [...] And we can open up our phones and surf the Internet and be in China or Antarctica.'¹¹ In this global depiction, though, he diverges from his predecessors: whereas Carpentier claimed this 'magic' was inherent in the lands around him, Hamid deploys it on a global scale. He thereby follows the emerging characteristic of deterritorialising the supernatural in transnational magical realism. The portals are the only supernatural element in *Exit West*, and they are barely discussed throughout, yet they dominate the text as the catalyst for the narrative. They amplify rather than dramatically alter real-world circumstances of increased migration that contemporary globalisation and technology has produced. This differs from such texts as *The Kingdom of this World* or *The Famished Road*, where the supernatural enables the authors to reimagine part of a national narrative. For Hamid, tensions between fluid and strictly delimited conceptions of nation and home render his global population homeless, a phenomenon he amplifies with magical realism.

Many studies on aspects of migrancy assert a sense of contradiction between relational, fluid conceptions and entrenched, static ones. Chiara Brambilla's work on border studies suggests that both migratory movement itself and the lines that

⁹ *Moth Smoke* (2000) employs shifting perspectives but follows an unreliable first-person narrator; *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) follows a relatively linear narrative but told in second person like a self-help book; and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* has a narrator talking to another character and whose motives are left deliberately obscure.

¹⁰ Mohsin Hamid and Alexandra Alter, 'Global Migration Meets Magic in Mohsin Hamid's Timely Novel', *The New York Times*, 7 March 2017, section Books <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/07/arts/exit-west-mohsin-hamid-refugee-.html>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

¹¹ Mohsin Hamid and Jeffrey Brown, 'Magical Novel *Exit West* Explores What Makes Refugees Leave Home', *PBS*, 2017 <<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/magical-novel-exit-west-explores-makes-refugees-leave-home>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

mobility crosses are dynamically interdependent. Since the 1990s, she explains, 'research interests [have] increasingly shifted from an initial focus on borders as territorial dividing lines and political institutions to borders regarded as socio-cultural and discursive processes and practices'.¹² The position argues that understanding borders as static demarcations of land overlooks their complexity and fluidity in spatial, temporal and social terms. Borders have ceased to be seen as lines in the sand but as processes, better concerned with the verb 'bordering' than as nouns. Brambilla depicts borders as relational, as a 'dynamic process of differentiation':

not static but fluid and shifting; established and at the same time continuously traversed by a number of bodies, discourses, practices, and relationships that highlight endless definitions and shifts in definition between inside and outside, citizens and foreigners, hosts and guests across state, regional, racial, and other symbolic boundaries.¹³

If borders delineate home, then this fluid understanding applies equally to home-seeking. This insight justifies a proposal asserted by Sara Ahmed that home is better termed as 'being-at-home'.¹⁴ Home is a transitory condition, a stative verb, in Shelley Mallett's term.¹⁵ Hamid's text explores how these dynamic borders affect the way in which a nation is imagined as home. His portals remove a nation-state's ability to monitor and control its borders. By undermining the state's boundaries, Hamid exposes nationality as a fragile category in which to construct a notion of home. Conversely, through his portrayal of national nativism, he explores the resilience of this illusion of static, essentialist borders.¹⁶

The processes of globalisation and concomitant advancements in technology have contributed to this transnational feeling of disorientation. They cause a sense of

¹² Chiara Brambilla, 'Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept', *Geopolitics*, 20.1 (2015), 14–34 (p. 15) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2014.884561>>.

¹³ Brambilla, 'Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept', p. 19.

¹⁴ Sara Ahmed, 'Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2.3 (1999), 329–47 (p. 330) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/136787799900200303>>.

¹⁵ Shelley Mallett, 'Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature', *The Sociological Review*, 52.1 (2004), 62–89 (p. 79) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00442.x>>.

¹⁶ Hamid's text further corresponds to Brambilla's study in this regard, as she states that despite the increasing nuancing of border studies in the last decade, the 'territorialist epistemology' is still 'pervasive' in the field (Brambilla, 'Exploring the Critical Potential of the Borderscapes Concept', p. 16).

simultaneous homelessness and being-at-home. Thus, Hamid extends the move in twenty-first-century novels towards expressing globalisation through paradox. His supernatural portrayal resonates with a characterisation of global connectivity made by Ioana Baetia Morpugo. She argues the recognisability of artefacts of capitalist markets causes a concurrent feeling of being-at-home and homelessness:

The only current way in which you can belong to a population mass is through consumerism. And consumer culture is a global one, it makes no difference where you are coming from and going to, but only if at this particular moment you are in a shopping mall or not. The thing is, what makes me feel I don't fully belong to the world here is the same stuff that makes me feel a stranger even at home.¹⁷

Advancements in communication technology have increased levels of connectivity between locations and cultures and flattened the differences between those cultures. This has caused a global sense of unfamiliarity with the prevailing homogeneous culture. More people are able to migrate for economic reasons, allowing further connections between locations, while causing those same people to be dislocated from their homes. This process proves helpful and necessary for individual and national economies but also particularly deleterious for the poorest in society, as Samarasan's novel will detail. Hamid uses magical realist techniques to exaggerate these processes. He imagines an instantaneous network of physical movement that further brings into relief a feeling of dislocation from home, not only for migrants but for all citizens of this globalised, transnational culture.

The hyper-mobile, relational world of Hamid's own globalised life is correspondingly characterised by connection and disconnection. Hamid was born in Pakistan but moved to the United States for a period when he was a child, before moving back there for his education at Princeton University and Harvard Law School. He then became a British citizen through marriage, living in the UK for some

¹⁷ Cited in Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru, "Transnational Perspectives on Romanian Gender and Ethnic Diversity in Ioana Baetica Morpurgo's *Imigranții*", in *Transnational Narratives in Englishes of Exile*, ed. by Catalina Florina Florescu and Sheng-mei Ma (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), pp. 135–52 (p. 140).

time, but currently resides back in Lahore.¹⁸ As with Oyeyemi, reviewers and critics have trouble reaching a consensus when labelling Hamid's fluid nationality. Their conclusions depend on their cultural perspectives: Mushtaq Bilal explains that in 'the Anglo-American publishing industry, academia, and press, Hamid who has chosen English as a medium for his creative expression is considered "Pakistani" or "Pakistan-born," but inside Pakistan he is considered a "Pakistani anglophone" writer'.¹⁹ A British press keen to adopt his work often label him 'British Pakistani', even though Hamid identifies much less as British than American or Pakistani.²⁰ Noticeably, his own website makes no reference to his nationality.²¹

Hamid's itinerant life has allowed him to view a world increasingly connected thanks to technology and economic and cultural globalisation. In an article for *The Guardian*, he recalls migrating in the pre-internet 1980s, emphasising the feeling of dislocation from the old home compared to today's migrants: 'In 1980 there were no email accounts or social media or text messages. [...] I never saw, or heard from, a single one of my friends again.'²² Twentieth-century migration was a complete disconnection and transformation: 'I had left one world and entered another. People looked different. The smells were different. Food tasted different.'²³ For Hamid, the hyperconnected twenty-first-century world allows multiple connections and the privilege of switching locations comfortably: 'I have a sense of belonging to many territories.'²⁴ However, Hamid occasionally contradicts his optimistic attitude towards multi-territorialisation, betraying the paradoxical nature of transnationality by pejoratively referring to himself as 'a hybridized mongrel' and as 'an immigrant

¹⁸ Qurshid Begum, 'Transnationalism in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*', *Research Journal of English*, 4.1 (2019), 209–13 (p. 210).

¹⁹ Bilal, 'Reading Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* as a World Novel', p. 412.

²⁰ Bilal, 'Reading Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* as a World Novel', p. 416.

²¹ Anonymous, 'About Mohsin Hamid', *Mohsinhamid.com*, n. d.
<<http://www.mohsinhamid.com/about.html>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

²² Mohsin Hamid, 'Mohsin Hamid on the Dangers of Nostalgia: We Need to Imagine a Brighter Future', *The Guardian*, 25 February 2017, section Books
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/25/mohsin-hamid-danger-nostalgia-brighter-future>> [accessed 22 November 2022].

²³ Hamid, 'Mohsin Hamid on the Dangers of Nostalgia'.

²⁴ Mohsin Hamid and Eve Gerber, 'The Best Transnational Literature', *Five Books*, 2017
<<https://fivebooks.com/best-books/mohsin-hamid-transnational-literature/>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

everywhere. Even in Lahore'.²⁵ At those times, he articulates a similar experience of non-belonging as Oyeyemi's Jess does: 'I have called and considered all three [Lahore, New York and London] home. And yet [...] I recognize that I have always felt myself a half outsider.'²⁶ Regarding this contradictory belonging and non-belonging, Hamid compares himself and his peers with aquatic flora: 'We spoke Urdu, cooked mutter keema, danced the bhangra, regularly overslept; we had roots. And yet we drifted. So [Hamid's friend] called us water lilies, after a plant rooted not in dry earth but in ponds and streams.'²⁷

In light of such multi-territorialised drifting roots, Hamid adopts the supernatural to envision a world in which static borders have been more fully torn down to expose such edifices as illusive, and to imagine a fragile utopia of global citizenship. Hamid rejects territory as a basis for constructing belonging. He instead posits a global home derived from rootlessness and homelessness. His novel, and the supernatural in it, diverges from any magical realist construction that emphasised the importance of physical locality. Like Hamid, his characters' roots shift. From this perspective static borders that restrict cultures around ideologies and nationalities seem both illusory and unnecessary. Hamid asks, 'what are these civilizations, these notions of Muslim-ness, Western-ness, European-ness, that attempt to describe where, and with whom, we belong? [...] They are illusions: arbitrarily drawn constructs with porous, brittle, and overlapping borders'.²⁸

In line with this sentiment, the fictional world Hamid builds in *Exit West* seems an attempt to avoid its being contained within national boundaries. Unlike Oyeyemi, whose locations and supernatural element are emphatically located in order to interrogate their rootedness, Hamid deterritorialises his primary location. Nadia and Saeed's city, the setting of the first act of his novel, is unnamed, stripped of any clear demarcations. Despite it resembling, and often being assumed to be, Pakistan, there is no 'home' country on which to pin the text to a national literature. As a result of such strategies, Hamid's work has been described by critics such as

²⁵ Mushtaq Bilal, *Writing Pakistan: Conversations on Identity, Nationhood and Fiction* (Noida, India: HarperCollins, 2016), p. 415, cited in Bilal, 'Reading Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* as a World Novel', p. 415.

²⁶ Mohsin Hamid, *Discontent and Its Civilizations* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015), Introduction: My Foreign Correspondence, paragraph 13. Ebook.

²⁷ Hamid, *Discontent and Its Civilizations*, A Home for Water Lilies, paragraph 4.

²⁸ Hamid, *Discontent and Its Civilizations*, Introduction: My Foreign Correspondence, paragraph 24.

Bilal as 'world literature' and by Joseph Darda as 'global fiction'.²⁹ Despite writing a text about forced exile, Hamid's position of comfortable migration raises concerns for Darda that strategies like Hamid's may underscore cultural imperialism: 'Is this merely American or Western literature disguised as global culture? [...] Is this the domain of privileged jet setters alone?'³⁰ The differences in the reception of *Exit West* partly confirm Darda's point: it has received almost unqualified credit in reviews from Britain and the United States. It was also longlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and Barack Obama has promoted it and is involved in a film production of the book.³¹ Conversely, in Pakistan responses are less positive of his work: Bilal highlights a number of critics in Pakistan who feel that Hamid 'offers a reductive, stereotypical, and inauthentic portrayal of Pakistan for the consumption of Western readers' and accuse him of being a 'neo-orientalist'.³² Such differing reactions to Hamid's fiction strongly suggest that while he may be attempting to engender a globality in his fiction, his work partly inspires the dissonance that he seeks to override.³³

In imagining portals to convey disorienting experiences of migration, deterritorialisation and globalisation, Hamid veers from many characteristics of

²⁹ Bilal, 'Reading Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* as a World Novel', p. 417; Joseph Darda, 'Precarious World: Rethinking Global Fiction in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 47.3 (2014), 107–22 (p. 108) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/mos.2014.0034>>.

³⁰ Darda, 'Precarious World', p. 109.

³¹ Barack Obama, 'Barack Obama: Posts', *Facebook*, 2017 <<https://www.facebook.com/barackobama/posts/10155532677446749>> [accessed 16 November 2022]; John Koblin, 'The Obamas Will Adapt *Exit West* into a Netflix Movie Starring Riz Ahmed', *New York Times*, 5 February 2021 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/business/exit-west-netflix-riz-ahmed.html>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

³² Bilal, 'Reading Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* as a World Novel', p. 414. Bilal also points out that the primary audience for Hamid's novel and his other work is not in Pakistan but in Europe and America. None of his novels has been translated into Urdu, and there are currently no Pakistani publishers of English-language novels.

³³ Hamid's text further invites concern by its seeming reification of economic inequality, which the text brings into focus through its title citing 'the West' and its use of the attendant term 'global north': 'the whole planet was on the move, much of the global south headed to the global north' (p. 167). Both terms are problematic as they flatten economic differences within and between countries in these huge, global categories. This conflicts with the experiences depicted in much literature that tracks migrations from South to North (or East to West): Nadia and Saeed have hardly any access to food or amenities while in the UK, a country ranked thirteenth wealthiest by the UNDP. The global north and south are additionally problematic for underscoring inequality by clustering countries, in Thomas Hylland Eriksen's words, 'not between political systems or degrees of poverty, but between the victims and the benefactors of global capitalism'. (Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 'What's Wrong with the Global North and the Global South?', *Global South Studies Center Cologne*, 2016 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20160923171120/http://gssc.uni-koeln.de/node/454>> [accessed 16 November 2022]).

postcolonial magical realist discourse. Hamid refutes his texts are postcolonial, preferring to suggest a progression from postcolonialism to transnational thinking in what he calls the 'post-postcolonial generation' to which he claims to belong.³⁴ Hamid's magical realism deviates far from the rural and pre-industrial of Jameson's characterisation of the mode as 'narrative raw material derived essentially from peasant society'.³⁵ It instead conforms to trends in transnational, globalised magical realism which sees it unmoored from specific localities. Even while it lingers around the territories of erstwhile colonies, its lens focuses more on contemporary, technologically advanced, urban societies. Hamid's supernatural portals reflect the same experiences that digital communities are bringing to pass between relational and atomised senses of belonging.

Despite this rather quixotic sentiment, *Exit West* uses the portals to present the tensions that arise when fixed ideas of home are exposed as incongruent. He adapts magical realism to represent metaphorically how migration and technology undermine, in both positive and negative ways, those conceptions. In doing so he reveals an underlying but boundless set of connectivities between migrants and non-migrants. Similar to Oyeyemi's rendering of the loss of stable identities, establishing an immutable conception of home within static boundaries is futile for those who travel extensively or whose upbringing transgresses national borders. Hamid mirrors others who narrate stories of migration alongside discourse about the concept of a home. Novels such as his, Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup* (2001) and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) highlight complications in a notion of home founded on fixed concentric circles around house, neighbourhood and nation. Migrants and their children, whether economically advantaged or outcast in exile, blur these boundaries. Stories of migration immediately expose the dichotomy of home and away as confused when they depict people leaving their countries and finding familiarity in abroad localities, while their erstwhile neighbourhoods become increasingly unfamiliar. Because of these complexities, *home* has a multitude of sometimes conflicting definitions. Mallet outlines some of its intricacies:

³⁴ Cited in Jay, *Global Matters*, p. 92.

³⁵ Jameson, 'On Magic Realism in Film', p. 302.

It can be a dwelling place or a lived space of interaction between people, places, things; or perhaps both. The boundaries of home can be permeable and/or impermeable. Home can be singular and/or plural, alienable and/or inalienable, fixed and stable and/or mobile and changing. It can be associated with feelings of comfort, ease intimacy, relaxation and security and/or oppression, tyranny and persecution. It can or can not be associated with family. Home can be an expression of one's (possibly fluid) identity and sense of self and/or one's body might be home to the self. It can constitute belonging and/or create a sense of marginalisation and estrangement.³⁶

The increasing amount of literature dealing with migration in the twenty-first century has particularly exposed the illusory stability of the concept.

Hamid's magical intervention engages with contemporary critical discourse on different concepts of home, including that of a safe haven and a place of familiarity, a homeland and a shared community. As this chapter outlines, Hamid undermines these conceptions in *Exit West*, all circled around the emergence and repercussions of the magical realist portals. The novel traces a search for home and a persistent homelessness not only for transnational migrants but all members of technologically, and supernaturally, hyperconnected globalised society. Through this modernised take on magical realist tropes, Hamid embraces near contradiction by uniting us all through dislocation. It leaves only the focus on human relatedness and the shared experience of global homelessness as a consistent conception of home.

One of the most frequent notions of home synonymises it with the household or the place one sleeps and eats.³⁷ This is somewhere familiar and safe, a haven; it is a place which forms one part of an uncomplicated binary with *away* or *abroad*. Hamid's novel brings into focus this same interplay between familiarity and strangeness, danger and safety, here and abroad. Nadia and Saeed's unnamed city becomes uninhabitable; its status as home is marred by militant violence. This everyday usage of the concept is particularly fraught for migrants and refugees who may have multiple 'homes' that do not squarely align with these conceptions. This is even more problematic when the place where one sleeps may be unsafe or

³⁶ Mallett, 'Understanding Home', p. 84.

³⁷ Mallett, 'Understanding Home', p. 72.

unfamiliar. In her landmark essay 'Home and Away: Narratives of migration and estrangement', Sara Ahmed outlines the common perception that 'when one [is] at home, one [is] a member of the family, a neighbour, a friend, and when one [leaves] home one [becomes] the stranger'.³⁸ She explains that this position overlooks the potential for what she calls 'strangerness' at home, the dangers that can lurk within one's familiar spaces, whether crime in a home city or abusive relatives in the household. As Ahmed points out in her critique of the notion of home as a place of the familiar and safe, 'The problem with such a model [...] is that it projects strangerness beyond the walls of the home'.³⁹ At the same time, such experiences often invoke these contradictory relationships between home and safety and familiarity. Adedoyin Ogunfeyimi, for example, cites a man who flees Afghanistan in exile and finds asylum in Europe. He calls Afghanistan his home but simultaneously finds home in the relative safety he feels elsewhere.⁴⁰

Even without the comfort of safety and familiarity, a homeland is a persistent conception of home, which is again destabilised by transnational experiences of migration and Hamid's portals. 'One's native country' conjures an opposition to neighbouring countries, tying homes to nostalgic visions and creating what Ahmed calls an 'analogy between places and memories'.⁴¹ At the same time it creates an illusion that those from other places are foreigners, adversarial outsiders. Hamid shows migration playing a significant role in influencing how those who view their nation in this way treat migrants and refugees as invaders into their haven. Hamid's supernatural migrations illustrate the tensions that arise when migrants' transnationality challenges entrenched, anachronistic nationalist standpoints. They expose the frailty of the concept of a nation as home, at least an essentialist one that restricts its borders and shows it to be as illusory as the false hope of finding home in exile.

While nation, familiarity and safety are critically disputed as definitions of home, community is one of the few notions that is little contested. Hamid turns his magical realist device towards the highly contemporary, even future-oriented

³⁸ Ahmed, 'Home and Away', p. 340.

³⁹ Ahmed, 'Home and Away', p. 340.

⁴⁰ Adedoyin Ogunfeyimi, 'Disabling the Binaries, Enabling the Boundaries: Home-Abroad Divide in the European Migration Crisis', in *Transnational Narratives in Englishes of Exile*, ed. by Catalina Florina Florescu and Sheng-mei Ma (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), pp. 153–72 (p. 159).

⁴¹ Ahmed, 'Home and Away', p. 343.

technology that collapses distances. This parallels and enacts the real-world circumstance, where it is now possible, in fact normal, to build social interactions and groups not at all based on physical location. In this sense, the novel vastly extends Melvin Webber's idea of a 'community without propinquity' to a global scale. It depicts a uniquely contemporary global home enabled, almost supernaturally, through communication technology, amplified through its links with the fully supernatural portals. But the technology and the portals that mirror it incur costs as well as provide benefits to a concept of home when it is spread too thinly. Hamid's text further suggests a seemingly paradoxical scenario that global connectivity can damage more intimate, closer connections. This is particularly so when migrants privilege connections with the homeland over their present surroundings and relationships. As a result, technology can disconnect while it connects, producing a homelessness through the alienation of a physical community. Hamid therefore echoes the other selected authors in highlighting paradox as an integral factor of transnationality. He underscores the feeling of near paradox that his characters face through his narrator's stylistic representation of their experience of disconnected connectivity. Ideas and locations are described in long, meandering sentences, which repeatedly contradict themselves. Such contradictions, and the concomitant stresses these conflicts incur, represent a contemporary transnational experience of homelessness that magical realism is singularly effective at crystallising. The narrator combines these with his supernatural elements to develop a milieu of paradox and disorientation: a global homelessness.

At the same time, Hamid's text highlights that for many, the contradictory, static notions of home are ardently and obstructively resilient. While multidisciplinary critics often hint at these relational, transnational notions of home, their arguments contradict many individuals' normal experiences.⁴² Many people prefer to see home as an unchanging and permanent, even mythic structure, particularly those who have strong associations with the 'homeland'. In *Exit West*, Nadia takes a relational approach to home. But Saeed clings to notions of permanence and fixity, resulting in a constant sense of homelessness for him. In his

⁴² Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller and John Urry, for example, highlight multiple critics who identify 'dislocation, displacement, disjuncture and dialogism' as opposed to stasis as defining migrant experiences (Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller, and John Urry, 'Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings', *Mobilities*, 1.1 (2006), 1–22 (p. 10) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450100500489189>>.

portrayal of the different characters of Nadia and Saeed, Hamid corroborates Ogunfeyimi's study that argues migrants' experiences cannot be homogenised into one celebratory view: 'blurring the home-away/abroad divide does not reflect the diverse multi-layered dimensions of home because the experiences of the migrants both recognized and transcended this divide.'⁴³ In spite of the resilience of the myth for many migrants, Hamid's supernatural collapse of national borders ultimately concurs with the critical move towards more complex and relational conceptions. The milieu depicted by Hamid, whereby technology has exposed the falsity of that mythical, bordered notion, represents a fluid and dynamic conception of home that reveals transnationality as characteristically relational.

Through this relationality, the novel offers a resolution to the paradox of homelessness. It suggests that a home can be found not in countries and social groups, but in the relationships between individuals. Mallett's summary suggests that home is often defined according to relationships between locations and people; it has little meaning without the social interactions contained within its space.⁴⁴ He cites Peter Saunders and Peter Williams, who go so far as to say that home is 'simultaneously and indivisibly a spatial and a social unit of interaction'.⁴⁵ This implies that although it may seem incompatible to view a dangerous homeland, a foreign, urban squat and a global online community as home, the contradiction is resolved when home is viewed fluidly and dynamically, modulating depending on an individual's position and relationships with those countries and communities.⁴⁶ Hamid makes universal claims in this relational transnationality, stating that 'we are all migrants' (p. 209). In doing so, he suggests that home is a global concept to which we all belong; at the same time, as migrants, it is a place to which none of us belongs. Tim Gauthier cites author Hari Kunzru who similarly argues that migrants only highlight a condition that everyone suffers: they 'expos[e] a sort of homelessness

⁴³ Ogunfeyimi, 'Disabling the Binaries', p. 167.

⁴⁴ Mallett, 'Understanding Home', p. 84.

⁴⁵ Peter Saunders and Peter Williams, 'The Constitution of the Home: Towards a Research Agenda', *Housing Studies*, 3.2 (1988), 81–93 (p. 82), cited in Mallett, 'Understanding Home', p. 68.

⁴⁶ Further examples of critical stances on home being complex and dynamic include Søren Frank's adoption of Deleuze and Guattari's model of a multi-rooted rhizome (Søren Frank, *Migration and Literature: Günter Grass, Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, and Jan Kjærstad* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 27) and Neil Brenner's depiction of 'political-economic space as a complex, tangled mosaic of superimposed and interpenetrating nodes, levels, scales, and morphologies' (Neil Brenner, *New State Spaces: Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 66).

that, I think, is the human condition. I think the idea of a natural connection to a place or a natural connection to a society is false. It is a constructed thing and we build “home”.⁴⁷ Hamid seems to agree: migrants and non-migrants alike are rendered homeless, yet if home is a construct it allows us to rebuild the concept within our own homelessness. Ahmed additionally reminds us that home is a personal matter of experience and affect: ‘the experience of moving often to a new home is most felt through the surprises in sensation: different smells, different sounds as night, more or less dust.’⁴⁸ Home, and homelessness, is therefore not fixed but relative only to its experiencer. Hamid presents a planetary being-at-home and homelessness, which, thanks to the ever-shifting nature of technology, represents a universal but seemingly paradoxical condition. His text suggests, as does Oyeyemi's of identity, that the persistent perception of home as a fixed monolith is proving incompatible with the experiences of migrants. By taking a more relational approach to self and home, we may avoid this cognitive dissonance that *Exit West* epitomises with magical realism.

‘Doors that could take you elsewhere’: Seeking refuge in exile

This section examines how *Exit West* initially appears to establish a framework that corresponds to tenets of earlier variants of magical realism; it then undermines them to mirror tensions between the relational and atomised as Oyeyemi also articulates. Hamid's opening emphasises a stable and localised setting of a city, a place of familiarity and security in which to introduce his magical realism. However, I argue Hamid deterritorialises the city by leaving it unnamed, and its safety is subsequently threatened by militant violence. The localisation of the supernatural, a typical feature of much postcolonial magical realism, is then dismantled. Hamid's portals appear globally, connecting multiple locations, thereby dramatically uprooting magical realism from its territorial associations. The deracination of the mode therefore coincides with the migrations he depicts and the effect the portals have on the text's characters. The portals also initially appear to resemble Zamora and Faris's notion of

⁴⁷ ‘Conversations: Hari Kunzru’ <<http://www.bookclub.co.nz/features/harikunzru.htm>>, cited in Tim Gauthier, ‘Mobility, Virality, and Security in Hari Kunzru's *Transmission*’, in *Transnational Narratives in Englishes of Exile*, ed. by Catalina Florina Florescu and Sheng-mei Ma (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), pp. 1–21 (p. 3).

⁴⁸ Ahmed, ‘Home and Away’, p. 342.

a cultural corrective by offering rescue from the danger of the turbulent city. However, I examine how Hamid conforms more closely to contemporary usages by delivering the protagonists into further harm, thereby representing rather than resisting trauma. Despite retaining key aspects of magical realist techniques in the portrayal of the portals, I suggest Hamid ultimately reconfigures the mode to capture a global phenomenon of increased migration. His changes suggest that the dramatic turn from notions of impermeable borders leads to paradoxical senses of benefit and loss.

Hamid's novel seems at first to develop a fixed setting that will contain his narrative. As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, this formulation is typical in most postcolonial magical realist texts and establishes the supernatural as a localised phenomenon. The novel initially presents the enduring notion of home in the familiarity of the district or city in which one spends most time. Hamid foregrounds his city as central by opening with: 'In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her' (p. 1). The beginning foreshadows the advancing migrations and globalisation that erodes the home-abroad distinction: the class the couple are taking is 'on corporate identity and product branding' (p. 1). Nevertheless, Hamid repeatedly calls the unnamed city 'their city', establishing it as a home for its residents (p. 2). For the man and woman, Saeed and Nadia, and for the reader, the city seems replete with signposts of near-universal familiarity in its evening classes and the boy-meets-girl trope. This is despite the vague threat of war depicted outside this classroom scene.

Yet, Hamid's depiction also partially undermines the localisation and familiarity of the city by giving it no name, fundamentally deviating from the framework of Carpentier, Okri and others. This strategy simultaneously renders the city universal as belonging to everyone, but also belonging to no one. Although Hamid gives the city no distinct cultural or geographical signposts, many reviewers have aligned it to real-world locations. As noted, the book was published when the influx of migrants into Europe from Syria dominated news in Europe.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ BBC News, 'Migration to Europe in Charts - BBC News', *BBC News*, 11 September 2018 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44660699>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

Consequently, many critics have likened the city to Aleppo.⁵⁰ In fact, Hamid has stated that he based it on Lahore, giving two reasons for stripping the city of its name:

I didn't want to name it Lahore where I live because something terrible happens to that city and it would have broken my heart to do it to my own city. But partly I wanted the reader to be able to imagine it as their city.⁵¹

Despite its missing specificity, it is an exaggeration to claim, as Bilal does, that Hamid depicts the city 'in terms that are so generic as to be meaningless'.⁵² Hamid's delocalisation is only partial because the unnamed city and country is thrown into relief by places which are specified, including London, Mykonos, California, Sydney and Tokyo. The distinction between these wealthy states and the unnamed one is explicit: the group of refugees which Nadia and Saeed soon join is part of 'the global south' (p. 167). This is further corroborated by the fact that on Nadia and Saeed's first journey, to Greece, Hamid highlights difference of skin colour: the refugees' skins are 'many colours and hues but mostly falling within a band of brown that ranged from dark chocolate to milky tea' in contrast to the 'pale-skinned man' who pre-existed the refugees on the island (p. 100). By making cities of the 'global north' specific but those of the 'global south' vague, Hamid's attempt at portraying the unnamed city as a universalised home backfires to some extent. It is not home for Hamid's predominantly European and American readers, and as it lacks the clarity and specificity of a realistically portrayed city, it barely resembles a real home for its own residents.⁵³ However, this interplay of portraying a city as both familiar and unfamiliar befits such a paradoxical condition that characterises the transnational experiences of Hamid's characters.

⁵⁰ Lionel Shriver, 'Exit West: A Novel by Mohsin Hamid', *The Times*, 4 March 2017, section Saturday Review <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/exit-west-a-novel-by-mohsin-hamid-cllskrwo2>> [accessed 16 November 2022]; Mini Kapoor, 'Door That Takes You Elsewhere', *The Hindu*, 18 March 2017, section Books <<http://www.thehindu.com/books/books-reviews/door-that-takes-you-elsewhere/article17527018.ece>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

⁵¹ Hamid and Brown, 'Magical Novel *Exit West* Explores What Makes Refugees Leave Home'.

⁵² Bilal, 'Reading Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* as a World Novel', p. 418.

⁵³ Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra describes texts like *Exit West*, which hint towards real-world locations despite leaving them unnamed, as 'dislocated' in both 'the sense of being without clear location' and in the sense of being out of place (Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, 'Introduction: Dislocations', *The Global South*, 7.2 (2013), 1–10 (p. 4) <<https://doi.org/10.2979/globalsouth.7.2.1>>). Other novels that echo this dislocated state are Aminatta Forna's *Memory of Love* (2010) and another of Hamid's texts, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*.

The uprootedness that refugees and migrants often encounter when prior homes are rendered unwelcome is mirrored in the effects produced by the portals. As with Oyeyemi, we therefore see a move in transnational magical realism towards a closer alignment between the manifestation of the supernatural, the characters' experiences and the novel's themes. Prior to the emergence of the portals, Nadia and Saeed's city is stripped of its sense of home, in terms of safety, by the war breaking out. State military, enacted by helicopters (p. 32), clash with militants whose violence and terrorism lead them to behead people in the street (p. 38). The motive or cause of the insurgency is elided and is therefore unfamiliar and unknown. The uncertainty and danger add to the sense that the city is losing its capacity to be seen as a home. The denial of safety relates not only to the public spaces of the city, but to the private sanctuary of the house. Nadia feels that 'this was no longer a city where the risks facing a young woman living independently could be thought of as manageable' (p. 72). As Nadia's private space is threatened by the war outside her window, Hamid's text crystallises the violence penetrating the haven of home by highlighting the window as a symbol of the border between the home and the outside:

One's relationship to windows now changed in the city. A window was the border through which death was possibly most likely to come. Windows could not stop even the most flagging round of ammunition [...]. Moreover the pane of a window could itself become shrapnel so easily, shattered by a nearby blast. (p. 68)

The violence shatters the border between the public and the private, just as the portals will destroy the boundaries between nations.

Again, Hamid's supernatural element initially seems to mirror a key characteristic of early magical realism whereby the supernatural emerges in a historical period and supports the cause of the oppressed. In such configurations the fictionalised account reimagines a traumatic experience for a population. However, as will be explored in the following section, *Exit West* diverges from twentieth-century narratives, as the portals deliver Nadia and Saeed not to safety but into further hardship and homelessness. They seem at first to offer an escape through the hard borders that imprison the couple within the city. Prior to the portals' mysterious emergence, the inhabitants of the unnamed city only have treacherous overland

journeys as a means to escape the terror in their hometown: 'visas, which had long been near-impossible, were now truly impossible for non-wealthy people to secure, and journeys on passenger planes and ships were therefore out of the question' (p. 50).⁵⁴ Hamid's novel replicates the real-world circumstance when wealthy nations put up impermeable borders around their territories for asylum seekers. However, the portals shred these boundaries. They appear randomly across the globe, symbolising borders by replacing normal doors. They allow instantaneous movement from one location to a seemingly arbitrarily selected 'elsewhere'. In an echo of the hearsay of supernatural events that are strewn throughout magical realist writing, Nadia and Saeed begin to hear initially unsubstantiated rumours of these portals:

Rumours had begun to circulate of doors that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country. Some people claimed to know people who knew people who had been through such doors. A normal door, they said, could become a special door, and it could happen without warning, to any door at all. Most people thought these rumours to be nonsense, the superstitions of the feeble-minded. But most people began to gaze at their own doors a little differently nonetheless. (p. 69)

Hamid's portals and the migration they represent imply an emancipatory potential, in contrast to the restrictive reality the couple will eventually face.

Apart from the deterritorialisation of his magical realism, Hamid's portrayal of the supernatural doors involves techniques that are consistent with many other iterations. They begin appearing early in the text (p. 5), but no commentary is made on them or on their impossibility. García Márquez's characters in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* often refuse to acknowledge the supernatural as even surprising. Hamid likewise portrays a wine-shop owner who finds a portal in his shop but makes 'no fuss of it, for the times were such' (p. 158). Similarly, like García Márquez's Buendías, Hamid's characters are amazed at aspects of the mundane (they wonder at

⁵⁴ This predicament reflects the unavailability of the relative safety of flight to real-world refugees seeking asylum in Europe: 'EU regulation [...] requires airlines that fly in asylum seekers who do not qualify to fly them out again at the airline's expense. [...] Airlines just won't allow people without the proper visas to board, even if the law would' (Scott Burris, 'Why Do Refugees Risk the Deadly Boat Crossing to Europe? It's the Law', *Bill of Health*, 2015 <<https://blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/2015/09/12/why-do-refugees-risk-the-deadly-boat-crossing-to-europe-its-the-law/>> [accessed 16 November 2022]).

a fox surviving in London (p. 137) and the staggering wealth they see in Chelsea (p. 115)) but have little emotional response to the marvellousness of the portals. Hamid compresses these episodes to a few words and neither expands on them nor comments on their wonder. The first transition the couple makes through the portals is the only one depicted at all, and even then Nadia and Saeed pass through 'without a word' (p. 98). The more pressing concern for the couple is not the impossibility of the portals but their search for another place to call home, another refuge. Their world-view-altering potential and ramifications are elided entirely, even while they generate a world unrecognisable from the less fluid one of the twentieth century.

