

APPARITIONS OF PLANETARY CONSCIOUSNESS IN  
CONTEMPORARY COMING-OF-AGE NARRATIVES: REIMAGINING  
KNOWLEDGE, RESPONSIBILITY AND BELONGING

BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

My dissertation explores contemporary coming-of-age stories that employ spectral and relational narrative strategies to address readers, demanding a re-negotiated response from them. Drawing upon and extending the observations of critics who emphasize the role of liberalism and its contradictory legacies for post-colonial *Bildungsroman*, my research highlights a radically ethical potential in unsettling reiterations of this long-standing narrative form. The narratives that I have chosen to examine—namely, U.S. Latino/a and Canadian diasporic second-generation coming-of-age stories and African child soldier narratives—reflect a broad geographical and linguistic range, drawing attention to constitutive relationality and various kinds of haunting to call upon a globally entangled sense of disappointment and responsibility in a profoundly critical register. These coming-of age stories signal the need to imagine alternative ethical and political frameworks for reconceptualising the way we think about knowledge, responsibility, and belonging in twenty-first century planetary relations. Even as they inevitably participate in the global market for stories of otherness and epistemological and/or material dispossession, these texts challenge generic and market expectations, troubling the reader's easy consumption of them. The open-endedness and ambiguity in the indirect, yet insistent, rhetorical manoeuvres of these narratives urge us as readers to confront complicated questions about global solidarity if we are to respond ethically to global, national and transnational realities.

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For the most part, I researched and wrote this thesis from geographical spaces thousands of kilometres removed from my supervisory committee. Especially given the “virtual” nature of this process, the thoughtful comments and suggestions made by Susan Searls Giroux and Helene Strauss at various points during the writing process were crucial to the development of the thesis. This project has been very much a relational undertaking, and I am especially indebted to my supervisor, Sarah Brophy, for her generous, judicious and insightful feedback, not only throughout the process of crafting this dissertation, but from the very first moment we met. Her continued confidence in and engagement with my intellectual project has helped to make it what it is today.

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I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my sons, Ariel and Mateo. Thank you for putting up with my constant state of distraction during pretty much my entire time as a student-mother. And I especially want to thank you for sharing your tireless sense of adventure and wonder with me as we travel across the hemispheres: you are and always will be my greatest inspiration.

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## INTRODUCTION: APPARITIONS OF PLANETARY CONSCIOUSNESS IN CONTEMPORARY COMING-OF-AGE NARRATIVES

To undergo *Bildung* is to identify with humanity: a humanity that is itself an ongoing process of self-realization or becoming.

—Marc Redfield, “The *Bildungsroman*” (*Oxford Encyclopaedia of British Literature*)

Coming-of-age narratives in the early twenty-first century gesture toward the shifting realities of contemporary cultural and political constellations of youth and citizenship, registering tensions among cultural memory, geopolitical mobility and belonging. Stories about negotiating the passage into adulthood, especially in conditions of dislocation and/or inequity, formulate these tensions in particularly compelling ways. Growing up involves a process of discovering one’s place within the larger community and claiming a space for oneself in relation to others by renegotiating attachments. Historically, the coming-of-age story as genre implies an ideologically fraught narrative tradition that aims to produce and reflect individualistic, masculine and capitalist forms of subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> In *Human Rights Inc.*, Joseph Slaughter identifies how the *Bildungsroman* genre and the notion of universal human rights are mutually informing and both deeply rooted in enlightenment discourses of possessive individualism, the modern nation, and the normative model of *homo economicus*. Franco Moretti has even suggested that the *Bildungsroman* represents the “symbolic form of modernity” (quoted in Redfield, *Phantom 57*). Moreover, the modern notion of individual growth of the (individual,

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<sup>1</sup>. The *Bildungsroman* is a general term used to describe a novel of education, formation, or growth, from the German ‘bildung’ (formation) and ‘roman’ (novel), and encompasses a few similar genres: the *Entwicklungsroman*, a story of general growth rather than self-culture; the *Erziehungsroman*, which focuses on training and formal education; and the *Kunstlerroman*, about the development of an artist. Originating in the 1700s, it was popularized at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Wilhelm Dilthey, who tied the tradition to Goethe’s 1795 novel, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. In the British context, the term was not used until well into the twentieth century (Fraiman 9-10).

capitalist) human personality has been recapitulated with regard to neoliberal notions of national maturity where growth (this time referring to the GDP) is invoked uncritically to measure the health and wealth of the nation. Significantly for my study, Slaughter notes that twentieth century postcolonial coming-of-age stories perform a double movement, simultaneously signalling a tension between plotting oneself into normative values (and implicitly into the social realm of citizenship) and critiquing patterns of historical, economic and cultural exclusion. While some coming-of-age novels work hard to mask these contradictions, the narratives about growing up in contexts of diaspora and displacement that I focus on in my analysis, far from allowing an easy fit into universal discourses, instead throw those very frameworks into question. In this thesis, I am concerned with identifying what is at stake in new iterations of a long-standing narrative form and in how we approach them as readers. Accordingly, I investigate the way that these contemporary narratives address readers in ways that demand a re-negotiated response from them.

The historical relationship between the postcolonial coming-of-age novel and the nation has been well-documented, but what I am specifically interested in is how such narratives are being shaped in post-national contexts, that is, in how to conceptualize the coming-of-age story at the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> Given that narrative is a “multiplicitous form of meaning-making thought” (Friedman 8), what is the place and

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<sup>2</sup>. For example, much critical attention has been given to Fredric Jameson’s analysis of the post-colonial *Bildungsroman* in “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” where he characterizes “third world texts” as “national allegory,” as “the story of the private individual destiny” which he says is “always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (Jameson 69). Imre Szeman argues that many critics have “wilfully misread” Jameson’s essay, tending to “obscure and misconstrue a sophisticated attempt to make sense of the relationship of literature to politics in the decolonizing world” (804).



potential of literature for thinking about contemporary global constellations? This thesis considers the role that literature might play in re-imagining and re-theorizing conceptions of citizenship in what Ramon Saldívar calls the “realm of the trans-nation” (“Aesthetic”). The “trans” here is meant to resonate with Enrique Dussel’s notion of “transmodernity.” Neither modernity nor postmodernity, transmodernity is something “otherwise,” signalling a way of thinking beyond Eurocentric assumptions.<sup>3</sup> Since, as Saldívar notes, globalization or “worlding” processes are “nowhere near over and done with”—“we are in the midst of it,” so to speak—it is important to reflect on how we might generate “forms of theorizing and writing” and “new cultural poetics adequate to deal with new world realities” (Saldívar, “Aesthetic”). In this dissertation, I am interested in identifying literary embodiments of the theoretical repositioning of citizenship in the form of a “transnational imaginary.”<sup>4</sup>

While narrative theory has traditionally placed considerable emphasis on time/temporality—for example, on the importance of linear development and a teleological notion of “becoming oneself” (O’Brien, “New” 72)—in the *Bildungsroman* genre, I inspect such stories primarily through the lens of space: as de Certeau suggests, “every story is a travel story— a spatial practice” (115). This approach draws attention to the way that “space is not the ‘outside’ of narrative...but an internal force that shapes it

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<sup>3</sup>. The “transmodern” is the unthought or overwritten potential of modernity that, over and against the hegemonic world-system, recovers the “exteriority” or difference that exposes the discourse of modernity for what it is — “Eurocentric, provincial and regional” (Dussel, “Europe” 469).

<sup>4</sup>. Not a question of one replacing the other, the national and the transnational can both be present in the same historical moment. In order to illustrate what he means by reconfiguring citizenship in the realm of the “transnation,” Saldívar points to the successful way that “the fictive entities with subject status that we call corporations have worked imaginatively, precisely to create a sense of those transnational rights with great success” and suggests that in the contemporary moment, a similar imaginative strategy is needed for thinking about, for example, the situation of the South-North diasporas of transnational workers within the global economy (“Aesthetic”).

from within” (Moretti 70). Spatiality is an important critical concept in order to highlight inequalities of physical and imaginative geographies in contemporary cultural and political contexts: “now landscape is more than a metaphor” (Gregory and Pred 4).<sup>5</sup> While the traditional form of the *Bildungsroman* genre often focuses on the (class) mobility of the protagonist within social space, for the purposes of this study I am interested in the emphasis placed upon mobility *between* spaces by focusing on stories of immigration, displacement, and second-generation experiences of doubleness in their uneasy sense of (un)belonging to both parental, diasporic origins and the national spaces in which they find themselves situated.<sup>6</sup> In the era of globalization, the idea of translocation refers to more than just a process, a change of location or the movement of people and/or cultural products to different locales: it also signals new kinds of locations—‘trans-locations’—consisting of fractured spaces that are connected in multiple ways. In order to understand shifting conceptions of place and home, what Susan Stanford Freidman identifies as the complex interplay of both “roots” and “routes,” we must remain attentive to the “geopolitics of identity within differing communal spaces of

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<sup>5</sup>. Theorists of social space focus on the way that, however ‘natural’ and given it seems, space is produced as well as lived. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre starts from the premise that the “spatial body” is “produced by” as well as is the ground for “the production of space” (195). Lefebvre’s conceptual “spatial triad” consists of “spatial practice,” “representations of space,” and “representational spaces” (38-39). Postmodern geographer Edward Soja expands on Lefebvre’s spatial triad, combining it with Foucault’s “heterotopias,” to form the idea of “thirdspace,” “an-Other form of spatial awareness...a product of the ‘thirthing’ of the spatial imagination,” which expands traditional dual or ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ spaces to include “real-and-imagined places” (*Thirdspace* 11) and—in his project to “mobilize and stimulate a radical and postmodern politics of (spatial) resistance that redraws the boundaries of identity and struggle” (154)—focuses on a specifically ethical dimension to space (also see Soja’s recent *Seeking Spatial Justice* and David Harvey’s “Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographic Evils” as well as feminist (Rose; Stanford Freeman) and anti-racist (Nash; Kobayashi and Peak) geographies.

<sup>6</sup>. This kind of doubleness is theorized in multiple and nuanced ways in the notions of “double consciousness” (W.E.B Dubois), “hybridity” (Bhabha), “creolization” (Glissant), and “*mestisaje*” (Anzaldúa), for example.

being and becoming” (3). The trans-locations of the protagonists in the narratives that I examine are inflected by global inequalities and patterns of migration that run between the global south and the global north.<sup>7</sup> In the contemporary world system, there is a clear link between problems of mobility and questions of ethics and human rights. There is unequal movement through and across the landscapes associated with global neoliberalism, where a privileged few voluntarily move about the globe with ease, carrying ‘home’ with them, while most are on the move by force, whether due to war, famine, ecological catastrophe, or economic necessity. I contend that paying attention to the social and cultural geographies of mobility and the spatial poetics of narrative might open a space for new readings of stories about growing up in contemporary contexts. My analysis engages shifting narrative strategies and creative imaginaries in twenty-first century coming-of-age stories, taking up the relationship between dis/locations on the one hand, and negotiating an ethical sense of self, citizenship, and community, on the other.

There is a contradictory yet mutually dependant relationship between coming-of-age narratives and modern discourses of possessive individualism and universal human rights. As a result, some of the animating questions of my dissertation include: Given that inclusion within the nation-state often (but not always) means empowerment, how (especially in contexts where recognition of full citizenship status is not easily claimed) might we critically interpret and learn from literary efforts to reclaim, critically re-evaluate or—in some cases—to reject such inclusion? What is literature’s place and

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<sup>7</sup>. My use of the term “global south” does not aim to lump vastly disparate nations together in one category but, as Saldívar suggests, the term “does usefully highlight” that “they share a set of vulnerabilities and challenges”: the “global south as a demand for comparative thinking....names primarily a geographical and geopolitical positioning in the global system of culture and material exchange” (Saldívar, “Aesthetic”).

potential as a prime site of resistant perspectives, especially given that the novel (understood specifically in generic terms, but also more generally as ‘the new,’ and as one of the engines driving literary markets) is itself a privileged cultural form, constituted by capitalist economic and ideological forces?

Traditionally, the *Bildungsroman* narrates the “acculturation of a self...the integration of a particular ‘I’ into the general subjectivity of a community, and thus, finally, into the universal subjectivity of humanity” and therefore represents a conservative, incorporative genre that is “weighed down by bourgeois pettiness” (Redfield 38; 39).<sup>8</sup> To be sure, the “idealism of the classical, affirmative *Bildungsroman* seems to have lost much of its social and aesthetic appeal in the ages of modernist irony and postmodern suspicion” (Slaughter, *Human* 27). However, as Marianne Hirsch argues, it remains a “salient genre for the literature of social outsiders, primarily women or minority groups” (“The Novel” 300) whose claim to subject and/or citizen status has historically been tenuous at best.<sup>9</sup> Drawing from and building upon Slaughter’s highlighting of the “dissentual” postcolonial *Bildungsroman*, a central premise of my analysis is that contemporary narratives explore and mobilize the narrator’s contradictory relationship to cultural norms in order to produce and sustain a dynamic of unsettlement. Even though, as Jeffrey Sammons argues in “Mystery of the Missing *Bildungsroman*,” the strict adherence to the prototypical

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<sup>8</sup>. Because of this somewhat prosaic function, the *Bildungsroman* has historically been considered to be of little literary value: “it seems counterintuitive to expect high aesthetic ambition from a genre seemingly built around a hero who, in Hegel’s ironic summary, ‘in the end usually gets his girl and some kind of position, marries and becomes a philistine just like the others’” (quoted in Redfield 39).

<sup>9</sup>. While (at least since the French Revolution) the ground for citizenship is theoretically “humanity,” as Maslan argues, many critics have pointed out that “the *man* of the Rights of Man” in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen is, “in fact, an exclusive category” (361). History has repeatedly proven that citizenship can be withheld on grounds of race, class, and sexuality.

model of the genre has rarely, if ever, existed, it is striking that the coming-of-age novels that I examine do not fit easily into the *Bildungsroman* genre.<sup>10</sup> For one thing, many of the texts that I examine do not focus solely on the development of one protagonist, instead often deploying collective narration and foregrounding relationality. Furthermore, instead of happily accommodating the protagonist within the social order in the end, these narratives emphasize their uneasy (and even impossible) fit, complicating the notion of belonging and the very structure of the social order. In these ways, far from merely representing a “stable site of production of subjects whose claim to universality” is “materially interested and bogus” (Redfield 56), these coming-of-age stories can be read as socially critical and contestatory.

In Chapters 1 and 2 I look at *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz, *Caramelo* by Sandra Cisneros, *Soucouyant* by David Chariandy, and *What We All Long For* by Dionne Brand, while in Chapter 3 I examine autobiographical child soldier narratives including *A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah, *Warchild* by Emmanuel Jal, and *Heart of Fire* by Senait Mehari, as well as the fictional representation of child soldiers in *Beasts of No Nation* by Udonzima Iweala, *Song for Night* by Chris Abani and *Moses, Citizen and Me* by Delia Jarrett-McCauley.<sup>11</sup> I have chosen these particular texts as my

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<sup>10</sup>. In “The Novel of Formation as Genre,” Marianne Hirsch outlines the characteristics of the genre: at root a quest story, in order to spur the hero or heroine on to their journey, some form of loss or discontent must jar them at an early stage away from the home or family setting; the process of maturity is long, arduous, and gradual, consisting of repeated clashes between the protagonist’s personal desires and the judgments enforced by the social order. Coming-of-age occurs when the values of the social order eventually become manifest in the protagonist, who is then accommodated into society, and the novel usually ends with an assessment by the protagonist his or her new place in that society.

<sup>11</sup>. This selection of child soldier narratives, which can be viewed as limit cases of the *Bildungsroman* tradition, especially foreground the question of violence—the violence perpetrated on and by newly minted post-colonial states, as well as the violence of growing up within contexts where survival,

sites of analysis because they each adopt strategies of *indirection* in order to perform a haunting of generic expectations. This unsettling work seeks to draw attention to and raise questions about, among other things: the ideal of the rational, individualistic (white, male, middle-class) subject as given and neutral; the mutually constitutive relationship between (racial, gendered, economic, geographical) exclusions and universal ‘humanity’; the need to re-read and re-interpret dominant historical narratives; the neoliberal marketing/commodification of difference; and the possibility of ethically re-imagining global relationships. By the phrase global relationships, I allude to inter- and intra-generational kin relationships in the context of global mobility, as well as to the ethical importance of reconceptualising global relations among complete strangers who may share geographical and imaginative spaces. I explore what the role of contemporary coming-of-age stories might be for theorizing these kinds of unwilled “global entanglements,” as Diana Brydon calls them (“Dionne” 1002).

When citizenship is measured largely by “one’s capacity to transact and consume” (Comaroff and Comaroff, “Millennial” 306), attention to human rights issues often becomes a matter of consumption, and consumer choice—including the individual books one chooses to read—is promoted and understood as humanitarian activism (as exemplified in Rita Barnard’s analysis of the Oprah Book Club phenomenon, which I will examine further in Chapter 3). For Slaughter, human personality development in coming-of-age stories is “inflected by and expressed within a heavily marketized international economy of both human rights and ‘world’ literature” (*Human* 274). In many ways, it is

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let along coming-of-age, is far from given— perhaps serving as a potent signifier for the future of all children trapped in a global permanent war on terror.

impossible to avoid the problematic absorption of such texts into transnational culture industries where they are fetishized as commodities of cultural difference. For example, Huggan argues that although “postcolonial writers/thinkers, working from within exoticist codes of representation” use the “strategic exotic” as a means to “either manage to subvert those codes...or succeed in redeploying them for the purposes of uncovering differential relations of power,” inevitably, the “language of resistance is entangled, like it or not, in the language of commerce” (Huggan 32; 264). Sarah Brouillette suggests that some authors, aware of and resistant to being designated as spokespeople for difference (writing *as* Caribbean-Canadian, Chicano, or African, for example) find ways to employ such “strategic exoticism” as a self-aware strategy of inhabiting dominant structures in order to criticize them. It is not only a matter of native informants contributing to the consumption of ‘authenticity’ and neatly packaging it for Western consumption. While the i(nte)rruption of individual and cultural memory that occurs in the novels that I examine here could be read as a kind of haunting spectacle of difference, I argue that, in the way that memory is structured and deployed in these texts, it goes beyond spectacle in order to make ethical demands upon readers.

In this dissertation I suggest that the narrative strategies of contemporary coming-of-age stories create unsettling, persistent, and spectral effects, which prevent their easy consumption by readers. What these narratives foreground, thematically as well as structurally, is a continuity between constitutive relationality and relations with (family, community, global) others; in each of these narratives, this relationality manifests as a haunting disruption. In the past decade or so there have been numerous critical

explorations of the social and cultural phenomenon of haunting.<sup>12</sup> Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters* describes haunting as a “social phenomenon” where the past continues to haunt the present in unexpected ways, “not there,” it somehow “makes itself known or apparent to us” nevertheless (8). In addition to examining the historical haunting of the present by the past, in this analysis I am also interested in identifying ways that the *you* haunts the *me*, and how the *there* haunts the *here*: from ‘haunted nations’ (as Gunew puts it) to the constitutive relationality that haunts the sovereign subject, from the irrational impulse that haunts reason to the ‘diasporic’ spatial and affective haunting of second-generation experiences, the cultural experience of haunting manifests itself in myriad ways in contemporary coming-of-age novels.

In the interest of finding ways that “literary practice” might be conceived as a “production of theoretical knowledge” instead of just “an object of study” (Mignolo 223), I query how and why coming-of-age narratives might be used as a tool for investigating the limits of presumably universal concepts like ‘humanity,’ ‘reason’ and ‘truth,’ as well as modern development narratives, whether of the individual or the nation. In particular, I consider the way that the particular texts I focus on constitute trans-national spaces where literary forms of “democratic iterations” (Benhabib) can be identified, used, theorized and critiqued. Not just concerned with plotting oneself neatly into the social world, the

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<sup>12</sup>. For example, analyses include Derrida’s neologism “hauntology,” first introduced in *Spectres of Marx*, which in French is a wordplay on ‘ontology’; Pheng Cheah’s *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (especially with regards to the *Bildung* and the nation) and Sneja Gunew’s *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms*. See also Ulrich Beck’s formulation of “zombie categories” to describe social concept which persists, even after it has lost the content, or substance, of its original or intended use (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim). In terms of postcolonial haunting in particular, in *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha considers “art as ‘the fully realized presence of a haunting’ of history” (Morrison quoted in Bhabha 18) .



narrators/protagonists in the narratives I examine in this thesis are insistently, if sometimes obliquely, unsatisfied with the state of this world and invite us to imaginatively consider alternatives to it. The contradictions and displacements in these contemporary coming-of-age stories gesture resolutely toward the margins of the text, urging us to listen for the echoes of spectral iterations of critical, planetary consciousness in the twenty-first century.

### **Modern Development Narratives and (Universal) Human Rights**

Does the universality of ethical imperatives operate only above a set per capita GNP?

—Cornelius Castoriadis, *World in Fragments*

The norm is itself predicated on the exclusion of the one who speaks, one whose speech calls into question the foundation of the universal itself...one who nevertheless insinuates his or her way into the name enough to speak 'in' it all the same.

—Judith Butler “Universality in Culture” (360)

Disappointment is the prominent tone of post-national coming-of-age narratives.

Where does this register of failure (and the implicit expectation of something different) come from? The patterns of promise and disappointment in these novels draw attention to the mutually constitutive relationship between humanist and racist discourse and the undemocratic, irrational and discriminatory assumptions that haunt contemporary formulations of ‘human rights’ and ‘democracy,’ the language of which is all too often co-opted and employed in the service of neoliberal and neo-imperial regimes of truth, especially in the post- 9/11 climate of “civilizationalist common sense” (Gilroy, *Postcolonial 1*).<sup>13</sup> The development narrative reflected and replayed in the generic

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<sup>13</sup>. See also Giroux, *Beyond* and McClennen and Morello. Of course, this kind of cooptation is far from new: as McClennen and Slaughter argue, “the current usurpation of the language of human rights and humanitarianism to cloak Western imperialist aggression has a precedent in the rhetorical cover of the

*Bildungsroman* narrates the story of an individual's incorporation into the social world; this personal story of development—from 'primitive' child to social subject—meshes with modern narratives of 'developing nations' inhabited by 'primitive' races, and affirms the relationship between nationalism and racism: the "seeds of racism" can be "seen as lying at the heart of politics from the birth of nationalism onwards, or even from the point where nations begin to exist" (Balibar, *Race* 47). Communities, by definition based upon what members hold in 'common,' are formed by way of opposition to that which is excluded.<sup>14</sup> The continual negotiation between the nation (largely a work of collective imagination) and the state (and the legal, political and military apparatuses that sustain it) means that, as the Comaroffs point out, "the nation-state has always and everywhere been a work in progress, nowhere a fully realized accomplishment" ("Millennial" 323).<sup>15</sup> As Susan Searls Giroux points out, David Goldberg's analysis of racisms shows that, far from being an element of our primitive, undeveloped past that has been supplanted by more progressive "colourblind" convictions, "race... is foundational to becoming modern"

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civilizing mission and the abolition of the slave trade that Europe used to justify the colonization of Africa" (3).

<sup>14</sup> Edward Said builds on Anderson's influential notion of "imagined communities" to suggest that (racialized) national identity acquires "narrative coherence" through the "hegemony of imperial ideology" (*Culture* 11-12). Challenging questions of natural homogeneity when it comes to community, in *The Inoperative Community* Jean-Luc Nancy questions presumptions of common-ness, wondering whether inclusion might in fact be more alienating than exclusion in contexts where one has to bury one's difference.

<sup>15</sup> In his exploration of the "co-articulation of race and the modern state" (*Racial* 4), Goldberg argues that the meanings of race shift over time and place in the modern project of managing heterogeneities. The (nation-)state as a racial entity is always temporary, on the move, in a constant state of becoming. Far from a monolithic given, understood as both a noun and a verb, the racial state is always already in a tenuous state, conditional upon a performance of power that is contingent, flexible and unstable. Like race as a "floating signifier" (Hall), the racial state must be continually re-(in)stated in order to exist; far from a fixed entity, constantly on the move, the state is a "work in progress." Spivak and Butler wonder what kind of work the hyphen between "nation" and "state" performs: "does the hyphen finesse the relation that needs to be explained? Does it mark a certain soldering that has taken place historically? Does it suggest a fallibility at the heart of the relation?" (3).

(12). Partly responsible for the crushing sense of disappointment felt by today's youth is the retrenchment of global civil rights movements, in the neoliberal combination of color-blind racisms and the dismantling of social state apparatuses. In the contemporary 'post-racial' moment, the dominant assumption is "not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences" (Balibar, *Race* 21).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, in the relentless privatization of racist expression and exclusion according to the logic of neoliberal privatization, racism is 'outsourced' by the state and shapes social life even though it is not state-controlled.

One of the characteristics of the new kinds of racisms is the insistence that race is irrelevant, to the extent that there is a repression of (both racist and anti-racist) racial discourse, and any kind of racial consciousness is seen as pathology.<sup>17</sup> Yet, despite the twenty-first century prevalence of colorblind racisms based on (endless, incomprehensible) cultural or socioeconomic difference, often construed as a matter of free 'choice,' it is impossible ignore the "return of the biological theme" (Balibar, *Race* 26). The spectre of biopolitics—the calculated and regulated management of life that Michel Foucault outlines in both his *History of Sexuality* and his 1976 lectures from the College de France, "Society Must be Defended"—looms large when it comes to current patterns of migration and movement. Claims to global citizenship for some depend upon the *immobility* and dispossession of others; that is, while some 'flexible' citizens seem to

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<sup>16</sup>. As Balibar argues, the "spectacle of these racisms, in its turn deformed by global communications, is continually feeding the stereotypes of white racism by keeping alive the old idea that three quarters of humanity are incapable of governing themselves" (*Race* 44).

<sup>17</sup>. Ulrich Beck traces the ways that "biologism is in vogue" in popular media and academic circles alike, showing how questions of inferiority and superiority are increasingly considered a matter of genes (*The Reinvention* 36-37).

be the privileged embodiment of global capital, others are policed, corralled, and/or rendered disposable in spaces of exception and violence.<sup>18</sup> Giroux's analysis of hurricane Katrina (*Stormy*), as well as Goldberg's continuing research into racial "redlining" practices—which links "residential segregation" with the "legitimizing discourse of security" and has decimated "many black and Latino communities, even entire cities" (Searls Giroux 7)—point out that specific populations are targeted and rendered immobile even within geographical spaces of supposed privilege.<sup>19</sup> On a global level, at the same time that the popular notion of the 'global village' implies a post-national sensibility, Gilroy argues that "though it was weakened by networking and the emancipation of capital from many of its local ties, the national state is now being strengthened by the new priority attached to security" (*Postcolonial* 59). Paradoxically, even though the state may be "eroded" in neoliberal contexts, it is "nonetheless vigorously asserted" (Benhabib 2) in the hyper-vigilant protection of the boundaries of the nation-state. The assertion of the state in the name of 'national security' comes in increasingly biopolitical terms: for example, the mass expulsion of Roma and the state-sanctioned destruction of their settlements in Europe; the routine deportation of illegal migrants along the U.S. Mexico border, potentially aggravated by Arizona's new immigration law sb1070; human rights abuses in detainment camps and prisons like Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib; hundreds of so-called "centres for third country nationals"

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<sup>18</sup>. For examples, see Balibar; Bauman; Benhabib; Giroux; Mbembe; Ong. Also see Foucault's 1978 set of lectures at the College de France, "Security, Territory, Population."

<sup>19</sup>. The fear and containment of otherness and "globalized mass violence" coexist side by side with the "fantasy of post-racial global triumphalism" including the presumed success of "'racial democracy' (Brazil), 'multiculturalism' (Australia and Canada), 'ethnic pluralism' (the European Union), 'nonracialism' (South Africa) or 'colorblindness' (United States)," for example (Searls Giroux 11).

in Europe (Clochard and Rekecewicz); state neglect of millions of people living in favelas, slums, and inner city housing, mostly in the global south; First Nations corralled into often undesirably located ‘Indian reservations’ across Canada; and deplorable conditions for stateless people who are housed in refugee camps around the world.<sup>20</sup>

What is to become of young people who are born into and/or grow up in conditions like these? According to Butler and Spivak, individuals like these— incarcerated, enslaved, neglected or residing illegally —are “spectral humans,” “contained within the polis as its interiorized outside” (15-16). As such, their existence is “barely legible or illegible” (15) within dominant discourses, and therefore they ostensibly need human rights organizations and other humanitarian groups to speak for them.<sup>21</sup>

The irony of human rights discourse is that, like racism and the nation, racism and humanism have been mutually constitutive and, as critics such as Benhabib and Slaughter have pointed out, the UN Declaration of Human Rights is full of internal contradictions. Indeed, liberalism has historically been particularly adept at accommodating racist intervention, and the ideal of universal human rights co-exists unsteadily with democratic

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<sup>20</sup>. Gregory and Pred argue that “When people flee violence in its different forms...seeking to escape famine, poverty or war, they often find that they are trapped in new spaces of exclusion...a quieter, geographically more distant and dispersed war against refugees is taking place...affluent states now routinely fortify their borders against the threat of unwanted peoples, often the surplus residue of their own neoliberal and military adventures, and the physical architectures that are involved —walls, fences, detention centers and the like —depend on a dense armature of spatial-legal strategies. (4)

<sup>21</sup>. In my analysis of autobiographical child soldier narratives in Chapter 3, Jal, Beah and Mehari each become actively involved with human rights organizations that combat the use of child soldiers worldwide, but it is striking that without the individual actions of dedicated people such as British aid worker Emma McCune or American storyteller Laura Simms, Jal and Beah might never have been able to disentangle themselves from active combat; without the collaboration of co-writers like Megan Lloyd Davies and Lukas Lessing, Jal and Mehari’s stories might never have been published, and their personal tales of trauma and resilience would be relegated to silence like thousands of other similar stories are. Jal is conscious of his role as spokesperson for those who do not have access to the means of self-expression and, in a 2009 TED Talk, explains: “I’m doing it for the young man” who wants to project his voice but “can’t write” (“Emmanuel Jal”).

societies' insistence on autonomy. Gilroy warns of the "waning of the UN" and the "benign and seductive language of humanitarianism" (*Postcolonial* 59). The ease with which this hijacking of human rights discourse occurs exemplifies the way that certain forms of rationality "foreclose others" in any given regime of intelligibility (Butler, *Giving* 120). In their analysis of life narratives in human rights contexts, Kay Shaffer and Sidonie Smith point out that "in the West the language of rights, so imbricated in modernist philosophical traditions and values, has been pervasive and pervasively mobilized" in the interest of Western global dominance (228).<sup>22</sup> They argue that, since in non-Western contexts "stories of suffering, abuse and violation may not always be framed within a recognizable 'rights' discourse," it is often difficult to recognize "concerns for human justice and dignity beyond Western frameworks" (228). Sophia McClennen suggests that this difficulty points to a fundamental failure of imagination. Since "endless difference negates the possibility of politically ethical comparison" what is needed in order to re-imagine these questions beyond Western frameworks, in non-Eurocentric ways, is a regeneration of the "comparative imagination" (McClennen 10), instead of adopting positions of neutrality or relativity in the face of cultural difference.

It is my contention that the novels about growing up that I examine in this dissertation can contribute to an ethical regeneration of the comparative imagination: in each of these

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<sup>22</sup>. How is it possible to organize struggles against racism when "crimes against humanity" are increasingly "perpetuated in the name of and by means of a humanistic discourse" (Balibar, *Race* 59)? For example, in a speech addressed to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, then-President George W. Bush claimed that "On September 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country," officially declaring the "War on Terror" (also known as Operation Enduring Freedom) (Bush). Since 2001, the U.S. and allied nations/corporations have exploited an ideological commitment to the 'freedom' of non-Western citizens (often women) in 'undemocratic' nations, not to mention to protecting 'our' freedoms at 'home.' Bush claimed that "what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom."

narratives, the register of disappointment points toward the internal contradictions of, and contrasts between, the universals which “continue to structure global asymmetries” (Tsing 9).<sup>23</sup> The generic *Bildungsroman* charts a story of development that traces an individual’s journey of incorporation into the community, where s/he is thereby ‘subjected’ to the norms of (capitalist) citizenship: a personal story about the individual’s acquisition of public personhood, the genre aims to reconcile the split between the subject and citizen. In postcolonial coming-of-age stories, according to Slaughter, this process of “citizen-subjectivation” is further fraught with the need to reconcile the contradictory demands of “producing citizens” and “reproducing [colonial] subjects,” which legitimates “authority by normalizing the dominant sociopolitical practices and patterns of nation-statist modernity” (*Human* 123). I am interested in considering what it would mean to dethrone the ‘universal’ subject of the coming-of-age story by emphasizing the constitutive *relationality* of identity, as theorized in (post)Hegelian linguistic, psychoanalytic and philosophical discourses, in order to expose the trace of the other in the same. Recognizing the pull of this trace— that is, the fundamental mutuality of constitutive relationality—has the potential to expose the ragged edges of the presumed hyperindividualism of the contemporary neoliberal moment, where allegedly we are all only responsible for ourselves. My argument draws upon psychoanalytic and poststructuralist insights into subjectivity and ethics in order to critically illuminate the post-national or transnational coming-of-age story. While these theoretical models have

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<sup>23</sup>. These asymmetries especially play out in (racist and gendered) assumptions about the “universal” and the “particular”: for Tsing, since “in the matrix of colonialism, universal reason became the mark of temporally dynamic and spatially expansive forms of knowledge and power” and while the “particular” is thought to be “stuck in place,” the “universal” “opens the way to constantly improving truths and even, in its utilitarian forms, to a better life for all humanity” (9).

rightly been critiqued for their Western economic and cultural individualistic assumptions, I believe that it is productive to bring such perspectives to bear on contemporary coming-of-age novels in addition to (and beyond) a materialist/discursive analysis that sees the very production and reading of these texts in terms of global power relations. Psychoanalytic and poststructural models can illuminate how the self-in-representation (and, in turn, the self-in-community) is structured by complex and often contradictory human desires and conditions. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler sets out to answer the following question: “Does the postulation of a subject who is not self-grounding, that is, whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for, undermine the possibility of responsibility and, in particular, of giving an account of oneself?” (19). Butler argues that, to begin with, the very demand that I give an account of myself to another, in order to justify my actions and my very way of being, exposes the constitutive structure of address that underlies all account-giving; furthermore, the very terms by which I give my account to another, the structure of language that I am compelled to use in order to make myself intelligible has not been invented by me. What this means is that because of the relationality implied in address, and the imposition/acquisition of language as something foreign to the self, the self is constituted by a lack of self-knowledge and is always already conditioned by a certain haunting: “my account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definitive story” (40). Faced with the dispossession of the self-knowing subject, Butler suggests the emergence of a new kind of ethics, “an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves” (42). The blindness of the self-knowing subject signals



particular vulnerability for those who also face myriad forms of material dispossession in the contemporary moment. In Butler's formulation, the basis for morality is not (rational, individualistic) self-identity or a capacity for rational moral judgement, but is in fact our exposure to others. The sociality— or constitutive relationality—at the heart of subjectivity is not to be conceived of primarily in terms of antagonistic self-other dialectic, but as an ethical dispossession: as a willingness to forego the closure of individualistic self-certainty.

Theorizing the importance of (relational) identity as haunting misrecognition or ethical dispossession is particularly relevant when it comes to contemporary coming-of-age narratives, because stories about negotiating the passage into adulthood, especially in contemporary conditions of dislocation, inequity, violence and abandonment, formulate these tensions in particularly compelling ways, dwelling in the realm of 'not knowing' while also demanding ethical engagement by the reader. Growing up involves, above all, a process of negotiating a place within the larger community, involving a renegotiation of attachments and claiming a space for oneself in relation to others. Coming-of-age as education for citizenship— understood as a kind of "care of the self" in Foucauldian terms (as outlined in *History of Sexuality*, Vol. 3) — involves self-regulation and self-control, and means being constituted by norms that are not of one's own making in order to be recognized within certain regimes of intelligibility. I am interested in exploring how viewing identity in terms of *misrecognition* relates specifically to space—to how one orients oneself in relation to others, to community, and to the world. This brings me back to my second epigraph for this section, which hints at the possibility of "double-speaking"

in the name of the universal, as “one who nevertheless insinuates his or her way into the name enough to speak ‘in’ it all the same” (Butler, “Universality” 360) in order to be able to speak at all. In this dissertation, I look at several instances where “the utterance has become a scene of conflict,” and the ambiguities of being able to interpret them, the impossibility of closure, is the “interpretive dilemma that is the dynamic mark of an emerging democratic practice” (361). As Butler frames it, the power of what she calls “performative contradictions” stem in large part from their interpretive undecidability: rather than impose epistemological closure, such contradictions hint toward openness, and are thus vulnerable to multiple interpretations. Resonating with the primary dependency of infants upon their caregivers and pointing towards the generative unpredictability of our encounters with others, vulnerability also seems to be a particularly apt way to index forms of contemporary political and material dispossession. At the same time, however, vulnerability poses potential difficulties as a critical term: for example, by directing our focus to subjectivity, in what ways does vulnerability risk equating and minimizing disparate forms of dispossession? If we start with the premise that our primary relations with the (m)other—exemplified in the psychoanalytic model of the transference situation—sets the stage for the structure of address that exists within us all, how do we connect the psychic and political, the private and the public, and what does the relationship between them mean for ethical practices of writing/reading?<sup>24</sup> Whose

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<sup>24</sup>. In *Novel Education*, critical educator and psychoanalyst Deborah Britzman compares the simultaneously creative and destructive desire for narrative coherence in the (relational) realms of literature, the clinical setting and in education. In education as in psychoanalysis, there is an implicit search for truth or certainty: Britzman asks, “can a fact keep company with subjectivity as a relation?” (xiii). Importantly, narrative closure is in fact counter-productive, and Britzman argues that it is important to heed the experimental, playful and incomplete nature of learning and *not* learning, and recognize the importance of

vulnerability is being referenced here: the vulnerability of marginalized subjects whose stories are being marketed and consumed, or the (often paranoid) vulnerability of Western/privileged subjects who are consuming them? To be sure, certain subjects are more vulnerable than others, especially those that fall outside of dominant norms, but the globalization of neoliberal imperatives has ushered in an era of acute and very real (economic, ecological, epidemiological) vulnerability for virtually everyone. In whose interests do narrative acts constitute or repair intersubjectivity and what relations of power are at work here?

In the analysis that follows, I am particularly interested in the relationship between constitutive structures of address, on the one hand, and the way that narrative vulnerability is consumed and contested within the framework of human rights and ‘minority’ literatures, on the other. We need to ask: in what ways does installing subjectivity as central play into consumerist logic where stories of pain and vulnerability are at risk of being consumed through an indulgently sentimental and apolitical lens, particularly in a neoliberal climate that is always already highly privatized and individualized? In order to (at least partially) elude these traps, the texts I have chosen to explore illustrate how contemporary coming-of-age narratives articulate relational vulnerability in *indirect* terms, as a form of haunting.

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embracing resistance, ambiguities, contradictions and ruptures as learning tools. She asks: “How does narrative affect the narrator?” and “how do words make a form of life? How, in our work and in our writing, do we encounter the Other, including there, one’s own Otherness?” (xiii). In the drive to shape, to make order, to protect the ego, narrative kills: but it also gives life to a story within the self/other relation.

### Spectral Relationality and the Implicated Reader: *What is the What?*

Is the noise of the world so cacophonous that mine cannot be heard? I ask only for one person!  
One person coming to my door will be enough.

—Dave Eggers (as Valentino Achak Deng), *What is the What* (162)

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me...When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, anything and everything except me.

—Ralph Ellison, “Prologue” to *Invisible Man*

With all due respect to Descartes, *cogito ergo sum* never brought anyone into the world.

—Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives* (127)

Before outlining how my main argument develops through Chapters 1-3 of this dissertation, I would like to introduce some of these relational and spectral strategies by way of an introductory exploration of Dave Eggers’s 2006 “fictional autobiography” of Sudanese “Lost Boy” Valentino Achak Deng, *What is the What*. The paradox of truthful (self-)representation is made obvious to the reader by the very existence of this text: How are we to read Eggers’s appropriation of Deng’s voice in order to write an account of his life? Can the subaltern *still* not speak? I argue that Eggers’s narrative strategies signal the problem of circulation and reception, intentionally drawing attention to the pressure to produce narratives along certain discursive lines. There is a tension in *What is the What* between making the story available to readers and forestalling its easy consumption. By enacting an interruption of cultural intelligibility, this narrative raises important questions about the ethics of representation, the possibility of truthful accounts of experience, and ethical and political solidarity across boundaries of various kinds. True-yet-fictional, this collaboratively-produced narrative illustrates the counter-hegemonic potential of emphasizing relational narratives by working through—or more accurately, working within, not leading to their resolution but allowing them to exist in all their aporetic

uncertainty—contradictions and antagonisms, and by not simply providing the reader with an easily digestible life-narrative. It is not a matter of tying up loose ends and getting rid of frictions, but of gesturing toward them in spectral—that is, indirect but also insistent—ways. As Tsing conceives of it, “as a metaphorical image,” friction is productive and allows for movement: it “reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power” (5).

The highlighting of the collaborative effort makes obvious the problematic demand for the authenticity of an ethnographical “native informant,” which as Spivak has argued, is an “impossible” position (*Critique* 6). From the very first page of the novel the reader is invited to question the truthfulness of the account, potentially eliciting an uncomfortable, self-reflexive response from the reader. The title page announces that this is “The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, a Novel.” In the Preface, Deng writes: “I told Dave what I know and what I could remember, and from that material he created this work of art” (xiv). What are the implications when a white man from the suburbs of Chicago appropriates the voice of a young Sudanese refugee in order to construct a “fictional autobiography” of his life?<sup>25</sup> *What is the What* was published in the West to be circulated among privileged readers, mostly targeted to the young literary subculture he himself created through his *McSweeney’s* publishing house. Coming on the heels of his genre-bending *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, “the members of Eggers’s large and youthful fan base” (Prose) are not surprised by his playful and political blurring

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<sup>25</sup>. Examples of indigenous/white autobiographical collaborative writing in Canada include *Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman* by Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson, and *The Book of Jessica* by Maria Campbell and Linda Griffiths. While these narratives challenge official generic expectations by straddling the line between auto/biography, unlike *What is the What*, they do not at the same time paradoxically claim to be ‘fictional.’

of lines between fiction and memoir. Lee Siegal suggests that “The eerie, slightly sickening quality” about this text is that “Deng's personhood has been displaced by someone else's style and sensibility— by someone else's story. Deng survived his would-be killers in the Sudan, only to have his identity erased here” (“The Niceness”). As Shaffer and Smith argue, “activist framing” of personal narratives, in order to keep a rights issue in the public eye, “may enfold the narrative within the individualist, humanist and secular frameworks of Western rights, overwriting the customs and beliefs of the victims” (17). Is it possible for a “fictional autobiography” to be considered an act of testimony, or is this merely another example of the epistemological violence of turning the other into a self? Is Eggers’s act of creative empathy a question of the “will to knowledge and power at the bottom of...our craving to know” (Gilmore 23)? I argue that there is something very self-aware in this act. It is possible that by transforming the generic merger of fiction and memoir, the text bears witness to the reader’s own unknowing, uncertainty, or even wilful refusal, by pointing to new contexts that shift older registers of truth, transparency or value.

I argue that by invoking and evoking the “crisis of truth” (Felman and Laub 6) in contemporary autobiography (a crisis that at some level calls into question the project of autobiography itself as always in part suspect, given the ways the unconscious shapes our memory, our sense of self, and our very desire to communicate one thing over another) this text enacts the problem of truth-telling and self-representation in the wake of trauma in interesting ways. According to Leigh Gilmore, the challenge posed by fiction to autobiography is to reveal the impossibility of “testimonial transparency” (24). In the

Preface, Deng claims that this book is “the soulful account of my life” (xiii), but the fact that, at the same time this “soulful” account is also fictional — somehow simultaneously occupying a place between fiction and autobiography—suggests a schism between “personal and collective forms of remembering, narrative authenticity, and juridical versus non-juridical understandings of truth telling” (Shaffer and Smith 30). We are told that the novel is born out of Deng’s desire to let the world “know the whole truth of my existence” (Eggers xiii), yet he also says that “it should be known to the readers that I was very young when some of the events in the book took place, and as a result we simply had to pronounce *What is the What* a novel,” even though at the same time he claims that “all of the major events in the book are true” (xiv). Para-textual inclusions, such as a map of the region where Deng’s experiences take place, add an aura of authenticity to the novel. What happens when “memory and imagination combine to form a historical record” (Gilmore 47), especially when the “memory” belongs to one person, and the “imagination” to another in the making of the same text?<sup>26</sup> Kelly Oliver argues that the “pathology of recognition” puts subjugated knowledge and experience “on trial,” its credibility illegible in dominant discourses (100). Keeping in mind the difficulty of representing individual trauma, perhaps it is important to consider that the “demands that trauma and the self make upon each other might require alternative forms through which to represent both” (Gilmore 143). Given that the genre of autobiography typically “helps to install a sovereign subject,” at least in its popular form, it is important to question what

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<sup>26</sup>. In *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White suggests that there is inevitably a fictive element to historiography by virtue of its narrative form—the very form that both literature and history share. He does not argue that this makes history fiction, but that the writing of history, making it intelligible within a given cultural context, is always beholden to something else—a politics, an ideology, an ethics.

is both “risked and gained by depositing such sovereignty” (21). The “culture of the individual, the belief in the individual’s uniqueness and unique story, and his or her individual rights, has gained international currency” (Shaffer and Smith 24), and therefore it is important to think about what happens when the ‘self’ of the narrative is being fashioned by a not-self. It is not so much a matter of focusing on how texts repudiate the sovereign self, the knowing subject, or the politics of truth claims, but of asking questions about what happens to autobiographical narrativization when there is a competing pressure toward neoliberalized privatization and a hungry global market for such personalistic narratives. What is at stake when (auto)biography becomes a kind of cross-cultural project that bears multiple witness?

