

TRANSNATIONAL COMPOSITIONALITY AND HEMON, SHTEYNGART, DÍAZ; A
NO MAN'S LAND, ETC.

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Contemporary transnational literature presents a unique interpretive problem, due to new methods of language and culture negotiation in the information age. The resulting condition, *transnational compositionality*, is evidenced by specific linguistic artifacts; to illustrate this I use three American novels as a case study: *Nowhere Man* by Aleksandar Hemon, *Absurdistan* by Gary Shteyngart, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. By extension, many conventional literary elements are changed in the transnational since modernity: satire is no longer a lampooning of cultures but a questioning of the methods by which humans blend cultures together; similarly, complex symbolic constructions may no longer be taken at face value, for they now communicate more about cultural identity processes than static ideologies. If scholars are to achieve adequate interpretations of these elements, we must consider the global framework that has so intimately shaped them in the twenty-first century.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary transnational literature in America – defined here as fiction written *by* or *about* Americans deeply entrenched in two or more nationalities – presents a unique interpretive problem. Firstly, the concept of nationality has itself been complicated by information-age kinship models; new media (or ways of culture exchange) have separated it from the concept of physical borders so basic to nation-state association. *Transnationality* is then likewise complicated. Because of this fundamental shift, many conventional elements of literature are changed since modernity: satire is no longer a lampooning of individuals, institutions or cultures so much as a questioning of the cognitive methods by which humans confront and blend cultures together; similarly, complex symbolic constructions such as metaphors and archetypes may no longer be taken at their face or even inverse, ironical values, for they now communicate more about processes of cultural identity than static ideologies. If scholars are to achieve adequate interpretations of these elements, they must consider the new global framework that has so intimately shaped them in the twenty-first century.

One hallmark of this system – called the “global village” by McLuhan in his 1962 analysis – is a proliferation of local communities which has fragmented the individual and his experience. Post-modern man is defined now also by the many things he *does*, not just where he’s from. Ultimately this is a phenomenon concerned with movement and with the spaces between sites or states, for if there might be one underlying aspect to both new media and globalization, it would be movement. Cultural flow is well-studied in the West by sociologists like Manuel Castells, whose research into cultural identity processes yielded his concept of the “space of flows” – it is in this new space, this *condition* of movement that new experiences, and so identities, manifest: “The space of flows ... links up distant locales around shared functions

and meanings on the basis of electronic circuits and fast transportation corridors, while isolating and subduing the logic of experience embodied in the space of places” (“Informationalism” 155-78). Castells explains that while movement is central to the space of flows, there *are* locales: referred to as “nodes,” these are defined not by their materiality but by their functionality, in a new, reconceived system. But our difficulty is compounded when we examine transnational authors and their texts, which by their very nature dwell perpetually not only in the space of flows, but in the spaces between nodes. They are at all times mid-flow – of culture, ideas and language. As Castells’ work suggests, inherent to this new condition is a disconnectedness from places and static states, particularly for those struggling to make reliable connections in the system. Transnational persons are caught in perpetual negotiation; their interconnectedness brings with it a sense of “nowhere” – the space of flows is our no man’s land. Yet this nowhere-ness differs from that feeling of displacement common to past diaspora. It is not only exacerbated but transformed by postmodernity. Yes, a system that has allowed for, even promoted, increased global travel also promotes intercultural disaffection.

As part of this negotiation process, contemporary transnational authors must contend with manifold languages in their work, each with its own associated culture – one might be balancing amid the nodes of American English and Dominican Spanish (and the many slangs of each), as in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Languages operate in disjunctive flows which anthropologist Arjun Appadurai refers to as “mediascapes,” where texts and images are exchanged between communities. It is in this complex environment of information transfer that transnational authors navigate networks of cultural communities, and it is in this environment that they use a multitude of sign systems (blended and not) in their distinctive exploration of cultural identity.

Contact zones like these are at the heart of language change. Out of this problem of the in-between we can observe artifacts that occur during the transfer of texts, and break down the process by which the process of *translation*, likewise, breaks down. Translation poses a particular set of problems in the space of flows – for images and ideas and narratives need translating, just as languages do. The problem occurs in multiform translation, in the replication of diverse coded elements from diverse language communities, a process which is both self-perpetuating and egalitarian in the sense that it is always redefining strata:

Dialect style as persona management captures how individuals, within and across speaking situations, manipulate the conventionalized social meanings of dialect varieties – the individual through the social. But it is the same process of self-projection that explains the effect of dialect stratification when the speech of social groups is aggregated in sociolinguistic surveys. ... It is in relation to group norms that stylistic variation becomes meaningful; it is through individual stylistic choices that group norms are produced and reproduced. (Coupland 198)

This cycle of translation and response characterizes identity assembly through language – especially within Castells’ flowspace where contact is more frequent, more violent and complicated. Transnational individuals are a community with a unique problem, and a unique process to address that problem, which I call *transnational compositionality*.

A Survey of Transnational Compositionality Features

Transnational compositionality exists first as a process of culture negotiation. The first practice to emerge from that sense of “nowhereness” is language play, a concept familiar to those acquainted with Jean-François Lyotard and his work on postmodernity. However, this play is born more out of an abundance of language systems than the skepticism or deconstruction of a single, totalizing one; such abundance leads to what sociolinguist Nikolas Coupland calls

“repertoire play,” in part because contemporary transnationals exist in a landscape where there are ever more repertoires to choose from:

But who we can dialectically *be* is not constrained to the dimensions that are socially diagnostic within any one community. [There are] styles which operate within a speaker’s primary versus secondary repertoires, where the term primary relates to the resources normally available within the local community. Secondary repertoires are made use of in mimicry or verbal play. (Coupland 199)

When the hierarchy of repertoires in a community is more flexible, or there is no consistent local community at all – bonds are often fragmented and too-many in transnational flowspace – all repertoires, all dialects are opened to play. Language play (and thus formation) becomes imperative; the processes of translation and transformation *become a stable condition*, an identifiable “position” in the space of flows.

As evidence of this, a handful of language artifacts may be found in contemporary transnational American fiction. These appear when an author seeks to explore inter-cultural translative difficulties – of metaphor, archetype, and narrative – which arise in the everyday. The *literative idiom* is indicative of the unique problem of metaphor translation (most idioms are highly context-reliant metaphors) for dwellers in the in-between: it arises when an unfamiliarity with idiomatic phrases in one system leads to a surface understanding yet skepticism of such expressions, manifesting in a hyperbolic literalization during reproduction. The idiom is extended via whatever basic grammatical logic is available to the speaker. But because idioms by definition defy logic, already difficult translation becomes near-impossible. So, idiomatic and iconographic expressions – an understanding of which helps anchor individuals in language communities – become surrealized. This renders them sometimes unrecognizable, particularly if the recipient belongs to only one community the speaker does.

Other artifacts of the translation process show yet more grammatical qualities. The *separative*, for example, involves a fragmentation of the individual according to his network – that is, by whichever communities he is connected to – and then a paring down of these into behavioral stereotypes. This occurs in part out of an inability to integrate and thus blend the cultural behaviors of separate systems, leading first to the fragmentation noted above, and then to an awkward reliance on culturo-behavioral archetypes. Labels like “gangsta,” “nerd,” “Jew,” “bachatero” and “Dominicana” (in the case of the novels examined here) allow characters to avoid the difficulty of either performing cultural blends, or acknowledging them in others. In function, the separative borrows its metadata function from programming languages, as features of these systems are reflected further in our speech and texts. It works much like an object class in a computer program: because it contains vital metadata, once invoked it determines character behavior until another separative arises. This includes jargon, grammar, and even worldview, which helps to shape certain speech acts. It is important to note that each individual will have many applicable labels, and a subset of appropriate linguistic behaviors for each. The separative process bears some resemblance to style-shifting, a phenomenon well-studied in sociolinguistics. But in this case usage is restricted to texts, which though often social are rarely dialogic in nature – so separatives become less situational and more available for self-expression.

The *hypercorrelate* is both the most abstract and most difficult to recognize of the observed translation artifacts, but it is also takes the most forms. In its most abstract sense, it is a tendency in contemporary transnational authors to render stories in fragmented ways. This often involves multiple, parallel narratives with unknown (or popular) narrators, frequently split on the basis of cultural identity, between which the story continuously shifts. A failure to accurately translate cultural narratives leads to an intertwining of local frames and their imprecise

approximations in target communities; roughly analogous narratives are appropriated as easy “translations.” In this way the hypercorrelate operates in much the same way as a hypertext. But the importance here is on narration in a space where nothing is stationary or secure, and authorship is not only social but highly multiform. Stories move between narratives not via related chronology or location, but rather symbols and ideas, as if embedded with a network of hyperlinks. In binary situations, one narrative expresses reality and the other fantasy; in such cases, fantasy often manifests in hypnagogic sequences – these can involve popular archetypes, symbols, and so on. This reflects both the high number of local narratives and their more egalitarian nature. A strict hierarchy no longer exists; no narrative is irrelevant or taboo, and all stories must be examined from all possible angles with regard to transnational flowpace. The level to which hypercorrelates determine language is high: each narrative comes packaged with different jargon and grammar, as with separatives.

By using three transnational novels by three transnational authors as a language case study, I show that certain observable artifacts are indeed indicative of an underlying, grammatical transformation. The difficulty with which these authors navigate a world of myriad languages and cultures has led to new forms unique to the transnational condition of the “in-between.” Each author traces his ancestry from a different part of the world: Aleksandar Hemon, from Bosnia and Ukraine; Gary Shteyngart, from Russia; and Junot Díaz, from the Dominican Republic. Nevertheless, their distinctive interplay of language and culture is a basic, unifying characteristic in their work that I call transnational compositionality – again, this describes not a common vocabulary but a hallmark grammar, a new syntactic ruleset governing transnational information exchange. Transnational compositionality is born out of a breakdown

of translation; it involves a compulsion to explore that breakdown, that sense of “nowhereness” which is associated with dwelling in the space of flows.

After exploring transnational compositionality in three of its mechanisms, I further propose that this condition has not only infiltrated fiction, but also embedded itself in all cultural exchanges of contemporary transnationality. I transpose the notion of transnational compositionality into a culturo-psychological context, suggesting that a failure in the translation of ideas and ideologies, as with texts and images, has resulted in a unique type of identity representation in these “nowhere” communities that lurk in the in-between. Ultimately, this process is closely connected with diaspora and with improving technology, which works to anonymize the individual and further disconnect him from all locales. This anonymity then leads to a dissociative interest in cultural violence – which, though it may seem directionless, is used as means of exploring the space of flows. This survives in transnational fiction. For here are persons foreign in some way to all more-static languages and cultures.

TRANSNATIONAL COMPOSITIONALITY: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Identity and Language in the Contact Zone

One aftereffect of the global village phenomenon is the growing sense that all forms deserve equal examination, and that people should have equal access to them. With this renewed interest in form, American authors are exploring identity through the formal elements of language, metaphor, archetype and narrative, particularly in transnational literatures where these must to a greater extent be negotiated. In the transnational, more cultural locales and so forms are springing up; it is necessity that has bred new translation methods. So this cultural climate has cultivated a new brand of self-concept: it seems identity is not false but rather elusive and fragmentary. This reflects the new informational web of the twenty-first century. Hand-in-hand with this interconnectedness and its associated movement goes the notion of the *contact zone* – where cultures collide and typically conflict, triggering language transformation. These collisions occur, according to Mary Louise Pratt, “in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34). And like Coupland’s repertoires, an abundance of collisions or contact sites leads to a near-unintelligible web of negotiation, where form is ever more open to play.