Reclaiming Britain for Britain: Nativism and its transnational collapse

While Hamid's portals expose the instability of national boundaries, they also galvanise the tribalistic defence of those borders. This section considers how Hamid's thematic shift from past-oriented magical realism exaggerates a uniquely twenty-first-century environment. Hamid reflects the milieu of the mid-2010s when entrenched conceptions of home configured around nation-states were threatened by increased migration, which resulted in those beliefs being held on to with progressively toxic fervour. Hamid turns his magical realism from the postcolonial frameworks of resistance and opposition, instead using his portals to represent the tensions and contradictions his transnational characters face. In fact, I argue Hamid critiques oppositionality itself, as Oyeyemi also does, as the main factor in generating traumatic experiences for migrants. The supernatural augments these tensions between the manifest relatedness of nations and the contrasting wish for localised homogeneity and mutual exclusivity that nationalistic ideologies espouse. Hamid's portrayal of Britain thus supports this project's thesis that magical realism has been fundamentally reconfigured to reveal affective experiences of tensions resulting from a denial of underlying connectivity between people regardless of location.

Exit West reflects the increases in right-wing ideologies that occurred in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Zygmunt Bauman suggests there is a direct link between these impulses and globalisation. He suggests increased mobility is a privilege of the wealthy, highlighting the immobility of the poorest, which in turn has fuelled xenophobia and racism: 'Neo-tribal and fundamentalist tendencies, which reflect and articulate the experience of people on the receiving end of

globalization, are as much legitimate offspring of globalization as the widely acclaimed “hybridization” of top culture.’⁵⁵ Visitors to wealthy nations are often marginalised, targeted as strange and unwelcome. Refugees to the UK, for example, have recently suffered an increase in resistance from its natives. This has resulted in their being afraid to leave the squalid camps in which they have been placed because of the violent reaction of nearby residents.⁵⁶ It corroborates recent research that suggests that:

distress among refugees is related as strongly to so-called ‘post-migration stressors’ as it is to experiences of war-related violence and loss. What happens to people after they become refugees affects their mental health just as powerfully as whatever they experienced during the war.⁵⁷

As a result, refugees fail to find a sense of home within host nations, wandering from one state of homelessness to another. At the same time, the native population whose tribalism is stimulated by globalisation also feel their home is being destabilised by the increase in what they perceive as invaders, or outsiders.

Hamid’s magical realist erosion of national borders represents rather than resists these exclusionary ideologies. The portals dismantle the validity of nation as home, subsequently rebuilding the imaginary walls of nationalism that prevent

⁵⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, Reprinted (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p. 3.

⁵⁶ Migrants suffer horrific conditions upon arrival in these supposed havens:

For refugees in camps, life entails continuous exposure to overcrowded and inadequate housing, a lack of access to adequate nutrition and medical care, unemployment and severe poverty, heightened family violence, sexual assault in and around the camps, separation from relatives left behind, and a chronic sense of uncertainty regarding the future—life on indefinite hold. These stressful conditions are powerfully linked to depression, anxiety, and trauma. (Kenneth E. Miller, ‘5 Myths About Refugees’, *Psychology Today*, 2017 <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-refugee-experience/201701/5-myths-about-refugees>> [accessed 16 November 2022])

For examples of these conditions in Lebanon, the UK and Australia, see: Paddy Dowling, ‘“We Can’t Survive like This”: Life in the Camps for Syria’s Refugee Children’, *The Independent*, 18 February 2019, section World News <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/syria-refugee-crisis-lebanon-child-forced-labour-photos-a8777191.html>> [accessed 16 November 2022]; BBC News, ‘“Human Rights Ignored” at Asylum Seeker Camp’, *BBC News*, 11 November 2020 <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-54907333>> [accessed 16 November 2022]; Elaine Pearson, ‘Seven Years of Suffering for Australia’s Asylum Seekers, Refugees’, *Human Rights Watch*, 2020 <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/16/seven-years-suffering-australias-asylum-seekers-refugees>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

⁵⁷ Kenneth E. Miller, ‘5 Myths About Refugees’.

immigrants from calling that nation home. Nationalism and its clash with immigration are prevalent in contemporary texts depicting immigrants attempting to survive in the UK; *Exit West* contributes to this dynamic when Nadia and Saeed flee their city and teleport to London.⁵⁸ Hamid calls the inhabitants of the UK who oppose the perceived invasion of their home as 'nativists'. The term aligns country with ownership and thus resists belonging and home-seeking for immigrants. Like Oyeyemi's vision of the self collapsing under nationalist pressure, in Hamid, similar transnational tensions result in a clash between nativists and migrants as the nation's borders lose their impermeability.

The binary between 'us' (the natives) and 'them' (the immigrants) reiterates in reverse the binary of coloniser/colonised. Hamid's text reveals this dual, oppositional model, seen so often in postcolonial magical realism, as being eroded by globalisation. It also exposes the harm that can be caused when an ideology of fundamental binary difference is upheld. The novel portrays London and the sudden influx of migrants through ironic oppositional play of light and darkness, exposing national purity as a myth that is being perforated. When Nadia and Saeed arrive in London, the first thing they see is its wealth: when the couple emerge on the other side of the portal, Hamid juxtaposes the meagre conditions the couple leave in Greece with a bedroom of a mansion in Chelsea or Kensington. There they witness 'furnishings so expensive and well made that Saeed and Nadia thought they were in a hotel' (p. 115). Despite having jumped through a supernatural portal, it is the wealth that presents as unbelievable. Each house is 'perfectly painted and maintained and implausibly like the next [...] and they stood and stared at this, for it seemed almost unreal' (p. 118). Hamid litters the scene with adjectives of comfort and light, of 'pale woods', 'cream rugs', and 'white', 'soft' water; he paints British nationality built into the crystalline purity of London's 'cherry trees, with buds and a few white blossoms' and 'taps that gushed water that was like spring water' (p. 118). However, this edifice of cultural purity and light is corrupted when the portals (repeatedly noted for their 'complete blackness' (p. 27)) begin teleporting migrants into the house. The migrants arriving are labelled as dark in contrast to London's light through a double entendre: 'When it was dark people began to emerge' (p. 119).

⁵⁸ Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* (2009) and Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (2015) are two such examples.

In this new location, light/dark, native/foreign, home/away binaries are reinforced. Yet, Hamid presents the clean dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' as being destabilised by both the portals and the relational attributes of transnational migrants. For a while after Nadia and Saeed arrive in London, the mansion represents a home of a sudden but comfortable multiculturalism. The narrator indicates how the portals deconstruct nationality and strangeness: 'everyone was foreign, and so, in a sense, no one was' (p. 100). Nationality proves to be an outmoded identity marker: in one scene, Nadia attends a meeting in the house, which has become known as the 'Nigerian house', and she is 'the only obvious non-Nigerian who attended' (p. 143). As is characteristic of the text, the narrator makes contradictory, oppositional statements that highlight the incongruence of nationality as label. As Nadia gets more familiar with these people, she finds 'that the Nigerians were in fact not all Nigerians': 'some were half-Nigerians, or from places that bordered Nigeria, from families that spanned both sides of a border' (p. 144). The illusion of nationality is then exposed: 'there was perhaps no such thing as a Nigerian' (p. 144). As in *The Icarus Girl*, Nigerianness is shown to be subjective, changing depending on the relation of one individual to another. This multicultural house enables transnationality to nuance stable notions of nations, almost suggesting a utopian potential of this realisation in the peaceable relationships within it.

However, this harmonious relationality is brought under attack by resilient nationalism. As soon as the migrants start to appear, a 'vanload' of police 'armed' with 'sub-machine guns' arrive at the house, looking more 'like soldiers' ready for war than police (p. 24). Hamid's prose vividly portrays the violent reaction to the immigrants by the state. It echoes the sensationalism peddled in the media during the real-world refugee crisis in the mid-2010s. The text's otherwise omniscient narrator conveys exaggerated and catastrophising rumours that arise in response to the threat to the nation the migrants pose: 'All over London houses and parks and disused lots were being peopled in this way, some said by a million migrants, some said by twice that' (p. 125); 'it was now said that between Westminster and Hammersmith legal residents were in a minority, and native-born ones vanishingly few, with local newspapers referring to the area as the worst of the black holes in the fabric of the nation' (p. 126). The use of the term 'black hole' recalls the infamous incident in Calcutta in 1757 when over one hundred Europeans were reportedly

captured and died of suffocation and heat exhaustion in a cramped dungeon cell. Although speaking of the incident in India, Gautam Thakur's commentary could equally refer to *Exit West*'s black hole: 'Similar to their galactic namesake, these terrestrial black holes suck in humans and disintegrate their symbolic identities, imagined bodies, and dreams of sovereignty.'⁵⁹ Their re-emergence in contemporary London revives the darkness of colonisation in the exploitation of twenty-first-century immigrants. The media's image of the black hole equates foreignness and outsiders with darkness, in opposition to the crystalline whiteness of Kensington and Chelsea before the emergence of the utterly black portals. For Hamid's nativists, the term 'black holes' points to an apocalyptic view of the portals destroying their nation. The perceived threat, amplified by xenophobia-inducing headlines, results in 'nativist mob[s]' forming to scare the invaders back through the portals or destroy them altogether. Nadia and Saeed are injured by one such mob (p. 131). The collapse of the nation's physical borders causes the nativists to reinforce barriers in other forms, in denial of this homelessness-causing magic. Despite the portals making multiple geographical connections, they create rancour that simultaneously disconnects many people from the nation, and thus any sense of having found home in these migrated places. Hamid paradoxically traverses and reinforces an oppositional framework akin to postcolonial models. In doing so, he suggests that a contradiction, of connection and simultaneous disconnection, epitomises migrants' experiences when transnationality clashes with nationalism.

By mirroring the right-wing politics arising around Europe and the Americas in the 2010s, Hamid's text indicts the governments of countries like the UK for fomenting these oppositional ways of thinking in their populations.⁶⁰ The circumstance Hamid's portals create allow him to imagine a more extreme response than the one the actual UK government gave. However, the xenophobia remains. The text depicts the state secretly sanctioning a backlash by locals that dehumanises the refugees. They cut their amenities and encourage violence so that this refuge is as unsafe as the unnamed city Nadia and Saeed left. Immediately following the riots in

⁵⁹ Gautam Basu Thakur, 'Necroecology: Undead, Dead, and Dying on the Limits of the Colony', *Victorian Studies*, 58.2 (2016), 202–12 (p. 208) <<https://doi.org/10.2979/victorianstudies.58.2.02>>.

⁶⁰ Two prominent examples of the state weaponising xenophobia occurred in 2016: the Brexit campaign in the UK, which targeted refugees, and Donald Trump's election campaign, which aimed at excluding Muslim and Mexican immigrants.

which the couple are injured, the government conducts 'a major operation ... to reclaim Britain for Britain' (p. 133). It allows only individuals which the government regards as native British to feel safe within the country's borders; those whom it sees as trespassers are denied the right to call Britain home. The state does so by treating the migrants as subhuman: it confines them, first by barricading areas of London, and later by forcing them into camps on the outskirts of the city. It cuts their access to electricity, internet and even water. Thanks to the severing of electricity, the part of London where most refugees live becomes known as 'dark London' (p. 142). Again, migrants are perceived as inhuman, unutterably different, the opposite side of a black/white binary. Appiah notes that, in the context of more violent conflicts between groups, the 'familiar' way to understand how any group can be capable of such mistreatment is because they are persuaded the 'members of [the] outgroup aren't really human at all'. Appiah suggests that this is a misconception, as the groups 'acknowledge their victims' humanity in the very act of humiliating, stigmatising, reviling, and torturing them'.⁶¹ However, the response to immigrants in Hamid's text (and corroborated by real-world media) is not one of reviled humanity but of a sincere fear. Immigrants are seen as human, but human of a wholly different type, undeserving of the benefits of compassion because they threaten the safety of the in-group. It seems that it is not cruelty but misunderstanding and fear that motivates Hamid's version of dehumanisation.

The portrayal of the technologies of force used by the government causes a further permutation of simultaneous home and homelessness. The technology taints the imagined sanctuary of the 'West' with the same militaristic menace that rendered the unnamed city unsafe. When the refugees see soldiers on the London streets, many are 'terrified' because 'most had seen first-hand what the police and soldiers could do' (p. 156). At the same time, the military presence contributes to the erosion of the distinction between home/abroad:

The fury of those nativists advocating wholesale slaughter was what struck Nadia most, and it struck her because it seemed so familiar, so much like the fury of the militants in her own city. She wondered whether she and Saeed had

⁶¹ Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*, The Mary Flexner Lectures (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 144.

done anything by moving, whether the faces and buildings had changed but the basic reality of their predicament had not. (p. 156)

In entirely different circumstances and for totally different reasons, therefore, Nadia's opinion mirrors Jess's that changing location has not provided any more stable semblance of belonging; Nadia, too, is 'half a world away, still feeling alien' (*Icarus Girl*, p. 30). *Exit West* incriminates wealthy governments for exacerbating this transnational homelessness. Again, Hamid's text exposes oppositional models as critically denying common relatedness.

Hamid's critique of this denial is underscored as his narrator ironically dehumanises the nativists for attempting to dehumanise the refugees. Hamid provides the nativists with no voice and depicts them as an alienating mass augmented by invasive, inhuman surveillance technology. Josephine Carter states that the novel 'invites uncomfortable encounters not only with the displaced but also with the kind of being that dehumanises the displaced'.⁶² While this is generally true, it is the absence of any direct encounters with the nativists that dehumanises them. No names are given; their voices and rationale are withheld. When they are depicted, they are given no individuality. They are conjured only as a hoard of faceless aggressors, a 'mob' or 'a strange and violent tribe, intent on [...] destruction', 'some armed with iron bars and knives' (p. 130). Likewise, the authorities who manipulate the nativists' xenophobia are also stripped of any humanising qualities, represented only in the faceless 'soldiers and armoured vehicles' on the streets and the thrum of 'drones and helicopters' overhead (p. 133).

Some citizens eventually begin to expose the nation as a crumbling idea:

The news in those days was full of war and migrants and nativists, and it was full of fracturing too, of regions pulling away from nations, and cities pulling away from hinterlands, and it seemed that as everyone was coming together everyone was also moving apart. Without borders nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory. (p. 155)

⁶² Josephine Carter, 'How Far Are We Prepared to Go? Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* and the Refugee Crisis', *Textual Practice*, 35.4 (2020), 1–20 (p. 4)
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1745877>>.

Hamid suggests that the increased globalisation, migration and communication the portals represent and exaggerate have the same de-homing effect on real-world individuals who assert the purity of nation. Magical realism has frequently been deployed to critique bigotry and the marginalisation of the oppressed by the powerful. In Hamid's transnational reframing, the mode spotlights polarisation, even between victim and perpetrator, as engendering global discord and disorientation in its denial of fundamental relationality.

Waving wands of communication: The connection and disconnection of supernatural technology

To supplement the conception of a world without national borders, *Exit West* draws parallels between its portals and communication technology. In doing so, the novel subverts the territorialised, rural, past-oriented tendencies that typify earlier forms of magical realism. In this section, I contend that Hamid recasts the mode to look towards the future by sourcing his supernatural element from technology. He uses it to underline a contemporary milieu of simultaneous connection and disconnection. I first show how Hamid deploys communication technology to further the globalising and deterritorialising that his portals instigate, configuring a notion of a non-localised community. He juxtaposes the portals with this technology, corroborating the thesis that transnational magical realism closely binds the supernatural to thematic content. By portraying the portals alongside the technology they represent, I argue Hamid also demonstrates a shift towards reframing the real world in terms of the inexplicable instead of merely inserting the supernatural into an otherwise realistic context. I then present how Hamid's technologically augmented magical realism suggests the potential of a global community. However, it implies the opposite is also true: disconnection is an intrinsic quality of technological connectivity. Hamid, like Oyeyemi, furthers the relationship between thematic elements, magical realism and narrative style. He epitomises this paradoxical state of connection and disconnection with language that connects ideas and people across vast distances while simultaneously contradicting itself. These shifts in the mode allow Hamid to picture a contemporary world filled with seeming paradoxes. At the same time, it enables him to retain the underlying implication that atomised

conceptions of home, nation and community are the root cause of these experiences of disorientation.

Hamid's focus on technology reinscribes the deterritorial quality of his magical realism. He has claimed the portals express the contemporary condition for migrants whereby 'Distance is collapsing in our world'.⁶³ In conveying the increased levels of migration that the globalised economy has enabled for some, Hamid engages with a key transnational concern about globalisation. His text adapts magical realist tropes to vivify these migratory experiences. In *Exit West*, however, the metaphor of the portals performs a double function, extending to a less literal but more widespread form of travel enabled by information technology. Hamid states they represent 'a technological reality we already live inside. We can open up our computers and Skype with someone, and we see them. It's like looking through a window'.⁶⁴ The way Hamid discusses electronic communication in his non-fiction as 'instantaneous' and 'frenzied' mirrors the speed of movement facilitated by the novel's portals.⁶⁵ Hamid's other novels stress the significance of technology in globalised contexts: *Moth Smoke* (2000) particularly emphasises the link between air conditioning and wealth. However, *Exit West* amplifies its significance, portraying technology as connecting everyone. Hamid's portrayal thus embodies Bauman's contention that 'We are all being "globalized"'.⁶⁶ The novel juxtaposes the supernatural doors with attention to mobile phones and social media. In doing so, Hamid establishes a conception of home based on community, of people with whom one feels a connection. Social media allows communities to form unconfined by location but constituted of shared interests, ages and outlooks. Technology is critical for maintaining transnational relationships across distances for migrants such as Hamid and Nadia and Saeed. It has contributed to the collapse of geographical borders as delimiters for forming home through community.

In wedding technology to magical realism, Hamid's text complicates the norm of embedding supernatural elements within a mundane setting as a feature that

⁶³ Hamid and Brown, 'Magical Novel *Exit West* Explores What Makes Refugees Leave Home'.

⁶⁴ David Bianculli and Mohsin Hamid, 'From Refugees to Politics, Mohsin Hamid Writes the Change He Wants to See', *NPR*, 2018 <<https://www.npr.org/2018/03/09/592158501/from-refugees-to-politics-mohsin-hamid-writes-the-change-he-wants-to-see>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

⁶⁵ Hamid, *Discontent and Its Civilizations*, Don't Angry Me, paragraph 3; How Do E-Books Change the Reading Experience?, paragraph 5.

⁶⁶ Bauman, *Globalization*, p. 1.

differentiates it from the extratextual world. It overlaps technology with the portals so that the distinction between them is unclear. In interviews, Hamid draws a parallel between mobile phones and the supernatural:

Technology works a bit like magic. So right now most of us have a little black rectangle in our pocket or backpack or purse. And when we look at it our consciousness goes far, far away from our bodies like magically appearing somewhere else.⁶⁷

The text follows this same reasoning, comparing mobile phones to 'wands waved in the city's air'; 'In their phones were antennas, and these antennas sniffed out an invisible world, as if by magic' (p. 35). In fact, only mobile phones, not the portals, are described specifically as magic. Hamid's technique compares to the convention of magical realism popularised by García Márquez in imbuing the mundane, technology in particular, with wonder, while the supernatural inspires no such awe. However, in novels such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the rural supernatural and the technological are in opposition, while in *Exit West* the former acts as a metonym of the latter. The portals represent the collapsed distances caused by technology, but they appear in the text in juxtaposition to the technology they represent. When the portals first emerge, in a woman's bedroom in Sydney, Hamid writes: 'Her room was bathed in the glow of her computer charger and wireless router, but the closet doorway was dark [...]. And out of this darkness, a man was emerging' (p. 6). Other, more insidious technology is also juxtaposed with magic: when Nadia suggests the couple leave Britain via a new portal, the conversation happens 'under the drone-crossed sky and in the invisible network of surveillance that radiated out from their phones' (p. 188–189). The location to which they travel – Marin, outside the technological centre of Silicon Valley – emphasises the links between technology and the portals. These overlaps between the metaphor of the portals and the technology they symbolise hint towards a shift in magical realism towards imagining aspects of the real world as magical. The chapter on Díaz in this thesis explores this trend in more detail. How this may continue to adapt is addressed in the conclusion.

⁶⁷ Mohsin Hamid and Jeffrey Brown, 'Exit West Author Mohsin Hamid Answers Your Questions', *PBS NewsHour*, 2018 <<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/exit-west-author-mohsin-hamid-answers-your-questions>> [accessed 24 November 2022].

These collapsed distances are instrumental in providing Hamid's migrants the means to maintain global communities. They allow people such as Nadia and Saeed to construct belonging grounded in relationships with others, a notion of home of relatedness rather than place. Global connectivity and relatedness are thus emphasised as critical objects in transnational contexts. Ahmed argues that for displaced people, a community can be formed among other migrants based on mutual displacement. Shared loss binds migrants, irrespective of destination or origin:

It is through the very loss of a past (the sharing of the loss, rather than the past as sharing) that the 'we' comes to be written as Home. It is hence the act of forgetting that allows the subject to identify with a history, to find out, to discover, what one has already lost: here, what is already lost is the phantastic 'we' of a nation, city and house.⁶⁸

It is within that shared 'we' of homelessness that migrants can find belonging. Yet Ahmed's 1999 article was written prior to the explosion of communication technology and the global spread of internet use and mobile phones. Hamid's text shows how technology enables a global community not merely, as Ahmed suggests, from the nearby displaced but from a far wider net. It also connects those who have migrated in opposing directions and those whom migrants have left behind. Via social media, Saeed spans the globe by contacting a cousin in Buenos Aires while he is in London, who connects him to his roots to hear for the first time of his father's death in the unnamed city (p. 170). These global social circles are also instantaneous, distance bearing no relation to time: 'Nadia tried to connect with people via chat applications and social media, and an acquaintance who made it to Auckland and another who had reached Manila replied right away' (p. 101). Compared with buildings, cities and countries, transitory relationships enabled by technology and the portals are paradoxically more stable as a foundation for home.

Yet, Hamid again undermines this utopian illusion of a relational home in digital connectivity through emphasising contradiction: an effect identified throughout this thesis. Hamid describes Nadia and Saeed sitting together using their

⁶⁸ Ahmed, 'Home and Away', p. 330.

phones as 'present without presence'. In relation to the outside world a community without propinquity is being maintained, but in relation to each other the oppositional phrase darkens the scene with a sense of solitude (p. 37). Hamid underscores this throughout the text, foregrounding the fact that people often sit physically together while silently communicating with others far away. In one scene, Hamid initially places the couple together, side by side as 'they often sat on the ground with their backs to the dormitory'. The pronouns 'they' and 'their' emphasise the couple's togetherness. Once it transpires that they are using their phones, however, we see that they are in fact travelling the globe in different directions, 'wandering far and wide but not together' (p. 184). In another scene, once again 'Nadia and Saeed [sit] next to each other on the ground' but their focus is on the global rather than the local as they both sit in silence catching up 'on the news, the tumult in the world' (p. 103). Hamid vividly reveals the contradiction of technology connecting while simultaneously disconnecting in this scene through a narrative deception that traces the couple's fragmenting relationship. The narrator strongly suggests that Nadia and Saeed are together, highlighting the mutuality of their experience:

In the late afternoon, Saeed went to the top of the hill, and Nadia went to the top of the hill, and there they gazed out over the island, and out to sea, and he stood beside where she stood, and she stood beside where he stood, and the wind tugged and pushed at their hair. (p. 103)

But it turns out that this connection is an illusion:

And they looked around at each other, but they did not see each other, for she went up before him, and he went up after her, and they were each at the crest of the hill only briefly, and at different times. (pp. 103–104)

Technology is depicted as creating more powerful and literal disconnections, straining the relational connectivity when wielded by the state to control and oppress the migrants. As a further expression of the divisive potential of technology, Hamid's text fictionalises governments' oppressive technological power. In his non-fiction, Hamid has criticised the US's use of drones against Pakistan, a technology which is

advanced enough to conjure dystopian science fiction imagery.⁶⁹ *Exit West* continuously draws a connection between technology and violence, particularly that of the state against migrants. Early on, the parallels are merely suggestive: when Nadia and Saeed first meet, Hamid depicts them 'sitting at a table for two by a window, overlooking snarled traffic on the street below. Their phones rested screens-down between them, like the weapons of desperadoes at a parley' (pp. 15–16). Later, the British government uses technologically advanced weapons of war to subjugate and terrorise the migrants in 'dark London'. Governments exercise power (in terms of strength) over their people by withdrawing power (in terms of electricity). In the unnamed city:

one day the signal to every mobile phone in the city simply vanished, turned off as if by flipping a switch. An announcement of the government's decision was made over television and radio, a temporary anti-terrorism measure, it was said, but with no end date given. Internet connectivity was suspended as well. (p. 55)

Likewise, in London, 'the electricity went out, cut off by the authorities, and Kensington and Chelsea descended into darkness' (pp. 139–140). As migrants' technology loses its power, so the people lose theirs, disconnected and dislocated from their global community; the state renders the migrants homeless once again. To remind the dark Londoners of their subjugation, the government parades its technologies of war in front of them: 'Every day a flight of fighter aircraft would streak through the sky, screaming a reminder to the people of dark London of the technological superiority of their opponents, of the government and nativist forces' (p. 150). As a violent response to the increased migration the portals literalise and exaggerate, Hamid shows how paradoxical states of being-at-home and homelessness are generated by technologies that both enhance and restrict connectivity.

Hamid stresses these experiences of connection and disconnection through a distinctive narrative style infused with contradictions and oppositions. As we also saw with Oyeyemi, this coordinates the language, the magical realist tropes and the

⁶⁹ Hamid, *Discontent and Its Civilizations*, *Why Drones Don't Help*, paragraphs 1–5.

thematic content more synergistically than in prior examples of the mode. Hamid opposes a portal, doubly depicted as 'black', with the light of mobile technology as the room is lit by 'the beam of [a] phone-torch' (pp. 63–64). The scene then segues into a parallel phrase highlighting the disjunctive logic of listening for silence: 'The brave man merely listened to the sounds in the stairwell outside, for a lack of sound in the stairwell outside' (p. 64). Oppositional phrases are scattered throughout the text: in the city of Marin 'the apocalypse appeared to have arrived and yet it was not apocalyptic' (p. 215); Nadia and Saeed listen to a singer with a 'so alive but no longer living voice' (p. 24); Nadia recalls an old boyfriend with whom a sexual encounter is 'not unsurprisingly, surprisingly good' (p. 32). These parallel phrases, which, as Claire Chambers mentions, are often diacopes or closely so, consistently highlight oppositions and contradiction: 'they were ashamed, and that they did not yet know that shame, for the displaced, was a common feeling, and that there was, therefore, no particular shame in being ashamed' (p. 184).⁷⁰ The phrases frequently bind technology to interpersonal relationships, continuing to suggest the omnipresence and intangibility of the virtual world that is 'all around them, and also nowhere' (p. 35). Like the portals, the technology exposes the tension between this digital, fluid home and the need for stable, physical human interaction to form a real home through community.

At the same time, the sentence structure in *Exit West* creates an impression of global connectivity. It reflects the network of relatedness and brokenness of the novel's magical, technological home-seeking. In contrast to the concise prose in his prior novels, Hamid envelops his oppositional phrases within very long sentences consisting of multiple short clauses. These drift between topics, creating links between notions while simultaneously contradicting themselves. One such sentence depicts state violence and riots in Vienna which have resulted from the broken borders and influx of migrants. The sentence explains that a 'mob [...] was intending to attack the migrants gathered near the zoo, everyone was talking and messaging about it' (p. 104). It connects the violence to the interpersonal and to the globe through internet coverage:

⁷⁰ Claire Chambers, *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 235 <<https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-52089-0>>.

all this happened as the sun dipped lower in the sky, as it was doing above Mykonos as well, which though south and east of Vienna, was after all in planetary terms not far away, and there in Mykonos Saeed and Nadia were reading about the riot, which was starting in Vienna, and which panicked people originally from their country were discussing online how best to endure or flee. (p. 106)

This drifting sentence contradicts itself in light of violence:

[...] militants shooting unarmed people and then disappearing, an afternoon of carnage unlike anything Vienna had ever seen, well, unlike anything it had seen since the fighting of the previous century, and of the centuries before that, which were of an entirely different and greater magnitude, Vienna being no stranger, in the annals of history, to war [...] (p. 104)

Hamid has said that for him the overlong sentences are 'incantatory, like a magic spell', recalling Asturias's prose that mimicked Mayan incantations.⁷¹ However, while Hamid's style is not related to any real-world supernatural beliefs, it still mirrors his own portals in that the sentences lattice the globe, making connections that span time and distance. The sentences enable Hamid to juxtapose the supernatural, technology and state violence. It suggests that, like the portals, technology connects but it also subjugates, separates and creates divisions.

That technology embraces such a contradiction of connecting and disconnecting is summed up by George Monbiot's description of social media as 'double edged: it is an excellent tool for creating connections, and a powerful weapon for breaking them'.⁷² Its negative influence is evident in both the real world and Hamid's magically augmented one. It has an alienating effect on Nadia and Saeed's relationship, and its divisiveness is strewn across the political environments of the 2010s and in Hamid's reimagined resistance to migration. Hamid's topic and the future-orientation of his supernatural element thus bring magical realism fully into

⁷¹ Paul Auster and others, 'What Makes a Man Booker Novel? Six Shortlisted Authors Share Their Secrets', *The Guardian*, 14 October 2017, section Books
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/oct/14/what-makes-a-man-booker-novel-six-shortlisted-authors-share-their-secrets>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

⁷² George Monbiot, *Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 57. Kindle ebook.

the globalised twenty-first century. Liliana Naydan argues technology 'creates a paradox of existence for immigrants that defines the historical moment at which Hamid writes'.⁷³ While this applies to the portals which generate physical connections and disconnections, the paradox is experiential rather than objective with technology. This is formed from the term 'connection' shifting between more and less literal forms along digital networks. The feeling of disjuncture is reiterated throughout the text and suggests that it is caused by migrants and nativists alike not acknowledging the fluidity of home. Persistent perceptions of 'us' as a community based on fixity and stasis repudiate a current condition technology has exposed: we may connect to everyone on the planet but to differing and often modulating degrees. Hamid's style reproduces the way technology has enabled migrants to seek home across and within a global community, but it has also caused dislocations and homelessness in interpersonal relationships. This is the experience his portals literalise. The more magic-than-magic wonder of modern technology, symbolised by Hamid's black rectangles, enables a global community-based home while simultaneously providing the conditions for the homelessness of isolation.

'To be among our own kind': Saeed's mythic homeland and Nadia's transnational relationality

To show how authors of contemporary magical realism often align supernatural, thematic and other elements of their texts, my discussion in this section turns to Hamid's characterisation. Hamid's two protagonists Nadia and Saeed exemplify different ways of dealing with the world the portals (and migration and technology) have brought about. One perspective strives, and fails, to establish belonging in stasis, myth and tradition. Like Hamid's magical realist intervention, the other perspective looks to the future, embracing the loss of permanence which migration embodies and adopting a relational conception of home. Hamid's characters thus echo what his portals do to the transnational environment: their relationship suffers tensions as a result of this interplay between permanence and fluidity, connection and disconnection, past and future.

⁷³ Liliana M. Naydan, 'Digital Screens and National Divides in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*', *Studies in the Novel*, 51.3 (2019), 433–51 (p. 434).

Migrating away from family and the culture in which one grows up may have become both literally and metaphorically easier thanks to globalisation and technology, but the cost on some aspects of being-at-home is significant. Hamid explains his own experience: 'Migration is painful [...]. When I think of leaving my parents in Pakistan [...], I feel there is real emotional harm that has to be reckoned with. This is the price every migrant pays when we migrate.'⁷⁴ However, the opportunities and costs of migrating are heightened for refugees like Nadia and Saeed, unlike Hamid who has the luxury of the choice to leave and the freedom to return. Hamid broadly divides the emancipatory and painful experiences of finding and losing home in migration between the divergent personalities of Nadia and Saeed. Hamid explains the difference in terms of temporal outlook:

Saeed is more nostalgic in temperament: He looks back to his childhood, to the past, as a model of where he wants to be. Nadia is more resolutely future-looking: She looks ahead, and doesn't want to look back. We all have these two tendencies within us, to varying degrees, and to degrees that change at various times in our lives.⁷⁵

Saeed fixates on stasis and permanence, which globalisation, technology and the portals rupture. In certain respects, Saeed's outlook personifies how postcolonial magical realism often envisions a return to the natural and rural past. However, this idea is at odds with the reality Saeed faces. Nadia, on the other hand, accepts the relational fluidity of the borderless, deterritorialised world. Her increased tolerance and flexibility allow her to embrace the contradictoriness of her experience and find nurturing relationships within it.

Saeed reflects the persistent concept of a homeland as a place of permanence. He exemplifies a mythical vision with roots, 'associated with stasis, boundaries, identity and fixity'.⁷⁶ His character corresponds to Madhu Singh's opinion that for many migrants, home takes on a mythic status and rests in the place and people they left behind: 'the nostalgic, or the romantic, marked with pangs of separation and

⁷⁴ Anne Brice, 'Exit West Author Mohsin Hamid: "Migration Is What Our Species Does"', *Berkeley News*, 2020 <<https://news.berkeley.edu/2020/09/01/on-the-same-page-exit-west-mohsin-hamid/>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

⁷⁵ Brice, "Migration Is What Our Species Does".

⁷⁶ Ahmed, 'Home and Away', p. 339.

regret.⁷⁷ These notions are undermined by increasing globalisation as changes render cities and towns unrecognisable at a heightened acceleration. Saeed's outlook represents fixed ideas surrounding nostalgia, tradition and family, and permanence; these ideas persist for many migrants even as critical emphasis moves away from these stances. Just as the collapse of borders strengthened nationalists' belief in nation, so Saeed's migration strengthens his bond with the mythical:

He was drawn to people from their country, both in the labour camp and online. It seemed to Nadia that the further they moved from the city of their birth, through space and through time, the more he sought to strengthen his connection to it, tying ropes to the air of an era that for her was unambiguously gone. (p. 187)

His affinity with family as a key factor in this conception is particularly conspicuous: Hamid emphasises the connection in a passage involving an heirloom of a telescope, which 'had been given to Saeed's father by his father, and Saeed's father had given it in turn to Saeed' (p. 13).⁷⁸ This device transcends time and space in its ability to view 'light from other centuries' (p. 14). The telescope, passed down the patriarchal line, represents ancestry as eternal and mythic. It enables 'time-travel', which contrasts with the motif of loss resulting from the one-directional migration through time that Hamid otherwise expresses throughout the text (p. 14). His father exemplifies this strong connection. Saeed's mother is killed accidentally by the militants, and when Nadia and Saeed find a way to escape they attempt to take Saeed's father with them. Yet he refuses to go because '[Saeed's] mother is here' (p. 90). For Saeed's father, home belongs 'in the past, for the past offered more to him' (p. 91). This conviction is contagious for Saeed: when he is required to escape but leave his father behind, he feels as if he is betraying his ancestry by leaving. After teleporting through the first portal, he 'pivot[s] back to the door, as though he wished maybe to reverse course

⁷⁷ Madhu Singh, 'No Place to Call Home: Representation of Forced Migration and Exile in South Asian Literature', *South Asian Review*, 34.1 (2013), 57–76 (p. 57) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2013.11932919>>. Such a view of the homeland is persistent throughout scholarship on its perception in migrants (see Ogunfeyimi). This continued view contradicts the opinions of many intellectuals, including Rushdie, who comments that such a homeland can never be located in any place or time: 'we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands' (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 10).