Throughout this dissertation I explore the notion of constitutive relationality as it is reflected in disparate coming-of-age stories by way of Adriana Cavarero’s conceptualization of “relational narratives.” Challenging individualistic and competitive models of identity, Cavarero claims that the “who” that someone is can only be known “through the narration of the life-story of which that person is the protagonist” (viii). The “sense of being narratable—quite apart from the content of the narration itself—and the accompanying sense that others are also narratable selves with unique stories,” is not only “essential to the self” but it also “makes it possible to speak of a unique being that is not simply a ‘subject’” (xvi). Importantly, Cavarero is not only describing a linguistic or symbolic function here: this “necessary other” is above all another person, another unique being: “an other who really is *an* other” (xiv). Challenging the fundamental antagonism within (post) Hegelian models of recognition and identity, Cavarero highlights how the



self in fact desires this narration, the “*unity...which this tale confers to identity*” (xvii) that can only come from the mouth of another. The fundamentally relational aspect of storytelling —“without the ‘you’ my own story becomes impossible” (32)—can also be extended to testimony. Butler, expanding upon Cavarero’s analysis, suggests that giving an account of oneself is always directed toward an “addressee” who “might receive the story and in receiving, alter it some,” representing the “prospect that the story might be given back in a new form, that fragments might be linked in some way, that some part of opacity might be brought to light” (*Giving* 80). In this way, the listener or one who receives the story is just as important as the speaking subject for storytelling. In *What is the What*, Eggers is the interlocutor, patiently listening to a story that has been told over several years, but he is also the teller of the tale, putting Deng’s story into words and offering them back to him in a new way: at the same time, however, he is also offering these words to us as readers.

I argue that, despite its production and circulation within a transnational economy of humanitarian cultural consumption, Eggers’s relational telling of Deng’s tale potentially complicates unproblematic receptions of his story. Cavarero suggests that, “within the horizon of the narratable self, the pronoun of biography is in fact not *he...but you...the one who tells us our story speaks the language of the you*” (92). *What is the What* invites us to read it extended meditation on this “you”: this is not only the story of Valentino Achak Deng, Sudanese Lost Boy, or Eggers’s relation to him, but by way of implication, it is the story of our own (ir)responsibility as well. The first-person narrator continually attempts to make contact with other people through storytelling:

When I first came to this country, I would tell silent stories. I would tell them to people who had wronged me....*you do not understand*, I would tell them. *You would not add to my suffering if you knew what I have seen....Do you have any idea?....Can you imagine this?...*It is wrong to say that I used to tell these stories. I still do, and not only to those I feel have wronged me. These stories emanate from me all the time I am awake and breathing and I want everyone to hear them. Written words are rare in small villages like mine, and it is my right and obligation to send my stories into the world, even if silently, even if utterly powerless. (29)

From “TV Boy”—“Be grateful TV Boy. Have respect. Have you seen the beginning of a war? Picture your neighbourhood, and now see the women screaming, the babies tossed into wells. Watch your brothers explode. I want you there with me” (73)—to the “Christian neighbours,” to Julian the nurse, to the photograph faces of the more-or-less well intentioned members of the fitness club where he works, Valentino’s silent yet insistent second-person “you” wanders from person to person, restlessly searching for someone who will finally listen to his story. There is a specifically ethical dimension to his silent and powerless plea. The novel recounts Valentino’s epic journey of growing up through war, famine, and refugee camps to settle finally in the United States. The tone of the frame narrative is one of utter disappointment: “You have no ears for someone like me” (Eggers 142). Assaulted, tied up and robbed in his own apartment, where there is no one to hear his screams, he says: “There is no feeling like rejection coupled with abandonment” (490). Ignored by the police and mocked by the robbers who continue to use his cell phone with impunity, he says: “this is the moment, above any other, when I wonder if I actually exist....there has been no account of my existence on either side of this crime” (471). A fragmentation of self especially accompanies his feelings of dispossession: “I pretend that I know who I am now but I simply don’t” (505). His

ceaseless attempts to find an interlocutor for his tale can be seen as constituting a “creative act of establishing witness” (Felman and Laub 87) within himself, yet time and again throughout the novel these attempts fail: “after all this, I am still in Atlanta, and I am still on the floor of my own apartment, tied with telephone cord, still kicking at the door” (Eggers 185). Like the Christian neighbours, who in Valentino’s mind will “feel the guilt in knowing that they could have done something sooner had they only been listening” (162), Eggers is implicating the reader directly by way of the structure of address. Valentino has moved from war, famine, and refugee camps to another, less obvious, state of ‘war’ and abandonment: the neoliberal state that turns against its most vulnerable residents. Far from the prototypical immigrant narrative of happy assimilation and able appropriation of the American dream, his relocation to the United States as a black Sudanese refugee places him within already existing (and unnamed) racially-configured relationships, of which the reader (and writer) also form a part.

A narrative device that recurs throughout the narratives I examine in this dissertation is what Slaughter calls the “implicated reader,” which he identifies in connection to the “dissentual” postcolonial *Bildungsroman*. To be distinguished from the “implied reader,” a literary term defined in the 1970s by reader-response critic Wolfgang Iser to describe the structural function of the hypothetical reader of a text (not to be confused with any real reader), Slaughter’s “implicated reader” is the “explicit narratee” —the reader who “comes to the story with particular presumptions, presentiments, and prejudices about development, colonialism....social, racial, and gender relations, as well as a general bourgeois humanitarian and *Bildungsroman* literary sensibility” (*Human* 230-231). As a

strategy that breaks the “fourth wall of fiction” by directly addressing a “society of readers outside the world of the literary text” (303), this device draws attention to a larger interpretive community as well as to the inequalities that structure it. Appeals to the implicated reader point to “the disjunction between the values espoused by the community and the actual practices that occur” (300). The enactment of a relational narrative in *What is the What* engages the implicated reader in order to expose the limits of universal discourse. At the same time, the narrative voice is implicitly including him or herself within this imagined community of readers, embodying what Butler calls the “double speaking” of being outside the norm but claiming to speak in its name all the same.

If the reception of a text is already circumscribed to a degree because at “any historical moment, only certain stories are tellable and intelligible to a broader audience” (Shaffer and Smith 32) and common-sense readings within certain truth regimes involve “testing whether the account seems right, whether it is understandable by the other, who ‘receives’ the account through one set of norms or another” (Butler, *Giving* 131), it is important to consider that the intended audience for this novel is, for the most part, North American. The narrative is set against the backdrop of terrorist bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and implicitly the events of September 11, 2001. Given the presumed audience/implicated reader, highlighting the plight of black southern Sudanese refugees might run the risk of playing to mainstream anti-Islamic discourses.<sup>27</sup> Yet something else

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<sup>27</sup>. Indeed, on the front cover of the paperback edition of the novel is an endorsement by Khaled Hosseini, author of *The Kite Runner*, a 2003 novel that has justifiably been criticized for “none-too-subtly” promoting “as humanitarian intervention the U.S.-Allied invasion of Afghanistan and the ‘War on Terror’” by representing the U.S. “as the land of perpetual opportunity and freedom while hypervilifying the Taliban

is being done by implicating the reader as the “you” in this text; Valentino’s repeated expressions of gratitude toward his benefactors, as well as his continued perplexity regarding the “act of generosity” of the U.S. in accepting refugees like him—“with no material benefit for them” (Eggers 482)—appear on the surface to confirm self-congratulatory first world sentiments of humanitarian benevolence. Despite this professed lack of “material benefit” the novel itself draws awareness to the role of refugees and undocumented people who work in undesirable, minimum wage jobs in North America, not to mention the symbolic benefit that is gained from appearing generous on the world stage. Sometimes such critiques are overt: “Do not think it was lost on us that the Kenyans, and every international body that monitors or provides for the displaced, customarily place their refugees in the least desirable regions on earth...I do not judge the UNHCR or any nation that takes in the nationless, but I do pose the question” (454). But sometimes it is less obvious, and throughout the narrative the persona of Valentino repeatedly expresses confusion about Western cultural behaviour, such as the world’s reaction to the death of Princess Diana, the irresistible “taste for TV,” the thoughtless circulation of “superficial pleasantries” such as “what’s the good word?” and “hang in there,” and the indignation of privileged North American fitness club members who are “determined to work out” but “cannot do it on the timetable they have planned” (259,467, 504, 503). There is clearly ambiguity in the (auto)biographical tone here: are we to read the text as earnest or ironic? Is Valentino genuinely confused, or is Eggers purposively staging his confusion in order to defamiliarize audiences about what is being taken for

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as a gang of Nazi-loving, heroin-using, homosexual pedophiles intent on repressing the free and full development of the human personality” (Slaughter, *Human* 38).

granted? Whose voice are we meant to be paying attention to, Deng's or Eggers's, or perhaps both simultaneously? In posing questions such as these, this text functions in an indirect way, inspiring a more nuanced and critical second reading of the story. Upon further reflection, the reader is compelled to see his or her (geographical and epistemological) position reflected ironically, and the assumed priority and goodness of the values of this position are significantly displaced.

Is this text to be read as a novel, as a collaborative autobiography, as testimony, or as all of these at the same time? Ross Chambers suggests that "what makes language feel adequate to its users is [the] generic appropriateness" of any given text (32). Given that cultural texts are produced and received within given regimes of intelligibility, Chambers argues that in order to sneak the message past generic border patrols, writers must look for other ways to point to or "signpost" what is "culturally occluded...something that is less 'surmised' than the reader is *reminded* of its existence" (37). As such, "signposting" as an indexical practice signals the unsayable or unintelligible by redirecting your attention, showing that "truth might be other than factual" (18). The apparition of this non-factual truth functions as a cultural haunting that is "spectral in its effect" (39). The haunting function of "signposting" is to signal toward something without pointing directly at it. In this sense, the irony in *What is the What* works as a technique of indirection, a way of sneaking past stereotypical readings.<sup>28</sup> Read in this light, Eggers's

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<sup>28</sup> Chambers urges us to "put back the wit into the act of witnessing, understanding wit to embrace a range of discursive skills" (20), including irony. To be distinguished from cool, postmodern shrug-of-the-shoulder uses of irony, there is a specifically ethical dimension to this strategy, which calls for critical and political self-reflexivity. Siegal suggests that Eggers is the "sincere young father of post-postmodern half-irony— call it sincerony," which he employs in order to "raise public awareness of the genocide in Darfur" ("The Niceness").

text disturbs generic expectations: it is an “infraction” that can be “read as deliberate, but necessary, and hence as constituting, not an error and not an act of madness or even of gratuitous provocation, but a meaningful utterance that requires—not despite of but because of its untimely character—to be taken seriously” (Chambers 30). The critical implications for the implicated reader are “smuggled into the conversation” (21) as an indirect form of critique. But the narrative voice is not only critical: it is also questioning and desirous, calling upon the reader to act as witness. In this sense, to bring Slaughter and Chambers into mutually informing dialogue, the function of signposting can be viewed as a particularly indirect way to illuminate the irony of the implicated reader. In the last paragraph of the novel, the second-person structure of address, the wandering “you,” shifts yet again:

Whatever I do, however I find a way to live, I will tell these stories...because to do anything else would be something less than human. I speak to these people, I speak to you because I cannot help it. It gives me strength, almost unbelievable strength, to know that you are there. I covet your eyes, your ears, the collapsible space between us. How blessed are we to have each other? I am alive and you are alive so we must fill the air with our words...I will tell stories to people who will listen and to people who don't want to listen, to people who seek me out and those who run. All the while I will know you are there. How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would almost be as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist. (535)

How one interprets this passage depends fundamentally on the structure of address: quite apart from the question of the “who” of the narrative of voice (Eggers’s or Deng’s), the reader is encouraged to consider just who the “you” is here. It may be Eggers, as interlocutor and friend, or perhaps even God. I suggest that in the final paragraph of the novel, the wandering “you” finally settles inescapably upon *you*, on *me*, on *us* as the readers of the text. Read in this light, the irony in this passage is clear: even though the

voice proclaims that “you pretending that I do not exist” would be “impossible,” other events of the narrative show that many people in this world (and perhaps even readers of this novel) do in fact seem to pretend that people like Valentino do not exist: “the boy thinks I am not of his species, that I am some other creature, one that can be crushed under the weight of a phone book. The pain is not great, but the symbolism is disagreeable” (Eggers 50). Throughout the novel, the telephone functions as a way for Valentino to make contact with family, friends, and the larger Sudanese community in the United States, yet the “symbolism” of the phone book as a weapon, combined with the fact that he is tied up by the robbers with the telephone cord and the suggestion that his stolen phone threatens the coherence of his identity (471), points to a dangerous failure of communication and signals how despite one’s best intentions, the ‘message’ of testimony can get lost before reaching its destination.<sup>29</sup>

Will we as readers of this text erect barriers like “TV Boy”? Will we slam the door closed, hang up the phone, drop a phonebook or “unabridged dictionary” (Eggers 52) on the other’s face, or otherwise refuse to listen? Throughout this dissertation I argue that contemporary coming-of-age narratives utilize spectral and relational literary strategies in order to generate a comparative imagination and reconsider global relationality. Chambers asks: when narrative attempts at witnessing “comes knocking at

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<sup>29</sup>. It is interesting to consider the way that Valentino’s plea resonates in conjunction with Ralph Ellison’s prologue to *Invisible Man* (1952), which reflects similar tropes of contact, invisibility, haunting, and frustration: “That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact.... You often doubt if you really exist. You wonder if you aren’t simply a phantom in other people’s minds” (in Chapman 193). Reading these texts together also implicitly brings witnessing from (post-slavery) 1950s society, predicated on forced immigration and second-class citizenship, into conversation with contemporary witnessing in the context of current forms of forced immigration and second-class citizenship.



our door...will we remain deaf, and turn away; or will we offer it hospitality?" (8).

Witnessing in this sense is a demand, yet it is up to the listener to listen (and perhaps act) or turn away. While personal narratives provide "avenues for empathy" (Felman and Laub 6) there are no guarantees as to how personal stories will be taken up: "while affect offers a potential for change, for becoming, it is impossible to predict how sensations will be channelled into knowledge or practice" (7). Especially in global human rights contexts, it is important to remember that "as often as cultural forms make human suffering visible they distort perceptions in ways that make it possible to disenfranchise and abuse others...culture has played an essential role in rendering entire populations into non-humans or even anti-human security threats" (McClennen and Slaughter 8). The "relative precariousness" of "rhetorical manoeuvres" like signposting and addressing the implicated reader is that, due to their "inevitably roundabout and makeshift character," they "can be fumbled, dropped or otherwise misperformed," or even "refused" (Chambers 38). Valentino himself knows that "your compassion surely has a limit" (Eggers 250). Spectral strategies of indirection by definition resist closure: Chamber suggests that "rather than attempting to lay the ghosts," perhaps "it would be better to attend to all the obscenities, past and present, that knock for attention...at culture's door...try to conceive what it would mean to open the door to them...to begin to contemplate the question of 'prolonging the moment of the open door'" (35). Similarly, in their formulation of an "ethics of recognition," Shaffer and Smith argue that if the "ethic of engagement" with stories within human rights frameworks is "visceral," it is not enough to stop there: it is important to pay attention to the "political and relational forces that motivate people's

capacity for critical responsiveness to an other” (232). I argue that *What is the What* does more than just “arouse readerly curiosity” (Chambers 40). To be sure, it does do this: but at the same time it also calls for more self-reflexive (and potentially uncomfortable) readings.

So, what *is* the “What” of this novel, in the end? Close to the beginning of the novel, Deng’s father tells a traditional story, where God says to the Dinka: “You can either have these cattle, as my gift to you, or you can have the What”: To the question, “What is the What?” God responds, “I cannot tell you. Still, you have to choose. You have to choose between the cattle and the What” (Eggers 62). In his father’s oft-repeated story, the Dinka make the safe choice of the cattle over the unknown (and it is the Arabs who are given the inferior What). By the end of this epic narrative, however, there is a change in the significance of the titular What, and it comes to symbolize the intangible potential of renewal, creative regeneration, and the ability to adapt when faced with seismic shifts to one’s way of life. On the verge of literally flying into the unknown, Valentino calls for boldness: “the mistakes of the Dinka before us were errors of timidity, of choosing what was before us over what might be...this is our first chance to choose our own unknown... as impossible as it sounds, we must keep walking” (531-532). Further, perhaps the “our” and the “we” have special significance in light of the “you” of the final paragraph mentioned above. In seeking, rhetorically, to unsettle complacent readings by breaking down generic expectations, the novel invokes the Sudanese community while at the same time refusing to allow the larger community of (implicated) readers off the hook, drawing attention to the fact that “reading and writing texts are never neutral

activities,” and there are “responsibilities with that role” (Said 319). Perhaps the intangible What also signals the unfinished nature of planetary relations, which I explain and elaborate upon in the following section. Even though the collaborative evocation/invocation of ethical planetarity in *What is the What* offers no guarantees, it still may prolong the moment of the “open door.”

### **Theorizing Planetary Relations: The Place and Potential of Literature**

Learning to read (or read well) both emblemizes and catalyzes the vagarious processes of modernization and personality development.

—Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc* (284)

Subalternity, forced exile, slavery, systematic exclusion, social invisibility, migration, and double-consciousness are not only the conditions to be analyzed, but also the loci from which thought emerges. The voices that erupt there may very well challenge our typical conceptions of spatiality and with that, help us in rescuing critical thinking from the analytical and continental ditches.

—Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Towards a Critique of Continental Reason” (79)

In the three chapters of my dissertation that follow I expand upon and complicate the way that presumptions about geopolitical mobility, patterns of promise and disappointment, and dominant versions of history and (private and public) memory are circulated in coming-of-age narratives, and how they might be challenged by reading such narratives through a lens of constitutive relationality and narrative haunting. Chapters 1 and 2 deal specifically with narratives about second-generation experiences of protagonists growing up in multicultural North American contexts, the United States and Canada, respectively. This focus on second-generation experiences introduces a new kind of productive doubleness or double consciousness—in their position of cultural ‘outsiders within’—echoing and enacting Butler’s “double speaking” (“Universality” 360) in interesting and productive ways. Importantly, the diasporic haunting that occurs in these

novels specifically emphasizes an intergenerational and unconscious transmission of affect. In Chapter One, “Coming-of-Age in Contemporary U.S. Latino/a Literature: Renegotiating History and Citizenship in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Caramelo*,” I examine the current “Latino Boom” in U.S. literature. Despite the prevalence of Latino pop culture in the contemporary U.S., the persistence of uncritical stereotypes of ‘Hispanic’ identity and the abhorrent treatment of most Latinos within and without its borders confirms that this is a toxic form of belonging. In the novels, the double consciousness of bilingual narrators does not imply a happy mixing as much as a troubled (and troubling) splittedness; this doubleness registers on both a linguistic and cultural level and allows the texts to explore various kinds of hauntings— for example, the haunting of the English language by Spanish by way of code-switching “Spanglish” use; the haunting of dominant versions of conflicted relational history by drawing attention to the role of the U.S. in Mexico and the Dominican Republic; the haunting of universal humanist discourse by what has been excluded; and the haunting of the individual by constitutive relationality: specifically, the narrators literally enact relational narratives by telling the story of an/other. The critique of dominant narratives in these novels goes hand in hand with an awareness of the need to tell new kinds of stories. Furthermore, both Dias and Cisneros signal intergenerational and diasporic haunting by using family photographs in order to evoke what Marianne Hirsch has called “post-memory” (*Family*; “The Generation”). The focus on dislocation, diaspora, and doubleness in both novels helps to combat what Maldonado-Torres calls the “amnesia of spatiality” (79) by drawing attention to the role that spatial location, and movement between

locations, plays in intergenerational memory. Intersubjective renegotiation involves thinking and feeling through personal memory, communal history, and spatial location.

In Chapter Two, “Unsettling (Trans)CanLit: Spectral Renegotiations of Second-Generation Belonging in *What We All Long For* and *Soucouyant*,” I look at two examples of diasporic Anglo-Canadian literature that showcase Toronto as a “global city.” Contrary to the perceived success story of multiculturalism as official policy and everyday reality in Canada, the first decade of the twenty-first century has registered a sense of anxiety about the apparent “waning of belonging” on the part of second-generation visibly raced Canadians. The myth of multicultural ‘tolerance’ exposes the homogeneity at the heart of Canada, a neoliberal, settler-invader nation that has overwritten its history of colonialism in multi(cultural)-coloured ink. Like the narratives in Chapter 1, they explore generational patterns of universal promise and disappointment: these second-generation narrators reject national origins *and* parental origins in favour of wider identifications, while at the same time, whether they like it or not, they are haunted by their families’ diasporic histories. As in Chapter 1, there are moments in these novels where relational narratives are enacted, and the spectral insistence of memories that will not be forgotten—and even refuse to respect subjective boundaries—is again explored by way of “post-memory.” The focus on intergenerational haunting implicitly undermines the expectation that the second generation will productively assimilate in order to have access to a ‘better’ life than their parents, and therefore challenges the notion of ‘progress’ when it comes to national belonging. The process of growing up that is explored within the narratives in these two chapters is not merely portrayed as a question of replaying Oedipal conflicts,

instead offering something more complicated (and on a global register) than an imperative to establish autonomy from one's origins.

Chapter Three, "Troubling Humanitarian Consumption: Relational Storytelling and (Affective) Global Citizenship in African Child Soldier Narratives," looks at how the figure of the child soldier is being framed, mobilized and challenged in cultural representations. Considering the West's penchant for consuming tales of 'savagery,' how do we read representations of Africa, Africanness, and the (black, male, African) child soldier in these accounts? Focusing on extreme contexts of violence and dispossession of (post)modern warfare, how do these novels complicate and resituate the postcolonial *Bildungsroman*? After briefly examining the coincidence between universal development narratives of the child (to be incorporated into larger society) and the figure of Africa (to be incorporated within a family of nations), the chapter is divided into two parts. In the first section, I look at three autobiographical narratives, Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (2007), Senait Mehari's *Heart of Fire: One Girl's Extraordinary Journey from Child Soldier to Soul Singer* (2007) and Emmanuel Jal's *Warchild: A Boy Soldier's Story* (2009). Exemplifying the inadequacy of Western frameworks of human rights and of psychoanalytic conceptions of individual trauma in non-Western contexts, these accounts register a need to move beyond "universalizing modes of sympathetic identification" in order to "create instead an urgent sense for differently located [readers] of their own ethical economic and political implication" (Brophy, "Troubling" 44). They question the economics and politics of humanitarian consumption while they simultaneously participate in them. In the second section I turn to an analysis of fictional representations

of child soldiers, Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007), and Delia Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen and Me* (2005). Interestingly, each of these novels reflects on losing and potentially regaining one's 'humanity' in contexts of brutal violence, yet through their indirect narrative structures they hint that perhaps these are not the questions we should be asking: Not only redemptive and/or recuperative, these stories point to the need to expose and question the exclusionary basis of supposedly universal categories like 'the human.' Furthermore, the line "it's not your fault" echoes throughout each of these texts about child soldiers, leading to larger questions about global responsibility. In an era of globalized war and securitization, zero tolerance, militarization and incarceration, the notion of childhood innocence is as mythic as the sovereign self, seeming to only exist as a function of the adult world's collective recognition of responsibility toward children. Importantly, in both autobiographical and fictional representations of child soldiers, it is creativity—and specifically, a shift from the power of the gun to the power of the pen and/or microphone—that seems potentially to lead toward to collective forms of healing.

Echoing Paul Gilroy, my research queries how, at a time when "translocal affiliations" are "virtually unthinkable outside the limited codes of human-rights talk, medical emergency, and environmental catastrophe," might we consider the potential role of literature for engaging "cosmopolitan solidarity from below and afar" (*Postcolonial* 5)? Contemporary forms of global relations and environmental realities call for a need to emphasize fundamental interdependences, in order to reverse the kind of "social self-estrangement" that Goldberg argues occurs when societies pursue "the illusion of

security and safety through power-assisted forms of social homogeneity...that require the disappearance, the eradication of enemies, foreign or domestic, inevitably racially indexed” (Searls Giroux 11). Searls Giroux suggests that one “path back from the brink of societal self-destruction” would involve “a refusal to participate in the wilful amnesia that marks contemporary racial politics, and to engage...the dense and diverse histories of modern globalizations” (11). Echoing the “amnesia of spatiality” invoked by Maldonado-Torres, in order to imagine alternative pathways it is of crucial importance to recognize and name unequal forms of privilege and dispossession for what they are. It is not only a question of inclusion and/or exclusion, but of fashioning new understandings of the way the local and the global are inextricably interconnected, to what Diana Brydon has called “global entanglements” (“Dionne” 1002). If Goldberg’s “self-estrangulation” image registers a sense of visceral anxiety and mortal fear (if not imminent suicide), perhaps a commitment to engaging with friction-producing yet productive “global entanglements” might offer an alternative way to think of global planetary relations.<sup>30</sup> I draw my understanding of “planetary” from Gayatri Spivak’s *Death of a Discipline*, where she theorizes it as a new mode of political (and ethical) consciousness that represents an alternative to neo-imperial, neoliberal forces of globalization: while the “globe” “allows us to think that we can aim to control it,” the “planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan” (72). There is a specifically ethical dimension to this sensitive awareness of the necessity to co-exist with difference, because “to be human is to be intended toward the other” as “planetary subjects rather

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<sup>30</sup>. Both “estrangulation” and “entanglement” are, interestingly, metaphors that evoke the constitutive relationality (and vulnerability) of the self.



than global agents” (73). As a descriptor, the term planetarity suggests “both contingency and movement,” and Gilroy suggests that, as such, it is a less “imperial” term than “globalization” (*Postcolonial* xv). As I argue in Chapter 2, planetary awareness also differs from conventional gestures toward “cosmopolitanism” in that it deemphasizes the idea of privilege or choice when it comes to mobility, foregrounds relationality, and allows space for conceptualizing responsible relations with non-human others in a world that so clearly privileges the mobility of goods over living beings. In Spivak’s understanding, it is necessary to “perhaps take a step, learning to learn from below, toward imagining planetarity” (*Death* 100), and the writing and reading of global literature(s) has an important role to play in this imaginative practice.

I also want to align myself with Dussel’s commitment to move toward a non-universalized “planetary vision of the human experience,” which would require identifying “moments in which the imaginary of the modern world system cracks” and other narratives emerge (“Beyond” 9, 23). These “other” narratives point to what Dussel calls the “transmodern”; neither modern nor postmodern, this notion coincides with Saldívar’s notion of the “transnation,” as something else altogether. I argue that the novels that I have chosen to examine in this thesis, as narratives about doubleness and dislocation, can at least in part be read as examples of this other kind of thinking. For example, many of the narratives I explore in this dissertation reflect what Walter Mignolo calls “border thinking,” which “implies a redistribution of the geopolitics of knowledge,” and as such it is “epistemological and also ethical” (67). The “key configuration of” such border consciousness is “thinking from dichotomous concepts rather than ordering the

world in dichotomies” (85), which would mean listening for spectral iterations of voices that have been overwritten, ignored, conveniently misinterpreted, or deliberately silenced. Mignolo warns that, unless thinking through difference comes from subaltern perspectives (what he calls the “space of the colonial difference”) “border thinking becomes a machine of appropriation”—using the “colonial difference as an object of study rather than as an epistemic potential” (45). It is not a matter of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak, but of exposing the limits of ‘universal’ concepts like reason and humanity, and attempting to think about them differently. For example, ‘reason’ has roundly rejected the ghostly as non-existent, as not there, yet as Avery Gordon argues: as a “constituent element of modern social life,” haunting represents “neither pre-modern superstition nor individual psychosis; it is a generalizable social phenomenon of great import” (7). The alternative to modern reason is not a rejection of reason itself, but a better and more inclusive articulation of it through the epistemic potential of border thinking. It does not involve an exorcism of the ghostly “underside” of modernity (as Dussel calls it) from realms of intelligibility, but of listening to what it has to say about the dead, the living, and those who are yet to come. Heeding the spectral narrative strategies in these contemporary coming-of-age narratives potentially points the way to newly imagined forms of rationality and relationality.

In the interest of considering the potential of literary relations for shaping ethical responses to the predicament of growing up in twenty-first century global contexts, I want to foreground here an understanding of literature as what Homi Bhabha calls “discursive event” (23). Each of the narratives I explore in this dissertation is doing something at

once political and creative in the “negotiation of contradictory and antagonistic instances that open up hybrid sites and objectives of struggle” (23; 25). But how is this kind of reading practice, which would correspond to an act of empathetic literary negotiation similar to what Spivak has called “critical intimacy,” different from the superficial “empathetic globalization” that Barnard identifies in the context of Oprah’s Book Club? How can we prevent our reception of child soldier narratives in the global north, for example, from devolving into this kind of overly sentimental humanitarian consumption of stories about difference from the global south? As opposed to “critical distance,” Spivak’s notion of critical intimacy reconceptualises what it means to “speak to” rather than “listen to or speak for” the subaltern in an act of self-conscious awareness of relationality (*Critique* 425). At bottom, it depends on the way we conceptualize the act of reading and the act of writing: we need to keep in mind the geopolitical economics and politics of whose voices are heard and who is being called upon to respond ethically to them. This leads to questions about unequal access to publishing technologies, to the hierarchies of English/es (Hitchcock), and to the politics of literacy.<sup>31</sup> I want to propose an understanding of literary texts as posing theoretical problems, as friction-producing in Tsing’s sense, as invitations to readers to work through resistances of various kinds. The “uncoercive rearrangement of desires” (Spivak, *Death* 101) that is the goal of humanities scholarship may begin on an affective level, but it must then spur critical reflection. These

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<sup>31</sup>. For example, in his analysis of the “transfers of technology, technologies of transfer” between reading and non-reading nations, Slaughter argues that international literacy, seen as an “essential technology,” has become the “writing man’s burden” (*Human* 277, 281).

novels explore contemporary growing up in ways that demand, or at the very least invite, the reinvention of models of literature and of reading. Diana Brydon says it well:

Fictional imaginings, stories and poems remain some of the most powerful modes we have for entering and engaging difficult ways of knowing and thus stretching our imaginations in the ways that will be necessary for addressing the challenges now facing our interconnected world with globalization. But they cannot stand alone. They need to be placed in dialogue with other modes of inquiry such as those developed within the civil, social, market, and physical spheres once confined for analysis to the social and natural sciences. Texts once studied within the confines of a national literature need to be read as involved in an emerging global dialogue but in a manner that beware assumptions of easy translatability across different cultural situations. (“Difficult” 10)

The coming-of-age narratives explored within these pages urge the reader to ask questions about the ethics and politics of proximity and vulnerability, in the unpredictability of our encounters with others and with unequal forms of contemporary political and material dispossession. It is not as much a question of overcoming our “limitations and partialities” as it is about recognizing them “for what they are” (Gregory and Pred 6). A self-reflexive awareness of (often unchosen) global entanglements, as well as of the limitations that blind us to ourselves, potentially goes a long way. In addition to heeding Haraway’s observation about all knowledge as being “situated” (that is, there is no detached, objective epistemological position) it is also important to keep in mind Grosfoguel’s distinction between “epistemic location” and “social location”—the fact that “one is socially located in the oppressed side of power relations does not automatically mean that he/she is epistemically thinking from a subaltern epistemic location”

(“Transmodernity” 3).<sup>32</sup> I suggest that contemporary coming-of-age narratives open spaces for us to consider these questions. Instead of viewing contradictions and antagonisms as undesirable and in need of being overcome in efforts at harmony and closure, perhaps it is time to consider that “double binds are less dangerously enabling than the unilaterality of dilemmas solved” (Spivak, *Critique* 173). A self-reflexive awareness of such uncertainty and vulnerability might lead to “a developing sense of what we share as well as what divides us, and above all a principled refusal to exclude others from the sphere of the human” (Gregory and Pred 6). The planetary consciousness that emerges in the coming-of-age narratives that I look at in the chapters that follow urges a reconsideration of what it means to be limited, partial, situated— yet still ethically— human, and to remember that constitutive relationality is what constitutes ethical humanity. This is a potential move toward imagining a very different model of literary global relations for the twenty-first century.

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<sup>32</sup>. As Grosfoguel points out, “the success of the modern/colonial world–system consists precisely in making subjects that are socially located on the oppressed side of the colonial difference think epistemically like the ones in dominant positions” (3).

**CHAPTER ONE~ COMING-OF-AGE IN CONTEMPORARY U.S.  
LATINO/A LITERATURE: RENEGOTIATING HISTORY AND  
CITIZENSHIP IN *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO* AND  
*CARAMELO***

Perhaps one should expect that an emergent literature, a body of writing that is itself coming of age, should gravitate toward coming-of-age stories. In this respect, Latino literature as a whole draws a broad allegory about its own becoming.

—Gustavo Perez Firmat, “Sel u no sel” (7)

Picture the scene: on the stage of an extravagant Hollywood theatre, bursting with some of the biggest names in the music industry, a young woman sings *a capella* in Spanish alongside a troupe of dancers dressed in ‘traditional’ Latin American outfits, their faces covered like bandits. The young, tattooed lead singer moves up the aisle among the audience members, followed by members of a Colombian indigenous tribe, dressed completely in white, who proceed to sit quietly on the stage throughout the rest of the performance. It is a hybrid clash of pan-Latino, indigenous and urban imagery. Alongside flower-adorned *orisha* figures, percussionists from the musical theatre group Stomp! bang frenetically on trash cans and plastic water drums, and massive flames fill the background. At one point, the lead singer takes off his shoe and hurls it into the crowd, yelling “todos somos residentes!” to the delighted (and defiant) cheers of the audience members.<sup>33</sup> This was the opening performance of the 2007 Latin Grammy Awards, where the Puerto Rican hip-hop/reggaeton group called Calle 13 performed their hit song “Pa’l Norte.” Especially given the explicitly political content of their music, for the (mostly young) people watching the above presentation on television the subtext was clear:

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<sup>33</sup>. “We are all residents!”

Latinos are invading the North for good. In fact, a look at recent census numbers shows the staggering growth of Latino populations within the United States, which are expected to triple by the year 2050: while controversy surrounds the exact numbers, “even by the most conservative estimate, there are now over 40 million Latino/as in U.S. territory,” which will make the U.S. the “second-largest Spanish-speaking country in the world, after Mexico” (Castillo 1; 197). As a result, Gonzalez argues:

This demographic shift is so massive it is transforming the ethnic composition of this country and challenging key aspects of its accepted national identity, language, culture, and official history, a seismic social change that caught the power structures and institutions of U.S. society unprepared. (quoted in Castillo 1)

Spanish-speaking residents, legal or not, are changing the cultural and political landscape of the U.S., both within the borders of ‘America’ and in this nation’s relationship to the Americas as a whole.

On a cultural level, a “Latino Boom” has been taking place within U.S. popular culture: from Tex-Mex fast food to the music/film industries to pop culture expressions, it seems that Latino cultural influences are everywhere.<sup>34</sup> However, one of the most pressing problems with this contemporary boom is that “uninflected stereotypes too often pass for complete knowledge about Latino Cultures” (Castillo 3). Latino identities are already hybrid, and “Latino culture” is arguably more a label of convenience for marketing purposes than an actual cultural entity. Even the broad census category “Hispanic” hides significant differences such as race, class, gender and national identity, especially since Spanish-speaking people tend to identify more along national lines (as

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<sup>34</sup>. This contemporary phenomenon is to be distinguished from the “Latin American boom,” which was a literary movement of the 1960s and 70s where a young group of Latin American novelists—for example, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Julio Cortazar and Mario Vargas Llosa —began to have literary influence in North America and Europe.

Cuban, Puerto Rican, or Mexican, for example) than in terms of ethnicity or language. In literary terms, according to Gustavo Perez Firmat, the main problem with the categorization of “Latino Literature” is that it “browns-out distinctions among the many nationalities that have an equal claim to so-called *Latinidad*” (“Sel” 8). However, as the hybrid performance described in the opening paragraph suggests, there is strategic strength to be gained in claiming to speak *as* Latino, despite significant historical and cultural differences between Latinos, especially within the context of an officially monolingual United States where legal inclusion is oftentimes elusive. Especially in the current social and political climate, where ‘illegal immigrants’ are being demonized, rounded up and deported in huge numbers, claiming the authorization to speak in the name of the universal — “we are *all* residents!” (my emphasis)— exposes what Wendy Brown calls the “paradox” of universality: that is, that those who are excluded from claims to universal rights are in fact constitutive of the universal itself (“Suffering” 432). As Judith Butler argues, “claiming to be covered by” the very universal that excludes the one who is speaking exposes “the contradictory character of previous conventional formulations of the universal” (Butler, “Universality” 359). As a kind of “double speaking” that precipitates and exposes the “failure of the norm,” the speaker “nevertheless insinuates his or her way into the name enough to speak ‘in’ it all the same” (360). Such “performative contradictions” (358) can raise serious questions about the limits of citizenship and belonging in contemporary contexts, drawing attention to the gap between universalist rhetoric and social and political realities.



Even though “the term ‘Latino’ can have instrumental or political value, it is important to remember that the ‘imagined community’ to which Latinos belong is more imagination than community” (Firmat, “Sel” 8). And this imagined community of the Latino finds itself simultaneously inside and outside of a geographical space that is defined by borders that are at once imaginary and violently tangible. The growing Latino population in the U.S. must negotiate the contradiction between the representation (and/or appropriation) of their culture(s) within mainstream culture, on the one hand, and the daily realities of life as an outsider on the inside of that culture, on the other. It is difficult to reconcile the presence of the Latino in U.S. popular culture with the security wall being built around the Mexico border, and National Guard troops being sent to guard it in the name of “national security” (Frosch); Arizona’s passing of immigration law sb1070, a law so harsh that “key egregious portions” of it have been blocked by a judge, at least temporarily (Markon and McCrummen); Arizona’s recent efforts to ban ethnic studies with the rationale that it promotes an ‘un-American’ resentment of whites; the “humiliating” regulations on movement that have spread north to the U.S.’s other border with Canada (Valpy); and the routine discrimination of all kinds that Latinos face on a daily basis (“Latino in America”). In their role as cultural and linguistic translators, what happens to second-generation Latino writers’ relationship to history, to language, and to place when they write from within such conflicted spaces? In terms of the complicated issues of cultural belonging and citizenship, how is the United States a particularly conflicted space from which to write, especially given its fraught historical relationship to the Latin American nations from which first-generation Latinos have immigrated? As

Christie and Gonzalez wonder, how is “one’s language” to be used or adjusted in the process of living, as Cuban revolutionary Jose Marti famously put it, within the “belly of the beast’?”(309).<sup>35</sup>

This chapter examines two contemporary coming-of-age novels written in English by Latino/a writers in the United States: *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by Junot Diaz and *Caramelo* (2002) by Sandra Cisneros. *Caramelo* is a story told by the young narrator Celaya (Lala) in four parts, with a “*Pilon*” —“something extra tossed into your bag as a thank-you for your patronage just as you are leaving” (Cisneros 433)—and a historical “Chronology.” In the first part, “Recuerdo de Acapulco,” Celaya Reyes remembers a trip from Chicago to visit her grandparents in Mexico one summer when she is a small child. Rich with imagery and humor from the perspective of a five-year-old, in this section Lala introduces the importance of her extended family and the culture of Mexico City in the mid-twentieth century. In the second part, “When I was Dirt,” with the ghost of her grandmother, Soledad, watching over her shoulder and frequently interrupting the narrative, an older Lala recounts Soledad's life story as she grows up in mid- twentieth century Mexico. The third and final part of the novel, “The Eagle and the Serpent, or My Mother and My Father,” recounts the story of Lala’s life from birth onwards from the perspective of adolescence and in the context of mobility —both within the U.S. itself and between the U.S. and Mexico. The other novel that I look at in this chapter, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, is an epic story narrated by Yunior, the

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<sup>35</sup>. A popular culture example of this negotiation is Mexican-American director Robert Rodriguez’s recent *Machete*, a critical yet tongue-in-cheek action film (inspired by B-movie and exploitation style cinema) that satirizes the U.S.’s relationship with the Latino, and *vice versa*.

protagonist of Díaz's first book *Drown*, and chronicles not just the life of Oscar, an overweight Dominican boy growing up in New Jersey who is obsessed with science fiction/fantasy novels, comic books, role-playing games, and falling in love: it is also the story of the curse of the *fukú* that has plagued his family for generations. The *fukú* also functions as a figurative comment on the transnational 'curse' that has afflicted the Americas (and by extension, arguably, the entire world) since colonization and slavery. Importantly, the middle sections of the novel also recount the multigenerational stories of Oscar's sister, Lola, his mother, Belicia, and his grandfather, Abelard, under the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. Junot Diaz was born in the Dominican Republic and moved with his family to New Jersey when he was six years old, while Sandra Cisneros was born in Chicago of a Mexican father and a Chicana mother. Although Cisneros's novel falls under the category of Chicano literature, in some ways, Diaz's text might more adequately be linked to Caribbean literature of the African Diaspora. Both novels highlight the linguistic doubleness of their young U.S.-raised protagonists, who are caught between the borders of English and Spanish, and both novels perform a re-reading of history by employing specifically spectral and relational narrative strategies.

It is particularly important to note that these "Latino" novels are written primarily in English, and to question how they differ from mainstream U.S. literature even though "they are both written in English and their geographical base is the same" (Carra 41). Gonzalez argues that Latino writers often "take on the task of explaining their stories and their cultures solely within a U.S. context, and solely to a dominant-culture reader,"

which leads to what he calls a “safari approach,” where the author acts “as guide and interpreter to the natives to be encountered along the way” (in Castillo 8). I have decided to focus on these particular texts by Cisneros and Diaz because, on the contrary, the specific textual strategies that they employ perform a critique of dominant narratives. They are neither “safari”-like interpretation of Latino culture for Anglo readers, nor are they simple attempts to incorporate Latino culture into hegemonic norms of national belonging: these novels offer critical renegotiations of public and private memory, of the promise and disappointment of universality, and of global relationships. Slaughter argues that the *Bildungsroman* is a genre particularly suited to exploring the contradictions and paradoxes of inclusionary rights claims because of its “capacity to sustain ambiguity and complexity” (*Human* 44). Coming-of-age stories “can both articulate narrative claims for inclusion in the normative rights regime and criticize those norms and their inegalitarian implementation” (28). The spatial poetics of these polyphonic narratives comes from the ontological condition of multiplicity and mobility, where coming-of-age occurs under conditions of (linguistic) doubleness and dislocation. As such, *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* can be read as a contemporary variation of what Slaughter has called “postcolonial novels of disillusionment” that problematize “the process of the subject’s incorporation” (Coundouriotis 1006). Going beyond postcolonial formulations, however, these are novels of disillusionment written from within the conflicted and ambivalent location of being at once outside *and* inside of the hegemonic space of the U.S.

According to Christie and Gonzalez, in much recent Latino/a writing there is a tendency to reconstruct a complicated past, and to re-read history “with an eye toward what is to come” (433). In particular, these novels examine how dislocation as a result of immigration has lasting, intergenerational effects in spatio-temporal terms: looking to the past, present and future, as well as the here and there of migration, these novels contribute to a critique of hegemonic conceptions of both space and time. In particular, they combat the “amnesia of spatiality” (Maldonado-Torres 79) by taking “the particularity of spatial location into account” (76).<sup>36</sup> In the first section of the chapter I explore how these novels re-interpret the conflicted relational histories of the U.S. with Mexico and the Dominican Republic, respectively, exploring the complex histories of racial, gender, and class injustices that have been overlooked or overwritten by dominant interpretations of history. The second section explores language and the global politics of fiction: specifically, the nuances of strategies such as code-switching—that is, the i(nte)rruption of Spanish into an otherwise English text — as profoundly contestatory strategies linked to the emergence of border epistemologies, what Mignolo calls “border-thinking,” for conceiving of a more inclusive planetary vision of belonging. The critical and spectral insistence of double consciousness in these texts stages a dynamic that exceeds the demands of cultural tourism or a mournful emphasis on preserving an originary, pure cultural origin. The final section of the chapter explores how haunting stages an ethical relatedness that pushes us to theorize multiple, criss-crossed borders, as well as consider

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<sup>36</sup>. This is what Wallerstien calls “structural TimeSpace,” a term which “refers to the coordination between long-term historical systems and large-scale spatial formations” (Maldonado-Torres “Towards” 69). In order to overcome “the forms of power that have been dominant in the west for more than five centuries” it is necessary to question “both time dynamics and spatial relations” and to see how “space and time are mobilized into the qualification of otherness” (71).

what does and does not translate as generations are shaped by their particular experiences of borders, and are haunted by the border-crossings that have come before. This section examines the literary strategies that these writers employ: namely, spectral apparitions of intergenerational memory as an indirect call to ethics, the enactment of relational narratives, the renegotiation of storytelling as an ethical—and hopeful— act, and a critical reevaluation of love and relationality in personal, national, and global contexts.

While claiming the identity of “Latino” can be limiting, it is at the same time an enabling fiction: “the idea of the Latino is fertile precisely because it is problematic” (Davis in Castillo 4). The challenge is “how to frame a rigorous critique in the absence of ground on which to stand, or when the choice of a particular grounding discourse must always be taken in consciousness of its incompleteness, its flaws, and its unwelcome political and social consequences” (Castillo 3). The challenge is also “to think differently—ultimately, to think biculturally” (2) in order to avoid an uncritical incorporation into the norm, as well as the easy consumption of complex texts. I am especially interested in considering how these coming-of-age narratives embody Dussel’s notion of “transmodernity”—as an “otherwise” to (post) modernity— as an/other way of thinking, as border epistemologies that contribute to the possibility of imagining what “decoloniality” might look like.<sup>37</sup> As manifestations of critical border thinking that re-interpret the past in order to point to possible futures, these novels challenge Eurocentric visions of universality and point toward the envisioning of a truly transmodern world. To echo and expand upon Fimat’s observation in the epigraph that opens this chapter, these

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<sup>37</sup>. For an important overview of the shift from thinking in terms of the “postcolonial” to thinking about the “decolonial,” see Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being.”

coming-of-age stories not only comment on their own “becoming” as Latino literature, but also represent emergent manifestations of critical border thinking and planetary consciousness.

### **What the *Fukú*? Relational Histories and Cultural Memory**

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, *fukú* – generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically, the curse and the Doom of the New World ...No matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the *fukú* on the world, and we’ve all been in the shit ever since.

Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (1).

Migrants do not arrive to an empty or neutral space. Rather, migrants arrive to metropolitan spaces that are already “polluted” by a colonial history, a colonial imaginary, colonial knowledges, a racial/ethnic hierarchy linked to a history of empire. That is, migrants arrive to a space of power relations that is already informed and constituted by coloniality.