This climate is particularly visible in the United States. Here, current ideological trends encourage immigrants to maintain their heritages, languages, narratives. Assimilation is no longer a part of the immigrant dream. Multiculturalism and multilingualism are now valued in America, encouraging even a re-culturation of long-assimilated individuals to their ethnic traditions. This ethnicism has been more or less *enforced* in the contemporary Western world – particularly on the poor – leading to new outlets and phenomena well beyond familiar nationalist expression; it in fact works *against* nationalism, as the notion of ethnicity plays a role where it

largely did not before (Castells, *Power* 32). John McWhorter notes the inherent class dynamic at work in this new American climate:

As a result, the understanding of immigration preached today – from the ivory tower, the media, the literary world and the social services industry – treats any dilution of native ways as a cause for indignation. Our *Zeitgeist* teaches newcomers to America to seek the perpetuation of their inherited cultures to an extent that would have seemed alien to earlier immigrants, who usually embraced becoming American in a much less ambivalent fashion. (250)

The changing *Zeitgeist* McWhorter refers to has also made its way into literature. While in the United States early immigrant narratives valued swift assimilation, those of the latter half of the twentieth century valued resistance, even (yes) indignation. In either case, for transnationals, here is a constant negotiation between self and culture: “their ethnicity continues to be recreated as a new form of identity” (Grosfoguel 351). Yet many novels written since September 11, 2001 unavoidably complicate that late-twentieth-century *Zeitgeist* – *Nowhere Man*, *Absurdistan*, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are but three examples. This complication is, in part, a response to the ethnicism which has lent further conflict to flowspace contact zones, a questioning of whether we ought to be sustaining every dark part of our ethnic identities. Post-9/11 narratives are in part a response to cultural conflict, to a worldview that values difference above effective communication. Now each fragment, each narrative, each repertoire of each identity must vie for importance. And because there is ever more movement in a globalized world, contact zones – loci of cultural and linguistic and ideological transformation – are ever more violent places. The transformative processes are themselves transformed in the work of transnational American authors.

Often these contact zones are masked by others not immediately recognized as “cultural,” yet which operate the same way. Zones crop up on the basis of gender, generation, profession, and so forth. Generational zones feature heavily in all three novels. In a broader sense, young

characters resist assimilation, unlike their parents – though there’s also that skepticism of complete resistance, a response to the above *Zeitgeist*. The divide is more striking when these characters interact: Oscar is pushed by even his mother into being more macho, more “Dominican”; when Oscar (at the age of *seven*) confides in her about a girl who’d demanded that he break up with a second girlfriend, she tells him “*Dale un galletazo* [Give her a slap] ... then see if the little *puta* [whore] respects you” (14). Throughout the novel, we see all the harm the Dominican machismo stereotype does to both those who don’t fit it *and* those that do. Yet we also see that Oscar’s failure to fit the stereotype is one reason for his failure to get laid. In *Absurdistan*, Misha Vainberg similarly seeks-yet-resists American assimilation; and like Oscar’s mother, Boris Vainberg scolds his son for losing sight of his ethnic identity, then suggests he’ll never be free of it:

“Idiot,” Papa said, shaking his double-jointed nose at me. “You’ll *never* be an American. You’ll always be a Jew. How can you forget who you are? You haven’t even left yet. Jew, Jew, Jew.”

I had heard from a distant cousin in California that one could be both an American and a Jew and even a practicing homosexual in the bargain, but I didn’t argue. “I’ll try to be a rich Jew,” I said. “Like a Spielberg or a Bronfman.” (17)

Here myriad cultural identities work against each other. In the context of the novel, where well-educated Misha so often loudly declares himself a “multiculturalist” yet succeeds only in caricatured mimicry, one begins to doubt whether multiculturalism is even possible. We get a sense from Shteyngart’s satire in the above passage, then, that “American” and “Jew” and “practicing homosexual” are somehow mutually exclusive, or that one must supersede the others. And though ethnicism does give way to a functional culturalism in the space of flows, it still plays a central role in culture-contact for transnationals. Castells contends that conflict is key to the birth of cultures, believing that for identity to develop “a process of social mobilization is

necessary” (*Power* 64). This interaction is the birthplace of local communities and their language systems.

Although its effect is compounded by complex nationalities, this new, post-9/11 flowspace is of course not exclusive to transnational persons. Castells points out that it is in large part grounded in our informational age, that new information systems “subvert the traditional Western concept of a separate, independent subject” (*Rise* 23). In the post-industrial world, our behaviors, beliefs and therefore identities have been resystematized by information (read: computer) processes, and now reflect them. We communicate in ever-shorter bursts of language, we obscure our selves with ever more usernames, we use frequent abbreviated “status updates” as a way of interfacing with others. We compartmentalize information about ourselves and others the way applications do. Computers and culture are henceforth intrinsically webbed. Ersel Aydinli and James N. Rosenau broadly address the complex relationship between new media and cultural identity formation:

Globalization as a techno-cultural process. Globalization in this sense is synonymous with multiple and complex interpenetrations of the local and the global. It refers to the shrinking of space and time, the communications revolution, the 24/7 world, and the confrontation of “Western” and other identities. Globalization is the set of processes constructing a smaller world. (31)

An irony lurks here: implicit is not only the notion of the contact zone, but also that this increased contact and access shrink our world. The global consistently penetrates, violates the local. A new process of language-culture change becomes a perpetual defense of the self; the “global” becomes a social agent, acting against the individual. Alain Touraine alludes to these process changes when he notes that “in a post-industrial society, in which cultural services have replaced material goods at the core of production, it is the defense of the subject, in its personality and in its culture, against the logic of apparatuses and markets, that replaces the idea

of class struggle”¹ (Castells, *Rise* 23). Conflict is the key here, between what Castells refers to as at least one “pair of social actors.” This is how meaning is constructed, how communities in a globalized world spark their first commonalities and assemble, and how language ultimately changes over time (*Power* 64).

Sociologist Tony Bennett extends the conflict argument to popular culture, which plays a crucial role in all three of our novels: its utility as a mediascape (or one context for new information systems) complicates its role as either an edifying or destructive force, just as ethnicity or any other cultural web. Bennett argues that the popular needs to be conceived “neither as the site of the people’s deformation, nor as that of their cultural self-affirmation, or ... of their own self-making; rather, it is viewed as a force field of relations shaped, precisely, by ...contradictory pressures and tendencies” (xiii). Again, the global is set against the individual. It is defined by conflict, by disagreement and divergence between people and the many social apparatuses that guide our lives.

This particular species of conflict breeds paranoia in the end, which in turn breeds ever tighter local communities, triggering an isolating counter-reflex even in individuals. Local communities look to connect on the basis of function, yet still often frame their interrelationships in familiar, *safe* ways. In this new world, function *is* value *is* trust (predictability). Constitutional differences are more marked, again, when considered from a viewpoint reminiscent of Touraine’s remodeled class dynamic:

For those social actors excluded from or resisting the individualization of identity attached to life in the global networks of power and wealth, cultural communes of religious, national, or territorial foundation seem to provide the main alternative for the construction of meaning in our society. ... They are, at the outset, defensive identities that function as refuge and solidarity, to protect against a hostile, outside world. They are culturally constituted; that is, organized around a specific set of values, whose meaning and sharing are marked by specific codes of self-identification. (Castells, *Power* 68)

¹ As translated by Manuel Castells.

Conflict and defense of the local are hallmarks of cultural development, Castells seems to emphasize. It's no wonder that in many contemporary transnational narratives *language* is the principal object of transformative reflection. Immigrant language forms are naturally defensive: the Dominican-English and Russian-English-Absurdi code-switches and creoles in *Oscar Wao* and *Absurdistan* show a skepticism of acknowledging any one language-culture as supreme. Switches occur in broader, more divided stages in Hemon's *Nowhere Man*; but in its case, whether in Sarajevo, Kiev, Shanghai or Chicago, American pop culture is always the comforting penetrator, always accompanying the protagonist at each stage of life. As Touraine predicted, creoles and argots, whether arisen in spoken language or other symbol systems, suffer from a self-consciousness reminiscent of some class struggle dynamic.

To point, in the work of transnational authors these “contradictory pressures” often actualize in Albert Memmi's “colonizer-colonized” relationship. The collective popular media does act as a “colonizer,” while individuals as “colonized”; in another sense, America becomes the cultural colonist and other nations the culturally colonized. Both are at work in each of these novels, where transnationals are saturated by American pop culture once they have arrived, but in fact had already been saturated from birth in their home nations. Assimilation now occurs *before immigrants ever leave their homes*. A growing number of transnational narratives don't just address the problem of assimilation, but appear to suggest that the young – Gens X and Y – feel it exists as only myth. Or rather, that for the worldly-wise it shouldn't be a problem at all. Much of *Absurdistan*'s satire stems from precisely this. Its subtext suggests that it is no longer en vogue to address the assimilation issue, because at heart we're all just poseurs, just poor situational actors anyway. Traditional questions of assimilation are lampooned, because the

young assume that sophisticates – one of Misha’s primary epithets – have already experienced global (read: Western) popular culture via twenty-first-century mediascapes.

Given this change, texts no longer explore the value of assimilation or resistance, but the processes by which these happen. There *is* no problem, so there is no assignable value; assimilation and autonomy (an aim of resistance) are a natural part of our interaction with the Popular Apparatus². These actions consist of bidirectional data flows. According to Castells, “because the new processes of domination to which people react are embedded in information flows, the building of autonomy has to rely on reverse information flows” (*Power* 69). In this way, the popular differs from other ideological apparatuses, which do not rely so heavily on interaction: the popular relies to a greater degree on “class alliances,” tacit agreements which are a hallmark of capitalistic class relations (Poulantzas 24). So in the global village, new economic forces have transferred some power to local communities. Bidirectional flow becomes a symbol of the democratic New World, with recent interactive media – Web 2.0 applications like Wikipedia, Digg, YouTube and Twitter, among many – allowing the local to penetrate the global. But reverse flow is problematic, particularly when it involves data requiring a high level of translation. Symbolic systems require interpreters. Similarly, data packets are useless without control information, without reliable coding and decoding methods. Computers still see enough difficulty tackling natural language translation; the recent hyper-proliferation of other language forms (creoles, programming languages, etc.) makes the situation all the more difficult. This begs one question essential to recent transnational works: if “reverse information flow” is fundamentally unnatural, is autonomy then unnatural, in the twenty-first century?

² The Popular (Culture) Apparatus, by which individuals conceive of themselves as subjects against the context of popular culture. My terminology, akin to Louis Althusser’s various “ideological (state) apparatuses.” Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

Our trouble does not stop with language proliferation. The mediascape realm Arjun Appadurai identified carries with it four others, all of which interact with each other. All may be framed as symbol exchanges: ethnoscapes, flows of people; technoscapes, flows of technology; deoscapes, flows of ideology; and finanscapes, flows of capital (Bell 62). These are reflected in various mediascapes – in this case, written language specifically. Their interaction simulates further proliferation in the post-industrial world, only compounding interpretive difficulties. Lyotard took a similar view of language; he imagined that symbolic systems both invade *and are co-opted by* local communities, and that more-abstract systems are reflected in all human languages (360). When system hierarchies are not reconstructed but made malleable, we arrive at a reliance on multiple systems, multiple forms – something akin to Coupland’s repertoire play. This produces a problem, wherein a small number of translation systems fail to handle the differing logics of myriad languages. Creoles are language forms that have sprung from more-localized argots or pidgins; they have developed their own sets of rules, for which there is often no adequate system of translation. This applies to creole cultures (material included), creole ideologies and mythologies, and so on. But though there aren’t yet any reliable rulesets for translating these forms’ more complex constructions, there are cognitive rules that guide their origination and development. We can decode this process of symbol system creation, this predictable way that individuals respond to the problem of compositionality.