⁷⁸ The value of family in transnational contexts is further explored in Chapter Four of this thesis.

and return through it' (p. 99). For Saeed, the transnational portals prove destructive for his feeling of being-at-home. The loss of his country, his parents, and the continual migrations cause Saeed to become increasingly withdrawn: his experience of migration is peppered with phrases depicting his emotional struggle: 'jarring' (p. 129), 'less comfortable' (p. 145) 'intimidated' (p. 146), 'torn' (p. 152), and 'melancholic' (p. 193).

The strict ties to family that root Saeed to this mythic formation are restated in the way Hamid depicts him seeking friendships more exclusively than Nadia among the people of his own country. As the narrative progresses, he becomes increasingly entrenched in this mythical conception when searching for belonging. In a telling conversation in London that shows the beginning of the drift occurring between the couple, Saeed suggests that it is more conducive for them to attempt to move to a house that is more crowded, uncomfortable and lacking in privacy, because of the shared nationality of the inhabitants:

'Why would we want to move?' [Nadia] said.

'To be among our own kind,' Saeed answered.

'What makes them our kind?'

'They're from our country.'

'From the country we used to be from.'

'Yes.' Saeed tried not to sound annoyed. (p. 149)

As Carter points out, in seeking to form communities that include and exclude based on nationality like this, Saeed 'parallel[s] the impulse of the nativist mob'.⁷⁹ In doing so he also echoes the essentialism Oyeyemi portrayed as deleterious in diasporic nationalism. Hamid thus shows how, in contrast to Carpentier, Okri, García Márquez and many others, attempting to foster fixed territory as a basis for belonging is an anachronistic and potentially traumatic disregard of fluid transnationality.

Just as Saeed embodies the fixity of nation and tradition, Nadia epitomises the same future-oriented, deterritorial, relational qualities the portals enact. She also aligns with a more experiential, affective idea of home. In these regards her outlook mirrors many of the adaptations in the techniques of transnational magical realist

⁷⁹ Carter, 'How Far Are We Prepared to Go?', p. 15.

writing. Hamid suggests, as Oyeyemi does, that these paradigmatic changes are necessary for well-being in migrants like himself and his characters. Nadia's position recalls Ahmed, who says:

Home is not simply about fantasies of belonging – where do I originate from – but that it is sentimentalized as a space of belonging ('home is where the heart is'). The question of home and being at home can only be addressed by considering the question of affect: being at home is here a matter of *how one feels or how one might fail to feel*.⁸⁰

This experiential conception continually changes in relation to other people and locations. It is specifically in relationships, in the forming of new ties and in the openness to new experience that Nadia's relationality brings her contentment where Saeed struggles with their peripatetic lives.

In fact, the heightened mobility and connectivity the portals instigate improve Nadia's well-being. She is depicted as constantly traversing and transgressing ideological boundaries, so the portals' erosion of physical borders allies with her natural transgressiveness. While Saeed never openly crosses his parents in the text, showing his conservative respect for family, Nadia's 'questioning and growing irreverence in matters of faith' produced in her parents 'utter horror', particularly when she decides to move out on her own (p. 18). Nadia is cut off from her family by this disagreement: 'Nadia and her family both considered her thereafter to be without a family' (p. 18). Scarce mention of them is made again in the text. She continues to subvert other conventions expected of her. She is depicted as wearing a 'flowing black robe' (p. 1) but her reasoning for wearing an apparently conservative garment is stated in starkly irreligious terms: 'So men don't fuck with me' (p. 16). She also defies stereotypes by riding a motorcycle (p. 3) and using drugs. Towards the end of the text, she goes further by violating the boundaries of sexuality (p. 217). Nadia's transgressive qualities not only betray rebellion against her conservative background, but they also show a contempt for the borders that enclose expectations of people.

⁸⁰ Ahmed, 'Home and Away', p. 341.

She applies this rejection of boundaries to her conceptualisation of home. When the couple first migrate to Mykonos, it is Nadia who first establishes friendships away from 'fellow countrywomen and men' (p. 100). In doing so, she mirrors the portals' collapse of national boundaries as she begins to appreciate the falsity of nations as monolithic categories in which to establish fellowship and belonging. Thus, while Saeed's perspective becomes more immutable in mythic ideas within the borders of family, nation and tradition, changes in Nadia's outlook show her shifting fluidly between them as she forms relational bonds within and across those categories. Their difference is laid bare when they arrive in Mykonos. As they 'set up their temporary home' in a tent in a refugee camp, 'Nadia felt as she was doing it that she was playing house [...] and Saeed felt as he was doing it that he was a bad son' (p. 102). Later, Nadia moves away from Saeed to a shop storeroom that 'smelled of potatoes', and even 'this room came to feel to her like a home' (p. 213). Nadia therefore echoes what the portals have done to society in creating a world of liquid borders, just as the borders represent the emotional transgression of boundaries needed to survive in the relational, transnational world. Hamid thus furthers the contemporary move towards paralleling supernatural manifestation, language and characters to parallel the text's theme. His uprooted magical realism echoes the experiences he depicts, while his characterisation demonstrates that embracing uprootedness is a necessary component of transnational well-being.

Citizen of the world, citizen of nowhere: Being-at-home in migration through time

In suggesting a relational way of seeking belonging in migration, Hamid's text shares features with Oyeyemi's, in contrast to postcolonial variants of magical realism that attempted to condemn localised cultural oppression. In this section I examine how Hamid's update culminates in a universal sentiment that seeks to show underlying humanity regardless of culture. Hamid suggests that the sense of homelessness and paradox he depicts for his characters is a global condition facing us all. In the antepenultimate chapter, the narrator likens physical migrants like Nadia and Saeed to those who do not move but for whom the world keeps changing: 'We are all migrants through time' (p. 209). This concept frames the whole text and is reiterated through vignettes of people who do not migrate but who are affected by the portals.

This universalising and flattening of the differences between migrants and non-migrants may befit a transnational elite, but it deservedly comes under fire for equating the harrowing experiences of refugees with the mere experience of change. Despite this awkward pairing, *Exit West* effectively suggests that in accepting homes are not built on static land but on dynamic relationships, belonging can still be found reflected in itinerant, transnational experiences. This global, universal proposition distinguishes *Exit West* as a revisioning of magical realism uniquely suited to the unprecedented levels of globality wrought by migration and technology.

Hamid's text suggests that the sense of paradox Nadia and Saeed face is a contemporary and universal reality that migrants expose. Wars continue to undermine safety, rises in migration and nationalism are fragmenting nations, and technology is polarising communities. The portals in his text merely accelerate these processes; their presence everywhere argues that they are true for everyone. The vignettes Hamid uses to underscore the universality of humanity are unrelated except they all emerge in reference to the portals. These scenes occur in widely distributed locations, including Japan, Australia, Mexico, the Netherlands and Morocco. The scenes depict loss of the past as equivalent to the loss of home that migrants face. In one example in Palo Alto, 'an old woman who had lived in the same house her own life' now 'barely recognized the town that existed outside her property' (pp. 206–207). Hamid suggests these people, too, are wandering, uprooted, experiencing the shared pain and opportunity of migration through change. The vignettes, like the portals, expose the common humanity of dislocation from the imaginary homeland of our pasts. It is in this sentiment that Hamid offers a unifying and universalising statement about our own mutual homelessness, through which we may find common ground. In interviews, Hamid has openly stated his belief that this is both literal and universal: 'I think that we're all migrants. If you lived in the same town your whole life and never move and you're 80 years old, that town has changed completely. You migrate through time.'⁸¹ The text is likewise explicit about both the universality of humanity and the universality of migration:

⁸¹ Hamid and Brown, 'Magical Novel *Exit West* Explores What Makes Refugees Leave Home'. This idea permeates interviews and content Hamid produces around the publication of *Exit West*: 'all of us, whether we travel far afield or not, are migrants through time' (Hamid, *Discontent and Its Civilizations*, Introduction: My Foreign Correspondence, paragraph 29); 'Every single human being is a refugee from their childhood. [...] I think that if we can recognize the universality of the migration

We are all children who lose our parents, all of us, every man and woman and boy and girl, and we too will all be lost by those who come after us and love us, and this loss unites humanity, unites every human being, the temporary nature of our being-ness, and our shared sorrow. (p. 202)

However, in drawing a parallel between exiled migrants like Nadia and Saeed and everyone who has experienced loss, Hamid has divided critical opinion. Maria-Irina Popescu and Asma Jahamah believe the move is relatively successful, stating that it 'evokes the concept of "coexistence"'.⁸² Khaled Karam is even more positive, proposing that the strategy 'proves that there is still hope in the existence of people capable of mutual recognition'.⁸³ However, Chambers suggests that Hamid is 'somewhat suspect' for attempting to ignore 'the specificity of [refugees'] trauma'.⁸⁴ Michael Perfect goes much further in his criticism, saying:

I would characterise his assertion that we are all refugees as not only erroneous but also irresponsible. To insist that all refugees are human beings is vital; to insist that all human beings are refugees, however, is wrongheaded.⁸⁵

I agree with Perfect's harsh condemnation to one important degree. Hamid narrates the global connectivity and dislocation caused by globalisation and its machinery, but refugees in forced exile are an inappropriate group to express a process that is most vivid for the more digitally connected elite minorities. It is problematic to connect the disorienting experiences of globalisation to the influx of asylum seekers entering Europe and other locations in the mid-2010s, but it is more so conflating those bleak experiences with mere change. As Perfect rightly points out, 'We may all experience

experience [...] that those of us who have never moved are also migrants and refugees—then the space for empathy opens up' (Mohsin Hamid and Caitlin L. Chandler, 'We Are All Refugees: A Conversation with Mohsin Hamid', *The Nation*, 2017 <<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/we-are-all-refugees-a-conversation-with-mohsin-hamid/>> [accessed 16 November 2022]).

⁸² Maria-Irina Popescu and Asma Jahamah, "London Is a City Built on the Wreckage of Itself": State Terrorism and Resistance in Chris Cleave's *Incendiary* and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, *The London Journal*, 45.1 (2020), 123–45 (p. 139) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/03058034.2019.1687203>>.

⁸³ Khaled Mostafa Karam, 'Reciprocal Self-Consciousness as an Antidote to the Fixity of Categorical Borders in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*', *Neophilologus*, 104.3 (2020), 301–19 (p. 312) <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11061-020-09639-5>>.

⁸⁴ Chambers, *Making Sense of Contemporary British Muslim Novels*, p. 238.

⁸⁵ Michael Perfect, "Black Holes in the Fabric of the Nation": Refugees in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, *Journal for Cultural Research*, 23.2 (2019), 187–201 (p. 199) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2019.1665896>>.

the “loss” of the past as such, but this is not analogous, nor even productively comparable, to the experience of being forcibly displaced by war, persecution, or natural disaster’.⁸⁶ Classifying those who are forced into exile, those who choose to relocate and those who simply experience temporal change as migrants on equal footing results from a slippage between metaphorical and literal notions of migration. Hamid’s universalising statements are countered by Anita Haya Goldman’s prescient criticism two decades beforehand. She claims:

there has been a rather misleading tendency to use the term [exile] metaphorically so that the experience of exile has come to mean, more broadly, the experience of difference and estrangement in society, and most broadly, an aspect of what is human in all of us.⁸⁷

It is in conflating the metaphorical and literal, using refugees fleeing war to portray digital migrancy, that Hamid’s analogy breaks down. It detracts from his universalising message and underscores a homogenising of the specificity and variances in human experience. It subsequently reifies the distinctions between migrants and ‘us’. Hamid’s universalisation also detrimentally ignores differences between migrants themselves, particularly economic differences: a crucial distinction given his own affluent upbringing. The following chapter explores in more detail the tensions arising from the vast inequality between different migrants and the failure of elites to acknowledge where their experiences differ.

Nevertheless, Hamid’s attempt to universalise demonstrates his conviction that oppositional preoccupations with differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ are exposed as illusory by transnationality. The text demonstrates how magical realism can be reconfigured from postcolonial models to allegorise these ideas. Although Hamid’s notion flattens distinctions between refugees’ experience and warrants some of the criticism he has garnered, his supernatural element effectively supplements the globalised, digital, metaphorical migrancy that economically empowered people can experience. This is especially the case for transnational individuals such as Hamid himself with the economic and educational means to allow opportunity rather

⁸⁶ Perfect, ‘Black Holes in the Fabric of the Nation’, p. 199.

⁸⁷ Anita Haya Goldman, ‘Comparative Identities: Exile in the Writings of Frantz Fanon and W. E. B. Du Bois’, in *Borders, Boundaries and Frames: Essays in Cultural Criticism and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Mae G. Henderson (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 107–312 (p. 180).

than survival to dictate his migrations. His connections to multiple locations, as with Oyeyemi, suggest that national boundaries are insufficient to categorise migrants with the freedom to travel as Hamid does. He has often stated sentiments that suggest he sees himself as a global nomad, a citizen of the world: 'I've been migrating my whole life.'⁸⁸ While Oyeyemi's outlook seems more focused on the challenges arising from her fluid configuration, Hamid adopts a more sanguine attitude to his nomadic status: 'the word de-territorialized suggests someone who is free of place. I see myself as multi-territorialized.'⁸⁹

In declaring himself belonging to multiple locations, Hamid, like Ahmed, sees the privileged, modern nomad as configuring the globe as home:

By refusing to belong to a particular place, the world becomes the global nomad's home, granting to this nomadic subject the ability to inhabit the world as a familiar and knowable terrain. [...] The expansion of the meaning of home involves the creation of a new imagined home and community, that of the globe itself.⁹⁰

Hamid's contradiction is that this utopian, unifying stance is predicated upon our lack of specific places to call home and the disorientation resulting from rapid change. It is in viewing this seeming contradiction as familiar, comfortable and a place for social belonging that Hamid can be at home in homelessness. Thus, when Theresa May denigrated the elites who hold a view like Hamid's for ignoring the depth of intuitions many have about the value of nation in constructing belonging, saying 'if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere', her comments and Hamid's text fall into an uncomfortable, contradictory agreement.⁹¹ Hamid turns May's derogation into a celebratory pronouncement, however. Through imagining a world where national borders cease to function thanks to technologically augmented magic, his text shows a scenario where the only configuration of 'home' or citizenship that is meaningful is a global one: we are all citizens of the world. At the same time, through the portals of migration and social media, we are all on

⁸⁸ Hamid and Brown, 'Magical Novel *Exit West* Explores What Makes Refugees Leave Home'.

⁸⁹ Hamid and Gerber, 'The Best Transnational Literature'.

⁹⁰ Ahmed, 'Home and Away', p. 337.

⁹¹ Jonathan Davis and Andy Hollis, 'Theresa May's Brexit Speech Had Shades of Hitler', *The Guardian*, 12 October 2018 <<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/oct/12/theresa-mays-brexit-speech-had-shades-of-hitler>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

migratory journeys that sever us from birthplaces, nationalities, communities and families: while we are citizens of the world, we also have no home anywhere in it – citizens of nowhere.

In this sense of paradox, Hamid engages with other authors employing magical realist discourse to accentuate an unacceptable real-world cultural milieu. Like Carpentier and Asturias and many other texts adopting aspects of magical realism since, *Exit West* conjoins the supernatural with the hardships stimulated by cultural exchanges. Hamid's portals therefore draw a trajectory between the plight of twenty-first-century refugees and the intolerable trauma of colonial rule in the Caribbean depicted almost a century beforehand. Like Oyeyemi, Hamid differs from those earlier authors in that his supernatural element articulates a near-paradoxical condition faced by his protagonists. He explores the tensions resulting from disconnection and homelessness in the hyperconnected, global, transnational population. Hamid reimagines a political and cultural landscape of the 2010s, whereby national borders collapse under the pressure of magically augmented mass migrations and technology. At the same time, his text alludes to a hope paralleled in Oyeyemi's. It suggests a resolution to these hardships can be achieved through acknowledging the truer transcendence of these hugely resilient static models of home, nationality and identity. Holding on to these models in spite of their transnational collapse causes the illusion of paradox.

The narrator's characteristic use of oppositional phrases in *Exit West* is therefore not wholly contradictory when it declares the ensuing apocalypse is not apocalyptic: for migrants like Hamid, the old world is falling apart, but it is providing the opportunity for a new configuration in relational conceptions of home. Nadia embodies this acknowledgement that relatedness and fluidity characterise transnational, globalised environments, just as Oyeyemi's Jess demonstrated of identity. While subversive postcolonial magical realism broke down barriers to expose their fragility in light of cultural hegemony, for Hamid and Oyeyemi the borders collapse to propose a relational paradigm between and among categories that transnationalism has brought to light. When these constructs of nation, home and identity are seen as relative, in dynamic relationship rather than as mythical monoliths, transnationality becomes a basis for a global connectivity of humanity.

However, this utopian vision is far from realised. It is threatened by extant nationalist and political forces. Neoliberal globalisation unequally divides economic privilege and hardship; people regarded as different are deprived of belonging by natives guided by racism and atomistic nationalism; refugees are treated as unwanted; families and nations are ruptured by war. But through embracing the relationality of nation and identity it is possible to negotiate these disconnections proliferating modern hyperconnectivity and arrive at a new understanding of home. Hamid captures this near paradox by blending the supernatural with real-world experiences, highlighting the potential of being content as citizens of nowhere, of being at home in transnational homelessness.

Chapter Three: The transnational elite, the denial of human relatedness and gothic magical realism in Preeta Samarasan's *Evening is the Whole Day*

Introduction

Where Hamid's revisions to magical realism conjured a vision of unified, global citizenship, Preeta Samarasan's take on the mode narrows in more cynically on enduring economic differences. In her debut novel *Evening is the Whole Day* (2008), Samarasan examines transnational elites and their rarely explored relationships with poorer migrants. This chapter contends that Samarasan adopts tropes similar to those found in postcolonial iterations of magical realism but recasts them from their focus on nations towards critiquing the economic elites in transnational contexts. In doing so she highlights colonial influences on contemporary circumstances but explores how differences are maintained on the basis of economic differences. Her magical realism helps her to evoke an interplay between reinforcing and destroying borders between classes.

This chapter brings attention to five of the magical realist adaptations Samarasan deploys. First, the text engages in a rarely studied fusion of magical realism and the gothic. She sets her narrative in a colonial mansion filled with secrets and spirits. The house resembles a gothic castle, shrouded in a darkness that is brought to the present from a past of colonial rule. Samarasan's gothic overtones underscore a revisionary analysis of how gothic conventions can generate transnational discourse. In particular, her deployment evokes the long-established connections with the gothic and concerns with the borders between the interior and exterior. This aligns with transnational magical realist perspectives on relatedness and tensions of difference. She adopts this emphasis on difference to highlight the comfortable fluidity of the elite and their perceptions of the poor as disgusting and monstrous. Second, Samarasan deploys prolepsis and prophecy, devices frequently found throughout magical realism. She reconfigures these to symbolise the immobility of the poor in transnational environments. The predictions parallel the real-world determinism that leads the poorest member of society inexorably into positions from which they cannot escape. This hard line of predestination starkly conflicts with the fluid mobility of the transnational wealthy. Third, the novel features two ghosts which bring into focus a shift that is developing in twenty-first-

century transnational magical realism away from the past and towards the present or future. One spirit produces a similar effect to ghosts seen throughout much postcolonial literature in that it revives the narratives of past colonial atrocities. The second, however, complicates this standard deployment: it looks towards what is to come, representing a pessimistic view of enduring elitist oppression. While Hamid envisions the impacts of colonialism being annulled in transnational circumstances, Samarasan draws attention to the trajectory of colonial influences on the present. Fourth, Samarasan contributes to a growing shift in twenty-first-century literature towards magical realist intertextuality. Her text echoes Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, though she ironically reverses its central supernatural motif. While Rushdie's novel features a nose endowed with supernatural powers, *Evening is the Whole Day* depicts a nose lacking the ability of smelling class difference. Its eventual failure furthers the novel's exploration of the wealthy's wilful reinforcement of class divisions in transnational contexts. Finally, Samarasan literalises class distinctions being undermined through a range of expressions of supernatural events which blur the boundaries of reality and fantasy: the events can be variously interpreted as ontologically sound, delusional, metaphorical, improbable, exaggerated and literalised. Her equivocation of fantasy and reality therefore echoes the muddying of class borders which the novel explores.

As with Hamid and Oyeyemi's texts, *Evening is the Whole Day* ultimately presents transnational experiences as relational but highlights the tensions that arise when people encounter resistant conceptions of difference. The act of ignoring common relatedness causes severe damage to the poor but also collapses the differences between the rich family's conceptions of self and other. This suggests why the magical realist blurring of fantasy and reality with literalised metaphors has become a prevalent method of conveying the difficult experiences of migrants and their descendants. The text foregrounds not only the subjugation of the underprivileged but the self-aborrence that infects the family because of their defensive mistreatment of their servants. The novel suggests a need to view the ethical treatment of others through relational models that look beyond nation, race and class.

Samarasan contributes to a small yet growing number of authors with connections to Malaysia deploying magical realist strategies. In a country where

magic in literature had once been prohibited, instances of the mode have more recently begun to appear in Malaysian anglophone fiction.¹ For example, K. S. Maniam's *In a Far Country* (1993) and Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother* (2014) both depict homelands imbued with an inherent, territorialised magic in a similar vein to Carpentier's depiction. Samarasan takes a more transnational perspective than these novels. Her story follows the Rajasekharans, a family living in Malaysia in the 1980s, whose descendants migrated from India during British colonial rule.² The wealthy family consists of Raju (Appa), the father; Vasanthi (Amma), the mother; Paati, Raju's mother; three children, Uma, Suresh and Aasha; and numerous servants. With links to Singapore, the UK and the US, as well as Malaysia and India, the family comfortably traverses national and cultural borders. Their servant, a young girl called Chellam, likewise connects the cultures as her family also came from India; however, because of her economic status she lacks the ease of fluidity the Rajasekharans' wealth allows.

As a result of the temporal and economic distance between the rich family and the frequent hardships of initial migrations, Samarasan's focus veers from much of the discourse in which transnational novels and studies often engage. *Evening is the Whole Day* portrays a different transnational dynamic to Hamid's and Oyeyemi's texts yet continues their motif of tensions arising in transnational experiences. While Samarasan's setting is the suburbs of Ipoh in Malaysia, both Oyeyemi's and Hamid's novels are set mostly in the cultural and economic 'centres' of the UK and USA. To an extent their texts reify both locations as global hubs of transnational migration.³ Their protagonists were first-generation migrants in the case of Hamid and the children of migrants in Oyeyemi. In contrast, Samarasan's novel chronicles the experiences of generations more removed from the initial migration. Arguably as a result of this, Hamid and Oyeyemi's concerns with homeland and identity are largely absent in *Evening is the Whole Day*. A large proportion of her novel does concern race and the interplay between nationalism, colonialism and present-day oppression. However, its sharpest critique targets transnational and political elites in Malaysia

¹ Mas Rynna Wati Ahmad, 'Communicating Culture through Magical Realism Perspectives on Selected Malaysian Short Stories', *Malaysia Journal of Society and Space*, 12.11 (2016), 187–99 (p. 188).

² It is more specifically set in both Malaysia and Malaya, the country's name until 1963.

³ Anonymous, 'Immigration by Country 2022', *World Population Review*, 2022
<<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/immigration-by-country>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

and beyond. It accuses the rich and powerful of classist discrimination which strengthens the distinction between themselves and the poor they dehumanise. Nevertheless, Samarasan's narrative, and the changes she makes to the tropes of earlier magical realism, reiterates the concern Oyeyemi and Hamid highlight. She, too, accentuates the pernicious consequences when categories of people are formed with hard borders and when any underlying connection between those categories is ignored.

Samarasan's supernatural elements accentuate the point that the fluidity and relatedness of national and cultural categories that Hamid and Oyeyemi explore are unavailable to the poor. The interrogation of the complex borders of class, and the levels of exclusion from the privileges of societies, are played out in the novel's relationships with transnational scholarship. It interrogates the focus on the transnational elite that Hamid arguably celebrates, showing how traversing geographical borders is only frictionless for the economically buoyant migrant. For the large remainder, such mobility and agency remain oppressed.⁴ Recent studies of mobility in migration suggest that an overlooked focus of mobility is its immobility, which Amanda Lagji argues is characterised not by stasis but by dynamism: 'New mobilities studies are revolutionary for the way they incorporate experiences of immobility into prior emphases on movement, viewing mobility and immobility as overlapping and dependent states.'⁵ The novel exemplifies such differences in mobility between the classes. Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani argue that affluent transnational groups are different from other diasporic peoples in that their relationships transcend cultural and racial boundaries: 'such communities may not be derived primarily or indeed exclusively from the forms of co-ethnic and cultural identification that are constitutive of diasporas, but rather from elective modes of identification involving class, sexuality, and even professional interest.'⁶ The Rajasekharan family is an archetype of such transnationality. The father Raju is educated in England, gains training in Singapore, espouses the culture and language

⁴ Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, 'The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and Its Variants', *AAPSS*, 530 (1993), 74–96 (p. 74).

⁵ Amanda Lagji, 'Waiting in Motion: Mapping Postcolonial Fiction, New Mobilities, and Migration through Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*', *Mobilities*, 14.2 (2019), 218–32 (p. 220) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2018.1533684>>.

⁶ Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani, 'Introduction: Diaspora and Transnationalism', in *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, ed. by Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 1–26 (p. 4).

of the English to friends from multiple countries, and crosses cultural and social boundaries through an affair with a poor Chinese noodle seller. His eighteen-year-old daughter Uma likewise demonstrates this fluidity. Uma is fluent in English and is enamoured with Hollywood, leaving the family at the end of the novel to study in the US. In contrast, the servant Chellam is the same age as Uma, but her English falters and she only expresses more restrictively diasporic interests in South Asian cinema.

In this exploration of the difficult dynamics between elite and lower-class transnational individuals, the novel brings into focus the relative scarcity of studies that deal with the economic differences between migrants and their descendants. There is even less research regarding how migrants of differing economic circumstances deal with each other. Arun P. Mukherjee highlights this same deficiency in much postcolonial analysis, explaining that postcolonial models tend to homogenise the colonised: 'When post-colonial theory constructs its centre-periphery discourse, it also obliterates the fact that the post-colonial societies also have their own internal centres and peripheries, their own dominants and marginals.'⁷ This fusing of the colonised ignores differences in 'race, class, gender, language, religion, ethnicity and political affiliation'.⁸ The gap is bridged to some degree in transnational scholarship, but some aspects remain under-studied. There have been scholars, notably Leslie Sklair, who focus on the upper echelons of transnationality.⁹ However, there have been fewer that look at the distinctions between wealthy and poor migrants, and fewer again the relationships between them. Alejandro Portes has co-authored a number of texts outlining what he terms 'segmented assimilation' for the children of migrants to the United States.¹⁰ While their focus is only on the US and the direct descendants of migrants, a parallel is apparent in Samarasan's text in the divergent lifestyles of Uma and Chellam. However, Portes focuses predominantly on the statistics of his studies, not the experience, so he overlooks how those who diverge in class perceive and deal with each other. In postcolonial contexts, Melissa Kennedy notes how the frequent

⁷ Arun P. Mukherjee, 'Whose Post-colonialism and Whose Postmodernism?', *World Literature Written in English*, 30.2 (2008), 1–9 (p. 6).

⁸ Mukherjee, "Whose Post-colonialism", p. 6.

⁹ Sklair, 'The Transnational Capitalist Class'.

¹⁰ Portes and Zhou, 'The New Second Generation'; Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*; Alejandro Portes, 'Introduction: The Debates and Significance of Immigrant Transnationalism', *Global Networks*, 1.3 (2001), 181–94 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0374.00012>>.

'inequality and discrimination' within ethnicities and nationalities, passed by in analysis, commonly features in literary texts.¹¹ Likewise, although Samarasan's depiction is highly specific and cannot speak for any other dynamic, it demonstrates the validity of studies of fiction to allow an insight into these qualitative relationships between classes.

Evening is the Whole Day stresses how the behaviours of the wealthy have a bearing on the trajectory of the poor. Whereas postcolonial magical realism tends towards interrogating hierarchies based on national and ethnic groupings, Samarasan advances the mode to elaborate on the power relations between classes. Her adapted tropes bring focus to the latent commonality between socioeconomic groups in a way that corresponds to Oyeyemi's and Hamid's related sentiments regarding nations. Just as hard racial categories remain ideologically persistent even while they cease to be meaningful in such fluid, deracinated dynamics, the notion of class also entails the contradictoriness of fluidity and fixity. Philosopher Robert John Ackerman highlights these contradictions by noting how the ideological contingencies of class can be viewed as 'potentially cooperative' from a liberal perspective but 'antagonistic' from a socialist one.¹² But even while Ackerman points to their constructedness, he also highlights that their effect is concrete, as they robustly stultify mobility for the poorest people in any society. He suggests, in alignment with Samarasan's view of Malaysia, that despite their arbitrariness, class structures are often used for political gain. They materialise in a hard differentiation in terms of educational and vocational achievement:

Where discrimination is wanted by some group, and already given notions of race and gender will not draw the dividing line that is wanted, new notions of class can always be constructed to plot any separation that prejudice requires.¹³

¹¹ Melissa Kennedy, 'Urban Poverty and Homelessness in the International Postcolonial World', in *Reworking Postcolonialism*, ed. by Pavan Kumar Malreddy and others (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 57–71 (p. 64) <<http://link.springer.com/10.1057/9781137435934>> [accessed 6 June 2022].

¹² Robert John Ackermann, *Heterogeneities: Race, Gender, Class, Nation, and State* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), p. 80.

¹³ Ackermann, *Heterogeneities*, p. 79.

Where Samarasan's portrayal differs is that Ackerman's characterisation of class-based bigotry suggests an insidious intentionality, that such strategies of maintaining power are conscious and calculated. Samarasan's narrative hints at an unconscious repulsion of lower classes based on a reactionary defensiveness and an effort to maintain status. The wealthy unconsciously but wilfully ignore the stark commonality of humanity in order to do so. The cognitive dissonance this produces is effectively characterised by embedding the supernatural into these dynamics. Samarasan therefore participates in a trend shared by other transnational authors in exposing the fragility and porousness of fixed national and racial boundaries. But while other such texts depict poverty as an inseparable consequence for many who migrate, her novel depicts its transnational characters as an elite who psychologically cannot help but reify class lines.

The way that the rich family perceives and treats the poor, whether unconsciously or otherwise, solidifies the differences between them. Despite some disputable and ambiguous aspects of the term, this treatment can be labelled as *classist*. Seemingly first used in the 1980s in Marxists context, classism has been criticised on numerous fronts as a conceptual tool on account of its lack of clarity.¹⁴ Chuck Barone argues that in studies of class, too much focus is put on interpersonal experiences and too little on the 'class structure of capitalism and its class-based dynamics' which he claims are more fundamental.¹⁵ Fred Pincus and Natalie Sokoloff go further, claiming that 'little is gained by talking about classism' in such an interpersonal way since 'the systemic nature of classism is usually not explored and capitalism and its impacts are rarely even mentioned'.¹⁶ I agree that, as a concept for studying systemic, capitalist power dynamics, the term may be imprecise, but this is largely due to attempting to view class as a stable, static demarcation, which renders class arbitrary. When it is used to analyse interpersonal dynamics between groups of different economic status, the term gains more clarity. Barone provides an explanation in 1999 of the three economic systems that usually demarcate class: 'private ownership, the hierarchical organization of capitalist factories and offices,

¹⁴ Fred L. Pincus and Natalie J. Sokoloff, 'Does "Classism" Help Us to Understand Class Oppression?', *Gender & Class*, 15.1 (2008), 9–23 (p. 12).

¹⁵ Chuck Barone, 'Bringing Classism Into The Race & Gender Picture', *Race, Gender & Class*, 6.3 (1999), 5–32 (p. 7).

¹⁶ Pincus and Sokoloff, p. 9; Pincus and Sokoloff, p. 13.

and the capitalist division of labor'.¹⁷ Given the expansion of globalisation, the production of virtual spaces and the significant turn of many national economies towards service industries, these categories have become much more complicated. Additionally, as Pincus and Sokoloff point out, 'it is completely arbitrary where one class or socioeconomic status stops and where the other begins.'¹⁸ From this systemic point of view, class is arguably too imprecise, complex and incoherent to be a useful analytical concept.

Yet, if class is viewed more relatively, as a social but ideological difference between groups in very similar ways to the constructedness of nation and race, then it becomes less arbitrary; Barone acknowledges that the experience of class is real enough as 'an important part of our identity, who we are, how we are, and how we relate to others and how we see the world'.¹⁹ Furthermore, the power dynamic between classes is rarely arbitrary: oppression almost exclusively flows in one direction. From the perspective of the relationship between individuals of differing economic statuses, therefore, *classism* is undeniable and concrete. Pincus and Sokoloff list some behaviours and attitudes of the rich that discriminate based on class: 'They can be snobbish and say negative things about people "below" them. They can maintain exclusive clubs and neighborhoods. They can be upset about their children "marrying down," even into the nouveau rich'.²⁰ Pincus and Sokoloff agree that such attitudes are a clear feature of classism: 'These are all examples of class-based prejudice and discrimination that some may call classism and we have no quarrel with this'.²¹ Barone supplements this list with other prejudicial attitudes of the rich against the poor, who are 'viewed as less intelligent, less talented, inferior, and thus not worth very much. Such views can be patronizing ("they are doing the best they can") or they can be vicious ("working class people are stupid, dirty, lazy, and uncivilized")'.²² These examples closely reflect the attitudes and behaviours of classism played out in *Evening is the Whole Day*. *Classism* may lack some academic stability as a conceptual tool, but as a social, relational feature of oppression, classism is vivid, detrimental and absolutely real.

¹⁷ Barone, p. 11.

¹⁸ Pincus and Sokoloff, p. 16.

¹⁹ Barone, p. 10.

²⁰ Pincus and Sokoloff, p. 19.

²¹ Pincus and Sokoloff, p. 19.

²² Barone, p. 14.