Grosfoguel, Maldonado-Torres, and Saldívar, *Latin@s in the World-System* (8)

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Caramelo* accentuate the colonial legacies of modernity in their fusion of fiction and historiography, particularly in the employment of unusually long and precisely detailed footnotes: these deliberate and often cumbersome references act as historical incursions into the narrative, interrupting the flow of the stories they weave about individual family histories in order to educate the reader on little known (or conveniently forgotten) aspects of public memory. Striving to recover events of Latino history that have been “sometimes repressed, certainly neglected, and often rewritten by mainstream sources” (Christie and Gonzalez 15), Diaz, for example, draws attention to the failure of public memory with regards to the relationship between the U.S. and the Dominican Republic, while linking this harmful failure of memory to the contemporary moment: “You didn’t know we were occupied

twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when you have kids they won't know the U.S. occupied Iraq either" (Diaz 19). Similarly, as Gutierrez y Muhs suggests, *Caramelo* should be read as "international, transnational and of a nature emergent from historiography" (23) because of its multi-textual and inter-textual celebration of Mexican popular culture at the expense of foregrounding U.S. popular culture.<sup>38</sup> Read alongside the "Chronology" attached at the back of her novel — which situates it "within a world of history as opposed to the indescribable mythic homeland of Aztlan" (Gutierrez y Muhs 34) — these references remind readers of the shifting borders (geographic and cultural) and imperial history between the U.S. and Mexico.<sup>39</sup>

These novels contribute to a critique of 'America' as a deeply-flawed imaginary construct, critically registering the pervasiveness of the American Dream as a false universal promise that most often leads to disappointment. Within the context of the U.S. melting pot, in order to become 'American' one must leave one's cultural history behind. The forms of recognition that are available within social (linguistic, racial, class, gender) hierarchies are exposed by these narratives as a "toxic form of belonging" (Sandin and Perez 3). In the words of Yunion— "we all know how tolerant the tolerant are" (Diaz

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<sup>38</sup>. Interestingly, one dominant culture figure that both novels ambivalently and critically engage is Elvis Presley, U.S. pop culture icon *par excellence*: in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Trujillo's cruelly comic Pompadour-haired henchmen are called "Elvis One" and "Elvis Two," and in *Caramelo*, there is a critical reference to the Elvis film *Fun In Acapulco*, during the filming of which he is said to have made a deeply offensive comment about Mexican women: "The last thing I want to do in my life is kiss a Mexican" (Cisneros 27). Elvis also makes a cameo appearance in David Chariandy's *Soucouyant*, in Chapter 2.

<sup>39</sup>. In Chicano/a literature, "Aztlan" is the mythical homeland of the Aztecs, referring to the very real space of northwest Mexico that was ceded to the U.S. (thus becoming the southwestern states) in 1848.



195).<sup>40</sup> The shock of “unheated tenements,” “children whose self hate short-circuited their minds” (Diaz 160) or “the horrors of a Chicago winter” (Cisneros 292) are disappointing realities that the first-generation immigrants in these novels face. Nowhere is the pattern of promise and disappointment more apparent than when it comes to questions of belonging and citizenship: “as any ten year old in East L.A. or Philly’s El Norte knows borders tend to follow working-class Latinos wherever they live and regardless of how long they have been in the United States” (Davis 71). In *Caramelo*, Inocencio’s traumatic experience with “La Migra [immigration officers]” toward the end of the novel (373) repeatedly —and, eventually, literally— makes him “sick and tired” (375; 378) and highlights the schism between the promise of citizenship “on this side” (375) of the border, and the deception of what Davis calls the “Third Border.” “We don’t need stories, we need papers,” say the immigration officials, and “what’s really sad is that one of them is Mexican” (Cisneros 375, 376). This element of daily interaction in public spheres remains invisible to whites but continually “slaps Latinos across the face” (Davis 71). Lala’s father is eventually forced to change the name of his upholstery business from “Tapicería Reyes” to “King Upholstery” in an attempt to “get more business”: “*los gueros*, Father says and sighs. ‘King’ makes them think of King Ranch. This way they think Mr. King is the boss, and I just work for him” (352). With a disappointed sigh, Inocencio descends from royalty to servitude in the mere translation of his name.

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<sup>40</sup>. For an excellent critique of multicultural “tolerance talk” as political discourse in the U.S., see Wendy Brown’s *Tolerating Aversion*. Among other things, Brown points out that the notion of tolerance means that the rights claims of various minorities are considered to be “special” rather than “universal” (2).

Both of these novels cast a critical eye on the seemingly deterministic relationship between ethnicity and social class and the false promise of meritocracy. Critics such as Firmat suggest that the “Latino aesthetic” falsely presuppose a “working-class identity...for all Hispanic writers in the United States” (“Sel” 8) and, indeed, not all Latinos are poor. Yet, one cannot ignore the concrete and specific histories of migration to the United States, where Spanish-speakers were historically brought in “first to replace the liberated slaves and later to alleviate manpower shortages” mostly in the service economy (Kanellos 173).<sup>41</sup> In *Caramelo*, the seven-child family moves from one run-down house to another within immigrant communities from Chicago to San Antonio, Texas, while Oscar is described as a “ghetto nerd” from Paterson, New Jersey. At least in the first-generation experiences of both families, transnational mobility moves in a decidedly downward direction: “Something happened when they crossed the border. Instead of being treated like the royalty they were, they were after all Mexican, they were treated like Mexicans, which was something that altogether startled the grandmother” (Cisneros 289). In their explorations of the flexibility of class, these novels underscore the shifting parameters of privilege. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, after fleeing to the relative safety of New York to escape the aftermath of the Trujillo regime, Oscar’s mother Belicia buys first-class seats to return to the Dominican Republic as an adult and gets “done up like she was having an audience with King Juan Carlos of Spain himself.... anything to communicate the distance she’d traveled, to emphasize how not

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<sup>41</sup>. These patterns continue to this day: a recent study by Rubén Rumbaut and Golnaz Komaie documenting the demographic changes in the United States over the past forty years points out that “immigrant groups experience gaps in social, economic, and legal status that are even greater than the gaps between native whites and blacks,” and that, of all of these groups, Dominicans have the “highest poverty rate” (43).

like the rest of these dominicanos she was” (Diaz 272). Beli would rather forget the time “before she created a better self, one with Victorian table manners and a disgust of filth and poor people” (259). In *Caramelo*, Soledad, like her mother-in-law Regina before her, rises “in social standing by riding on the back of her husband, the Spaniard” (116). She works hard to distance herself from her indigenous past: “Ay, ay qué horror...Get me out of this inferno of Indians, it smells worse than a pigsty” she complains, while at the same time we learn that “Soledad was a Reyes too, although, of that backward, Indian variety that reminded Regina too much of her humble roots” (Cisneros 79, 113).<sup>42</sup>

Marrying up in Regina’s case also means “whitening up,” suggesting that the shifting parameters of class and ethnicity are also often linked to discourses of race.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, contributing to a project to expose the “discursive products of global, racial history within the structure of nationality” (Stevens 31), Cisneros and Diaz both illustrate the flexibility of race as Stuart Hall’s “floating signifier” whose meanings constantly shift and slide (Hall, “Race”). The category of race is therefore always a fiction in a sense, albeit one with clear cultural and material consequences. In *Caramelo*, Lala shows her awareness of perceived racial differences as a small child in Mexico:

The girl Candelaria has skin bright as a copper *veinte centavos* coin after you’ve sucked it. Not transparent as an ear like Aunty Light-Skin’s. Not shark-belly pale like Father and the Grandmother. Not the red river-clay color of Mother and her family. Not the coffee-with-too-much-milk color like me, nor the fried tortilla color of the washerwoman Amparo, her mother. Not like anybody. Smooth as peanut butter, deep as burnt milk candy. (Cisneros 34)

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<sup>42</sup>. The Reyes family are chronic tale-tellers, having “invented a past, reminding everyone that their ancestors had been accustomed to eating oysters with mother-of-pearl forks on porcelain plates brought over on the Manila galleons” (Cisneros 163).

<sup>43</sup>. For an extended discussion of Latin American “policies of national whitening” (204) see Goldberg’s chapter called “Racial Latinamericanization” in *Threat of Race*.

In this passage, Lala's double identity as both Mexican and American is figured by way of her familiarity with all-American "peanut butter" as well as the traditional "burnt milk candy," known in Mexico as *cajeta*. Part of Lala's coming-of-age involves coming to realize her own intimate connection to that "smooth," "deep" skin color by realizing that Candelaria is in fact her older sister. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* the "first sign" of the *fukú* for the Cabral family is that their "third and final daughter" is "born black":

And not just any kind of black. But *black* black — kongoblack, shangoblack, kaliblack, zapotoblack, rekhablack — and no amount of fancy Dominican racial legerdemain was going to obscure the fact. That's the kind of culture I belong to: people took their child's black complexion as an ill omen. (Diaz 248)

The "fancy Dominican racial legerdemain" of the narrative exposes the vicissitudes of race as a floating signifier. The subtle (and not-so-subtle) politics of skin color described in the texts illustrate the concrete, destructive influence of perceived morphological differences —what W.E.B. Dubois called differences of "hair, skin, and bone" —on cultural imaginations. In an interview, Diaz himself says that "if there's one thing that ties African Americans and Dominicans together it's our self hatred, this tendency to value whiteness and to devalue blackness" (quoted in Esdaille). In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, when Oscar eventually becomes a teacher in the high school that he himself once attended he notes that "some things (like white supremacy and people-of-color self-hate) never change" in the U.S. public school system: "No one, alas," is "more oppressive than the oppressed" (264, 22). These texts bear powerful witness to the destructive effects of such internalized racism and lead to questions about what kind of relational demand internalized racism might produce: "Maldito haitanos," Beli growls at

the dark-skinned “clusters of peddlers at every traffic light” when she gets off the plane from New York, while at the same time repeatedly lamenting “her own despised black skin” throughout the text (273, 80). Beli’s older sisters are said to suffer from “Mulatto Pigment Degradation Disorder, a.k.a tans” while playing on the beach, while their mother hides under an umbrella “unable to risk no extra darkness” (Diaz 213). Similarly, in *Caramelo*, Lala’s cousin contrasts her with a Cuban dancer who is “Blond-blond-blond and white-white-white. Very pretty, not like you,” while Soledad is “delighted” that her son was “born lighter than herself,” and breathes a sigh of relief: “Yes, he would be *güero*, fair. The world would be kind to him” (Cisneros 29, 157).<sup>44</sup>

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Diaz uses the central metaphor of the *fukú* to represent the New World (dis)order of racism and displacement, explicitly linking the Dominican Diaspora to the African Diaspora. Like the historical footnotes that connect familial history to public memory, Diaz argues that “what a curse allows you to do is take all these national historical issues and tie them to a family” (“Writers”). By including the extended metaphor of the *fukú* as an integral aspect of the story, Diaz contests historical injustice and highlights the “need to link the present racial/ethnic hierarchy to the colonial history of each empire” (Grosfoguel, Maldonado-Torres and Saldívar 11). Far from a promised land, the New World has proven itself to be a cursed space for millions of African slaves and indigenous populations and their descendents. Like the haunting *fukú*, racism is a transatlantic process: Lewis Gordon argues that “the

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<sup>44</sup>. In Diaz’s text, Lola’s hair is repeatedly described as straight and the envy of other neighbourhood girls. As she grows up, Lola slowly begins to rebel against societal pressures and expresses a desire to “let myself grow dark in the sun, no more hiding from it, let my hair indulge in all its kinks” (209). Perhaps it is significant that at the end of the novel, after she has gone through a transformation of (self-) consciousness and become a mother herself, “Lola’s hair is long now and never straightened” (327).

reality of slavery in the economies and political institutions that followed” the conquest of the New World “has been so pervasive that all New World blacks are yoked to it” (91). Because “race signifies differently across the Americas,” upon relocating to the United States, “black immigrants often find themselves having to adjust to new experiences of racialization in a nation where the black-white dichotomy continues to rule both local and national politics” (Stevens 27).

In both *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the confusing silences and harmful stories that haunt the protagonists relate most harmfully to women: these coming-of-age narratives explore gender hypocrisy as it moves over national borders and across the generations. Not only do these novels critically diagnose the problem of machismo for Latino culture and the destructive effect it has on both girls and boys, but they also draw attention to the ways machismo shifts and is reinforced when it relocates to what Diaz has called the “toxic masculinist culture of the United States” (“Writers”). Set in the U.S. of the 1970s, in the context of the particular masculine pathologies stemming from the Vietnam War, adolescent Lala wonders: “Father says the army will do Toto good, make a man out of him and all that shit. But what’s available to make a woman a woman?” (Cisneros 361). In Diaz’s text, there is an almost total absence of father figures, yet masculine culture is everywhere dominant. Oscar is a complete failure by typical ‘Dominican’ standards and he refuses to even try to live up to the “latin hypermaleness” (Diaz 30) modeled for him by other Dominican men in the text, giving up on Yuniór’s attempts to whip him into shape and ignoring the macho advice offered to him by his uncle, who gives him a box of condoms and some advice as Oscar heads off to

college: “Use them all, he said, and then added: On girls” (49). Oscar’s conflicted and impossible relationship to masculinity in this text makes it clear that “machismo oppresses not just the girls but also the boys” (Alvarez 73).

For generations of Latina girls in predominantly Catholic households, coming-of-age occurs under conditions of willed silence about the workings of their own bodies. For example, in *Caramelo*, when Soledad was a girl “the philosophy of sexual education for women was— the less said the better” and, in the absence of her mother, Lala’s first menstruation on a visit to her grandmother in Mexico is a traumatizing event, involving equally generous proportions of uncomfortable wads of paper towel and burning shame (156). In the similarly hypocritical Dominican culture of Belicia’s adolescence as presented in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, it seems as if the only thing wrong with Jack Pujols’ behaviour is his lack of discretion: “The fucking of poor prietas was considered standard operating procedure for elites just as long as it was kept on the do-lo” (100). This power scenario is also echoed repeatedly in *Caramelo*, where poor domestic servants ‘service’ the privileged male youth of the household: the repeated refrain “we are not dogs” has its origin in just such a situation, and while this dictum reigns in two consecutive generations of Reyes, one of the central mysteries of the novel involves Inocencio’s illicit relationship with Amparo—the “Indian” woman who “makes a long bus ride into the city” each Monday to “wash our dirty clothes” (Cisneros 36)— and his subsequent silence about his having fathered a child, Candelaria of the caramel-coloured skin, with her before marrying Lala’s mother.

By deliberately interrupting the private, familial narrative with the spectral insistence of historical memory, Diaz and Cisneros both underscore the importance of re-reading global history from the perspective of gender oppression. Signposting racialized standards of beauty, the novels suggest a need to “recover a more grounded sense of Atlantic and diasporic histories as profoundly sexual, as much as racial, formations” (Stevens 28). Second-generation stories of coming-of-age are uniquely positioned to engage in such a critique, and in both novels it is the second generation narrator’s physical and emotional alienation from the homeland of their parents—in a sense, their ‘American-ness’—that allows them to see past the common sense cultural views of class, race and gender that are entrenched within Mexican and Dominican culture. At the same time, however, their alienation from mainstream U.S. culture not only allows them to diagnose sexual and racial formations wrought by colonialism, but it also sparks them to critically view the way unjust forms of relations travel, shift and become re-entrenched in new geographical and social contexts.

### **Spanglish, Border Consciousness, and the Global Politics of Fiction**

The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds...the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (25)

How shall I proceed in this rethinking and undoing? From ‘where’ will I rethink? ...We should perhaps begin to think from border languages instead of from national languages.

—Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* (256).

Mi estilo es la venganza del inmigrante sobre el inglés.<sup>45</sup>

—Junot Diaz (quoted in Larre Borges)

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<sup>45</sup>. “My style is one of immigrant revenge upon English” [my translation].



From the perspective of Latinos writing critically within the conflicted political and cultural context of the U.S., it might seem contradictory that these writers have chosen to write their novels in English. Indeed, Firmat is critical of most contemporary Latino Literature, saying that it has yet to fully “come of age” because it is still primarily the “monolingual representation of a largely bilingual population” (“Sel” 6). Firmat argues that it is obvious that many texts by Latino writers are “not addressed to a Latino readership” because, “even as these works gesture toward their natural audience, they embed these gestures in a translational context that reveals for whom the books are really intended” (“Sel” 6). The inclusion of sometimes awkwardly placed translation scenes in the text suggests that Latino readers themselves are not the target readership, and that the emphasis is placed on offering the non-Latino reader a glimpse into ‘authentic’ Latino experience. Firmat explicitly critiques the generic limitations of much of Latino literature as “social testimony,” which “usually follow the model of the coming-of-age story, narratives about adolescents —barrio boys and Garcia girls— struggling with their bifurcated cultural heritage” (6). The second-generation tale-teller’s voice is that of a “biculturally sensitive but English-dominant adolescent who, even as he speaks for his or her culture of origin, moves ineluctably toward assimilation (the telling of the story is itself an indication that assimilation has succeeded),” and the mere fact that the narratives are in English means that the “picture of the Hispanic condition” is “incomplete” (7). The role of the Spanish language in Latino literature too often has an “ornamental function,” rather than functioning “as a medium for literary expression” (6). At least as far as Firmat is concerned, Latino/a literature is still an “English only zone” (6), as a “body of work

that endeavors to make an art of talking to strangers” (6). However, I would argue that—to varying degrees and with varying degrees of success— these novels are also doing something different with their focus on the protagonists’ doubleness, which is echoed in the structure of the texts themselves. The idea of “double consciousness,” conceptualized by African American scholar WEB DuBois, has particular relevance to these particular examples of Latino/a literature because they creatively mix the narrator/protagonist’s two languages in interesting ways. DuBois acknowledges the possibility that the “twoness” of double consciousness causes psychic harm —of this “sense of looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (“Prologue”)—while at the same time suggesting that this double consciousness not only marks a pathological condition, but also signals a privileged gaze of its own.<sup>46</sup> The apparition of Spanish words in these texts (understanding “apparition” in a double sense, as both the appearance of something unexpected and a ghostly appearance) performs much more than a mere ornamental function here. Rather, the code-switching between Spanish and English in these novels reflects the ambivalence of belonging in second-generation experience and expression. As a result, this narrative strategy pushes the reader to consider fundamental questions about cultural identity and language, and the shifting and sometimes contradictory relationship between them in second-generation contexts.

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<sup>46</sup>. On the other hand, it is important to recognize the limits of DuBois’s notion when it comes to contemporary contexts: in his recent *Darker than Blue*, Paul Gilroy claims that “double consciousness should be excluded from the ways that we approach the pressing issues that are redefining the field of contemporary racial politics: security, citizenship, migration, multicultural, war, identity and human rights,” suggesting that new notions are needed in these times, when “culture is diffused through virtual and viral technologies” (158). He argues that “dualism is neither appropriate nor sufficient” (148) for contemporary thinking on race.

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Caramelo* are both novels that feature border-dwelling protagonists. These young protagonists are caught within and between the dis/locations of their parent's immigration and diasporic histories, but they are also marginalized in other ways and, as such, represent a critical kind of peculiarity and precarity. For example, Oscar is an outsider to both mainstream white culture and to his own community. Despite the repeated narratorial insistence that he is not a "proper" Dominican, Oscar himself makes feeble attempts to claim otherwise: "Tú no eres nada de dominicano, but Oscar would insist unhappily, I am Dominican, I am" (180). On a visit to Santo Domingo as a young adult, Oscar refuses to "succumb to that whisper that all long-term immigrants carry inside themselves, the whisper that says *You do not belong*" (276). The often heart-wrenching descriptions of Oscar's repeated marginalization draw attention to the violent and arbitrary imposition of 'normalcy' on young people as they grow up: "Every day he watched the 'cool' kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminine, the gay—and in every one of these clashes he saw himself" (264). Yunió describes the monstrosity, and even the impossibility, of what Oscar represents in Sci-fi terms: "You really want to know what being an X-man feels like? Just be a smart, bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest" (Diaz 22). In *Caramelo*, as Lala grows up she must come to terms with the often conflicted relationship between both her parent's (Mexican and Chicana) heritage and her own U.S.-born status, as located somewhere between the two. Despite being "American," she is clearly aware

that her ethnicity places her outside of the mainstream: “‘cause we’re teenagers, ‘cause we’re brown, ‘cause we’re not rich enough, right?” (338). At the same time that Lala is alienated from hegemonic *güero* culture, which is represented by the very “white” images used to describe the house of the Catholic priest that smells “like chalk and the holy clouds from boiled potatoes” (319), she is also bullied and beaten by Chicana girls, who are empowered by their claim to *mestizo* identity and resent Lala’s family stories of pure “Spanish” Mexican heritage: “Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about when you say I don’t look Mexican. I am Mexican. Even though I was born on the U.S. side of the border” (353). Like the *rebozo* —which was born in Mexico, but like all mestizos, it came from everywhere —Lala is “All Parts from Mexico, Assembled in the USA” (Cisneros 96, 231). The idea of *mestizo* or border consciousness has long been a trope in Chicano/a literature yet it is important not to overlook the dangers of uncritical celebrations of *mestisaje*, which, as Dernessesian argues, presumes that the “struggle between warring Spanish conquistadores and hermetic, stoic Indians is ongoing in the blood of all Mexicans” and “serves all too conveniently to explain away a multitude of economic, political and social sins” (272-273). In his chapter on “racial Latinamericanization” in *Threat of Race*, Goldberg traces how the fascination with racial mixing between black, indigenous and European populations embodied in late eighteenth century *casta* paintings was “postulated as national ideal” in the service of nation building in Mexico by the end of the nineteenth century (210). Thus, “through the magic of Euro-catalysis,” a new “Latin race” was born —*la raza latina* (204). Like the concept of hybridity, far from being a “natural phenomenon,” *mestisaje* needs to be continually interrogated as a

“discourse” (Dernersesian 277). *Caramelo* illustrates how this discourse is far from innocent or harmless: during Mexico’s “Golden Age...the arts flourished, creating a new *mestizo* identity proud of its Indian heritage, though in reality Indians were still treated like Indians everywhere, like dirt” (206). Apart from potentially being a harmful and depoliticizing fetish, the idea of hybridity relies problematically on the assumption of prior purity, which is something that—in their continual historical digging out of previously hidden mixed-race and mixed-class origins—these novels refute: in *Caramelo*, even Old World “Spanish” identity turns out to be “mixed with so much Sephardic and Moorish ancestry” as to question any possibility of purity (163).<sup>47</sup>

The border epistemologies that are exhibited in these second-generation coming-of-age narratives can be illuminated by way of Edouard Glissant’s concept of creolization. Coined in reference to Caribbean identity specifically, creolization contains an enormous range of meanings depending on the historical and geographical context.<sup>48</sup> For Glissant, “the basic symptom of the cross-cultural contact that is creolization” relates to the “unceasing process of transformation” that continues in the wake of the cross-cultural contact of colonization (*Caribbean* 140, 142). As Glissant argues elsewhere, if *métissage* is “in general an encounter and synthesis between two different entities, then creolisation appears to us as a *métissage* without limits — that is, something whose elements are multiplied and whose results are unforeseeable” (“Beyond” 561).

Creolization, therefore, is not a synonym for hybridity or cultural mixing, but presents a

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<sup>47</sup>. The term hybridity has been dismissed as well as reclaimed in postcolonial theory; see for instance Robert Young’s *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*.

<sup>48</sup>. Stuart Hall’s “Créolité and the Process of Creolization” is a useful essay for mapping the debates around creolization and *créolité*, a literary movement originating in Martinique as an alternative to the *négritude* movement that preceded it.

nuanced way to understand the specifically New World experiences of colonization, slavery, and migration, which is linked to mobility and dislocation, uprooting and transformation.<sup>49</sup> Diasporic subjects are continually caught in processes of change and development, and mobility is not a merely a question of departures and arrivals. The multiplicity and mixture exhibited in these novels is not an uncritical celebration of hybridity, but registers an awareness of a condition of continual reinvention and renegotiation. The double consciousness of the bilingual narrators in these novels does not imply a happy mixing as much as a troubled splittedness. Alluded to in the upholstery metaphor of *Caramelo*, recovery is also a process of uncovering, a re-recovery in which the original does not disappear completely but lurks continually behind the surface, hauntingly. Far from merely being seen as a curse—like the *fukú*, which is a mysterious negativity that comes from clashes between Old and New World—the double consciousness of second-generation protagonists might be read as something paradoxically productive: “Something is always being produced in cultural contact, a mixture, a doubleness, that is often read as performative” and may be “a source of surprisingly valuable insights” (Castillo 188). Doris Sommer points out that when asked: “if you could cure your double consciousness...would you want to?” most people say “no” (quoted in Castillo 188).

In these novels, the ambivalent ‘curse’ of bilingualism, the fact of being continually haunted by one’s other language, is a crucial element of the protagonist’s

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<sup>49</sup>. Theoretical concepts such as Clifford’s “traveler” and Said’s “migrant” similarly recognize the mixture and combination of peoples and cultures that are forced to continually reinvent themselves. Clifford suggests the need to find more mobile theory, but also recognizes privilege of metaphor “traveler” which is marked by issues of class, gender, race, ethnicity, etc. Said’s notion of the “migrant” specifically focuses on exile and dispossession.

double consciousness. Traveling to Mexico every summer as a child, it strikes Lala that “as soon as we cross the bridge everything switches to another language. *Toc*, says the light switch in this country, at home it says *click*. *Honk*, say the cars at home, here they say *tan-tan-tan*” (Cisneros 17), followed by a two-page list of other small differences that the child’s mind has discerned: “Every year I cross the border, it’s the same — my mind forgets. But my body always remembers” (18). When she is a small child, Lala does “not have the words for what I want to say. Not in English. Not in Spanish” (60). Throughout the narrative, the young girl marvels at the differences between her two languages — “*El rapto*. I wonder if that means ‘The Rape’” (313) — and eventually learns to inhabit both languages. In the *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* the reader is led to believe that Oscar has a dubious command of the Spanish language, even (or especially) at the moment of his death.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, however, even though he is college-educated and has written a number of books in English, he suffers from a debilitating inability to communicate with others: Oscar sighs, “Everybody, he shook his head, misapprehends me” (Diaz 189). Unable to communicate successfully in any language, the slippage of meaning in Oscar’s disappointed deployment of this malapropism is ironically apt.

An oral, conversational tone pervades both these novels, which utilize a unique form of Spanish-accented English, or Spanglish.<sup>51</sup> The linguistic term “code-switching” refers to the concurrent use of more than one language by multilinguals in oral

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<sup>50</sup>. Even though his Spanish was ironically “good for once” (Diaz 321) in his final plea to his executioners, the Elvis-pompadour sporting henchmen tell him: “Listen, we’ll let you go if you tell us what *fuego* means in English. Fire, he blurted out, unable to stop himself” (322).

<sup>51</sup>. Spanglish results from “incorrectly” introducing English terms into Spanish, and the term (actually “Espanglish”) was first coined by Puerto Rican journalist Salvador Tio in 1954, who said: “I don’t believe in either Latin or bilingualism. Latin is a dead language. Bilingualism, two dead languages” (“Do You”).

conversation. While all languages form and develop through contact with other languages, the difference with Spanglish is that it is formed precisely by breaking the rules of grammar and syntax of both English and Spanish. This disregard for rigor means that Spanglish is usually viewed in derogatory terms. On the one hand, there is a fear on the part of mainstream Americans of what they perceive to be an “invasion” of Spanish in the U.S., while, on the other hand, many Spanish speakers express concern about the watering down—or “tex mex” degeneration—of Spanish. This fear is illustrated in *Caramelo*, when Soledad wonders “how much Spanish” her American-born granddaughters “really understood when they nodded at everything she said, even when it wasn’t appropriate,” and “mumbled in their atrocious *pocho* Spanish with English words minced in” (288, 290). Often viewed as the language of a largely uneducated younger second- or third-generation who cannot speak either language correctly, and therefore resort to a chaotic mish-mash of neither, Spanglish is usually looked upon with disdain.

In response to this perception, literary critic Ilan Stavans has written a *Spanglish Dictionary* suggesting that “Spanglish is more than a way of communication...it’s a way of thinking, a new way of being for us almost 40 million people in the United States” (“Do”). Far from a symptom of degeneration and lack, Spanglish is a “creative style of bilingual communication that accomplishes important cultural and conversational work,” and has been “deliberately claimed as linguistic and cultural patrimony” (Lipsiks 208-209) by writers such as Cisneros and Diaz. Communicating in Spanglish requires a certain amount of “linguistic dexterity” and a “great deal of bilingual competence” which has made it “the basis for a new literary form of production” (Carra 41 my translation).



Yet, it is important to remember that this playful deployment of code-switching is not merely a question of language games. One's affective ties to (and linguistic competency in) each language are not equal, nor are a bilingual person's languages "interchangeable...languages occupy distinct psychic slots and serve separate affective agendas" (Firmat, *Tongue* 162).<sup>52</sup> For a bilingual person, the decision to use one language or the other in a given context is made on the basis of the situation. What is important to remember is that, whether "Spanish or English, the other language and other identity ineluctably run under the chosen main voice" (Castillo 187) in a kind of relational haunting of language.

In both *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Caramelo*, the ghostly presence of Spanish, as the protagonist's other language, is made manifest in the texts. The "rhythms of the two languages rubbing against each other" represents an "exciting and vital potentiality for new poetic expression" (Castillo 11). Both Diaz and Cisneros deliberately employ code-switching techniques for specific purposes. In *Caramelo*, Spanish syntax (and Spanish context) is transposed onto the English language, resulting in awkward and defamiliarizing effects. For example, throughout the text, Cisneros includes too-literal translations of Spanish in order to "emphasize, from the place of English, the omnipresence of" Spanish "in the text, even if in hidden form" (Carra 56, my translation). Stumbling on the unfamiliar syntax, the reader is encouraged to understand that the voice is "speaking Spanish" even if the words themselves are English (Kevane and Heredia 53): for example, the sentences "it's that the wall has fallen [es que se ha

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<sup>52</sup>. Cisneros herself admits that "me hacen falta las palabras en Espanol [I am lacking the words in Spanish]" (Carra 38, my translation).

caido la pared] (60) and “But silk, Innocencio, how exaggerated!” (Pero seda, Inocencio, que exagerado] (38) sound correct in Spanish but not English. One of the effects of this defamiliarization is a sense of alienation on the part of the reader, but another possible effect is an ethical opening up of the reader to a “universe of sensibilities and ways of thinking that are very different to their own” (Carra 45). Indeed, like Oscar’s malapropism mentioned above, when transposed onto English, Spanish syntax often speaks more to the capacity to respond ethically to the situation than either language could: for example, the Little Grandfather suffers an “attack of the heart” (Cisneros 249) while driving on the freeway, a term that—even though incorrect grammatically—captures the essence of the situation better than either the English “heart attack” or the Spanish “ataque cardiaco” can.<sup>53</sup> Cisneros’s technique, therefore, is not merely a question of addressing readers in English-speaking markets; instead, it contributes to Firmat’s observation that in many Latino narratives the reader needs to read “bilingually in seemingly monolingual contexts,” in order to “examine how the absent or lost language shapes the writer’s transactions with his vehicular tongue” (Firmat, *Tongue* 8). Importantly, as Junquera suggests, far from being a symptom of assimilation, even when English “dominates Spanish in the text...Spanish still resists, in the same way that Mexican culture remains in the United States, without being completely erased” (quoted in Carra 38). However, the ethical potential of this defamiliarizing linguistic haunting is in some ways weakened by translation. Cisneros either directly translates most of the

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<sup>53</sup>. Deliberately incorporating Spanish syntax into her writing in this way allows Cisneros to say things that have not been said before and, in her own words, add a “new spice...to the English language” (quoted in Carra 45).

Spanish words she includes in her novel, or at least ensures that the context will illuminate them for the Anglophone reader: “*feo, fuerte y formal*. A man has got to be ugly, strong and proper, he kept repeating to himself in order to keep from buckling under” (129). Holding the reader’s hand, so to speak, Cisneros even italicizes Spanish words, giving readers an obvious visual clue; she also bolds the grandmother’s narrative interruptions in one section of the novel, to differentiate her voice from Lala’s, in effect ‘translating’ the relational narrative for readers. In contrast, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* lacks this translational feel. In fact, Diaz offers readers no translation at all for the Spanish words in his text, which are not italicized but instead flow fluently and unapologetically into the (albeit still predominantly) English sentences: “Listen palomo: you have to grab a muchacha, y méteselo. That will take care of *everything*. Start with a fea. Coje that fea y méteselo!” (24). Nor does he allow the context to necessarily illuminate the meanings, as even the generous footnotes appear to be intended more to give a historical background —“for those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history” (2) — than to translate the cultural or linguistic context to mainstream readers. Especially given the colloquial, hip-hop, urban tone of the narrator, it can be argued that Diaz is, in effect, writing this text *in Spanglish*. The relentlessly fast-paced code-switching in this text proves challenging for the English-speaking reader and certain critics initially labelled *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as “not accessible” for mainstream readers.<sup>54</sup> I would argue that part of Diaz’s originality lies in his apparent refusal to engage in translation for the benefit of monolingual readers. The novel leaves

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<sup>54</sup>. This is yet more evidence to prove that only the experiences of “whites speak for humanity” (L. Gordon 96).

the responsibility with the reader to do their homework while reading the text: in this way, it is not only writing that is an ethical task but also the act of reading itself.<sup>55</sup> Not only does it recapitulates an experience of alienation, bewilderment, or confusion that seems to be the bequest of second generation immigrants caught in between cultures, but it also draws attention to the impossibility of adequate translation in the first place: as Castillo argues, translating “performative utterances into either Spanish or English” distorts “them into meaninglessness” and subjects “them to a kind of linguistic assimilation and erasure” and “speak[s] to the reader only in a very limited sense, since they would inextricably dislocate the doubleness of the language into an unacceptable version of monolingualism” (Castillo 12). Most importantly, the effect of code-switching between English and Spanish on the reader exposes the violence of linguistic imposition, implicitly challenging the ethical tenability of monolingualism within ostensibly multicultural contexts. For example, even though Latinos have the “highest retention rate of their ancestral language of any other group in the United States” (Kanellos 173), English is still the *lingua franca* for daily interactions in the public world: for example, “whereas the rest of the world recognizes that bilingualism is an invaluable comparative advantage in a globalized economy, Spanish skills are treated in U.S. schools, frequently even by Latino educators, as a learning disability” (Davis 139). The English language has certainly not proven itself to be the great equalizer that many proponents of the ‘melting pot’ model of multiculturalism suggested it would. In fact, what these narratives make

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<sup>55</sup>. Diaz expresses his admiration for Toni Morrison, who “is not attempting to translate black American culture for a white audience, she is not a guide, no native informant” (quoted in Esdaille).

clear is the political nature of Spanglish use, as a response to the insistent imperatives to speak English in order to fit in.<sup>56</sup>

Given that the U.S. is the third largest consumer of Spanish-language books sold each year (after Spain and Mexico), Echavez-Solano and Dworkin y Mendez wonder why there is “virtually no dialogue between Latin American writers who write in Spanish and Latino writers who write in English,” and why the “literary spaces” of these two groups of writers remain “distinctly separate” (139). Even though “the literatures of the Americas have been in ‘continuous conversation’ or ‘mutual interrogation’ from the very first postcolonial exchanges” (Castillo 194), not only are the spaces of literary production and reception separate, but there are also clearly unequal power relationship in terms of literary canons and academic departments. Writing in Spanish clearly does not carry the same cultural capital as writing in English does: those who write primarily in Spanish will “never appear, as Junot Diaz did, on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine...will never be invited, as Sandra Cisneros was, to give talks at English Departments or Latino Studies programs” (Echavez-Solano and Dworkin y Mendez 144-145). Mariscal points out that, until very recently, Spanish was not even considered to be a valid language in

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<sup>56</sup>. A backlash against the growing numbers of Spanish speakers in the U.S. is being felt in the adoption of “English only” policies in some schools, which has eliminated the possibility of bilingual education in several states including California and Arizona (Crawford). Recall George W. Bush’s 2006 hypocritical declaration (upon learning of a recording of the Star-Spangled Banner in Spanish) that: “I think the national anthem ought to be sung in English, and I think people who want to be a citizen of this country ought to learn English” (Penketh). In contrast, Obama’s appointment of Sonia Sotomayor as (the first Hispanic and only the third female) Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court appears to signal a change (at least symbolically) in official attitude towards Latinos: in a video posted on *YouTube* after a 2008 campaign event in Georgia, Barack Obama says “Instead of worrying about whether immigrants can learn English — they’ll learn English — you need to make sure your child can speak Spanish” (Barak Obama). But this symbolic commitment to Latino culture has in some cases not yet been translated into concrete actions: Obama is still sending troops to guard the U.S.-Mexico border in the name of national security (Frosch).

Comparative Literature departments: “Writings in Spanish did not emit the same amount of high cultural sheen that French, German and even certain periods of Italian literature exuded for the academy in the United States” (61). Given that this situation has only recently begun to change, Castillo asks us to seriously consider: “What would U.S. literature look like if we included literature from the United States in languages other than English?” (14). What is more, she asks: “What would Latin American literature look like if we understood the United States to be a Latin American country and took seriously the work by U.S. Latino/as with respect to what our departments consider the generally accepted hemispheric canon on Spanish?” (Castillo 14).<sup>57</sup> To these questions I would add: what would young people’s experience of schooling be like under conditions of broad curricular reform around literature and language in the United States? Partly because of Cisneros’s popularity, *Caramelo* is one of the first texts to be released simultaneously in Spanish translation, without having to first become a bestseller in English. *The Brief Wondrous life of Oscar Wao* was also translated into Spanish relatively quickly, even though Diaz is not as well established a writer as Cisneros is. Aside from the obvious commercial interest of publishing houses in accessing vast Spanish-speaking markets by translating such popular texts, these translational efforts might at least in part be read as examples of Apter’s “translational transnationalism,” a term coined by combining Balibar’s “transnationalism” —which is “an activist term, allowing for access, cultural reciprocity” —and “translational,” which is a modifier that “evokes the exchanges that

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<sup>57</sup>. Spanish actually predates English by 400 years in the United States—“English-speaking European immigrants arrived on the East Coast after the Spanish arrived in California and Florida, making Spanish, in a sense, the first language of the United States” (Christie and Gonzalez 48).

occur when languages cross national borders” (quoted in Castillo 190). Both of these (inevitably imperfect) translations took place in close, relational collaboration between author and translator, who each express a wish to evoke similar effects in Spanish-speaking readers that they do in English (Carra; Abejas). However, in *La Breve y Maravillosa Vida de Oscar Wao*, in the instances where English appears within Spanish sentences (which, admittedly, occurs far less frequently than in the original)—for example, “Hoy en dia ando medio nerd. La respuesta fue una fockin avalanche” (6)—the translator has seen fit to include a footnote, in this case explaining the linguistic and cultural meaning of “nerd” to Spanish readers. Perhaps this can be seen as a relational and translational (re)negotiation of Diaz’s self-styled “immigrant vengeance on English” (Larre Borges). It might also be indicative of continuing structural imbalances when it comes to the transnational commercial dynamics of global fiction. Whether or not the novels are equally (in)accessible in English and in Spanish, they do encourage the conversation, in either language or in both, to continue in new ways. Moving well beyond the “safari” approach, *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* dispel popular stereotypes of “junk” Spanish and the Latino *Bildungsroman*, allowing for more complex cross-cultural conversations to occur.

### **Haunting (Post-)Memories, Relational Storytelling, and Decolonial Love**

[W]hat kinds of historical memory enables certain claims and disables others? ... [W]hat is the nature of memory in a transnational or cross-cultural situation?

— David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American* (218; 298)

For crying out loud, Grandmother. If you can't let me do my job and tell this story without your constant interruptions...

**All I wanted was a little understanding, but I see I was asking for too much.**

... And to tell the truth, you're getting in the way of my story.

**Your story? I thought you were telling *my* story?**

Your story is my story. Now please be quiet, Grandmother, or I'll have to ask you to leave.....

—Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo* (172).

In their study of contemporary Latino Literature, Christie and Gonzalez note that one of the differences between first generation Latino immigrant writers and their second-generation counterparts is that they write less of “boats, documents, planes, and the Statue of Liberty and more of memory, nostalgia, family heritage and assorted ghosts of the past” (48). Cisneros herself has said that “if I were asked what it is I write about...I would have to say I write about those ghosts inside that haunt me, that will not let me sleep, of that which even memory does not like to mention” (quoted in Caulfield and Davis 73). Diaz recalls how he was affected by the silences surrounding the dictator Trujillo as he was growing up: “not only did we hear stories about him, but we *didn't* hear stories about him” (“Writers”). Referring to *Oscar Wao*, Diaz says that, because in the Caribbean, “ninety-five percent of who we are has been evaporated due to historical trauma,” he set out to “write a novel where inside it was a secret book stitched together of all the silences” (quoted in Ch'ien). Both novels open up silences in new ways, making the ghostly presence of the forgotten past apparent through devices that foreground an intergenerational transmission of affect. The idea of affective transmission suggests that the emotions or energies of one individual or group can be unconsciously absorbed by, or passed along to, another. Challenging the Oedipal “foundational fantasy” of subject formation, which “explains how it is that we come to think of ourselves as separate from others” In contrast to what Theresa Brennan calls the uniquely modern, Western myth of individual self-containment, she argues that the “transmission of affect” means that “we



are not affectively self-contained in terms of our energies...there is no secure distinction between the 'individual' and the 'environment'" (14, 6). This notion of (ongoing, continual) affective transmission offers a nuanced way of thinking about the working of family dynamics; the difference here is that while psychoanalytic models focus on the relationship between affect and physical environments (through proximity and the senses, for example), the "atmosphere" or "impression" that is being transmitted in these novels is historical and inherited. Expanding upon the transmission of affect to include a transmission of memory, both novels use the trope of looking at family photographs to explore "post-memory," a term Marianne Hirsch uses to describe the "relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" ("Generation" 103). The traumatic experiences that preceded the protagonist's birth continue to shape lived experience and relationships, refusing to be consigned to the past in their ongoing effects.

These novels are also relational narratives, literally employing multiple—and in some cases conflicting—narrative voices in order to foreground constitutive relationality and exposing the plurality of the self: the lack of a unitary "I" calls the idea of the individual as self-contained into question. Furthermore, by drawing attention to the intergenerational inheritance of the *fukú* as curse in *Oscar Wao* and the inheritance of gender injustice in *Caramelo*, Diaz and Cisneros playfully and critically engage genres such as the fairy tale and sci-fi/fantasy in order to re-read and contest dominant historical narratives, at the same time underscoring the need to find new ways to tell

familiar stories in order to disrupt harmful patterns. For example, the recurring figure of the *rebozo* in *Caramelo* — the traditional embroidered silk shawl that acts as a common thread that weaves through the novel linking multiple generations of women — draws attention to the interconnected and relational nature of storytelling. As examples of cross-cultural identity formation, these novels participate in the development of border epistemologies. Finally, by bringing a reconceptualised sense of relationality to the fore, these novels pull love out from the private/subjective familial realm, and into a more expansive vision of what Chela Sandoval calls “decolonial love”: relational ethics as an opening onto the world.

These novels foreground the relationship between narrative, spectrality and ethical responsiveness when it comes to history and memory.<sup>58</sup> In *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon explores the cultural experience of haunting as a “social phenomenon” where the past continues to haunt the present in unexpected ways: “that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence...the ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost or barely visible...makes itself known or apparent to us” (8). Haunting as a “social phenomenon” plays a formative role in the process of the narrator’s coming-of-age in these novels, where young protagonists confront family photographs as catalysts

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<sup>58</sup>. Theoretical engagement with the ghostly as a call to ethics include Jacques Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1994), where—aside from alluding to the ghostly excluded meaning that haunts all texts, as that which is excluded in order to shape a coherent meaning yet nevertheless hovers about the margins of the text—he makes an attempt to revive the ethical “spirit” of Marxism in the face of “end of history” cynicism; Pheng Cheah’s *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (2003), where he engages Derrida’s work on spectrality to argue that “the most apposite metaphor for freedom today is not the organism but the haunted nation” in his examination of the future of “postcolonial nationalism” (12); and Roger Simon’s *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning and Ethics* (2005), where he looks at how historically traumatic events uniquely summon forgetting and remembrance by communities who struggle with “difficult histories.”

for coming to terms with the mysteries of the past; as tangible physical objects that are available for all to see, photographs are at the same time tied to intangible memories (and non-memories) for those with personal connections to them. As “ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world” Hirsch argues that family photographs “enable us, in the present, not only to see and to touch that past but also to try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic ‘take’” (“Generation” 115).<sup>59</sup> As a particular form of memory, “post-memory” offers a connection to an “object or source” that is “mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation” (*Family* 22). The imaginative investment and creation of post-memory, like the transmission of affect—“even if I am picking up on your affect...the thoughts that I attach to that affect, remain my own: they remain the product of the particular historical conjunction of words and experiences I represent” (Brennan 7)—exposes the myth of self-containment, and proves to be a matter of relational re-negotiation.

“We’re all little in the photograph above Father’s bed” is the first line of the novel *Caramelo* (3). The opening passages of the text describe a photo taken on family vacation at the beach in Acapulco, and the trope of the family photograph recurs throughout the novel, presenting Lala with a mystery:

I’m not here. They’ve forgotten about me when the photographer walking along the beach proposes a portrait, *un recuerdo*, a remembrance literally....Then everyone realizes the portrait is incomplete. It’s as if I didn’t exist. It’s as if I’m the photographer walking along the beach with the tripod camera on my shoulder asking, —¿*un recuerdo?* A souvenir? A memory? (4)

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<sup>59</sup>. In her classic *On Photography*, Susan Sontag suggests that “that claustrophobic unit, the nuclear family, was being carved out of a much larger family aggregate” just as “photography came along to memorialize” it (9).

“[N]ot in a photograph in which she was supposed to be” (A. Gordon 27), the narrator creatively and imaginatively invests the photo with meaning. Despite her young age, the transmission of affect that occurs between the narrator and her mother on the family trip to Acapulco sharpens only as she matures and begins to question her connection to others. Later in the novel, when her mother finally tells her the truth about the events of that trip while her father lies in his hospital bed, Lala “remembers” something traumatic that she never officially knew. Her father’s squint in the photograph, her own squint, is linked to her memory of Candelaria on the beach in Acapulco: “When she turns her head squinting that squint, it’s then I know. Without knowing I know” (78). The other recurring photographic image in the text is the sepia image of Lala’s Little Grandfather, “Artistic photography, the achievement of the century,” taken on a whim at the circus that Narciso attends with his elusive lover Exaltación Henestrosa (175). In the years that follow, the photo surfaces repeatedly. Half of the photo has been torn away, but what is left shows Narciso’s “head tilted toward a ghost” (179). The absent presence of the figure that has been ripped out of the photo haunts Narciso—and Soledad—unto death. Like the family photograph taken in Acapulco, the repetition of this mysterious image draws attention to the way that memories can be transmitted silently through the generations. Paradoxically, Lala says that “We’re all little” in the photograph at the beach, while at the same time she admits, “I’m not there” (4). As one of seven children — “I could never draw myself without drawing the others” (393) —part of Lala’s coming-of-age is learning to negotiate relationality: “It’s as if I’m the photographer walking along the beach with the tripod camera on my shoulder asking, —¿un recuerdo? A souvenir? A memory?” (4). Perhaps

in a way the story that Celaya spins, the novel itself, is like a memory-capturing set of snapshots. More than an individual tale of incorporation into the protagonist's social realm, here the process of coming-of-age is highlighted as an intersubjective renegotiation of memory.