Reverse Information Flow as a Problem of Compositionality

Early philosophers like Sanskrit linguist Yāska recognized its fundamental aspects, but the modern principle of compositionality is derived from the work of Gottlob Frege, whose theories in logic and semantics laid some of the groundwork for language study in the twentieth

century. Logician Jaakko Hintikka explains the basic, mathematical sense of the principle: “[T]he meaning (semantical interpretation) of a complex expression is a function of the meanings ... of its constituent expressions” (31). In natural language, however, its definition must be expanded: the meaning of any given expression is constructed via the meaning of constituents *plus* the meaning of the rules used to combine them, which are often not rendered symbolically at all. Further, the context of surrounding symbols/expressions plays a major role in meaning also. Linguists have known for a long time that compositionality is problematic, for the field of pragmatics proves that we have known – though have yet to fully explain – meaning beyond lexical and syntactic constructions passes between individuals. In 1983, L. A. Zadeh claimed the principle of compositionality had “limited validity in application” to the study of natural languages (254) – but just because the principle is problematic doesn’t mean there aren’t useful applications. The mere fact that the compositionality myth exists suggests we ought to be examining how people react to it. Transnationality is one such context for study.

Context-reliant language features prove a problem for compositionality but also for standard methods of structural analysis. They are highly adaptable and thus central to linguistic identity construction, however, and thus its study. Examples include irony, idioms, expletives, inside jokes, catch phrases and other pop speech forms, and, more recently, internet-based memes – these require translative rules not implicit in expressions themselves. They arise out of a want for efficiency; in effect, they are symbolic shortcuts for communicating larger packets of data relevant to identity and community reinforcement. We use these features to set ourselves apart from the system, to work against and even influence the popular. Outland forms and features are the stuff reverse information flow is made of. And by this a new kind of space is created: a space of resistance.

If indeed these apparatuses are more computerized than ever, it stands to reason that the current system relies more on strict rulesets than past ones, which might have been more fluid and organic, as natural language is. The near-impossibility of current computer technology to adequately replicate or even decode natural languages suggests that much of the problem with natural language processing has less to do with the strictness of rulesets, however, than with the local ways that people must break them in order to define themselves, to self-conceptualize. Computers handle rules fine but don't handle exceptions well at all, when exceptions must be incorporated and the system reprocessed and evaluated. Thus, the birth of esoteric programming languages (or esolangs), which computer programmers develop in attempt to stretch and even break the conventions of current language systems.

How does global-level compositionality difficulty correlate with difficulty on the individual level? When the popular absorbs and replicates the above-mentioned features, transnationals find the system's key isn't adequate for understanding all its disseminated information. When transnationals run into these features for the first time, whether contact occurs after migration or before, at home, a trademark awkwardness develops. Resulting transnational language features *are* transnational compositionality – an information-age, global-village twist on an old problem. Transnational compositionality exists as a process of discovery, by which individuals negotiate their relationship with so many nodes in the space of flows, with so many interrelated contexts, with the system(s) itself. Here is a process of multisystem negotiation and identity. These are distinction-making acts performed on the sub-linguistic level: the syntactic, the semantic, the pragmatic.

Our defensive reflex against cultural hyper-heterogeneity (a kind of *homogeneity*) lies at the nexus. The artifacts present in the novels I examine here are only a few examples of the

innumerable transnational language forms Lyotard assures us are coming. The system, however, is capable of absorbing them all despite their organicity. *We* are the new natural language processors, the computers failing at translation. And during this process, in the shadow of the Popular Apparatus, the individual flies out the window.

The Vanishing Subject

As interconnected people now affect language forms like never before, the social subject is making an attempt at self-legitimation. But we find the subject disappearing behind new language structures, as with pop speech. Transnational persons, previously bastions of individuality, ever-resistant to homogeneity, are falling into patterns; hallmarks are developing in their communication. The loss occurs when micronarratives come into contact with one another: with no metalanguage to translate accurately between, no decryption cipher, identity is no longer communicable or describable. Lyotard anticipates this very social development, that even as local communities spring up and vie for legitimacy, people necessarily disappear:

The social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games. The social bond is linguistic, but is not woven with a single thread. It is a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number) of language games, obeying different rules. (360)

This disappearance occurs to a great degree in the realm of computers and the Internet, in part because of physical isolation and the development of the avatar. It occurs similarly behind celebrity and other popular symbols. Just as consumers relinquish their identities behind user handles, avatars and local jargon, those most heavily entrenched in pop speech lose themselves in other efficient identity-differentiating/dissolving forms.

These features of postmodern communication fit well with Lyotard's notion of the delegitimation of metanarratives, precisely because these new language forms create meaning

only within their given spheres. These spheres are what Lyotard calls “clouds of narrative language elements” – he named four classes: narrative, denotative, prescriptive and descriptive – that help convey meaning and connect us variably to other related linguistic communities (356). These accompany an unfamiliarity, a skepticism for unrelated spheres, which disrupts or even severs communication. As a result of this, communicable personality vanishes.

There has been a related concern, recently, about the loss of language and culture in transnationals. This is perhaps a critical reaction to Generation X/Y’s rekindled love affair with the cosmopolitan. Stephen Steinberg alludes to this fear in an examination of traditional patterns of immigrant culture negotiation:

... An early indicator of the eventual assimilation of European immigrants was the rapidity with which they lost their native languages. A pattern emerges with stubborn consistency. Immigrants, of course, retained their native tongues; their children typically were bilingual, and by the third generation, the vast majority were monolingual in English. The virtual eradication of language in only two generations shows just how fragile culture is, as least once it loses its “survival value” and is severed from the institutions that nourish it. (241)

But nationalisms no longer have survival value – not even in home nations. Certainly some elements of culture are lost; evidence will show this is the case, particularly with American pop culture displacing other systems for transnationals. But while some elements of culture wash away, new elements are being created *in place* of those lost. Language is not so much lost as changed. Numerous blended systems continue to crop up. Dictionaries of Spanglish and Engrish have been published in the past ten years, and this legitimizing trend will continue. Linguists are paying increased attention to these forms.

However, if language is not lost, what institutions are keeping it alive? The current issue of language change is connected with American pop culture and its dominion. Fewer nations are major players; ideological apparatuses are less and less “of the state.” Capitalistic technoculture

is the new site of power, the new locus of language dominance. Castells suggests that in informational societies the consumer becomes the receiver of culture:

The control over knowledge and information decides who holds power.... Technocrats are the new dominant class, regardless of the fact that political power is exercised by politicians controlling the state. Who are the “dominated” classes? The answer ... on this point becomes more tenuous. In any case they are not the workers, but the “citizens,” the “consumers,” communities, the nonparticipant population. (*Flows* 40)

This perhaps explains the consumer fetishism seen in recent transnational texts, such as the three examined here. (It is also seen in the transnational texts of other nations – Viktor Pelevin’s *Generation P* is a prime example coming out of Russia.) What Castells fails to consider, of course, is his own notion of reverse information flow. In *Nowhere Man*, the Beatles reign supreme; in *Absurdistan*, ghetto tech, drug culture and the internet do. And in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, despite the weight of *La Era de Trujillo* bearing down upon generations of the Cabral family, it is the superhero and fantasy narratives that frame and guide Oscar’s life. But these narratives are continuously migrating to electronic media – a new institution – thereby allowing increased penetration by the local. Each popular element functions as a uniting but also divisive force between intersecting language communities; this effect is more pronounced when those who are members of two or more communities perform speech acts inappropriate to their current context or locale. This inappropriateness may be actively exploited for concealment or self-expression, also – a major component of transnational compositionality.

A common critique of contemporary transnational texts is their tendency to “stereotype.” Many American readers note there is no longer that sense of the exotic they have long consumed. But they are still seeing a reflection of life, for they have mistaken *themselves* for something other than stereotypes, cardboard cutouts. They do not recognize that the individual has, to a

large degree, vanished behind a wash of pop technoculture. What we see in transnational texts is persistent contact between communities, where there is a focus not on the ends but the means: in language, *how* rather than *what* is said. Authors are observing the processes of transnational consumer interaction. They are deciphering those processes, and mining their expressions for information about the multiform transnational experience.

NOWHERE'S ARGOT: TRANSLATING THE LITERATIVE IDIOM

Conceptual Idio-Syntax and Other Roadblocks

To understand the artifact I've called the literative idiom, it is first necessary to understand some aspects of metaphor, syntax, and how the two fit together. Theories about metaphor trace their development through the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Mark Turner, Gilles Fauconnier and Michael J. Reddy, all of whom explored metaphor as both a cross-mapping of domains and as a sort of abstract, condensed narrative that helps individuals frame and order information. Their varying work on cognitive architectures contributed to the theory of "conceptual metaphor." In *Philosophy in the Flesh*, Lakoff and Johnson proved that the Aristotelian theory of metaphor needed some ... adjustments: they took issue with the classical view that tropes were mere figures of speech, which has survived to this day as a sort of linguistic mythology despite copious research to the contrary. As they philosophically put forth, "metaphor is centrally a matter of thought, not just words" (123). They showed that for every set of related metaphors – "we're spinning our wheels," "we're at a crossroads," "our marriage is on the rocks," for example – there is an underlying conceptual metaphor ("Love is a Journey"), a framework which binds them together. In effect, each turn of phrase is a surface manifestation of an underlying conceptual construction.

Similarly, syntax is centrally a matter of thought and not just language. Or rather, thought – specifically, the ordering of conceptual information – has itself a syntax also, and that this syntax can vary between communities. It necessarily binds all conceptual language constructions (such as metaphors/idioms), and even those seemingly removed from language (like cultural archetypes, narratives, etc.); it describes the different patterns people exhibit when ordering information. In this way, (conceptual) syntax has a lot to do with conceptual metaphor.

I was first tipped off to this correlation while teaching a college writing course at the University of North Texas, where I encountered a freshman named Bai Chen. She was a transnational student; she'd grown up in China, yet had a startlingly sophisticated command of English – more sophisticated than most of her fellow (American) students. When giving a presentation on the final day of class, however, one hiccup in her otherwise solid delivery took me by surprise: “Like when we throw one stone at many birds...”

This sort of reordering is not new. Writers manipulate syntax as a means of defamiliarization and/or irony, and anyone learning a non-native language knows that while vocabulary is relatively easy, some deeper aspects of grammar are more difficult to acquire. But again, Chen spoke English very well, and she clearly understood the idiom she'd used. Yet she had failed to render the idiom “correctly” during her presentation. I expected she'd done this in part as a reflection of the topic-comment structure familiar to Mandarin speakers, but also to apply a different thematic order to the expression – agent-instrument-patient, as opposed to agent-patient-instrument. What had afforded her this freedom? Idiom modification is common in creative written forms, but much less so in speech. When asked about her idio-syntactic error afterward, Chen showed she hadn't the same cultural attachment to the idiom; it seemed it was this that told her it was open for change. To her the expression wasn't yet a fixed exception to Chinese syntax. Chen's reliance on topic-comment structure as opposed to mere surface-level syntax suggested to me that there might also be a deeper, *conceptual* syntax, a framework that guides the ordering of information in larger, more abstract expressions. Structural theorists often allude to syntaxes underlying even immensely complex expressions such as literary texts: Tzvetan Todorov writes that “every ... text functions in the manner of a system; which implies that there exist necessary and not arbitrary relations between [its] constitutive parts” (75).

Todorov argues, similarly, that each *class* of text – in his case literary genre – bears its own appropriate syntax that must be invoked in some way within any member text.

If errors can occur in surface-level syntax, if it can be incorrectly coded and decoded, then it follows that the conceptual syntax underlying metaphors, archetypes and narratives can also be mishandled, mistranslated, transformed. In the case of the literative idiom, the logic of the expression disagrees with the system of the individual trying to make sense of it. But rather than being inhibited by cultural association – there are many idioms that no one understands the logic of any longer, yet few reorder their constituents during a speech act – unlike native speakers, transnationals don't perceive these expressions as static. They, like Chen, feel more comfortable altering idioms; they co-opt “fixed” forms for their own self-expression, unconstrained by any belief that this is not allowed. Because of this, transnationals respond not *against* fixed forms in the ironical way of most postmodern writers, but rather as a reflection, a meditation on everyday compositionality problems. Resulting brands of defamiliarization show some surface similarity, yet underneath are quite distinct from each other.