The apparent paradoxical depiction of the supernatural in magical realism enables Samarasan to underscore both these trenchant perceptions of differences and the underlying connectedness beneath class construction. Studies of transnationality corroborate this relatedness: Cati Coe, for example, notes that many Ghanaian migrants in the US are considered low class in America while in Ghana they rise to middle classes.²³ Like Portes, however, Coe defines the difference but omits how this experience affects those migrants, or how their relationships are affected by these interdependent class formulations. *Evening is the Whole Day* vividly narrates how that relatedness affects both parties. It points to a blind spot Jayati Ghosh raises concerning studies on reducing poverty. She contends many such studies ignore the connection:

between the enrichment of some and the impoverishment of others, as if the rich and the poor somehow inhabit different social worlds with no economic interdependence at all, and that the rich do not rely upon the labour of the poor.²⁴

This suggests that the rich, even when helping the poor or attempting to do so, fail because they ignore the moral culpability of wealth. Jonathan Pattendon calls for a 'class-relational approach' of examining poverty, taking the interdependence of class into account.²⁵ He suggests, as does Samarasan's novel, that only through understanding the relatedness of wealth, poverty and exploitation can the economic conditions of the lowest classes be bettered and suffering ameliorated.

A class-relational approach thus raises a spotlight on morality. Elizabeth Shaw distinguishes between classical absolutist, abstract ethical codes of '*What ought I do*' compared to the relational ethics of '*What is my duty to others*'.²⁶ Relationality

²³ Cati Coe, 'Social Class in Transnational Perspective: Emotional Responses to the Status Paradox among Ghanaian Migrants', *Africa Today*, 66.3–4 (2020), 161–78 (pp. 161–62) <https://doi.org/10.2979/africatoday.66.3_4.08>.

²⁴ Jayati Ghosh, 'Dealing with "The Poor"', *Development and Change*, 42.3 (2011), 849–58 (p. 854) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2011.01709.x>>.

²⁵ Jonathan Pattenden, *Labour, State and Society in Rural India: A Class-Relational Approach* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), p. 2 <<http://manchester.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.7228/manchester/9780719089145.001.0001/upso-9780719089145>> [accessed 1 July 2022].

²⁶ Elisabeth Shaw, 'Relational Ethics and Moral Imagination in Contemporary Systemic Practice', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy (ANZJFT)*, 32.1 (2011), 1–14 (p. 3) <<https://doi.org/10.1375/anft.32.1.1>>.

implies that in forming an idea of ethical behaviour, choosing an ethical course of action lacks meaning without considering it in terms of how it affects other conscious beings. In the context of economic distribution in Samarasan's text, when the rich devalue the humanity of their servants whom they perceive as somehow fundamentally different to them, it divests them of the impetus to act with conscience in relation to them.

Samarasan elaborates on this humanistic discourse on ethics and class with aspects of magical realism fused with the gothic. The novel's primary setting is the Rajasekharan's home, a colonial mansion called the Big House. It evokes the postcolonial gothic, haunted by the ghosts of past atrocities that have been kept secret, and the spirits of the classist present. The Big House recalls the gothic–magical-realist house 124 from *Beloved*, as well as the large houses and haciendas filled with spirits in Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992) and Isabel Allende's *House of the Spirits* (1982). The connection between the gothic and magical realism is not often brought into focus.²⁷ Cooper draws a clean distinction between the two supernatural writing forms, claiming, 'In the ideal magical realist plot, there is no gothic subtext, no dark space of the unconscious, no suppressed libidinous attic space, in which a madwoman is concealed'.²⁸ However, nothing regarding the mode actively precludes these gothic overtones, and in the intervening decades since Cooper's statement, numerous texts that cross this border into the dark unconscious have emerged. Lucie Armitt has studied the distinctions and parallels between the forms in more depth, often in the contexts of postcolonial writing. She argues:

Where magical realism embraces the foreign, whether spiritual or extraterritorial, the Gothic fights to keep the stranger at bay but fails, intimating a cultural failure which Western cultures have perhaps found it easier to identify with than to overcome.²⁹

²⁷ Arguably, supernatural fiction that is labelled or publicised as global, world, postcolonial, migrant or transnational literature will more likely be classed as magical realism, which will subsume the perhaps less saleable gothic label.

²⁸ Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, p. 36.

²⁹ Lucie Armitt, 'The Gothic and Magical Realism', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 224–39 (p. 225).

Samarasan complicates Armitt's distinction as her magical realist ghosts emphasise the failed attempts to keep the foreigner, in the form of Chellam and the poor she represents, at bay.³⁰ In globalised, transnational texts such as Samarasan's, the gothic has rarely received focus as an interpretive lens.³¹ Twenty-first-century magical realist texts have even more rarely been analysed in this frame, despite many texts intersecting these elements.³² Novels by Samarasan, Oyeyemi, Jeet Thayil and Carol Shields are among those that cross these borders, suggesting a somewhat overlooked relationship between magical realism, the gothic and transnationalism.

Emerging from the gothic and resonant in Samarasan's text, Julia Kristeva's essay on abjection, *The Powers of Horror* (1982), is useful for reading how the Rajasekharans' prejudice reveals their own moral failings. Studies that link abjection to transnational environments tend to elide the area that Kennedy highlighted: they analyse abjection, prejudice and poverty across, but not within, ethnic and national divides.³³ In such works, the rich belong to one national or ethnic group, and those they subjugate to another. Samarasan's novel shows these processes at play between migrants divided only by economics. The abject for Kristeva is a psychological reaction of repulsion to experiences that threaten the integrity of the self in that they collapse the distinction between the self and the other, or the subject and the object. Resulting ultimately from before birth and the inherent lack of distinction therein between the self and the mother, anything that reminds the subject that it is not entirely separable from the exterior arouses this reaction. The abject manifests in things that the self 'jettisons', which now 'harr[y] me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A "something" that I do not

³⁰ Armitt does not suggest that the two are mutually exclusive. In another study, she draws on the overlaps between the gothic and magical realism about the wonder of travel, linking Freud and Carpentier's differing journeys (Lucie Armitt, 'The Magical Realism of the Contemporary Gothic', in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 510–22 (p. 506)).

³¹ One of the few works to deal with this intersection, Monika Elbert and Bridget M. Marshall, *Transnational Gothic Literary and Social Exchanges in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2016) relies on revising nineteenth- and eighteenth-century gothic texts through a transnational perspective.

³² One exception is Esra Melikoğlu, 'Unless: A Covert Post-Colonial and Transnational Gothic Novel, Or The Haunted House (of Fiction) Is Falling Apart', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 40.2 (2015), 211–25. It deals with Carol Shields's *Unless* (2002).

³³ Katarzyna Marciniak, 'Transnational Anatomies of Exile and Abjection in Milcho Manchevski's *Before the Rain* (1994)', *Cinema Journal*, 43.1 (2003), 63–84 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2003.0025>>; Robbie B. H. Goh, 'The Semiotics of Undesirable Bodies: Transnationalism, Race Culture, Abjection', *Semiotica*, 200, 2014, 203–27 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2014-0002>>.

recognize as a thing'.³⁴ These evocations of repulsion and horror connect the abject to the gothic in its relationships with the darkness and opposition of the sublime. As Jerrold E. Hogle points out, the abject is 'a site of the repulsively "other", as though a fundamental otherness-from-ourselves within ourselves can appear entirely outside us and look abhorrently alien'.³⁵ Abjection is thus an apposite metaphor for the inherent lack of distinction between the Rajasekharans and their servant, and their simultaneous impulse to cast out Chellam as somehow other to maintain their integrity. Samarasan's text is littered with allusions to excrement and other items of abjection that inspire disgust, usually surrounding the Rajasekharans' perspective of the poor. Through their wilful ignorance of the common relatedness between the classes, they repeat a similar false insistence on difference that Oyeyemi's *Gbenga* and Hamid's *nativists* do. As in *The Icarus Girl* and *Exit West*, *Evening is the Whole Day* shows that the blurred magical realist divide between reality and fantasy is fruitful for expressing these contrasts as well as the tensions they provoke.

Samarasan's novel links these contemporary anxieties to the history of colonialism in Malaysia. It shows the influence of the past while directing attention to how those impacts continue to evolve in increasingly transnational environments. As will be explored, Samarasan's differing supernatural devices show both these relations to the colonial past and the changes taking place. The very different trajectories from India that the fictional Rajasekharans' and Chellam's families take follow paths that the real-world British colonial project put in place: what Dashini Jeyathurai calls 'the debris of the British plantation economy'.³⁶ Samarasan locates her story within a complex political framework that ties the British colonial endeavour to later-day oppressive relationships between race and class. The families of both Chellam and the Rajasekharans share an underlying commonality in Tamil backgrounds. However, the family labels Chellam an 'estate girl', a person of Indian background working on plantations established during British rule, whose economic prospects were, and remain, dire. The British administration brought in thousands of

³⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 2.

³⁵ Jerrold E. Hogle, 'Abjection as Gothic and the Gothic as Abjection', in *The Gothic and Theory: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle and Robert Miles, Edinburgh Companions to the Gothic (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 108–25 (p. 108).

³⁶ Dashini Jeyathurai, 'Labouring Bodies, Labouring Histories: The Malaysian-Indian Estate Girl', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47.3 (2012), 303–23 (p. 318).

indentured labourers from South Asia and China to work tin mines and rubber plantations. Those of Indian heritage who had been educated by the British were able to achieve affluence in management jobs, as Raju's father does. Chellam's relative weakness at English, however, ('Yes Master! Cannot see. I want buying spectacles, but my Appa every time coming, every time taking money'), is a signifier of her divergent path.³⁷ This is because children growing up on the rubber estates were given scant education, making it difficult for them to break out of this cycle.³⁸ While the novel barely discusses this historical context, its influence resonates in the insurmountability of the class divide for plantation workers such as Chellam's family. Samarasan's novel shows how colonialism contributes to present-day social ostracism and neglect. Samarasan therefore implicates the British colonial legacy in the extant inequalities of Malaysia in the latter half of the twentieth century. These bind constructed notions of race to class stratification and immobilise its society's poorest members.

Due to her own Indian background and her eloquent and vivid, colourful prose, Samarasan's novel is often associated with Rushdie's and Arundhati Roy's work. The comparisons annoy her since they are overly determined by racial grouping and ignore her other, non-Indian influences.³⁹ Nevertheless, she does cite Rushdie as an inspiration, although she distances herself somewhat: 'I wanted to write a *Midnight's Children* for Malaysia — yet I wanted also to make a book that was in some ways more *female* than Rushdie's.'⁴⁰ By this she means a story more focused on the people whom politics affects than the politics themselves. As with Oyeyemi's and Hamid's, Samarasan's text literalises the experiences of transnationality through reworking the magical realist techniques of the twentieth century.

³⁷ Preeta Samarasan, *Evening Is the Whole Day* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), p. 239. Further references to this text are provided in parenthesis after quotations.

³⁸ In another important element of the text, less related to its magical realist elements, Samarasan discusses the way race is also implicated in the subjugation of low-paid Indian communities in Malaysia.

³⁹ Preeta Samarasan and Travis Elborough, 'Evening Is the Whole Day: P. S.: Ideas, Interviews & Features', in *Evening Is the Whole Day* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), pp. 1–16 (p. 8). She claims her influences to be far more outreaching, diverse and transnational than that, citing Dickens and Graham Swift as other influences, both of which are explicitly referenced in the novel.

⁴⁰ Preeta Samarasan and Anne Stameshkin, 'Interview with Preeta Samarasan, *Evening Is the Whole Day*', *Fiction Writers Review*, 2008 <<https://fictionwritersreview.com/interview/preeta-samarasan-evening-is-the-whole-day/>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

Samarasan also demonstrates a burgeoning trend towards magical realist intertextuality in doing so; this is a facet which the chapter on Díaz will more fully explore. She makes self-conscious allusions to *Midnight's Children*, ironically casting a doomed optimism to the earliest moments of Malaysian independence. Rushdie's Saleem's birth at the very instance of India's independence vividly mirrors Raju's father switching on the Big House lights for the first time:

Tata put the index finger of his right hand to the switch, took a deep breath, and flicked it on. At exactly midnight on the thirty-first of August 1957, there was Light...

...at precisely the same moment as, two hundred hopeful miles away, Tunku Abdul Rahman raised his right arm high on a colonial cricket ground and saluted the country's new freedom to the accompaniment of an aroused-and-rousing cheer of 'Merdeka!'—Freedom! (p. 25)⁴¹

The light of hope offers a way out of the gothic shadows of colonial rule, but this openly intertextual reference to Rushdie foreshadows the decimation of the idealistic notion that occurs in both novels. As if to underscore this Rushdie-esque premonition of national disillusionment, Raju's son Suresh is born on the day of the so-called 'race riots' of 1969, the symbol of Malaysian failure to assimilate a multicultural harmony given its endemic race-based classism (p. 128).⁴² Samarasan

⁴¹ Compare with Rushdie's passage:

I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more ... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowds. (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 9)

⁴² Following independence, the race-based class dynamics that the British set in place became constitutionally fossilised and thus continue to dominate the socioeconomic circumstances of Malaysian citizens. In a seeming effort to strengthen the status of 'indigenous' Malays who had not prospered as well as the Chinese under British rule, Malaya's constitution upon independence, written under the advisement of a British commission, awarded the Malays 'special' status. It privileged Malays to employment and educational rights and effectively demoted even centuries-long-standing Chinese and Indian families to the status of immigrants. The tension between the constitutionally privileged Malays and the wealthy Chinese came to a boiling point following an election in 1969 in which a Chinese-led party won. The result led to riots, dubiously labelled 'race riots', that are hugely formative in Malaysian history, and which forms the backdrop to Suresh's birth in the novel. They riots symbolically indicate the failure of Malaysia's multiculturalism given the oppressive, colonial class and race structures still in place, and which later policies continue to reinforce. The

thus shows the relationship between the postcolonial and transnational iterations of magical realism while adapting the tropes developed by authors such as Rushdie for more contemporary concerns.

Similarly, the interpersonal and experiential contingencies of reality and fantasy that typify 'faith-based' forms of magical realism are realigned in Samarasan's novel to express the relationality inherent within transnationality. A turn towards the interior and personal is furthered by Samarasan focalising the perceptions of the supernatural through Aasha, the youngest daughter. Through this perspective, the distinction between rich and poor is blurred by a concurrent set of supernatural effects that complicate a clean boundary between fantasy and reality. The child's perspective enables an entanglement of the two, manifesting in literalisations of exaggerations and powerful emotions. It suggests that the tensions caused by colonialism and globalisation have their most influential effects on human experience. These motifs align with the other texts in this study where the erosion of national distinctions refracts into collapses of categories of history, race, identity and reality. They reveal an underlying, seemingly paradoxical, relationality resisted by nationalist and oppressive forces. The collapse of reality and fantasy brings into relief the hardened distinction the text depicts of class, and the ensuing trauma that classism triggers. For Samarasan, class remains a barrier that transnationality reliably fails to erode.

It is in this contrast that Samarasan challenges Hamid's universalising notion that all individuals are migrants. Chellam and the Rajasekharans' widely different positions are a reminder that even among those who physically migrate, differences between economic circumstances render their experiences antithetical. In Samarasan's context, the majority of Malaysian Indians are not as wealthy as the

government's New Economic Policy of 1969, which granted further educational and employment privileges to Malays, is particularly contentious, and which Samarasan has labelled not 'affirmative action' but 'apartheid' (Preeta Samarasan, *Evening Is the Whole Day P.S.: Ideas, Interviews & Features* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), p. 14). Further, Sharmani P. Gabriel notes that although these categories having 'begun to lose much of their salience on the ground' thanks to the increased natural complexity as groups mingle and mix with nations beyond these boundaries, 'they continue to be mobilized by the state and other hegemonic non-state actors as a primary marker of difference and differentiation between groups'; they are still treated incoherently as 'fixed, pre-existing and stable but also mutually exclusive' (Sharmani P. Gabriel, 'The Meaning of Race in Malaysia: Colonial, Post-Colonial and Possible New Conjunctures', *Ethnicities*, 15.6 (2015), 782–809 (p. 783) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796815570347>>; Gabriel, p. 793). As with Hamid and Oyeyemi's portrayals, relational actuality is continually contested by social atomisation.

transnational Rajasekharans; it is therefore necessary to make the distinction Hamid does not between the affluent, cosmopolitan transnational and the immobile and abjected poor. In facing the hard border of class imposed by the wealthy, the transnational experiences of the underprivileged are totally at odds with the fundamental humanity Hamid sought to underline.

Despite Samarasan's own intellectual, if not economic, privilege, she raises the profile of the non-elite, reproving transnational elites who leave behind, exclude and cast off the poor in a global rush to break down national borders. Like Hamid, Oyeyemi and Díaz, Samarasan is exceptionally well-educated, from an intellectual, transnational elite. She was born and raised in and around Ipoh, Malaysia. Her family is Tamil, but English is her first and literary language. She gained a university education in the US and has lived for the last decade in France. Her Malaysian, Tamil, British, American and French influences betray her transnational status.⁴³ The economic standing of such authors often comes under fire from critics, particularly when their fiction focuses on wealthy migrants. Mishra highlights how studies of Indian diaspora often revolve around the 'more exciting' experiences of the hyper-mobile and globalised (therefore transnational) travellers in the wealthiest nations.⁴⁴ This is borne out in the lives and many of the stories that are told by authors like Jhumpa Lahiri and Rushdie. Although Samarasan focuses explicitly on how the elite oppress the poor, she, too, has garnered criticism for making 'inauthentic' portrayals of the country and its people, pandering to the exoticist demands of British or American publishing houses.⁴⁵ Yet, like Roy's *God of Small Things* (1998), *Evening is the Whole Day* self-consciously and ironically packages

⁴³ At the same time, in interviews Samarasan has described herself as a kind of reluctant transnational, unkeen to travel any longer other than occasionally to see her family in Malaysia (Preeta Samarasan and Sambhashana, '(Mis)Journeying with Preeta Samarasan and Deepak Unnikrishnan', online video recording, *Facebook Live*, n.d. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=1139813209775749&ref=watch_permalink> [accessed 16 November 2022]).

⁴⁴ Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Some critics, such as Fong Leong Ming, have complained that the novel lacks 'authenticity' as if written by a foreigner: 'Have the passage of time, a thoroughly Western education and years of assimilation into an alien culture coloured her perceptions or, worse, refined her sensibilities to an almost foreign form completely?' (Fong Leong Ming, 'Oh, Such Drama', *New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur, 23 August 2008), p. 13). Anis Shivani similarly criticises the novel for pandering to the anodyne demands of American and British publishers in conforming to an exoticist 'type' of novel: 'the multigenerational family-secrets saga with a touch of magical realism' (Anis Shivani, 'Good Muslims Versus Bad Muslims in Contemporary Literature', *Antioch Review*, 71.1 (2013), 40–58 (p. 42) <<https://doi.org/10.7723/antiochreview.71.1.0040>>).

itself in the exoticist veneer of Malaysian tourism campaigns. It initially portrays the country as a sublime, multicultural paradise only to reveal its unseemly, gothic underside. At the start, Samarasan depicts Malaysia as if seen from an aeroplane or on a map, as 'delicate as a bird's head' (p. 1). It evokes imagery of exotic, far-away jungle wildlife, 'hot, damp, bright, bursting with lazy tropical life' (p. 1). However, Samarasan simultaneously forewarns the reader of the darkness beneath this exotic façade, foreshadowing the relationship between the gothic and her modifications to magical realism: the sublime bird's head becomes somewhat grotesque with a 'thin neck', and 'Singapore hovers like a bubble escaped from its throat' (p. 1). The tropical exotic is also tarnished with the 'black smoke of lorries' and 'screeching brakes' (p. 1); these discordant sights and sounds foreground the use of senses to inspire repulsion, a technique Samarasan deploys throughout the text. Towards the end of the novel, the family visits an airport and sees a promotion of Malaysian tourism, 'Visit Malaysia Year 1980', which echoes the current real-world one, 'Malaysia Truly Asia':

The life-size cardboard ladies advertising Visit Malaysia Year 1980. They are MalayChineseIndian, IbanKadazanDayak, sleek and beaming ladies of every race, namaste-ing and salam-ing the wide world in toothy testimony to the country's legendary Racial Harmony. (p. 330)

However, Samarasan then immediately points to the superficiality and artificiality of this image: 'From the front these ladies seem perfect. Perfectly happy. Perfectly shapely. Perfectly poised. From the side, though, Aasha sees that they are just perfectly flat' (p. 330). By framing the narrative with pastiches of tourism, turned out hollow, Samarasan's text devalues criticisms of consumable exoticism. Instead, it foreshadows the novel's focus on the darkness of racism, inequality and immorality – beneath the tropical, multicultural exterior – that have tainted Malaysia's twentieth-century history.

Something unnameable: Perceiving class difference through gothic borders and monsters

This section critically explores how Samarasan institutes a gothic framework to represent the differentiation between rich and poor, before eradicating that boundary. I first establish the novel's use of the gothic in terms of oppositions

between light and dark, the interior and exterior, and the psychological interior of the self and the exterior other. This framework mimics the conflict between discursive systems that Slemon notes of postcolonial variants of magical realism. However, it reformulates the opposition around class rather than race or nation. The technique reveals the connections between transnational classism and colonial racism and nationalism, a burden that elites rejoice in having overcome. The gothic is superimposed with vibrant and colourful magical realist imagery that lacks the eeriness of the uncanny but fully contains its misanthropic darkness in that it reveals class oppression. I argue that the Rajasekharans strive to maintain a clear divide between themselves and the object of their loathing – the poor – by demeaning Chellam as a gothic monster. Samarasan converges with the contemporary magical realist proclivity towards the experiential by focusing on sensory disgust to depict Chellam in this degrading way. In blending gothic and magical realist elements in a transnational context, I assert that Samarasan evokes tensions between relational notions of common humanity and the elite's atomistic perspectives of insurmountable difference between classes.

Samarasan's setting echoes how Armitte characterises the gothic as 'a form of literature and culture wedded to [...] the interior and its claustrophobic secrets'.⁴⁶ Secrets, lies and silence dominate the events of the narrative, often beheld from behind a piece of furniture by the youngest member of the family, Aasha, the novel's primary focaliser. Such secrets usually manifest in the sinister and the ugly, picturing 'a world of grotesque, abjected bodies' as David Punter notes, corresponding to human, moral flaws.⁴⁷ These symbolise Malaysia's dark interior landscape of economic and racial oppression. This fixation on the abominations emanating from within invites analysis of the gothic as primarily concerned with the boundaries between the interior and exterior. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has notably explored this interpretation through the gothic motif of the veil.⁴⁸ Samarasan's text centres on this border and the interplay between reinforcing and diminishing distinctions between

⁴⁶ Armitte, 'The Gothic and Magical Realism', p. 224.

⁴⁷ David Punter, 'Introduction: Of Apparitions', in *Spectral Readings*, ed. by Glennis Byron and David Punter (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), pp. 1–8 (p. 6) <<https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230374614>>.

⁴⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'The Character in the Veil: Imagery of the Surface in the Gothic Novel', *PMLA*, 96.2 (1981), 255–70 (p. 255) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/461992>>.

the classes. It further evokes the gothic grotesque and the monstrous reality of the moral abhorrence and self-indulgence of the rich.

Samarasan places most of her narrative within the confines of a colonial mansion paralleling a gothic castle. The gothic mansion, with its emphasis on stark contrasts of light and dark, mirrors the questionable morality and the self-imposed hard lines set up between the Rajasekharans and their servants. Her setting, albeit reconfigured by various magical realist traits, corresponds to Punter and Glennis Byron's contention that 'If there is such a thing as a general topography of the Gothic, then its central motif is the castle'.⁴⁹ Such buildings, dark and foreboding on the exterior, typically conceal deeper darkness, secrecy and horror on the interior. The Rajasekharans call their gothic mansion 'the Big House', its capital initials emphasising its narrative importance and its foreboding size. The house 'stands proud' on the outskirts of Ipoh (p. 2). Built during British rule by 'a dyspeptic Scotsman', Mr McDougall, the Big House enters into the family story via Raju's father, who had worked his way into great wealth and bought the house just before the nation's independence (p. 18). The house reflects the labyrinthine nature of the gothic castle. It betrays colonial overreach and ignorance in its extensions in an incongruous assortment of colonial and local styles. In contrast to gothic conventions of imposing exterior darkness, however, Samarasan's mansion is attuned by the vivid colours and ironic exoticism typical of magical realism. The house is an 'unapologetic peacock blue', so bright and conspicuous it 'practically glowed in the dark' (p. 26). This bright rendering characterises the earlier part of the story when optimism infuses the house. The gothic contrast between within and without, and light and darkness, arises when the narrative shifts to the later period occupying the larger and more detailed narrative. At this time gothic tropes pervade the text; the house now hides in the darkness of an 'aching, violet dusk', lit by 'one streetlight that flickers on and off', full of 'clouds of moths and beetles' (p. 30). Samarasan hints at decay beneath the façade of the Big House, termites 'secretly devouring its foundation for years' (p. 2). The house is silent, and Aasha sees her once beloved and warm-hearted sister, now sullen, 'icy', haunted by 'something [...] unnameable' hiding 'behind the locked door of her bedroom' (pp. 29–30). The gothic concern with that which is

⁴⁹ David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic*, Blackwell Guides to Literature (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 259.

beneath the surface or that which is hidden, 'darker secrets' and the psychological interior, manifests in whispers and closed doors.⁵⁰

In blurring the distinctions between the gothic and magical realism, Samarasan articulates tensions between the free fluidity of transnational elite experiences and the stultifying implications of class. Chapter Four of this thesis will consider further how magical realist writing is increasingly intermingled with other fictional devices to generate new forms and meanings in contemporary contexts. As with many gothic texts, Samarasan's novel features numerous spirits. However, in her revised, transnational iteration, they are stripped of their uncanniness and instead accentuate moral horrors enacted by the elites. For Freud, the uncanny resembles humanity but is distorted. It is inspired by imagery of old toys, dolls and disembodied limbs. Most of Freud's examples of the uncanny (such as ghosts, madness or bizarre coincidence) can further be interpreted as manifestations of an erosion of the boundary between fantasy and reality. He suggests that the blurring of the differences between them can engender the uncanny, 'when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary'.⁵¹ In this sense, the magical realist techniques that often confound the distinction between reality and fantasy serve as an effective vehicle for conveying the uncanny. However, in employing strategies that depict apparitions devoid of the eeriness with which they are portrayed in gothic fiction, Samarasan largely drains the uncanny from its ghosts: as Armitt explains, 'even the ghosts of magical realism surrender their clanking chains'.⁵² The daughter of Mr McDougall is one such affable ghost, who befriends Aasha. The other prominent ghost, Aasha's grandmother Paati, whose contribution to Samarasan's presentation is explored in a following section, likewise inspires no fear. Aasha reprimands Paati for irrational behaviour that might evoke horror in gothic fiction: 'Eh Paati Paati, don't pull your hair like that, don't shout and scream, your throat will pain!' (p. 31)). However, while the ghosts themselves do not arouse the uncanny, their stories contain moral horrors that inspire the real sense of dread in the novel. McDougall's daughter is killed by her desperate mother when Mr McDougall abandons them to poverty, and Paati's death fuels a defensive and classist

⁵⁰ Punter and Byron, *The Gothic*, p. 171.

⁵¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 185.

⁵² Armitt, 'The Gothic and Magical Realism', p. 238.

rage against Chellam. In reconfiguring the gothic trope of uncanny spirits with apparent magical realist levity, Samarasan turns her critique towards the powerful and their dehumanisation of the subjugated. The ghosts' lingering presence reminds the Rajasekharans, as Hamid's portals do of the nation, that this gothic, colonial house is uncanny – unhomely – particularly for its oppressed servants.

Chellam, and the underclass she represents, inspires the uncanny and disgusts the Rajasekharans because of her simultaneous resemblance and dissimilarity to their conception of humanity. From the Rajasekharans' perspective, Chellam is a gothic monster possessing their house, what Punter and Byron depict as the 'abhuman':

The abhuman may be a body that retains traces of human identity but has become, or is in the process of becoming, something quite different.

Alternatively, it may be some indefinable 'thing' that is mimicking the human, appropriating the human form. Either way, it is the integrity of human identity that is threatened.⁵³

The Rajasekharans' disgust centres on Chellam and her poverty, the gothic monster invited in but now possessing their house. Chellam's introduction in the text, as with the gothic house, is accompanied by imagery of darkness and decay. These highlight her perceived abhumanity, in contrast to the initial experiential, sensory onrush of brightness and openness with which Samarasan introduces the country. 'Generous sweet spices', 'red-and-gold' and 'dragons' of Chinese mansions, 'bright blue', and 'wide and airy' houses are overshadowed as soon as Chellam appears (p. 2). She is associated with darkness, ('severe myopia' makes Chellam almost blind, and she used to have to prostitute herself in 'sordid alleys') and objectification (Chellam has been 'handed down', 'used', from another family (p. 3)). She is depicted through imagery of filth and disease, in clusters of hard, grating syllables:

her calves are as thin as chicken wings and her skin is pockmarked from the crawling childhood diseases her late mother medicated with leafy pastes and still-warm piss furtively collected in a tin pail as it streamed from the neighbors' cow. (p. 3)

⁵³ Punter and Byron, *The Gothic*, p. 41.

Her portrayal as something dirty and decaying establishes the family's fear of Chellam, as Kristevan abject, 'on the edges of primal repression [...], a non-assimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer'.⁵⁴ The text mostly filters her through the perceptions of the Rajasekharans' rich yet fearful position. The family members characterise her and her class in terms of sensory disgust and dirt. She is insulted as a 'rubber-estate girl', a pejorative term for families of Indian immigrants who may still work on colonial plantations (p. 143).⁵⁵ They are repulsed by 'her coconut hair oil and her hairy armpits' (p. 252). The novel's fine-grained focus on dirt as representative of low class and of low moral calibre sees the family attempting to distance themselves, as a different type of person, from those lower classes:

They catch Chellam stealthily picking her nose with her pillar-box-red nails [...]. She wipes her fingers behind the sitting room settee and under the side table [...] before pulling a hairpin from her head and running it under the fingernails to dislodge crescents of dirt that fall onto the white marble floor. 'Ee-yeer,' Suresh whispers, 'now just see, she's going to go and mix Paati's rice and paruppu curry with her hands. A real estate-woman she is.' (p. 252)

The children's unfiltered insulting of Chellam as 'the best shitpot carrier in all the land' (p. 221) echoes Kristeva's view of bodily waste as abject: 'dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be'; 'Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without.'⁵⁶ Samarasan underscores Chellam's alignment with the abjection of bodily waste in the days before Chellam is sent from the house. She suffers a 'thundering, volcanic attack of diarrhoea, all rapid-fire bangs and squeaks and liquescent bursts, all orchestral-class hooting and tooting and blasting and rolling' (p. 82). Samarasan thus adopts the gothic but reconfigures it, as she does magical realism, in turning the victim of colonial and economic oppression

⁵⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 11.

⁵⁵ The narrator expands on the slur and its association with poverty and degradation:

Not only is it a hackneyed insult (visit any school playground [...]; listen to what rich girls call poor girls on the bus; ask anyone to caption a picture of a young woman with coconut-oiled plaits and unfashionable polyester clothes), it's been silently lobbed at Chellam before [...]. *Tapper's daughter*, [...] *doing shameful frontside-backside games with old men*. (p. 207)

⁵⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 3; p. 71.

into an abject monster. Jeyathurai is right to argue that the Rajasekharans' behaviour 'reflects how privileged Indians in the novel imbibe the very vocabulary and outlook of colonial masters when relating to their working-class counterparts'.⁵⁷ Samarasan shows how the prejudices of colonial oppression prevail through this marking of difference of class lines, in direct conflict with the easy fluidity of transnational elite mobility.

Samarasan closely links sensory disgust with the way the rich family attempts to distance themselves from the gothic, monstrous poor. The novel is often described as 'colourful' because of its heightened depictions of senses; particularly, unpleasant smells and sounds predominate the text. Vasanthi, Raju's wife, is especially sensitive to such odours, reflecting the fact that she escaped an association with the poor by marrying out of the meagre classes into this wealthy family. For her, smells 'slither forth in a thousand black dragontails' (p. 63). The sounds that the poor like Chellam make also prove intolerably abrasive, 'The sniffing, the wheezing, the scraping, and the grating' (p. 10). In the chronologically earlier parts of the book when Vasanthi is pregnant with her son, she enters the 'civilised' environs of a colonial hotel in the city. The phrases 'elegant', 'creaking gently' and 'breeze' are accompanied by the acceptable smell of 'quiet, wise dust' (p. 113). On exiting the hotel and coming into contact with the lower classes, Vasanthi and the reader are hit with a malodorous onslaught of 'food smells, [...] industrial fumes, [...] faint human odors. Fried bananas from the goreng pisang stall. Thick black grease and fresh paint. Someone's sly, lingering fart' (p. 113). Elsewhere, a 'throng' of working-class 'factory girls', also 'reeking of coconut oil' is juxtaposed with a cockroach, 'creep[ing] from one end of the window ledge to the other' (p. 211). For Vasanthi, this is not an individual dirtiness that she cannot abide but something inherent she perceives in 'these people' (p. 6). These perceptions of innate difference between classes reveal a stubbornness to accept common humanity, even within nationally or culturally equivalent people. In Samarasan's transnational magical realism, class above all replaces race or nationality as a category with which the powerful marginalise the powerless.

Chellam's transnational immobility and supernatural prophecies

⁵⁷ Jeyathurai, 'Labouring Bodies, Labouring Histories', p. 314.

Samarasan's characterisation of the servant Chellam, whose demise is predetermined from the outset of the novel, reiterates the connections between the colonial past and present-day oppression. In this section I argue how, through adjustments to the trope of fatalism, Samarasan exposes the deep connectivity between the past and the present. Prophecies and prolepses are found throughout magical realist writing of the twentieth century, featuring prominently in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Samarasan recasts them in her context to represent the lack of agency and immobility of the transnational poor. Prophecies correspond to deterministic class immobility, in stark contrast to the mobility, fluidity and agency of the affluent elite. They highlight economic discriminations that supplement or even supersede concerns in prior magical realism with modernity and racial or national discrimination.

Samarasan employs prolepsis as a device with which to emphasise the near supernatural lack of agency and mobility that is awarded to the economically deprived. In her adaptations to these tropes, she ironically juxtaposes them with the free mobility of the transnational elite. She consequently reveals the tensions and repercussions resulting from conflicting processes of fluidity for the rich and stasis for the poor. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, research finds that many migrants may assimilate upwards into the middle classes, or downwards into low-income work and exclusion. While the Rajasekharans follow the former path, Chellam conforms solidly to the latter. Samarasan's convoluted narrative structure sees the eviction of Chellam and its effect before exploring its causes. The narrator's characteristic use of prolepsis removes any ambiguity about how Chellam's life will transpire:

A year from today, Chellam will be dead. Her father will say she committed suicide after a failed love affair. The villagers will say he beat her to death for bringing shame to her family. Chellam herself will say nothing. (p. 4)

From the reader's point of view, Chellam's fate is now almost supernaturally bound from the second page. It mirrors the real-life lack of agency afflicting the poorest young people in Malaysia.