In the middle sections of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* we learn that the first few years of the protagonist's mother Belicia's life are lost in a fog of loneliness and desolation: "a loneliness that obliterated all memory, the loneliness of a childhood where she's not even had her own name...forever, alone, black, fea, scratching at the dust with a stick, pretending that the scribble was words, letters, names" (148). A distant relative called "La Inca" rescues her, restores her name, and becomes her "madre." By refusing to even acknowledge those traumatic first years of her life, however, La Inca encourages Beli to relegate them to the silence of forgetting: "Instead of talking about the Burning, or Outer Azua, La Inca talked to Beli about her lost, forgotten past, about her father, the famous doctor, about her mother, the beautiful nurse, about her sisters Jackie and Astrid, and about that marvelous castle in the Cibao: Casa Hatüey" (260). In other words, instead of providing Beli with her family history she feeds her a fairy tale. Despite this encouragement to forget, however, La Inca at the same time gives Beli "the greatest of gifts, which she would appreciate only much later; one night La Inca produced an old newspaper, pointed to a fotograph: This, she said, is your father and mother. This, she said, is who you are" (260). La Inca tries to overwrite Beli's traumatic past by overlaying on a photograph fabricated memories of the glorious past of her parents. The idiosyncratic spelling of the word "fotograph" is important here, as an amalgam of the Spanish "foto"

and the English “photograph.” With La Inca’s help, Beli is encouraged to take what she can from her family’s past and make up the rest in a self-conscious act of creolization: “she embraced the amnesia that was so common throughout the islands, five parts denial, five parts negative hallucination. Embraced the power of the Untilles [sic]. And from it, forged herself anew” (259). Beli is scarred for life from the burns that she suffers, both emotionally and physically, but in overwriting her past in order to create her own future she is still capable of regeneration and creativity. As Y-Dang Troeung suggests, despite the fact that “forgetting is, for the most part, seen as complicit with hegemonic forms of power,” perhaps it is sometimes necessary to forget “when remembering threatens to re-injure” (“Forgetting”). The “value of forgetting” is echoed in my discussion of *Soucouyant* in Chapter 2, where the scars on Adele’s body insistently haunt the forgetting of her dementia: both first-generation Caribbean mothers, after having immigrated to North America, develop cancer and dementia and are dead by the end of the novels, highlighting the “costs of remembering for the individual” (Troeung, “Forgetting”).<sup>60</sup> Haunted by the diasporic histories of their parents, the second-generation protagonists in these novels must find ways to ethically heed the spectral apparitions of these pasts: “What is at stake in allowing a space for forgetting is not only the psychic survival of those who have suffered atrocity firsthand, but also of those in the postmemorial generation who perhaps feel most acutely that it would be a failure to forget” (“Forgetting”). Avery Gordon suggests that persistent haunting draws attention to the “need for the dead to be remembered and accommodated” (179), suggesting that

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<sup>60</sup>. Their inability to survive perhaps also reflects the atrophied nature of family life in North America in contrast to an extensive network of familial relations in Caribbean and Latin American contexts.

“ultimately haunting is about how to transform a shadow of a life into an undiminished life whose shadows touch softly in the spirit of a peaceful reconciliation” (208).

The process of coming-of-age for the second-generation protagonists in *Oscar Wao* and *Caramelo* involves travelling to their parents’ homeland in order to somehow come to a “peaceful reconciliation” with the past, the present, and, ultimately the future. This literal and figurative journey south to the primal “underworld,” the land of the past and of the unconscious, is a common trope in Latino literature: “A character, seeking to belong to two worlds at once, journeys south in an attempt to retrieve a part of the self that has been displaced or lost...The character dives into the past to redirect his or her future” (Christie and Gonzalez 50). Beli sends her daughter Lola to the Dominican Republic as an adolescent, in a desperate attempt to control her “wild” ways. In the first section of the novel, narrated by Yunió but from Oscar’s point of view, Lola’s “crazy years” (24) are only mentioned in passing. In the next section of the novel, however, some of the blanks of her experience of puberty are filled in for us by Yunió, as he addresses Lola directly in second-person voice: “You change too. Not right away, but it happens. And it’s in that bathroom where it all begins. Where you begin” (54).<sup>61</sup> The “door” that opens that day leads to a series of events that culminate with her trip to live in Santo Domingo. Like her mother Beli before her, Lola is sent by La Inca to a private school where (again, like her mother) she learns the ins and outs of class, race, and

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<sup>61</sup>. For the girls in these novels, coming-of-age is a physical and emotional process marking dramatic change. Lola describes the “witchy” feelings that begin at puberty, which also coincide with the discovery of her mother’s breast cancer as a “wildness that had been in me all along...it was a message more than a feeling, a message that tolled like a bell: change, change, change” (Diaz 58). In contrast, the “Pilon” of *Caramelo* seems to register more nostalgia than celebration of lost childhood: “a time I couldn’t remember...In this case, I’d forgotten a mood. Not a mood — a state of being to be more precise...I mean the me I was before puberty, that red Rio Bravo you have to carry yourself over” (Cisneros 433).

belonging —“You ain’t so great, are you, Gringa”— as well as the power of her own sexuality, which she comes to recognize as a “tesoro” [treasure] rather than a liability (74, 73). As she did for her mother Belicia, La Inca shares family photographs with Lola: “Old photos, the kind I’d never seen in my house...of my mother when she was young and of course other people” (75):

She plucked out one photo. This is your mother’s father, she offered me the photo. He was my cousin, and ---  
She was about to say something else and then she stopped.  
And that’s when it hit with the force of a hurricane. The *feeling*. I stood straight up, the way my mother always wanted me to stand up. My abuela was sitting there, forlorn, trying to cobble together the right words and I could not move or breathe...She was about to say something and I was waiting for whatever she was going to tell me. I was waiting to begin. (75)

Like the preconscious transmission of affect that allows Lala to “remember” information that was never shared with her when looking at the photograph taken in Acapulco, Lola’s “witchy” feelings of hauntedness while looking at this photo reflects what Sontag calls a disturbing “memento mori” (15) and, as a reminder of her own mortality, makes her recognize the importance of coming to terms with the connection between her mother’s past and her own future.

For Hirsch, whose understanding of “post-memory” developed in connection to the Jewish Holocaust, the power of this kind of memory is a question of the power of trauma to cross generations. In these novels, not only do affect and memory filter down through family photographs, but traumatic experiences themselves tend to be repeated inter-generationally. For example, in *Oscar Wao* there is an inheritance of physical as well as emotional landscapes, drawing attention to the continuity of unequal power dynamics even in contexts of relocation: *Fukú* or not, there is an eerie similarity between



Beli's near-death canefield beating and Oscar's "beating to end all beatings....Where did they take him? Where else. The canefields. How's that for eternal return?" (298, 296). During Oscar's beating "this world seemed strangely familiar to him; he had the overwhelming feeling he's been in this very place, a long time ago. It was worse than déjà vu..." (299). The literal embodiment of such non-memory memories also marks the canefields as a topography closely tied to the history of forced labour and the brutality of slavery. Private repetitions of family history thus points toward public history and collective trauma. La Inca and Beli join hands in silence when they learn about this repetition: "If they noticed the similarities between Past and Present they did not speak of it" (301). The personal, familial and cultural silences that surround these violent inheritances are what the narrative vision of the novel attempts to overcome.

The relational workings of post-memory suggest that "our memory is never fully ours" (Hirsch, *Family* 14). The illusion of individual self-containment is challenged by the narratives of photographic haunting in both of these texts. Photographs are at once private and public, and like the historical footnotes that connect public history to private family stories in these novels, the repeated appearance of mysterious family photographs draws attention to the relationship between the familial network and public history: departing from the nuclear family model, the idea of familial networks hints at an expanded community of others. Hirsch suggests that post-memory is a "diasporic aesthetics of temporal and spatial exile that needs simultaneously to (re)build and to mourn" (245). In each case, the photographs represent a mystery or puzzle, and the protagonists must revisit their families' past in order to come to terms with their own

present and, by extension, their future. No matter how unique second generation experiences are in new socio-cultural, historical and geographical contexts, there is still a relational history that must be acknowledged: “most of us are like Oscar and his family in that we don’t believe that history has any hold on us, and yet it’s quite clear we are the children of history” (quoted in Ali). Diaz’s narrator muses that whether or not you believe in the *fukú*, “the *fukú* believes in you” (Diaz 5). By the end of the novel, Oscar has realized this: “It’s the curse that made me do it you know. I don’t believe in that shit, Oscar. That’s our parent’s shit. It’s ours too, he said” (Diaz 194): “Santo Domingo might be *fukú*’s Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not” (Diaz 2). In recognizing this connection to his family’s cultural past, Oscar refuses to forget like his mother does: “Beli’s house was new and crisp, had no history at all attached to it” (87).<sup>62</sup> While Belicia looks exclusively to the future at the expense of the past, her children are haunted by this past that has been transmitted to them wordlessly. Even though the past is not recuperable, and returns ‘home’ are impossible, the protagonists of both novels are compelled to “Return to a Nativeland” (Diaz 272), Mexico and the Dominican Republic, in order to reconstruct their place within the present.

Just as the complex workings of post-memory suggest that memory is not a strictly individual affair, neither are the stories we tell (about) ourselves a matter of individual self-narration. Both novels perform a literal enactment of what Cavarero calls

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<sup>62</sup>. “What did she know about her family except the stories she was told ad nauseum? And ultimately, what did she care? She wasn’t a *maldita cigüapa*, with her feet pointing backward in the past. Her feet pointed forward, she reminded La Inca over and over. Pointed to the future” (81).

“relational narratives.” *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* moves through generations, between gendered points of view, and across national boundaries, while the tale being told by the young US-born narrator of *Caramelo* is constantly being interrupted and contradicted by the voice of her Mexican grandmother, Soledad. As I explored in my introductory analysis of *What is the What*, Cavarero suggests that the “who” that someone is can only be “known” “through the narration of the life-story of which that person is the protagonist” performed by another person (viii). Diaz’s text opens with the voice of an unknown narrator, who we slowly come to know as Yunior, sometime boyfriend of Lola and roommate and a strange double for Oscar: Yunior is a writer like Oscar, but the narrative implies he has been able to suppress his “ghetto nerd” tendencies in order to become the “player” that his culture dictates he should be as a Dominican male. At some points the narrative shifts to Lola’s more personal first-person voice, but mostly it is told by Yunior. There are suggestions throughout that Yunior has stitched together the stories through interviews with La Inca—“I got it here on tape” (160)— through his intimate discussions with (and perhaps letters from) Lola, and by looking through the family photographs kept by La Inca in order to piece together the family’s history. In an interview, Diaz comments on his decision to have Yunior narrate Oscar’s story: “That’s usually the way it works in catastrophes,” the survivors that are left to tell the tale are not blood-related (“Writers”). Challenging essentialist logics of victimhood, this notion of relational witnessing potentially expands our sense of responsibility for speaking to and about catastrophe. Functioning as witness, Yunior is one-step removed from the de León family: he is tied to the Dominican Republic through his own family history, yet he is

also an outsider. Yuniór often refers to himself as the “Watcher,” a sci-fi reference to *The Watchmen* series, who is sent to earth to observe and witness—but not to interfere with—the goings on of earthly beings. In the relational narrative, because “each of us is ...dependant upon the other for the narration of our own life-story, which begins from birth,” the story, told by a witness, “reveals the meaning of what otherwise remains an intolerable sequence of events” (Cavarero ix, 2). In this sense, the telling of the story is caught up in ethical complexities. Because of his own investment in the culture of machismo that excludes Oscar, Yuniór’s is a rather complex narrating voice: he is haunted by guilt about his own behaviour toward both Oscar and Lola, yet his own value system does not line up neatly with Oscar’s or Lola’s.

Cavarero argues that “the unifying meaning of the story, can only be posed by the one who lives it, in the form of a question” or a “desire” (2). This “question” is clear in Soledad’s ghostly plea to her granddaughter in *Caramelo*. Revealing herself to be caught in the borderlands in death much as much as she was in (post-immigration) life, Soledad pleads with her granddaughter:

Help me, Celaya, you’ll help me to cross over, won’t you?  
 —Like a coyote who smuggles you over the border?  
 —Well, in a manner of speaking, I suppose.  
 —Can’t you get somebody else to carry you across?  
 —But who? You’re the only one who can see me... You’ll tell my story, won’t you Celaya? So that I’ll be understood? So that I’ll be forgiven? (408)

The reader then realizes that the previous section of the novel, which takes place before Lala’s birth —“When I was Dirt”— is in fact an imaginative reconstruction of her grandmother’s life in response to this plea. Lala’s retelling of her grandmother’s story can thus be viewed as an empathetic act: “The less you tell me, the more I’ll have to imagine.

And the more I imagine, the easier it is for me to understand you” (205). Lala’s grandmother recognizes the intergenerational transmission of affect, especially when it comes to gender issues, which is figured specifically as a haunting: “Me? Haunting you? It’s you, Celaya, who’s haunting me. I can’t bear it. Why do you insist on repeating my life?” (406). Appearing before her as a ghost and interrupting her granddaughter’s life with her plea for empathy, Soledad simultaneously acts as a catalyst for Lala’s coming-of-age and for her burgeoning feminist consciousness. The grandmother figures as a witness who prompts Lala to view her own life differently, suggesting that empathy and self-transformation are closely interwoven in a reciprocal relationship. Soledad chastises her granddaughter: “That’s what comes of being raised in the United States. *Sin memoria y sin vergüenza*,” to which Lala responds: “You’re mistaken. I too have shame. That’s how I know where the stories are” (Cisneros 205). Here Cisneros is playing with two linguistic senses of shame/*vergüenza*. In Spanish, *vergüenza* means shame, embarrassment, humiliation, and dishonor; but in English, along with these other meanings, shame can also be linked to guilt, regret or even pity, which has a specifically ethical element in its implicit concern for others. In searching out these hidden stories against her grandmother’s wishes, yet in response to her grandmother’s plea for empathy, the narrator is performing a difficult task. The Awful Grandmother is a contradictory figure; as both fictionalized and a product of memory, these contradictions are borne out of Lala’s (un)conscious struggles with familial and public histories. In order to fulfill her role as dutiful daughter, Lala is expected to keep silent about the “shameful” or undignified aspects of the family’s past. According to her father, being “digna” means

remaining silent even if that silence is harmful: “there are stories no one is willing to tell you. And there are stories you’re not willing to tell...we’re so Mexican. So much left unsaid” (Cisneros 428). The final words of the novel are “I promise,” words spoken by Lala to her sick father swearing that she will not tell “undignified” tales about her family. But the novel itself, as a recovery of unspoken relational histories, is testament that she has in a sense broken this promise. However, drawing attention to the relationship between responsibility, storytelling and fictionalization in relational narratives, by telling her own version of the (previously male) “healthy lie” she is, in fact, promising to redefine what dignified means from a woman-centered perspective. Similarly, the negative and gendered connotations attached to being a storyteller throughout the narrative — *metiche*, *mirona*, *Mitotera*, *hocicon* (busybody, ogler, liar/gossip/troublemaker) — are reversed, and the storyteller instead becomes a *curandera* or healer, reweaving the strings of the unfinished *rebozo*: “Maybe it’s my job to separate the strands and knot the words together for everyone who can’t say them, and make it all right in the end” (428).

This relational vision of storytelling as healing is connected to the central metaphor of the *caramelo rebozo* in Cisneros’s text which, like Diaz’s *fukú* metaphor, represents a specifically transatlantic object: “The *rebozo* was born in Mexico, but like all *mestizos*, it came from everywhere. It evolved from the cloths Indian women used to carry their babies, borrowed its knotted fringe from Spanish shawls, and was influenced by the silk embroideries from the imperial court of China exported to Manila, then Acapulco, via the Spanish galleons” (Cisneros 96). Also like the *fukú*, as a

transgenerational inheritance the *rebozo* is deeply relational: “it was as if all the mothers and daughters were at work, all one thread interlocking and double-looping, each woman learning from the woman before, but adding a flourish that became her signature, then passing it on” (Cisneros 93). Lala’s great-grandmother dies when she is still very young, leaving the pattern unfinished, and leaving no one to “interpret the language of the *rebozo* to Soledad” (105). Adolescent Lala runs away to Mexico, and it is there that she becomes aware of the relationality signified by the interwoven strings of the *rebozo*:

The universe a cloth, and all humanity interwoven. Each and every person connected to me, and me connected to them, like the strands of a *rebozo*. Pull one string and the whole thing comes undone. Each person who comes into my life affecting the pattern, and me affecting theirs. (389)

It is only later on, after she has agreed to tell her grandmother’s story, that she gradually realizes the link between herself and her grandmother: “It hits me at once, the terrible truth of it. I am the Awful Grandmother” (424). The *rebozo* represents both unfinished pasts and possible futures: “The past, *el pasado*. *El porvenir*, the days to come” all swirl “together like the stripes of a *chuchuluco*” (254). As she comes of age, Lala eventually gains the independence to lend the *rebozo* that she has inherited from her grandmother her own personal meanings: for example, the embroidered cloth plays a role in her sexual awakening in Mexico City— “I unpack the *caramelo rebozo* and drape Ernesto in it” (382)— as well as in the celebration that occurs at end of the narrative: “I found a dress that doesn’t make me look too freaky...it’s cocktail length, but I dressed it up with the Grandmother’s *caramelo rebozo*” (417).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>. Staged as a quasi *cumpleaños de quince* (a Latino coming out party for girls), the party at the end of the narrative celebrates her parents anniversary as well as Lala’s coming-of-age.

Both *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* illustrate how the “multivalent pasts as well as the ongoing effects of historical trauma have channelled across generations through a process of socialization and storytelling” (Sandin and Perez 9). In both of these novels, the mystery of the past is resolved “in the process of recovery,” and “the dead seem less dead in the act of storytelling” (Ch’ien). However, far from providing a neat resolution, the waking of the dead also suggests a kind of unsettling that complicates a straightforward narrative of recovery. Telling another person’s life story in relational narratives is an ethical act of reconstruction that, in a sense, brings back the dead, but in order to allow for them to speak another kind of truth. While the Awful Grandmother returns to haunt her granddaughter, Yunior is conducting a veritable séance for the dead Oscar Wao in the writing of his story. Yet, at the same time, telling tales about others leads to fundamental questions about experience and authenticity: In what ways are Yunior and Celaya licensed to tell these tales about others, and what does this suggest about the possibility of a truthful account in relational narratives? It is clear that they each have their own agendas in the telling, and are far from ‘reliable’ as far as narrators go: “if you’re looking for a full story, I don’t have it” (Diaz 243). A reliable, “full story” cannot even be guaranteed by those who speak to their own experiences and re-constructed memories. In a second-person voice “Note From Your Author,” Yunior blurs the fine line between truth and fiction by anticipating the reader’s suspicions about authenticity: “I know I’ve thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi into the mix... This is your chance. If blue pill, continue. If red pill, return to the Matrix” (285). Similarly, the subtitle



of Cisneros's text is *puro cuento*, or "nothing but story," and she precedes her tale with the following disclaimer:

The truth, these stories are nothing but story... I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies. If, in the course of my inventing, I have inadvertently stumbled on the truth, *perdonenme*....To write is to ask questions. It doesn't matter if the answers are true or *puro cuento*.

As embroidered with healthy lies, the stories we tell are both dangerous and necessary: they are both a risky endeavour, stemming from the imperative to impose narrative closure, and an enabling and necessary fiction. It is not only a question of what kinds of stories are told, but the ways in which they are told, and to what ends. Throughout this semi-autobiographical coming-of-age narrative, Cisneros ironically plays with the idea that stories are not true (or at least, not entirely true), drawing and re-drawing the line between truth and fiction. Lala nags her father to tell her more stories from his past, eliciting the reply: "I keep telling you, they're not *cuentos*, Lala, they're true. They're *historias*. What's the difference between a '*un cuento*' and '*una historia*'? Ah! ...now that's a different kind of lie" (246). In drawing attention to the blurred boundary between truth and fiction, these narratives highlight the need to address the presumed objective truth of both history and memory; they also suggest the need to find a balance between stories as "healthy lies" and stories as dangerous claims to coherence, because "life is always more astounding than anyone's imagination" (Cisneros 126). Nearing the end of her life, Soledad begins to "doubt what she'd actually seen and what she'd embroidered over time, because after a while the embroidery seems real and the real seems embroidery" (135). The *rebozo* motif of embroidery, as a creative, life-giving

embellishment of fact, is transformed (in the process of the Reyes family's relocation to the U.S. side of the border) into the motif of upholstery.<sup>64</sup> As a metaphor, upholstery differs from embroidery in that there is an element of re-covery, of making something new while simultaneously covering something old: disguising while at the same time creating. The fact that the upholstery motif first appears on "this side" of the border, as a kind of antithesis to the weaving of the *rebozo*, attests to the necessity of developing new strategies for storytelling in the dislocation of immigration. In the narrative, Lala's role of storyteller is compared with the role of "coyote," suggesting that there is a certain amount of inventiveness and cunning involved in helping her grandmother cross over to the other side.<sup>65</sup>

The stories we tell ourselves are useful, necessary and, like stereotypes, have both "seductive and simplifying potential" (Castillo 13). In order to question and re-write the seductive and simplifying potential of popular stories, Cisneros and Diaz both engage in a critical reappraisal of fairy tales as ways of working out relations, stories which (especially when combined with gender hypocrisy) can be a dangerous combination for little girls. In *Caramelo* especially, these self-conscious references abound: on her father's side, Lala comes from a long line of Reyes de Castillo (Kings of the castle), and her mother's last name is Reyna (Queen); there are countless references to fairy tales

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<sup>64</sup>. "Uncle Old" is the first upholsterer in the Reyes family, and even though Narciso's attempt to learn the trade during his stay in the U.S. fails, he paves the way for all three of his sons to later become upholsterers.

<sup>65</sup>. Aside from the direct reference to people who reap economic benefits from the illegal crossing of migrants over the Mexico/U.S. border, the ingenious and healing power of coyote as trickster figure is important in Southwestern U.S. Native American and Chicano/a folklore. Sometimes viewed as a mediator between life and death, Coyote represents a rather subversive figure who, not unlike the trickster of Northern First Nations cultures, functions as a kind of educator and healer.

(such as Cinderella and Rumpelstiltskin) and the even the moniker “Awful Grandmother” —for Soledad, who hails of the “Kingdom of Kitchen” (167)—sounds suspiciously like “Evil Stepmother.” No longer her father’s little “princesa,” an important part of Lala’s coming of age is learning how negotiate the contradiction between the fantasy of girls as princesses versus the stark reality of the treatment of women in real life, especially within the realm of the family.<sup>66</sup> In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the family *fukú* hurtles Beli from her fairy tale world of privilege into a life of utter slavery, banned to the “wasteland” of “Outer Azua” (Diaz 256). Like a character in one of Oscar’s fantasy books, the “orphan” (253) becomes a “criada” (literally, a slave) and is cruelly burned with hot oil and locked in a chicken coop until La Inca rescues her and makes repeated failed attempts to return her to her rightful place of royalty. As an adolescent, Beli spins a romantic fairy tale world purely in her imagination, waiting to be swept off her feet by her Prince Charming, Jack Pujols: “She wasn’t the only girl dreaming this. This jirirongza was in the air, it was the dreamshit that they fed girls day and night” (87).<sup>67</sup> Yuniors cynical denigration of romantic love as “dreamshit” exposes it as a fantasy targeting Latina girls, specifically. Love in these novels is explored in its most hypocritical and dangerous forms: Beli is such a “loca for love” that it “almost killed her”

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<sup>66</sup>. In *Once Upon a Quinceañera*, Alvarez says that “we are crowning them princesses and meanwhile the statistics are showing a large number of our young girls headed for poverty and failure” (6).

<sup>67</sup>. Of course, she does not hinge her future happiness on falling in love with just anyone:

Jack Pujols is the school’s handsomest (read: whitest) boy, a haughty slender melniboién of pure European stock whose cheeks looked like they’d been knapped by a master and whose skin was unflawed by scar, mole, blemish, or hair...he had the physical swagger of a boy twice his size and an unbearable loudmouthed cockiness that he drove into people like a metal spur...he was proof positive that God...does not love his children equally. (Diaz 89-90)

A veritable personification of white supremacy, Beli’s infatuation with him at least in apart fed by what Diaz calls “people-of-color self-hate”: “if she’d been interested in the niggers in the barrio” it would be one thing, but “Beli at thirteen only had eyes for the Jack Pujolses of the world” (88).

(Diaz 45), and Oscar literally dies over his love for Ybon. This element of dangerous love is also echoed in *Caramelo*, with many descriptions of “how Mexicans love” (57), and particularly of how Mexican women love: “That’s how we are, we *mexicanas*, *puro coraje y passion*.... We love like we hate. Backward and forward, past present, future. With our heart and soul and our *tripas* too” (274-5).<sup>68</sup> Mexican men, on the other hand, repeatedly “take women’s love for granted” (202). Like the little “Mexican pillows embroidered with Mexican *piropos*, sugary as any *chuchuluco*” (45)—at least as far as Mexican men are concerned — love is embroidered with what Lala’s Little Grandfather calls “healthy lies” which “sometimes we have to tell so that there won’t be trouble” (56). The Reyes men’s penchant for these lies, which are in fact far from being healthy for the women in their lives, confuses Lala. She finds herself continually torn between her “Father’s story” and her “Mother’s history” (Cisneros 310). The fantasy of romantic love, fuelled by fairy tales and *telenovelas*, is really not “healthy” at all. What this narrative exposes is that such fantasies in fact trap women into place and silence them. The flip-side of the oft-repeated mantra in *Caramelo* that men are to be “*feo, fuerte y formal*” is that women must be silent, obedient and accepting of their husband’s unfaithfulness. Similarly, from the Prince Charming to the “Gangster,” Beli’s choice of prototypical love objects corresponds to common myths fed to girls about boys. Yet even after nearly being beaten to death on account of love, Beli is still “big on dreams of rescue” (Diaz 164).

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<sup>68</sup>. Aunt Licha’s histrionics at the discovery of her husband’s unfaithfulness are easily explained: “It’s that she’s from over there, Mother continues, meaning from the Mexican side, and not this side. — Mexican women are just like the Mexican songs, *locas* for love” (11).

The familial narratives in these texts feature gender hypocrisy in the realm of the family, and conflicted mother-daughter relationships loom large in both novels. In *Caramelo*, Lala's mother is so harried with her seven *hijos* (which in Spanish means both "sons" and "children") that Lala, as the youngest and the only girl, feels invisible: "All you ever worry about is your boys" (Cisneros 365).<sup>69</sup> In *The Brief Wondrous life of Oscar Wao* Lola and her mother share an explosive and ambivalent relationship of physical and emotional abuse. Far from a safe, protected place for girls, the family turns out to be a site of conflict and, worse, dangerous silence: when Lola is raped by a neighbour at eight years old, her mother's first reaction is to tell her to shut her mouth "and stop crying" (Diaz 56). As she comes of age, Lola disappointedly questions her mother: "And this is how you treat your daughter?" (55). Similarly, in *Caramelo* Soledad lavishes attention on her first-born son, Inocencio, at the expense of her other children. Echoing Lola's defiant question, Lala's Aunt Light-Skin asks "what kind of mother tells her child she hates her?" (Cisneros 240), and wonders whether love is "too much to ask one's mother" (262).

Both of these novels draw attention to the urgent need to read history from a feminist perspective—to, as bell hooks put it, view "feminism as a persistent critique of history" (quoted in Stevens 34). Echoing black feminist critiques, here there is a sense of "loyalty" to race over gender in Chicano discourse, which has "not only liberated" Latina writers, "but also gagged and disempowered many of" them by "glossing over their ethnic and cultural distinctions," and containing "ethnic pluralities within brown masculinities"

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<sup>69</sup>. The linguistically generic "son/child" is linked to a cultural male bias in the novel: "There is nothing Mexican men revere more than their mamas; they are the most devoted of sons, perhaps because their mamas are the most devoted of mamas...when it comes to their boys" (Cisneros 128).

(Dernersesian 270-272). Cisneros's text in particular echoes the critique by 1970s Chicana feminists who point to concerns about sex, marriage, and religion that Chicano men did not address (Pratt 861). In both texts, the critique of familial history is, at the same time, a critique of gender. Like the figure of Malinche, who has been invoked by Chicana writers "as a vital, resonant site through which to respond to androcentric ethno-nationalism and to claim a gendered oppositional identity and history" (Pratt 861), these texts urge us to re-read images of female strength.<sup>70</sup> Diaz's text encourages readers to re-read female figures as more than victims or foils for men, but as strong, powerful agents capable of change: following the "summer of her Secondary Sex Characteristics" (91), Beli trades in socially-induced feelings of shame for a feeling of "power and a true sense of self" (94). Viva's advice to Lala—"You're the author of the telenovela of your life. You want a comedy or a tragedy?...Choose. I believe in destiny as much as you do, but sometimes you've gotta help your destiny along" (Cisneros 345)—counters fairy tale passivity and links female agency to storytelling and creative self-narration.

The unhealthy lies of the fantasy of romantic love are challenged by the "healthy lies" of relational storytelling. Both of these novels suggest that love, especially in its fairy tale romantic and selfish filial forms, can be dangerous. It is no coincidence that the

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<sup>70</sup>. In Diaz's text, there is a repeated apparition of a mystical mongoose who lures Beli back to life and guides her out of the cane (149), and later does the same for Oscar on two occasions (190; 301). Introduced into the Caribbean from India by sugar cane farmers to eradicate the cane rat, the mongoose can be read as a subversive symbol because of their capacity to hunt snakes, as a challenge to corrupt power: "the mongoose has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains and hierarchies" (f.151). In this text the mongoose is also a symbol of female powers of survival in a male-dominated world: La Inca has "a mind like a mongoose" (57), Beli takes to "La Inca's civilizing procedures like a mongoose to chicken" (259) and Lola later discovers the dangerous power of her own sexuality, using her desirability to extract money from an older man in Santo Domingo: "Every snake thinks its biting into a rat until the day it bites into a mongoose" (206). In fact, this text is full of ambiguous female figures, such as the historical figure of Anacaona (Diaz 244) and the mythic figure of the "cigüapa," recognizing the agency of women as actors in history.

*fukú* is linked to a disastrous choice of love objects in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Starting with Abelard's navel-gazing love of his daughter (a private obsession with protecting her from Trujillo, while simultaneously looking the other way during the public slaughter of thousands of Haitians), recurring in Oscar's unrequited love for Ybon, and culminating in Yunior's inability to love Lola—"Couldn't keep my rabo in my pants, even though she was the most beautiful fucking girl in the world" (Diaz 311)—the intergenerational curse of the *fukú* seems to attach itself to ill-timed, selfish, or ill-advised love. For example, Beli's love for the "gangster... catapulted her and hers into Diaspora" (115). In *Caramelo*, Inocencio tells Lala: "We have a history, we Reyes, of bad hearts, father says...And I wonder if he means we love too much. Or too little" (Cisneros 250).<sup>71</sup> In *Oscar Wao*, Oscar tells the Capitan's thugs immediately before his death that "Love was a rare thing, easily confused with a million other things" (Diaz 321). Oscar throws himself at girls "with absolutely no regard for self" (183): perhaps what is most "wondrous" about the life of Oscar Wao is that his "selfless" vision opens up a space for a new vision of humanity based on a different kind of love. Perhaps another view of love can make it possible for Yunior and for us as readers, to understand the significance of Oscar's refusal to become a "proper" Dominican male: "dude never had much luck with the females (how very *un*-Dominican of him") (11). Also *un*-Dominican (as well as *un*-American, for that matter, considering the "toxic masculinist culture of the United States"

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<sup>71</sup>. "We are not dogs" is repeated throughout the text as a (male-centered) call for dignified, proper behaviour in the realm of love: a play on words, the parallel between men and dogs is evident throughout the text in the critique of masculine culture. In Diaz's text, too, Dominican men are given dog-like tendencies when it comes to women: for example, Oscar dances the "perrito" (11) at age seven (back when he was still a "normal" Dominican boy) under approving maternal gazes: "Look at that little macho, his mother's friends said. Que hombre"(14). Later, when he greets Yunior on their first day together as college roommates he says, "Hail, Dog of God....God. Domini. Dog. Canis. Hail Dominicanis" (171).

[Diaz quoted in “Writers”]) is the fact that “he simply lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies” (15). More important than the tragic inevitability of Oscar’s death is the way that the narrative draws attention to the ‘impossibility’ of life for a man like Oscar, in the Dominican Republic *or* in the United States. What the narrative draws attention to is the necessity of imagining a different model of love: not only private or familial, this is an expanded view of love of humanity that is both public and political. In *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Chela Sandoval imagines a “hermeneutics of love” as an “apparatus” or “technology for social transformation” (2.2). Sandoval’s vision of love as a “decolonizing *movida*” is taken up by Maldonado-Torres in *Against War*, where he attempts to imagine “affiliation through altericity, love or non-indifference” in an “ethico-political struggle for non-sexist human fraternity” (233). The “not yet” or unfinished quality of this model, a model that still needs to be imagined, is underscored in Oscar’s death and in Yuniór’s inability to utter three words to Lola: “Before all hope died I used to have this stupid dream that shit could be saved...and I’d finally try to say the words that could have saved us. \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_.” (327). However, the story does not end there: by the conclusion of the narrative, the emphasis has shifted from romantic love to a more expansive vision. The last words of the novel, which are notably Oscar’s and not Yuniór’s, are contained within a posthumous letter to his sister. Echoing Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Oscar proclaims “the beauty, the beauty” of love, and the reader learns that Oscar finally consummated his love for Ybon just before his death. Transforming “horror” into “beauty” by way of this reference to this classic (post)colonial literary inter-text urges the reader to consider how Oscar’s view of love might transform his death into something hopeful, especially when



combined with the narrative focus on his third-generation niece at the end. The transnational scope of extended family networks in this novel suggests that such a reevaluation needs to occur at the level of collective cultural or political identity as well as the individual psyche.<sup>72</sup>

While Cisneros critically engages the fairy tale to highlight the necessity of resignifying love, Diaz engages the genre of Sci-fi/fantasy: Oscar was a “hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, believed that that was the kind of story we were all living in. He’d ask: What more sci-fi and the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?” (Diaz 6). In the narrator’s “mandatory two seconds of Dominican history,” Trujillo is described as “a *personaje* so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up” (Diaz 2). In their anthology of postcolonial readings of sci-fi, Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan aim to correct how the sci-fi/fantasy genre “speaks so much about the experience of being alienated but contains so little writing by alienated people themselves” (Hopkinson and Mehan). Diaz argues that he uses the genre of sci-fi fantasy “as a pre-packaged metaphor” because it allows him to deal with issues such as the total power of authoritarianism in ways that a purely realistic narrative style cannot: “without access to other narrative strategies, other than realism, we have a very inaccurate picture of the world”: in this way, sci-fi and fantasy are not only a means of escape, but constitute another “way to make sense” or “understand a world which is extraordinarily complex” (quoted in Ali). Diaz’s adoption of sci-fi/fantasy also ruptures the stereotypes

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<sup>72</sup>. Other critical explorations of the political and ethical potential of love as a way of thinking about larger community include: Reinhard, Santner and Žižek’s *The Neighbor*; Hardt and Negri’s *Multitude*; Bauman’s *Liquid Love*; and Gilroy’s *Postcolonial Melancholia*, to name a few.

that fetter Latin American fiction to “magical realism” by allowing Diaz to, in his own words, engage in a project of “browning” the very white metaphors found in science fiction (quoted in Ali). In a reference to Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, Oscar wonders aloud, “If we were orcs, wouldn’t we, at a racial level, *imagine* ourselves to look like elves?” (Diaz 178). Diaz suggests that the sci-fi fantasy references in his novel underscore the need to recognize the utopian impulse often found in apocalyptic stories: not only a matter of mass destruction, “the apocalyptic always meant the end of one world and the revelation of another” (quoted in Ali). The hope of the narrator (and the novel itself) is that future generations will break the cycle of the *fukú*. This possibility is alluded to at the very end of the novel, with the birth of Lola’s daughter: “And maybe, just maybe, if she’s as smart and as brave as I’m expecting she’ll be, she’ll take all we’ve done and all we’ve learned and add her own insights and she’ll put an end to it. That’s what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream” (Diaz 330-331). In an interview, Diaz explains that it is Yunion’s hope that Oscar’s niece “will see all the information, hear the stories and instead of running away and spreading the disease which is the *fukú* further,” she “will confront it and make a new relationship to history, and a relationship to our past and to our present” (quoted in Ali). At the very beginning of the narrative, Yunion attempts to ward off the curse by writing: “as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t a *zafa* of sorts. My very own counterspell” (Diaz 7). By the end of the novel, hope has been explicitly linked to storytelling: the “book is blank” (Diaz 302) and, for better or for worse, must be written by future generations. The metaphor of the blank book alludes to the unfinishedness of history, but also to the fact that there are no guarantees that this hopeful

vision will not just as easily fail: “there are other days, when I’m downtrodden or morose” where “nothing ever ends” (331). The “man without a face” who appears repeatedly in the narrative, echoing the blank pages of the book as well as Yuniors’ three blank spaces instead of words of love, has a decidedly ambivalent feel, both hopeful *and* ominous.

As examples of emergent border epistemologies, *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are coming-of-age narratives that defy easy consumption, leading the reader to experience a “more entangled hermeneutics,” exhibiting a “rhizomatic sensibility, with roots that extend to Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas” (Sandin and Perez 3). The critical re-evaluation of universality in these stories draws attention to the need to imagine an expanded awareness of global relationality: “Our imagination tends to forget that our borders are not our borders. The Dominican Republic is the U.S.....The fate of one will not be resolved without the fate of the other (Diaz quoted in “Writers”). In an interview, Cisneros connects ethics and storytelling in a specifically global vision: “as I am getting older, I am writing more about global connections...I also take my responsibility seriously of being a woman who lives in the border of cultures, a translator for a time when all the communities are shifting and colliding in history” (quoted in Kevane and Heredia 53). The focus on the ethical haunting of transnational cultural memory in these coming-of-age narratives contributes to efforts to measure “non-imperial forms of human interrelationality” (Maldonado-Torres, “Towards” 74).

The critical vision that emerges in these narratives about growing up Latino in the United States forces the reader to confront the unjust schism between the promise and disappointment of national citizenship. A crucial part of the coming-of-age of the young protagonists involves learning to negotiate between their place of “particularity”—as Latino, as black, as “nerd,” as female—and the promise of a supposedly universally attainable mainstream cultural identity. For example, in *Caramelo*, Lala confronts her perplexed father with her non-conventional aspirations: she wants to “teach people how to read, or rescue animals, or study Egyptian history at a university....like you see people doing in the movies. I want a life like... —Girls who are not Mexican? —Like other human beings” (Cisneros 360).<sup>73</sup> What the young protagonists of these novels desire is a life that reaches out beyond their immediate families and communities, who for the most part do not understand the situation that second-generation youth find themselves in.<sup>74</sup> In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Lola is unable to communicate to her mother her desire for a “life that I used to see when I watched *Big Blue Marble* as a kid...that drove me to make pen pals and to take atlases home from school ...that existed beyond Paterson, beyond my family, beyond Spanish” (Diaz 55). Unfortunately, the current social and educational conditions for young Latinos in the U.S. makes it so that one needs to move “beyond Spanish” in order to participate in the universal. Diaz suggests that at

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<sup>73</sup>. Critical of the streaming of kids of colour in the public school system, Lala asserts that she wants to “take classes like anthropology and drama...travel someday...Be in a movie, or even better, make a movie. I want to do something interesting, I don’t know what yet, but you can bet it’s not something they offer at a vocational” (Cisneros 352).

<sup>74</sup>. In *Inventing Modern Adolescence: The Children of Immigrants in Turn-of-the-Century America*, Sarah Chinn suggests not only that adolescence itself is a distinctly modern phenomenon, but that the notion of the “generation gap” itself came from a schism between immigrant parents and their US-born children.

the same time that young people maintain ties to the “home country,” it is also important to heed a planetary awareness: “it would be nice if young people felt that this is their world. That it is not only cultureless North Americans and Europeans who feel at home with the rest of the world,” who feel “the world is their inheritance” and are “as comfortable to roam as anyone else” (“Writers”). This restless desire to feel “comfortable to roam” is experienced by these protagonists as they come of age and must find ways to negotiate their place between the universal and the particular as minority subjects in the U.S.<sup>75</sup>

In order to be able to conceptualize citizenship in the realm of the “transnation,” as Saldívar calls it, we need to “rethink the national subject as postnational, transnational, as a displaced subject, always in process” (Castillo 7). Grosfoguel suggests that there is a certain “decolonizing potential” in the “growth of the Latino@ population of the United States” (Grosfoguel, Maldonado-Torres and Saldívar 4). It is “a strategic location from which to refashion a transnational connection to ourselves and to one

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<sup>75</sup>. In her study of coming-of-age traditions for Latino girls in the U.S., Julia Alvarez interviews a man who makes his living from the *quinceañera* tradition and who identifies a trend of “retroculturation” within Latino communities:

First generation comes to the United States and they push to assimilate. They adopt the American culture and norms. Second generation, they want to be all-American. Many don’t even speak Spanish. By the third generation, they’re born and bred here, but they have this special something that makes them unique, their Hispanic culture. They want to learn Spanish...they make a concerted effort to hold on to their traditions, to establish cultural ties with their past. (quoted in Alvarez 69-70)

Alvarez’s study suggests that third generation U.S. Latinos blend traditions from various cultures, mixing and matching “traditional” elements of Puerto Rican, Mexican, or Cuban cultures in order to affirm a sense of *latinidad*: “being Latina/o is about being a hybrid, a made-in-the USA sancocho of all our different cultures and races and histories and nationalities” (81). This is a decidedly trans-national—or at least, trans-American—view of the Latino. However, as Alvarez’s study points out, in the melding of traditional and new in the context of cultural consumption there is the constant danger of commodification and depoliticization: pointing to a “generation gap” in the realm of civic participation, Kasinitz and Mollenkopf’s study of second-generation urban youth suggests that while “politics looms large the literature on how late nineteenth and early twentieth century immigrants became Americans,” in the current climate “assimilation” too-often means “coming to share the apathy of” their “American peers” (274).

another, and to contribute to a widening of imagined communities and spheres of contestation...from where we refashion a connection to *Our/Nuestra América*” (290). Diaz recognizes that “the identities that we cleave to or create for ourselves are often simplifying myths more than anything else,” and that “there’s no greater or perhaps alluring simplifying myth than the myth of America with the capital ‘A,’” imagined as a “sort of un-nuanced good” (quoted in Ali). As Maldonado-Torres suggests, “criticising ‘estadounidense’ imperialism and pledging allegiance to America is a contradiction in terms” (“Towards” 73). I argue that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Caramelo* do not offer simple or un-nuanced conceptions of what “Our/Nuestra América” is or should be: as deeply critical visions from the perspective of outsider within, neither do they argue for any sort of incorporative politics that would simply make immigrants into citizens. The highlighting of relational histories and spectral relations in these novels prompts readers to question the “geopoliticality of reason,” and reconsider “the convergence of place and power in the formation of thought” (L. Gordon, xi). These narratives urge readers to re-think citizenship, belonging and community and thus have the potential to contribute to an emerging field of “hemispheric American studies” which recognizes “the tangled systems of expression, representation and economic and power relations” that are a “shared hemispheric reality” (Taylor 1417). Not limited to the geographical and political spaces that make up the Americas, however, I suggest that these narratives expand to encompass planetary consciousness. Ybarra-Frausto links contemporary Latino cultural expression to “an incipient transnational imaginary” (6).<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>. In *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, Dimock and Buell call for

Instead of emphasizing “dislocation and disaffection,” he argues that “today’s Latino(a) culture is nurtured within translocal spaces and is vibrant in the formation of new, mobile identities, nascent coalitions and solidarities, and possible social formations of connection, communication, and conciliation within national groups and across borders” (6). Diaz has been described as a “double-visioned outsider...the anointed prince of a generation of young immigrants writing ‘global’ fiction inside the U.S.” (“At”). I suggest that *The Brief Wondrous life of Oscar Wao* and *Caramelo* both be read as border epistemologies that contribute to the formation of this kind of global fiction, exhibiting openness to new spatial imaginaries without attempting to silence or forget the painful lessons of history.

## CHAPTER TWO~ UNSETTLING (TRANS)CANLIT: SPECTRAL RENEGOTIATIONS OF SECOND-GENERATION BELONGING IN *WHAT WE ALL LONG FOR AND SOUCOUYANT*

To feel at home is to be comfortably unaware of things, to know that things are in their places and so are you....The object of longing, then, is not really a place called home but this sense of intimacy with the world, it is not the past in general, but that imaginary moment when we didn't know the temptation of nostalgia...[...] diasporic intimacy is dystopic by definition: it is rooted in the suspicion of a single home, in shared longing without belonging.

—Svetlana Boym, “On Diasporic Intimacy”

I don't want no fucking country . . .

—Dionne Brand, *Land to Light On* (48)

A few years ago I attended a graduate seminar where I, along with over a dozen other students from diverse backgrounds, spent hours debating Canadian multiculturalism. No matter how rigorously we engaged with highly critical analyses of Canada's official multicultural policies, no matter how sceptical we were about how state-legislated multiculturalism works on a practical level, there was always something inexplicable in each member of the class's personal experiences with the particular form of heterogeneity we had experienced in Canada that made it impossible to dismiss multiculturalism out of hand. Perhaps it was our shared sense of commitment to an animating (but ultimately unachievable) vision as an ideal horizon to work toward. Or perhaps it was in part an example of what Diana Bryon calls “sanctioned ignorance,” which is the “interplay of pride in multiculturalism and denial of structural racism” that is tied up with narratives of Canadian national identity (“Cross-Talk” 81). Whether or not these difficult-to-pin-down feelings stem from our (un)conscious participation in a nationalist fantasy, it is true that Canada's official multiculturalism is a “policy and act that has often been celebrated as a unique ‘success’ by Canadians themselves and touted,



across the world, as Canada's ideological gift to less enlightened liberal democracies" (Chariandy, "Fiction" 818). Until the 1960s, immigrants to Canada were largely from white, Western European backgrounds; in 1967, Canada's immigration policy was revised not only to allow but to encourage immigration from across the globe.<sup>77</sup> This has fundamentally changed the population of Canada, which has since become one of the most racially and culturally diverse countries in the world; indeed, a recent Statistics Canada report suggests that the number of visible minorities in Canadian cities is expected to rise to one third of the nation's population by 2031: "whites will become the minority in Toronto and Vancouver over the course of the next three decades" ("Minorities"). Still, multiculturalism is seen by many people to be a uniquely 'Canadian Dream' that more or less 'works' on a daily level, especially in Canada's major cities.