Most metaphors are inherently idiomatic (meaning they are linked to local contexts); most idioms are inherently metaphorical. Both metaphor and idiom are ultimately about *vision*, about the differing ways people perceive their worlds – about the differing ways we as individuals are socialized into perceiving. Though it might seem contrary to our ideas about “literary” metaphor, while metaphors are local, they only *appear* subjective. This is implicit in an explanation of the basis for Lakoff's theory in *Philosophy in the Flesh*:

We make subjective judgments about such abstract things as importance, similarity, difficulty, and morality, and we have subjective experiences of desire, affection, intimacy, and achievement. Yet, as rich as these experiences are, much of the way we conceptualize them, reason about them, and visualize them comes from other domains of experience. These other domains are mostly sensorimotor domains, as when we conceptualize understanding an idea (subjective experience) in terms of grasping an

object (sensorimotor experience) and failing to understand an idea as having it go right by us or over our heads. The cognitive mechanism for such conceptualizations is conceptual metaphor, which allows us to use the physical logic of grasping to reason about understanding. (45)

Lakoff and Johnson point out, further, how subjective and sensorimotor experience are intimately woven together, to the point that each affects all language. This integration starts in infancy. Lakoff and Johnson use Christopher Johnson's conflation theory to support their ideas about the early acquisition of conceptual frameworks: "For young children, subjective experiences and judgments, on the one hand, and sensorimotor experiences, on the other, are so regularly conflated – undifferentiated in experience – that for a time children do not distinguish between the two when they occur together" (46). This accounts for much of the everyday translation problem regarding idiomatic expressions. While metaphors express similarities, their cross-mapping also inherently embodies differences; and when individuals encounter idioms, they either accept them on the basis of context, or attempt to unravel them, to render them in a way consistent with the conceptual syntax of their local communit(ies).

This unraveling is a process of conceptual translation – again, with regard to not just simple metaphors but also complex symbolic objects like archetypes and narratives, and the rules used to create meaning from them. Meaning, in this sense, is information about interactions between the individual and the local, the local and the global. Each new text is a Rosetta Stone, which must be mined for a cipher before any associated text may be translated. And with postmodern language proliferation, for each former cultural-linguistic domain ("Egyptologist," in the example of the Stone) there are now dozens of distinct combinations, tributaries and versions altered by new media and popular culture.

All three novels I examine focus on the many facets of cultural translation. In *Nowhere Man*, the unnamed narrator of the novel's first chapter is a poor Bosnian immigrant who is

applying for a job as an ESL teacher. His repeated experiences with “abandoned” dictionaries are poignant, because each English word seems to have a dual meaning, a primary and then secondary or tertiary one which seems more applicable to his personal experience (5, 13). When his interviewers give him a tour of the international school, the narrator visits courses with different “levels” of proficiency (17) – here Hemon meditates on hierarchies of linguistic assimilation. But even the equalizing popular apparatus doesn’t seem to do its job: early on, the narrator encounters a “weather-beaten sign on a Coke machine [which] read NO WORKING” (9). In the space of transnationality, the popular fails as a platform for real cultural contact. Despite so many related aspects of translation, however, Hemon does prime us for the sort of grammatical questions he wants to ask. The narrator discovers another sign pinned to a tree, upon which is written the following message:

LOST DOG

I LOST MASCULINE DOG, THIS COCTAIL SPANIEL AND HIS NAME LUCKY BOY. HE HAS LONG, LONG EARS AND CURVE HAIR GOLD BROWN COLOR WITH SHORT TAIL ALSO HE IS VERY FRIENDLY, LITTLE CRAZY. IF ANYONE FOUND MY DOG PLEASE PLEASE CONTRACT MARIA. (7)

We aren’t told Maria’s ethnicity or native language, but we do understand that Hemon wants us to consider not just meaning but also the creole syntaxes that emerge in cultural contact zones. Changing narrators in *Nowhere Man* press us on the (often unrecognized) question of syntax which underlies cultural translation – of metaphors, archetypes, narratives, and so forth. And though awkwardness is a part of the translative equation, Hemon too wants us to see the freedom with which he approaches language, metaphor, narrative; it’s that freedom from idiomatic rules my student demonstrated which often accompanies transnational nowhere-ness.

The Duality of Estrangement

A reader's first encounter with the literative idiom in *Nowhere Man* occurs in the first chapter, before we know either who the protagonist or narrator is: "I had butterflies in my stomach, ripping off one another's wings, biting viciously through one another's abdomen" (12) – the same freedom, same exploration, same hyperbole as my former student. We do know by this point the narrator is from Bosnia, having emigrated just before the start of the Bosnian War (like Aleksandar Hemon himself), and it's clear from the narrator's strange rendering of the idiom that he's heard it many times from the mouths of Americans, knows its meaning, yet hasn't quite committed its idiomatic form to habit memory. At his hyperbole we wonder if he doesn't quite comprehend the construction's basic comparison between the fluttering of butterflies' wings and an unsettled stomach. The narrator therefore displays a difficulty understanding how the idiom fits with either subjective or cultural sensorimotor experience. These syntax and symbol translation problems are centrally an issue of compositionality. But freedom from local idiomization sidesteps that roadblock. This is when transnationals render idioms in their most hyperbolic forms, playing them out to their literal, often illogical, conclusions. Yet despite the awkwardness sometimes seen in such passages, the process shows a *mastery* of language on the part of the author. Indeed, transnational authors demonstrate a command of their new tongues by reproducing the nuances of everyday translation. A cultural outsidersness, manifested in language and grammar, is explored here.

Again, the literative idiom is not just a turn of phrase. Like the surface manifestations of Lakoff's primary conceptual metaphors, literative idioms are sometimes hard to spot; they often do not fit the conventional language frame for metaphors (A is B). Often the comparison is implicit, the domain cross-map must be inferred, as in "I had butterflies in my stomach."

Compositionality difficulties are encountered underneath, on the conceptual level. But though conceptual metaphor is supported by the logic of shared local sensorimotor experience, our postmodern sense of the proliferation of the local, of the emerging of ever more niche cultures predicated upon new media, dictates that we look at the theory of conceptual metaphor with some skepticism. It is naïve (particularly at this point in history) to assume that any local experience is identical for all involved. Even shared experience is shaped by subjectivity and by the nuances of individual perception and worldview; so that, while related, such experiences are not alike. These experiences help to create idiomatic expressions.

If idioms are shaped by local metaphor and experience, they are of course culturally coded. In order to fully unpack idioms, and the way transnationals respond to them, we must look at each through a cultural lens. Metaphor is never entirely subjective – so a movement across cultures, a perpetual inter-cultural existence is bound to be problematic. Particularly because, as Lakoff reminds us (from Terry Regier’s neural language model), language reinforces the link between the perceptual and the conceptual. Each may be coded and must therefore be decoded. One of the mapped domains might be perceptual, the other conceptual; any domain may be subjective, local, or global: they are all conflated (40).

Lakoff and Johnson do not, however, explore symbol translation. With regard to this, linguist Michael Reddy uses an analysis of his “conduit metaphor” paradigm to show that such processes are not predicated on just logic, but also belief. Our belief that language *contains* and does not just represent meaning leads to assumptions about translation – namely, that it is mathematical, and therefore easy and precise. Further, Reddy shows that idiosyntax shapes more than mere surface language or concepts; it affects even beliefs about what is true, untrue, just or unjust – often against all logic: “the power of the framework to enforce consistency of rationale

even when the results are inane [is] apparent” (169). Contexts and conceptual frameworks are easy detours for avoiding symbol and syntax roadblocks during translation. Frameworks govern the way individuals have conceptualized language (before current information-system changes), and these are rooted in correlations with sensorimotor experience.

So there is this subjective yet locally- and globally-coded process of syntax translation in metaphor exchange. When a transnational speaker works in a non-native language system, he must face localized constructions on the basis of compositionality. He is necessarily estranged by his failure to be a member of that community. Regardless of any understanding of the language, he cannot understand idioms until he acquires their appropriate contextual information. But he *knows* there is meaning *in* the words: meaning was correctly packaged in symbolic form – a faulty assumption inherent in the conduit paradigm, according to Reddy – and has been conveyed via some medium. Ultimately, it is this estrangement, in concert with the conduit assumption, which leads individuals to presume the freedom to modify idioms: “If all meaning is in the constituents and not overall form or context, I can alter them while still preserving portions of the expression’s meaning that I so choose,” and so on. The compositionality mythology reassures transnationals that words contain meaning; no expression violates its local rules. But in reality idioms pose a problem, for by their very nature they violate semantic rules. On the surface. And only by the freedom lent by their estrangement do transnationals buy further into the compositionality myth.

Even less-metaphoric idioms are in part based on assumptions about coded images and symbols. Language is never separated from local contexts: “[Language] is its own worst enemy,” Reddy writes (166). Communities employ their local knowledge and/or beliefs about objects when generating idiomatic expressions. For example, the relationship we have with dogs

in the West, the way we've integrated them into our social systems grants them micronarrative aspects ripe for use in metaphor: "sick as a dog," "every dog has its day," "let sleeping dogs lie," "tail wagging the dog," "top dog," and even "man's best friend," an idiom whose entire domain doesn't even feature in the expression. Communities where the dog has not been domesticated would surely generate different, mutually meaningless expressions.

Idiosyntax translation errors come into play when complex symbols like these are combined. In *Absurdistan*, cigarette ads in "St. Leninsburg" feature American football players catching hamburgers in baseball mitts (3). Shteyngart assembles this expression for satirical effect, certainly, but through it he doesn't set his characters against an omnipresent American syntax. Rather, they wade through a surreal, compositionality-plagued transnational version of it. A corrupted copy. Nevertheless, the passage does provide us with a transnational phrase for examination. It is the breaking of the conceptual syntaxes of these American iconographies – "cigarette ad," "sports ad," "fast food ad" – that lends irony to the passage. Further, the cigarette, the hamburger, the mitt, the football helmet – each of these means something unique (maybe contradictory) to every American locality: leisure, comfort, "cool," celebrity, wealth, even a lack of education, for example; while in another system, perhaps that of St. Petersburg or fictional Svanī City, the expression might not break syntax at all. Downtown Svanī City is crowded with high-end perfume advertisements featuring prison-striped African Americans, for example – another surreal rearrangement of American iconography. In concert, these symbols carry meaning for St. Petersburg and Svanī residents, though it is partly based on a "corrupted" (or just changed) syntax: progress, wealth, Westernization, cosmopolitanism. Conceptual symbols and grammars are altered, localized; in the transnational, the forms of many locales are blended and made new.

Hemon and Shteyngart are masters of estrangement, of making real environments seem surreal, even unreal. Both co-opt idioms and modify them for this purpose. Though the literative idiom is often born out of awkwardness, some narrators of both *Nowhere Man* and *Absurdistan* are sophisticated transnational speakers. They navigate this translative minefield, use it as a source of humor. Shteyngart's entire novel is tongue-in-cheek, and his unflinching satire is a clue that he is intentionally exploiting the literative idiom, spotlighting its awkwardness for the American audience. Aleksandar Hemon makes this point in an interview with Barry Pearce of *Other Voices*. He refers to the ability of transnationals to use their unfamiliarity, their sense of being outside all contexts and clichés:

The Russian structuralists, the literary theoreticians, they have a word in Russian, *Ostranenie*. In English it's translated as "defamiliarization." This same word was in my native language, Bosnian – it's the same word. It means "estrangement," that is, making something strange but also making something wondrous. They thought this is what literature does, that, for instance in poetry, everyone gets numb to the language they're using because its function is primarily clear communication...if I spoke to you in rhymed couplets right now, it wouldn't help the conversation. So you get used to metaphors and clichés and idioms and all that, and you accept that.