The context of Chellam's arrival to and departure from the Big House reveal the immorality and classism that infect the Rajasekharans and how Chellam is

figured as the gothic monster, already doomed to exile. Raju has a long-term love affair and an illicit family with a Chinese noodle seller. When this relationship abruptly ends, Raju returns to the house and, in a moment of madness, sexually assaults Uma, his eldest daughter. Uma becomes withdrawn and barely talks to her siblings. Raju's mother Paati witnesses the event but ignores it, but the pressure of wilful ignorance suddenly ages and blinds her. The family hires Chellam to support the ailing Paati. Chellam is likewise an Indian Malaysian but from a low-class background and was handed down to the Rajasekharans from another rich family. She suffers persistent verbal abuse, and her salary is given to her alcoholic father instead of to her.⁵⁸ After a year of Chellam's service, Paati accidentally falls and dies while Chellam is out of the room. The young Aasha, who does not understand why her sister and her grandmother have changed so dramatically, feels they have withdrawn their love for her. In a bid to try and restore her sister's love, she tells her family she saw Chellam push, and kill, Paati. The family, already fragmenting from the resultant strains of Raju's lies and betrayals, transfers all of their rage on to Chellam. They send her back to her abusive father and into a life of prostitution, where she either commits suicide or is beaten to death by her father.

The novel stresses socioeconomic status as an unassailable marker of difference by entrapping Chellam in prophecies that, due to the prolepsis, the reader knows will bear out. Magical realism thus allows Samarasan to emphasise that the relational fluidity and mobility that characterise so many aspects of transnationality is a privilege retained for the wealthy. It also allows her to implicate the rich and their moral paucity in the correlated immobility of the poor. Here Samarasan ties Chellam to her fate as a grotesque monster bound to be abjected through a combination of prophecy and a non-supernatural determinism. Apart from Aasha, Chellam is one of the few other characters sensitive to the supernatural. She fully believes in ghosts and fortune-telling, which Vasanthi classify as superstitions and another fault of Chellam's class (p. 32). But such superstitions, particularly prophecy, are more solidly grounded in this book than other supernatural moments. Aasha, for example, has a prophetic vision that is confirmed at the novel's end of a neighbour

⁵⁸ Chellam's father shows up every month and embarrasses them outside their house until they have given him her money. Social shame prevails over their conscience in their decision not to pay Chellam. This detail augurs how moral abhorrence is the truer abjection for Samarasan.

committing suicide as a result of betrayal (p. 81). The text's prolepses underscore the notion that fates are pre-ordained: 'Time's running out for everyone: three more pages of the 1980 Perak Turf Club calendar and Uma will be gone' (p. 22). The immutability of fate converges on Chellam. She initially seeks an optimistic agency when she first moves in, trying to save up money to improve her circumstances. These ambitions are dashed, however, by her father taking the money. The Rajasekharans fail to resist this because of the 'unflinching knowledge that the watchers-from-windows would cluck and shake their heads at any lapse in the Big House's kindness to poor men and beggar men' (p. 253). Her dreams of mobility further crash when she is taken to hear a prophecy from a neighbour who is famous for his insightful predictions. His response is (more or less) pre-validated by the narrative's reverse structure:

Your only bridegroom will be four wooden planks and a roaring fire! For you the flames will be as high as my head, no, even higher, like a tree, like a tower, like a mountain! Yes, yes, he's coming for you very soon, that fiery bridegroom, no need to wait too long! Itchy whore that you are, you're impatient for his wedding-night embraces, aren't you? They're coming, they're coming, that mountain of flame will embrace you nicely, you'll see! (p. 216)

In typical gothic literature, monsters are often duly expelled so that 'Limits and boundaries can [...] be reinstated as the monster is despatched, good is distinguished from evil and self from other'.⁵⁹ Likewise, Chellam is evicted from the house, scapegoated as the source of the family's woes. Like Hamid's portals, Samarasan's prophecies symbolise a real-world, non-supernatural element of contemporary experience. In Samarasan's case, the prophecies reflect the lack of agency and inevitability of hardship for the lower classes. She suggests that economic borders are almost supernaturally difficult to overcome, unlike the national and cultural ones the wealthy easily traverse. As in Hamid's and Oyeyemi's texts, this tension between fluid interconnectivity and resilient notions of difference is metaphorically represented through established magical realist techniques reconfigured for this contradictory, transnational dynamic.

⁵⁹ Punter and Byron, *The Gothic*, p. 264.

The ghosts of the colonial past and the elitist present

In this section, I bring attention to the ghost trope. I first examine how Samarasan adopts one such manifestation to generate meaning in similar ways to many postcolonial novels by bringing colonial injustices of the past into the present. Samarasan thereby demonstrates the continuum between colonial experiences and more contemporary, transnational ones through magical realism. It shows the mode, and the experiences depicted within such narratives, growing out of the postcolonial but moving away from resistance to representation. However, I argue Samarasan's second ghost advances a new perspective, which shows the range of ways supernatural devices can be modified to inspire discourse outside postcolonial magical realist tenets. This spirit represents extant and continued classism prevailing within transnational communities. Samarasan suggests bigotry has changed but has not waned. The ghost further diverges from standard representations in magical realism as it reveals the underlying commonality between the rich and poor by transmuting the most classist character into the abject she loathes. This again shows how persistent denial of common relatedness inspires trauma for both the poor and the transnational elite. In these ways Samarasan's text supplements the thesis that such experiences are represented in magical realism through interplays between relational connections and ideologies that resist the social foundation of relationship.

With the ghost of McDougall's daughter, Samarasan largely follows conventions set out by postcolonial variants of magical realism (notably Morrison's *Beloved*) in bringing back from the dead untold stories of colonial injustice. In Samarasan's more globalised and transnational context, the spirit interconnects colonial and present-day oppression. While Hamid suggested a clear demarcation between European colonial expansion and today's transnational concerns, Samarasan exposes the continued harm afflicting the least fortunate members of migrant communities. The ghost brings a dark colonial past into the present, as epitomised in a quotation by William Faulkner that Stef Craps uses as an epithet in his study of ghosts: 'The past is never dead. It's not even past.'⁶⁰ The tragic story of McDougall's daughter, like the main narrative, is told in reversed fragments, starting

⁶⁰ Stef Craps, 'Learning to Live With Ghosts: Postcolonial Haunting and Mid-Mourning in David Dabydeen's "Turner" and Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*', *Callaloo*, 33.2 (2010), 467–75 (p. 467) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.0.0651>>.

from her death but providing no information regarding the cause. Details of the life the spirit had lost are gradually revealed. This structure allows Samarasan to uncover the hidden but underlying causal connectivity between colonialism, classism and racism. McDougall's unnamed daughter reveals the story of her father's callousness to Aasha over the course of the novel. She tells Aasha how she discovered she was dead:

When I couldn't see the sunlight and the birds. Before that I was alive, the whole time my Ma and I were sinking down through the pond—there were no fish in it at all, it was silent and dark like a big empty church— but I could see the light far away at the top, above the water. When I couldn't see it anymore, that's when I was dead. (p. 16)

It is later revealed that she was an illegitimate daughter of the wealthy British mine owner and his mistress. For reasons that are not explored, the mistress drowns herself and her daughter in a pond after Mr McDougall abandons them to return home after the British leave Malaya. Throughout the novel, the daughter's name is never revealed. Her ethnicity is at first only suggested in that her eyes resemble dark, elongated 'longan seeds' (p. 20); later, the text openly proclaims her to be half white (p. 192). Samarasan's technique of slowly revealing crucial details foregrounds the effects before examining the causes, allowing her to gradually implicate colonial immorality and racial dynamics in the girl's death. As with Chellam's fate, this analysis of causality hints at a sense of inexorability that those born under the wrong racial and economic circumstances are doomed to an oppressive social climate. These connections reveal how contemporary victims of class inequality can link to those of colonial racism because, in part, of the reification of class borders by transnational elites. McDougall's flagrant sexual callousness in conceiving and then abandoning his daughter reflects the wider lack of concern the British administration showed to those they brought in to work their plantations and mines. In this respect her portrayal bears little difference to the cold-blooded mistreatment of slaves in European colonial sites of the Americas depicted by many authors, including Morrison, Carpentier, Asturias, Díaz, Andrea Levy and Pauline Melville. Yet Samarasan's ghost connects the colonial past with the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond. In telling her story to the youngest member of the family, the

ghost transmits her narrative to the character most closely representative of the future. She tells Aasha 'I've told you my story, so you have to tell me yours' (p. 173), but the story Aasha has to tell is the way her own privileged position allows her, for selfish reasons, inadvertently to condemn Chellam to death. The link between McDougall's daughter and Aasha's continuation of race and class dynamics shows that the past is not easily separable from the present. This relatedness is verified, but denied, by the Rajasekharans' mirroring of colonial injustice. The connection is underscored as the ghost reappears throughout the text at times when the family members commit the worst of their classist aggressions. She manifests during a scene following Paati's death when Aasha lies that she sees Chellam kill Paati (p. 158). She appears again at the end of the narrative, during Chellam's eviction from the house: 'From the front door Aasha watches her, dry-mouthed, empty-eyed. Only Mr McDougall's daughter's breath, on Aasha's neck, is moist' (p. 336). In ending on this bleak note, Samarasan's employment of the postcolonial magical realist ghost differs to many others due to the narrative's cynical recapitulation; the lessons of the past have not been learned, despite the ghost's intervention. But in that failure, Samarasan suggests, as Hamid and Oyeyemi do regarding identity and nationality, a need for transnational experiences to be re-evaluated according to the relatedness between colonialism and economic inequality.

McDougall's daughter's ghost illustrates that the establishment of a decolonised new nation does not come as a clean break but as a progression of intact colonial injustices. It underscores the value of magical realist techniques in emblematising late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century transnational experiences. Samarasan's ghosts and her gothic setting show that 'nothing can stop the dead from crossing the thin line that separates them from the living' (p. 70). Likewise, making a sharp differentiation between past and present, and between colonialism, postcolonialism and transnationalism, without taking into account their interdependence, leads to misunderstanding and the perpetuation of harmful prejudice. The gothic distinction between the inside and the outside, the self and the other, is eroded by this interdependence. It leads not to a celebratory planetarity but to rejuvenated efforts by the rich to maintain the inequality. Samarasan's more cynical use of magical realist hauntings shows that the line between the old colonial masters and the cosmopolitan elites has not at all been severed during

decolonisation. Díaz will also depict this near-fatalistic inequality, in terms of a transnational curse that reaches across centuries and continents, connecting people bleakly but inexorably to oppression. Samarasan's magical realist spirits show the active way that race and class are used to engender exclusion and discrimination by elites. Because of this, these fluid categories are fossilised in the same way as Oyeyemi's persistent and atomised categories of national and racial identity. They corroborate Hamid's exploration of the twofold transcending and reinforcing of political, emotional and ideological borders in transnational experiences. They call for a need to recognise underlying humanity and that, as Shaw argues, 'the preservation of connectedness is a crucial component in ethical decision-making'.⁶¹

Samarasan rejuvenates postcolonial tropes with her second ghost to highlight this relationality and to project the same inequality into the future. Paati ties the late twentieth century to the colonies through her 'nineteenth-century mentality' that rues the end of the British rule of Malaya (p. 66). She concretises this embodiment of her pro-colonial stance by once having had an affair with her husband's British boss (p. 288). Her classism is yoked to this nostalgia. She indignantly claims that the 'disrespect' with which she believes 'the servant girl' Chellam treats her is a sad display of 'what's become of society since the British left' (p. 139). She reveals her classist bigotry when she disapproves of her son marrying Vasanthi, someone she believes is beneath Paati's class: '*Your mother's people*, Paati would say to Uma, *are not like us*' (p. 147). For Paati, the distinction of class is immutable and pre-ordained: she hates Vasanthi for her 'origins rather than her destination, for who she was rather than what she did' (p. 101).

However, the novel's modified magical realist devices collapse the difference between classes through transmuted Paati into a ghost. Samarasan places the demise of Paati as the novel's centrepiece. Through a process of supernatural transfiguration she highlights the relationship between the eviction of Chellam and classist moral abjection. The accidental death brings about the eviction of Chellam from the house as they try to blame her for it, leaving her to the fate that will eventually kill her. Paati's death results in her becoming a corpse, 'the utmost of abjection' as 'death infecting life' in Kristeva's view.⁶² In doing so she transforms into

⁶¹ Shaw, 'Relational Ethics', pp. 2–3.

⁶² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

the filth with which she and her family view the poor, eradicating her sense of self in a way that mirrors Oyeyemi's depiction. Magical realism thus allows Samarasan to evoke the continuous strain caused by upholding a non-relational view of humanity in light of the collapsing of difference which transnationality embodies.

The narrator initially suggests an overlap between Chellam and Paati in the scene that culminates in her death. It foreshadows her transmutation and betrays the falsity of Paati's imagined distinction from the poor. At this stage Paati is frail and reliant on Chellam, who takes her to the bathroom. Through Aasha's perspective, the two begin to imbricate despite their positions at far ends of the spectrums of age and class: 'They hobble and shuffle into view, an incongruous pair in everything but their equal bitterness' (p. 141). On the way to the bathroom, the symbolism of sensory disgust that epitomises the Rajasekharans' attitude towards the poor overlaps with Paati. She is humiliated by a bowel malfunction, vividly represented in colour, sound and smell: 'there's a squelchy, bubbling sound. [...] A stream of brown dribbles onto the marble floor between Paati's broad, bony ankles' (p. 142). Her transition continues as Chellam leaves her in the bathroom to clean up the mess, rationalising that she will be punished by Vasanthi if she does not do this first. During this time, Paati slips, and the fall kills her. Samarasan again paints the dying Paati in unsavoury imagery that levels her class status: 'Her seaweed hair spreads out on the tiles, as nasty and out of place as any clumps of hair on any wet bathroom floor' (p. 154). When Chellam finds Paati dead, Aasha again overlaps the master and servant: 'Chellam screams. *It's Paati!* [Aasha] thinks' (p. 156). Now a corpse, Paati has become Kristeva's ultimate symbol of abjection, a rupture of the distinction between subject and object: 'A decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, [...] the corpse represents fundamental pollution. A body without soul, a non-body.'⁶³ Soon after, as a ghost, Paati joins the oppressed daughter of colonial McDougall's daughter, becoming the Other she loathes. Samarasan's use of the supernatural then completes Paati's transformation to a symbol of her own moral abjection, softened from an apparition of gothic terror by Aasha's magical realist nonchalance: 'So. Paati is back again, two weeks after her death' (p. 7). Samarasan's deployment thus envisions the collapse of the imaginary class divide that the Rajasekharans defend.

⁶³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 109.

At the same time, Paati's re-emergence suggests a pessimistic outlook for the future that bigotry refuses to die. Whereas McDougall's daughter embodied a rather conventional deployment of the ghost trope to return past atrocities to the present, Paati's ghost involves the resurrection of a major perpetrator of classist abuse. Paati transforms into a spirit, abjected from the mortal world, but she retains her classism. As Chellam is wrongfully cast out of the house, Paati's ghost mouths '*Good riddance to bad rubbish*' (p. 10). This use of a ghost to take a cynical stance on the persistence of prejudice marks a clear difference from the numerous examples of such tropes that inspire validation or progress as adopted by authors like Morrison and Asturias. The ghost trope enables Samarasan instead to make a comment relating to abjection that is more fitting to the transnational contexts which she narrates: immorality and colonial bigotry continue to thrive despite the celebratory relationality such mobility often elicits. It further allows Samarasan to present the pessimistic notion that colonial oppression continues to flourish through racism and classism; not even death is final enough to thwart a moral abjection that began centuries beforehand and has little hope of ending without significant social change.

'What stink?': Magical realist intertextuality and Raju's elitist hypocrisy

In addition to the revision of the ghost trope, *Evening is the Whole Day* demonstrates a recent tendency to make intertextual allusions to prior examples of magical realism. These references augment the supernatural elements and further demonstrate the connections and differences between the postcolonial ideals of nation-building and Samarasan's more contemporary concerns with economic oppression. This section argues that Samarasan deploys magical realist intertextuality to show the connectivity between the colonial and the transnational; however, she retains her focus on the milieu of capitalism and globalisation of the late twentieth century and beyond. Samarasan self-consciously alludes to *Midnight's Children* in telling the story of the father, Raju. The text draws parallels to, and subverts, Rushdie's magical realist metaphor to further her transnational critique of class. While Rushdie used Saleem's supernatural abilities to imagine the unification of a nation, Samarasan adjusts the idea of a supernatural nose to imagine Raju's classist hypocrisy. Through a metaphor of smell, she portrays Raju feigning to make relational connections with the poor through a vapid notion of socialism, while

inadvertently reinforcing the distinction between himself and the poor.

Consequently, while the Rajasekharans behold Chellam as the monster, the reader regards Raju with moral horror. Through hypocrisy, infidelity, dishonesty, classism, racism and even incest, the text portrays Raju and his elitist family as truly its gothic monsters, 'immoral, sinister, scheming'.⁶⁴

Raju's condescending classism conceals a defensiveness of his elite position and a tendency towards adultery and betrayals that render him morally hollow. His hypocrisy contributes to the text's contradictory interplay between breaking down and reinforcing class barriers. Raju is initially portrayed as the pinnacle of the family's neocolonial transnationalism. He bridges several countries, a true transnational 'global citizen', echoing Malaysia's self-promotion as a hub of multiculturalism. His status comes from the accumulation of wealth his father had achieved through working for a British shipping company. Upon accruing this wealth and shifting to a higher class, Raju's father buys the grand house of a British businessman, intending for it to be a house 'that would declare his family's stake in the new country. A great house, a grand house, a dynastic seat' (p. 18). The adoption of language of monarchy and political elitism reverberates through his grandiose ideas. Rather than use his wealth to instigate changes in the system of oppression the British left, Raju's father maintains the structure for his own 'dynastic' family's gain (p. 18). It provides Raju with an Oxford education and work experience in nearby cosmopolitan Singapore. This allows him to continue accumulating wealth as a 'bigshot lawyer' (p. 8). As the British begin leaving the country in the years after independence, Samarasan sees the management of British companies deliberately selecting successors that most resemble themselves:

[Raju] bagged a coveted associateship in the venerable law firm of Rackham Fields & Company. Though his bosses were all British for now, they'd be throwing up their jobs and leaving one by one, and whom would they choose to fill their shoes if not a fellow who'd come down from Oxford with first-class honors? (p. 26)

⁶⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

Raju furthers his contribution to neocolonialism by imitating the British sexual conquests of the subaltern; he has, and abandons, illegitimate children with a long-term Chinese mistress (p. 327–328). The wealth and power Raju obtains from this mimicry of colonial stances reveal how the powerful end up emulating previous power structures. This marks a perception of fundamental difference between people who may otherwise share similar backgrounds, language and culture. Such an apprehension of categorical dissimilarity is brought to light when Chellam's poor, alcoholic father comes to the Big House to pick up his daughter following her eviction. Raju's class is figured in oppositional terms to Chellam's father: The poor man stands at the exterior of the house while the rich stands within its grounds, reversing the gothic trope of the abject within the castle's interior:

Standing across from each other on either side of the gate, Appa and Chellam's father are reflected in the glass panel of the open front door. Insider and outsider, bigshot lawyer and full-of-snot laborer, toothful and toothless. Chellam's father's dirty white singlet is spattered with rain; Appa holds his umbrella perfectly erect above his impeccably slicked-and-styled hair. (p. 8)

The opposition foregrounds class as the definitive point of difference between these two South Asian fathers.

Samarasan adopts the contemporary move towards magical realist intertextuality by drawing comparison to Saleem's supernatural sense in *Midnight's Children*. However, Raju's nose differs in that it is endowed with an inability to smell that is almost as implausible as Saleem's telepathic gift. As outlined earlier, the text represents the perception of the poor through sensory disgust and excrement, so Raju's lack of smell appears to align with a display of hypocritical and pretentious leftism. During his cosmopolitan training abroad, Raju becomes influenced by socialistic ideals. He attempts at first to differentiate himself from his peers' stances, which he sees as a version of champagne socialism: he asks of them, 'Somewhere along the way, hadn't they confused idealism with elitism in choosing to consort only with fellow intellectuals?' (p. 62). He thus begins with genuine, if somewhat condescending, ideals of collapsing the distance between classes in the same way he concatenates cultures. Believing that 'true socialism would have them all embrace' people such as his moderately poor neighbours, he courts and marries the eldest

daughter, Vasanthi. Her appearance parallels Chellam's in its evincing of repulsion in others as an 'unfortunate exemplum of all the worst physical characteristics of Tamil stock: skinny, shapeless legs, almost-black skin, frizzy hair' (p. 46). Just as Chellam's poverty is depicted through sensory disgust, so Vasanthi's upbringing is characterised by poverty and excrement. On account of her mother's asceticism and use of a chamber pot in her room, Vasanthi's house becomes infused with the smells of 'Simmering shit' and 'sizzling turds' (p. 47). When Raju goes to Vasanthi's house for dinner, Samarasan accentuates his socialistic conceit. She reverses Rushdie's Saleem's supernatural 'olfactory organ' in that Raju is afforded a near miraculous inability to smell: "Stink?" said Appa, [...] "What stink?" (pp. 64–65).⁶⁵ This gift allows him, superficially, to traverse the class divide and accept the common humanity of rich and poor, the annihilation of perceptions of difference.

Raju's socialist ambitions fail, however, undermined by his intrusive elitism and involuntary bigotry. His selfishness further causes his own most catastrophic mistake that irreparably harms himself and his family. Raju does not recognise his hypocrisy and defensively derides those who challenge him. Raju's unconscious immorality raises a point made by Mollie Painter-Morland that morality is representative of a system of relations rather than an independent agent of his own: 'Moral agency does not reside in an isolated individual agent.'⁶⁶ The collapse of the border between self and other which Samarasan literalises through magical realism reveals the tension that results from ignoring the moral imperative to appreciate this underlying relationality. She depicts the cost of transnational elites repeating the errors of their colonial forebears in marking a distinct difference between themselves and the poor. She places Raju's comfortable, utopian ideals in conflict with his perfidious elitism that reinforces the barriers his socialism sought to eradicate. It results in Raju eventually losing his gift of the inability to smell class difference, much as Saleem lost his ability to unite the people of India. While courting Vasanthi, Raju is simultaneously in the process of building a 'brick wall' between his Big House and Vasanthi's lower-class parents' (p. 53). In fact, Raju's socialist stance disintegrates into victim blaming, an assumption that those of lower socioeconomic

⁶⁵ Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 38.

⁶⁶ Mollie Painter-Morland, 'Redefining Accountability as Relational Responsiveness', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 66.1 (2006), 89–98 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-006-9046-0>>.

classes are immobile on account of their own deficiencies rather than systemic social obstruction. His bigotry is crystallised following the meeting with Chellam's father, where his opinion transforms into a semi-literalised reaction to the poor as dirty:

The more time you spend with them the more you start to see them as animals because that's what they want. In the end it's better to close your eyes and pretend they don't exist. Appa shudders and steps into the shower to cleanse himself of his contact with the world's filth. (p. 257)

Raju's 'soft bigotry of low expectations' does not merely materialise in casual arrogance but leads to catastrophic effects that epitomise its implication in Raju's moral abjection.⁶⁷ Another of the Rajasekharans' servants, Lourdesmary, earns a meagre salary which condemns her family to live illegally in a cave overlooking the Big House. Her children and husband die when the caves collapse: 'There were cries from under the rubble for days, but no one was saved. [...] Lourdesmary ticked the names of her eight children off on her fingers, one by one' (p. 254). She only takes one day off work at the Big House following this tragedy. Instead of empathising with the shocking horror of such a loss, Raju dismisses it in a throwaway comment: 'Poor woman [...] Needs the money, what to do?' (p. 316). This comment implies he would not pay her for missing any further work and that he shoulders no responsibility, as her sole employer, for the poverty that led her to live in the caves in the first place. It is from his arrogant, elitist transnationality that Samarasan derives her most salient alignment with Kristeva in the characterisation of immorality as a manifestation of abjection. Raju's sense of smell returns after he abuses Uma. The shock of his incestuous depravity (an instance of abjection Kristeva devotes much time to in her essay) projects into smell as 'his most devastating punishment' of 'what he'd done' (p. 351).

In framing Raju's condescending and faulty socialist idealism in reference to Rushdie, Samarasan demonstrates an engagement with the most canonical works of magical realism to further her transnational themes. She recasts Rushdie's national

⁶⁷ The term 'soft bigotry of low expectations' was first used in a speech made by George W. Bush about the prejudice of gaps in educational achievement (Laurie Rubel and Andrea V. McCloskey, 'The Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations ... Through Mathematics Education', *Racial Equity Institute*, 2019 <<https://www.racialequityinstitute.com/blog/2019/8/7/the-soft-bigotry-of-low-expectations-through-mathematics-education>> [accessed 16 November 2022]).

allegory into a more personal realm of Raju's emerging hypocrisy, adapting Saleem's supernatural nose into a critique of transnational elites. This illustrates how the devices adopted in twentieth-century postcolonial fiction can be moulded to express more contemporary perspectives. It also queries the involvement of those elite, postcolonial authors in the continued subjugation of the least mobile. She suggests that authors who fixate on binaries in nations and colonial freedom overlook critical dynamics within those groups and the common humanity on either side of those borders. As with Oyeyemi and Hamid, Samarasan both adopts and adapts magical realist techniques to convey this sense that the underlying relational qualities of transnational experience are put into conflict with persistent notions of difference. Raju's immorality acts as a salutary call to look beyond economic as well as national and ethical boundaries.

Literalising relationality in exaggerations and metaphors

As the other selected novels have explored, *The Evening is the Whole Day* shifts magical realism towards increasing interiority as most of its supernatural events are solely focalised by Aasha. As magical realism blurs categories of reality and fantasy, this section contends that Samarasan scatters her text with embellishments which metaphorically reinforce the collapsed distinctions between the rich and the poor. Samarasan's main child focaliser, as with Oyeyemi's Jess, allows the reader access to the supernatural that adults lack. The novel complicates and equivocates the ontological status of the events in numerous ways to erode the distinction between fantasy and reality. The supernatural also marks a difference from much postcolonial magical realism as it focuses more keenly on the relationship between the experiences of the individual than on the politics of colonialism, nation-building and economics. Like Hamid and Oyeyemi, Samarasan tailors her magical realist intervention to literalise the erosion and reconstructing of borders and highlight the importance of relational connections between all individuals.

In addition to the ghosts, prophecies and allusions to Rushdie, Samarasan's repertoire of magical realist elements includes a ream of exaggerations and literalisations that break down distinctions between metaphor, fantasy and reality. Some critics such as Rajat Chaudhuri see these as 'contrived' and the weakest aspects

of the novel.⁶⁸ Yet, viewed from the perspective of classism, and the denial of human relatedness, they further the trend outlined in this thesis that they play a central role in aligning with the novel's discourse. In doing so, the techniques shine a light on the actual commonalities between those who support and those who are oppressed by the cumulative forces of colonialism, racism, classism and globalisation. They also underscore the rupture of the divide between the subject and object resulting from the abjection of Chellam and the Rajasekharans. Aasha and the narrator's depictions of the supernatural give way at different times to external verification, exaggeration, literalisation and delusion. If the gothic is 'grounded on the terrain of hallucination' as Punter and Byron state, then magical realism heightens and interrogates these distorted perceptions.⁶⁹ It blurs ontological categories, which highlights in relief the rigid fate of the lower classes. *Evening is the Whole Day* thus demonstrates the contemporary shift in the mode this thesis identifies towards literalising those conditions in supernatural moments.

The novel's focalisation through Aasha allows the spirit of Paati to be smuggled in without a direct clash against realism, despite its apparent impossibility:

Behind Amma something stirs the curtains. Not wind, it's not that sort of movement—not a gentle billowing, not a filling and unfilling with air, but a sudden jerk, as if someone's hiding behind them, and sure enough, when Aasha checks she sees that her grandmother's transparent ghost feet are peeking out from under the curtains. (p. 7)

The child's interior vision blurs conceptions of reality. There are sometimes suggestions that the ghosts Aasha sees are not real: Chellam tells Aasha that she needs to feed the spirits food, so she offers 'a jelebi or two bondas or a handful of omapoddi' to Paati's ghost; the following day the food is untouched, turned into 'disintegrating bondas, rock-hard jelebis, dusty omapoddi' (pp. 31-32). At other times the perspective permits a reading that if not literally true, then such spirits are metaphorically indubitable as unpleasant but resistant memories: Raju takes 'a cool shower humming with the ghost of his dead mother' (p. 14). This play between the

⁶⁸ Rajat Chaudhuri, 'Review: Sad but Satisfying', *Indian Literature*, 53.2 (2009), 227–30 (p. 229).

⁶⁹ Punter and Byron, *The Gothic*, p. 293.

literal and metaphorical characterises Samarasan's magical realism, paralleling the emphasis on muddy borders and relationships.

Samarasan adds exaggeration, literalisation and metaphor to further the blurring of reality and fantasy, recreating the thematic erosion of boundaries. In addition to the purely imaginary and metaphorical, improbable but symbolic coincidences often shake the veneer of realism, such as when, 'On the day Paati dies, a black butterfly finds its way into the Big House' (p. 136). At other times, an exaggeration of emotion powers a literalisation that punctures the 'real' world. Uma's joyful birth is exaggerated: 'as the hospital groundskeeper's roosters roused themselves, stretched their necks, and heralded the dawn, Uma somersaulted out into the harsh fluorescent light' (p. 104). Additionally, Aasha panics when she sees the black butterfly, and her anxiety is literalised:

She breathes so fast and hard that each breath sweeps hurricane-like through the house, blowing the lace curtains ceiling-high, sending pages of the New Straits Times flying from coffee table to dining room and kitchen floor and back yard, rotating the blades of the turned-off ceiling fans. (p. 136)

At another time, in pretending not to pay attention to their parents' awkward dynamics, the children watch 'from the corner of their eyes, and whenever they had to turn away, their skin burned with such fierce longing that new eyes burst open on their necks and backs, unblinking' (p. 181). These literalisations, often following the perspective of Aasha, are often vividly detailed, as when she tries to break through Uma's silence by shouting a question to her:

The blood rushes to her brain as she dives, and all that air in her face takes her breath away and stands her arm hairs on end. She plunges down through the dining room, spreading her fingers and toes to slow herself, screwing up her face against the sunlight, narrowly avoiding the whirling blades of the ceiling fan. (p. 219)

Yet at other times these literalisations of emotions have external effects that lean towards their being ontologically sound. Aasha begs Uma not to burn Paati's chair, but her plea:

quivers, turns to liquid, and seeps into the damp soil, suffusing the roots of the tamarind tree in its desperate grief. Next week Lourdesmary will complain that its fruit is becoming less succulent, drying out and turning too fibrous in the pod. (p. 39)

In addition, the immorality of the rich is literalised by their greed for scandal and rumour: a neighbour is 'an untiring digger-upper of gossip, [...] a feaster on other people's misfortunes' (p. 203). When a rich friend discovers gossip relating to Raju's misdemeanours, she 'down[s] the lot' and 'bloat[s] with delectation'; 'In three years she gained sixteen pounds trying to keep these secrets' (p. 269). Throughout all of these depictions, Samarasan complicates any distinct notion of fantasy and reality. She undermines classical understandings of magical realism having two distinct codes. This blurring of ontological categories underscores and literalises the tensions between transnational relationality and the elitism that condemns Chellam to unjust abjection.

The end of *Evening is the Whole Day* reiterates the pessimistic notion of the tenacity of elitist distinctions that the novel's magical realist elements illuminate. While Chellam and Uma are both portrayed as victims, Uma's wealth and cosmopolitan upbringing provide her with agency denied to Chellam; at the end of the novel she moves to the US. Although she escapes the gothic confines of the Big House and the text never reveals how she fares there, Samarasan still restricts her freedom to escape her own, her family's and her country's pasts. Samarasan has said in interviews that she originally had chapters following Uma in the US, where Uma is seen 'settling into her own kind of apathy', but she adds, 'I don't think she totally escapes her past' by becoming successful and happy.⁷⁰ This is validated in the text through the near supernatural and pessimistic determinism of the novel's framing. The family members attempt to convince themselves that they have been rid of their problems by evicting Chellam. But they have learned nothing, capitulating to the predestination of classist thinking that Samarasan delineates as comorbid with wealth. In the last scene the family takes Uma to the airport. Raju's earlier optimism for Malaysia ('The whole country is his for the taking, his generation's. What an

⁷⁰ Samarasan and Stameshkin, 'Interview with Preeta Samarasan'.

inheritance!' (p. 27)) makes way for the disappointments of the new nation failing in its cultural harmony. He turns this optimism outwards: 'In America [...] anything can happen' (p. 339). Uma's unnarrated disappointment in the US emphasises that such transference of hope is faulty because Uma uses her privilege to escape, further reinforcing the barriers between classes. The selfishness and lack of ethical mooring that pins the nation's policies, Chellam's fate and the Rajasekharans' failure as a family, are left intact. Samarasan offers no escape route, leaving the poor to continue to be excluded from such a noble cosmopolitan relationality that enriches the lives of transnational elites. Lee Erwin suggests that a recurrent motif of magical realist butterflies in the text recalls chaos theory in how the story throws causality into disarray.⁷¹ However, for the trajectory of classism through the colonial position and from parent to child, causality is clearly drawn. The butterfly fixes in deterministic certainty the inheritance of bigotry as a path from which the characters prove unable to veer. This resembles the centuries-old transnational curse that Díaz also explores as blighting migrants and their descendants. It highlights the moral danger in the way certain transnational elites may profess global egalitarianism while at the same time surreptitiously defending their own global affluent lifestyles, building the walls they purport to break down.

Samarasan's adaptations to magical realism to explore the play of tensions between fluid and hard borders echoes equivalent collapsing of categories of nation and self in Oyeyemi's and Hamid's texts. She likewise demonstrates the shift towards a twenty-first-century inclination to use supernatural literalisations of borders breaking down to symbolise the tensions surrounding experiences of transnationality. For Samarasan, the common relatedness of humanity represents the total annihilation of hierarchical borders of human difference, a truth that transnationality makes apparent. But this reality is ignored, and difference is upheld, by those who are set to profit most from maintaining those differences. Samarasan's aureate prose evokes the sublime beauty of her home nation, but like the tourist campaign, the veneer is shallow. Beneath the façade Samarasan combines aspects of magical realism and the gothic to expose the darkness of racial and class injustices

⁷¹ Lee Erwin, 'Class and the Time of the Nation in Preeta Samarasan's *Evening Is the Whole Day*', *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 45.1–2 (2014), 195–220 (p. 207) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/ari.2014.0002>>.

enduring in transnational contexts. Out of this gothic darkness comes the abjected: the ghosts of colonial abuse and extant classism, the repulsive poor in Chellam, the living and the dead yoked to a predetermined outcome of immiseration and death. These abjected characters threaten the integrity of the elite self. They highlight the diaphanous characteristic of the distinction between rich and poor. Samarasan's revisions further the interiorisation of transnational magical realism; they show that experience, the affective realm, is the area of most concern to these contemporary authors. Samarasan moves away from the ideas of resistance in postcolonial magical realism. She instead uses the mode to portray a relatedness between the colonial past and the transnational present with the supernatural attenuating the border between perceptions of fantasy and reality. She turns that gaze towards the future into a pessimistic assumption of what yet may come. She adapts fatalism to suggest that social inequality, the borders her supernatural elements expose as fragile, is a border that is resistant to erasure. The novel highlights classism, racism and greed as truly horrifying in their real-world effects, offering economic determinism as a prison that binds both elites and the poor into a structure of oppression that few may escape.