Complicated patterns of global mobility (of goods, information, capital, people) in the early twenty-first century have not only shifted the cultural, economic and social make-up of Canada, but they are also shifting the imaginaries of (national) belonging, and commitments to multiculturalism have been complicated and undermined by the imposition of neoliberal agendas. In spite of the perceived success of Canadian

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<sup>77</sup>. While in Quebec the history of immigration has played out in slightly different ways, in Anglophone Canada immigration by visibly-raced people was earlier viewed in terms of degree of "threat" or menace: for example, immigrants from Ireland, Eastern and Southern Europe were 'dark' invaders, feared to contaminate the whiteness of the nation. This is not to say that there were no exceptions, the most notable early ones being communities of Loyalist blacks that came to Canada in the late 1700s and Chinese labourers who built the railroads in the mid-1800s. In *White Civility*, Daniel Coleman points out the mutually constitutive relationship between 'whiteness' and 'citizenship' through an analysis of four allegorical figures: the Loyalist brother, the enterprising Scottish orphan, the muscular Christian, and the maturing colonial son, each of which represents a specific aspect of the "official symbolic history of Canada" that obscures what is being occluded: namely, the "spectral, 'fantasmatic history'" (Coleman, 28), a history that includes the "denial of Indigenous presence in these lands, the disregard of pre-contact history, and the continuing suppression of First Peoples' claims to land and sovereignty" (29). For Coleman, "the performance of civility is a way to manage our traumatic history" (29) in Canada.

multiculturalism, a survey released in 2007 reflected (and produced) a growing anxiety about what David Chariandy has called the “waning of belonging on the part of Canadian second-generation visible minorities” (“Fiction” 818). The report, co-written by Rietz and Banerjee and published by the Institute for Research on Public Policy, found that “visible minorities who were born here feel less like they belong than their parents” (Jimenez, “How”). Most importantly, the study found that the darker the colour of one’s skin, the more likely this sense of disaffection. These expressions of second-generation unbelonging reflect crucial changes in the ‘post civil rights’ era in North America, for example, the ongoing attacks on the social state that includes the cutting of services that target (minority) youth especially. More than reflecting a failure of multicultural commitment, the imposed precarity of neoliberal agendas extend and are extended by new ‘colorblind’ racisms. The sense of anxiety is registered on all sides of the political spectrum; what do we make of this lack of belonging, this apparent alienation—as feeling alien to the nation— on the part of second-generation youth? How do these findings change the way we view the supposed ‘triumph’ of multiculturalism in Canada, especially when invoked in comparison to ethnic-based exclusions in other nations like the U.S. or the E.U.? Events of the first decade of the twenty-first century like the London subway bombings and the unrest of the Paris *banlieux*, both of which drew international attention in 2005, lead to questions about the cultural integration of second-generation young people: as Lily Cho argues, these examples “signal both the failure and the indispensability of contemporary citizenship” (468), as well as draw attention to the “exclusionary and inhuman legacy” of “citizenship” itself (477). Immigration has been

linked to threats to national security since long before 9/11 (see Knowles), but many Canadians maintain that — despite Canada’s ‘official’ multicultural status—in the contemporary moment an espousal of cohesive ‘core values’ is needed to combat the proliferation of ethnic enclaves (Jimenez, “Do”) and the possibility of home-grown terrorists: for example the so-called “Toronto Eighteen” (“Jury”) and Omar Khadr, whose plight I examine in more detail in Chapter 3 in my discussion of child soldier discourses. The fragility of Khadr’s (and his family’s) claim to Canadian citizenship, at least as suggested in conservative public opinion polls that for a very long time were constructed as the majority position [Martin], suggests that for many Canadians “tolerance” of second-generation youth has reached its limit, and that even discourses that ostensibly celebrate diversity imply that there are limits to cultural pluralism.<sup>78</sup> Lip-service to ideals of multiculturalism does not change the fact that Canada still has a long way to go to be a truly pluralistic, intercultural entity.<sup>79</sup> For example, one of the aspects of Canada’s history

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<sup>78</sup>. As Wendy Brown has argued in *Regulating Aversion*, what she calls “tolerance talk” relegates it to the realm of private choice rather than seeing it as an important civic issue that we need to think alternatively to. Discussions of ‘reasonable accommodation’ attest to the complexities involved here; more than just a superficial celebration of culture reflected in the so-called ‘saris, samosas and steel bands’ syndrome, there are serious contemporary concerns about the limits of multicultural ‘accommodation.’ For example, recent legal questions in Canada about whether to allow sexual abuse victims to testify while wearing a Niqab, or head covering (Hassan) echo debates playing out in European countries like Spain and Belgium (Nussbaum) and in France, in particular, where the Sarkozy government has recently approved a controversial ban (“French Parliament”) on wearing headscarves in public places.

<sup>79</sup>. Canadian multiculturalism operates in both a normative and a prescriptive sense, both describing a contemporary state of affairs and an ideological commitment to valuing difference over homogeneity. As Eva Mackey points out, unlike places like the US and Britain (heterogeneous nations defined in large part in terms of the erasure of differences within the commonality of national identity) in Canada multiculturalism has been “state-sanctioned,” actually promoted in order to manage, imagine and organize diversity (xix) in the service of nationalism. In the decades since its adoption as state policy, official multiculturalism has come under attack by many critics who argue that multiculturalism has “never been as benign or idealistic as it professed itself to be” (Coleman and Goellnicht 8). For example, Himani Bannerji argues that since its adoption as official policy, the state cooptation of multiculturalism in fact functions as an “ideological sleight of hand” (95) that weakens its power to address the issues of race, gender and class injustice that hide behind the colour-blind façade of neoliberal meritocracy: “we demanded some genuine reforms, some

that has been managed and overwritten by a presumed-to-be shared immigrant past (i.e. “we are all immigrants from *somewhere*”) is Canada’s colonial history: the refusal to engage with the settler-invader past that continues to haunt the present is what allows many Canadians to not even bat an eye when, for example, Prime Minister Stephen Harper asserts that we “have no history of colonialism” (quoted in Wherry).<sup>80</sup> Discourses celebrating multiculturalism are also complicit with the dominant cultural logic of multinational capitalism, and the self-congratulatory rhetoric of multiculturalism is all too often employed in the service of neoliberal aims.<sup>81</sup> As Chariandy points out, “there is no contradiction” in “making it in mainstream bourgeois ways *and* celebrating one’s ethnic background,” because “neoliberal ideologies” and the celebration of an ethnic past “go so well together” (“Spirits”). It is, therefore, important to distinguish between aspects of

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changes—some among us even demanded the end of racist capitalism— and instead we got ‘multiculturalism’” (89). Smaro Kamboureli calls multiculturalism a “sedative politics” that “attempts to recognize ethnic differences, but only in a contained fashion in order to manage them” (Scandalous 82). As Kanaganayakam suggests, it is time to interrogate the “consensual hallucination” of Canada, because despite the “celebration of multiculturalism in Canada,” “for the immigrant” —and, I would add, for First Nations people— “Canada is still colonial” (quoted in Moss 18). Indeed, in today’s world, “colonialism continues to thrive under the name of immigration” (Cho 477).

<sup>80</sup>. This assertion was made during a press conference at the G20 summit in Pittsburg in 2009: less than six months prior to making this statement, Harper made an official apology about Canada’s residential schools, where for decades First Nations children were systematically stripped of their culture and identity, abused physically, emotionally, spiritually and sexually: however, even then, “the absence of the word ‘colonialism’ from the prime minister’s apology enables a strategic isolation and containment of residential schools as a discrete historical problem of educational malpractice rather than one devastating prong of an overarching and multifaceted system of colonial oppression that persists in the present” (Henderson and Wakeham).

<sup>81</sup>. For example, Kathryn Mitchell’s study of conflicts over real estate in Vancouver in the late 1980s illustrates how the (neo)liberal rhetoric of multiculturalism in Canada is all too easily appropriated by “Canadian business interests” (220). Mackey points out that one needs to be careful about uncritically embracing the entanglements of “diasporic networks,” recognizing that “state intervention into the cultural politics of diversity...not only appropriates and institutionalizes diversity for the project of nation-building,” but “now proposes that multiculturalism is a national resource in the context of global capitalism” (70).

multicultural commitments that are complicit with neoliberal agendas and those that offer potential sites of resistance.

Given the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities that attach to contemporary thinking about multiculturalism, what role might literature play in re-animating a commitment to cultural heterogeneity in such a way that would highlight its limitations, yet nonetheless pursue it as a social ideal—a horizon to work toward? To be sure, in terms of literary production, the relative success of ‘multicultural literature’ in Canada is in large part due to the commitment of public funding agencies like Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and the Canada Council, which have played an important role in ensuring heterogeneity in Canada’s publishing industry in the name of official multiculturalism.<sup>82</sup> Yet, the resistant potential of such literature continually runs the risk of being co-opted by neoliberal ideologies. Kit Dobson has pointed out how the commercialization of such texts colludes with what he calls “banal multiculturalism” where, “rather than challenging the real and imagined ethnicities of the nation,” uncritical readings reinforce “the idea that Canada is a nation-state that welcomes difference and is free of ethno-cultural strife” (“Banal”). Furthermore, in *Transnational Canadas*, Dobson argues that “writing in Canada has become transnational in terms of its interests, its politics, and in terms of the corporate industry that supports it,” and it “is concerned with crossing national borders thematically, just as it is concerned with marketing on a global

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<sup>82</sup>. Even the most vehement critics of multiculturalism are hesitant about condemning it *tout court*, registering a need to maintain the intangible ethical claim behind the ideal of multiculturalism that stems from a radically democratic impulse and a genuine respect for human difference and social justice, commitments that are in danger of disappearing in name of ‘efficiency’ and ‘fiscal responsibility’ within the current political and economic climate.

scale”— much like the “nation-state,” Anglo-Canadian literature is being “rethought in the context of global capitalism” (180).

In this chapter I look at Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For* and David Chariandy’s *Soucouyant* in order to explore how such “trans-” or “post-” national sensibilities are being imagined in second-generation fiction in contemporary Canada. Cho argues that for today’s youth, “citizenship in the form granted by the nation-state cannot fully encompass the multiple modes of belonging that are actually practiced” and therefore there is a growing need to think about ‘post-national’ forms of belonging (469). Of course, given the neoliberal dismantling of the welfarist services (like public education, decent housing and health care) that second-generation youth rely on, it is important to remember that the nation-state has traditionally borne responsibility for these things, offering protections (at least in theory) for citizens and (less so) for residents: indeed, the “old protectionisms of nationhood” have “given way to a spirit of deregulation” (Comaroff and Comaroff, “Millennial” 299). However, as Saldívar suggests, even though “we are far from abandoning the nation as a viable category of political and personal identity,” at the same time “it is clear that a new paradigm for broadly global, as well as more local, ways of studying culture and literature must be created” (“Aesthetic”). Despite their inevitable participation in the market for ‘multicultural literature,’ I suggest that *What We All Long For* and *Soucouyant* offer ways to imagine an alternative sense of belonging by using strategies that haunt dominant national narratives. In their explorations of the tensions between disaffection and belonging for youth growing up in Toronto, they disrupt what Daniel Coleman has called the “trance of Canadian civility”

(“From” 25) in spectral, indirect, and often non-narrative ways, suggesting the need to re-imagine national *and* trans-national forms of belonging simultaneously.<sup>83</sup>

These texts feature young adult protagonists in their early twenties who are caught between adolescence and uncertain adult futures in Toronto: an aspiring artist, a university student, an entrepreneur, and others who are seemingly frozen with indecision, these protagonists reflect the anxious yet also cautiously hopeful attitude of contemporary youth. They ask readers to recognize the limits of discourses of belonging and therefore disrupt nationally incorporative readings that make multiculturalism seem like a conflict-free achievement. In order to move away from the framework of tolerance and what Kelly Oliver calls the “pathology of recognition,” as the particular “pathology of colonial or oppressive cultures” where recognition is bestowed by a dominant culture (23), in these stories there is an emphasis on interpersonal and intercultural connections that are nuanced, multi-dimensional, and generative of new forms connection (if still imperfect). At the same time that they critique national belonging, they also draw attention to the dangers of basing belonging on essentialized diasporic cultural identities: both of these narratives exhibit ambivalent and conflicted ties to the past, to culture and language, and to geopolitical place. Like *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Caramelo*, discussed in my first chapter, Brand’s and Chariandy’s coming-of-age novels employ specifically spectral and relational narrative strategies in order to critique exclusionary

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<sup>83</sup>. Recent studies that have exploded the Canadian myth of civility include Romeo Dallaire’s new book, *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children*, in which he expresses his “level of rage against Canada” because “This country ... is changing its fundamental philosophy towards humanity and values and moral standing. It has already happened” (quoted in Hampson). Similarly, Sherene Razack’s examination of Canada’s role in international peacekeeping missions (especially the ‘Somalia affair’) explodes the assumptions behind popular image of Canada as “the nicest place on earth” and the Canadian as a “modest, self-deprecating individual who is able to gently teach Third World Other about civility” (9).

notions of 'home' and 'nation,' to renegotiate their relationship to diasporic family histories, to critique the very material effects of neoliberal agendas on second-generation youth, and to imagine alternative forms of belonging.

Reflecting more than an imperative to establish autonomy from one's origins in the process of growing up, *What We All Long For* and *Soucoyant* are stories about crafting a new relation to complex origins that, in turn, generates new possibilities for social relations. I argue that in their refusal to identify with simple narratives of (parental, diasporic) origins while at the same time being unable and unwilling to identify simply as 'Canadian,' the protagonists in these narratives allow for the possibility of belonging as informed by planetary consciousness. Gayatri Spivak's notion of "planetary," first outlined in *Death of a Discipline* as a new mode of political (and ethical) consciousness has been taken up by Diana Brydon within the specific context of Canadian literature; Brydon suggests the importance of looking at how "writers and critics are rethinking relations of place, space and non-place in ways that complicate understandings of where and how the nation fits. They are not transcending nation but resituating it" ("Metamorphoses" 14).<sup>84</sup> Set explicitly in the multicultural city of Toronto, these texts point out very powerfully the necessity of engaging with the entanglements of relational histories through the interrelationships and haunting that they evoke. Toronto in these texts figures as what Saskia Sassen has called the "global city," an urban space that is not distinguished by its national status but from its connection(s) to other places in the world.

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<sup>84</sup>. For Brydon as for Spivak, literature can play an important role in imagining new relations to heterogeneity, and she wonders about the "need to rethink Canadian literature beyond older forms of nationalism and internationalism toward multi-scaled visions of place—local, regional, national and global—as each imbricated within the other" ("Metamorphoses" 14).



This urban space is the site of relational haunting of various kinds. The Canadian nation is not only haunted by the spectre of its own colonial history, but by its historical and ongoing relationships with other nations as well. The renegotiated second-generation vision that emerges in Brand and Chariandy's narratives goes beyond national and/or diasporic belonging, but without losing a sense of importance about the specificities of place and history.

While it may seem especially strange that I have chosen to examine a novel like *What We All Long For* in the context of the coming-of-age story I suggest that, while this text does stray significantly from the generic form (for example, there is more than one main protagonist and the temporal setting takes place when they are all well into their twenties), there may be a need for alternative ways of exploring coming-of-age in contemporary contexts than the generic conventions of the traditional *Bildungsroman* allow. In fact, the focus on the interrelationships *between* these youth, instead of centering on the development of one individual, as well as the belated nature of their coming-of-age, might better reflect the realities of growing up as a second-generation youth in twenty-first century Toronto.<sup>85</sup> Joseph Slaughter argues that postcolonial coming-of-age stories have historically performed a double movement, signalling a tension between plotting oneself into normative values (and implicitly into citizenship status) while at the same time critiquing patterns of historical, economic and cultural exclusion. If the *Bildungsroman* tradition has typically been about “education for citizenship” (Slaughter

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<sup>85</sup>. Indeed, for the so-called ‘millennial generation’ in North America in general, the key factors to indicate maturation—marriage, financial independence—are latent or entirely absent until young people are closer to thirty (Uchitelle).

“Enabling Fictions” 1410), I would suggest that the citizenship claims in these contemporary Anglo-Canadian coming-of-age stories are not necessarily recuperative, but are in fact contestatory and critical. Bannerji suggests that, in the context of Canadian multiculturalism, “we must bite the hand that feeds us, because what it feeds us is neither good enough nor for our own good” (118). Understanding this metaphor in a double sense as somewhat contradictorily referring to both the host nation and the parental hand, I argue that both of these coming-of-age stories perform just such a hand-biting.<sup>86</sup> *Soucouyant* and *What We All Long For* explore the intergenerational effects of colonialism, racism and neoliberal globalization, not in the “service of nationalization” (1416), but in order to imagine planetary conceptions of solidarity and belonging. Moving beyond typical gestures toward cosmopolitanism, which often centre upon individualized notions of consumption and mobility, what I find particularly useful about the notion of the planetary is how it alludes to a constitutive relationality. Using spectral and relational narrative strategies to unsettle officially sanctioned national myths of the settler-invader nation, I argue that these narratives gesture toward the potential of literature for envisioning an ethics of planetarity in the twenty-first century.

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<sup>86</sup> In terms of state-funded literary production in Canada, this metaphor might aptly be extended to the writers themselves, who participate in structures that commodify ‘difference’ while at the same time critiquing them. In some ways it is impossible to avoid the absorption of “multicultural” literature into the self-congratulatory rhetoric of state multiculturalism. The critical and commercial success of both of these novels suggests that the inevitable paradox of cultural production in Canada within the ambiguous context of (real and ideal) multiculturalisms is that, as a “booming otherness industry” (Moss 17), the institutionalization of “racialized cultural production” makes literary institutions *both* “prisons or reservations” *and* “pathways and avenues,” as Coleman and Goellnicht argue (23).

## The Limits of Belonging: Cultivating Patterns of Promise and Disappointment in Multicultural Toronto

Why couldn't they have planted a good tree anywhere here, why couldn't they have laid out beds of plants and flowers, a forsythia bush or two, a grove of hostas, some forget-me-nots, some phlox, smoke trees now and then, mint bushes and rosemary, why had it been so hard for the city to come up with a bit of beauty?...With one thought they could have made it beautiful, but perhaps they didn't think that poor people deserved beauty.

—Dionne Brand, *What We All Long For* (260)

“You people come here. You insist on coming here. So what the hell do you expect?”

—David Chariandy, *Soucouyant* (78)

David Chariandy's first novel, *Soucouyant*, is the story of a Canadian-born son who despairingly abandons his Trinidadian-born mother who is suffering from dementia, and returns two years later to find that a young woman has mysteriously moved into the house, apparently to help care for her. The present of the novel is autumn in the late 1980s, the narrative deliberately set in the wake of the “Multiculturalism Act passed over a year ago” (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 33).<sup>87</sup> We are told that the narrator's mother, Adele, came to Canada from Trinidad as a domestic worker many years earlier, thanks to the “new immigration act” (72) of the 1960s that changed race-based exclusions and ostensibly made it easier for non-white immigrants to come to Canada.<sup>88</sup> The story takes place near the Scarborough bluffs, and the family home is a “heritage house” on a “lonely cul-de-sac in the midst of a ‘good neighborhood’” (58). This “good neighbourhood” holds a yearly “Heritage Day Parade” to celebrate their traditional community, “traditional” in this case explicitly meaning “distant from the growing ethnic neighborhoods to the west”

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<sup>87</sup>. In 1988, the Canadian government passed legislation called the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (also known as Bill C-93), the passing of which “has imbued the principle of racial and cultural equality with the force of law” in Canada (“Canadian Multiculturalism”).

<sup>88</sup>. Of course, the domestic work schemes of this period, like those of our present day, had built in limitations (for an exploration of the experiences of Caribbean and, more recently, Filipina domestic workers, see Silvera; Grandea and Kerr).

(60). This parade is a physical enactment of what Mackey calls the “pedagogies of patriotism” (59-60) where national identity is both celebrated and performed. Despite outwardly espousing the ideals of official multiculturalism—“The flyers explained that everyone was invited to participate, since the Heritage Day parade was being revamped these days, to recognize ‘people of multicultural backgrounds,’ and not just ‘Canadians’” (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 60)—the participants are dressed up in traditional settler garb, in effect (re)producing the difference between multicultural Canadians and “traditional” Canadians. The novel explicitly references how, despite official multiculturalism, national culture in English Canada is still defined in terms of the presumption of a ‘core’ of a “*Canadian-Canadian*” (Mackey 19-22) identity—as opposed to Caribbean-Canadian, Native-Canadian or Somali-Canadian identities, for example. Reversing the characterization of non-white immigration as invasive, the “noises of Heritage” (61) that are made by the white Canadians are experienced as invasive, confusing, and threatening by Adele, and at one point the narrator is horrified to find that she has wandered outside dressed in nothing but her bra and pantyhose, along with several pairs of underwear layered on top of one another. The semi-nakedness of his mother, the impropriety of her (hyper)visibly-raced presence, interrupts the Heritage Day celebration and exposes it for what it is: “*A performance, Mother, Just a performance*” (60), explains the narrator.

The young protagonists of *What We All Long For* are called upon to perform their heritage in different ways. In this novel, the third-person narratives of four Canadian-born children of ‘visible minority’ parents —Tuyen, Carla, Jackie and Oku —are intertwined with the first-person narrative of a man who might or might not be Tuyen’s lost older

brother, Quy, who was separated from his family on the fateful night in the 1970s when they fled Vietnam. Each of the young protagonists is significantly “born in the city from people born elsewhere” (Brand, *What We All* 20) and it is their “friendship of opposition to the state of things, and their common oddness” that “held them together” (19).

Reflecting the phenomenon of second-generation disaffection described at the beginning of the chapter, these young people, unlike their parents, “weren’t willing to twist” themselves “up into the requisite shape” (47) even if they could successfully enact such a performance. What holds them together is their common desire *not* to be like their parents, who all suffer to varying degrees from disappointment and paralysis stemming from their unsuccessful attempts to feel at home in their adoptive land. For example, Tuyen’s parents are “defined by the city” as purveyors of “Vietnamese food” even though they are trained professionals and cannot even “cook very well”: unable to pursue their professions in Canada, the “eager Anglos ready to taste the fare of their multicultural city wouldn’t know the difference” (66, 67). In *Soucouyant*, “everything seemed wonderful” to Adele when she first comes to Canada; opening her mouth to take in falling snowflakes, she is “disappointed at its tastelessness when it fell upon her tongue” (Chariandy 48). The tastelessness of the white snow reflects the alienation she feels in this new, icy land. It is perhaps not surprising that Adele’s plane “had trouble arriving” because of an ice storm (47). This sense of disappointment is echoed the “two-ness” of the lemon meringue pie —acid and sweet, tart yellow and fluffy white — the bittersweet irony of a promise that is not meant for her as a West Indian immigrant in Toronto (53). Despite being “intoxicated with possibility” in the beginning, the “magic of this place”

quickly fades for both Adele and her husband Roger (72, 48). Unable to name the systemic, everyday racism that they face in their new home, they can only blame themselves for their repeated “disappointments,” thinking them private failures instead of public barriers (74). Adele thinks that she should be “grateful” for being one of the “lucky ones” (51).

In *Soucouyant* and *What We All Long For* parental disappointment is strategically yoked to the urban landscape to which they have immigrated: the image of the failed garden circulates throughout both of these novels, drawing attention to the relationship between urban spaces, public policies, and private failures. The (failed) garden seems a particularly apt metaphor for socio-economic disappointment, especially given the longstanding colonial designation of the ‘new world’ as Promised Land.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, the trope of gardening in these novels echoes the history of transatlantic slavery, imperialism and colonial settlement: as Jamaica Kincaid says, “thinking in the garden has led me to understand the relationship between the garden and colonialism and the garden and conquest” (quoted in Nurse).<sup>90</sup> While in both novels the failure of cultivation seems to occur in the private realm of the family, it ultimately points to a stinging

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<sup>89</sup>. Susie O’Brien argues that “critics such as Max Weber have pointed out, the rhetorical structure of the promise, which foretells the translation through work, faith, and God’s grace of present hardship into future plenitude, chaos into meaning, displacement into homecoming, was ripe for secular conversion into the doctrine of free-market capitalism, in which disciplined labour holds out its own vision of plenitude” (“The Garden”).

<sup>90</sup>. Ewert describes how in *Autobiography of My Mother*. Kincaid explicitly links gardening to colonial practices in the gardening practices of the British husband of her Caribbean protagonist: Philip clears his land of all native species and to the best of his ability the herbaceous order he remembers. Kincaid links this activity to other colonial practices...he had an obsessive interest in rearranging the landscape: not gardening in the way of necessity, the growing of food, but gardening in the way of luxury, the growing of flowering plants for no other reason than the pleasure and making these plants do exactly what he wanted them to do; and it made great sense that he would be drawn to this activity, for it is an act of conquest, benign though it may be. (115)

disappointment in the failed promise of public institutions. For example, even though they are “suspicious about medical institutions and offices,” Adele’s family takes her to the doctor: “After leaving the specialist’s office, we all went immediately to the neighborhood hardware store. My father spoke with the owner about extending the small garden in our front lawn...we wanted to plant more flowers, she added. Vegetables too. And flowers” (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 39). This double emphasis on Adele’s desire to grow “flowers” in her garden signals a tension between cultivation as useful or necessary and gardening for the sheer pleasure and beauty of it, something that has not historically been linked with working-class immigrants: in the end, the family leaves the store “buying pansies and a sweet potato vine and promised to come back soon, ignoring the giggles from a salesclerk” (39).<sup>91</sup> The failures of botanical transplantation emblemize the disappointment of immigration and the failure of cultural memory. Adele repeatedly mistakes Lake Ontario for the Caribbean, wondering in her Trinidadian-inflected voice how the “waves loss it salt and smell and the jellyfish done melt away” and has her heart set on planting the “tropical plant” hibiscus in her new Canadian home (112, 39).<sup>92</sup> Despite her hard work and desire, Adele’s attempts at recuperating memory through the space of her garden in Scarbrough ultimately fail: the couple who eventually buy the

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<sup>91</sup>. As Brophy argues in her analysis of Kincaid’s use of the motif of gardening in *My Brother*, “gardening, especially the aesthetic cultivation of nonfood plants, provides the ruling class with the fantasy of a paradoxically natural and controlled luxury, one that allows for the retrospective minimization of the ecological devastation and agricultural exploitation that characterized the European con-quest of the Caribbean” (“Angels” 269).

<sup>92</sup>. Adele’s attempted transplantation echoes Jamaica Kincaid’s observation in *My Garden (Book)* about her Vermont garden:

The garden I was making (and am still making and will always be making) resembled a map of the Caribbean and the sea that surrounds it...the garden is for me an exercise in memory, a way of remembering my own immediate past, a way of getting to a past that is my own (the Caribbean Sea) and the past as it is indirectly related to me (the conquest of Mexico and its surroundings). (8)

old house “admits that they’re planning on razing the property and building anew” (145). The “Heritage house” that had become the home of a transplanted Trinidadian family is destroyed, its history obliterated, so that it can be overwritten.

In *What We All Long For*, Oku becomes aware of his father’s intense and paralyzing sense of disappointment while “looking back from the window and the carcasses of Fitz’s plants and cars” (Brand 86). Trapped within the confines of both her depression and her high-rise apartment building—“this was not a home where memories were cultivated, it was an anonymous stack of concrete and glass” (110)—Carla’s mother Angie plants a balcony garden, with potted “impatiens and marigolds and morning glories,” and even a “grapevine” (104), before she eventually plunges to her death from that very same balcony. Later, even though she tries to encourage “reluctant branches to grow,” Carla’s step-mother Nadine’s “rose bushes” were perpetually “stunted (248), just as Carla herself “had grown lank and long as if from too much rain and small portions of strong sunlight” (279). But perhaps the most significant garden of the novel might be the one that is a failure because it is, in fact, completely absent. Jackie wonders why there are no plants or trees in the public housing unit where she grows up:

Yes, why not a plantation of rose bushes all along Vanauley Way, millions of petals growing and falling, giving off a little velvet. It’s amazing what a garden can do. And Jackie could have sure done with a place like that...they tried to make the best, but then had it been a garden instead of that dry narrow roadway, Jackie’s childhood might have been less hazardous...Would it have killed them to splash a little colour on the buildings?...The sense of space might have triggered lighter emotions, less depressing thoughts, a sense of well-being. God, hope! (261).

Since the city planners do not have the “good grace to plant a shrub or two,” Jackie is forced to “cultivate it with her own trees and flowers....In her mind” (264). The



interiorized vision of the garden that she cultivates in her imagination represents a failure, in that it is implicitly contrasted to the idea of sharing public space with other members of the community, transforming a “shadowy” place into a space full of “laughter” and “music” (260-261), a promise that remains unfulfilled.

The majority of residents in the public housing unit where Jackie grows up in Toronto are so-called ‘visible minorities,’ including many recent immigrants to Canada. Charles Taylor’s well known “politics of recognition” positions a certain group as being able to offer recognition (or worse, tolerance) upon “others” based on an objective study of those others to ascertain the ethical worth of their cultural difference. Oliver cites Taylor to critique the assumption that “our” worth does not need to be questioned, while “other cultures and other people are objects of study...if they don’t have worth for us, then they don’t have worth” (45). Oliver suggests that the *politics* of recognition actually reflects and perpetuates a *pathology* of recognition: a “one-way gaze of the judging subject” that is destructive for minority subjects (46).<sup>93</sup> Indeed, “minorities” can only be “visible” in a culture where whiteness is always already the norm. Both of these novels explore how the pathology of recognition fosters an internalization of hatred and the projection of that hatred onto others.

The disappointment of systematic exclusion, specifically the “difference between being white and being black, in control or out of control” (Brand, *What We* 177), is

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<sup>93</sup>. This notion of recognition as a one-way gaze of power is at work in Daniel Coleman’s discussion of the ways in which the Canadian government has imposed a form of “sub-citizenship” on the Haudenosaunee (Six Nations). Coleman opens his essay with an excerpt from a poem by Antonio Machado: “The eye you see is not/an eye because you see it;/it is an eye because it sees you,” arguing that “Machado’s reciprocal gaze reminds us that to know ourselves truly in the world, we need not just to see the world, but to perceive ourselves as subjects in relation to other subjects, agents in relation to other agents” (“Imposing”).

especially enacted upon the bodies of black men and boys. In *Soucouyant*, Roger's body is paralyzed, scarred and, finally, completely mutilated and killed while working at dangerous and underpaid factory jobs.<sup>94</sup> Due to societal fantasies about black masculinity, the narrator's older brother becomes "someone else in those days, someone fuller and more potent in people's imaginations" (Chariandy 27). The young men in these novels become symbols of how even public school systems that are officially multicultural tend to fail black boys. Both of Adele and Roger's sons quietly drift (or are driven) away from school: "What exactly was so funny about seeing a young man read a book?...Soon nobody at all was smiling at my brother" who "came to be 'known' by teachers, neighborhood watch volunteers, and police throughout 'the good neighborhood' where we lived" (27-28). Similarly, in *What We All Long For* the second-generation youth are "abandoned" to "rough public terrain," relegated to being "spectators to the white kids in the class" : they "couldn't wait to get out of school, where they had very early realized, as early as grade three, that nothing there was about them" (19-20). Even though these young people are born in Canada, they "had never been able to join in what their parents called 'regular Canadian life.' The crucial piece, of course, was that they weren't the required race" (47). In *What We All Long For*, by contrast, the young black protagonist, Oku, attends university. Compelled by forces he does not completely understand, Oku opts to abandon his university education in favour of an education on the streets of Toronto: "instead of the university, he would go to Kensington Market" and to the

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<sup>94</sup>. The tragic fate of Roger's working body is contrasted to his good looks and confidence when Adele first meets him as a young man: Roger "looks like some South Asian Elvis" (114), listens to Country and Western music, and wears a rhinestone cowboy suit (one of the few things that his son claims by the end of the book).

barbershops on Eglinton Avenue, which were “universities of a kind and repositories for all the stifled ambition of men who were sidelined by prejudices of one sort or another” (Brand 167, 189). The novel does not romanticize the heavy consequences of this alternative education for black boys, however, and perhaps the fact that by the end of the narrative Oku pledges to go back to school to complete his MA suggests the promise of combining heterogeneous forms of ‘education.’ On the streets of Toronto, Oku is especially drawn to the figure of the “Rasta” and the figure of the “Musician,” who can be read alongside Oku’s Jamaican father Fitz, as “parts of the same person or the same state” whose “promises had dried up” (172). Despite his desire to escape his father’s weary fate, as well as the fate of “the guys from the jungle” (167), Oku himself has little control over the way he is (mis)recognized by society: on his way home late one night, Oku’s body is misread as a criminal black body by police officers. That this encounter feels painfully intimate, an “accustomed embrace” or “perverse fondling” (165), offers him a glimpse into what may await him if he does not forge his own alternative to the models of black masculinity that are available to him: “Did he want to end up bled out in a parking lot outside a club? Did he want to float out of his body like the Rasta and the musician? Or did he want the hard-heeled bitterness of his father, living in the fantasies of *if only?*” (174-5). He seems caught between his father’s past of exclusion and disappointment—“striving makes you bitter” (187) — and the future that is prescribed for him as a young (uneducated) black male in Toronto: he is “scared of something lurking in himself, in his body —some idea threatening to overpower him” and so “he would lock his bedroom

door to prevent himself from sleep-walking into these acts” (167).<sup>95</sup> In *Soucouyant*, in contrast to the “better houses and properties” on the other side of the train tracks, the narrator’s family home is on a “cul-de-sac” (9) which is, of course, just a fancier term for a dead end. The ‘waning of belonging’ on the part of second-generation boys in these novels is tied to the difficulty of moving past the disappointment of previous generations, as well as the pathology of recognition—as illustrated by Oku’s encounter with the police—by the dominant culture.

For the second-generation young women in these novels, the fact of gender difference complicates these challenges. In *What We All long For*, Jackie is determined to avoid the pitfalls that snag her parents, and (at least as far as Oku is concerned) this in part involves a rejection of blackness: “Hence the white boy” (265).<sup>96</sup> The racial pathology of recognition is doubly inscribed upon the bodies of the three generations of women in *Soucouyant*: faced with raising a daughter all by herself, the narrator’s grandmother sells her body to white American soldiers in Trinidad; like an introduced botanical species (or perhaps a weed) Adele’s body is constantly read as being out of place in Canada, as having crossed a line of propriety—“the oddity she had become in this land” (49); and

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<sup>95</sup>. Oku is on the verge of succumbing to the same paralysis as his parents: he sees them as “people who somehow lived in the near past and were unable or unwilling to step into the present” (Brand 190), while at the same time realizing that he himself “didn’t know where to go from here” (88).

<sup>96</sup>. The novel seems to warn against reading Jackie’s relationship with “the German boyfriend” Reiner as the same kind of pathology, or “people of color self-hate,” exhibited by Beli’s desire for Jack Pujols in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, by offering a complex rendering of her interiority: the description of her tumultuous feelings for Oku are fraught with conflicted feelings for her parents, while Reiner is described as predictable, safe, and separate, which suggests that her desire to be with him stems from more than just an idealization of whiteness. Jackie is arguably the most enigmatic of the young protagonists in this text; the fact that she is often not present in the narrative, but is instead being talked about by the other characters, affirms her independence. However, despite her separateness, Jackie does not seek to run away from the past entirely, refusing to cut her ties to Vanauley Way and her parents while at the same time owning her own store and refusing to give in to paralysis, negotiating the impossible space between independence and responsibility in her own way.

discrimination against Meera, a “mixed-race” girl who “grew up in the shadows cast” (154) by Adele’s house, is violently played out upon her body by neighborhood bullies (159).<sup>97</sup> Gendered pathologies of recognition are especially figured in the centrality of the “soucouyant,” a vampire-like creature of Trinidadian folklore, an old woman who lives alone at the edge of the village and by night sheds her skin and flames across the sky. In an ironic nod to the banality of violence against women, one of the only ways to discover her is to beat her with a stick: “In the morning, you’ll only have to look for an old woman in the village who appears to be beaten. Bruises upon her. Clearly the one to blame” (135). Another method is to find out where she keeps her skin and sprinkle salt onto it so that she cannot put it back on in the morning. The image of misfitting skin echoes recurrently in the book, most notably in the song that the soucouyant (and Adele) quietly sings to herself in the morning: “Old skin, ‘kin,’ kin/You na know me, / You na know me...” (134). The repetition of this song, which also serves as an epigraph to the book, reflects the importance of identity, memory and (mis)recognition as narrative themes that weave through the novel.

Adele’s son must somehow interpret the importance of the memory of the soucouyant that haunts his mother’s past. Eventually, the narrator uncovers that the real monster that his mother comes across as she walks along the path on a fateful morning of her childhood is not in fact the soucouyant as old woman/vampire, but something else altogether: “The creature smiled and beckoned her to horrors” (173). I suggest that the

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<sup>97</sup>. The performance of white civility and self-satisfied tolerance that emerge at Meera’s post-graduation party —“Look at all of the coloured people moving into the neighborhood lately... we ought to be a little prouder of ourselves” (163) —drives her to make a cruel crank call to the “wandering lady” Adele. Meera later realizes that this act has in fact caused her irrevocable self-harm, signaling the destructive internalization of abjection.

“creature” that beckons to Adele, the monster that she is forced to confront, is actually the horror of her own self-hatred and shame—the pathology of racial and gender recognition itself. In the box full of gifts that the white American soldier gives her, young Adele finds an apple, which she understands as “a promise that something else is possible” (188). The image of the apple, a non-tropical fruit transferred to the Caribbean, alludes to the quintessential garden metaphor for promise leading to bitter disappointment: the temptation of Eve by the apple in the Garden of Eden. Even though Adele later realizes that the inside of the apple is in fact “chalky and turned” (188), the irresistible promise of possibility draws her in. Like the shiny new cigarette lighter (also a gift from the soldier) that she uses, tragically, to set her mother and herself on fire, this promise becomes symbolic of the destruction wrought by self-hatred and the projection of that hatred onto significant others.

The internalization of mainstream views of race combined with a second-generation rejection of parental origins leads to various forms of self-disavowal which (like a symptom, which is buried but manifests nonetheless) is passed along physically, emotionally and linguistically in both of the novels. For example, the young narrator of *Soucouyant* is somehow proud that he “didn’t say *tank you*, like my parents. I said thank you” (Chariandy 150). This pride in pronunciation is clearly ambivalent: earlier in the narrative the reader has already witnessed his difficult introduction to the racialization of accents, when as a child he physically learns to pronounce this English diphthong with help from a special needs teacher: “Thhhhhh,’ she said in demonstration. ‘Thhhank you. Thhhhhhhank you.’ Bubbles and flecks of spit blew out of her mouth....It was the most

disgusting sound and gesture an adult had ever made to me” (102). The narrator’s disgust resonates both with Adele’s disappointment with the “chalky and turned” apple, and with his obsessive hand-washing after touching the bump of burned and imperfectly healed flesh on his “beautiful monster” of a grandmother during his one-time visit to Trinidad (116). In *What We All Long For*, as a child Tuyen renamed herself “Tracey because she didn’t like anything Vietnamese,” and rebelled “against the language, refusing to speak it” (Brand 21). Tuyen will only eat plain “potatoes” and white “milk,” even though her “stomach reacted violently to it” (130). She thinks of this self-inflicted “violent response as something to be conquered, like learning a new and necessary language” (130). It is significant that the second-generation rejection of parental origins involves a rejection of two of the most primal, nourishing elements imaginable: food and one’s maternal tongue. At the reception of his mother’s funeral, the narrator of *Soucouyant* “gorges” himself on “the most delicious food” that he has ever tasted: “I gorge and gorge and gorge, and then hurry to the bathroom to retch endlessly into the sink...and then return to the table to gorge some more” (143). Like his too-late realization of the beauty of the steel pan music played at the funeral—“How could anyone, including me, have failed to appreciate” that “it’s the most sorrowful instrument that humankind has ever created”?—it seems as though he cannot get enough of the “jerk chicken and roti and dal and rice” that is served after she is gone (142, 143). In *What We All Long For*, in contrast to Oku who had “learned to cook lovingly,” Carla rejects her father’s “language” and despises shopping for, preparing, and eating Jamaican food (131). Arguably, though, Oku’s cooking is in itself a form of rebellion against his own parents: “his father would probably not approve,

preferring the monoculture of Jamaican food, but Oku's tastes had expanded from this base to a repertoire that was vast and cosmopolitan" (133).<sup>98</sup> Here, the rejection of parental origins, while involving a self-destructive internalization, also points to an important desire to envision more positive spaces of communal identity.<sup>99</sup> In evoking Oku's "cosmopolitan" culinary repertoire, Brand is alluding to the way that these second-generation protagonists reject both national *and* parental stories of origins in favour of larger community identifications, exploring both the limits to and the tensions within the cosmopolitan impulses of the second generation.<sup>100</sup>

The protagonists of *Soucouyant* and *What We All Long For* expose and reject the constitutive limits of belonging by attempting to make their own ways within the anonymity and heterogeneity of the cosmopolitan city. At the same time, however, the rejection of origins goes hand in hand with the temptation to forget difficult histories, and a tendency to deny relationality: "Anonymity is the big lie of a city. You aren't anonymous at all. You're common, really, common like so many pebbles, so many specks of dirt, so many atoms of materiality" (Brand, *What* 3). In her examination of

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<sup>98</sup>. One city space in particular, Kensington Market, features prominently in both novels. Aside from being Oku's favourite haunt and where first generation parents shop in Brand's text, in *Soucouyant* it is where Adele and Roger meet for the first time. Nestled in the heart of Toronto's Chinatown, it was originally known as the Jewish market, but has developed into the place to find Caribbean, Asian, African, and Latino foods of all kinds. As a unique and colorful space within the cosmopolitan city, it is contrasted to the "whiteness" of suburban areas like Scarborough or Richmond Hill.

<sup>99</sup>. Elsewhere, Brand has claimed that "too much has been made of origins" (*A Map* 69) and, indeed, a quest for origins often becomes the central concern for both the dominant "host" culture, which clings to an exclusionary (white, settler) fantasy of national origins, as well as for newcomers, who wave "a white flag to the powerful for inclusion" while at the same time nostalgically longing for a past "back home": "each of these arguments select and calcify origins. Out of a multiplicity of stories, they cobble together a narrative glossing over accident, opportunism, necessity, and misdirection" (69-70).

<sup>100</sup>. For a thought-provoking collection of essays on the ethical and cultural possibilities of cosmopolitanism and its relation to nationalism, see Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah, *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*.



Brand's text, Brydon argues that unlike their parents, the second-generation characters in the novel eventually reject anonymity, claiming "their own subjectivity as part of an emerging multitude...claiming their own place on the map of the world through their familiarity with the streets, backways and subways of Toronto" (Brydon, "A Place"). However, at the same time that these novels thematize the second-generation protagonists' need to claim their own subjective place in the world, they also point out their misguided desire to forget the past in the process.

Immediately after ironically (defiantly?) uttering his carefully pronounced "Thank You" to Mrs. Christopher, the narrator of *Soucouyant* hands over every penny from the sale of his mother's house to her, even walking out of her apartment without his shoes. If Mrs. Christopher can be read as a representation of responsibility for first-generation disappointments, what does it mean that he gives absolutely everything over to her? In fact, by the end of the novel, the narrator has either given away or thrown out the entire contents of his mother's home: "I planned on saving some of the photos, but at the last moment I put them in a grocery bag to throw out" (153). At first glance, this extreme letting go, or rejection, of the familial past appears to be a second-generation strategy of forgetting in order to avoid the disappointments of the generation before and start anew. But memory is a strange and unpredictable thing, and as Meera notes it "never seems to abide by the rules of time or space or individual consciousness" (166). As discussed in the previous chapter, there is a tension in these narratives between the necessity of *actively* forgetting, the "value of forgetting" (Troeng, "Forgetting") as a kind of defence strategy—"Mother began to forget in far more creative ways" (Chariandy, *Soucouyant*

12) — and the spectral insistence of memories that will not be forgotten. These haunting memories are not personal recollections, but instead are memories that belong to others and are inherited through intergenerational transmissions of affect. In the next section, I examine the spectral and relational strategies that *Soucouyant* and *What We All Long For* employ in order to reflect upon the ghostly processes whereby relational histories, though over-written by dominant narratives, have a tendency to haunt the present, and the way that constitutive relationality has a tendency to re-assert itself despite attempts at self-mastery.

### **Diasporic Haunting, Relational Histories**

[I]t is not a question of exorcising ghosts, but rather, perhaps, of summoning them.

—Benedict Anderson, “Radicalism after Communism”

Knowing the history of this place means knowing the history of other places too. History is about relations.

—David Chariandy, *Soucouyant* (106)

The protagonists in both Brand and Chariandy’s novels must find some way of addressing the diasporic memories that haunt them and their families: this haunting importantly shapes and qualifies how they understand and pursue their multicultural or cosmopolitan futures, complicating their dreams of borderlessness by making them accountable to ethical demands that carry over from the past. In *Soucouyant* the narrator flees from the suburb of Scarborough to downtown Toronto, a “place of forgetting,” in search of “anonymity” as a way to avoid the pain of witnessing the progression of his mother’s dementia; in the city he meets “others who were fleeing their pasts, the discontents of nations and cultures, tribes and families” (30). In *What We All Long For*, Tuyen similarly runs away by refusing to live in her family’s suburban home in

Richmond Hill, instead choosing to live in an apartment on College Street: “Not that she hated her family. She just didn’t want to be in their everyday life” (Brand 303). She tries to escape into the public and autonomous world of her art, but in the end her family’s history returns, haunting her “again and again” (149), and she finds herself unable to get a handle on her creative work until she is able to reconcile her family’s place within it (and *vice versa*). Tuyen’s desire to pick and choose who she relates to reflects the contemporary notion of ‘cosmopolitanism’ as a matter of mobility and choice, and may represent a denial of relationality as much as an act of agency. The city is a space that is evocative of feelings of alienation, aloneness, and anonymity, and as such can be as oppressive as it is potentially liberating. The narrator of *Soucouyant* “abandoned everyone” of his past, thinking himself “completely anonymous in the city” (Chariandy 106), but is eventually compelled to return to his childhood home when he receives a package in the mail from the history-loving librarian from the library that he ‘haunts’ as a child.

Expanding upon my discussion of intergenerational memory and relational narratives from Chapter 1, in this section I explore the way that *Soucouyant* and *What We All Long For* employ narrative strategies that reappraise dominant history and diasporic memory. As in my discussion of Diaz and Cisneros’s texts in Chapter 1, the relationship between unspoken yet unbearably present family stories and the recurrence of family photographs in both of these novels can be read in light of what Marianne Hirsch has called “post-memory,” a structuring dynamic that represents second-generation memories of cultural or collective trauma as something very different than biological or genetic inheritance.