Transnational authors are naturally more capable of, and their characters more prone to, this literary technique – estrangement better equips them to reproduce the strange. Their strange language, strange identity is a reflection of that "nowhereness" Hemon and Shteyngart want to explore. A true *Nowhere Man* results from the process of transnational discovery.

This estrangement is often performed because of a failure of idiomized symbols and metaphors to adequately reflect transnational self-concepts. Transnationals necessarily qualify or complicate expressions; they penetrate the global, transforming the frameworks upon which language functions. This is common in both *Absurdistan* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, where characters' multiculturalism is a hindrance, implicitly equated with their obesity.

One example has Misha qualifying a widespread conceptual metaphor – his estranged version more closely reflects his localized self-concept:

I don't think I can fly like a graceful bird or like a rich American superhero. I think I can fly the way I do everything else – in fits and starts, with gravity constantly trying to thrash me against the narrow black band of the horizon, with sharp rocks scraping against my tits and stomachs, with rivers filling my mouth with mossy water and deserts plying my pockets with sand, with every hard-won ascent brokered by the possibility of a sharp fall into nothingness. ... I'm soaring away from the ancient rabbi clinging warmly to the collar of my tracksuit, over ... [the] mountain ranges that keep the prehistoric Mountain Jews safe ... over ... pockmarked Sarajevo, ... over Europe ... toward the tip of the slender island. (ix)

A number of things are at work here. The literalization and exaggeration of the familiar flying superhero are evident, with every material aspect of the flight of an obese Russian-American Jew explored. Misha also sets himself against the cookie-cutter image of the American superhero, a tension frequent also in Díaz's text. In the process, however, Misha also soars over so many parts of his cultural identity; there is no one iconic city – not Metropolis, not just New York or Moscow. He traces a physical path through them all, to the one that he relates to yet is ultimately most separated from: the slender island.

SIX DEGREES OF KEVIN BACON:
THE SEPARATIVE AND THE *ABSURD*

Passages like the above from *Absurdistan* are a reflection of the “small world phenomenon,” a theory that gained popularity with Stanley Milgram’s research into social networks during the 1960s and ‘70s. Milgram focused only on interconnectedness in the United States, but his work showed a remarkably low degree of separation between individuals – his ideas (and others like it) were popularized by John Guare in the stage play *Six Degrees of Separation*. The phrase “six degrees” didn’t enter the pop culture lexicon, however, until three college students developed the game Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon in 1994, and since that time it’s been invoked in television and radio talk shows, sitcoms and television dramas, fiction and nonfiction books (including a photographic coffee table book), dozens of social experiments, and even academic literature. Anyone even remotely plugged in to the popular has heard of Six Degrees. The game goes as follows: choose anyone in the film industry; that person can be linked through his or her roles to actor Kevin Bacon in six steps or less. The game carries with it one fundamental difference from the associated theory. Its focus on a limited community (the film industry) echoes the proliferation of the local since the middle of the twentieth century; it explores the small world phenomenon in a fragmented fashion, with each individual (or node) belonging to the *local* network in question. But whether or not the “six degrees of separation” statistical principle is instead really an “academic myth,” as some scholars have claimed, is to some extent inconsequential (Kleinfeld) – it has entered and remains in the popular psyche. It defines the way we conceptualize our shrinking world, by these novel methods of social organization granted us by new media. Again, contemporary social networks have shifted. They

are based more on function than location (of birth, ancestry, etc.). Diaspora is one of many reasons location has become problematic for post-industrial social organization.

The *separative* is based in some measure on this myth which has been absorbed by the popular psyche. In its most metalinguistic sense, the separative partitions people by their aspects, relationships, or factoids – in other words, their associated local networks. People therefore acquire a multitude of labels based on the many communities they belong to (not merely self-identity with), and these allow and disallow certain culturally-coded behaviors and speech acts until another separative tag is invoked in the text. Separatives are related to a difficulty rendering complex transnational identities, an exacerbation of the already fragmented post-industrial subject: Todorov predicted this metamorphosis, noting that “[any] character will be readily multiplied. We all experience ourselves *as if* we are several persons.... The multiplication of personality ... is an immediate consequence of the possible transition between matter and mind: we are several persons mentally, we become so physically” (116). The paradox of singularly rendering manifold cultural frameworks leads to an over-reliance on the easiest stereotypes, those most widely circulated among the dominant culture. The objects of such stereotyping are the consumers of Castells’ model.

This fragmented response is equivalent to switching between multiple, simultaneous computer protocols in lieu of generating new, blended protocols in manifold situations. Protocols guide the transfer of data; they determine both the grammar of message information and the local procedures regarding their transfer within systems. Even in literary texts, separative use is logic-oriented, very computerized – again technoculture features heavily in language frameworks. The separative process centers on cultural archetypes, the failure of individuals to make immediate sense of foreign “protocols.” Individuals then require commands

or guide words to mark switches. Transnational estrangement breeds a reliance on cultural caricature that, as with the literative idiom, consequently lends an air of the surreal to otherwise grave narratives – this is often what lends Shteyngart’s *Absurdistan* its absurdity. The reader watches overweight Russians and suburban Midwestern Americans imitate sex rap and Detroit ghetto-tech. In one instance, when it seems that Misha has “forgotten” a part of his identity, Alyosha-Bob invokes the appropriate linguistic protocol with the label “The Gentlemen Who Like to Rap.” This signals a style-shift, and the two share a few call-and-response verses of DJ Funk and Divada’s “Let Me See Ya Dick Work” from 1998 (5, 163):

“ ‘Lemme see yoah dick work, / Lemme see yoah dick work,’ ” Alyosha-Bob sang into an imaginary microphone, mimicking the tone of a young promiscuous woman from the Detroit ghetto. “ ‘Lemme see yoah dick work...’ ”

He leaned the microphone over to me. Pretending to be this imaginary ghetto woman’s paramour, I sang in a false ghetto-pimp baritone: “ ‘Let me see dat *pussy* work.’ ”

We both laughed. “Good boy,” Alyosha-Bob said. “That’s how we do it. That’s how we *hit it*. Straight-up Detroit shit. Call-and-response. You’re my nigga.” (163)

The irony here of course is that neither of them is terribly connected to this local community (which has been borrowed by the popular), and even after the song they rely on cardboard linguistic stereotypes. Following the shared speech act, Alyosha-Bob closes with another highly charged separative label, “nigga,” and the two are back to their usual Midwestern-liberal-arts-college repartee.

Interestingly, the repertoires that seem to call for separative use are not primary; they lie on the periphery of the webs that form our aggregate personalities. Identity is more fluid when based on function rather than something more essential, the way identity has been framed (and often abused) for millennia. Class and racial power structures of course still exist – but a new functional structure and the equalizing mechanisms of postmodernity dictate that identity is now more unstable. This is why we see Misha and Alyosha-Bob – neither of them black or urban –

unabashedly replicating Detroit ghettotech. There is a sense of caricature in their emulation that might be mistaken for disrespect were it not that we find it in a novel by Gary Shteyngart, master of irony and estrangement. Scenes like these are a meditation on cultural archetypes, on their popular yet ultimately local nature (because of characters' failure to credibly reproduce them), and on our dependence on caricature during the self-conceptualizing process.

Making Use of Cultural Caricature

Like the literative idiom, separatives do not call forward *false* repertoires. Shteyngart largely uses seminal works from the sex rap and ghettotech genres in his novel, showing us that *we steep ourselves* in caricature, even the caricature of others, for self-expression. He does, however, carry them out to their most ridiculous conclusions. In one scene we find Lyuba, a Russian peasant girl (and Misha's stepmother), seducing Misha with heavily-accented sex rap during a striptease: *Uh, sex in the Lex / Check my dzhenuine Rolex / Vaiping cum off your tits / I'm busting phat beats / Right past yo' shoulder / It's over / Now go cook for my kids* (90). The foreplay here occurs after they echo the phrase "when he busts" (89) – a shared invocation. And true to absurd form, the seduction works. Outside its cultural context, the misogyny inherent in sex rap becomes less offensive to outsiders and is simply unreal. It defies all logic when cast in Shteyngart's manufactured context – we can believe only that there's been some error, some breakdown in translation. In this way, separative style-shifts challenge the belief that respectable multiculturalism is even possible.

We recognize that multiculturalism doesn't always work like that – but it certainly can, and it does happen. New media have facilitated the free flow of information, but haven't packaged it with the appropriate contexts or conceptual grammars necessary for processing. The

separative, too, arises out of a problem of compositionality: transnational characters just don't have the tools necessary to put blended archetypes together, precisely because there aren't any established rules for doing so. Popular forms have spread prematurely, penetrated many corners of the world, and thus far we've been making things up as we go along. Hyperbole then becomes another method of exploration, of reflection and self-conceptualization.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao makes a similar statement about multiculturalism, though there are fewer characters involved in separative shifts. Oscar is a failure in every aspect of life precisely because he attempts to straddle that absurd line between contextually unlike locales. He attempts to cast his life in both fantasy and machismo contexts, which oppose each other primarily in their conception of women: while both objectify the female, fantasy narratives revere and protect her, machismo narratives revere and *dominate* her. Oscar has trouble putting on either aspect of the Dominican machismo archetype, which involves both socialized hyper-masculinity and a worldview that casts women as objects (of both sex and worship). Yet most secondary characters achieve some measure of accomplishment. Stereotypical Dominican men and even Oscar's geeky friends eventually succeed in their interactions with women. The narrator himself, Yunior, cheats on multiple girlfriends and still finds himself wildly successful by contrast. The only "mixed" character to break the Cabral's legendary fukú (a family curse) is his sister, Lola, who graduates from college, is remarkably assimilated and yet still maintains a measure of Dominicaness. But even Lola suffers some of the problems of her Dominicana peers: Yunior repeatedly runs around on her.

In Díaz's novel, separatives are not invoked as they are in *Absurdistan*; characters do not *employ* style-shifts so much as *receive* them. Oscar's problem is less than he shouldn't be interested in *The Lord of the Rings* or comic books, but rather that his social environment

executes for him the “wrong” separative, invokes at an inappropriate time a repertoire of behavior inappropriate to his current locale. Other characters push him to these repertoires and ultimately failure: his mother, his friends, Yuniar, his sister and even *her* friends – they all have a hand in his behavior and speech acts. “*Dale un galletazo,*” his mother taunts him (14). We are appalled that Oscar’s mother would so blatantly and coarsely perpetuate a misogynist archetype – particularly given her troubled history, which we receive in a later chapter – and not just teach it to her son but antagonize him into it. But the novel itself seems to absolve Belicia by reinforcing the notion that Oscar ought to take on the machismo repertoire. When other characters aren’t pushing style-shifts on Oscar, he seems to do it by mere accident. There is no intention as in *Absurdistan*. Rather, *Oscar Wao* conveys a sense of inevitability, that these cultural stereotypes rule and will continue to rule all of us. Global imitations penetrate the individual; they shape even our behaviors and speech.