The pessimistic bind of the hardships of class is a reminder that when borders are threatened, some groups coalesce to defend those borders. For Hamid the border of nations crumbled, thus reanimating nationalism and xenophobia. For Samarasan a self-identity tied to class is threatened, and the same process of defending the borders between classes results in certain suffering. *Evening is the Whole Day's* prophecies, ghosts and interrogation of causality combine with its blurring of the lines between fantasy and reality, life and death, the colonial and the transnational; but its transnational transcendences and prophecies leave the poor immobile, under-represented and abjected. Samarasan adjusts the tropes of twentieth-century magical realism to literalise her critique of transnational economic inequality. However, it paves the way, as the other selected authors have done, for future novelists to continue the mode with a real focus on the contemporary and experiential qualities of living in complex transnational processes of cultural and social exchange.

Chapter Four: Writing the lightning: Family relatedness, transnational curses and metafictional magical realism in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Introduction

Junot Díaz's debut novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) explores many of the tensions in transnational experiences that the previous chapters have discussed. It resonates with Samarasan's work in firmly implicating the role of colonial oppression in present-day hardships for migrants and their descendants. It converges the economic inequality Samarasan describes with the issues of racism, essentialism and crisis of identity that Oyeyemi explored. It also interrogates belonging, paradox and home-seeking, deploying future-inflected supernatural expressions as Hamid's text does. In addressing these issues, Díaz's novel integrates many of the shifts in magical realism identified in this thesis, including changes towards interiority, futuristic sources and intertextuality. In this chapter I argue that Díaz dramatically innovates a number of fundamental precepts of twentieth-century magical realism. He uses these to present the paradoxical experiences of simultaneous connection and disconnection in the traumatic history and context of Dominican families seeking belonging in the US. Díaz's innovations emphasise the significance of maintaining close family bonds across transnational and transgenerational spaces.

The chapter first examines how Díaz deploys magical realist elements that resemble prior utilisations, and which I suggest highlight generational links across historical and geographical distances. However, he derives inspiration for these elements from science fiction, a genre usually assumed to be antithetical to magical realism's connections to nature and the past. In doing so I argue he retains a core feature of the mode, suggesting a vast broadening of resources for magical realist fiction. The chapter then turns to Díaz's depiction of a supernatural curse. I claim it articulates a sense of traumatic connectedness through history, binding its characters to the colonial past as Samarasan's ghosts and prophecies do. It traces a trajectory through colonialism, dictatorships and neoliberal inequality, manifesting in communication breakdowns, abuse and neglect. Díaz subverts the standard magical realist method of envisioning a change in history through the insertion of the

supernatural, instead reframing real-world history as endowed with supernatural trauma and disconnection. In the next section, I examine how Díaz employs magical realism outside of the narrative. I assert that the text's narrator positions the novel itself as transnational by self-consciously combining numerous culturally associated genres or modes, including magical realism, the dictator novel and science fiction. Yunior personifies the curse in the depiction of Dominican Republican dictator Rafael Trujillo, whom Díaz reframes in terms of a comic book super villain. Trujillo is countered by the unlikely superhero Oscar, the overweight and socially awkward protagonist Oscar de León. Díaz uses metafictional innovations to the mode to structure his narrative according to a framework of science fiction and fantasy. He relates this structure to the story of Oscar searching for, and failing to attain, belonging with his hypermasculine, essentialist peers. The chapter finally turns to the intertextual and metafictional elements of Díaz's magical realism. The narrator, Yunior, claims that the text is a remedy to the curse the novel depicts. Like Samarasan, Díaz demonstrates a move towards self-conscious references to prior magical realist works. He cites Rushdie and, like *Midnight's Children*, describes his events through an unreliable narrator, who makes mistakes and contradicts his own story. Such dubious narration likewise invites interrogation of authorial and dictatorial power in historiography. Yet, Yunior's obfuscation of the truth echoes how Trujillo also manipulates and obscures narratives by making people and evidence disappear and cultivating a culture of secrecy. These cause 'blank pages', narratorial gaps in traumatic memory. In this sense Yunior paradoxically contributes to the magical curse he claims the novel counters. I therefore argue that Díaz binds magical realism more closely to his metafictional element, reiterating the tightened relationship between the supernatural and thematic content explored throughout this thesis. Throughout these innovations, Díaz shares with the other selected authors a heightened sense of relatedness in transnational lives. Again, the tensions that afflict these populations revolve around conflicts between these fluid relationships and perceptions of atomistic difference. Díaz's focus for this interaction is on the critical importance of family connectedness for regaining harmony. This is the relational counterspell to his transnational curse.

Díaz sets his novel in a transnational dynamic between the United States and the Dominican Republic, a relationship Díaz depicts using his distinct innovation of

linking magical realism to science fiction. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* chronicles the lives of a family of Dominican heritage evolving and fragmenting as they move between Santo Domingo and New Jersey. It follows Belicia (Beli), as she escapes to the US from the murderous regime of dictator Trujillo. It then narrates the story of her two children, the unfashionable protagonist and fan of speculative fiction Oscar, and his sister, Lola. Beli's traumatic experiences in the Dominican Republic and the poverty she experiences as a Caribbean migrant in the US divide her family. These result in conflict between the family members, injuries to the children's emotional well-being, and ultimately Oscar's death. Beli and her family continually travel between the two countries; their lives and their cultural outlooks reflect this transnationality. Díaz, too, shares this dynamic.¹ Throughout the novel, Díaz prefers the term *diaspora* to *transnational* to describe this population. He collapses the distinction between the terms, depicting a community in the US deeply connected and associated with family and culture in the Dominican Republic. At the same time, both cultures reciprocally influence each other in the repeated travel and communication between both locations. Díaz has suggested that this circumstance is both unprecedented and global: 'We are in a complete new world [...] where people are back and forth all the time.'² In the novel, he portrays this back-and-forthness in terms of the science fiction imagery that pervades the text and which echoes Oscar's infatuation with these genres: 'Every summer Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine into reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children as it can.'³ His language suggests a sense of instantaneity and unwillingness in these movements, echoing the simultaneous connections between cultures distinguished by transnationality.

Such sudden and involuntary connections are characterised in Díaz's novel and in the other selected texts of this study by their problematic and often traumatic consequences. Díaz focuses on family connections and how migrations can lead to significant strain in maintaining familial relationships. Deborah Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela eschew similar contentions in a real-world context, explaining that

¹ Anonymous, 'Faculty Members', *MIT Comparative Media Studies/Writing*, n. d. <<https://cmsw.mit.edu/people/faculty/>> [accessed 3 August 2022].

² Cited in Jay, *Global Matters*, p. 177.

³ Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 271. Kindle ebook. Further references to this text are provided in parenthesis after quotations.

'Transnational families have had to face the atrocities of genocide, wars, forced migration and intolerant immigration laws. Family members may become forcibly separated from each other'.⁴ Beli's traumatic upbringing reflects many of these issues: as will be explored, she suffers racism because of her dark skin, she is hounded from the country by agents of Trujillo, and she is forced to take low-paid, hard work to survive in the US. Her children face totally different issues. Similarly to Oyeyemi's Jess, they are required to negotiate a fluid, relational identity with more complex ties between their Dominican heritage and American culture. Therefore, as noted, researchers such as Bryceson and Vuorela find these differences can lead to significant conflict, even to the point of precipitating 'bodily harm to family members'.⁵ Díaz replicates this in the fractious relationship between Beli and her children, and in particular the children's perspective of their mother's violence and neglect. Maintaining ties with family who did not migrate poses additional issues: children often have fewer cultural connections to 'back home' and may have lesser control over the language. They also tend to fare better economically, which may provoke further fragmentation. Díaz's depiction thus illuminates the points Bryceson and Vuorela make: although 'Transnational families are primarily relational in nature' and 'Their fundamental raison d'être is mutual welfare', the relationality itself can cause their unity to 'be severely tested'.⁶

Díaz links these contemporary concerns with the long history of trauma and colonial oppression in the Caribbean. He brings the eras together using a curse called fukú, which features as the most visible and recurrent supernatural element in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Although fukú never manifests as overtly ontological, its presence frames the entire novel. As will be examined in this chapter, it extends the development seen throughout this thesis in tightening the relationship between the supernatural and thematic content. It is depicted as beginning during the Spanish colonial expansion in the Caribbean. When Columbus first landed on the island now known as Hispaniola (the island on which The Dominican Republic and Haiti now stand) in 1492, a short period of relatively amicable dealings followed with

⁴ Bryceson and Vuorela, 'Transnational Families in the Twenty-First Century', p. 7.

⁵ Bryceson and Vuorela, 'Transnational Families in the Twenty-First Century', p. 13.

⁶ Bryceson and Vuorela, 'Transnational Families in the Twenty-First Century', p. 7.

the inhabitants, the Taínos.⁷ Grievances appear to have begun after the Europeans started taking local women from their tribes as wives, against the will of the locals. This abuse foreshadows Trujillo's exertion of power through sexual domination centuries later, suggesting that toxic masculinity is inextricable from colonialism and twentieth-century totalitarianism. Columbus returned to Hispaniola later with a much larger force and decimated the population. He forced the Taínos into near slavery and populated the island with African people also sentenced to servitude.⁸ Díaz's narrator claims that these events invoked a powerful curse, which afflicted the island and its people and which endures into the twentieth century. Its power is crystallised in Trujillo's oppression, racism and sexism, condemning all Dominicans to a similar fate to the Taínos.

Díaz does not dislocate colonial history from his transnational novel as Hamid does, even while its techniques differ greatly from postcolonial magical realism. Like *Evening is the Whole Day*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* links colonialism and twentieth-century neoliberalism. The bleak connectedness of the curse continues to manifest outside the Dominican borders, to the migrants growing up in the US who attempted to flee its effects. In Díaz's case this focuses on migrants in the ghettos of US suburbs. He has said that one of his aims in writing the novel was to explore how the past has an unconscious effect on our present:

Do those histories ever meet? Do they actually ever influence each other? [...] A lot of the things that have happened in our past have very subtle influence on us. [...] Even though I was living in a real contemporary Jersey [...] I always felt the shadow of that past history was on us.⁹

Díaz shows the generational procession of effects from those histories of racism and imperialism into the abuse that Beli deals to her children. As a migrant in the US, Beli becomes stratified into low-paid work, a determinism that she is unable to avoid.

⁷ *The Dominican Republic Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. by Eric Roorda, Lauren Hutchinson Derby, and Raymundo González, *The Latin America Readers* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 2–16.

⁸ The Taínos now do not exist as a discrete social group, but miscegenation between the Europeans, Africans and Taínos has resulted in a large proportion of Dominicans being able to claim partial heritage to this traumatic history.

⁹ Junot Díaz and Talks at Google, 'Junot Díaz: The Brief Wondrous Lives of Oscar Wao', online video recording, *YouTube*, 2007 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-tD45oj1ro>> [accessed 22 November 2022].

Oscar and Lola's father abandons them at a young age, and Beli is left to raise them on her own. The trauma she suffered before migration negatively affects her relationship with her children, with whom she shares little except bitter confrontations. Díaz's depiction reinscribes the pressures placed on mothers in general, and transnational mothers in particular:

The success of the initial attachment to the mother is seen as influencing children's later social adaptation or delinquency, their educational success or failure, their ability to build a 'normal family life' [...] The mother-child dyad is thus constructed as the relationship most crucial to a child's development. [...] This has the effect of exercising pressure on mothers and holding them singularly responsible for their child's development.¹⁰

Although this portrayal by Umut Erel is from a Turkish point of view, the same social pressure afflicts Beli. Jacqueline Rose furthers the point that mothers are continually held responsible for imperfection, despite the poverty, abuse and neglect they themselves may suffer:

As austerity and inequality increase across the globe, more and more children are falling into poverty [...]. Focus on mothers is a sure-fire diversionary tactic, not least because it so effectively deflects what might be far more disruptive forms of social critique. Mothers always fail.¹¹

Rose parallels Erel's contention by suggesting that immigrant mothers are particularly held accountable, damaging both them and the relationships they are able to form.¹² Díaz's narrator does blame Beli from the perspective of her children, but his curse clearly shows the generational, historical reach of colonial oppression and male predatory misogyny on her behaviour.

The influence of fukú passes from Beli to her children and to all Dominican migrants that leave the island. The enclave in which Oscar grows up defies concepts

¹⁰ Umut Erel, 'Reconceptualizing Motherhood: Experiences of Migrant Women from Turkey Living in Germany', in *The Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks*, ed. by Deborah Fahy Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela, *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women*, v. 25 (Oxford: Berg, 2002), pp. 127–46 (p. 133).

¹¹ Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), Chapter 1: Social Punishment: Now, section 4, paragraph 1.

¹² Rose, *Mothers*, Chapter 1: Social Punishment: Now, section 1, paragraph 1.

of harmonious multiculturalism. Integration into wider society is partial, many communities disassociating from the 'host' culture and maintaining stronger bonds to the cultures 'back home'. Díaz depicts dire economic and social circumstances in Oscar's upbringing; crime and violence predominate, as well as strong attitudes against people seen as outsiders. Amid xenophobia, Oscar tries to assimilate into Dominican culture, not the culture of middle-class USA. However, his transnationality is at odds with the society around him, supporting Lyn Dickens's contention that multiculturalism:

impedes multiracial identities and splits transracial families through its tendencies to segregate and control cultural, which is often equated with racial, difference [...]. These aspects of multiculturalism have a traumatic effect on individuals and families with ambiguous racial and cultural identities.¹³

By causing the exile of so many Dominicans, Trujillo can be seen as a significant catalyst of Dominican migration to the US and therefore the progenitor of the transnational continuation of the curse. Yet the cultural damage he embodies continues to traumatise those migrants. Díaz thus portrays Trujillo as the central embodiment of fukú. Trujillo's infamy exemplifies how a country's people may view themselves as cursed: Díaz's narrator Yunior emphasises that a real heyday for fukú was his parents' generation, specifically the 1930s to the 1960s. 'In those days fukú had it good; it even had a hypeman of sorts, a high priest, you could say. Our then dictator-for-life Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina' (p. 2). Trujillo embodies the curse; whether as its 'servant or its master, its agent or its principal [...] it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them two was tight' (p. 2). Trujillo commanded the murder of thousands of Haitians in what came to be known as the 'Parsley Massacre'.¹⁴ His sexual appetite has been called 'Neronic' in its excess as he used his

¹³ Lyn Dickens, 'The "Shattered Racialised Person" and (Post)Multiculturalism in Australia', in *Reworking Postcolonialism*, ed. by Pavan Kumar Malreddy and others (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 87–101 (p. 88).

¹⁴ 'The slaughter of Haitians—also known as El Corte (the cutting), La Masacre (the massacre), or Operación Perejil (operation parsley)—commenced on September 28, 1937, and continued for four days.[...] Edwidge Danticat, also Haitian, recounts that "groups of Haitians were killed in the night because they could not manage to trill their 'r' and utter a throaty 'j' to ask for parsley, to say 'perejil.'" The actual number of Haitians killed has never been established. Some place it as low as twelve thousand and others as high as twenty- five thousand' (Milagros Ricourt, *The Dominican Racial*

presidential power to rapaciously predate on young women.¹⁵ He also tortured citizens that were seen as a threat to his regime, making many 'disappear' by murdering them and never officially disclosing what had happened. After he was assassinated, Trujillo's effect continued to prevail in police and government corruption into the late twentieth century. Whether or not the curse is real in any ontological sense, the emphasis is clear that the effects of it are absolutely pinned to real-world exploitation that seems, from Díaz's perspective, to be an inescapable fact of Dominican life. The level of damage Trujillo causes seems so exaggerated as to beggar belief: Díaz suggests that standard tropes of realism are incapable of representing these effects. They require the interventions he makes to magical realism to capture these levels of trauma.

The novel suggests, as is hinted throughout the other three selected texts, that a cure of sorts to this transnational ailment is available through appreciating the value of family, not merely the close family but the whole of intergenerational history. He suggests that in focusing on connections and communication, relationships and the familial, and national interdependency, it may be possible to partially ease many of the harmful emotional symptoms of transnational experiences.

Díaz's family mongoose and science fiction transnationality

One of Díaz's more conventional magical realist tropes in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is an (almost) irreducibly supernatural, singing mongoose. This section addresses how, despite conforming to certain magical realist practices, Díaz's deployment of the mythical creature innovates the trope to further explore relationality in transnational family dynamics. The section first examines the relationship between standard readings of the mode and science fiction. It argues that while science fiction is an unusual source for the supernatural, the novel retains a magical realist core but demonstrates the contemporary turn from reliance on myth, nature and the past. I then emphasise how Díaz contributes to the increasing alignment between the specific supernatural manifestation and the novel's thematic content by presenting the mongoose as transnational like his characters. In addition,

Imaginary: Surveying the Landscape of Race and Nation in Hispaniola (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), p. 36 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1hd17fg.5>>).

¹⁵ Roorda, Derby, and González, *The Dominican Republic Reader*, p. 308.

it is always perceived by characters in isolation, which additionally advances the turn towards the interior and experiential aspects of transnationality. From this conjugation of transnationality and interior experience, Díaz, like Hamid, unmoors magical realism from its persistent associations with locality. I suggest Díaz's mongoose instead represents family connectivity across temporal and geographical spaces. However, this section finally brings attention to the failure of the mongoose to help the novel's characters, showing a reference to, but a move away from, the conventions of resistance in postcolonial magical realism. It also highlights the potential trauma and disconnection that characterises transnational experiences.

Díaz's mongoose differs vastly from the portrayals of Carpentier's mythical creatures in that its source is neither folklore nor religion but a combination of science fiction and an account of Díaz's own family history. In combining sources, the mongoose exhibits a developing factor of transnational magical realism that differs from many prior models: it is becoming less frequently deployed as a mutually exclusive genre, proving it to be slippery to static definitions surrounding territory or source. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is certainly not exclusively magical realist. Because of its unusual approach, T. S. Miller states 'we should no more dub *Oscar Wao* a work of magic realism than we should nominate it for a Nebula [an award for science fiction and fantasy]'.¹⁶ The ethereal mongoose seems particularly to engender disagreement. Mysterious animals are ubiquitous in magical realist fiction, from Carpentier's shape-shifting mosquito and Asturias's nagual coyote in the 1940s, through to Raj Kamal Jha's giant cockroach in *She Will Build Him a City* (2015). Critics including Monica Hanna, Daniel Bautista and Heike Schaefer all supplement this list with Díaz's creature.¹⁷ However, Díaz himself disagrees. He states in one interview that he was surprised that people interpret the mongoose as magical realist. For him, it represents a truth that springs from his own family heritage:

¹⁶ T. S. Miller, 'Preternatural Narration and the Lens of Genre Fiction in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*', *Science Fiction Studies*, 38.1 (2011), 92–114 (p. 93) <<https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.38.1.0092>>.

¹⁷ Monica Hanna, "Reassembling the Fragments": Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*', *Callaloo*, 33.2 (2010), 498–520 (p. 509) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.0.0661>>; Daniel Bautista, 'Comic Book Realism: Form and Genre in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*', *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 21.1 (2010), 41–53 (p. 47); Heike Schaefer, 'The Novel as "the Most Complex Artifact of Networking": The Relevance of Network Theory for the Study of Transcultural Fiction', *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, Network Theory and American Studies, 60.1 (2015), 139–56 (p. 148).

The mongoose is funny because he's my favorite character. He is the only real character. In the Díaz family cosmology, he's the only real character in the whole book. [...] That is what I thought was funny because some people have said, oh, this magic realism bit. And I am like, oh my God, it's the exact opposite of it.¹⁸

He adds that it was inspired by a story about his own mother who saw a mongoose during a moment that echoes how it appears to Beli. Conversely, in a footnote discussing the creature, the text claims it to be an alien: 'Many Watchers suspect that the Mongoose arrived to our world from another, but to date no evidence of such a migration has been unearthed' (p. 151 n. 18). Díaz corroborates this footnote in another interview, claiming that he derived the alien mongoose character from science fiction novel *Flight to the Lonesome Place* by Alexander Key (1971).¹⁹

Despite being refuted by Díaz and some critics as magical realism, the portrayal of the mongoose conforms to many conventions in more standard variations of the mode. There is little in critical definitions of magical realism, even ones that do not consider its moves towards transnationality, that precludes plot elements also typically found in science fiction. Chanady's definition of two world views, whose incompatibility is resolved through the mimetic representation of supernatural phenomena, could just as easily apply to a work in which an extra-terrestrial culture clashes with earth.²⁰ Likewise, Warnes's definition of naturalising the supernatural aligns with science fiction as long as those elements seem currently impossible but are treated as if normal and occur within a 'realistic' present-day or past environment.²¹ Díaz's depiction of the characters' and narrator's response to the mongoose is also commensurate with the characterisation set out in the introduction to this thesis. When it first appears to Beli, the narrator gives no account of her reaction to it, incredulous or otherwise. As soon as it has gone, it entirely disappears from the narrative perspective; Beli never sees or speaks of it again (p. 150). In an

¹⁸ Gregg Barrios and Junot Díaz, 'Guest Interview: Junot Díaz', *La Bloga*, 2007 <<https://labloga.blogspot.com/2007/10/guest-interview-junot-daz.html>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

¹⁹ Junot Díaz and Katherine Miranda, 'Junot Díaz, Diaspora and Redemption: Creating Progressive Imaginaries', *Sargasso*, II (2008), 23–40 (p. 34).

²⁰ Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic*, pp. 21–30.

²¹ Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, p. 3.

episode surrounding Oscar attempting suicide, Yunior comments on Oscar's peculiar but total disregard for the supernatural thing he witnesses:

Dude had been waiting his whole life for something just like this to happen to him, had always wanted to live in a world of magic and mystery, but instead of taking note of the vision and changing his ways the fuck just shook his swollen head. (p. 190)

As with Samarasan's ghosts and Oyeyemi's abiku, the text restricts the supernatural to interior experience. Also, like them, the text does not depict the mongoose as unequivocally ontologically sound. Yunior forewarns the reader of its appearance, as if anticipating the reader's incredulity: 'And now we arrive at the strangest part of our tale. Whether what follows was a figment of Beli's wracked imagination or something else altogether I cannot say' (p. 148). Silvia Mejía suggests that Yunior's sceptical comments 'disenchant' the novel's magical realism because he 'may accept the existence of supernatural events but neither experiences nor narrates them as mundane.'²² This kind of stance relies on comparison with the more rigid expressions of magical realism dominating the twentieth century. As cited throughout this thesis, narrators in more fluid examples of the mode differ greatly in their responses, without diminishing or disenchanting the supernatural. It exemplifies why the changes being made to the mode require further attention to shift from models now rarely deployed. Whether the mongoose is an alien, a figure taken from Díaz's family history, or an aesthetic magical realist device, its portrayal shows the interplay between standard and innovated conventions of contemporary texts in concert with the exploration of transnational relationships. Díaz's innovative source demonstrates the mode's burgeoning transnationality in blending styles usually associated exclusively to Latin and North America; this feature of the novel is explored further in the section of this chapter on Oscar's transnationality. The novel thus embeds science fiction and his own (stated) personal family history into the fluidity of interactions that magical realism, as a genre, can be deployed to represent. Díaz

²² Silvia Mejía, 'Caught in the Ethnographic Trap: The Disenchantment of Magical Realism in Novels by Junot Díaz and Alberto Fuguet', *Hispania*, 104.2 (2021), 211–25 (p. 211) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/hpn.2021.0041>>.

takes advantage of this elasticity to underscore the relational connections between family and history.

The mongoose underscores these connections by being depicted as transnational itself. In featuring the creature as a literalised metaphor of transnationality, the text illustrates the closing alignment seen throughout this thesis between the portrayal of the supernatural and the themes and characterisations. Díaz draws a parallel between the mongoose and the slaves that were brought to the Americas in the fifteenth century and beyond: it 'Accompanied humanity out of Africa and after a long furlough in India jumped ship to the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean' (p. 151 n. 18). The mongoose therefore follows the people throughout traumatic Dominican history. It joins them as they encounter Columbus and colonial rule, as they face the continuation of cruelty in the Trujillato, and as many migrate to the US in an attempt to escape the island and its curse. Díaz's creature binds these transnational connections to Oscar's family by reappearing across different times and locations. It evokes the value of family connections as it rescues Oscar and his mother from the effects of the curse. The mongoose thus epitomises the increasing transnationality of magical realism, uprooted, like the migrant families it accompanies, from the past and specific territories. It emerges at different stages of the narrative when colonial and dictatorial influences in misogyny, racism and corruption are heightened; Díaz thus points towards the inadequacy of realism to express the incomprehensibility of traumatic aspects of transnational experience. When it first appears to Beli in Trujillo-era Dominican Republic in the 1960s, it helps to rescue her after she is almost fatally beaten by henchmen working for Trujillo's sister and left to die in a canefield.²³ The context links colonial slavery to the racism prevalent in Trujillo's regime. Beli's childhood had already been tarnished by this connection as she suffers racist treatment on account of her 'despised black skin' (p. 80). The dark connection between sugar, slavery and trauma on the island is illustrated through this symbolism. Beli attempts to escape the canefield but 'The cane didn't want her to leave [...]; it slashed at her palms, jabbed into her flank and clawed her thighs': the colonial past exhibits a vampiric desire to devour her (p. 150). Her salvation arrives when, 'as Beli was flitting in and out of life, there appeared at

²³ She is seduced by the husband of Trujillo's sister, who, upon discovering Beli is pregnant with his baby, organises a beating which causes Beli to miscarry and almost die.

her side a creature' resembling 'an amiable mongoose' with unnatural 'golden lion eyes' (p. 149). It leads Beli out of the canefield by singing to her and delivers her back to safety.

That the mongoose maintains relational ties to family is underscored by the fact that the next person to see it is Beli's son, decades later, in 1980s neoliberal New Jersey. Oscar meets it as he is preparing to throw himself off a bridge in despair for failing to live up to the demands of his peers. From his perspective, the creature's saviour-like appearance is intensified. Where Beli saw only golden eyes, Oscar describes it as a 'Golden Mongoose' (p. 189). It also appears divine, described as inspiring awe: 'Gold-limned eyes that reached through you, not so much in judgment or reproach but for something far scarier' (p. 189). Oscar still jumps from the bridge, but the distraction of the mongoose causes him to survive. The animal thus literalises the relational nature of migrant experiences by forging the critical significance of family across transnational and transgenerational divides.

Díaz accentuates the importance of the network of family relationships, over national ties so often figured into prior magical realism. When asked in an interview if he believed in the curse himself, Díaz responded: 'I only believe in my ancestors. And in history.'²⁴ As family and history intersect in the symbol of the mongoose, its recurrence suggests that it is through enhancing familial connections that migrants and their children such as Beli and Oscar can combat the traumatic present-day consequences of the past. The reason for the timely appearance of this supernatural saviour is related directly to Beli's positive relationship with her aunt and primary guardian, La Inca. Worried about her niece, La Inca prays intensively. Yunió explains: 'Let me tell you, True Believers: in the annals of Dominican piety there has never been prayer like this' (p. 144). La Inca's maternal care in praying invokes the creature and is reflected in the mongoose's song, which resembles a lullaby: 'Sueño, sueño, sueño, como tú te llamas' (p. 150).²⁵ Its liberatory power connects Beli and her

²⁴ Rosa Cao and Junot Díaz, 'Interview in the Sandbox: An Interview with Junot Díaz', *The Tech*, 2008 <<https://thetech.com/2008/06/06/diaz-v128-n27>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

²⁵ On a website dedicated to creating a glossary for the obscure references and Spanish passages in the text, contributors have translated these words as either 'sleep, sleep, sleep, what is your name' or 'I dream and dream and dream of you calling my name' (Kim, 'The Annotated Oscar Wao: Notes and Translations for *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz', *The Annotated Oscar Wao*, n.d. <<http://www.annotated-oscar-wao.com/index.html>> [accessed 16 November 2022]).

aunt across generations, echoing the emphasis on the relational that Oyeyemi, Hamid and Samarasan all suggest is characteristic of transnational experiences.

Yet, like in the other selected texts, the positive influence of connectivity is challenged, and partially defeated, by oppression and other tensions in migrant experiences. Unlike Carpentier's mosquito or Angela Carter's winged performer, Díaz's mongoose advances another model developing in transnational contexts. As is increasingly characteristic in contemporary iterations of magical realism, Díaz deploys the supernatural to evince this contradictory, unreal sense of disconnected connectedness. Whereas supernatural elements had often been used to imagine a corrective to traumatic history, Díaz's ultimately fails to protect the family from the curse. Towards the end of the novel, Oscar falls in love with the girlfriend of a jealous, corrupt police officer in the Dominican Republic. Consequently, he is taken into a canefield and beaten up, binding him to his mother's history and a cycle of abuse. Díaz underscores the connection to the colonial curse when Yunior visits Oscar after the beating: 'two days later, I saw his face and was like: Holy shit, Oscar. Holy fucking shit. [...] He wrote out the word for me: fukú' (p. 306). Again, the mongoose rescues him, but Oscar is not deterred, despite warnings from his family, and finally he is murdered in the same canefields. Díaz's recurrent symbol of the canefield stands as a reminder that Oscar is connected, through his mother's lineage, to colonial oppression, which still results in terminal outcomes for many when it manifests in police corruption. The mongoose thus fails; it connects Oscar transnationally to the Dominican Republic and its history, but it also reveals a cynical interconnectivity that destroys the family. Through his magical realist take, Díaz reproduces a similar, paradoxical dynamic to that which Oyeyemi, Hamid and Samarasan depicted. He presents a motif of relatedness, in terms of connectivity between family and history across temporal and geographical borders, generated by migration. This connectivity, however, is strained and broken by those same processes. The mongoose, and the curse it attempts to abate, both connect families across generations and continents, while rupturing those affiliations. Nevertheless, the theme of family connectivity will ultimately re-emerge as the only effective foil to this transnational curse.

Fukú: Díaz's transnational curse and the traumatic breakdown of family connection

This section examines how Díaz adapts magical realism to engage in seeming paradoxes between connection and disconnection similar to those that Hamid evokes. It first argues that Díaz innovates supernatural tropes by again combining the supernatural with science fiction but also adding real-world Dominican superstitions. This allows Díaz to share with the other selected texts the reconfiguration of magical realism to literalise the migrant experiences he depicts. As mentioned, Díaz interprets the real-world traumas depicted in the novel as a curse. This section argues that he consequently reverses the standard magical realist deployment, noted by Faris and others, of containing irreducible, overtly supernatural events within a narrative otherwise conforming to the norms of realism. Díaz instead depicts the real world as infused with the supernatural. Through the curse and his science fiction framing, Díaz emphasises that realism is insufficiently evocative to capture the trauma and complexity inherent in transnational experiences. This section draws attention to the intergenerational links that bind Dominicans to this curse, showing a trajectory from colonialism, totalitarianism and migrant poverty. I argue Díaz makes similar connections to Samarasan in recognising the effects of colonialism on the descendants of migrants, likewise focusing on the harm that disconnection and perceptions of difference can cause. These manifest in the abuse, neglect and ostracism strewn throughout Oscar's and his family's lives. The section finally examines Díaz's motif of blank pages and the magical realist depiction of a faceless man, both of which literalise these senses of disconnection. These textual elements imply, as do Oyeyemi's, Hamid's and Samarasan's texts, that when distinction and disconnection is reinforced by societal conditions, a basic concept of human relatedness is impaired; they suggest that the well-being of migrants and their children could dramatically improve should societies embrace this notion of fundamental humanism.

Díaz frames the entire text as an expression of the curse and the characters' interactions with, and battles against, it. Yunió opens the novel with a description of *fukú*, characteristically recalling American pulp fiction:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and

another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. (p. 1)

This Lovecraftian demon is not an invention of Díaz's. It is a superstition in the Dominican Republic regarding a curse that will befall anyone who speaks Columbus's name (they refer to him, as does Yunior, as the Admiral).²⁶ Yunior explains that it emerges from the destruction of the native people of the Caribbean by Columbus and the colonists that followed. It continues to arise in the dictatorship of the Dominican 'Sauron' Rafael Trujillo (p. 2 n. 1), the poverty Dominicans suffer at home and after they migrate, and even in the interpersonal misfortunes of individuals:

It is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we've all been in the shit ever since. Santo Domingo might be fukú's Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not. (p. 1)

Díaz links the real-world history of Hispaniola and the curse to his science fiction resources with his epigraph 'Of what import are brief, nameless lives ... to Galactus??' (n. p.). This is in reference to a planet-devouring being from Jack Kirby and Stan Lee's *The Fantastic Four* comic book series (debuting in 1961). Galactus parallels fukú in its uncaring destruction of humanity. It therefore emphasises Díaz's and Oscar's position that only through science fiction can appropriate metaphors be found to encapsulate the enormity of the Antilles's tragic history. He explicitly spells out this parallel between genres and Dominican history when he asks: 'What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?' (p. 6).

The curse subverts the typical tenet of magical realism whereby the supernatural is inserted into a realistic context as a reimagining of a real-world scenario. Fukú, Díaz suggests, is a supernatural phenomenon that is nonetheless real and affects us all: 'It's perfectly fine if you don't believe in these "superstitions." In fact, it's better than fine—it's perfect. Because no matter what you believe, fukú believes in you' (p. 5). The concept that an island is cursed may be figurative, but it is also in a sense more concretely true as the effects of the initial colonial meeting

²⁶ Douglas Farah, 'Light for Columbus Dims', *Washington Post*, 1 September 1992 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/09/01/light-for-columbus-dims/f099a9cf-2f42-4597-80a0-61398e48314d/>> [accessed 22 July 2022].

inexorably reverberate into the twentieth century. Fukú is a supernatural interpretation of factual events and actions. It therefore coheres with the way Oyeyemi, Hamid and Samarasan deploy the supernatural element in that it literalises aspects of the experiences of transnational individuals like Beli and Oscar: Dominican migrants are both magically and literally cursed in Díaz's illustration. It furthers the notion that fiction using magical realism is often uniquely adept at expressing situations on earth whose traumas beggar standard belief.

As well as depicting a trajectory from colonialism to the present, Díaz's narrative vividly depicts the curse travelling through generational links, paradoxically damaging those connections as it makes them. In this regard Díaz's text echoes Samarasan's, which likewise used supernatural tropes to highlight an intergenerational transmission of colonial violence. Díaz connects Oscar and Beli's family history to the traumatic past of the island through a series of correlations that burden the members of the family with their own strands of fukú. In framing all these historical episodes in an inescapable curse, Díaz suggests the devastation wreaked by the Spanish in the fifteenth century is not a closed-off segment of history but still present in Dominicans' lives today. It is Oscar that first properly notices the transgenerational links that perpetuate the curse beyond the historical to the personal, and beyond the past to the present. When Oscar discusses fukú with Yunior after his failed suicide attempt, he says:

It was the curse that made me do it, you know.