For example, in *Soucouyant*, a box that the narrator discovers in the basement of his childhood home upon his return is full of forgotten old family photographs, “lost images” of “relatives that I cannot name, although their moods and postures seem strangely familiar to me” (Chariandy 114). In *What We All Long For*, Tuyen’s “eyes took in every human experience as an installation, her lids affecting the shuttering mechanism of a camera” (Brand 206). She is called back to her family home by the (re)apparition of a ghost in a photograph that she has taken of a man she suspects is her missing brother Quy. Various photographs of the boy haunt Tuyen’s family, and when she “was little these photographs littered the house. Their subject was the source of strange outbursts and crying” (225-226). Even though her parents never explicitly mention their missing first-born son to Tuyen, she “couldn’t bear overhearing anymore” (64).<sup>101</sup> When Tuyen develops the surreptitious photos that she has snapped of the mysterious stranger with her brother Binh, sensing that she has a connection of some kind to this man, she “realizes that there is one interpretation that she needed to catch. The one that had led her memory to her mother’s photographs disappearing and reappearing” on the mantel of the family home (224).

While they are irresistibly drawn to these “lost images,” which are at once strange and familiar, in both cases the protagonists also feel inexplicably threatened by them. Even though the narrator of *Soucouyant* feels unconnected to the photographs he finds, they spark his memories of his grandmother on his one-time visit to Trinidad as a small

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<sup>101</sup>. Never having been told the “whole story” by her parents, Tuyen “had made sense out of nonsense” (Brand, *What* 59) and “had not even been able to get the story fully spoken” (69). She “not so much overheard as sensed...only able to gather in fragments...the story that haunted them” (65).

child. Tuyen's hip, urban self-composure begins to fall apart as she makes a ghostly connection between the face in the photos from the mantel of her childhood and the one in photos she has snapped of the mysterious stranger at the World Cup celebration. The prick of unconscious recognition that comes when viewing family photographs—what Hirsch, drawing on Roland Barthes, calls the “arresting anti-narrative wound of the *punctum*” (5)—is at the same time a moment of self-awareness.<sup>102</sup> For the young protagonists of these novels, “when it came to their families they could only draw half conclusions, make half inferences, for fear of the real things that lay there” (Brand, *What* 21). In his own reading of Brand's novel, Chariandy suggests that:

Tuyen and her companions encounter their ancestors' legacies of displacement and disenfranchisement not through official histories or even family tales, but through a doubly-willed circulation of feeling...the second generation awakens to its diasporic legacy not through a conscious communication but through an unconscious transmission of affect. (“Fiction” 826)

Unconscious transmission causes the second-generation protagonists to be unwillingly haunted by their parents' pasts, having inherited their sense of nostalgia. These protagonists participate in what Svetlana Boym calls “diasporic intimacy,” whereby the second generation inherits and rebels against their parents' nostalgia, while they are at the same time compelled by the losses of their parents in ways that are not fully conscious. This is the intimacy of un-belonging which is “not opposed to uprootedness and defamiliarization but is constituted by it. So much has been made of the happy home-coming that it is time to do justice to the stories of non-return to the place one has never

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<sup>102</sup>. Drawing on Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, where he meditates on photos of his own mother, Hirsch argues that family photos are “a very private kind of self-portrait revealing, unexpectedly, the most intimate and unexposed aspects” of oneself: “the picture of his mother provokes a moment of self-recognition which, in the reading process, becomes a process of self-discovery, a discovery of a self-in-relation” (Hirsch 2).

been” (Boym). For second-generation protagonists of the multicultural narratives that I am discussing, this “non-return” is figured in spectral and indirect ways.

The relational workings of post-memory suggest both that “our memory is never fully ours” and that photographs are never “unmediated representations of our past” (Hirsch 14). The uncomfortable and relational look that occurs when examining family photographs crosses borders of various kinds—then/now, here/there, me/you, male/female—spanning geographical places as well as historical epochs, and intersecting spatial, relational and temporal modes. Such memories are fraught with fantasies and desires that attach themselves as much to familial origins myths as they do to national ones. These visibly-raced protagonists do not find their own families reflected in the bright “blue” eyes that look out from the photos on property development billboards in this Toronto suburb (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 60).<sup>103</sup> Framed within (and mediated by) dominant national discourses of whiteness, the second-generation protagonists have a dispossessed relationship to their parents’ cultural memory.

Working the act of the protagonist looking at—and reacting to—family photographs into the narrative takes the photograph out of “the realm of stasis, immobility, mortification” and “into fluidity, movement” (Hirsch 4). It is another way to bring the past back into the present. Most importantly, the intergenerational haunting of memories in these novels challenges dominant versions of the history of multiculturalism in Canada: “Whatever the official story, her mother’s cache of photographs told another,

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<sup>103</sup>. In the context of Asian North Americans, Eleanor Ty develops the idea of “politics of the visible” to discuss “the effects of being legally, socially, and culturally marked as ‘visible’” while at the same time “invisible in dominant culture and history” (11-12). Perhaps it is significant that, as Tuyen’s family moves up in social status, the photograph of Quy that was omnipresent in her childhood “was not on the mantel of the house in Richmond Hill” anymore (Brand 226).

a parallel story, a set of possible stories, an exquisite corpse” (Brand, *What* 225). In an interview, Chariandy insists that the structure of *Soucouyant* is meant to reflect and embody the theme of spectral memories:

[D]ementia also became, for me, a way to explore the fragility of cultural memory, and how difficult it can be for us to know the past....[it] is about a mother who is forgetting the past, and her son who finds himself rather reluctantly piecing it all together. As such, the novel progresses in a non-linear and associative fashion— through *seemingly* random evocations of feeling, touch, memory and official history. Admittedly, this is a risky way of structuring a novel; but to structure it differently would likely have missed the point entirely. (Demers)

Chariandy argues that his novel is written out of an “urgent responsibility to rethink what the past means, to read ‘history’ more carefully or ‘against the grain,’ and to attend, more rigorously, to what may have been omitted from official records —oftentimes very deliberately by those who stand to benefit from such amnesia” (Demers). As Adele notes, “they does always tell the biggest stories in book” (Chariandy *Soucouyant* 175). Adele’s Caribbean-inflected voice challenges the ‘official’ voice of dominant history. Historical sources—“American engineers had whole libraries at their disposal” (176) — on the one hand, are contrasted to the kind of alternative recuperation of the past that is figured by the old “woman with the long memory and the proper names of things” (23) and Miss Cameron, on the other.<sup>104</sup> Near the end of the novel there is an even more noticeable interruption of the narrative voice, which suddenly shifts from personal and poetic to official, detached and ultra-rational. In a tone that strikes the reader as coolly ironic, this voice explains that the locals of the Caribbean island are “not mentally equipped to

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<sup>104</sup>. This is possibly a reference to Grace Nichols, a Guyanese poet who wrote *I is a Long Memored Woman*, which touches on issues of gender injustice, the legacy of slavery, and the voicelessness of immigration. In contrast to Miss Cameron, whose passion for local history finds its outlet in her position at the public library, the unnamed long-memored woman in this novel is comparatively voiceless.

understand the logic” (178) of the military operation, and that some of them “had even come to imagine that they had some sort of right to live there” (178).<sup>105</sup> This interruption of narrative momentum amounts to a parody of an ‘objective’ historical perspective on cultural genocide and forced removal: “The legacy of the base might in fact be rather more complicated and ironic than some have supposed. People trapped in the aftermath of slavery and colonialism had the chance to encounter the modern world, and to find their place in it” (179). Of course, the only thing that is “ironic” here is that the “place” that Adele and her mother are able to find within supposedly post-colonial Trinidadian structures represent very little improvement over slavery and colonialism.

Alluding to the haunting of historical narratives, Miss Cameron’s “passion for local history” contrasts with other neighbourhood residents who have “little genuine interest in the past” (105). She is the one that draws the narrator’s attention to details of Canadian history like the “‘Toronto Purchase’ of land from three Mississauga chiefs in 1787” (103). But Miss Cameron’s passion is not enough to teach him about the truths of his own family’s past in Trinidad. In Canada, the narrator feels that his own family “history is a travel guidebook,” a “creature nobody really believes in,” or a “foreign word” (137). Most importantly, aside from sending him the package that acts as the catalyst for his return to his mother’s house, the most important thing that Miss Cameron teaches the narrator is that “History is about relations” (106). By the end of the novel, the reader has experienced a retelling of the tale of the soucouyant from the perspective of the disenfranchised, drawing attention to ghostly trans-Atlantic slave ships —the sea with its

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<sup>105</sup>. Note the similarities to Jamaica Kincaid’s critically charged use of a detached voice in her work, particularly *A Small Place*.



“endless floors of bone” (182) —and neo-imperial military operations in Trinidad that “cut through layers of prehistory” (176). Despite this, like the memories that haunt the photos, the voices of the dispersed “still haunted the place” (181). The overwritten colonial history of Canada is signalled only in the names on the road signs Adele and Mrs. Christopher pass on their “adventure north” (87)—for example, “Tyendinaga” and “Long Sault”—while at the same time they refuse to stop and give a ride to “the first Indian they had seen in this country” (89). Similarly, in the opening chapter of *What We All Long For*, the narrator muses that all of the people riding the morning subway train “sit on Ojibway land, but hardly any of them know it or care, because that genealogy is willfully untraceable except in the name of the city itself” (Brand 4). The relational re(dis)covery process works through kinship and personal history, but opens up beyond it to encompass wider social relations.

For the young protagonists in these novels, a re-reading of history in order to uncover that which has been elided requires a reconsideration of the dominant structures of language that is used to describe the past, the present and the future. In *Soucouyant* there is a poetic “investment in naming the world properly and a wariness of those moments when language seems to spill and tumble dangerously” (Chariandy 127). The narrator refuses to identify with the condescending medical language used in the information on dementia given out by the doctor: “I put the pamphlet back and joined Mother in the living room, determined to see her my own way” (41). At one point in the novel the narrator fantasizes about his brother becoming a well-known poet, saying that he “understood the need for poetry because language can never be trusted and what the

world doesn't need is another long story and all the real stories have become untellable anyway" (129). The inadequacy of language is especially reflected in Adele's grasping for forgotten words. While desperate and sad, her made-up, hybrid Caribbean-English-mixed-with-dementia ironically often gets closer to the truth than established expressions do, echoing Oscar's disappointed but strangely appropriate malapropism in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, "everybody, he shook his head, misapprehends me" (Diaz 189). For example, Adele's insistence on using the word "eyestache" (Chariandy 92) for eyebrow is echoed by Meera on the very last line of the novel (196). The linguistic dominance of English in ostensibly multicultural (geographical or imaginative) spaces is in part belied by this second-generation affirmation of Adele's alternative linguistic framework, unmasking the presumed neutrality of language and exposing it as a site of racialization and enculturation. As Peter Hitchcock argues, the "Caliban clause in English" is the "delegitimation of the race- and class-bound hierarchies of appropriate language use...the weak spot in cultural hegemony where language is appropriated for ends not altogether English as a posited norm" (761). While maintaining a sense of suspicion when it comes to official versions of English, it is important to recognize multiple modes of expression, and pay attention to moments where the cracks in monolithic 'English' show that there are, in fact, many Englishes that carry their histories with them.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup>. Without falling prey to what Hitchcock calls the "emerging tendency to see English as simply a global conspiracy" (750), I suggest that it is still important to remain aware of the rise of what Robert McCrum has called "globish" to describe the phenomenon whereby the English language has become the world's *lingua franca*. At the same time that local uses of English represent acts of linguistic agency, across the globe native languages are disappearing fast as parents push to speak English-only to their children, as in the case of certain populations in Indonesia (Onishi) and Hong Kong (Yu).

In contrast to the dispassionate narration of official history, the language that Adele uses functions as “a way of telling without really telling” (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 66). In this way, the “unspoken ... past emerges in spectral forms, in uncanny moods and actions, in stories or even individual words that remain haunting or seductive, but are not, in fact, fully decipherable” (“Words”). Bombarded by dominant versions of history one must remain open to reading otherwise. Even if it is impossible to truly know the past, there are always signs to be read and fragments to be put together if only in a partial or incomplete way. For example, the narrator “couldn’t always control the signals that my body gave off” (101); Adele continually runs her fingertips along the “lacy script” (35) of her scars, “A Braille, it told a story” (24); the story of Roger’s socioeconomic disappointment is told through “his hacking cough, his body stinking of chemicals and mapped with heat blisters and funguses” (78); and he bequeaths the mole on his wrist—a “period,” a “full stop” —to his son, the narrator’s older brother, who sits at the dinner table “preoccupied with the task of arranging the macaroni on his plate into a series of commas without words” (25). The older brother murmurs, “exclamation point,” as he sits “mesmerized by a streak of bird shit on the office window” (26). This is the mysterious punctuation that is inscribed upon the unnamed narrator and his (similarly unnamed) brother’s life in non-linguistic ways. Adele “told, but she never explained or deciphered. She never put the stories together. She never could or wanted to do so” (136) for her sons.

Adele’s face is described by her son as simply “a question” (35). What I want to foreground here is the ambiguity of these signs, along with the material insistence of their presence: what does the persistence of these signs, particularly understood as a form of

questioning, entail? The mother's injunction to her son on the very first page —“You should step in” (7) —introduces *Soucouyant* as a deeply relational narrative. Like Celaya's coyote act for her grandmother and Yuniór's séance for Oscar in the previous chapter, the narrator in *Soucouyant* embodies Cavarero's idea that “who” someone is can only be “known” “through the narration of the life-story of which that person is the protagonist” (Cavarero viii). Because the “unifying meaning of the story, can only be posed by the one who lives it, in the form of a question,” it is only when the story is told by another that “the meaning of what otherwise remain an intolerable sequence of events” is revealed (2). This is quite literally the case when the person who is living that life is suffering from dementia. Perhaps the young narrator of this story remains unnamed to the very end of the novel because he is not, in fact, telling his own story. The son is, quite simply, “the narrator” of his mother's story: “There was once a girl named Adele,” he begins a story in third-person voice, but by the end of the telling their voices have become almost indistinguishable (180). “Mother, how can I tell the story if you don't listen to me?” and, “Child?” she shouts, “Is *I* telling this story or *you*?” (190, 45).<sup>107</sup>

*Soucouyant* is a narrative exploration of the way that relational memories are affectively and wordlessly passed on to others, silently seeping through the generations. For example, Meera “doesn't understand” why memory “never seems to abide by the rules of time or space or individual consciousness” (166). The narrator recognizes that “when you live with anyone that long, they tell you all sorts of things without ever meaning to do so” (82). Not unlike what happens to his Dominican counterpart Oscar

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<sup>107</sup>. On the back jacket of the novel Austin Clarke describes the narrative voice as “a man in the drifting soul of a woman.”

Wao, an intergenerational and transnational transmission of affect makes it so that “something seeped” into Adele’s son, “some mood or manner was transmitted” (101). This “something” affected not only his pronunciation —“I picked up my parents’ accent, including the inability to pronounce ‘thhh’” (101)—but is also responsible for his “eternal” sadness (119). In a porous, boundary-crossing manner, the narrator literally “steps in” for his mother. He is attempting to make sense of her life story before it is completely lost. However, in the process of narrating her life story, he is also himself being narrated *by* her: “I caught her reading me all the way through. The person I’d become, despite all of her efforts...a boy moping for lost things, for hurts never his own” (194). This is “the heaviness of a history that wouldn’t leave” (Chariandy 115). There is a certain ambiguity surrounding narrative agency here: the task of narrating is at once unchosen and chosen by children of diasporic subjects caught in the “complexities of constructing identity against transnational backdrops” (Petty 6). It is something that the narrator is steeped in but also has to deliberately “step in” to.

The second-generation youth in both novels try in vain to break away from their parents’ pasts, not wanting to repeat their mistakes and unable and/or unwilling to identify with their failures: “There’s obviously no ...hope of reasoning with that whole idiotic generation before me” (Chariandy 49), concludes the narrator after his exasperating encounter with Mrs. Christopher. At the same time, they are unable to make good on the sense of hope that the previous generation’s boundary-crossing has afforded them, especially when it comes to mixed-race relationships. *In What We All Long For*, Carla says of her Italian mother: “good or bad she must have crossed a border” in her love

for a black man (Brand 106). In *Soucouyant*, Adele and Roger are described as being of Trinidadian black and south Asian heritage, and as such “there was something special” in their relationship: “despite history and tradition, they had loved each other” (Chariandy 21). In both texts there is a sense that this is a hopeful transgression, even if it is as precariously balanced as Roger’s charming “tightrope act in the bustle around him” bicycle trick in Kensington Market (71), which is echoed again in his “tightrope act in the bustle around him” at work (81).<sup>108</sup> For her part, *What We All Long For*’s Tuyen had “wanted as far back as she could remember to not be” like her parents (Brand 69). Given that she is an artist who attempts to bridge the public and the private in her work— “the city was full of longings and she wanted to make them public” (151) — it is especially significant that, until her world and work is shaken by her photographs of the man who might be her brother Quy, Tuyen is almost obsessively self-absorbed and, at times, quite unsympathetic to those around her. For example, she is described in almost predatory terms when it comes to her longing for Carla, unthinkingly abusing her with her artwork and interpreting Jamal’s arrest as “grabbing” all of Carla’s “attention” (43; 231; 52). She “virtually destroyed” Mrs. Chou’s apartment for the sake of her artwork, steals money and food from her emotionally debilitated parents, deliberately misrepresents and

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<sup>108</sup>. As in the Latino narratives I examine in Chapter 1, there is a tricky balance when it comes to the relationship between filial and romantic love: *Soucouyant* ends with the touching yet “incredibly ordinary” image between Adele and her mother: “Each reaching for the other and then holding hands the rest of the way” (196) as well as with the suggestion that Meera and the narrator may begin a relationship together. Like their parents, the young protagonists in *What We All Long For* are “trying to step across the border of who they were” (213), but despite the suggestion that there is hope for the somewhat truncated yet hopeful narratives of Oku and Jackie, the ending is left undecided. Although the novel closes with Carla waiting expectantly for Tuyen to return, for the first time free of a weight of responsibility for her baby brother and able to imagine their future life together (and possibly challenging hetero-normative expectations), what she doesn’t know is that her own brother has just beaten the man who may be Tuyen’s brother to death—or almost to death: it is left up to the reader to decide whether or not he survives and what this might mean for the future of their relationship.

mistranslates in her dealings with them and verbally abuses her siblings (25; 56; 61; 68; 60). Although her brother Binh is no less self-interested—to the point of embodying the market ethics of global capitalism in his own business dealings which include the illegal traffic of goods and people—he is not completely wrong in his accusation that “you’re always pretending. People are real, eh? They’re not just something in your head” (Brand 156). In contrast to Tuyen herself, Binh “always wanted some kind of touching, even if it was painful. He always sought out the rawness of human contact, the veins exposed. She wanted to leave well enough alone. She was content to witness at a distance” (147). At least when it comes to her family, Tuyen tries to avoid being “tangled up in their presences” (126). Yet, despite her best efforts, she is consistently unable to separate her preoccupations about her family from her preoccupations about her art (155). Her desire for mastery in work and love amounts to a denial of relationality and, more importantly, to a denial of the contingency of birth: “‘Alike’—the word revolted her; it gave her some other unwanted feeling of possession. To be possessed, she thought, not by Binh only but by family, Bo and Mama, Ai and Lam, yes them, and time, the acts that passed in it, the bow, the course of events” (157). Whether she likes it or not, she is tied by an “invisible string” to her family, and, even though she “fled” from their history, in the end it finds her (267-268).<sup>109</sup> Until the end of the novel, when she actually finds comfort in her

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<sup>109</sup> The following passage from *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* refers to Belicia, but could almost just as easily describe Tuyen’s attitude to her family: “What did she know about her family except the stories she was told ad nauseum? And ultimately, what did she care? She wasn’t a maldita cigüapa, with her feet pointing backward in the past. Her feet pointed forward...Pointed to the future” (Diaz 81). Of course, to paraphrase Yuniors, whether or not you believe in relational histories, relational histories believe in you (Diaz 5).

“commonality” with her brother Binh (307) and in their shared experiences, Tuyen is unable to successfully envision her art installation.<sup>110</sup>

Importantly, not only do these novels draw attention to intergenerational relationships, but they also signal the importance of forging new forms of *intra-*generational relations. Perhaps a commentary on the limits of individualism in the global city, in both novels the conflicted relationships that the protagonists have with their siblings suggest the narrative and ethical need for the second-generation to come to some sort of new terms with itself. In *Soucouyant*, the mysterious absent presence of the narrator’s estranged older brother, the “poet,” is an important catalyst for his own coming-of-age. The narrator’s discovery of the “red metal toolbox” in the basement containing his brother’s old notebooks occurs at a climactic moment in the narrative. It is the startling visual representation of his brother’s real “poetry” on the pages of this novel, coupled with the stuttering, stunted, crossed-out attempts to spell the word “soucouyant,” represented in handwriting at the start of every chapter—“su,” “so,” ssooouccooo,” “souku,” “souuoyawn,” “soucu” — that force the narrator (and by extension the reader) to confront the possibility of his brother’s dyslexia. At this point he is called upon to make sense out of his brother’s desperate attempts to make sense of the world, and this moment in the text resonates powerfully with the wor(l)d-making power of relational narratives.

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<sup>110</sup>. *What We All Long For* might not be a traditional coming-of-age narrative, but certainly the portrait of Tuyen as an artist corresponds to the *Kunsterroman*, a prominent variation of the *Bildungsroman* tradition.



The call of obligation to the sibling's similar but unique experiences is also reflected in *What We All Long For*, with Carla and Tuyen shouldering the weight of fraternal responsibilities in different ways. Tuyen suspects that she has snapped a photograph of her oldest brother Quy, who had been lost by her parents before she was even born. More than just a return of the repressed of his own family's history as Vietnamese refugees (known in Canada as "Boat People") throughout the novel Quy stands in as a larger figure for contingency: "I didn't have a hard life. It was simply a life. A life like millions of lives. We may pretend to have control of things, but we don't" (200). Importantly, he serves as a reminder of the ruthless nature of global inequities, of how the "hopes" and "expectations" of "people like me" inevitably end in disappointment: "For some of us the world is never forgiving" (285). "I'm doomed to boats" (285) claims Quy, signalling the unchosen mobility of the world's most disposable populations, those Bauman calls the "vagabonds" of the world (*Globalization*). Echoing Thy Phu's critique of "detention photography" where the "indignity of the camera's scrutiny...does not merely document but also may even intensify the sufferings" (Phu 337) of detainees, Quy is wryly critical of the photographs taken for the consumption of the seemingly endless chain of "stupid new humanitarians" (Brand, *What* 288) at refugee camps:

Was it us or was it the photographer who couldn't make distinctions among people he didn't know? Unable to make us human. Unable to help his audience see us, in other words, in individual little houses or suburban streets like those where he came from. Had he done it, would it have shortened my time at Bidong? (9)

Rey Chow suggests that "engagement with otherness almost always involves some kind of imagistic objectification (of the other)," drawing attention to the fact that presumably 'natural' acts of looking are mediated by mechanical, cultural and narrative processes

(676). And Quy is all-too aware of the predatory nature of photographic representations of suffering that participate in the circulation of commodified images of tragedy, images which are too easily consumed by privileged (and fickle) viewers: “Other tragedies have overshadowed mine”, says Quy (Brand, *What* 74). He is only too aware of the global commercial dynamic whereby one tragic portrait of anonymous victims is quickly superseded by another. The fact that the narrative never confirms that this man *really is* Tuyen’s lost older brother, leaving just a hint of doubt in the reader’s mind to the very end of the novel, contributes to this sense of generic/interchangeable suffering. This crucial ambiguity haunts the novel, and prompts the reader to wonder if it makes any difference for our reading to know for sure whether or not this man is Quy.

Quy is a physical manifestation of a ghostly return that is inexplicably experienced by Tuyen as a very real threat: “she felt disoriented, drawn to the babyishness of the face against the body springy as violence” (227). Even though the face that appears in the photograph is the “face of a boy,” of a “baby, innocent and expectant,” she immediately senses that there is “something wrong about it” (208). Chow identifies a contemporary distrust of the visual image to represent the other—what she calls “iconophobia”—that has “become the predominant way of reading cross-culturally” (Chow 679). Instead of refusing to engage with otherness in the name of ethics, she suggests that perhaps there is an “ethics in the form of a de-idealization and disabling—of visibility’s complacency and supremacy...ethics as a capacity to produce aesthetic rupture, that critical distance from within the bounds of what comes across successfully as a conventional and crowdpleasing story” (687). This discomfiting and unsettling

experience of looking “would assume as its primary concern issues of collective responsibility and well-being with regard not only to the present but also to the past and the future” (679). Brand’s Tuyen is intensely unsettled by her own act of visual consumption; this man “was a ghost in her childhood, the unseen, the un-understood, yet here he was, insinuating himself” and just as he had “looked at her from every mantel, every surface...now she thought she had looked at him” (Brand, *What* 268). The word “insinuating” carries the connotation of an unsolicited contact with another, but it also emphasizes the fact that one has no choice but to respond in some way to this unwanted provocation; most importantly, in the act of “looking back at him” Tuyen finally recognizes herself-in-relation.<sup>111</sup>

Given the focus on familial narratives, what prevents these novels from devolving into a privatized logic of grievance, rather than analyzing the injustices that condition the lives of contemporary youth? The disturbing figure of Quy makes visible the way lives are managed and contained like all of those other flows of goods and information in times of neoliberal borderless markets. Abandoned in an unintentional yet radical way, the lost child Quy is a symbol of the failure of responsibility and protection of youth in this global system, and the violence of global exclusions that delimit the question of who is to be viewed as human enough to count. Quy is not only meant to appear as a (private) threat to Tuyen but is meant to feel like a (public) threat to us all, a threat that is dormant but “penetrating as the winter wind” (Brand, *What* 215). The first-person voice of this

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<sup>111</sup>. The engagement with photography in Brand’s novel signals “the importance and the necessity of looking at the very apparatus that had historically either refused to look back or did so only equivocally” (Phu 336).

narrator (who may or may not be related to Tuyen) not only disrupts the crowd-pleasing consumption of photographic images, but also—as a figure for global dispossession and (im)mobility—urgently interrupts the third-person omniscient narration about the four main protagonists.

Yet, despite the potential threat of Quy's resentment, in the end it is the "temperamental bundle" (278) that is Carla's younger brother who is the biggest threat of the novel: "danger was what Jamal was in at birth and what he had always gravitated toward" (237). Unlike Oku, who restrains himself from "sleepwalking" into the stereotype he is presumed to be, Jamal embraces criminality and close to the end of the novel takes a joy ride with his buddy Bashir to ritzy Richmond Hill. In a terrible twist of irony, Jamal beats Quy until he is "half dead" in a carjacking outside of Tuyen's parents' home, just moments before he is ostensibly to be reunited with them (317). What does it mean that in this novel the ultimate threat is (once again) the black male youth? Why does the story end so abruptly with this tragic encounter between these two figures, Quy and Jamal, instead of offering the reader a happy family reunion? These figures are both clearly maligned by fate, not fully responsible for the dreadful things that happen to them that may contribute to their becoming criminals, yet at the same time they steadfastly refuse to be cast in the role of "innocent." Quy knows that the aura of innocence "makes a story more appealing to some" (288), but he refuses to be viewed as such: "Don't expect me to tell you about the innocence of youth, that would be another story, not mine" (139). That this refusal of innocence is also echoed by Jackie in her determination to steer romantically clear of Oku might suggest that it is important to accept responsibility for

our ability to respond even (or maybe especially) when our entanglements with others are unwilling or unwelcome (91). Read in this light, the narrator of *Soucouyant*'s bewildering and seemingly rash gesture of giving all of his material possessions to Mrs. Christopher might similarly reflect a desire to take responsibility: "You think I've had it easy. You think I haven't paid any price at all. And so you want me to pay for what *you've* experienced. You want me to pay for all the things that have happened to *you*," he tells her (149). Although Mrs. Christopher's written record of "debt owing" might seem ridiculous to the reader, as if one could quantify or make an inventory of suffering in this way, the narrator's radical gesture suggests a willingness to finally own up to the "carpet stain that nobody would confess to" (148, 14). Even though "Justice don't never make anyone happy. Is just justice," there is still something ethical in this willingness to accept responsibility for the debt, and to avoid the easy excuse of innocence (149). As I will explore in the next chapter, child soldier narratives complicate questions of responsibility, countering the simplistic and reassuring "it's not your fault" and exposing that childhood 'innocence' is in fact willed (or not) by adult choices instead of being a natural state. Similarly, Chariandy's and Brand's second-generation protagonists' refusal to shirk responsibility interrupts the guilt/innocence binary and compels the reader to confront the consequences of global interdependence.

The figure that might be Quy engages in a relational (albeit imaginary) act of storytelling when, hearing laughter on the subway, "he rouses himself from going over the details of his life, repeating them in his head as if to the woman reading a newspaper next to him" (4). The importance of relationality is doubly emphasised in this passage,

given that the reader later learns that the laughter he hears on the subway is that of Tuyen and her friends. “I have these moments,” he says, “very dangerous, I feel scattered. But I’m here, and I feel like telling you the rest. Not because you’ll get it, but because I feel like telling it” (74). Even though it is a “dangerous” act, Quy feels compelled to tell his story, to be witnessed by another (even a complete stranger) in order for the fragments of his tale to cohere, in order to “battle lightness, non-existence” (74). Perhaps it is significant that Quy, as an antagonistic anti-hero, is the only narrator in this novel to make use of the second-person “you,” which directly implicates the reader him/ herself in his narrative act of self-making. As I outlined in my introductory exploration of *What is the What* and will explore in greater detail in Chapter 3, what is being demanded by the narrative voice in this structure of address is more than an aesthetic experience of empathetic identification: unable to ignore a global web of relations, the reader is called upon to recognize his/her own position of complicity. Addressed as a potential witness, the reader of this text “personifies the public demand that” the narrator “give an account” of himself, and “who serves as a synecdoche for (the shared assumptions of) a more general...society of readers” (Slaughter, *Human* 292). The way that the narrator addresses the implicated reader, while simultaneously taking the liberty of claiming membership in the “society of readers” that s/he addresses, calls attention to the exclusions and contradictions that structure that community. Quy says, “If you were a boy like me, you’d wise up soon enough to the way things get told and what the weight of telling is” (Brand, *What* 283). The reader is thus called upon to respond to the “weight” of this telling through an imaginative act of empathy: more than sentimental self-projection, this is self-

reflexive empathy would ideally go beyond the kind of multicultural tolerance or recognition that these narratives work hard to unmask.

### **(Mis)recognition, Beyond National Belonging**

Aren't we all implicated in each other?

—Dionne Brand, *Map to the Door of No Return*

In *Soucouyant* and *What We All Long For*, individual, community and national desires for self-containment and closure are challenged by the haunting of history and the force of relational narratives. If, as Hirsch suggests, postmemory is a “diasporic aesthetics of temporal and spatial exile that needs simultaneously to (re)build and to mourn” (245), I would argue that, rather than mourning as a “compensatory” and “aggressive action of normalizing closure” (Brophy, *Witnessing* 21), these narratives emphasize the melancholic and open-ended hauntings of the remnants of what has been lost. More than just explorations of the diasporic (Caribbean, Vietnamese, Africadian) communities of the protagonist’s parents, the narratives draw attention to the multicultural city itself, as a site where people with multiple relations to global history converge and relate, offering a vision of community with much wider identifications, but one that is not afraid to call discourses of universality to task. The process of growing up entails a separation from origins, on the one hand, and a reworking of self-other relationships and the establishment of new kinds of ties, on the other. Brand’s and Chariandy’s fictional investigations exceed typical frameworks for thinking about growing up in late twentieth- and twenty-first-century multicultural cities; in turn, the challenges they present to the myth of

multicultural tolerance in Canada prompts important new conceptualizations of knowledge, responsibility and belonging.

These novels draw attention to the relationship between recognition and antagonism and, in enacting relational narratives, establish the importance of the fact that “dialogue with others makes dialogue with oneself possible” (Oliver 87). Poststructuralist models of identity and identification —where every one of us necessarily wears our multiple identities and identifications in an imperfect fit — offer ways to re-think the nation.<sup>112</sup> Yet uncritical celebrations of fragmented, fragile and fictional (national) identity boundaries might be problematic in the neoliberal context of global flows of people, goods and capital, and it is important to question how ‘postmodern’ models of failure or impossibility can lend themselves to ongoing social and political critiques of multiculturalism that take ethical planetary relationality seriously. As the uneasy sense of un-belonging on the part of the second-generation protagonists in Brand and Chariandy’s narratives makes clear, not all identities are equally misrecognized.<sup>113</sup> Crucially, in their explorations of contemporary second-generation coming-of-age in urban Canada,

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<sup>112</sup>. For example, Richard Day uses a Lacanian model of identity, desire, and recognition in order to expose the “fantasy of unity” of the multicultural nation as social fantasy. Day exposes the presumed “naturalness” of the nation as a collective identity by examining how it is produced and performed at the level of state policy, intellectual production, and the popular imagination. Following the psychoanalytic structure of identification and desire, any identity, whether individual, group, or nation, is incomplete: this view of human subjectivity posits that the autonomous speaking subject is merely an illusory veil, covering over what is ultimately a fundamental lack at the core of the self. Therefore, if the ideal multicultural “nation” operates at the level of fantasy, then it can necessarily only be an “endless series of failed attempts” (43), which brings into question the very (im)possibility of multiculturalism, at least as it has been articulated thus far.

<sup>113</sup>. Not everyone can afford to adopt a suspicion of essence or identity: might the “social fantasy” of stable identity not still be a little bit useful for those who would seek to fight against race, class, gender or “ethnocultural” inequalities? Despite her eloquent critique of the existing “officially constructed identities,” Bannerji still argues for a *strategic* use of multiculturalism as social ideal in collective political struggles.



*Soucouyant* and *What We All Long For* offer a recasting of both intersubjectivity and responsibility, in the awareness that there can be no subjectivity without response-ability (as ability to respond to another). As such, they move beyond the pathology of recognition and towards a paradoxically productive understanding of such misrecognition.

In particular, the novels question the fantasy of national unity that takes the form of white nostalgia for a “city that doesn’t exist anymore,” a “city that perhaps never really existed, though you’ll sometimes hear people talking about it...where people cared for each other and children were allowed to play outside unattended...before the new dark-skinned troubles and the new dark-skinned excitements” (Chariandy, *Soucouyant* 69). Brand and Chariandy utilize narrative strategies that interrupt nostalgic conceptualizations of Canada as the ‘great white north.’ In order to address the absence or suppression of racial histories in the nation’s fantasized past, and to radically imagine alternative future possibilities, the pragmatic and idealistic aspects of official multiculturalism need to be constantly contested, scrutinized and re-defined. Bannerji points out that official discourses of multiculturalism in Canada have never been carried out within “power neutral” contexts (96) and, as Coleman argues, especially because “whiteness still occupies the positions of normalcy and privilege in Canada,” any “anti-racist activity remains hamstrung until we begin to carry out the historical work that traces its genealogy” (Coleman, *White* 7-8). When the presumed naturalness of the nation is demystified in the realization that (national as well as personal) identities are always already plural and fragmented, it might become possible to, as Kamboureli suggests,

“strive to form a community in which the recognition...of the Other is always also the failure to know that Other” (130). There is a certain sense of impossibility here, a “negative capability” that “both reveals the alterity of the Other and exposes the fallacy that dominant culture is transparent” or “fully knows itself” (130). As Judith Butler wonders, “is the relationality that conditions and blinds this ‘self’ not, precisely, an indispensable resource for ethics?” (40). It is not a matter of shared national identity or sameness but of finding other points of commonality. In the “friendship of opposition to the state of things, and their common oddness” that “held them together” (Brand, *What* 19) it is important to remain self-reflexive about connections across difference. These novels ask us to reconsider the ethics and politics of proximity and vulnerability, in the unpredictability of our friction-riddled encounters with others.

A self-congratulatory impulse emerges when many Canadians talk about multiculturalism, attesting to the fact that it is surprisingly easy to forget that “multiculturalism is not a post-conflictual state” (Goldberg, “Introduction” 30). Most importantly, multiculturalism in Canada should never be understood as a “thing” that has been achieved but as a “site for struggle” (Bannerji 120). The heterogeneity of any given space should not be a matter of tolerance or hospitality: Goldberg wonders, “in a world of difference, to what extent are we open and prepared—really open, really prepared—to live in a world of shared possibilities?” (“The Space”).<sup>114</sup> In a truly intercultural

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<sup>114</sup>. Given the re-reading of racial histories in these novels, the reader might be prompted to ask, instead of an ideal of multiculturalism, why not focus on projects to envision an anti-racist state, crucially different from one predicated on post-racial denial (or anti-race)? What visions of justice and incorporation would this offer, beyond a critique of whiteness parading as universalism? The critiques of tolerance and hospitality posed by these coming-of-age novels lead to an important question: given that multiculturalism is a reflection of reality, a state policy *and* an ideological project in Canada, who is to define what the ‘core’

environment, one of constant contestation and mutual transformation, instead of viewing this continual negotiation as antagonistic, perhaps it would be more apt to see it in terms of Tsing's productive "friction": "A wheel turns because of its encounter with the road....as a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogenous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power" (5). As Brand and Chariandy illustrate, an emphasis on constitutive relationality might lead to a responsiveness that goes beyond the antagonism characteristic of the dialectics of Hegelian recognition. Instead of thinking from the perspective of the "hospitality" of a global city—a word which, as Derrida points out, paradoxically includes "hostility" at its root ("Hostipitality")—perhaps it is more important to focus on the mutual transformation that occurs as an outcome of uneasy encounters with others. Brand and Chariandy represent Toronto in these novels as a geographical space full of contact zones where these kinds of continual and contingent negotiations —of the past, of (un)belonging—can occur. The challenges and failures of multiculturalism cannot be disconnected from the processes of neoliberal globalization that prompt 'post-racial' racisms and promote deepening inequality, and the failure of belonging that is illustrated by the young, visibly-raced protagonists of these coming-of-age stories must be seen in the context of an intensified battle over (national) resources. A diligent attention to the moments of friction, to working through the "cross-talk" (Brydon) of relational encounters, holds the promise of formulating new relationships to difference. In this context, instead of fearing the

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values are in an ostensibly heterogeneous culture? The *Globe and Mail* recently conducted an online chat about "What Makes us Canadian?" where the focus of the largely vacuous discussion was on reaching consensus on things like a national dish, a national animal, and a national plant: contenders included blueberries, perogies, and the caribou, which echoes quintessential literary focus on the landscape of Canada, and (in the case of the perogi) the continued nostalgic 'safety' of pre-1967 waves of immigration.

spectre of “civil disobedience” (Jiménez, “Ethnic”) and second-generation unease, perhaps the key is to embrace the productive (im)possibilities they represent. This unsettled (and unsettling) view of multicultural contestation and lack of closure is destined to “fail” (Kamboureli 130), but this failure might lead to new and more ethical ways of relating to others.

Toronto, the contemporary urban space featured in these novels, offers a unique stage upon which to connect with different others who share that space through the accident of birth or migration. In *What We All Long For*, the space of the city represents these “permutations of existence,” where “people...turn into other people imperceptibly, unconsciously, right here in the grumbling train...there’s so much spillage...lives in the city are doubled, tripled, conjugated.... It’s hard not to wake up here without the certainty of misapprehension” (Brand 5). At the same time that they produce a sense of alienation, fragmentation and “misapprehension”—understood here as mis-apprehension, or the failure to apprehend—multicultural cities also expose the fiction of individual self-containment and the chanciness of social relations. There is an openness here that resists closure. As Goldberg says, the potential of cities lies in the fact that “residents intimately live, work and intermingle within relatively restricted spatial areas...The experience of rubbing shoulders, the pressing of bodies, being thrown together in unexpected ways with the different, creates its own effect,” the politics of which “demand taking notice of others, attending to their condition, refusing to turn away too easily” (“The Space”). Like the jazz music enjoyed by the protagonists of Brand’s novel, where “every horn is alone, but they’re together, crashing” (*What* 229) the protagonist’s movements through the city

streets expose them to other people in unpredictable physical and sensory ways. The vague threat of global antagonism that Quy represents at the same time represents a positive energy in the novel, an idea that is embodied in the World Cup celebrations in Toronto. Oku conveys this ambiguity, this simultaneous sense of threat and hope: “Days like this are a warning. A promise...some world shit is coming down and some of us are ready and some not...I think it’s visionary. That guy just saw possibility” (Brand 210).<sup>115</sup> The man who might be Quy coldly asserts that he hasn’t the “heart for another city. It’s just that I haven’t the bones to reach my hand into another set of lives, feel the sweat of stupid dreams” (283). Even though by the end of the novel even this man has allowed himself to imagine a future in Toronto—“I’ll find someone to tell this story to” (312)—the reader is left with a sense of doubt regarding whether he will ever find a place in the city or a witness for his story, whether his identity will be corroborated, or even whether he will survive the beating. If, as Slaughter suggests, “literary personification produces a person capable of responding to my call” (*Human* 23), then how are we to understand the violent silencing of the only first-person voice in the text at the novel’s end? Given the unpredictability of our encounters with others, the sense of hope in these narratives is open-ended and far from guaranteed.

Instead of wondering whether there is in fact a “waning of belonging” on the part of second-generation Canadians, then, perhaps it is more important to remember two

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<sup>115</sup>. Through an exploration of the depiction of the World Cup celebrations within the novel, Buma argues that there is a sense of possibility in that the novel’s protagonists, failing to identify with their parent’s cultures or simply as “Canadian,” instead exist within a “global city,” an urban space that is not distinguished by its national status but from its connection(s) to other places in the world. Of course, it is also important to recognize the limitations of the corporate-driven, nostalgically nationalist versions of diasporic identifications that the World Cup foments.

things: first, that “the second-generation is Canadian —intimately so” (Chariandy in Dobson, “Spirits” 811) and second, that there is “no outside to the Canadian nation anymore” (Brydon, “Dionne” 997). For Brydon, this means recognizing “multilayered forms of citizenship and asymmetrical modes of belonging” instead of “singular notions of the citizens and national belonging” (“Metamorphoses” 14). The history of Canadian immigration and the continuing course of neoliberal globalization have caused mutual transformations in the geographical spaces as well as in the identities of those who live within them. Rinaldo Walcott suggests that “diasporic sensibilities speak to nation’s limitations and demands nations be remade in a constant and restless ethical search for home” (23). Going one step further, Boym echoes Butler and Kamboureli’s suspicion of narrative coherence when it comes to identity, extending the notion of “diasporic” to encompass all identity as nostalgic: “internal and external exiles from imagined communities” who “also long for home....might develop solidarity with strangers like themselves. An imagined community of reflective strangers? As utopias go, this might be a less risky one” (Boym, “Diasporic”). Forms of multi-layered engagement with others, lacking unity and coherence, might be considered a failure from another perspective. While it might be unsatisfying for those who are anxious about social cohesion, the challenge to dominant multicultural and (post)colonial narratives that these texts represent suggests that the ongoing critique of multiculturalism involves striving for what Kamboureli calls a “mastery of discomfort” (*Scandalous* 130). That is to say, a realization of impossibility while at the same time maintaining an urge to find ambiguous spaces from which to embark on a critical re-imagining of this being-together. Read through the

lens of “critical intimacy” (Spivak’s pedagogical transnational reading practice), *What We All Long For* and *Soucouyant* open pathways for imagining this global sense of intimacy. This vision, which reaches out toward planetary relations in an awareness of interconnectivity, suggests the need to lean toward “tentativeness over certainty” (Hirsch 15). Narrative explorations of the ethics of tentativeness can help us think through the question of how to keep a productive unsettling of national—as well as neoliberal and trans-national—epistemologies open and unfinished, without falling prey to the desire for ‘unity’ or closure. According to Brydon, forms of critical intimacy when it comes to reading literature require “openness to others” in “imaginative co-presence” (“Dionne” 997). Perhaps this imaginative openness to others is a metaphorical and planetary version of bumping into difference on the subway without looking the other way.

### CHAPTER THREE ~ TROUBLING HUMANITARIAN CONSUMPTION: RELATIONAL STORYTELLING AND AFFECTIVE GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP IN AFRICAN CHILD SOLDIER NARRATIVES

But it ain't just because we want to  
We ain't got nowhere we can run to  
Somebody please press the undo  
They only teach us the things that guns do  
—K'naan, "ABC's"

[E]very time you ask child soldiers to tell stories, it leads to trouble.