Popular music serves as a key vehicle for separatives in *Nowhere Man*. Like in *Absurdistan*, style-shifting is associated also with the young, the juvenile. Young Bosniaks Jozef and Mirza co-opt Beatles music during the British Invasion, use the lyrics (in English, which they do not understand) to call forth cosmopolitan, Western identities for girls in their neighborhood – there are noticeable differences in their behaviors and speech, unique even to the particular song they sing. “Nowhere Man” invokes a sort of “John” personality, while “Yesterday” invokes a sort of “Paul.” In *Nowhere Man*, style-shift seems to be the luxury of children, a thing that adults aren’t often afforded. As a child Jozef seems perfectly international, capable of switching between repertoires at will; as an adolescent he can manage, though he has lost some of that freedom: his accent weighs more heavily and boxes him in as “foreign” to Americans. As an older adult, however, he has somehow regressed. He has been typecast as

Balkan, has lost whatever Ukrainian he had during childhood, whatever internationalism he'd gained from Shanghai, Kiev or Chicago. In a rare moment during young adulthood, Jozef finds himself going door-to-door with Greenpeace, capable at least of fooling the ignorant, of masking his foreignness with some *other* foreignness:

To a young couple in Evanston who sat on their sofa holding hands, Pronek introduced himself as Mirza from Bosnia. To a college girl in La Grange with DE PAW stretching across her bosom he introduced himself as Sergei Katastrofenko from Ukraine. To a man in Oak Park with chintzy hair falling down on his shoulders, the top of his dome twinkling with sweat, he introduced himself as Jukka Smrdiprdiuskas from Estonia. To an old couple from Romania in Homewood, who could speak no English and sat with their hands gently touching their knees, he was John from Liverpool. To a tired construction worker in Forest Park who opened the door angrily and asked, "Who the fuck are you?" he was Nobody. To a Catholic priest in Blue Island, with eczema and a handsome, blue-eyed boyfriend, he was Phillip from Luxembourg. To a bunch of pot-bellied Christian bikers barbecuing on a Walgreen's parking lot in Elk Grove Village, he was Joseph from Snitzlland (the homeland of the *snitzl*). To a woman in Hyde Park who opened the door with a gorgeous grin, which then transmogrified into a suspicious smirk as she said, "I thought you were someone else," he was Someone Else. (179-80)

Regardless of their nationality, it is only the less-dimensional, the non-transnational that Jozef is able to fool, and he makes changes to his language when he puts on his various cultural masks. There are few instances when adults have the opportunity to participate in the kind of multiform identity seen in *Absurdistan* and *Oscar Wao* – in this case, it is a *luxury* and not a curse. Nor is it unreal. But it is fleeting: *Nowhere Man* takes a comparable stance on multiculturalism, suggesting that a social apparatus that prefers binaries inevitably imposes them on us. No matter how long Jozef (or any of the narrators) lives in America, despite how truly transnational they are, they cannot avoid being culturally typecast.

Identities *are* more complex in transnational flowspace, but this is largely incommunicable to those on the clear insides of cultural spheres. Characters in *Nowhere Man* repeatedly struggle on this account. Like the novel's unnamed first narrator, Jozef Pronek tries

to express himself to others, but most Americans fail to understand, like the detective who's hired Jozef to serve a Serb with a subpoena:

“Who are you?” Owen asked. “It's Serbs fighting Muslims over there, right? Are you a Serb or a Muslim?”

“I am complicated,” Pronek said, and retched. (146)

“Who are you?” – a strange, blatant question to ask someone, but a question that sits at the heart of Hemon's novel. While complex cultural identities might be familiar to some Americans, there just doesn't seem to be an adequate way to communicate the *experience* of transnationality, the unique continuum of transnational self-concepts. Pronek has no way to tell anyone “who he is.” Transnational characters in *Nowhere Man* try to describe themselves to those that ask – at first. But in the end they all end up replying like Jozef; when asked if they're “basically Yugoslavian,” they just answer “I guess” (146). They may only rely on the popular to connect with others, thanks to cultural imperialism and our increasingly ubiquitous “Western invasion.”

LIFE IN THE NO MAN'S LAND:
NEGOTIATING VIA THE HYPERCORRELATE

Cultural narrative – narrative in general – goes through this same transformative process in the hands of hyper-fragmented and multiform individuals. Particularly in the postmodern, narratives are often difficult to translate, to make meaningful in other symbolic systems. This is only exacerbated in the transcultural space of flows, where, at a loss for words, we can only describe resulting narrative forms the way Pronek would: “complicated.” These stories fall automatically to a structure that I call the hypercorrelate narrative.

Though its imprint on texts is often subtler, the hypercorrelate is felt first in surface-level narrative structure. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is split into eight chapters which switch their narrative focus on a generational basis, a feature common in immigrant narratives. Narrative is framed and reframed in the contexts of the old and new; second-generation immigrants have historically structured their identities on the basis of parents’ birth location – in effect a bifurcation of personal identity where the individual fades behind the framing method of another era (Bailey 157). *Nowhere Man* similarly features seven chapters, each with the same character subject but narrated from a different point of view, in at least four separate locations: Chicago, Sarajevo, Kiev and Shanghai. With regard to nationality, *Absurdistan* functions like *Oscar Wao* but has a third location; so that while there is a generational, place-based bifurcation between St. Petersburg (Russia) and New York (the US), there is an additional, *absurd* plane, a world that has borrowed culture from both the old superpowers that Misha ultimately maps himself against during self-conceptualization. Mossad agents masquerade as Texas oilmen and Sevo girls as wanton American co-eds. Even Misha manages to appear not just Russian or American, but Belgian – until airport swindlers strip everything away to exploit his Jewishness,

which is repeatedly framed as “nationality” by the Absurdi people. All of these show the changeability of identity, specifically national identity. There are three basic narratives to the story, split on the basis of time and place; however, this is a relic of the modern. Though a knowledge of American and Russian culture is useful in processing the international aspects of Absurdsvani, the Absurdi narrative proves we can’t get the whole story from this sort of framework. New self-concepts are no longer mere amalgams of nationality.

But even the hypercorrelate’s more superficial manifestations spring in part, again, from a negotiation of syntax. Narrative syntax works similarly to the syntaxes of metaphor and archetype. Didier Coste explains it as a blended conceptualization: “The syntax of narrative should be understood as a compound of the grammaticalization of semantic data and the semanticization of grammatical data” (207). Essentially, meaning becomes form, and vice versa. A breakdown in the decryption of form then becomes a breakdown in meaning – an amplified breakdown, because form necessarily precedes meaning. The resulting structure bears some semblance to that of the separative, for the hypercorrelate involves the same forced switches between archetypes in lieu of a proper blend, where elements are synthesized and redefined. The hypercorrelate is a manifold narrative, its threads parallel and egalitarian. Narrative accountability is nonexistent, and in fact the identities of narrators often remain unknown until stories’ close. New media are key here, however. The subtler hypercorrelate narrative borrows its mechanism from hypertexts, as narrative shifts are signaled by various hyperlink analogs, such as catchwords or even images and symbols. (This also mirrors cinematic storytelling techniques.) Jumps occur mid-paragraph, -thought, and -sentence, in part because transnational characters participate in their construction and development: hypercorrelates reflect the

spontaneous composition (i.e., self-conceptualization) of real experience, not the deific order brought to modern narratives by their authors.

National (meta)narratives prove problematic for translation. This is especially so in post-industrial nations, where changing conceptual frameworks tend not to rely on them as they have. And hierarchical differences between the industrial and post-industrial complicate the process: the post-industrial awareness of nationality's past conceptual supremacy is high, and this leads to a skepticism of such narratives. This is prominent in Hemon's *Nowhere Man*, where national narratives are an utter failure. They are a source of either confusion or hostility. Unnamed narrators are boiled down, often named *only* by their nationalities, functioning as representative types; no one narrative sticks around long enough to give a complete picture of any character. Those nameless narrators hardly have identities at all: they are unrelated to the main character; their stories lie entirely outside his. They serve only as a frame to the novel, little more than an awkward context or extraneous narrative device. They barely qualify as observers. Narrators might have lived across the street from Pronek for a few months, or stayed next door as an exchange student, and so forth. Anonymous narrators allow narrative *switches* in *Nowhere Man* to occur as narrative *inhabitations*; they are co-opted by dissimilar national identities or perspectives in order to surrealize the story. It's no surprise that the novel's opening narrator, our anonymous, extraneous plot device, closely resembles Aleksandar Hemon himself (they share many biographical details, including the ESL job in Chicago). It is this self-erasure that begs for inhabitation – a sort of borrowed, surrogate self-concept.

Yet despite their natural disjunction, hypercorrelate narratives often eclipse their diminished subjects and *resemble* past metanarratives. They are not merely relics of modernity, but rather a dependence on it in response to post-modern anxieties. The individual has been

anonymized amid an over-reliance on popular narratives. In *Oscar Wao*, Oscar takes on popular American “nerd” narratives, precisely because he cannot make reliable connections elsewhere. *The Lord of the Rings*, *Fantastic Four* and other superhero stories all provide a roughly comparable Western framework for Oscar’s self-conceptualization. He is granted significance in these fantasy contexts, something he fails to actualize otherwise. But he cannot cast himself in just one: they are popular and so generic; they lack the narrative complexity to accommodate countless localities. Historically, comic books have been rife with racial stereotypes – few have featured Hispanic heroes, and those that do often have characters “suddenly discover” Hispanic ancestry or a lost Mexican father (*Green Lantern*). Because of their one-dimensionality and reliance on the fantastic, these narratives cannot be employed for long. So, though these narratives are bound loosely by a conceptual syntax, characters must make use of many in their practice of self-conceptualization.

As with most of Hemon’s characters, Oscar rarely signals his own narrative shifts. He is not incapable of intentionality, only enaction. Narratives are often forced upon him by other characters at the sight of posters, lunch boxes, sci-fi books, fantasy miniatures. Then his mother or uncle or Yunior (as either character or narrator) toggle him back to machismo. These representative objects illustrate the hypertextual method of narratives; more importantly, they show how the Universe (or fukú?) conspires against Oscar. Outside agents play a greater role in determining Oscar’s multicultural narrative identity. But Yunior, our unnamed-til-the-end narrator, is granted by Díaz/the gods both intentionality and enaction. Yunior frequently signals shifts. He employs multiple narratives – this includes the fantasy narratives he “pins” on Oscar – toward a hypercorrelate structure.

Other postmodern hypercorrelate forms may be co-opted in contemporary transnational texts. Notes are one paradoxical example, for they are situated both super- and subordinately to the primary text; they provide supplementary information, yet by their academic quality appear also more authoritative and thus authentic. Transnational authors and characters may then use paratextual elements to historicize and legitimize Other narratives – Yunior exploits their contradictory nature to this end. In them he largely presents the narrative of Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, a story Yunior believes is linked to the fate of the Dominican people and specifically Oscar’s family, the Cabrals. But his notes feature lengthy prose, allowing him to legitimize a myth he’s only loosely assembled from history. Díaz himself claimed *Oscar Wao*’s footnotes are half-full of lies (“Interview”) – filled with almost as much fantasy and legend as Oscar’s roleplaying games. Yunior borrows the legacy of Trujillo’s antihaitianismo policy, uses it as a traumatic atmosphere by which to orient Oscar’s story. The novel’s few (unspoken) acknowledgements of Haitian-Dominican racial tension come out of mentions of the Cabrals’ blackness, and do not appear in the paratext. But Yunior doesn’t seem content just manipulating unspoken histories. He wants to reveal unspoken mythological contexts, to develop them, as if to remind us that Western frameworks do not accommodate all of us. If the reader detects this, he is left with a dilemma: he wonders why the narrator has infused a hyperviolent history with falsehood and fantasy at all, and whether this mythologizing act in any way diminishes the significance of the real violence visited upon the Haitian (and to a lesser degree, Dominican) people by the Trujillo regime. At this point, it feels like a step backward.

Self-Fantasizing, Local Mythologizing

In contemporary transnational fiction there exists an element of what Tzvetan Todorov calls “the fantastic,” whether authors express it in form, language or ways of seeing. This is reflected in transnational surreality, because Todorov notes that the fantastic presents readers with abnormality, illogic, and establishes a dilemma of belief. He illuminates the distinctions between the fantastic and what he calls “the marvelous,” a watered-down version: unlike the marvelous, the fantastic “is uniquely linked to the sentiments of the characters and not [just] to a material event defying reason” (47). Stories composed from an angle of transnational compositionality work on a similar plane; in these stories, fantastic elements *are* the characters’ sentiments, their responses to cultural “logic.” Oscar Cabral bows before the “real” laws of his life, and begs for the fantasy logic of another universe. *Nowhere Man*’s anonymous Bosniak narrator stretches and surrealizes language to reflect the distance he feels from all places. Even Misha Vainberg masters the surreal systems and art forms of America and Russia, milks them for every advantage, only to fall apart when a third system (Absurdsvani) fails to make sense. These are self-conceptual, self-referential responses to estrangement.