I don't believe in that shit, Oscar. That's our parents' shit.

It's ours too, he said. (p. 192)

The novel points to the fall of Oscar's grandfather, Abelard, as the beginning of the family's personal fukú: 'When the family talks about it at all – which is like never – they always begin in the same place: with Abelard and the Bad Thing he said about Trujillo' (p. 211). Abelard falls victim to the curse through its association with predatory sexuality: he attempts to hide his daughters from the salacious interests of the president, for which he is arrested and killed. According to Yunior, this event signals the emergence of the family's engagement with the curse as it 'precipitated an unprecedented downturn in the family fortune. Tripped, at some cosmic level, a lever against the family. Call it a whole lot of bad luck, outstanding karmic debt, or

something else. (Fukú?)' (pp. 247–248). The curse then infects the next generation: a symptom for Beli manifests in her connection to slavery in that she is dark-skinned. It causes her to be subject to racist abuse throughout her childhood. Yunió describes Beli's appearance by reiterating the names Beli is fated to be called. She 'was born black. And not just any kind of black. But black black—kongoblack, shangoblack, kaliblack, zapotoblack, rekhablack—and no amount of fancy Dominican racial legerdemain was going to obscure the fact' (p. 248). Ashley Kunsá notes how Dominicans often deny their lineage to Africa, and as a result racism against dark-skinned Dominicans has remained endemic.²⁷ As if to underscore this, ethnic cleansing was a major part of the motivation behind Trujillo's slaughter of Haitians. As a result of her dark skin, Beli is disregarded by her family: Yunió explains, 'That's the kind of culture I belong to: people took their child's black complexion as an ill omen' (p. 248). She is forced after her father's disappearance into child labour and racialised as if a colonial-era slave, exposing the deep thread of historical connection the curse forges.

Although Díaz makes clear links between colonialism and its effects on subsequent migrants, his context moves beyond colonial iterations of magical realism to depict the curse as transnational. After the attack in the canefields, Beli flees to the United States to begin a new life. It is there that she raises her two children, Lulu and Oscar. However, the fukú follows her. Whereas Beli's life in the Dominican Republic as a young adult was dominated by the terror of Trujillo and racial discrimination, now it is overshadowed by economic hardship and isolation. Having left her family behind, Beli struggles alone to support her family. Her early experiences of life in the US are of 'the cold, the backbreaking drudgery of the factorías, the loneliness of Diaspora' (p. 164). Through fukú, Díaz supernaturally interprets the loneliness and poverty that can characterise the lives of many migrants, particularly those who may suffer from racial as well as national discrimination in their new country. As many studies attest, Beli shares feelings of loneliness and dislocation from her family, which many migrants face regardless of

²⁷ Ashley Kunsá, 'History, Hair, and Reimagining Racial Categories in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 54.2 (2013), 211–24 (p. 216) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2011.574747>>.

their origin or current residing place.²⁸ Her experience mirrors studies such as Fremio Sepulveda's that contend that 'for recent, predominantly black Caribbean arrivals, coming into the U.S. almost always translates into relocating into ethnic enclaves where they encounter stagnant socio-economic prospects and similar racial constraints and struggles similar to those of black Americans'.²⁹ In an echo of Samarasan's concerns with class and poverty, Díaz correspondingly depicts a neighbourhood racked by domestic abuse and violence: Oscar's first love Maritza grows up to be a girl 'who seemed to delight in getting slapped around by her boyfriends' (p. 16); his other childhood crush Olga later allegedly 'tried to rob the local Safeway, Dana Plato style' (p. 266).

In addition to manifesting in economic hardship for Beli as she migrates, the curse subsequently results in her abusing and neglecting her children. Díaz thus moves away from cultures and nations as agents of oppression, instead highlighting the effects of trauma and poverty on family connections. Díaz depicts the curse affecting Beli's transnational family in two related ways: the poverty and abuse Beli suffers causes her to maintain a cycle of violence towards her children; additionally, generational differences, heightened by transnationality, contribute to these conflicts. As a result of the psychological strain Beli suffers in being torn away from her family and forced into hard, low-paid work, she becomes emotionally detached, even hostile, towards her children. Portes and Rubén Rumbaut note that 'intergenerational dissonance not only reduces parental control but is also linked to a diminished sense of self-worth and well-being among children'.³⁰ This is borne out in Oscar's bad habits of overeating and his critical low self-esteem. Lola comments on her mother's abuse and neglect stemming from the fact that she is forced by her status as a migrant to work several jobs simultaneously:

My mother would never win any awards, believe me. You could call her an absentee parent: if she wasn't at work she was sleeping, and when she was

²⁸ Nadje Al-Ali, 'Loss of Status or New Opportunities? Gender Relations and Transnational Ties among Bosnian Refugees', in *The Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks*, ed. by Deborah Fahy Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela, Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women, v. 25 (Oxford: Berg, 2002), pp. 83–102 (p. 90); Alencar, Kondova, and Ribbens, 'The Smartphone as a Lifeline', p. 836; Singh, 'No Place to Call Home', p. 69.

²⁹ Fremio Sepulveda, 'Coding the Immigrant Experience: Race, Gender and the Figure of the Dictator in Junot Díaz's *Oscar Wao*', *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, 7.2 (2013), 15–33 (p. 18).

³⁰ Portes and Rumbaut, *Legacies*, p. 210.

around it seemed all she did was scream and hit. As kids, me and Oscar were more scared of our mother than we were of the dark or el cuco. (p. 54)

The destructiveness of the neighbourhood, the silence that surrounds trauma and Beli's neglect are crystallised by Lola in a short passage that receives no further attention:

When that thing happened to me when I was eight and I finally told her what he had done, she told me to shut my mouth and stop crying, and I did exactly that, I shut my mouth and clenched my legs, and my mind, and within a year I couldn't have told you what that neighbor looked like, or even his name. (pp. 56–57)

Paul Jay suggests that 'deepening poverty and desperation' is symptomatic, to some degree, of late globalisation perpetuating the dynamics of the colonial period: this statement is substantiated in these tragic stories.³¹ The curse, unhindered by national or historical boundaries, flourishes in late twentieth-century US migrants. It results in fragmented upbringings, isolation from friends and home, and disconnections between family members. Thus, Díaz furthers the recurrent motif found in many transnational instances of magical realism: tensions between the relational aspects of transnationality, and agents that undermine that relationship-based interconnectivity, are metaphorically represented by supernatural elements. Beli's relationship with her family is broken down due to the poverty and hard labor resulting from these consequences.

Díaz supplements the evocation of these breakdowns in a motif of blank pages, or páginas en blanco, which in turn is supernaturally symbolised by a man with no face. They both indicate the turn in transnational magical realism towards epitomising experiences of paradox surrounding connection and disconnection. The connection between the curse and the blank page is clarified when Díaz analogises the fukú with fragmented narratives. He has explained that part of his intention to write the novel was because he was 'interested in the gaps in stories'.³² He elaborates by explaining that his fascination with the untold aspects of a narrative is derived

³¹ Jay, *Global Matters*, p. 12.

³² Díaz and Talks at Google, 'The Brief Wondrous Lives of Oscar Wao'.

from the secrecy in Dominicans that the fear of Trujillo's informants aroused: 'Everybody talks about this dictatorship, but nobody actually says anything. It was such a weird trauma.'³³ The text explains the reasons for this sense of paranoid secrecy:

you could say a bad thing about El Jefe [Trujillo] at eight-forty in the morning and before the clock struck ten you'd be in the Cuarenta having a cattleprod shoved up your ass. [...] It was widely believed that at any one time between forty-two and eighty-seven percent of the Dominican population was on the Secret Police's payroll. Your own fucking neighbors could acabar con you just because you had something they coveted or because you cut in front of them at the colmado. (pp. 225–226)

Páginas en blanco represent parts of personal stories which have been lost or hidden. For example, Beli's childhood is littered with missing episodes: 'Before 1951, our orphaned girl had lived with another foster family, monstrous people if the rumors are to be believed, a dark period of her life neither she nor her madre ever referenced. Their very own página en blanco' (p. 78). Trujillo controls the national narrative and silences people who do not agree with him, causing them to disappear without trace and eradicating any evidence that incriminates him. He destroys all copies of a book written by Abelard, for example, that exposes his supernatural powers and subsequently arrests and 'disappears' its author (p. 244).

The blank page and its resonances of colonial and diasporic absence and loss is literalised in the figure of a faceless man. Like the mongoose, the same character appears to both Beli and Oscar, which detracts from the idea that it is a singular delusion. Beli is the first to see him: 'a man sitting in a rocking chair in front of one of the hovels had no face and he waved at her', a forebodingly insincere act of friendliness (p. 135). His complicity in the fukú is made clear as his presence augurs Beli's near-fatal beating. Oscar's vision of the faceless man is expressed with similarly unnerving imagery: 'there was only a lone man sitting in his rocking chair out in front of his ruined house and for a moment Oscar could have sworn the dude had no face' (p. 298). It precedes his own beating up by corrupt policemen. Yunió echoes

³³ Díaz and Talks at Google, 'The Brief Wondrous Lives of Oscar Wao'.

Rushdie's Saleem's alternative history of India in *Midnight's Children* in the way he depicts how the powerful control narratives. Yuniors focus, however, is not on what is wrong in the dominant narrative, but what is missing. The faceless man and the blank pages break up the continuity of personal and national histories so that there is disruption to the network of allusions and stories that make up a full personal narrative.

The blank pages somewhat complicate Jennifer Harford Vargas's claim that Díaz's book 'simultaneously foregrounds these absent presences and provides a narrative space in which repressed stories can be dictated and chronicled in the archive of fiction'.³⁴ Although the text explicitly draws attention to these absences, Díaz's narrative often exacerbates these obfuscations rather than allowing space to reveal the hidden stories. This technique is examined in more detail in the section of this chapter on metafiction. As an example, in part of the tale that Lola narrates, she discusses an argument with her mother:

The last time she tried to whale on me it was because of my hair, but instead of cringing or running I punched her hand. It was a reflex more than anything. [...] She just stood there shaking [...], the smell of burning wig all around us. (p. 55)

She gives no contextual clue as to why there is a smell of burning wig or what the problem with her hair is, but the image is graphic and draws attention to the fact that something significant had clearly happened. Later in the book, the context is revealed and this conspicuous blank in the story is filled in: Lola had decided to shave her head:

The next day my mother threw the wig at me. You're going to wear this. [...] And if I see you without it on I'm going to kill you! I didn't say a word. I held the wig over the burner. Don't do it, she swore as the burner clicked. Don't you dare—[...] That was when she slapped at me, when I struck her hand and she snatched it back, like I was the fire. (p. 59)

³⁴ Jennifer Harford Vargas, 'Dictating a Zafa: The Power of Narrative Form in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*', *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 39.3 (2014), 8–30 (p. 23) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mluo34>>.

By mixing up the chronology and partially revealing a narrative element in order to highlight its concealment, Díaz shows how the present, particularly one marred by *páginas en blanco*, influences how we see the past. This hints at an interdependence of past and present, not merely a linear set of forward-moving influences. Díaz emphasises that this multidirectional relationship between past and present reinforces the deleterious consequences of interruptions to those connections by secrecy and omissions: symptoms of *fukú* that damage migrant relationships.

Díaz's portrayal of the curse underscores an interplay of connection and disconnection in binding Oscar's family to the colonial past while filling family narratives with secrets and gaps. He reiterates this notion through the motif of the blank page, in turn represented by his magical realist faceless man. The technique thus confirms the contemporary trend towards literalising the theme with the supernatural. Despite the differences to the other selected texts in location and the transnationalities of his characters, Díaz's novel shows remarkable crossovers in bringing attention to the seeming contradiction of connection and simultaneous disconnection in varying transnational experiences. *Fukú* is symptomatic of the colonial control over narratives in dictatorships. It represents breakdowns in networks of affiliations between history and family. It leads to racist treatment, poverty and isolation, felt by migrants such as Oscar and Beli living in twentieth-century US. Díaz thus brings together the real-world historical traumas of the European colonial project in the Americas, the tragic dictatorships that followed independence, and the poverty, racism and abuse that accompany lower-class immigration. Díaz's transnational modifications to magical realist techniques combine science fiction with superstition and revise real-world history as supernatural. These techniques highlight the inadequacy of realistic representations to convey such a complex web of interconnected disconnections.

Intertextual relationality in the battle between supervillain Trujillo and superhero Oscar

In this section I examine how Díaz expands his supernatural network of interconnections beyond plot elements and into the frames of reference of science fiction, fantasy and comic books. The allusions centre on the experiences of Oscar, who is an avid reader of these 'speculative genres' (p. 43). Many of the innovations

Díaz makes regarding these elements bypass standard definitions of magical realism. Because of these differences, Díaz has been credited by Bautista as creating a new offshoot of the mode which he calls 'comic book realism'.³⁵ Yet, like the mongoose, Díaz's text shows the relational way such modes may be combined. Díaz's innovations interact with the more overt aspects of the supernatural in the text. In doing so they metaphorically enact the text's themes, thereby engaging in the shifts outlined in this thesis. This section first argues that Díaz uses magical realism, not merely as an element within the narrative but as a genre, which he combines with other writing styles commonly associated with specific locations. In this intertextual way he emphasises the novel's transnationality and the characters' relationships with the cultures with which they interact. The narrator's intertextual network of allusions from speculative fiction predominates in the text's characterisation of Trujillo, suggesting that the extent of the dictator's influence can only be represented through these exaggerated references. However, I argue the references are more than merely denotational as they directly interact with the narrative structure of the novel. Díaz adopts the supernatural in a comic book version of a battle between good and evil. Oscar's transnationality, represented by the novel's mixture of North and Latin American genres, is pitted against Trujillo and the dis-connective fukú, embodied by the hostile essentialism and discrimination Oscar faces. However, I also contend that Oscar's quest fails, showing how, in transnational circumstances, clear binaries of race, nationality and history damage the relational qualities needed to defeat the curse.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao echoes Oscar's fluid relationship with the United States and the Dominican Republic in combining styles closely associated with his dual heritages. The novel is told through a dense array of intertextual allusions to many different genres, presenting a thoroughly transnational narrative. Díaz enters new territory in fusing many of these genres into one story. In addition to magical realism, which he and other authors have extricated from its territorialised moorings, the novel also engages with the quintessentially Latin American dictator novel genre. His text joins García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), Asturias's *The President* (1946) and Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat* (2000) in depicting the effects of dictatorial regimes. Díaz, like Julia Alvarez and

³⁵ Bautista, 'Comic Book Realism'.

Edwidge Danticat, expands the dictator novel to the US, his text bridging dictator and migrant narratives. However, he then complicates simple delineations of genre by combining these Latin American styles with science fiction and comic books. These concentrate in North American cultural output in the DC and Marvel worlds, but he also references British and Japanese books and films. The novel itself, like Oscar, is therefore a transnational negotiation of Dominican and American influences.

Díaz implies that lenses such as science fiction and fantasy are more representational of the experiences of Dominicans and Dominican migrants in the US than mundane realism. This suggestion again further closes the gap between the supernatural and the reality he depicts, a trend that continues to develop in the twenty-first century. Standard realism, and arguably standard magical realism, is not extreme enough to depict it, he suggests. This is particularly so during the 'heyday' of the curse, Trujillo's regime. Díaz's text most unambiguously underscores the unique aptness of speculative fiction when dealing with the dreadful levels of violence, control and abuse of power Trujillo exercised. Largely described in a series of footnotes throughout the text, Trujillo as agent of fukú is equated with Sauron, the evil presence in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954). This is not merely in their kindred evil but in the overwhelming extent of their power:

At first glance, [Trujillo] was just your prototypical Latin American caudillo, but his power was terminal in ways that few historians or writers have ever truly captured or, I would say, imagined. He was our Sauron. (p. 10)

Díaz even attributes to him a 'shrill' voice in keeping with a typical archvillain in other examples of the speculative genres (p. 218). However, the novel does not use this extreme supernatural allusion as an exaggeration but almost as an understatement. Yunió describes Trujillo as even more insidious than Sauron. He states:

At the end of *The Return of the King*, Sauron's evil was taken by 'a great wind' and neatly 'blown away,' with no lasting consequences to our heroes; but Trujillo was too powerful, too toxic a radiation to be dispelled so easily. (p. 156)

The comparison emphasises why, if Trujillo is more malevolent and powerful than the purest evil of Tolkien's imagination, Oscar's speculative genres are the most accurate lenses through which Dominican history can be portrayed. Díaz's intertextual network is thus literalised in the depiction of Trujillo, whose preternatural ability to disrupt and control is demonstrated through fukú. His power is further expressed in terms of his sexual appetite and domination:

It's a well-documented fact that in Trujillo's DR if you were of a certain class and you put your cute daughter anywhere near El Jefe, within the week she'd be mamando his ripio like an old pro and *there would be nothing you could do about it!* (p. 217)

The causal link between predatory sexuality, nationality and the curse is underlined throughout the novel and through history: the Taínos' demise began with European sexual appetite for local women; Abelard's imprisonment was because of Trujillo coveting his daughter; Beli is beaten up because of her dalliance with members of the Trujillato; and the story tragically ends with Oscar being killed thanks to his involvement with a corrupt police officer's girlfriend. Díaz suggests that his appropriation of the unusual resources of fantasy and science fiction in which to narrate this history is a necessary alteration.

Díaz engages in a relatively frequent but less characteristic technique of magical realism by incorporating elements of the supernatural into the structure of the text as well as within its contents. Asturias's mythical quests in *Men of Maize* follow the structures of the Mayan *Popul Vuh* and Okri augments the supernatural aspects of Yoruba folklore in *The Famished Road* with a cyclicity expressed in Yoruba oral tradition. Likewise, Díaz couches his entire narrative in references to these speculative genres, a framework which renders his fantastical story more meaningful than realism to Oscar. However, Díaz's use of structural aspects of fantasy and science fiction to interact with plot elements in the context of transnationality constitutes a new vision of magical realism. In contrast to Trujillo, comic book references are applied to Oscar in the form of fantasies of being a superhero. Oscar dreams about being 'some kind of plátano Doc Savage, a supergenius who combined world-class martial artistry with deadly firearms proficiency' who saves a girl 'from a pack of irradiated ghouls and together they'd set

out across a ravaged America in search of a better tomorrow' (p. 27). These fantasies place Oscar in opposition to Trujillo in a dynamic of comic book superhero and nemesis. In this figurative battle Oscar represents transnational connectivity, against the violence and misogyny of Trujillo and his superpower, fukú. Although discrete plot elements found in science fiction and fantasy such as dragons or aliens are largely absent, the structure of the narrative echoes the quests emblematic of fantasy fiction. L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) and *The Lord of the Rings* are both regularly referenced in the text. The novel's plot thus structurally resembles Oscar embarking on a quest to defeat the evil Trujillo. In completing this quest, Oscar aims to dispel the curse put on him and the island by its agents, Columbus and Trujillo. This aligns Oscar with unlikely heroes such as Frodo and Bilbo in Tolkien's fiction defeating almost insurmountably superior evil.

Trujillo and Oscar are thus transformed into supervillain and superhero locked in battle. This battle takes place in an arena constructed around Oscar attempting to find belonging within a social group. Unfortunately for Oscar, the network of genres colludes with fukú to create a network that disconnects Oscar from his peers, denying him belonging ironically because of his transnationality and his love of these genres. Oscar loves writing as well as reading speculative fiction: given his ancestry, his ambition is to become the 'Dominican Tolkien' (p. 192). However, such an easy compatibility is denied him by his peers. Oscar's love for speculative fiction and his Dominican heritage are portrayed by Yunió as utterly mutually exclusive. Oscar is outcast from his community because he is too overweight and nerdy to be seen as Dominican. He is vividly characterised in terms of 'geek' culture, 'painting his D&D miniatures or reading the latest Stephen King' (p. 18). He is simultaneously framed with pejoratives, Yunió identifying Oscar's hobbies with social ostracism. He is, for example, outcast as 'a loser with a capital L', reduced to a derogatory 'fat, sci-fi-reading nerd', and tormented with taunts such as 'Hey Oscar, are there faggots on Mars?' (pp. 17–20).

As a result, his label as a geek nullifies the Dominican side of his identity as far as his peers are concerned. When his schoolmates tell him 'You're not Dominican', he clings pitifully to his sense of nationality: 'But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy' (p. 49); 'Harold would say, Tú no eres nada de dominicano, but Oscar would insist unhappily, I am Dominican, I am' (p. 180). These two mirrored sentences in

Spanish and English, as Oscar responds in a different language to the accusation, insinuate that he is clumsy in adopting the appropriate code for his peers. They will not permit a non-essentialist Dominican nerd, and the ensuing loneliness causes him to attempt suicide. Like Oyeyemi's Jess, his transnationality falls foul of these essentialist notions. Despite his links to both American and Dominican culture, he belongs not to both but to neither: 'The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican' (p. 49). Sara Suleri notes that the 'devastating rhetoric of "us" and "them" [...] beleaguers issues of identity formation today'.³⁶ Despite the thirty years since Suleri's comment, and despite numerous improvements in life quality for many migrants, more recent studies find that even among highly skilled immigrants, narratives of 'us' versus 'them' continue to beset immigrant experiences.³⁷ Such distinctions may even be used by migrants as a source of solidarity when discrimination damages their prospects. Díaz's portrayal of Oscar's struggle demonstrates that this same rhetoric can cause significant internal trauma as he is unable to define himself in terms of 'us' or 'them'. Díaz applies the supernatural elements of US nerd culture to depict this denial of common humanity. As a metaphor, it shows, like Jess's narrative does, that maintaining connections across nations can cause disconnections within social groups. Loneliness thus becomes the predominant characteristic of Oscar's life, an isolation that is intimately tied to his condition as a transnational young adult failing to reconcile his dual identity.

Unfortunately, his plan for defeating the fukú is doomed. He misguidedly pursues belonging to his peers through their own association with Trujillo-esque sexual predation. Oscar's quest to restore connectivity therefore comes to an abject halt when it coincides with Trujillo's signature misogyny. Oscar ultimately seeks cultural belonging by losing his virginity, an act which his peers regard as a fundamental prerequisite for acceptance as a male Dominican. This quest remains Oscar's explicit obsession throughout the text: 'no one, and I mean *no one*, was into

³⁶ Sara Suleri, 'Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition', *Critical Inquiry*, 18.4 (1992), 756–69 (p. 756).

³⁷ Dulini Fernando and Gerardo Patriotta, "'Us versus Them': Sensemaking and Identity Processes in Skilled Migrants' Experiences of Occupational Downgrading', *Journal of World Business*, 55.4 (2020), 101109 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2020.101109>>.

[women] the way Oscar was. To him they were the beginning and end, the Alpha and the Omega, the DC and the Marvel' (p. 173). Yunior links this to his status as a Dominican male, a quality which is reduced singularly to the ability to attract women. Yunior makes explicit claims about what being a Dominican male means: 'no Dominican male has ever died a virgin' (p. 174). Yunior and other Dominican males emphasise that success with females is the most characteristic hallmark of Dominican masculinity; because Oscar 'Had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male', the 'dude never had much luck with the females (how very un-Dominican of him)' (p. 19; p. 11). It proves to be a capacity which Oscar completely lacks: he 'couldn't have pulled a girl if his life depended on it' (p. 20). Oscar's 'nerdiness' and obesity obstruct him from becoming Dominican, the essence of which he perceives to be a quality directly aligned with *fukú*. But such predatory masculinity furthers rather than diminishes the agency of the *fukú*. The impossibility of this quest leads inevitably to his death: although he finally does manage to fulfil his dream of losing his virginity, it is with a woman whose jealous partner kills him.

Although using speculative fiction as a metaphor for these transnational tensions does not constitute a typical usage of magical realism, it hints at a shift towards metafictional usages that Samarasan's text likewise suggested. Díaz deploys the supernatural outside the narrative and into the diegetic level of the narrator to help express the incomprehensibility of experiences like Oscar's. It binds Oscar to his transnationality by blurring the boundaries between the dictator fiction associated with Latin American authors and the science fiction prevalent in American literature. In this comic book metaphor, Oscar seeks (but fails) to re-establish the relatedness of family and the healthy connectivity which colonialism, Trujillo and economic inequality have severed. By drastically altering magical realist tenets in both the sources of the supernatural and their use as figurative and structural devices, Díaz expresses the difficulties facing people like Oscar in negotiating the social and personal pressures of growing up in transnational environments. It shows that the curse, through the misogyny and poverty characterising Oscar's social environment, is a real deterrent to maintaining the fluid connections inherent in transnational lives.

'Like recognizes like': Magical realism, metaphor and metafiction in Yunior's blurred lines and dictatorial narrative

The framing of the superhero and supervillain, the intertextual references and the slang that proliferate the text are expressed through Yuniór, the self-titled 'player' that narrates the story of Oscar and his family (p. 185). Díaz contributes most greatly to apparent shifts in contemporary usages of magical realism through an interplay of Yuniór's metafiction and metaphor. As with other aspects explored throughout this chapter and the thesis, these tighten the relationship between the text's transnational concerns and magical realism. In this section I examine how Díaz's metafiction interacts with the mode to articulate the novel's, and the thesis's, overarching concern with relational connection and disconnection. I identify Díaz's contribution towards increased self-referentiality of the mode. However, I also argue that Díaz moves his magical realism more literally into metafiction by claiming the novel itself to be a counter to *fukú*. Yuniór thus blurs the distinctions between reality, the supernatural and metaphor as Samarasan's narrator does. This change in technique allows Díaz to reiterate the novel's themes on the metafictional level by producing a sense of paradox as the narrator simultaneously enacts the curse upon the reader. In doing so he engages with Rushdie's unreliable narrator but reconfigures the trope as a further metaphorical representation of breakdowns in familial relationships.

Like Samarasan's narrator, Yuniór makes intertextual allusions to magical realism. Díaz's central contribution to this recent inclination is by incorporating it into the metafictional level of the text. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* joins other texts that supplement its supernatural elements with metafiction, including *Midnight's Children*, Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1987) and Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* (2005). Many of these elements occur in a series of footnotes that Díaz/Yuniór uses to elaborate on many Dominican historical and cultural issues. He brings attention to both Alvarez and Vargas Llosa, somewhat critically commenting on their own dictator narratives (p. 83; p. 90 n. 9). He likewise metafictionally distances himself from magical realism by referring to 'Mcondo', in reference to Alberto Fuguet's criticism of the mode having saturated the Latin American market (p. 6).³⁸

³⁸ Fuguet's position is summarised succinctly by Bautista:

In his essay 'I Am Not a Magical Realist,' the Chilean writer expresses his frustration at having his literary works repeatedly rejected by publishers who came to expect and demand magical realism from all Latin American writers in the wake of the enormous success of García

However, Yunior does not only make reference to the mode in these metafictional elements. The narrator claims the novel itself to be supernatural. Yunior invokes magical realism within this narrative space between the narrator and the reader by declaring that telling his story can overturn the curse inflicting Oscar. He explains in the prologue that the counterspell to the fukú is a 'simple word': 'zafa' (p. 6). In telling Oscar's story, Yunior claims to be attempting to undo the fukú: 'I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell' (p. 10). Fukú is cast through controlling and withholding knowledge, manifesting in secrecy and breakdowns in communications; zafa is achieved through uncovering those untold stories, thereby restoring the connectivity between them. His depiction of zafa retains magical realist traits inasmuch as Yunior deals with it as casually as any supernatural event in Macondo. In doing so it muddies the distinction between fantasy and reality characteristic of magical realist deployment. But in shifting the supernatural into the metafictional realm, Díaz is able to underscore the novel's emphasis on relatedness.

Yunior enacts the metafictional superpower zafa to magically fight alongside Oscar against Trujillo and fukú. His commentary undermines Trujillo by denying him his dictatorial power to control Yunior's narrative. Most of Yunior's discussion of Trujillo is written in footnotes to the main text. This physically lowers Trujillo to the bottom of the page, relegating him to the margins of Oscar's story. When he is discussed, Yunior mocks him relentlessly, giving him such monikers as 'Failed Cattle Thief' and 'Mr Friday the Thirteenth'.³⁹ Trujillo himself appears only once in person in the text, which largely denies him his voice and thus his power to dictate. Zafa then resembles a superpower in comic books, with Yunior, similarly to Oscar, taking

Márquez. Fuguet argues that because his own upbringing in modern Chile was more influenced by a global Western culture than by any traditional or magical beliefs, magical realism was in no way the proper form in which to express his experiences. In contrast to the sense of magic that characterized García Márquez's mythical town of Macondo, Fuguet describes a thoroughly modern and often banal world defined by Apple Macintoshes, condos, and McDonald's, a world he subversively renames as McOndo. (Bautista, 'Comic Book Realism', p. 51)

³⁹ Vargas collates some of Yunior's terms: "Failed Cattle Thief" (2n1, 214, 217), "Fuckface" (2n1, 155n19, 216), "Mr. Friday the Thirteenth" (225), and the "Dictatingest Dictator who ever Dictated" (80). [...] He satirically praises the Trujillo regime as "the first modern kleptocracy" (3n1) [...]. He even creates new and bilingually witty words to name Trujillo's abuses, deeming his regime, for example, "the world's first culocracy" (217). He hilariously mocks Trujillo as the "consummate culocrat" (154), crowns him "Number-One Bellaco" (217).' (Vargas, 'Dictating a Zafa', p. 13).

the role as superhero against the archvillain Trujillo. Zafa underscores the power of connectivity: communication, the relationship between the past and present, and the network of affinities that tie Oscar and Beli to Dominican history.

Díaz develops this technique in such a way that it mirrors the experiences of contradiction between connection and disconnection identified throughout this thesis. Like Oscar, Yunior's zafa fails to defeat the curse precisely because he paradoxically deploys fukú while claiming to attempt to overthrow it. He explicitly parallels the destructive power Trujillo exercised regarding masculinity and oppressive misogyny. Yunior's promiscuity and sexism is explicit and open, his reference to it sounding not like contrition but like bragging: 'Me, who was fucking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches at the same time and that wasn't even counting the side-sluts I scooped at the parties and the clubs' (p. 185). Trujillo's destructive sexual superpower is replicated by Yunior's predatory attitude, making him resemble the dictator he otherwise attempts to undermine.

Díaz's references and mix of Spanish and English language further his contribution to fukú to one extent. It suggests a combative postcolonial sentiment of linguistic agency while simultaneously conforming to a more collegial depiction of organic transnational language. Whether inadvertently or invidiously, Yunior metafictionally also casts fukú on the reader by creating páginas en blanco in his own narrative through multiple concealments. A large amount of criticism on Díaz's work focuses on its substantial use of Spanish and Spanglish, which has caused many readers to complain of the novel's incomprehensibility.⁴⁰ Díaz refuses to italicise or translate Spanish words, stating as his reason in interviews that 'Spanish is not a minority language' and therefore needs no differentiation from English.⁴¹ He also suggested that it is his 'revenge on English' for his being forced to learn it when he

⁴⁰ Ana María Manzananas-Calvo states that most Anglo-Latinx authors give some form of help to monolingual readers, through direct translation, making meaning clear through context or 'narratorial paraphrasing' (Ana María Manzananas-Calvo, 'From Locus Classicus to Locus Lumpen: Junot Díaz's "Aurora"', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 39.2 (2016), 39–52 (p. 46)

<<https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.39.2.03>>). Certainly, other writers discussing the Trujillato such as Alvarez use both italics and translations, and works such as Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998) keep non-English to a bare minimum.

⁴¹ Diógenes Céspedes, Silvio Torres-Saillant, and Junot Díaz, 'Fiction Is the Poor Man's Cinema: An Interview with Junot Díaz', *Callaloo*, 23.3 (2000), 892–907 (p. 904)

<<https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2000.0131>>. An early British edition of Díaz's debut book *Drown* included a glossary which Díaz fought to remove (Allison Fagan, 'Translating in the Margins: Attending to Glossaries in Latina/o Literature', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 39.3 (2016), 57–75 (p. 62) <<https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.39.3.05>>).

migrated to the US.⁴² This applies both to direct linguistic translation and the majority of local cultural translation. Díaz's mix of Spanish and slang is frequent and disruptive to English grammar, demonstrating a clear resistance to being 'translated' into what Díaz disputes to be the dominant language. It also demonstrates the disconnections in communication that can occur when cultures intersect. At the same time, the mix is certainly not an unequivocally subversive strategy against monolingualists: it can also be read as an expression of lived language for migrant cultures. Frequent code switching is a characteristic of many bilingual communities: as Yasemin Yildiz explains, 'the postmigrants of a transnational age do not necessarily remain in [...] monolingualism but rather may actively mix multiple languages'.⁴³ Therefore, while Díaz's own extratextual commentary suggests a postcolonial oppositionality, the novel demonstrates a shift to a more fluid approach to language. Marcela Polanco corroborates this relational position, arguing that bilingualism and magical realism share the capacity to hold two 'stories simultaneously, preserving the relationship between them'.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, large numbers of readers have taken it as subversive, feeling that they have been 'locked out' by the Spanish and even giving up on the book because Díaz has 'failed them'.⁴⁵ Yunior therefore casts the curse on to at least some of his monolingual readers. For them, Díaz effectively recreates the sense of disconnection and dislocation that typify Oscar's experience of transnationality.

This partial evocation of the curse is augmented by narratorial 'blanks', gaps in the stories he tells of Oscar and his family, that echo Trujillo's censorship. Yunior's fragmented narrative hides important plot features, and despite his omniscience, he refrains from filling in certain gaps: 'Even your Watcher [a nickname Yunior gives to himself] has his silences, his páginas en blanco' (p. 149). As if to corroborate this dictatorial secrecy, Yunior hides throughout half the text, masquerading as an omniscient narrator who only introduces himself as a character on page 167: 'It started with me. The year before Oscar fell, I suffered some nuttiness

⁴² Céspedes, Torres-Saillant, and Díaz, 'Fiction is the Poor Man's Cinema', p. 904.

⁴³ Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University, 2012), p. 171 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13xocqr.9>>.

⁴⁴ Marcela Polanco, 'Rethinking Narrative Therapy: An Examination of Bilingualism and Magical Realism', *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 40.1 (2021), 61–74 (p. 61).

⁴⁵ Susan Balée, 'Caves, Masks, and Code Switching: The Inventive Narratives of Junot Díaz', *The Hudson Review*, 66.2 (2013), 337–52 (p. 348); Fagan, p. 63.

of my own.' He also disguises his own authority by seemingly offering the narrative voice to other characters. Lola appears to become the first-person narrator in two chapters. The chapters almost exclusively suggest that Yunior has relinquished control, until, close to the end of the first, Lola says: 'that's not what I wanted to tell you' (p. 72). 'You' in this context can only refer to Yunior. Again, in the next chapter that Lola narrates, 'you' reappears in the first paragraph: 'It felt like the deepest of treacheries to me. I wouldn't feel that again until I broke with you' (p. 205). This suggests that he is reporting, and therefore controlling, what Lola had said.