—Delia Jarrett-McCauley, *Moses, Citizen and Me* (133)

This chapter explores the global North's contemporary fascination with child soldier narratives. Produced largely for the consumption of English-speaking consumers, these narratives are often written in the interest of drawing attention to—and garnering support for—efforts to demobilize, rehabilitate and reintegrate children who are drawn into armed conflicts around the world. It is estimated that there are currently around 300,000 child soldiers in over 18 countries, and approximately 40 percent of them are in Africa. This number is on the rise: despite concerted global efforts to stop the practice, the UN Special Representative for the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy, has called for crackdown “on countries and rebel groups” that continue to “use children to wage war” in places such as Burma, Philippines, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (“UN Names”) and UNICEF has expressed alarm about the growing use of child soldiers “by numerous armed groups” on “opposing sides” of the conflict in Somalia (“After”). Although child soldiering is not a new phenomenon, since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 and the signing of the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed



Conflict in 2002 by most (but not all) UN member nations, research about, as well as socio-political, legal, and cultural discourses surrounding, child soldiers has increased significantly. From the frenzied media attention related to former Liberian leader Charles Taylor's gift of "dirty looking stones" (Davies) to supermodel Naomi Campbell, to the seemingly endless string of Hollywood films and/or documentaries produced in the past few years dealing with African child soldiers, to the many international organizations that have been set up with the aim of drawing attention to the issue through public and popular education, it is clear that by mid-decade of the twenty-first century the child soldier had become an "American pop icon" (Ochieng).<sup>116</sup> Given that the vast majority of people that consume cultural representations of child soldiers come from the very nations of the

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<sup>116</sup>. Organizations include including "Invisible Children" (who raise awareness by pairing high school students in the U.S. with war-affected children in Uganda); "War Child International" (a UK, Dutch and Canadian organization started in response to the Bosnian war, and linked to musicians like Brian Eno); the "Child Soldiers Initiative" (led by retired Lieutenant-General Romeo Dallaire in partnership with Ishmael Beah and other "private partners"); the designation of February 12<sup>th</sup> as "Red Hand Day," a worldwide initiative to stop the use of child soldiers; and a Red Cross campaign featuring life-sized cardboard cut-outs of (white-skinned and blonde-haired) children holding AK-47s in the Adelaide railway station in order to raise awareness about the Geneva Conventions, just to name a few examples. Popular films and documentaries include: *God Grew Tired of Us: The Story of Lost Boys of Sudan* (2006) produced by Brad Pitt and narrated by Nicole Kidman; *Blood Diamond* (2006) directed by Edward Zwick and starring Leonardo di Caprio; a French cinematic adaptation of Emmanuel Dongala's novel *Johnny Mad Dog* (screened at Cannes in May 2008); *Kassim the Dream*, a film about former child soldier turned champion boxer Kassim Ouma (screened at the Tribeca film festival in April 2008); *War Child*, a documentary about the life of Sudanese child soldier Emmanuel Jal directed by C. Karim Chrobog (2008); *Feuerherz* (2008), a German-Austrian production by Italian director Luigi Florni a film adaptation of Senait Mehari's memoir *Heart of Fire* that was screened at the Berlin Film Festival; *The Silent Army*, by Belgian writer-director Jean van de Velde, which was shown at the 2009 Cannes Festival and was selected as the official Dutch entry for the Oscars; *White Material*, a French film screened at the 2009 Toronto International Film Festival; *War Don Don*, a documentary about the controversial trial of Sierra Leone rebel leader Issa Sesay by filmmaker Rebecca Richman Cohen (2010); and a Canadian documentary about three Ugandan woman abducted into the Lord's Resistance Army, *Grace, Milly, Lucy...Child Soldiers* (2010), directed by Raymonde Provencher, which was screened at the 2010 Hot Docs Film Festival in Toronto. *Girl Soldier* is in production, a film adaptation of Kathy Cook's *Stolen Angels* about girls abducted into Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army, starring Uma Thurman with rumours of George Clooney being slated to play the role of Canadian peace-worker Dr. Ben Hoffman. Despite this apparent wealth of recent cultural material on child soldiers, it seems as though only the film *Ezra* (2007), a French/Nigerian production directed by Newton I. Aduaka and screened at the Sundance Film Festival, has been lauded as giving an "African perspective on the disturbing phenomenon of abducting child soldiers" (IMDB entry).

global North that produce the world's weapons, how is it possible for them to be shocked to see them in the hands of children, especially considering President Obama's recent presidential memorandum stating that it is "in the national interest of the United States" to grant waivers from the Child Soldiers Prevention Act (and extend military aid) to Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Yemen (LaFranchi)? What is more, how do we explain the West's lurid and hypocritical fascination with African child soldier narratives, especially given the utter militarization of youth culture (most vividly in North America)?<sup>117</sup>

Given that "there is nothing new about child soldiers"—indeed, "children have picked up weapons and been forced to run from those who want to drag them into war for as long as wars have existed" (Mengestu) —how might we explain the current demand for stories of unimaginable cruelty, displacement and 'stolen innocence'? More than an analysis of the phenomenon of child soldiering itself, in this chapter I am interested in how the figure of the child soldier is being framed in discursive representations: that is, how is this figure being mobilized and challenged, and what imaginative cultural and political work is being performed in such narratives. Discursive representation of child soldiers as "figures of a popular imagination" are often "far removed from more nuanced social realities" (Comaroff and Comaroff, "Reflections" 236), therefore, what do these representations (and the reception of them) signal to us about the particular anxieties of late capitalist global contexts?

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<sup>117</sup>. Indeed, children in North America are themselves educated within a dominant logic of militarism and militarization, from incessant video gaming, popular cultural narratives of soldiers and private contractors, Junior Reserves Officers' Training Corps recruitment on high school campuses (in the U.S.) —which particularly targets young people from poor and minority communities (Savage; "Yo Soy")— to the general suffusion of the military point of view in the news media.

Even though more than half of the conflicts involving child combatants do not take place on the African continent, the vast majority of popular cultural representations of them feature African child soldiers. In this chapter I will examine selected autobiographical and fictional representations of the African child soldier experience to consider what important questions these texts raise about 'Africa' and 'Africanness' as constructs that are produced and consumed in the non-African world. What challenges do these stories (as limit-cases that depict coming-of-age under atrocious conditions) pose to the contemporary *Bildungsroman* genre? Iweala explains that "as African writers we have a compulsion to tell our own stories" even though "there can be an expectation for stories about Africa to be about suffering, death and destruction...but for too long we had to listen to other people, non-Africans, as they attempted to tell our stories" (quoted in Cowley). Given the ease with which such narratives are absorbed into the self-congratulatory rhetoric of the civilized West versus Africa as impossible different 'dark continent,' it is important to question whether it is a matter of "Africans telling their own stories," or whether they are "merely signs of our appetite for tales of 'savagery'" (Cowley).<sup>118</sup> Identifying a "'sinister side' to our fascination with Africa," Iweala wonders whether "this resurgence of interest in Africa and its issues indicative of a genuine desire to see change" or if it "merely reflect[s] that Africa has been centre stage for the past two or three years, even if it is now being edged out by the new celebrity cause of global

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<sup>118</sup>. For a discussion of some of the complexities of the challenges of the (self-) representation of violence and war in Africa, see Mbembe's "African Modes of Self-Writing."

warming” (quoted in Cowley).<sup>119</sup> Alexandra Schultheis argues that “child soldiers (real or imagined), particularly when viewed as wayward products of technological advances in light weaponry, faulty family structures, and postcolonial statehood, seem to mark a failure in discourses of modernity” (33). Furthermore, Mamdani’s suggestion that if “the Nazi Holocaust was testimony to the crisis of the nation-state in Europe, the Rwandan genocide is testimony to the crisis of citizenship in postcolonial Africa” (39), is also registered in the anxiety-ridden discourse surrounding African child soldiers. In contemporary Africa, those subjects that exist within and between James Ferguson’s “points” of mineral extraction enclaves also often exist between the points of citizenship (*Global Shadows*). It is important not to underestimate the role that transnational mineral extraction plays in fuelling contemporary conflicts involving children (who are used as miners as well as soldiers) as the ongoing conflict in Rwanda and Congo to control resources such as Coltan (columbite-tantalite) —a valuable mineral which is used in cell phones and computer chips— illustrates (Nolen). Neoliberal globalization “divides the planet as much as it unites it” (*Global 4*), and one must critically question the nature of this unity. It is important to recognize claims to social and economic rights by those who are normally excluded from such rights as claims “to the rights of a common membership in a global society” (Ferguson, “Mimicry” 564). In this chapter, I explore the visions of citizenship and community that emerge in and from these stories, focusing especially on the way that each text not only features local community ties, but also forcefully makes a

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<sup>119</sup>. In some cases, African conflicts and global warming are directly related to one another: “environmental degradation and the symptoms of a warming planet are at the root of the Darfur crisis” (Polgreen).

critical claim to membership within a (re-imagined) global community, registering a similar kind of planetary consciousness to the narratives I examined in Chapters 1 and 2.

How are we to hear the voice of the child soldier, as a quintessential figure of the voiceless, when it asserts itself within an imagined community of writers/readers of literature? Given that “choice of audience is political” (Egan 122), I want to examine what these narratives suggest about the relationship between the spaces where child soldiers are being used and the spaces where narratives about them are being consumed. For example, autobiographical child soldier narratives respond to a demand for stories of violence, displacement and lost childhood within the context of what Schaffer and Smith characterize with due circumspection as the “decade of life narratives” (1). This demand is both ethically- and market-based. After a short consideration of the way universal development narratives, the discourse of childhood ‘innocence,’ and the limits of citizenship converge when it comes to the child soldier, I will examine the life narratives of three former child soldiers: Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Senait Mehari’s *Heart of Fire: One Girl’s Extraordinary Journey from Child Soldier to Soul Singer*, and Emmanuel Jal’s *Warchild: A Boy Soldier’s Story*. As in Eggers’s *What is the What*, in order to side-step generic expectations these narratives employ indirect and relational narrative strategies that register a highly critical sensibility, challenging complacent readings even as they inevitably participate in what Illouz has called “therapeutic biography” mode (quoted in Barnard 9). I will then examine fictional renderings of the child soldier experience in a reading of Uzodinma Iweala’s novel *Beasts of No Nation*, Chris Abani’s novella *Song for Night*, and Delia Jarrett-MacCauley’s novel

*Moses, Citizen and Me*. These texts use similar strategies to signpost the difficulty of representation, urge us to question the universal category of humanity and point toward the urgent need to imagine a sense of global responsibility and global solidarity.

In different yet interrelated ways, the autobiographical and fictional narratives in this chapter draw attention to the inadequacy of Western frameworks, pointing to the necessity of recognizing and imagining other ways of telling and healing. Indeed, there are already non-Western methods of telling and listening to stories of suffering, and “community-based strategies” have proven to be “more effective in the reintegration of these children than approaches that are rooted in Western clinical psychology” (Wessels quoted in Ochieng). Far from merely being passive victims, a “parallel storyline to the dominant discourse of trauma” in these narratives “is the story of resilience, coping, and adaptation” (Ochieng).<sup>120</sup> Instead of focusing on these children as a ‘lost generation,’ perhaps it is important to consider their remarkable powers of regeneration and creative adaptation. The kind of agency exercised by children within such violent contexts can, however, be a “double-edged sword,” and “some children deliberately seek combat and find meaning through wielding the power of the gun” (Wessells 74).<sup>121</sup> Interestingly, each of the representations of child soldiers that I look at in this chapter trace a movement away from the power of the gun (as quasi- fetishized object as well as a signifier of community) and toward the pedagogical/healing power of the pen, crayon and/or

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<sup>120</sup>. Carolyn Nordstrom coins the phrase “war-scapes” to describe spaces of conflict as symbolic processes as much as physical places, and focuses on de Certeau’s idea of “tactical agency” to recognize how, even when children’s choices are highly constrained, they exercise forms of agency nonetheless.

<sup>121</sup>. In an interview for the *New York Times*, the reporter asks a Somali child soldier about his experience, and he responds, “I enjoy the gun” (Gettleman). Of course, the same thing might be said of young people in the global North who wield the “power of the gun” often against their own teachers and classmates.

microphone, marking a clear shift in technologies of self and community. These narratives emphasize both vulnerability *and* resilience, and the biggest source of both vulnerability and strength are to be found in relations with others. It is important to ask to what extent such (relatively) happy endings are encouraged by publishing houses who realize that redemptive narratives sell much better than stories of children whose lives have been physically, psychically and socially crushed. Yet, in their critical deployment of indirect (yet insistent) relational narrative strategies and open-endings, these narratives do not offer unambiguous visions of redemption for their young protagonists.

There is a great deal of anxiety surrounding young people, who are everywhere deemed to be in ‘trouble’ in the twenty-first century. However, if we read troubled youth in Judith Butler’s sense as troubling figures that spark the “productive unsettlement of dominant epistemic regimes” (Comaroff and Comaroff, “Millennial” 268), then it is important to pay attention to the unsettling work that is being performed in indirect ways in stories that are told by and about child soldiers. These narratives make ethical demands on Western readers specifically, holding them accountable for their own response. Yet, how is it possible to summon relationality in readerly engagements with these tragic coming-of-age narratives when the reality of African children is always already so exotic, so radically unlike (or so we imagine) the situation of ‘our’ own children? As McClennen points out, “endless difference negates the possibility of politically ethical comparison” (McClennen 10). I suggest that these narratives succeed, at least potentially, in coaxing the reader into recognizing the vast networks of complicity in, and responsibility for,

what happens in such preternaturally violent spaces, drawing attention to the need to rethink planetary relations.

### **Development Narratives, Shifting (the Limits of) Citizenship**

The shift away from the nation-state—articulated eloquently by a subject who demands our attention, yet exists beyond even fictional citizenship—challenges both postcolonial theory and human rights discourses in their ability to negotiate competing claims of the representability of and political responsibility for African child soldiers within a global marketplace.

—Alexandra Schultheis, “African Child Soldiers and Humanitarian Consumption” (37)

Before moving on to explore a selected set of autobiographical and fictional narratives, I would like to briefly examine the way that Western developmental models of childhood interact with universal (human) rights and gender/racial stereotypes in discourses surrounding the child soldier. As Schultheis argues, while the “cultivation of humanitarian empathy and possibly even a desire to alleviate the suffering of others...certainly remains a laudatory goal...the terms defining the relationship between humanitarian and ‘victim’ depend on global structural inequalities, masked by a discourse of universalized childhood” (35). Within these overlapping discourses, childhood is imagined to be universally a time of innocence and potentiality, even though cross-cultural and historical views of childhood differ widely.<sup>122</sup> While “cultural meanings and social attributes ascribed to ‘youth’ have varied a great deal across time and space” (Comaroff and Comaroff, “Reflections” 235), in contemporary Western imaginations the very pairing of the words “child” and “soldier” seems contradictory, and even

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<sup>122</sup>. Even in Western culture, the idea of childhood has proven to be a modern historical construct (see Ashcroft; Comaroff and Comaroff, “Reflections”; Rosen).



oxymoronic. Indeed, our “emotional logic” tells us that “something is clearly and profoundly wrong when children are soldiers” (Rosen 1).

As a category, childhood is a contested domain with no fixed meaning, yet the modern narrative of childhood as undeveloped potential has been encoded in the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which constitutes a “compilation and clarification of children’s human rights” and sets out “the necessary environment and means to enable every human being to develop to their full potential” (“Convention”).<sup>123</sup> In *Human Rights Inc*, Slaughter identifies a similar development narrative at work in the *Bildungsroman* genre, where children are always already to-be-developed individuals who will eventually be incorporated into the community as citizens. I suggest that in the discourses surrounding African child soldiers, developmental presumptions about children also intersect with modernist narratives about Africa’s place within the global community: “what attracts immediate and superficial attention to Africa’s child soldiers...is that the brutal existence of a child soldier dovetails neatly with depictions of Africa both as a place born of hell and misery and as a continent that, like a child, can be saved” (Mengestu). For example, Ashcroft points out how the historical invention of childhood is a “necessary precondition of imperialism,” because the modern legacies of theoretical discourses like that of Freud and Marx explicitly link childhood innocence with “primitivism” (Ashcroft 37).<sup>124</sup> The ideological parallel between the (undeveloped) child

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<sup>123</sup>. The CRC is a comprehensive, internationally binding agreement on the rights of children, and was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989.

<sup>124</sup>. From Locke’s view of the child as *tabula rasa* to Rousseau’s romantic child as “state of nature,” the child, “signifying a blank slate, an innocent of nature, a subject of exotic possibility and moral instruction, as well as a barbarous and unsettling primitive, suggests an almost endlessly protean capacity for inscription and meaning” (Ashcroft 42).

and the (undeveloped) savage also provides the link between the modern invention of 'childhood' and the logic and justification of the imperial project: troped as a "child of empire," the "colonial subject is both inherently evil and potentially good," justifying the "parent's" "own contradictory impulses for exploitation and nurture" (36). In this way, the "concept of the child became of great importance to the imperial enterprise because it actually embodied a contradiction which enabled it to absorb the contradictions of imperial rule" (Ashcroft 39).<sup>125</sup>

Importantly, the image of the child soldier—who, like Slaughter's immature subject, must eventually be incorporated within the frame of modern individual citizenship—also stands in for the continent of Africa, a passive victim of its own inevitably violent nature who must somehow 'develop' in order to be incorporated, in a spatiotemporal sense, into the 'civilized' world. The transatlantic history of slavery and colonization launched Africa into the "never-ending *process of brutalization*" (Mbembe, *On* 14) that continues to this day under various guises.<sup>126</sup> Ferguson's analysis of "Africa's contemporary place-in-the-world" in *Global Shadows* sheds light on the way that colonial representations of Africa have persisted and shifted in the context of neoliberal globalization. Ferguson argues that in contemporary development narratives, African countries are imagined to not only be "at the bottom" but also "at the beginning" of the narrative of modernity, but that the reality of contemporary global capitalism means that

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<sup>125</sup>. Of course, the idea of childhood as a special time of innocence and protection was not universal, even within the West: the "industrial revolution attacked childhood" by exploiting children as cheap labour, while the concept of childhood was only really "kept alive by upper and middle classes" (Ashcroft 41)

<sup>126</sup>. Ever since colonial conquest, Africa has been "the supreme receptacle of the West's obsession with, and circular discourse about, the facts of 'absence,' 'lack,' and 'non-being,' of identity and difference, of negativeness—in short, of nothingness" (Mbembe, *On* 4).

the vast majority of Africa exists in the “shadows” of this developmental dream, forever denied “the real thing”; quite to the contrary to popular assumptions, capital does not “flow” seamlessly about the globe, but in fact “hops” around it, from “point to point...skipping over most of what lies in between” (Ferguson quoted in West 154). The vast majority of the African continent, in fact, lies “in-between” these “points,” and “even though foreign investments do connect the continent to the global economy, they do not really integrate Africans into higher forms of production that generate a broad range of goods and services” (Mortimer 204). Shifting global power structures have changed the way wars are fought, and transnational mobilities might be a better frame for understanding (post)modern warfare: “War machines have emerged in Africa during the last quarter of the twentieth century in direct relation to the erosion of the postcolonial state’s capacity to build the economic underpinnings of political authority and order” (Mbembe, “Necropolitics” 33). For example, “no longer contained by the boundaries of a territorial state” (32), Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army (eradicated in Uganda only to retrench itself within the Democratic Republic of Congo) is only one current embodiment of these mobile fighting units, which are becoming the norm rather than the exception in contemporary post-colonies.<sup>127</sup>

The mobilization of youth for the purposes of conducting warfare is neither a contemporary nor a solely non-Western phenomenon: “those not yet deemed ready to live as full citizens of the nation-state have been called upon to die for it” (Comaroff and

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<sup>127</sup>. Goldberg extends this “necropolitical” impetus far beyond Africa: “for a necropolitics gone global, the right to kill is no longer restricted to state institutionalities, challenged as they now are by their own, necrophilic, suicidal spin-off action figures” (*Threat* 143). As Susan Searls Giroux points out, “far from frozen in prehistorical past, as Hegel once insisted, Africa appears often to function as the test-site for the to-come” (8).

Comaroff , “Reflections” 241).<sup>128</sup> However, even though children have participated in war for centuries, Alice Honwana suggests that what is different in the twenty-first century is not only the visibility of civil wars “but also that children are more deeply involved: in some places, they form a substantial proportion of combatants” (1). There are a multitude of social, political, and economic factors that lead children to become soldiers, through a complex “accumulation of risks” (Wessells 27) that need to be considered. According to the official definition:

A child soldier is any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms. (Cape Town Principles)

Given this broad –ranging definition of the child soldier, how do we explain the persistence of the mediated image of figure of ‘The Child Soldier’ as a small, barefoot black African boy wielding an AK-47? Increasingly, the girl soldier “embodies the new face of armed conflict, for girls now serve as combatants on a much wider scale than ever before” (Wessells 102) yet, until very recently, this reality has seldom been reflected in cultural representations.<sup>129</sup> How can we explain the persistence of specific racial and gendered images of the child soldier? I suggest that it might in part be because the image

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<sup>128</sup>. Indeed, “at the core of the making of modern youth...has been the role of the state in naturalizing, exploiting, and narrating the relationship between juveniles and violence” (241).

<sup>129</sup>. Because of their relative invisibility, reintegration is especially difficult for girl combatants. The stigma of sexual exploitation that attaches itself more visibly to girls (in the form of babies and/or HIV infection) and so reintegration into the community is often “far more stressful” than her “attempts to ‘cope’ with what she had experienced in the bush” (Ochieng). There is a clear gender gap in child protection strategies, and girls are more at risk of suffering post traumatic stress disorder than boys (Jayatunge). For example, despite the rampant use of girls as sex slaves and sometimes combatants in the Democratic Republic of Congo, “girls are less likely to be freed than boys; they continue to suffer systematic and repeated rape...less than 20% of the former child soldiers under the care of UNICEF are girls” (“Girl Soldiers”).

of the child soldier participates in discourses about what Comaroff and Comaroff identify as “one global feature of the contemporary world”: that is, “a sense of crisis surrounding the predicament of juveniles” due to the “workings of neoliberal capitalism and the changing planetary order” (“Millennial” 307). The common association of certain youth with “the threat of precocious, uncontained, physicality—sexual, reproductive, combative—has haunted popular and scholarly perceptions alike” (“Reflections” 273). As I explored in the previous chapter in my discussion of *What We All Long For*, the quintessential figure of “youth” that is perceived to be in crisis is not only male, but is also black (274).

Identities are never fixed, and this is especially the case when it comes to young people who are caught in the complex process of growing up: “children’s identities, even more than adults, are multiple, fluid and contextual” (Wessells 84). The negotiation between the identity of “victim” and “perpetrator” is particularly complicated given that a common strategy used by state and non-state armed fighters alike is that of turning victims into perpetrators by forcing them to kill or rape family members or neighbours in order to make it difficult for them to return to their home communities. Honwana suggests that most contemporary civil wars using child soldiers represent a “total social crisis” (1), leading to (and in part resulting from) a complete breakdown of community; war “redefines the horizons of their experience and transforms the social contexts in which they develop...violence and killing are normalized” (Wessells 44). For such children, “adaptation to life in an armed group entails a process of resocialization that may reshape behaviour, roles, values and identities. In its extreme form, the process

involves both taking apart and remaking the child” (57). This (re)educational process is reflected in each of the child soldier narratives that I explore later in this chapter.

The line delimiting ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ is reified within human rights frameworks where, in the name of child protection, one must emphasize the innocence of former child soldiers in order to advance their rehabilitation and reintegration into communities that may reject them, seeing them as “vehicles of violence rather than citizens who can build peace (3). As Rosenbloom suggests, the issue of child soldiers has “challenged the depiction of children as cute and raised complicated questions about child agency” (109). Children are neither passive, blank slates waiting to be written upon, nor are they “irrational or prelogical beings”: interacting with the social order, children shape as much as they are shaped by the world around them, and have surprising “capacity to act and to exercise power, even in situations not of their making” (133). There are currently on-going debates in legal theory about how to deal with former child soldiers: should they be seen as “innocent victims of political circumstances who should be protected and forgiven? Or as moral agents who should be held responsible for their actions?” (Rosen 157). The presumption that children do not exercise choice (however circumscribed that choice might be in any given context) simultaneously robs children of their agency and takes away their accountability: as Rosen points out, “neither demons nor victims are rational actors” (134). At the same time that it is important to recognize child agency, however, it remains important to acknowledge the physical, emotional, intellectual and material influence that adults have over children.

The politics of age, gender, religion and ethnicity intersect with the limits of universal human rights and citizenship when we consider the apparent distinction between the African child soldier—presumed to be in need of protection and rehabilitation—and the discourse of the “unlawful enemy combatant,” as evidenced in the case of Canadian Guantanamo Bay detainee, Omar Khadr. Khadr was fifteen years old when he was pulled from the rubble after a 2002 firefight in Afghanistan, after having been shot in the back and accused of throwing a grenade that killed a U.S. army officer. In January 2010, the Supreme Court of Canada unanimously decided that officials violated Khadr’s human rights (and Canada’s constitution) through the use of illegal interrogation methods. Even so, they stopped short of ordering the government to repatriate him, and Khadr was recently forced to plead guilty in order to avoid a (legally questionable) U.S. military commission process—the “first war crimes tribunal since World War Two to prosecute someone for acts committed as a child” (“Guantanamo”)—that has been “challenged for its use of evidence gleaned from interrogation after torture” (Wienburg).<sup>130</sup> Judith Butler’s critique of “differential grieving” in *Frames of War* addresses the way that some lives are viewed as lives, while others are discursively “framed” as merely living. Butler argues that this logic allows for certain children to be framed as potential threats in contemporary contexts of war: “transformed into duplicitous shrapnel, the child is no longer living but is regarded as a threat to life”

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<sup>130</sup>. Khadr has now spent more than one third of his life at the Guantanamo Bay detention centre. Article 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child says that: “state parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of ...armed conflicts” while Article 40 states that a child is “innocent until proven guilty” (“Convention”). In addition to the fact that his confessions of guilt were coerced through torture methods, both of these Articles have been breached in the case of Omar Khadr.

("Frames"). The logic that "frames" Omar Khadr as an "enemy combatant" (according to Bush) or an "unlawful (or unprivileged) enemy belligerent" (according to Obama) instead of a Canadian citizen and child soldier, is similar to the logic at work in the justification of the Israeli bombing of Palestinian children as "human shields" or "collateral damage" in the name of Israel's self-protection. Especially considering recent UN concerns over the alleged increase in the number of children being recruited as suicide bombers in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq (Sharma), it is clear that "certain populations do not count as living beings...their very life, their very bodies are construed as instruments of war or pure vessels of attack...they are already deprived of life before they are killed...worthy of destruction in the name of life" ("Frames"). Suicide bombers, of no matter what age, are apparently not to be equated with child soldiers: according to Talal Asad, in the matter of distinguishing soldier from suicide bomber, it is the alleged "civilizational" attributes of the parties involved that decide the question one way or another.<sup>131</sup> Affiliated with the figure of the suicide bomber by (religious and/or ideological) association in the minds of the Western public, Omar Khadr is seen as a threat to human civilization itself—a figure who *cannot* be rehabilitated.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>131</sup>. The 2006 film, *The Making of a Martyr* by Brooke Goldstein and Alastair Leyland, offers a problematic glimpse into the life of a would-be Palestinian child suicide bomber. In contrast to this film's rather simplistic take on suicide bombing as an irrational act of passion or religious fervour, Goldberg argues that "suicide bombings are not emblematic of a distinctly Islamic 'culture of death'" as much as they should be understood as "a direct response to the brutality of Israeli rule" (quoted in Abu El-Haj 37). Indeed, as Talad Asad argues, "suicide bombing, in its banality and its horror," opens up "modern assumptions about dying and killing...however much we try to distinguish between morally good and morally evil ways of killing, our attempts are beset with contradictions, and these contradictions remain a fragile part of our modern subjectivity" (Asad 2).

<sup>132</sup>. In *The Threat of Race*, Goldberg's analysis of "racial palestinianization" shows how, "framed increasingly in the language of religious dispositions— as a clash of *religious* civilizations— violence is read into the very fabric of Palestinian (and/as Muslim) personhood" (Abu El-Haj 36).



The controversies surrounding Omar Khadr's detention at Guantanamo Bay expose the limits of supposedly universal and objective concepts like human rights and justice in a particularly stark way. Khadr himself fired his lawyers at one point, in an attempt to boycott the Military tribunal process. In a letter to his Canadian lawyer Dennis Edney, released shortly before the announcement of his guilty plea—or more correctly, plea bargain—he calls the process a “sham” that “we all don't believe in and know it's unfair”:

[T]here must be somebody to sacrifice to really show the world the unfairness, and really it seems that it's me....I don't want that, I want my freedom and life, but I really don't see it coming from this way....you always say that I have an obligation to show the world what is going on down here and it seems that we've done every thing [sic] but the world doesn't get it, so it might work if the world sees the US sentencing a child to life in prison, it might show the world how unfair and sham this process is, and if the world doesn't see all this, to what world am I being released to? A world of hate, unjust and discrimination! I really don't want to live in a life like this...justice and freedom have a very high cost and value, and history is a good witness to it [...]. (Finn)

At the bottom of the page, he writes: “P.S. Please keep this letter as private as can be, and as you see appropriate.” The intended reader, the “you,” in this letter is clearly Khadr's lawyer: however, Edney's decision to publish the letter in the *Washington Post*—despite Khadr's apparent wish for it to remain “as private as can be”—implicitly extends this “you” to apply to us as readers. The fact that Khadr uses words like “freedom” and “justice” while he is being incarcerated under doubtful legal (and ethical) circumstances is more than just ironic: by voicing his desire to “show the world” how unfair the military process is, he is including himself within the imagined community of readers and rights-holders that he is addressing. He is also including us as readers in the “we” who “all don't believe in” the process he is being subjected to. Like the protagonists in the coming-of-

age stories from Chapters 1 and 2, Khadr's sense of disappointment is palpable in this letter. At the very least, Omar Khadr's predicament draws attention to a crisis in citizenship.<sup>133</sup> Khadr was born in Toronto and was only fifteen years old at the time of his capture, yet the government refuses to recognize him as a young Canadian who has been influenced by the adults in his life, in need of protection and rehabilitation, abandoning him to a U.S. military tribunal that seems determined to find him guilty at all costs. Despite the fact that Canada was one of the leading countries in the adoption of the Optional Protocol on child rights regarding child soldiers— which was signed by all UN members (except for Somalia and the United States)— the Canadian government still determinedly refuses to consider Khadr a child soldier.<sup>134</sup> In public opinion and official discourse alike, Khadr's membership in Canada appears to be precarious at best, especially given his family's well-publicized (and sensationalized) anti-Western views.<sup>135</sup>

The crisis in citizenship, as a crisis of belonging and agency, is reflected and explored in the fictional and autobiographical child soldier narratives that I will examine for the rest of this chapter. The figure of the child soldier especially draws our attention to

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<sup>133</sup>. Whatever the particular (and shifting) nomenclature used to distinguish state-sponsored fighters from terrorists, the fact remains that Khadr's citizenship is hotly debated by both sides. Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff suggests that Khadr's is a "test case in the indivisibility of Canadian citizenship," because many Canadians "take a very serious view of the accusations against Mr. Khadr. But he's a Canadian citizen. And you don't pick and choose here. You defend them all. Otherwise, no one's citizenship is worth very much" (quoted in Blanchfield).

<sup>134</sup>. The U.S and Somalia are the only countries that have failed to uphold the "straight-18" policy adopted by most other UN member states (which raised the minimum age of recruitment from 15 to 18). Concerning (child) soldiers in the U.S., there has been a "rise in the aggressive recruitment tactics and misconduct by recruiters" in the U.S. military in the past decade, leading to "coercion, deception and false promises" made to young people: arguably, this "nullifies the voluntariness of youths' enlistment, violating our international human rights obligations" (Shahshahani and Franzen).

<sup>135</sup>. At the time of writing, Khadr is posed to serve one more year in Guantanamo Bay, after which he will possibly be transferred to a Canadian prison to serve out the rest of his sentence: it remains to be seen how the government of Canada's —as well as the public's— position on his status will shift.

the question of who counts as ‘human’ in the global system: finding themselves in a position that breaks down neat divisions “between civilian and combatant, victim and perpetrator, initiate and initiated, protected and protector,” child soldiers occupy “multiple, interstitial positions” and “epitomize the condition of simultaneously having multifaceted identities and utterly lacking a permanent, stable and socially defined place” (Honwana 4).<sup>136</sup> In this way, the figure of the child soldier can perform a uniquely critical function, challenging the very structures of belonging and (human and civil) rights in universal discourses of global community. The anxieties surrounding child soldiers in these narratives should be read, as Ferguson suggests, as a “haunting claim for equal rights of membership in a spectacularly unequal global society... a moral claim to something like global citizenship” (“Mimicry” 565). However, more than echoing Slaughter’s characterization of the *Bildungsroman* as incorporative genre, I argue that these stories are not only recuperative rehabilitation narratives that end with the child subject being incorporated into the social realm. The utter destruction of their families and communities and the transnational displacements they are forced to undergo lead to larger questions about belonging beyond national identifications. I argue that these narratives complicate their easy or uncritical consumption, instead drawing the reader’s attention to the webs of power and complicity that we all form a part of, especially when it comes to contests over resources and markets in what is expected to be the “African Century” (as suggested in the *Globe and Mail* special edition of May 10, 2010). The

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<sup>136</sup>. Honwana suggests that efforts to “theorize the place occupied by child soldiers are not entirely satisfactory” because “this position is inherently unstable, without sanctioned cultural definition, embodying a societal contradiction, and entirely embedded in conflict” suggesting that the interstitial place occupied by the child soldier might “provide the terrain for the emergence of new strategies of selfhood and identity” (3).

autobiographical and fictional narratives that I look at here exhibit a relational insistence on radically expanding conceptions of planetary awareness, citizenship and responsibility for the twenty-first century.

### **Relational Implications in Autobiographical Child Soldier Narratives**

Human rights claimants may (inevitably) become caught in a politics of otherness, but they also engage in new modes of intersubjective exchange that open out rather than foreclose the radical relationalities possible within social life, generating hope and opening new futures.

—Schaffer and Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* (233).

My mother told me that whenever a story is told, it is worth listening to. So please listen. I will tell it quickly.

—Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone*

This section examines three narratives of former child soldiers, written and published in contexts of global displacement: Ishmael Beah wrote *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* after settling in New York; Senait Mehari wrote *Heart of Fire: One Girl's Extraordinary Journey from Child Soldier to Soul Singer* from her new home in Germany; and Emmanuel Jal co-wrote his memoir (with Megan Lloyd Davies) *Warchild: A Boy Soldier's Story* after having immigrated to England. Beah's *A Long Way Gone* is an account of his experiences as a child soldier in the government army in Sierra Leone, Jal gives an account of his life as a child soldier with the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), and Mehari recounts her experiences at an Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) child soldier training camp. In each case, the narrator's personal stories of suffering are called upon to do specific political work within human rights networks,

which include UN aid agencies, refugee camps and rehabilitation centres.<sup>137</sup> However, the complexities of self-representation do not always line up easily with the cultural work that these narratives are expected to do in terms of human rights discourse. While this kind of storytelling is implicitly linked to human rights claims, it is also important to consider the consequences and complexities of this pressure to “represent oneself” (Gilmore 19) on the world stage within contexts of extreme duress and unequal relationships of power. There are specific generic expectations when it comes to memoir, or “life writing,” which, Gilmore argues “has become *the* genre in the skittish period around the turn of the millennium” (1). Judith Butler’s observation that it is important to remain attentive to “who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relation to power” (*Giving* 131) is especially applicable when examining life narratives written by former child soldiers, who are among the world’s most vulnerable populations. Participating in what Spivak defines as the “culture of testimony...the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other” (quoted in Gilmore 2) these texts lead to questions about the politics of humanitarian consumption. There are no guarantees about how these narratives will be circulated and received by readers who appear to be “interested in particular kinds of suffering” (Shaffer and Smith 23). Chosen as a selection for the Starbucks book club program, Beah’s memoir sold 62,000 copies in its first three weeks: how are stories of vulnerability, pain and

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<sup>137</sup>. For example, aside from running his own charitable foundation, Gna Africa, Jal is a spokesman for Amnesty International and Oxfam, and has done work for Save the Children, UNICEF, World Food Programme, Christian Aid and others; Beah has spoken numerous times at the UN and works for the Human Rights Watch Children’s Division Advisory Committee and heads the Child Soldiers Initiative with retired Lt. General Romeo Dallaire (<http://chidsoldiersinitiative.org/>); and Mehari campaigns for UNICEF to stop the use of child soldiers.

dispossession at risk of being consumed through an indulgently sentimental (and apolitical) lens by curious readers, who turn them into consumable spectacles of savagery and/or cleansing sentimentality?

To be sure, human rights claims operate within an already existing economy of humanitarian consumption.<sup>138</sup> In her examination of Oprah Winfrey's Book Club phenomenon, Rita Barnard describes how certain life narratives participate in the "glamour of misery," which "generates a highly sentimental and commercialized form of global thinking and feeling" ("Introduction" 5). As devices for "processing and presenting suffering" (Barnard "Oprah's" 13) life narratives of suffering and redemption are examples of what Illouz has called "therapeutic biography" (quoted in Barnard, "Oprah's" 9). These kinds of autobiographical stories often follow a "redemptive scheme" where "pain must be made to yield uplifting lessons" (12, 10). Especially when it comes to African child soldier narratives, the mass consumption of such texts play into and perpetuate global inequities and dangerous stereotypes: nations "come to signify in a new way, as mediascapes, occasions for certain kinds of stories, and (to be sure) certain kinds of touristic experiences" (15). According to Barnard, the kind of "empathetic globalization" championed by Oprah in the consumption of these texts has serious "implications for studies of literary reception" and "is far too closely tied to a therapeutic feel-good mode of consumption to be ethical in any serious sense" (5).<sup>139</sup> Is it possible to,

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<sup>138</sup>. Recently, the United Nations appealed to Hollywood elites to "create story lines based on issues" of human rights, in order to educate the public and increase popular sympathy for such causes (Abramowitz).

<sup>139</sup>. Barnard follows Eva Illouz in suggesting that the Oprah Book Club represents a project to "devise a cultural form through which to process and manage suffering in the contemporary world. A world

as Sarah Brophy argues in her reading of South African films about HIV/AIDS, move beyond “universalizing modes of sympathetic identification” in order to “create instead an urgent sense for differently located viewers of their own ethical economic and political implication” (44)? In this section I consider how, despite their collusion with humanitarian rights regimes and patterns of literary consumption, these texts exhibit narrative strategies that challenge complacent readings in indirect ways. In their critical explorations of memory and community, these narratives support, as well as test the limits of, the generic conventions of autobiography. They challenge literary consumption as merely “empathetic globalization” by emphasizing local as well as global forms of relationality. Particularly, they employ relational structures of address in order to place the reader as situated, and implicated, within unequal global cultural, social and economic networks.

The autobiographical texts that I discuss in this section are deeply critical of the false promise of universality in discourses of human rights and development, at the same time that they draw awareness to economic, social and gender exclusions and make implicit claims to be recognized within these structures. More specific to the idea of coming-of-age, they call attention to the fact that the promise of education remains forever out of reach for many who exist in the “shadows” of global citizenship. Slaughter argues that the role of “literacy” in the *Bildungsroman* is part of the larger project of development, a “project of release from Kant’s self-incurred tutelage—a primary means to enlightenment itself” (*Human* 273). Literacy and education represent a “defining

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where psychic pain is pervasive and where the prevailing ideology treats happiness as dependant on ‘successful self-management’” (Barnard, “Oprah’s” 9).

separation between the civilized and the barbarous nations” (Ashcroft 39). In postcolonial coming-of-age narratives, the promise of the “full development of human personality” is extended to children by way of a Western-style education, and the process of learning how to read “catalyzes the vagarious processes of modernization and personality development” (Slaughter, *Human* 273, 284). Indeed, the “acquisition of literacy” is an “ambivalent achievement,” exhibiting a deep sense of loss and alienation (287).<sup>140</sup> At the same time that education appears to offer the promise of membership in the universal, by extension a symbol of hope for the future, in these narratives this promise often leads to disappointment because such inclusion is far from universally available.

In *War Child*, Emmanuel Jal’s father sends him away to “school, school, school” at the age of seven (53). Jal is convinced that only a Western-style education will teach him how to fly a “nanking,” one of the helicopters that he has seen flying overhead, so he is initially excited by the prospect of going there. However, after a harrowing and death-defying journey, the young boy is instead detained at the Pinyudo refugee camp across the border in Ethiopia: “a place where hope had died” (57). This is the same camp that Valentino Achak Deng lived in for many years. Unlike Deng, however, after spending many months languishing along with thousands of other Sudanese “Lost Boys” Jal is eventually recruited as a “*Jesh a mer*,” or boy soldier. Thus begins a very different kind of education for Jal, as he is initiated into an alternative pedagogical process: “as the days turned into months, the child inside me hardened into a soldier” (86). In general terms, Wessells points out that the re-socialization of the child within the armed group is “not

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<sup>140</sup> For notable examples of postcolonial coming-of-age novels that explore these tensions in powerful ways, see *Nervous Conditions* by Tsisi Dangaremba and Thomspson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen*.



something done to the child but a process of reciprocal influence between the child and the group” (58). Challenging popular assumptions about child agency, Jal recalls that he took on this role as soldier willingly and with pride, having voluntarily joined in order to liberate his people from the hated “Arab” enemy. Thoroughly educated in the ways of war, Jal finds it difficult to readjust to childhood once he is rescued from this life, and he continues to play war games on the sly. For Western readers accustomed to seeing little boys play with toy guns and violent video games, what is most unsettling about Jal’s make-believe —“I pointed at anything that moved and pretended to shoot” —is that it is not a game at all for him: “I knew I was safe to be a soldier when Emma and Sally were out” (183).

Similarly, in *A Long Way Gone*, the war in Sierra Leone interrupts Ishmael Beah’s formal education.<sup>141</sup> He is instead inducted into the pedagogies of war: being forced to look at dead bodies (107), ideology drills (repeating mottos such as “the rebels are responsible for everything that has happened to you” [113] and “the prisoner was simply another rebel who was responsible for the death of my family” [124]) and the constant viewing of war movies like “*Rambo: First Blood*, *Rambo II*, *Commando* and so on” (121) on a generator-powered TV screen. The films play an important role in their de- (and re-) socialization: “we all wanted to be like Rambo; we couldn’t wait to implement his techniques” (212). Furthermore, the constant abuse of drugs, smoking marijuana, sniffing

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<sup>141</sup>. By showing his early passion for Shakespeare and performance, Beah’s narrative implicitly suggests that his eventual graduation from Oberlin College and the writing of this book are natural outcomes of his (albeit temporarily derailed) educational development. Beah’s transformation from schoolboy into soldier actually occurs very gradually in the text: the majority of the narrative details his experiences before being captured by the army, which only happens in Chapter 12, about one hundred pages into the story.

“*brown brown*” (cocaine mixed with gun powder), and swallowing the ever-present “white capsules” that “boost your energy” (116), ensure that the young soldier’s minds remain free of troublesome thoughts, and therefore any sense of responsibility for their actions: “the combination of these drugs gave us a lot of energy and made us fierce. The idea of death didn’t cross my mind at all and killing had become as easy as drinking water” (122). This new education, which takes place within the “revised moral space” (Wessels 65) of the armed group, is deeply inscribed upon Beah’s psyche, even to the point of making him resistant to demobilization: “It hadn’t crossed their minds that a change of environment wouldn’t immediately make us normal boys; we were dangerous and brainwashed to kill...we were not children to play with” (135, 137).

While recognizing the role of ideological indoctrination by adults in this resocialization process, these narrators still refuse to claim victim status, challenging the binary between victim and perpetrator by showing rational reasons for their actions.<sup>142</sup> One of the main differences between both *War Child* and *A Long Way Gone*, on the one hand, and *Heart of Fire* by Sunait Mehari, on the other, is that in Mehari’s narrative she consistently refuses to accept the ideological standards that are imposed upon her. Mehari describes her early years living in state and church-sponsored orphanages after being abandoned in a suitcase by her emotionally unstable mother. Following a brief but idyllic time with her paternal grandparents, she is sent to live with her father, his new wife, and

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<sup>142</sup>. By the end of his narrative, Jal has moved toward forgiveness and a desire for peace, but he is far from claiming innocence: “I feel no guilt about that day because I was a child who took part in killing... I did not kill in cold blood, I killed in war. But that day has tormented me —just as the stories of others have” (Jal 255). The passive construction of Beah’s “there were no indications that our childhood was threatened, much less that we would be robbed of it” (101) belies the ambiguous line between innocence and guilt, while at the same time he describes a tactical (if circumscribed) form of agency: “We had no choice. Leaving the village was as good as being dead” (107).

her half-sisters. This stay proves to be even briefer (luckily for her), and her abusive father decides to send his three daughters away to an ELF child soldier camp because he cannot afford to feed them. Throughout the narrative, Mehari continually comes up against authority figures and refuses to succumb to their ideological indoctrination: she refuses to be educated on the terms provided by the church, the patriarchal family structure, or the armed group. The resulting *miseducation* that she receives in these various contexts comes largely as a result of an early awareness of racial, gender, religious and socioeconomic hierarchies, and a deep suspicion of authority.<sup>143</sup> While both Jal and Beah express a certain sense of protection from (and willingness to please) superior officers, who are not seen as ruthless terrorisers but are sometimes even described as “tender” (Beah 158), Mehari repeatedly describes her sense of disappointment in, and sometimes abandonment by, the people who are supposed to be looking after her. Furthermore, whereas for both Jal and Beah, the masculine social dynamics within the armed group provides an alternative to the traditional coming-of-age ceremonies that they have been deprived of—especially given the manipulation of “father imagery” (Wessels 66) by leaders—Mehari deliberately refuses to conform to any of the expectations that are placed on her. She feels resentment and eventually pity for all of those in positions of power, especially her parents.<sup>144</sup> Mehari is deeply suspicious of

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<sup>143</sup>. As the only black girl in a Catholic orphanage in Ethiopia, Mehari grows up learning to speak Italian, eating “European food” (21), and being thoroughly indoctrinated with Christian guilt (6). Mehari is even acutely aware of inter-species hierarchies: after an early traumatic episode with a chicken, she resolves never again to eat meat.

<sup>144</sup>. Unable to have official coming-of-age ceremony, Jal equates it with the pain of war injuries: “I had to be brave...I knew war was like the *gaar* ceremony I’d watched in Luual many years before; I had to keep silent however deeply it cut into me” (Jal 138). Beah as well expresses a certain sense of pride in his soldierly prowess (Beah 144).

authority figures in the camp, and is able to see through the ideological façade of social justice: “despite what we were taught, it was constantly made clear to me that girls were worth less than boys, and that we did not have the same rights,” and “any child could be hit by someone older for no reason” (123, 82). She is unconvinced by the seemingly arbitrary ideological distinction between the “ELF, who were the right side,” and the “EPLF, who were the wrong side” yet looked “exactly like us” (60, 105).

Upon her move to Germany, Mehari finds secondary school a welcome relief from the oppression of home life with her father, quickly making friends and learning German (192). Even though the acquisition of literacy is often an “ambivalent achievement” (Slaughter, *Human* 287) for colonial subjects, Ashcroft points out how such an education also provides them with the “discursive tools of empire” in order to “reinscribe an equally ambivalent and hybrid, but assertive, post-colonial reality” (50). Mehari describes how her “thirst for knowledge” sometimes “caused friction” with other students in Germany, “many of whom could not believe that a black person could be well educated or have a good general knowledge” (193).<sup>145</sup> Jal describes how the Muslim regime in Sudan forced black students into inferior positions by denying them the promise of education, and his superiors tell him that “you will have a bright future one day when we send you to school. We need you to go there and learn things to make your country great” (Jal 132). Despite his self-described “rescue” by aid worker Emma

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<sup>145</sup>. Despite this admission, in the rest of the narrative Mehari is very reluctant to discuss her experiences in terms of racism: she is careful to distance herself from “black Americans” (237) and is angry when asked to discuss incidents of racism in Germany, arguing (contradictorily) that she is first discriminated against only when she travels to Berlin (240). This might be an example of how race and racism are “not absent in a straightforward way. Instead it is masked, tacit, hidden and displaced” (Wade 44).

McCune, who insists that he receive an education, Jal's hard-won entrance into formal schooling eventually leads to disappointment. The other students call him names— "black boy, gorilla boy, refugee boy" (196), and "Lost Boy, *jenajesh*, outsider...He was a child soldier, he's crazy" (190)—and he is eventually dismissed (literally and figuratively) by the headmaster of the school: "you'll never be anything or go anywhere" (202). Realizing that he would "never get the education I needed to help my people" (202), Jal eventually renounces his desire for formal education and focuses instead on an alternative pedagogical project that is more closely aligned to his experiences as a soldier. He swears to tell his "story using the music and lyrics that are my weapons now I have laid down guns and machetes forever" (245). The remainder of the narrative describes his journey to raise awareness and promote peace through his music.