Practically, narrative estrangement is only possible because popular narratives are so linked with phrases and symbols. Much the same way the separative calls up certain behaviors, narratives may be invoked even when their coincidence defies common logic. Because of their analogous mechanisms, separatives often coincide with hypercorrelate shifts; archetypal characters and their associated narratives may be invoked in concert:

Hiding your doe-eyed, large-breasted daughter from Trujillo, however, was anything but easy. (Like keeping the Ring from Sauron.) If you think the average Dominican guy’s bad, Trujillo was five thousand times worse. Dude had hundreds of spies whose entire job was to scour the provinces for his next piece of ass; if the procurement of ass had been any more central to the Trujillato the regime would have been the world’s first culocracy (and maybe, in fact, it was). (217)

Here is a compacted narrative switch: before it, Trujillo is just Trujillo; after, Trujillo has become Sauron, his spies have become ring wraiths searching the land for women instead of the One Ring, and a beautiful woman's *culo* (ass) has become the irresistible source of omnipotence. These narrative markers are not mere references, but a reframing of the current story in a different narrative context; a popular narrative serves as a coarse translation for Western audiences. The membership of catchwords like "Sauron" and "the Ring" in the popular fantasy lexicon allows these hypercorrelate shifts. Between these separative markers exists a language style change for Yuniór, too – no matter how much he belittles Oscar's fantasy interests, how much he talks up his own machismo, his jargon says otherwise.

Yuniór's footnote narrative functions as if an ethnography – it masquerades as paratextual, authorizing and yet oddly subverting Dominican cultural identity. The correlation between *La Era de Trujillo* and *The Lord of the Rings* undermines Dominican history; it clothes in the surreal something we are appalled to see is still vulnerable – namely, recorded history. In modernity we perceived ourselves as no longer distorting the past, but have since realized this is impossible. Yuniór is not supposed to be able to rewrite history. Trujillo becomes less a violent dictator than a supervillain, in a myth that *has no hero*. It has only unfortunate dreamers, who perpetuate its repression. Fantasy narratives are correlated even with the most horrible historical tragedies; these are carried over to familial events, as one key purpose of the story is to demonstrate the mysterious fukú which has plagued the Cabral's for generations:

26. After Trujillo launched the 1937 genocide of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans, you didn't see that many Haitian types working in the DR. Not until at least the late fifties. Esteban was the exception because (a) he looked so damned Dominican, and (b) during the genocide, Socorro had hidden him inside her daughter Astrid's dollhouse. Spent four days in there, cramped up like a brown-skinned Alice. (218)

Here we see the story the Cabral's manservant correlated with Alice's surreal growing and shrinking within the White Rabbit's house – from a European children's book. Esteban takes on self-referential fantasy within a “scholarly,” paratextual object. Elsewhere we see Oscar's awful experiences in the New Jersey ghetto correlated with an X-Man comic, his failure to meet the norms of his ethnicity likened to “bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of [his] chest” (22). Again, this is a narrative that Yuniors applies *to* Oscar.

Nowhere Man contains some of the most abstract hypercorrelate variants. Its fragmented narrative structure reflects the hypercorrelate mechanism, but it is Hemon's choice of inappropriate narrators – only one of the chapters is told from Pronek's perspective; one is a letter from his friend but *translated* by Pronek – that further complicates narrative authority and identity. And like the footnotes in *Oscar Wao*, Hemon often infuses his hypercorrelates with a fantastic and violent ambient narrative context. It's more subtly woven into the surface narrative(s) than Díaz's footnotes, but it relies on similar shifts, and ultimately provides much of the transnational context in which secondary characters interact with Jozef Pronek. In some cases we are simultaneously signaled into both the correlated and ambient narratives, by newspapers which regard the Bosnian War:

A young woman in front of me ... was reading the paper. DEFENSES COLLAPSE IN GORAZDE, a headline read. I had been in Goražde only once, only because I had vomited in the car, on our way somewhere, and my parents stopped in Goražde to clean the mess up. All I remembered was being thirsty and shivering on the front seat, as my father retched in the back seat, wiping it with a cloth; and then my father leaving my cloth-wrapped vomit by the road, and hungry, desperate little animals crawling out of the bushes to devour it. (8)

Practically, we shift in and out of multiple characters' loosely-related micronarratives from Goražde, but we also receive the ambient, violent Bosnian War story which anchors the subtext for half the novel, particularly the chapters covering years 1992 - 1995. Even these extraneous

narratives are weighted by violence, working to an effect opposite that in *Oscar Wao*: while Yuniors footnotes buoy the Trujillo Era with pop mythology, Hemon's newspapers focus all the gravity of the Bosnian War on our ordinary, everyday experience.

Hypercorrelates function another way in *Absurdistan*. Most of its characters are late-life immigrants, educated, who desire assimilation and view popular culture as an effective interface for communication. Hypercorrelates here are binary; switches occur as hypnagogic sequences, lending to brief passages about life in New York and St. Petersburg an air of the fantastic. But it is *their* absurdity that makes sense to Misha, that feels logical in contrast with Absurdsvanī. He soars over surreal New York, its signs self-referentially reminding him "YOU ARE HERE" (xi); experiences strange hallucinations of his strange childhood in St. Petersburg; even enjoys shared daydreams with Nana, his Americanized Sevo NYU co-ed. Though we see access and estrangement are widespread, not all "locales" in flowspace are created equal. Misha revels in the absurd capitalist iconography of the Russian cigarette ad and of a "billboard featuring three near-naked brown women dripping with gold and filled with silicone leaning over the crotch of a black man in prison stripes. 718 PERFUMERY: THE ODOUR OF THE BRONX IN SVANĪ CITY" (118); yet he cannot comprehend the religious disputes of the Svanī and Sevo orthodoxy, their disagreement over the angle of Christ's footrest (118). His worldview is infused with the pragmatic agnosticism of the post-industrialist world. Of course, satire forces us to examine the novel's threads more closely. But fictional Absurdistan does represent a sort of bastard transnationality, one that though separated relies on the West. The surreal hypercorrelate forms woven into *Absurdistan* reflect this relationship, they illuminate that interdependence between reality and its estranged double.

Interdependence of the Real/Surreal

What can I tell you? In Santo Domingo, a story is not a story unless it casts a supernatural shadow.

Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

In the transnational, the fantastic always refers back to some less-estranged, “normal” reality; in fact, it complicates the definition of normal itself. Hypercorrelates in *Absurdistan* carry out this function. On passage into a daydream late in the novel, Misha observes the sudden, odd “glamour” of Svanī City, yet signals a narrative shift by remarking, “But I wasn’t there” (275). Instead he inhabits an American narrative, briefly exploring some familiar streets in New York as he does in the opening pages of the novel. The neighborhood is “their stretch,” referring to his full-bodied, ethnic Rouenna, who earlier had showed herself to be the apotheosis of complicated American multiculturalism:

“What are you, then?” Max demanded.

“Half Puerto Rican. And half German. And half Mexican and Irish. But I was raised mostly Dominican.”

“Catholic, then,” said Max, satisfied she wasn’t Jewish.

“We *was* Catholic. But then these Methodists came around and gave us food. So we were like—okay, we’re Methodists now.” (32)

But this sort of absurdity feels familiar, *real*. In a later scene, Misha experiences a kind of prolonged acid trip, in which many aspects of America and (childhood) Russia beckon him from Absurdistan: tube socks and laundromats, frying pans, his mother – each of these seems wildly more attractive than the SCROD and GRAD missiles that punctuate those same pages, in moments when he blinks out of hallucination. Finally the Hyatt skyscraper, symbol of American capitalist imperialism, jumps across the sea (279-83). Hypnagogic sequences grow more and more surreal, disobeying even natural laws by novel’s end. When these short passages are strung together they form a narrative correlated with the primary one, which is set almost entirely in

Russia and Absurdistan. The American narrative thread, with its underlying thematic and iconographic consistency, symbolizes a command over the surreal; the Absurdistan narrative represents a loss of control, an inability to make sense of the surreal. Further, much as the American sequences, multiethnic Rouenna represents the ideal of successful assimilation. Absurdistan represents the precise opposite: while on the surface Nana appears a cosmopolitan exchange student, she suffers from the same inexplicable worldview as her father.

As is common in transnational novels, narrative shifts often work off generational tension. This reflects generational differences in views toward multiculturalism. Late in *Absurdistan*, while relaxing in the Svanī City Hyatt, Misha conjures his dead father in a daydream, imagines him eating breakfast with him in the room so that he can ask unanswered questions. Boris does not respond lovingly; there is no support for Misha's Gen-X-brand of transnationality (235). Here a character generates his own supernatural event to address personal anxieties about the present – he reflects and even participates in the collapse of logic we note throughout the novel. This is yet another way transnational authors present the dilemma of belief that Todorov recognizes in the fantastic.

Regardless of basis, hypercorrelates express inextricable binary tensions. Indeed, I borrowed terminology from English grammar to reflect this: the term “hypercorrelate” is based on correlatives, pairs of conjunctions that function only in concert (either/or, not only/but, etc.). In the same way, each hypercorrelate cannot exist without one or more counterparts. Misha spends the entirety of Shteyngart's story chasing an impossible multicultural dream; if that dream ceased to exist, so would Misha. Oscar Cabral would not exist without fantasy, without the fukú, nor without the Cabral family narrative; likewise, the Dominican people would not be the same if not for *La Era de Trujillo*. Without his anonymous observers, as well as the ambient

violence provided by the multiform Goražde narrative, Pronek loses much of his transnationality – his context has disappeared. Early in *Nowhere Man* we find a perfect example of hypercorrelate interconnectedness. As our first unnamed narrator tours a series of ESL classes, in the “level seven” room we find students reading a story about Ronnie and Donnie, a pair of Siamese twins joined at the torso. Jozef Pronek, an older student who later becomes the main character, struggles to read a passage to the rest of the class: “ ‘What people often don’t realize,’ Ronnie said, ‘is that if one of us dies, the other one is going to die too,’ ” Pronek read (24). At this the narrator remembers Pronek from his own childhood, and the suggestion of Pronek’s words is twofold. Firstly, they suggest that Pronek and the unnamed narrator are linked; that they, like Ronnie and Donnie, share part of the same body and are connected until death. Second, by extension of the first, we must assume this applies to all the novel’s narrators. Ronnie and Donnie become a metaphor for narrative interconnectedness, as well as the co-dependence of the national and transnational. The twins cannot be separated without being irreparably changed, even erased – because of this, they express also that paradoxical vein of interdependence and dissociation that pervades transnational stories.

Interdependence is reflected in narrative, but the characters themselves work in a similar way. In *Absurdistan*, Misha (the Russian Americophile) does not exist without Alyosha-Bob (the American Russophile), his inverted self. Even author Gary Shteyngart has an absurd doppelgänger: Jerry Shteynfarb, Rouenna’s second love interest, author of *The Russian Arriviste’s Handjob* (a reference to Shteyngart’s first novel, *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook*, and a shot at Shteyngart himself). Rouenna has a double, too – Nana Nanabragovna, whom Misha is perfectly suited for yet ultimately leaves behind in the mountains of Absurdistan. Not all are inversions, however. One bond the industrial and the post-industrial share is violence:

Hypatia “Belicia” Cabral, Oscar’s mother, exhibits almost as much violence as her Dominican gangster boyfriend; and Boris Vainberg’s old school gangster violence is expressed perfectly in the “revolutionary” Mr. Nanabragov, Misha’s surrogate father. *Violence* is the tie that binds the real and the surreal. No world can escape it. But in the end Misha prefers the more familiar version, the one with – to the Western mind – some method to the madness.