The double narrator–character and the narratorial subterfuge expose the artificiality of authoritative narratives, which Díaz further underlines by highlighting the fictitiousness of its narrator. Díaz blurs the distinctions between himself and Yunior as they both claim to share a number of parallels. For example, both of them say they used to deliver pool tables as a job, and Díaz claims that his mother, like Beli, had scars on her back as a result of something that she would not talk about. He conflates them further by adding footnotes to the novel's footnotes on a website, so that it is impossible to tell if the commentary is Yunior's or Díaz's.⁴⁶ In highlighting the fictionality of his author-narrator, Díaz asks the reader to question assumptions about whether any narrative 'dictated' by such a narratorial authority may be trusted. The strategy suggests that, as a narrator–dictator, Yunior is just as guilty as fukú for the severing of Oscar's family connectivity.

In questioning authority and in Yunior's unreliability, Díaz shares Samarasan's engagement in the increasing trend to use examples of magical realism, particularly *Midnight's Children*, intertextually and self-referentially. However, Díaz deploys this unreliability more directly as an embodiment of his magical realism and thematic content. Díaz is explicit in these links. Yunior draws attention to Díaz's and Rushdie's parallel connections to dictatorship:

Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that's too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just

⁴⁶ Junot Díaz, 'Junot Díaz', *Genius*, 2022 <<https://genius.com/artists/Junot-diaz>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

know competition when they see it. Same with writers. Like, after all, recognizes like. (p. 166 n. 11)⁴⁷

Yunior converges with Rushdie's protagonist, but while Saleem suggests that the truth cannot be known, Díaz's narrator focuses on where it is hidden. Like Saleem, despite appearing at times authoritative and omniscient, Yunior sometimes recognises his narratorial mistakes:

In my first draft, Samaná was actually Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert in all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa. Beautiful rivers but no beaches. Leonie was also the one who informed me that the perrito (see first paragraphs of chapter one, 'GhettoNerd at the End of the World') wasn't popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn't change, just liked the image too much. Forgive me, historians of popular dance, forgive me! (p. 132 n. 17)⁴⁸

The fact that Yunior highlights a mistake made at the start of the novel is a reminder that the entire narrative is susceptible to error. Also, while Saleem reflects on but asserts his own centrality in the creation of his narrative, Yunior makes a false demonstration of relinquishing his centrality by exposing another error.⁴⁹ Yunior tells us that Oscar had met Ybón, the woman with whom he falls in love, on the street: he 'bumped into her [...] during breaks in his writing [when] he would go for walks along the hot, bland cul-de-sacs' (p. 280). In a short section entitled 'La Inca Speaks', La Inca demurs: 'He didn't meet her on the street like he told you. His

⁴⁷ Díaz has also commented in interviews on the overlap between dictator and author: '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' (Meghan O'Rourke, 'An Interview with Pulitzer Prize-Winning Author Junot Díaz', *Slate*, 2008 <<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2008/04/an-interview-with-pulitzer-prize-winning-author-junot-diaz.html>> [accessed 16 November 2022]).

⁴⁸ Compare with Saleem, who confesses his mistakes but refuses to change his narrative:

Rereading my work, I have discovered an error in chronology. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi occurs, in these pages, on the wrong date. But I cannot say, now, what the actual sequence of events might have been; in my India, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time. (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 166)

⁴⁹ Saleem asks: 'Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything – to re-write the whole history... purely in order to place myself in a central role?' (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 166).

cousins, los idiotas, took him to a cabaret and that's where he first saw her' (p. 289). As unreliable narrators, Yunior and Saleem expose the prejudices of assuming an authoritative version of reality, which parallel their depictions of supernatural elements casting doubt over both reality and its authorship. However, Yunior's unreliability connects more explicitly with the story's supernatural aspects as his dictatoralism and errata actively contribute to his own definition of the curse. It breaks down the network of stories that could lead to the amelioration of traumatic colonial and dictatorial history. Yunior undermines his own counter curse and instead contributes to fukú. This metafictional reconfiguration of magical realism renders it unrecognisable to its more conventional iterations. Yet, like the other authors in this project, through the interaction of metafiction with the supernatural, Díaz plants the notion that relational ties are inevitably accompanied by conflict. It emphasises the fact that magical realism remain is a powerful vehicle for expressing the tensions, incomprehensibility, contradictoriness and trauma that characterise these aspects of transnational experience.

Shazam! The relational counter curse

Although the curse echoes Samarasan's prophecies in its sense of inevitability and predestination, Díaz shifts tone at the very end of his novel. He instead joins Hamid in conveying a more optimistic message about an increase in relational approaches for migrants and their descendants. Díaz offers a means to alleviate some of the emotional torment that is caused by the forces of oppression and atomisation. Again, Díaz depicts this hope through the lenses of his repertoire of speculative fiction.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao's narrator implies that this hope is formed through family. Yunior suggests that through maintaining continued connections between familial relationships, there is real potential to find, to some degree, a cure to the curse. La Inca, Beli's aunt and Oscar's great-aunt, reveals the critical importance of family. Yunior depicts her as a near-divine 'ageless' saviour (p. 318). Again, this portrayal is refracted through his characteristic lens of fantasy as he describes her as 'the family's very own Galadriel', an enemy of Sauron (p. 274). La Inca's prayers help rescue Beli by invoking the mongoose, and she helps Beli escape to the US. She also allows Oscar contact with his Dominican heritage by taking care

of him when he visits the island. Family connection thus becomes essential in combatting the Dominican curse that attempts to sever such ties.

Yunior finally suggests that *zafa* is most powerfully invoked through a specific emphasis on relatedness. This invocation relies on nourishing the relationships between individuals rather than the individuals themselves. This is most clearly enabled by family. Oscar's sister Lola has a daughter, Isis, years after Oscar's death. Yunior describes her only very briefly, but in the small passage there is a suggestion that Isis demonstrates relational qualities that may restore the numerous disconnections thematising the novel and the plights of its characters. Yunior only makes one statement about her language: 'Speaks Spanish and English' (p. 329). Despite the fact that Yunior has clearly been speaking both languages throughout the text, the simple synergy of Yunior's statement implies that her languages are more complementary and relational, in contrast to the tumultuous and rebellious contest of Yunior's Spanglish. These differing linguistic traits correlate with Isis's and Oscar's divergent emotional well-being. While Oscar felt despair in his concept of identity, which took similarly jarred and chaotic directions as the narratorial language, Isis is a 'happy kid, as far as these things go. Happy!' (p. 329). This is not a sudden and miraculous erasure of all the hardships Beli and Oscar faced: 'as far as things go' is a reminder that Isis's more comfortable transnationality will likely still undergo some elements of poverty, racism and questions of identity. Nevertheless, Yunior suggests that the increased relational syncretism of her identity may enable her to thwart the curse and restore the networks it inhibited: 'if she's as smart and as brave as I'm expecting she'll be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to [fukú]' (p. 330). Yunior imagines that he will reconnect Isis with her family: 'I'll bring out the pictures of the three of us from back in the day, and [...] I'll take her down to my basement [...] where I store [Oscar's] books, his games, his manuscript, his comic books, his papers'. He also highlights her physical connections to her relatives: 'she has her mother's legs, her uncle's eyes' (p. 330). Isis's sense of self is endowed with a coherent knowledge of her ancestors' history. It acknowledges itself in terms of a network of connections that interact relationally rather than as essentialised cultural fragments. Díaz suggests that such a configuration will produce individuals that are less dominated by the dislocation and

homelessness often depicted as characteristic of the lives of migrants and their children.

Díaz further emphasises Isis's relationality using his magical realist repertoire sourced from speculative fiction. Yunior describes Oscar's niece as 'Neither Captain Marvel nor Billy Batson, but the lightning' (p. 329). Díaz explains the significance of describing Isis as lightning in an interview:

Billy Batson, the normal guy, suddenly says the word shazam! and turns into this superbeing [Captain Marvel]. And in some ways it's basically what happens. Santo Domingo's typical-normal, we think the Third World's commiseration and suffering is normal, and the United States is this superbeing. And so I kept wondering, What the fuck? Where's my role in this? And you find yourself neither. The joke is you're neither Billy Batson or Captain Marvel, you're basically shazam!, you're the word, you're that lightning which transforms, that runs back and forth between them and holds them together, and I think part of this narrative was attempting to write the lightning, because I don't think I could've done anything else.⁵⁰

Isis represents not the demarcated and isolated nodes in the network of Dominicanness and Americanness, but the reciprocal connection and interaction between the two. Oscar struggled to reconcile his need to be Dominican, to delimit himself as belonging to a single nation. His pain highlights the incompatibility between such clearly demarcated categories and his fluid and proportional nationalities. Isis, on the other hand, a generation further from Beli's exile, reconciles them by being neither nationality but the relatedness between them. This hints that she and her generation may represent a collective connectivity that finally lifts the curse of disconnection that troubled Oscar. That Yunior uses another science fiction reference to make sense of this connectivity emphasises that Díaz, as well as many other magical realist authors, sees the fantastic as an articulate means of expressing the complexity of transnational experience.

⁵⁰ Junot Díaz, David Shook, and Armando Celayo, 'In Darkness We Meet: A Conversation with Junot Díaz', *World Literature Today*, 82.2 (2008), 12–17 (p. 17).

Similarly to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz's more recently published children's book *Islandborn* (2018) details a young girl's attempt to understand her transnational self by imagining her Dominican 'home' land. Díaz characteristically expresses his academic thought through slang in an interview about the book, discussing the assumption that different senses of nationality are too often considered mutually exclusive and incompatible:

Think of it not as some weird, bizarre buffet where you only get one damn choice. That's like a sinister, sadistic buffet – how about you get to choose more than one thing? You could literally be Dominican and from New Jersey and there's no conflict. Fill the damn plate.⁵¹

Díaz's extensive innovations to magical realism substantiate this transnational complementarity. He mixes magical realist tropes both old and new, combining multiple styles, registers and genres and enacting intertextual and thematic links across continents that mirror transnational networks. His changes to the mode exemplify the trends identified in this thesis: Díaz shifts towards interiority in his representations of the mongoose; he closes the distance between the supernatural, the theme of the novel and the reality it depicts with his curse; he deterritorialises his supernatural elements and looks towards the future in his transnational, magical-realist–science-fiction resources; and he contributes to increasing intertextuality with older, postcolonial magical realist texts. Díaz's narratorial network works relationally, reciprocally informing and influencing the novel's impact. He, like Oyeyemi, Hamid and Samarasen, suggests that experiences of transnationality are likewise relational in nature. Cultures, nationalities, family, peers, are all fluidly moving, all interconnected, all changing in relationship to one another. It is only in accepting this relatedness, in focusing on relationships and not on fixed ideas of race, ethics, nations and so on, that many of the hardships caused by varying forms of discrimination can be lessened. In the terminology of Díaz's speculative fiction we all must consider ourselves not to be Billy Batson or Captain Marvel but Shazam!, the lightning, the communication, the relationality. It is by accepting our experiences as

⁵¹ Junot Díaz and The Daily Show with Trevor Noah, 'Junot Díaz: Learning to Inhabit Multiple Worlds in *Islandborn*', online video recording, *YouTube*, 2018
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jo2uNyjJONc>> [accessed 16 November 2022].

relational that we can all find true belonging. These reconfigurations ensure that transnational magical realism counters Graham Huggan's accusation at the turn of the century that the mode had become 'increasingly formulaic'.⁵² *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* testifies how the mode can be reimagined to express the underlying commonality unifying transnationalities.

⁵² Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 71.

Conclusion

The literary mode of magical realism, formulated in the twentieth century, has retained much of its cultural significance. However, the techniques adopted to engender its effects have changed consistently. In the intervening seven decades since it was first conceived, many of the dramatic social, intellectual and political changes that have taken place have been captured in novels that use magical realism to illuminate those developments. During the early decades of the twenty-first century, in the heightened global interconnectedness of transnational economics, business, communication and living, the mode has continued to evolve. However, the critical conversation about magical realism has not kept pace with these developments. In 2021, Silvia Mejía takes a stance that I argue exemplifies the reliance on magical realist readings of the past. She contends that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* has ‘stripped’ the mode ‘of its power to subvert imaginatively the postcolonial order’.¹ She further claims that the mode ‘has gone from being a subversive aesthetics that works to destabilize hegemonic discourses to becoming a rather tamed marker of difference, useful for emphasizing the contrast between US mainstream culture and the Latinx experience’.² While Mejía usefully recognises a change in the deployment of magical realism, the idea that it has become a tamed, weakened effect relies on maintaining a postcolonial perspective on the mode. It implies that Díaz’s text should somehow be compared to examples of Latin American magical realism in terms of its oppositional, subversive power alone. By suggesting that the mode can be understood generically according to US and Latinx experience alone, Mejía betrays a fossilisation of perspective. The argument dismisses the extensive deployment of the mode outside of the Americas and in transnational contexts. I argue instead that subversiveness and contestatory constructions have made way for more nuanced relational frameworks to explore cultural exchanges. I suggest they strengthen rather than weaken its magic: they more closely reproduce complex contemporary experiences than the combative imaginative interventions of the past.

This project aimed to broaden the framework of magical realism that was established in the twentieth century to take into account the changes that have been

¹ Mejía, *Caught in the Ethnographic Trap*, p. 217.

² Mejía, *Caught in the Ethnographic Trap*, p. 219.

made to the mode in transnational and twenty-first-century contexts. As outlined in the introduction, the changes do not necessarily mean the creation of a new mode, but rather a continuous shifting and evolving as new authors adapt and build on the techniques of their forbears. The selected texts substantiate the argument that there remains at the core of the mode certain characteristics, which allow comparison of texts across geographical and generational distances and which bridge the wide array of differences. Magical realist texts continue to depict the supernatural according to a prevailing world view; the texts in which those events occur are usually set at least partly in a generally recognisable version of the real world; most centrally to my thesis, characters typically make little or no effort to reconcile the impossibility of the supernatural events with their world views. These strategies have often been put to good effect in situations of cultural conflict and exchange, and many of magical realism's most well-known examples engage in these dynamics. As such, cultural exchange is a useful point of contact between magical realism and the social changes it has accompanied.

This study has identified six related areas of change made to magical realism in its sources, themes and literary techniques. The first and most conspicuous of these is the move towards deterritorialisation, in contrast to the emphasis on specific locations in most postcolonial contexts. Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* envisions a spirit child uprooted from Nigeria and relocated to the UK. Samarasan's *Evening is the Whole Day* depicts supernatural elements in the transnational environment of the elites of multicultural Malaysia. Díaz's mongoose in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* appears across times and locations. Hamid's *Exit West* expands this point to the truly global, thoroughly dislocating its portals from specific sites.

As the locations shift, so authors of contemporary magical realism have widened the repertoire of sources for their supernatural elements. The typical reliance on the mythologies of cultures threatened by colonisation or globalisation has been subsumed as just one of many resources. In this study, I identified Hamid as focusing on a future-orientation as he develops a relationship between the supernatural and the expansion of communication technology. Díaz likewise turns towards the futuristic, developing science fiction and pop culture as magical realist tropes. Oyeyemi employs emblematic techniques of the twentieth century but clashes them with nascent twenty-first-century psychological understanding of trauma.

Samarasan points to intertextuality, referencing prior examples of the mode as another source.

As many transnational magical realist narratives now take place outside colonial sites even while maintaining ties with them, the third shift identified in this thesis sees a move away from portraying cultures in opposition. The supernatural now rarely stems from the beliefs of one culture in conflict with another. The binary models prevalent in the twentieth century are unable to reflect the more complex relationships between cultures that migrants and their children negotiate. Hamid parallels Oyeyemi in openly condemning oppositional ways of thinking; they both suggest that such ideological battles between cultures cause many harmful experiences. This is a drastic reworking of postcolonial magical realism which typically depicted, and imagined resistance to, cultural hegemony and oppression. Transnational novels often acknowledge these postcolonial ideas but intermingle them with more transnational complexities. Samarasan adopts such a technique by deploying gothic tropes that embodied the postcolonial heritage of the mode in regurgitating the unsavoury past. This is reflected in her wealthy, transnational family assuming a role similar to British colonial exploitation. However, she also adjusts the ghost trope by immortalising the classism of the family in a bigoted spirit, showing economics rather than nationality or race as the underpinnings of transnational injustice. She shows the links between the colonial past and present injustice while also highlighting changes to those circumstances. Díaz likewise makes the influences of colonialism explicit, but like Samarasan, his focus is not on the differences between groups and cosmologies but on the damage caused by perceptions of these differences.

This move from an oppositional framework has resulted in a fourth shift, from conceptions of resistance and subversive thinking towards representation of lived experiences. The supernatural emerges in many postcolonial magical realist texts as a creative reimagining of traumatic encounters, whether directly rescuing its characters or promoting the voices of those under threat. In a more contemporary, transnational context, it often represents rather than resists the circumstances being depicted, usually making little difference to the hardships befalling the characters. Oyeyemi's spirit child literalises the social pressure to essentialise a national identity which her protagonist experiences. Hamid's portals represent the technological advances and migration taking place in the twenty-first century. Díaz's curse arises

as commensurate with real-world political, social and familial injustices. Likewise, Samarasan's ghosts and prophecies reflect the text's emphasis on maintaining class difference. These events do little to ameliorate the difficult predicaments or promote the outlook of the marginalised or oppressed. Mejía suggests that this less defiant turn constitutes a return to 'some sort of ethnographic representation' in magical realism.³ While I agree this is a shift towards representation, the charge towards ethnography again relies on an assumption of the mode's attachment to a specific culture; transnational magical realism is precisely a move away from such delimitations. The supernatural elements act as metaphors of transnational realities, materialising in the perceptions of migrants and their descendants. The relationship between the real world and the supernatural ones the novelists create is therefore brought much closer in these texts than the more abstract manifestations in the past.

These representations relate less to broad political or social contexts than in many prior magical realist texts. The fifth shift distinguished in this thesis involves a move to the personal, towards representations of emotional experiences. Samarasan's ghosts, Díaz's mongoose and Oyeyemi's abiku exemplify the degree to which supernatural manifestations are increasingly restricted to individual and interior perceptions. This contrasts with the political and public incidents of Carpentier or García Márquez. In these transnational contexts, characters usually witness the supernatural in isolation; even in Hamid's global eruption of portals, characters' direct interactions with the supernatural are individual rather than collective. Subsequently, I argue this demonstrates a shift towards the experiential, affective aspects of transnationality: in *The Icarus Girl* the spirit represents the trauma of feeling split in two by social pressures; in *Exit West* the portals literalise sensations of disorientation and homelessness as national borders crumbled; in *Evening is the Whole Day* disgust, self-loathing and feelings of impotence are reproduced by the ghosts and prophecies; *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* evokes loneliness and fear when families are disconnected by larger social and economic forces. The supernatural reproduces the emotional tensions resulting from erstwhile colonialism, economics, globalisation, nationalism and other factors affecting transnational migrants and their children. These changes suggest that

³ Mejía, *Caught in the Ethnographic Trap*, p. 219.

transnationality, particularly for the children of migrants, is often an isolating experience, characterised by feeling disconnected from culture, peers and families.

The novels in this study all contribute to the sixth and overarching shift that this thesis has identified: transnational magical realist texts typically depict these difficult experiences as a result of tensions between the character's transnationality and fixed, atomistic ideologies. Migrants and their children expose unprecedented relationality between ideas of nationality, race, identity, class, family and history: conceptions that are often held to be permanent, independent and mutually exclusive. Their relationality confronts nationalism, xenophobia, racism, elitism, and strong emotional ties to tradition. Oyeyemi depicts transnational identities as interdependent, in tension with absolutist ideas; Hamid portrays nations as fluid processes as opposed to entrenched notions of nationalism; Samarasan reveals differences between economic groups to be arbitrary in comparison to a deeper sense of relational connection between all groups; Díaz likewise develops connectivity between history, family and relationships as a necessary condition for migrants' well-being. The bewildering experiences resulting from these tensions induce a sense of cognitive dissonance, often incorporated in the language and motifs of the texts. The characters encounter these contradictions and, unable to resolve them, must learn to live with paradox as a central feature of their experience. This aligns with the core characteristic of magical realism I outlined in the introduction to this thesis: while the supernatural remains perceived as impossible, characters accept that it is happening, nonetheless. That these authors adopt the supernatural, particularly in the way it manifests in magical realism, suggests that the experiences they face are often senseless, intolerable, paradoxical and bizarre, a condition that the mode is uniquely able to articulate.

Although this thesis has argued for an expansion of the framework of magical realism to incorporate different aspects of transnational experience, there are areas ripe for further development. Avenues of research that would benefit from more detailed exploration with this framework include gender and sexuality. I also acknowledge that this thesis has been limited by focusing on English-language texts originally published in the UK and the USA. This arguably reifies the publishing houses of London and New York as the cultural centres to which authors must resort,

as critics such as Sarah Brouillette and Huggan have argued.⁴ This critique, however, holds less weight in certain transnational contexts than in postcolonial ones. Many such authors, regardless of the political or economic influences that caused them to be there, are able to identify at least in part with those ‘centres’. As such, focusing on English-language texts does not necessarily equate to capitulation or promotion of global capitalism, as has been suggested by Huggan, Arif Dirlik and others.⁵ At the same time, the further analysis of samples from other languages and sites of publication would benefit the understanding of transnational magical realism.

Studying magical realism in relation to cultural exchange necessarily dallies with many criticisms of postcolonialism that Huggan outlines in his work on the postcolonial exotic. Analyses of texts that span multiple locations often invite the criticism made of postcolonial studies that they come from a place of insufficient knowledge, ‘sacrific[ing] cultural and historical specificity to the blandishments of abstract theory’.⁶ However, in transnational contexts, cultural specificity is to a great extent the antithesis of the content of such novels. These works of fiction often characterise the very lack of specificity and the ambiguity of those cultures, questioning their validity as fixed, specific categories. Studies of transnationality that centre on single locations create artificial geographical restrictions on a phenomenon that is defined by the transgression of those boundaries. An intimate historical and cultural understanding of each and every culture broached in any work transnational fiction, therefore, is an impractical requirement; it may even inaccurately force transnational individuals into a cultural specificity they themselves deny.

But what of the role of magical realism itself as a device of commodification, used to emphasise the exotic in far-away locations to sell books? This is also a charge commonly levelled at authors deploying magical realism and there are undeniable examples that corroborate this critique. The label is routinely appropriated as a marketing device into the 2020s and there are many examples of a superfluous use of the supernatural that seems to pander to audiences seeking exoticism. That being said, there is a limit to what real-world harm this may have in most cases. Few of these books garner the sales that they may have done in the twentieth century. It is

⁴ Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*.

⁵ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, pp. 8–9.

⁶ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 2.

unfair to bestow the same amount of opprobrium Rushdie may have received on to authors whose sales are often limited to the low thousands. Further, transnational magical realism often sees a relocation of the mode into the flows of transnationality so that location and the supernatural are no longer tied. American and European cities are just as likely to stage these magical interventions as Latin America or South Asia. The supernatural is less often in these cases a matter of exoticism, even while the authors may still self-consciously use the association of the mode with postcolonial sites such as the Caribbean, West Africa or South Asia. However, when authors who do this come under fire for being neo-oriental or neocolonial, this in itself is a dubiously unethical charge. It implies that authors' appropriation of artefacts from another culture for relatively small production in Europe and the USA is somehow an equivalent injustice to the actual purveying of suffering during some of the worst atrocities of those colonial misdemeanours. It also attempts to disqualify such authors from manipulating the cultural heritage of which magical realism has become part. Those who adopt it cannot help but be 'culture brokers', in Huggan's term, because of the mode's longstanding cultural influence in those sites.⁷ Furthermore, the use of the mode need not be so cynically viewed. In the four texts in this study, and many others, the supernatural is deployed not superficially but in a way that greatly contributes to the meanings generated. As Díaz expressed and as Lyn di Iorio Sandín and Richard Perez point out, realism is often an 'insufficient barometer of lived experience'.⁸ Magical realism is an effective means to bridge this gap between experience and its literary expression – particularly in the transnational senses outlined in this study of contradiction, relationality and tension – as the mode continues to develop.

If magical realism continues to be used to convey experiences of cultural exchange, it is not possible to speak with any authority on where new authors may take the mode. However, certain trends can already be identified that seem likely to continue. The continued relationship between magical realism and technology is probable, as Hamid, Haruki Murakami and William Gibson have arguably already

⁷ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 26.

⁸ Lyn Di Iorio Sandín and Richard Perez, 'Tracing Magical Irruptions in US Ethnic Literatures', in *Moments of Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures*, ed. by Lyn Di Iorio Sandín and Richard Perez (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 1–15 (p. 4).

broached.⁹ The confluence of magical realism and augmented reality has been explored through art, and such developments are likely to feature in examples of transnational literature.¹⁰

Secondly, recent scholarship appears to be identifying a move towards the explorations of environmental damage and ensuing existential risk through magical realism. Andrei Terian has recently cited two magical realist novels that ‘represent neoextractivism as a mechanism for the destruction of the biocoenosis’, using ‘the magical, mythical, and supernatural’.¹¹ This suggests an even more planetary perspective than that analysed in this thesis, while suggesting a return to a focus on the natural that the mode had originally imagined. Mouhamédoul Amine Niang furthers this commentary with a study on magical realism and biocentrism, citing Richard A. Watson’s argument that human relationships are interdependent with the natural world: ‘human needs, goals, and desires should not be taken as privileged or overriding [those] of all biological species taken together [...]. Birds, trees, and the land itself [...] have a right to be and to live out their individual and species’ potentials.’¹² In visualising the consciousness of the natural world beyond our own, magical realism could therefore help instigate a change required in global ethics if the planet is to survive.

Thirdly, magical realism is increasingly being deployed as a framework in which to comprehend the intensification of polarisation and the destabilising of consensus realities that have taken place in recent years. Stephen and Jordan Hart suggest that the mode reveals the degrees to which mis- and disinformation are disseminated:

While magical realism uses the devices used by governments and other powerful commercial enterprises to manipulate the truth (i.e. by

⁹ Haruki Murakami, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (London: Vintage, 1985); William Gibson, *All Tomorrow's Parties* (New York: Berkley Books, 1999).

¹⁰ Shilo Shiv Suleman, ‘TEDx Talks: An Exploration of Magical Realism and Technology’, online video recording, *YouTube*, 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqtvWEt2soY>> [accessed 22 November 2022].

¹¹ Andrei Terian, ‘Neoextractivism, or the Birth of Magical Realism as World Literature’, *Textual Practice*, 35.3 (2021), 485–503 (p. 485) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1886710>>.

¹² Richard A. Watson, ‘A Critique of Anti-Anthropocentric Biocentrism’, *Environmental Ethics*, 5.3 (1983), 245–56 (p. 245), cited in Mouhamédoul Amine Niang, ‘Biocentrism as Magic Realism, Realism, and Hybrid Transculturation: Fatou Diome’s Innovative Fictionalization of Biocentric Characterization through Transnational Testimonials in *Kétala*’, *Research in African Literatures*, 52.3 (2021), 20–40 (p. 24).

disseminating ‘fake news’), it does so not in order to replicate but to expose ‘fake news’ as false information and untruth. Magical realism thereby captures the monstrous magic of reality.¹³

This contention has also been suggested in reference to Donald Trump’s tweets generating a kind of alternate reality for many.¹⁴ There is increasing research that suggests magical realism is therefore a better lens for examining these ‘post-truth’ realities as perspectives have fragmented and anything is now perceptible as possible.¹⁵ In one respect, therefore, magical realism appears to be returning full-circle to Carpentier’s original manifesto. Morris Dickstein states that ‘in 1961 Philip Roth complained [...] that reality in America had grown so bizarre, so grotesque, that it had outstripped the novelist’s ability to handle it in a credible way’¹⁶. This condition is reaching unprecedented, planetary proportions in the twenty-first century. Carpentier claimed that Latin America was imbued with magic and wonder: a marvellous reality. Contemporary magical realist analysis suggests that the world is likewise becoming imbued with magic, but rather than inspiring wonder it is a violent reality built on division, chaos and delusion.

The conclusion that I reach in this project is that contemporary transnational authors’ deployment of magical realism suggests a need for an appreciation of underlying humanity and relatedness regardless of nation, class or any other category. Hamid’s more recent novel *The Last White Man* (2022) continues where *Exit West* left off in this vein. This does not involve an envisioning of some kind of unified homogeneous global culture. The notion of shared humanity is not a denial or an eradication of difference, but an acknowledgement that all differences are built upon common foundations. When entire world views are constructed on premises of

¹³ Stephen Malcolm Hart and Jordan Hart, ‘Magical Realism Is the Language of the Emergent Post-Truth World’, *Orbis Litterarum*, 76.4 (2021), 158–68 (p. 160) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/oli.12297>>.

¹⁴ Trevor Clohessy and others, ‘An Analysis of the 2016 American Presidential Nominees’ Tweets: A Magical Realism Perspective’ (presented at the ICIS 2017 International Conference on Information Systems, Seoul: NUI Galway, 2017) <<https://doi.org/10.13025/s89s53>>.

¹⁵ Ayyub Rajabi, Majid Azizi, and Mehrdad Akbari, ‘Magical Realism: The Magic of Realism’, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 12.1 (2020), 1–13 (p. 1) <<https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v12n2.18>>.

¹⁶ Morris Dickstein, *A Mirror in the Roadway: Literature and the Real World* ([n.p.]: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 137 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1nj34t3>>. This process is not limited to the US: as outlined in the chapter on Hamid, similar polarisation and misinformation is also prevalent in the UK. For examples elsewhere, see: *Political Polarization in South and Southeast Asia: Old Divisions, New Dangers*, ed. by Thomas Carothers and Andrew O’Donohue (Washington, D.C: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020).

absolute difference, it results in the discrimination and violence depicted throughout this thesis and the twenty-first century. This study does not endorse a naïve utopianism, as Ulrich Beck belittled cosmopolitanism for claiming the ‘first rays of brotherly love among peoples’.¹⁷ Such an overly optimistic view contradicts the experiences of conflict and rancour the authors in this thesis depict. The emphasis is not on the celebration of humanity or ‘boutique’ multiculturalism but on the tensions the ignorance of commonality is causing.¹⁸ Transnational novels like these complicate claims that nationalism and regionalism are waning. Instead, they underscore the opposite because such borders are being threatened by globalisation. Appiah questions the cosmopolitan assumption that ‘all cultures have enough overlap in their vocabulary of values to begin a conversation’.¹⁹ However, it can conversely be argued that it is counterproductive, and even existentially dangerous, to assume otherwise, that there is nothing there to bind the concept of humanity. Even if the overlap seems vanishingly small between values, these must be the starting ground for any conversation, given how fractious arbitrary, artificial and ideological notions of difference can become.

In arguing for an understanding of common humanity, the texts promote a form of humanism that echoes some of Edward Said’s comments at the end of the twentieth century. Said had stated that, historically, a philosophy of humanism, particularly Renaissance humanism, was central to the imperialist project and systems of oppression. He quotes Sartre, who said there is ‘nothing more consistent than a racist humanism, since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters’.²⁰ For Said, this type of humanism is hypocritical, an anti-humanist stance since it prioritised Europeans, making distinctions between the treatment of perceived in-groups and out-groups. Humanism’s proponents held grandiose, universalising positions, regarding ‘the life and happiness of human beings as a supreme value to be cherished and promoted’.²¹ Yet, as Karl Marx pointed out, these ideas tended eventually to yield to more

¹⁷ Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision*, trans. by Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 13.

¹⁸ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 8.

¹⁹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006). Chapter 4: Moral Disagreement. Terms of Contention, paragraph 1. Ebook.

²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Preface’, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, by Frantz Fanon, trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p. 26.

²¹ Perez Zagorin, ‘On Humanism Past & Present’, *Daedalus*, 132.4 (2003), 87–92 (p. 87)

<<https://doi.org/10.1162/001152603771338832>>.

fundamental bigotry.²² Samarasan's texts in this thesis bears out this critique of hypocritical humanism. Her novel, and the others in this thesis, veer from many of the tenets of various historical versions of humanism that perpetuated these duplicities, hinting at a more global notion of connectedness. Renaissance humanism often extolled individuality, whereas these novels promote community and collectivity.²³ Unlike secular humanism, their version characteristically undermines rationality and science (or religion and myth) as the sole means of understanding reality. It shares some notions of epistemological humanism in that it suggests reality as we can know it is experiential.²⁴ Yet it shares little of the aggrandising of some humanist perspectives that elevate humans as the pinnacle of evolution.²⁵ In fact, it acknowledges, as critics like Kate Mann and Appiah have implied, that bigotry, cruelty and violence are as much part of the human condition as imagination, morality and compassion.²⁶ Yet these magical realist texts suggest that these negative aspects are founded on a wrongful conception of divergent humanity, that some humans are inherently different. These texts make the claim, as Said argues, that 'common experiences' and 'interdependencies' are a 'universal norm' across cultures, ethnicities and nations.²⁷ These commonalities need to form our fundamental guiding principles. This is an idealistic aim given the concurrent human proclivity towards tribalism and aggression, as these novels also point towards. But their explorations of the permeability of cultures strongly suggest that promoting a humanistic notion of underlying commonality is an existential requirement, at least for the world's migrating populations.

A further critique of the claim towards universal humanity, provided by Huggan, is that efforts made in 'Western' academia to take such universal stances merely read their own values into other cultures.²⁸ Although the example he gives supports this, the critique itself is vulnerable to relaying the same Eurocentrism it is

²² Tony Davies, *Humanism* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 26.

²³ Davies, p. 18.

²⁴ The texts' focus on the experiential and how perception inflects reality echoes Wittgenstein's stance that 'the world is dependent on our view of it' (David E. Cooper, *The Measure of Things: Humanism, Humility, and Mystery* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 18).

²⁵ Perez Zagorin, for example, claims that humans are 'the only one of nature's creations on Earth who have fashioned progressive moral codes ordaining love, care, compassion, and concern for their fellow creatures and other living things' and that this awards them a special status in nature (Zagorin, p. 89).

²⁶ Kate Manne, 'Humanism: A Critique', *Social Theory and Practice*, 42.2 (2016), 389–415 (p. 407) <<https://doi.org/10.5840/soctheorpract201642221>>; Appiah, p. 144.

²⁷ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 217.

²⁸ Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p. 23.

criticising. It cannot be assumed that claims of common humanity, even when they come from Euro-American study, must necessarily be focused on its own involvement. This assumption gives excessive attention to the Euro-American perspective. On the contrary, despite coming from totally disparate backgrounds, the texts in this project all highlight perceptions of insurmountable differences causing trauma and division to migrants and the people with which they interact. This hints, if not categorically, towards such a universality. The way in which the chosen authors adapt magical realism within these difficult experiences implies that the mode remains an apposite metaphor for these conflicting notions. The transnational, twenty-first-century magical realism illustrated in this study suggests it is possible to celebrate difference without opposing cosmologies and fomenting contradiction. To do so, transnational magical realism argues for a need to embrace the underlying relationality of human experience, from which a marvellous reality may yet be imagined.

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