SOME NOTES ON VIOLENCE AND DIASPORA

Transnational fiction regularly involves characters from diasporic groups whose home nations have undergone periods of ethnic violence. Both emigration and bloodshed are sources of tension in the transnational, and are involved in its self-conceptualizing process; for Jennifer Brinkerhoff notes that “diaspora participation in transnational violence is fundamentally about identity” (68). Violence is a perpetuated background component in diasporic communities, due in part to its legacy – but contact zones in host nations also play a role because of the constant tensions inherent to intercultural mediation: “diaspora identities are constantly produced and reproduced. [According to Friedman,] they are ‘a negotiated result rather than a reflection of an objective or described reality’ ” (Brinkerhoff 71).

Legacies of ethnic cleansing provide an unfortunate, violent context that characters must repeatedly frame themselves against in both *Nowhere Man* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. During the Bosnian War from 1992-5, the United Nations Protection Force declared Goražde in Bosnia and Herzegovina a UN “safe area”; it became a Bosniak enclave, a symbol of last stands, as the Bosnian Serb Army sieged it for months and slaughtered hundreds of its citizens when the United Nations retreated. Though Hemon’s characters seem only able to muster mundane memories of Goražde, memories of vomit and first kisses and girls who let boys touch their breasts, there’s no doubt that the narrators and Jozef Pronek must confront its violent history every day. Even the letter from Pronek’s childhood friend Mirza (now a soldier), written from Sarajevo, includes as much about horses and American films as it does the war. It’s as if everyone wants to forget what has gone on; neither Pronek nor Hemon’s narrators want to talk about it, especially when asked by Americans.

Past violence weighs more heavily on Oscar and his family. Yunió frames his entire story by this manipulated legacy, noting that the Cabrals have been battling it for generations. In this case, while violence was carried out against the Dominican people, it is the Haitians that Rafael Trujillo demanded be massacred en masse. The fukú becomes an echo – especially from the mouth of Yunió – of that violence, a violence that transcends ethnicity, even diaspora, to become something more universal. It accentuates and perpetuates common transnational anxieties. Díaz’s novel is full of exaggerated information about Rafael Trujillo and the period, but it’s the full-circle diaspora narrative we get from Oscar’s grandfather and mother that presents to us the real legacy, this tendency to return to cruelty – whenever characters revisit the island, that legacy resurfaces. In those narratives we sense Dominicans are powerless to fully escape their past:

Every summer Santo Domingo slaps the Diaspora engine in reverse, yanks back as many of its expelled children as it can; airports choke with the overdressed; necks and luggage carousels groan under the accumulated weight of that year’s cadenas and paquetas, and pilots fear for their planes – overburdened beyond belief – and for themselves.... Like someone had sounded a general reverse evacuation order: Back home, everybody! Back home! ... this is when the basic thermodynamic gets modified so that reality can now reflect a final aspect.... (271-2)

This is reflected in the language and grammar that Yunió employs when he weaves together his narrative(s). The novel begins and ends with the fukú, with Oscar writing, with his superhero mythologies that somehow recast the cruel cycle that has taken his life. In the end, it is this “reverse Diaspora engine,” this compulsion to return to the violence of the past that leads Oscar back to the Dominican Republic and to his death: somehow the vicious beating he receives weeks before does not served as a warning, as intended, but instead has changed the love he’s felt for girls since childhood and given it meaning. He now no longer fears that infamous Dominican cruelty – this makes Ybón irresistible, even necessary for him.

Violence contributes greatly to transnational compositionality, in part because of its effect on contact zones. It is only in *Absurdistan* that we see *contemporary* intercultural violence and its effect on symbol negotiation and translation. Interestingly, Shteyngart presents a dual, mutually referent situation: we see how Misha conceptualizes the Holocaust and the current Sevo-Svani conflict through his proposal for “The Institute for Caspian Holocaust Studies, aka the Museum of Sevo-Jewish Friendship” (268). Misha builds a monument to emotional and psychological processing with regard to a past genocide, set it in the context of a new revolution where – though there are religious and ethnic elements – war is motivated by money. Religion and ethnicity are a mirage, a façade for the West: the SCROD revolutionaries know they’ll only get UN aid if they fake an ethnic conflict. They have mastered the propaganda of their Nazi forbears yet inverted its goal and effect. Implicit in Misha’s proposal is the comparison of the two crises, which leads readers to wonder how much the Holocaust has affected a peripheral Jew like Misha, and whether current events will bear the same effects on the Sevo and Svanī in the future. Because transnational texts demonstrate that past violence heightens even non-violent, current contact zones. (Cosmopolitan Nana and her friend Sissy are not safe.) This occurs in part because of relationships between post-industrial and industrial nations, where symbol translation is heavily influenced by power structures. Progressive narratives are often favored by the powerful, while mnemonic ones are favored by the social Other – but Shteyngart complicates this fabric by showing us a new world in which the colonized are the aggressors, where violence becomes an act of self-aggression. The disenfranchised discover they can use it to their advantage: the SCROD not only start the war but eventually bomb their own city in order to make it into the international news media. It is this twist on an old power dynamic which lends *Absurdistan* and its contact zones that surreal and violent ambience – all social interaction is

affected by it. And that ambience colors each lens, each viewing angle. Their surreal self-aggression compels Misha to relate to the Absurdis on the basis of his Russianness and Jewishness; he moves from a sense of disdainful superiority to a desire to take care of them as his own. In the beginning the Russian orphans are “Misha’s children,” but later this includes the Absurdi children, the little girls whose mothers try to sell them for sex to wealthy tourists. They become his charity project, an opportunity for redemption. At some point Absurdistan’s self-hatred just makes sense to him.

Diaspora and violence become ways of marking time or framing generational experiences, of framing narratives. In transnational post-modernity, blended contexts become necessary – long-lived homogenous legacies are no longer appropriate contemporary contexts. Ever-fragmented local communities must exhibit some measure of autonomy; they do so through idiomized language, grammars and mythologies. These mythologies express each of their related histories or contexts, but also the process of fabrication by which local communities create them: the Trujillo-Cabral fukú and Sevo-Svani War narratives, for instance, are born from this creative re-historicizing process. Their importance to the community is defined as much by the aspects of their fabrication as by their verifiable truth. In *Nowhere Man*’s violent Bosnian War narrative, the characters’ homeland becomes blended with American popular culture by their own design. This presents us with the continuums of assimilation and preservation, progress and memory. Immigrant characters confront the Goražde narrative differently, not merely because they don’t know translative rules but because they feel the disquiet lurking beneath that familiar American dissociation. Americans have long tried to forget our *own* history of ethnic violence, here within our own borders.

Violence informs all features of transnational compositionality, including the literative idiom. The hyperbolic rendering of the “butterflies in the stomach” idiom in *Nowhere Man* makes violent not only the metaphor but also the sort of anxiety the narrator expresses with it. It is now not just an upset stomach, but an overwhelming, violent nausea that attacks and even consumes itself. Idiomatic expressions in *Absurdistan* are certainly affected, too: they are all about façade, about wearing the correct mask to get attention from the world. Advertising becomes an ideal vehicle satire for Shteyngart in this regard. Refashioning local information into popular forms is a major subject of the novel: it is a capacity and even compulsion that the West has bestowed upon the industrial and developing worlds. That violent conflict is just one more bit of data the SCROD rebels can manipulate for the purpose of acquiring money from the international community seems positively Western.

Separatives are in part informed by violence because characters and their multiform identities are informed by it; the personae they wear include violent, even manipulative elements. In *Absurdistan*, wealthy and dissociated individuals co-opt popular urban forms (rap music, for example) that express violence, whether in sexual, ethnic or class contexts. Misha is clearly not prepared for the reality of conflict when he finds it in Absurdsvani. And regardless of a violent Dominican history and urban New Jersey childhood in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, even Yunior is separated from the genocide that so affects his people; he expresses it in other contexts, with popular nerd characters and jargon. From the beginning we are confused as to this conflation of the fantastic and violently real. The fukú is not an adequate explanation of Yunior creative conflation. But we err if we assume these anomalies are only a literary device; they are a natural part of the transnational fabric that Yunior and Oscar and even Díaz inhabit. Even this is a process of intercultural negotiation, however: the way that transnational stories transform

and blend together show that separatives, these markers of archetypal character shifts, become an interface for cultural engagement, for the meeting of myriad locales. This includes national-transnational engagement, but also generational engagement, for the popular alone moves too quickly to serve as a sufficient interface.

THERE ARE NO MORE PLACES

Nowhere Man's first narrator, our immigrant from Bosnia, makes his way to the interview for an ESL teaching position in 1994. On the train, in the waiting room, during the interview and elsewhere, newspapers and broadcasts flash over and over "DEFENSES COLLAPSE IN GORAZDE," but this has little practical relevance to him because he cannot relate the associated context nor his experiences to any of the individuals he now knows. Through all the media coverage and our around-the-clock compulsion for saturation with shocking news, the Bosnian narrator's interviewers exhibit barely a cursory knowledge of the conflict, failing to connect his nationality with the war:

"What is your point of origin?" Marcus asked.

"Sarajevo, Bosnia," I said.

"Oh, man," Robin said. "That is so neat." (15)

... and moments later:

"[Mihalka] is from Czechoslovakia," Robin said. "You are from Czechoslovakia too, right?"

"He is from Yugoslavia," Marcus said. "It's a wartorn country."

"I am from Bosnia," I said. (16)

No mention of the news, no mention of the Bosnian War or genocide or Goražde. But this is more than a parody of American geopolitical apathy and ignorance: here Americans show a delight in the exotic, as well as confusion – justifiably so, for in many places like Eastern Europe national borders seem to be redrawn by the day. Depending on the year, Bosnia doesn't exist for those on the outside, those removed from its locality. It is a catchword, if that. This sense of vanishing is implicit in a later scene, when Jozef Pronek talks to a man about getting a job at a detective agency:

"Where you from?"

"Bosnia."

"Never heard of it."

“It was in Yugoslavia.” (141)

Vocabulary and grammar are not the obstacle here – rather, cultural landscapes are so different as to render others imperceptible, incomprehensible. And as Robin, her boss Marcus and the anonymous narrator walk toward the classrooms after that first interview, encountering differing levels of English proficiency among the school’s transnational students, she remarks to herself, “I do not understand these people. I simply do not” (17).

This confusion comes despite an equivalent reliance on the popular in transnational individuals – the popular ought to connect everyone. Misha raps ghettotech just as its other fans in Detroit, but something about his delivery, about his existence outside the music’s context, distorts the communication. Oscar’s use of comic-isms is endearing but surely awkward, just as Yuniors’ reliance on fantasy narratives to frame Oscar’s story feels a bit ... ambitious. Emulation becomes a sort of cultural parody. But while many theorists contend that the surging use of popular culture is superficial, even empty – and would say so more fervently with regard to transnational usage – it would be a mistake to consider these new texts mere “blank fiction,” concerned only with referentiality or irony (Annesley 85). Instead they illustrate changing American views toward multiculturalism and transnationality. And, perhaps more importantly, their exploration of transnational compositionality is an exploration of *what exactly constitutes* identity in a mediated information age.

There are no more places. Transnationals are in many senses “nowhere people,” because the cultural locales they inhabit are almost impossible to translate into other contexts. The spaces between locales often go unnoticed, and seem at first irrelevant to the system. Hemon’s *Nowhere Man* alludes to this in its first pages, after the narrator has pawned all of his furniture in order to survive:

I sat down on the floor, where the futon used to be, in my jacket, with a frightening premonition that most of the things in this world would go on existing whether I lived or died. There was a hole in the world, and I fit right into it; if I perished, the hole would just close, like a scar healing. (26-7)

But those in-between spaces are not irrelevant. They make up the material by which cultures interface with each other. Though the textual devices born from transnational compositionality are not necessarily new in technique, together they form a linguistic repertoire that reflects that “material,” and more specifically the contemporary transnational experience in America. Language and identity negotiation must not be ignored in transnational texts. It is their arrangement that creates this ambience of mediation which is so fundamental to post-modernity, even if we can’t quite articulate how they go together.

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