These narratives trace a movement away from the power of the gun and toward the pedagogical/healing power of the pen and/or microphone, marking a clear shift in technologies of self and community; for example, the tagline for the documentary about Jal's move from child soldier to hip hop artist is "The same fight: a new weapon." For Jal, the gun as object becomes a technology of self-expression— "My gun was speaking for me as it spat bullets. My gun was taking my revenge" (140) — while at the same time it is a signifier that ties the community together: "I am light, I am quick, I am my bullet and my bullet is me. My bullet is my people and my people are me" (203). At the improvised school in the refugee camp, the children are encouraged to recite: "*The pencil is my home/My home is the pencil/My future my mother and father*" (68). Slaughter notes the pattern in the postcolonial *Bildungsroman*, where the "taking [up] of writing,"

presumably “obviates the need to take up arms” (*Human* 302). The pencil and the family, symbols of home and community, shift as Jal’s pedagogical context changes: in the army, Jal’s superiors tell him: “always remember: the gun is your mother and father now....I had a family, a home again” (92). The gun not only replaces the pencil as a technology of community, but has in fact *become* all the community he needs. In *A Long Way Gone*, Beah similarly reflects on the important role that the gun, as both a material object and a semiotic representation of power, plays in his renegotiated sense of community:

I stood there holding my gun and felt special because I was part of something that took me seriously and I was not running from anyone anymore. I had my gun now, and as the corporal always said, ‘This gun is your source of power in these times. It will protect you and provide for you all you need, if you know how to use it well.’ (124)

Beah feels betrayed when he is unceremoniously dismissed from this community and sent to a Red Cross centre for child soldiers in Freetown. Here he suffers through difficult withdrawal symptoms, as much from being separated from his gun as from the drugs that are still in his system: “I hadn’t parted from my gun since the day I became a soldier...the squad had been our family” (130). The gun had become an integral part of Beah’s sense of community belonging, and at the Red Cross centre he struggles to renegotiate his identity without it.

Mehari’s narrative echoes an awareness of the role of the gun as a technology of self and of community in the camp, where “nobody was allowed to touch anyone else’s machine gun —guns were sacred” (84). However, while expressing ambivalence at receiving her own gun (she is “proud and close to tears at the same time”), she quickly comes to resent the “monstrous lump of metal” (84). Utterly alienated from the

technology of the gun, Mehari describes the ludicrous and dangerous sight of small children with “gigantic, unwieldy sub-machine guns” (109). Far from a symbol of power or community for Mehari, the gun is “an impossible thing to carry around—I didn’t want to have it with me at all” (85). In fact, characterized as both “monstrous” and “impossible,” the machine gun only represents one more element of Mehari’s alienation from her surroundings: “I could not have cared less who the enemy was. My personal enemies were hunger, thirst, the heat, the rats, the hyenas, the relentless military training and the heavy Kalashnikov that I now had to lug around with me all the time” (85). She is repeatedly chastised for “losing” her weapon, and even goes so far as to bury her ammunition in order to lighten her load (106).

In stark contrast to her experience with the gun, Mehari describes the effect that music had on her while she was at the camp: instead of deriving a sense of protection and pride from her weapon as Jal and Beah do, in the face of extreme fear Mehari tries “to counter the hyenas with quieter sounds: drumming my hands against the ground, kicking my feet, and making sounds of life in the face of this concert of death” (63). Importantly, she is eventually drawn to the female singers in the camp, and resolves “there and then that I would one day try and sing as beautifully” (116). Also drawing attention to the importance of music, *War Child* follows Jal’s development from child soldier to rap musician. Jal’s experience of writing his memoir follows the narrative arc of working through painful trauma, yet it is always clear to the reader that his preferred storytelling medium is music. Challenging the privilege of written text over oral storytelling, the importance of the oral tradition is established from the very beginning of the narrative: Jal

says that he “was a child of war, born in a land without books and writing, a land where history was carried on your mother’s tongue and in the songs of your village” (“Preface”), and expresses a wariness toward writing, reluctant to “imprison” music on paper (191). In fact, the text itself often adopts a mode of oral storytelling, and especially in moments of high emotion is punctuated with onomatopoeia: Jal describes the “*T-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t*, the bullets screamed in front of me” and “the low *tuk tuk tuk* of helicopters” (120, 31). He argues that music is “the only thing that can speak to your mind, soul, heart, and spirit—enter into you without your permission and influence you” (256). Music is not only a powerful healing medium, but it also has a unique potential to unite disparate people: “music is a language everybody speaks, rhythm is not tribal or national” (243). Through musical collaboration, Jal is eventually even able to put aside his hatred of Arabs and join with them to create music for peace. Because Jal’s music takes on a characteristically autobiographical tone, it can be read as contributing to a “destabilizing of written narrative as a primary mode for autobiography” (Egan 13).

In *A Long Way Gone*, Beah is eventually able to renounce his gun for the power of the Bob Marley cassettes that Esther, the nurse at the rehabilitation centre, gives him. Instead of “gripping” his “gun for comfort,” he is “able to avoid my nightmares by busying myself day and night with listening to and writing the lyrics of Bob Marley’s songs” (164).<sup>146</sup> Importantly, along with these cassettes Esther gives Beah some notebooks to write in, and it is through writing that he is eventually able to exorcise his

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<sup>146</sup> The idea of music as a life-saver is foreshadowed in the text on more than one occasion, for example when Beah’s rap cassettes (and his impromptu performance) save him and his friends when they are captured by suspicious villagers (Beah 66-68).



demons. Beah emphasizes that he comes from “a very storytelling oriented culture” (197), and the act of storytelling itself is a central trope that is repeated throughout the text. Significantly, Beah’s account begins temporally and spatially from his new home in North America, opening with a preface titled “New York City, 1998”: “My high school friends have begun to suspect I haven’t told them the full story of my life... ‘You should tell us about it sometime.’ Yes, sometime” (Beah 4). This injunction to represent himself acts as both a framing device and a catalyst for the tale that follows, which is structured in response to the imperative to give an account of his life as a child soldier, specifically for Western readers.

The popular success of *A Long Way Gone* has been haunted, however, by suggestions that Beah’s memoir is in fact “factually flawed” (McMahon). Mehari’s narrative, which has recently been adapted into a feature film, has similarly been discredited by members of the Eritrean community in Germany. These scandals of veracity illustrate the role of testimony in advancing human rights claims through personal narratives, and signal the more general problem of (auto)biography: the slippery divide between “truth” and fiction, and the autobiographical pact undertaken by writer and reader alike. That is, the injunction to present the reader with authentic “experience,” because identity and experience somehow confer (or undermine) credibility. In *War Child*, Jal states from the outset that his account is not meant to be read as literal history: “The exact dates this book contains are those of events written down in history books, but most of the everyday violence of war never makes it into books, and this one is not meant to be a history of a country to be read by scholars. It is the story of one boy, his

memories, and what he witnessed” (“Preface”). Like Adele in *Soucouyant*, who wryly notes that “they does always tell the biggest stories in book” (Chariandy 175), Jal’s “story of one boy” contests the official voice of dominant history. Beah, on the other hand, claims to have “an excellent photographic memory that enables me to remember details of the day-to-day moments of my life, indelibly” (51). What is more, like in *What is the What*, the paratextual inclusion of a map of Sierra Leone at the beginning of the book and a chronology of its history at the end invite the reader to read what is contained within the pages as of *A Long Way Gone* as an accurate historical account. *Heart of Fire* similarly features a map of Ethiopia, and Mehari goes one step further to include photographs of herself and her family within the pages of the text. Why do Beah and Mehari go to these lengths in order to insist on historical accuracy, even though (or especially since) there is no such thing as history that is unmediated or unselective in its arrangement of ‘fact’?

The vehemence with which both Beah and Mehari have been attacked by their detractors brings to mind Smith and Watson’s observation that the “socio-political context of production and reception” might lend the narrative an “aura of suspicion,” especially given the “vulnerable social location of the narrator” (“The Trouble” 360) and the impossibility of verifying facts in certain circumstances. Furthermore, it is important to remember that experience itself needs to be interrogated: “experience is...at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation” because identities are always “contextual, contested and contingent” (Scott 37, 36). What the scandal of truth surrounding these narratives makes clear is both the violence of the demand for, and the impossibility of delivering on the expectation of, ‘truth’ when it comes to relating

individual traumatic experiences. As Smith and Watson point out, the “instability of something called the authority of experience suggests how it is that the category of experience itself is socially, culturally, historically and politically negotiated” (*Reading* 28). This negotiation can be highly complex given the vicissitudes of personal memory and the difficulty of representing stories of personal trauma.

If, as Egan suggests, “crisis is seminal for autobiography” (4), then the experiences that Jal, Beah and Mehari recount in these narratives about their lives as child soldiers draw attention to the difficult relationship between trauma and representability. The Greek meaning of the word trauma, understood as “wound,” attests to the “self-altering, even self-shattering experience of violence, injury, and harm” (Gilmore 6). As such, “language fails in the face of trauma...trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency” (6). These narrators struggle to find ways of telling about a suffering that defies representation:

They struggle to reassemble memories so dreadful they must be repressed for human beings to survive and function in life. In such narratives, the problem of recalling and recreating a past life involves organizing the inescapable but often disabling force of memory and negotiating its fragmentary intrusions with increasing, if partial, understanding. (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 22)

Some kinds of memories are, of course, more traumatic than others, and in all three texts the reader experiences a sense that there are certain memories that the narrators are still unwilling or unable to revisit: “the act of witnessing may open traumatic wounds for the narrator rather than offer healing and reconciliation” (Smith and Watson, “The Trouble” 365). For these narrators, writing in response to the injunction to represent oneself involves an experience of both psychological and physical pain: Beah suffers from debilitating

migraines and “painful memories” that stain him like “blood” (19, 150); in an interview, Jal admits that he experienced nosebleeds every day during the process of writing his memoir; Mehari lives with “haunting memories” that leave her “paralyzed with pain” especially when it comes to her memories of sexual abuse (211, 215).<sup>147</sup> In the Preface to *Heart of Fire*, she writes, “Now that I have written everything down, I am free. This book will give me peace,” yet the trauma of her sexual abuse still haunts the text and refuses to offer a sense of closure for the reader.

Yet these narratives show a “resistance of the colonized to the controls others have exercised over their stories; they talk back, not to implode the margins upon the center but to decentralize the telling of their lives” (Egan 11). Gilmore argues that “trauma narratives” often show “evidence of shaping” and that, indeed, “part of what we must call healing lies in the assertion of creativity. The ability to write beyond the silence meted out by trauma” (Gilmore 24). The reader’s desire for accounts of personal experience (and his or her anger when the account does not live up to certain standards of truth) discounts the possibility that some narratives might have “achieved a larger symbolic truth” (Gilmore 4) and that some narratives have “truth value beyond the accuracy of particular facts” (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 30). By questioning the possibility of ‘truthful’ accounts of individual trauma, these narratives cast suspicion on the Western valuation of objective, fact-driven truth and individualist notions of trauma, suggesting that memory may be as much collective as individual: “Precisely because acts

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<sup>147</sup>. She admits, “I have worked my way through a lot of my past, but not through the sexual abuse, which I cannot speak of neutrally or think about objectively to this day....it is harder to come to terms with the past than to have actually lived through it” (244-245).

of remembering are implicated in how people understand the past and make claims about their versions of the past, memory is an inescapably intersubjective act” (20). Especially outside of Western frameworks, the “self” is often “not a signifier of one ‘I’ but the coming together of many ‘I’s”—in this way, the self of the narrative embodies “collective reality, past and present, family and community” (Egan 127). In order to draw attention to the acute difficulty “with speaking and with being heard” (120) that accompanies the experiences of childhood trauma and the radical deracination that comes with forced immigration, these narratives employ structures of address that interpolate readers into a critical vision of relationality, employing indirect strategies to get around the expectation of individual truth.

The thread of constitutive relationality that flows through the first two chapters of my dissertation—where “all identity is relational” and “the Other...provides the map of the self” (Miller in Egan 9)—also finds expression in these child soldier narratives. Recall that in Cavarero’s understanding of relational narratives, the “other” is a concrete other, with ears to listen and a face to witness. In *A Long Way Gone*, the nurse Esther is the first to call Beah by his first name, “Ishmael” (153). She recognizes him as a person, not just another boy soldier, and thus opens a dialogue with him: “she listened attentively when I began to talk” (155). The refrain “it’s not your fault,” which is uttered repeatedly by the rehabilitation staff, finally gains meaning as Esther responds to Beah’s testimony:

The phrase finally began to sink into my mind and heart. That didn’t make me immune from the guilt that I felt for what I had done. Nonetheless it lightened my burdensome memories and gave me strength to think about things. The more I spoke about my experiences to Esther the more I began to cringe at the gruesome details, even though I didn’t let her know that. (166)

Esther as Other awakens in Ishmael Beah an ethical impulse: mirroring his self-image back to him, her act of witnessing is “more constructive than reflective of the self” (Egan 12), helping him to (re)construct the ethical impulses that were damaged by the traumatic violence of war. In some way, Beah’s bafflement over the seemingly inexplicable patience of the rehabilitation workers—“Why does she do it? Why do they all do it?” (181)—is a hopeful plea, one that is also directed toward the reader. The “listener/reader are entwined in an ethical call to emphatic identification, recognition and oftentimes action” (Smith and Watson, “The Trouble” 364).

While highlighting the relational aspects of autobiographical storytelling as giving an account of oneself may help to combat the “dominance of Western belief in the individual’s uniqueness and unique story” (Shaffer and Smith 24), relying on psychoanalytic models of trauma within human rights frameworks runs the risk of falling back into such individuality by privatizing these experiences and imposing Eurocentric theoretical discourse on non-Western contexts. However, these narratives avoid simply being “therapeutic biographies” by critically registering, in oblique and sometimes ironic ways, the differential global relationality of the teller of the story to the reader who is consuming the text. If, as Egan suggests, the “choice of audience is political” (122), then what is being demanded of the reader of these autobiographical child soldier narratives? *A Long Way Gone*, *Heart of Fire* and *War Child* each signal relationality on a global scale in their literal production as well as thematically: Beah suggests that his story would never have been written had it not been for the encouragement and support of his New York “mother” Laura Simms (not to mention his professors at Oberlin College); Jal’s

narrative was co-written with Meagan Lloyd Davies; and Mehari's account, originally published in German, was co-written with journalist Lukas Lessing. Given the constitutive multiplicity of identity, I suggest that like Dave Eggers's "fictional autobiography" of Valentino Achak Deng, perhaps the collaborative nature of the very *production* of these texts signals that testimony be understood as "project of address" rather than a "project of artistic mastery" (Felman and Laub 38).<sup>148</sup>

The structures of address in these narratives suggest that what is being demanded is more than just an aesthetic experience of empathetic identification. Unable to ignore the web of global relations, the reader is called upon to recognize his or her own position of complicity: the reader, as witness, participates in the larger community of what Slaughter has called the "implicated reader" who "personifies the public demand that" the narrator "give an account" of self, and "who serves as a synecdoche for (the shared assumptions of) a more general...society of readers" (*Human* 292). As in Khadr's publicized letter to his lawyer, the narrator addresses the implicated reader while simultaneously taking the liberty of claiming membership in the "society of readers" that s/he addresses, and thus calls attention to the exclusions and contradictions inherent to that formation of community.<sup>149</sup> The structures of address suggest that it might be important to pay closer attention to the (indirectly) critical representation of privileged, middle-class white and

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<sup>148</sup>. For examples of critical explorations of the politics of collaborative writing between indigenous and white writers in Canada see York and Rymhs, in the Americas in general see McHugh and Komisaruk, and in South Africa see McClintock. See also Y-Dang Troeung, "A Gift."

<sup>149</sup>. In his discussion of Calixthe Beyala's *Loukoum: The 'Little Prince' of Belleville*, Slaughter writes that the "implicated reader summoned by" the narrators of this text "stands in for an ethnonationalist society that declaims its commitments to universal liberty, equality, and fraternity even as it erects discriminatory social, economic, cultural, racial, legal, and literary-generic barriers to their incorporation" (293).

black people in these texts —aid workers, missionaries, business people, psychologists, teachers, surrogate parents, and even the co-writers of the stories themselves. Moreover, the representation of the contradictory (and often hypocritical) role of Western popular culture forces the reader to reconsider his or her own assumptions about global historical relationships, and especially the North's cultural and economic role in them. For example, each text registers the way that war-affected youth already belong to a modern, trans-Atlantic consumer culture, highlighting the centrality of such cultural items as violent *Rambo*-style Hollywood films, “American television programmes” (Mehari 154), the BBC World Service, U.S. rap music, Shakespeare, and brand name running shoes: “some people got Adidas and others Nikes. I got a black Reebok Pump and was happier about my new *crapes* than anything else that was going on” (Beah 110).

The reader is encouraged to view the third-to-first-world stories of mobility from a critical rather than celebratory perspective. The narrators express an ambivalent relation to the experience of immigration, describing a sense of alienation that begins even before boarding the plane. Bureaucratic rules allow for and sometimes encourage apparent indifference to human suffering and despair, as is exhibited by gate-keeping officials: in *Heart of Fire*, Mehari is frustrated with the officials who “did not recognize the Eritrean system of naming” (172) while she is applying for German entry permits; in *A Long Way Gone*, Beah faces the immigration officer at the U.S. embassy and is “confused about why the window was set up in such a way that the human connection was lost...Do you know anything about people's lives in this country? I thought of asking her”(191); in *War Child*, the woman behind the glass at the British Embassy tells Jal that “we cannot issue



you with a visa...I looked at her and felt rage being born in a place far away from my heart, tearing its way through my body to reach it as the *khawaja* fell silent. Fuck her, Fuck white people. Fuck Britain” (225). Human beings are, in these circumstances, reduced to manageable objects and are dehumanized in the name of efficiency and order through the routine performance of bureaucratic actions.<sup>150</sup>

Echoing Adele’s experience of Toronto in *Soucouyant*, the sense of alienation accompanying immigration to the global north is mirrored in the coldness of the climate. Arriving to a New York winter, Beah recalls that he “knew the word ‘winter’ from Shakespeare’s texts” but thought “I should look up its meaning again” (193).<sup>151</sup> The “sense of coldness and alienation” that Mehari feels upon realizing that “there really were people with light-coloured hair and skin” as a small child is intensified and echoed in her “alienation” from the European winter: she is struck by the “biting cold” (12-13, 175). Jal’s description of his reaction to his new surroundings similarly links the coldness of the climate to the coldness of the people:

I found England a strange place. The food that tasted bad, the trains that ran underground and didn’t blow out smoke, and the people who never looked each other in the eyes. Sometimes I’d play games trying to catch someone’s gaze, but it was impossible. Maybe everyone was sad because it was so cold all the time...I knew the sun in England lied. (222)

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<sup>150</sup>. Of course, sometimes the treatment of refugee claimants is overtly discriminatory: a whistleblower at the UK Border agency claimed that “asylum seekers are mistreated, tricked and humiliated by staff.” Allegedly, one official boasted “that he tested the claims of boys from African countries who said they had been forcibly conscripted as child soldiers by making them lie down on the floor and demonstrate how they shot at people in the bush” (Taylor and Muir).

<sup>151</sup>. Here there is an implicit criticism of the African organizers of Beah’s trip as well: sent into the bitter cold of a New York winter with no jacket, Beah wonders how “for some reason” his chaperone, Dr. Tamba, has a jacket (Beah 195).

The sun is not the only thing that deceives and disappoints Jal in England: even though he outwardly expresses respect for public figures, such as the “future British prime minister Gordon Brown,” who “I could see” were “good men who cared about Africa” (Jal 242), the narrative encourages the reader to consider the bitter irony of his words. Upon meeting Bob Geldof, the organizer of the “Live Aid” relief concert that would not allow African musicians to perform, Jal says that “anger bit my stomach as I looked at him, but I knew I must be respectful to the man who once fed me” (242). Simultaneously expressing gratitude for the organization “which had fed me and other refugees when I was a child,” Jal’s anger represents a critique of agencies that, more often than not, do not take Africans into consideration when they are ostensibly supposed to be working for them: how “could a party be thrown for our people if none of us was invited?”(242).<sup>152</sup> On a later trip to the United States, Jal finds himself disappointed by the music industry there despite the important influence that rap music has had on his own life: “I might know my way in the jungle of Africa, but here a hyena, a snake, or a rat all looked the

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<sup>152</sup>. A glance at the May 10, 2010 “African Century” edition of the *Globe and Mail* would seem to suggest that Africans are still not being invited to their own party. Guest edited by Bob Geldof and Bono the question becomes: why does it take two white male celebrities to discuss “how Africa will change the world”? In fact, there is an alarming absence of African voices in the edition, which focuses overwhelmingly on the role of the West when it comes to commercial interests in Africa; a search of the edition finds no mention at all of the problem of child soldiers, for example, and the tone seems mostly celebratory, as if trying to convey that it is “safe” to invest in Africa. An exception rather than the norm, Ory Okolloh, Kenyan blogger, activist and founder of “Ushahidi”— a new technology being used by individuals in remote places to map and bear witness to disaster (Giridharadas)— was invited to guest edit the digital version of the edition. Okolloh participated in a 30-minute “live chat” with Geldof to answer reader’s questions. During the exchange, Geldof became very defensive when Okolloh asked him about the potentiality of perpetuating harmful stereotypes through celebrity activism. Okolloh was especially concerned that despite the fact that 60% of the population is under the age of 25, young people are still excluded from the decision making process. When Geldof suggested that young people’s role is in “bypassing those traditional structures” and making “decisions for themselves through virtual institutions” like Ushahidi, Okolloh responded: “virtual societies are great, but we all know decisions are made in the real world...I would be curious to know whether the *Globe and Mail* would consider a guest edit of the print edition by two young Africans the next time around (if there is one...hehehe).” Okolloh wonders, “where are all the young Africans? Who is talking to us and listening to us?” (“The Potential”).

same” (250), applying animalistic imagery to allude to the insincerity and ruthlessness of the entertainment business. He is particularly discouraged when he hears “rappers in the West boast about guns” (249), referencing the hyper-masculine and highly militarized culture that little boys grow up within in North America. Jal becomes involved in organizations for tighter arms control, and his question directed at the reader—“But who had supplied Sudan with the weapons we used to kill each other? How much blood money had been made?” (252)—ultimately goes unanswered. The question does continue to hang in the air, though, and the reader is encouraged to consider it. The sense of deception that he feels when realizing the role that Western economies play in African affairs is palpable: “I am ashamed the world promised after the Second World War that genocide would never happen again, but then came Rwanda and now Darfur. It seems as if good things are signed on papers but the world turns its back when it comes to Africa” (254). Relational strategies to hail the reader as witness do little to unsettle most people’s indifference to the arms trade, an indifference that is subtended by neoliberal ‘commonsense’ that insists on the survival of the economically (and, implicitly, racially) fittest. Nevertheless, by addressing the reader directly Jal is attempting to implicate both the reader and himself in a shared web of responsibility for global affairs.

*Warchild* and *Heart of Fire* are narratives that are not only concerned with the place of Africa in the world: from their position as outsiders within, upon relocation these narrators as world citizens are critical of unjust socioeconomic relationships wherever they occur. For example, Jal is shocked on his trip to the United States, “the place where hip-hop and rap had been born” (250), when he learns about the events surrounding

Hurricane Katrina. He comes to realize the role that a combination of economics, race, and power —what Henry Giroux has called the “biopolitics of disposability” (*Stormy*) — played in the crisis: “I couldn’t believe something so terrible happened in America....so much money was being spent on wars, but none seemed to be left for the poor” (Jal 251). The reader might be surprised to read that, after everything he has been through, what “scares” Jal the most is not violence or war, but poverty: “poverty is like a virus that torments you mentally and emotionally. It is a slow and painful death of hope, humiliating and degrading, a parasite that sucks life from everyone it touches” (257). His expression of solidarity with those marginalized by the military-industrial-prison complex in the U.S. intensifies his sense of global citizenship: “I was a war child from Africa and they were the war children of America” (251). The characterization of contemporary North American society as staging a “war” on youth reflects what Giroux calls “the changing conditions of youth within the relentless expansion of global market society,” where youth are treated either “largely as commodities” or (particularly for “poor youth and youth of color”) are subjected to “a growing youth-crime complex” (*Youth* xii). Echoing the lyrics of the song by fellow rapper K’naan that serves as an epigraph for this chapter, Jal highlights the hypocrisy in the North American outrage at the ‘unthinkable’ horror of armed African child soldiers.<sup>153</sup>

In *Heart of Fire*, the streets of Germany are not “paved with gold” as Mehari had once imagined, and she is “surprised” as much by “the wealth” she sees as by “how busy

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<sup>153</sup>. Marian Wright Edelman points out that, “as shameful as it is that the United States may be inadvertently paying the salaries of Somali child soldiers, it shouldn’t be surprising. Our nation continues to allow gun violence to destroy thousands of children’s lives at home too.”

and discontented everyone seemed,” and especially at the contradictory sight of “beggars sitting outside the entrances to these overflowing department stores” (181).<sup>154</sup> Mehari’s description of “foreigners’ ghettos” in Germany suggests that the problem of social and economic marginalisation knows no geographical bounds:

The streets were dirty, the parks were grotty, the walls were smeared with graffiti, the telephone boxes had all been vandalized and the shopping centres were grimy. Lots of young people hung around on the streets aimlessly. Apart from the vandalism, much of the area looked not unlike Africa. (Mehari 179)

The imagery of “dirty,” “grotty,” “grimy,” “graffitied” and “vandalized” city spaces in this passage describes how the neighbourhoods set apart for foreigners within Europe are in fact spaces of exclusion within the body of the state. Like the Toronto housing project where Jackie grows up in *What We All Long For*, there is a sense of deliberate neglect and official marginalization here. Balibar points out that the notion of ‘universal’ human rights, when combined with European national belonging, leads “inevitably to systems of *exclusion*: the divide between ‘majorities’ and ‘minorities’ and, more profoundly still, between populations considered native and those considered foreign, heterogeneous, who are racially or culturally stigmatized” (*We* 8). Notably, the main difference that Mehari notes between Africa and the foreigner’s ghettos is that these spaces are also “vandalized,” alluding to the unique frustration of transnational youth, who are alienated from their parental cultures as well as from the ‘host’ culture. The image of idle “young people” hanging “around on the streets aimlessly” echoes the image of marginalized

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<sup>154</sup>. She writes: “Money, careers, power, success and fulfillment are what count here, and fulfillment is primarily gained through gaining material comfort and financial independence” (247). After running away from her father’s home, Mehari decides to live temporarily with a group of homeless people under a bridge.

(black) youth as a vague threat haunting the (white, middle-class) neoliberal economic order in twenty-first century cities.<sup>155</sup>

The experience of transnational dislocation that these narrators undergo leads to a critical awareness of doubleness; the identities of these ex-child soldiers are shaped by traumatic memories that lead to a disconcerting feeling of being split in two. Complicated patterns of global mobility mean that “diaspora identities” are “those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Egan 121). Beah’s narrative ends before he leaves African soil, just after he has crossed the border from Sierra Leone into Guinea; the narrative does not go into detail about his experiences of immigration to the U.S. but it begins with Beah in New York being haunted by “memories I sometimes wish I could wash away, even though I am aware that they are an important part of what my life is: who I am now” (19). Jal recognizes that “before I had learned to transform the hate burning inside this boy into love, I had wanted to leave him behind. But now I knew I never wanted to forget the message the war child had taught me” (246). In Mehari’s recurring dream, a “small, ragged girl is walking beside me. That girl is me, and these are the two sides of me that live alongside each

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<sup>155</sup>. For a complex, thought-provoking treatment of European migration and settlement, and particularly how these issues pertain to young people, see Laurent Cantet’s 2008 film *The Class* (*Entre les Murs*), based on an autobiographical novel by a author and former teacher François Bégaudeau. The film is the story of a teacher (played by Bégaudeau himself) as he struggles to teach a diverse group of students in a tough multi-ethnic school in the Parisian *banlieux*. The cultural and generational friction between the students and teachers in this school powerfully evokes issues of integration and the presumed neutrality (or even relevance) of ‘common’ French culture when it comes to multicultural schools in twenty-first century Paris: in one scene, for example, the students pepper the teacher with questions about French grammar, including why he always uses “*babtou* [derogatory name for white-skinned person]” names like “Bill” as examples in his lessons, rather than “Rachid or Ahmed.”

other” (245). The persistence of this recurring dream girl emphasizes the spectral sense of doubleness that accompanies trauma and migration.<sup>156</sup>

Mehari returns to Africa as an adult, acknowledging the pull of roots as well as routes: “I had to come here to learn about myself” (228). She is reluctant to romanticize African culture— “recognizing that I had rights was incredibly liberating. In Africa beatings and injustice are part of everyday life” (230) —but avoids imposing Western standards of psychological health and family dynamics on African contexts: “strictly speaking, there are no ‘mums’ or ‘dads’ in the cosy, intimate way Europeans think of them...In Africa, ‘mother’ and ‘father’ are better used to describe functions, blood relations or dependencies, but nothing more” (231). Although these rather harsh comments about African family life are shaped by her own personal experiences, neither does she romanticize the nuclear family unit in Germany: in her boyfriend Stephan’s family, “anything that could not be put on the credit card was swept under the carpet” (217). Similarly calling attention to the tendency to romanticize childhood as a time of innocence, Jal reminds readers that “childhood in Africa does not hold the same romance that it does in Europe and America” (256). The double-standard when it comes to the ‘universality’ of childhood partially explains the West’s fascination with child soldiers, yet Jal suggests that the idea of children as soldiers is only “unusual in a country where children are children until eighteen, many years more than in my village at home” (244). Without calling for simplified Western idealizations of childhood, these narrators call

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<sup>156</sup>. In contrast to Mehari’s consciousness of doubleness, “People in Eritrea never go through these agonies of selfhood” because “freedom of the individual takes a back seat” (246). Eritreans who stay behind “don’t have to make that choice,” and “have pride and self-worth...while I torture myself with questions of who or what I really am” (248).

attention to a shared sense of adult responsibility to protect the world's youth. Jal explicitly links his act of storytelling to the sense of responsibility he feels for other young people: "Everyone in my country has a story to tell, but I am telling mine to speak for all those who can't. I'm still a soldier, fighting with my pen and paper, for peace till the day I cease" (254).<sup>157</sup> For Jal, memory, testimony and storytelling are all collective and relational enterprises rather than individual acts.

These narratives expose the burden of memoir, where the imperative seems to be to 'work through' individual trauma by making sense of it, by creatively making it intelligible to (and easily consumable by) others.<sup>158</sup> Perhaps because the (auto)biographical pressure to remain true to experience mingles uneasily with a sense of accountability to others, certain issues might be avoided in acts of (conscious and unconscious) self-censorship. This might partially explain why *A Long Way Gone* stops short of exploring any negative aspects of Beah's experience of immigration to the U.S. by ending just as he gets across the border to Guinea. Also, despite the statistics about the sexual abuse of male and female child soldiers, personal experiences of it are barely mentioned (or only mentioned in passing) by both Beah and Jal. Mehari is never able to openly discuss her experiences of sexual abuse, which hover about the edges of the text, obliquely haunting her narrative. These autobiographical child soldier narratives operate

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<sup>157</sup>. In his 2009 TED talk, Jal explains: "I'm doing it for the young man" who wants to project his voice but "can't write" because he lacks the means to express himself publicly: interestingly, Jal specifically mentions the lack of access to technologies of self-expression such as Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace ("Emmanuel Jal").

<sup>158</sup>. Jamaica Kincaid, at a 2007 reading at MIT, describes an antipathy toward the genre of autobiography: "I rule out the memoir. It caramelizes and beautifies things....I wouldn't want to know how to make a beautiful thing. Implied in memoir is forgiveness that I don't feel. I never forgive and I never forget, and I'm never cathartic" ("A Reading").



uneasily within the logic of fact and experience, even as they challenge generic expectations by using relational and spectral narrative strategies.

## Re/presenting Humanity in Fictional Child Soldier Narratives

So I am saying to her, if I am telling this to you it will be making you to think that I am some sort of beast or devil. Amy is never saying anything when I am saying this, but the water is just shining in her eye. And I am saying to her, fine. I am all of this thing. I am all of this thing, but I am also having mother once, and she is loving me.

—Uzodinma Iweala, *Beasts of No Nation* (142)

We stayed where we were, in the margins of truth.

—Delia Jarrett-Macauley, *Moses, Citizen and Me* (13)

I have chosen to look at Uzodinma Iweala's novel *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), Chris Abani's novella *Song for Night* (2007), and Delia Jarrett-McCauley's novel *Moses, Citizen and Me* (2005) because they conjure the hybrid space of childhood in complex and nuanced ways. Drawing from Bhabha's notion of hybridity, I suggest that childhood is a space of both resistance and potentiality. In the extreme circumstances of the child soldier, how do these novels complicate and re-situate the postcolonial *Bildungsroman*? What does the narrative development of these protagonists tell us about growing up within twenty-first century warsapes? The child soldiers in all three of these narratives resist literal readings: not burdened with the same task of representing or translating experience as autobiographical life narratives are, the fictional child soldiers here are meant to represent no one real person, while at the same time representing many. Agu in *Beasts of No Nation*, My Luck in *Song for Night*, and Citizen in *Moses, Citizen and Me* are meant to be read figuratively. As Alexandra Schultheis argues, they "draw the reader's attention instead to the 'problem' of speaking, of constructing and bridging cultural difference and of speaking on/from the edges of representability" (37-38).

Signposting the impossible — in Chambers’ sense of signposting as a strategy of indirection— these narratives enact the inadequacy of language to represent trauma. By positioning non-fictional and fictional texts in relation to one another in this way I do not mean to imply a hierarchy, only to highlight how their dilemmas and strategies are tied to generic and market expectations. Like life narratives, fictional renderings of child soldier experiences use spectral narrative strategies that foreground relationality, and in each of these texts the apparition of various kinds of spirits, ghosts and zombies draws attention to that which has been elided or repressed. These decidedly not-quite-human figures also force the reader to think about what ‘rehumanization’ might mean in terms of the reintegration of child soldiers; by addressing a decidedly Westernized implicated reader, these narratives implicitly urge us to think about how *inhuman* contemporary global processes of ‘humanity’ really are.<sup>159</sup> It is not only a matter of renegotiating the terms for the child soldier’s re-entry into their local communities: these narratives point out that a different understanding of global relationality is necessary.

Chris Abani is a Nigerian living and writing within the U.S, Uzodinma Iweala is the son of Nigerian diplomats, born and raised in Washington, D.C. and Delia Jarrett-McCauley is a second-generation Sierra Leonean who lives in England; like the autobiographical narratives in the previous section, these narratives are written from within the geographical and intellectual space of the global north. If testimony is to be understood as “project of address” rather than a “project of artistic mastery” (Felman and

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<sup>159</sup>. A closer look at the constitutive contradictions and exclusions involved in the binary human/inhuman leads to the necessity of putting the term ‘humanity’ under erasure, as Derrida might have it, recognizing both the necessity and impossibility of the term.

Laub 38) in the life narratives I just examined, what do we make of the structures of address in these fictional testimonies of child soldier experiences written for Westernized readers? As implicated readers, we are called upon (like Jarrett-McCauley's narrator, Julia) to stretch our empathetic imaginations in order to take in these tales of horror, and move past visceral reactions to it. While visceral reactions are not necessarily negative, self-reflexivity is necessary in order to turn such disturbances into creative empathy. The consumption of stories of suffering and violence has the potential to confirm pre-existing stereotypes about Africa as a savage, inhuman landscape full of untold horrors. However, at the very least, allowing oneself to read uncomfortably challenges the "systematic refusal to let the voice of the suffering person become disturbing" (Illouz quoted in Barnard 14). Specifically, by drawing attention to the importance of relationality these texts hint toward something more than a privatized, individual experience of suffering, gesturing toward a critical sense of planetarity. While *Beasts of No Nation's* title reference to "no nation" might be read as a generic "any (African) nation," a conflation of all the countries that make up the continent into a singular geographical and political entity that figures in the generalising Western imagination simply as 'Africa,' there might be other ways of reading the ambiguity of location in Iweala's and Abani's narratives, that is, as implying more than merely the transcendence of national identity. These texts implicate a larger web of responsibility and signal the need to rethink global relations.

Iweala's novel *Beasts of No Nation* implicates the reader by way of the emotional force of the language of the text, which is difficult to read at first but then becomes so compelling that the reader cannot help but enter into Agu's vivid emotional landscape.

The very first paragraph introduces the reader to the voice of 9 year-old Agu, who narrates the tale in disjointed yet lyrical “pidgin” English. As the novel opens, he has just been separated from his father, who was killed in front of his terrified eyes. He is hiding from rebel soldiers who capture him and force him to become a child soldier or die. The opening paragraph introduces the reader to the grammatical simplicity of the child’s voice, which contrasts with the chaos that it attempts to describe:

It is starting like this. I am feeling like insect is crawling on my skin, and then my head is just starting to tingle right between my eye, and then I am wanting to sneeze because my nose is itching, and then air is just blowing into my ear and I am hearing many thing: the clicking of insect, the sound of truck grumbling like one kind of animal, and then the sound of somebody shouting, TAKE YOUR POSITION RIGHT NOW! QUICK! QUICK QUICK! MOVE WITH SPEED! MOVE FAST OH! in a voice that is just touching my body like knife. (Iweala 1)

Madeliene Hron reads the novel in terms of Iweala’s deft deployment of “rotten English,” the “solecisms” of which “poignantly reproduce the problematic, if not incommunicable, worldview of the child soldier” (41).<sup>160</sup> The use of the first-person, the present continuous tense, the continual repetition of words — “seeing all of this, all of this bombing bombing, killing killing, and dying dying” (119)—as well as the child narrator’s microscopic attention to detail, impart a sense of relentlessness: the reader is left as overwhelmed as Agu himself is as he tries to make sense of his new surroundings and his new identity. “What am I supposed to be doing? So I am joining. Just like that. I am soldier” (11), he says simply. The helplessness reflected in Agu’s language mirrors his

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<sup>160</sup> In *Sozaboy*, Ken Saro-Wiwa defines rotten English as “a mixture of Nigerian pidgin English, broken English and occasional flashes of good, even idiomatic English” (Author’s Notes). In the context of Nigeria’s civil war, the hybrid form of language in this novel represents a mixing that crosses ethnic and cultural barriers. North argues that “Rotten English” is a “hybridized, syncretic language” that suggests the possibility of imagining “a Nigeria that is not divided along ethnic and linguistic lines,” and allowing *Sozaboy* “to contradict, to speak against, the civil war at the level of form” (North 109).

sense of being overwhelmed by outside forces, and in a sense distances him from responsibility for the events: “Hunger is attacking me...Sleep is attacking me” (40). Realizing that he is too small to carry a gun, the “Commandant” gives Agu a knife, which he learns to wield with terrible efficiency: “I am chopping and chopping and chopping until I am looking up and it is dark” (51). Agu’s perceived powerlessness is juxtaposed with the absolute power he has of killing and terrorizing others. Baffled by his own predicament, Agu wonders “Why can I not just be saying no?” (42). In moments of extreme trauma, Agu either makes wordless sounds or is left completely speechless, and Agu’s only friend, Strika, “is not making one noise since they are killing his parent [sic]” (37), forced to scratch “pictures” into the ground with a stick in order to communicate. Faced with incomprehensible horrors, Strika and Agu both experience a complete failure of language and the reader is forced to read indirectly, paying attention to what is *not* being said.

As a particularly stark coming-of-age story, *Beasts of No Nation* highlights the oxymoronic nature of the figure of the ‘child’ who is also a ‘soldier.’ As Hron argues, the genre of the *Bildungsroman* explores “a child’s entry into the adult world and the social order,” but “in this case, the social order is that of war, and Agu not only transforms into an adult, but into a serial killer...the spaces of both childhood and adulthood are severely distorted, if not perverted” (Hron 42). Hron builds on Bhabha’s understanding of “hybridity” as a space of possibility and resistance where the “precarious passage from childhood to adulthood figures as” an “in-between space” (29). Childhood is a critical space of “mimicry” where “the ‘civilized,’ rational and independent ‘adult’ behaviour and

values are repeatedly being undermined” (30). For example, the defamiliarizing effect of a child ‘playing soldier’ can be unsettling, especially the way Agu is able to rationalize his transformation in uncharacteristically controlled grammatical structure that mirrors a cold logic: “I am not bad boy. I am not a bad boy. I am soldier and soldier is not bad if he is killing” (Iweala 23). Agu realizes, however, that this new identity is no game: “I am not remembering the last time I am playing games” (122). The mimicry of the child (who is at the same time a soldier) holds a mirror up to expose the inherent contradictions in adult behaviour.

Reflected in the book’s title, the framing epigraphs, and throughout the narrative is the idea that the text is a meditation on a loss of humanity. Echoing Beah’s experience of the dehumanizing effects of substance abuse, after Agu’s first taste of “gun juice” he begins to feel his humanity slip away: “I am feeling like animal” (44), and “everybody is looking like one kind of animal, no more human” (45):

I am feeling in my body something like electricity and I am starting to think: Yes it is good to fight. I am liking how the gun is shooting and the knife is chopping. I am liking to see people running from me and people screaming for me when I am killing them and taking their blood. I am liking to kill. (45)

Immediately following his participation in the brutal murder of a woman and her small daughter (who remind Agu of his mother and sister) Agu says: “it is not Devil that is borning me. I am having father and mother and I am coming from them” (48). Agu’s strangely lucid insistence on being born of human beings right after he commits a horrendously *inhuman* act underscores the fact that inhumane behaviour is an undeniable aspect of humanity. Once he is “across the stream” of the gun juice effects, Agu refers to himself as a “leopard” and, in fact, his name itself means leopard in Igbo (Hron 45, 43).

Agu recalls a coming-of-age ceremony in his village where the “young person is having to spend one whole year learning all the dance that is turning you to man” (Iweala 52). Abruptly forced to undergo a grotesquely parodied version of the ceremonial Ox and Leopard dance, Agu’s growth has been stunted: “I am thinking, if war is not coming, then I would be man by now” (56). Denied the opportunity to become a man in the socially acceptable ways of his village, he has gone from boy to beast instead of from boy to man.<sup>161</sup>

The contrast between the figure of the child and figure of the predator are combined into one character in the person of Agu. The soldier’s predatory activities — “we are eating everything that is making noise” (75)—are merely examples of generally human (or, more specifically, masculine) behaviour when power corrupts: “All of these men are always looking at this whole country on map and acting as if it is piece of meat they can just be dividing by cutting it with knife” (83). The predator extraordinaire in this text is “Commandant,” who not only embodies the destructive power politics of war, but preys sexually upon the young boys in his unit. Commandant holds the power of life or death over the small boy, repeatedly brutalizing and sodomizing him: “He is telling me, take of your clothe. I do not want to be taking off my clothe, but I am not saying so” (83-84). The Commandant’s power over Agu resonates with Mbembe’s description of power relations in contemporary African post-colonial landscapes as a “necropolitical” subjugation of life to the power of death, where the authority to kill is no longer solely

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<sup>161</sup>. Agu laments his lost childhood: “All we are knowing is that, before the war we are children and now we are not,” and “I am knowing I am no more child so if this war is ending I cannot be going back to doing child things” (Iweala 36, 93).

controlled by the state, but rather distributed throughout society in mobile “war machines” like the unit into which Agu has been incorporated (“Necropolitics”). More recently, Mbembe identifies two types of expenditures of war in contemporary Africa: namely, the way that warlike action “contains an erotic dimension,” and the way that “giving death” has become an “expression of sovereign power” (“On Politics” 229). Both of these expenditures come together both in the figure of the Commandant and the men/boys under his power in *Beasts of No Nation*. The Lieutenant tells Agu that “Killing is like falling in love” and, indeed, after his first kill is surprised to find he has an erection: “I am growing hard between my leg. Is this like falling in love?” (12, 22). Agu’s sexual development has been accelerated and distorted by repeated rapes, and he is aroused “hearing all of these noise coming from inside sounding just like Commandant when he is entering me,” even though he uses animalistic metaphors to describe what he suspects “is not natural thing” (112, 85).

Highlighting the ‘beastliness’ of human behaviour forces the reader to question how, and even whether, it is possible to ‘regain’ one’s humanity. Agu finally decides to question authority and act out of conscience instead of fear: “If they are ordering me KILL, I am killing, SHOOT, I am shooting, ENTER WOMAN, I am entering woman and not even saying anything even if I am not liking it....I am thinking that I cannot be doing this anymore (135). Quite literally “walking walking walking” (136) off into the sunset and away from this brutal behaviour, Agu chooses to put down his weapon. Importantly, the narrative suggests that if there is any hope for humanity it is to be found in relations with other people: it is the loss of “Strika,” who is “my brother and my family and the



only person I can be talking to even if he is never talking back until now” (131), that acts as a catalyst for Agu’s decision to run away. Once within the safety of the rehabilitation centre, it is through the care of Amy, the “white woman from America who is coming here to be helping people like me” (Iweala 140), that the narrative suggests that Agu’s re-entry into society may take place.

Schultheis argues that the narrator “retains hope in rehabilitation within the formulation of a coming-of-age story,” which leaves him “poised to reclaim his childhood at the end of the book” (38). However, I suggest that there is a crucial ambivalence in this recuperative rescue narrative that cannot be ignored. The relationship between Agu and Amy is tinged with antagonism, and her presence makes him feel compelled to give an account of himself against his will: “she is telling me to speak speak speak and thinking that my not speaking is because I am like baby...but everytime I am sitting with her I am thinking I am like old man and she is like small girl because I am fighting in war and she is not even knowing what war is” (140). The particular view of therapy that Amy represents is experienced by Agu as a violent imposition of narrative coherence, reflecting the inadequacy of confession and other Western modes of rehabilitation. Indeed, Agu is confused by the issues of “Confession and Forgiveness and Resurrection” that the priest at the rehabilitation centre discusses, and while the bible used to be his favourite book, he now uses it “to be holding my drawing down on my desk so the fan is not throwing them everywhere” (140). On the other hand, drawing is another method of telling and Agu is happy to be given “as much paper as I can be wanting and telling me to write or draw whatever I am wanting to draw” (139). Sensing himself reflected in Amy’s

eyes while talking with her, Agu's self-assessment degrades from child to "beast" to "devil," and finally to simply "this thing" on the last page. Agu does not understand that the water that is "just shining in her eye" stems from Amy's empathy toward him, and he feels compelled to assert his humanity: "I am saying to her, fine. I am all of this thing, but I am also having mother once, and she is loving me" (142). The antagonistic and alienated relationship between Agu and Amy suggests that empathetic identification and witnessing across cultural difference, however well-intentioned, may not be as straightforward as it seems.

The narrative strategies in Chris Abani's hauntingly poetic novella *Song for Night* also draw the reader's awareness to a critical sense of relationality. The story is narrated by My Luck, who is concussed and adrift in an eerie memory-landscape after being separated from his platoon during a mine-blast: "It is a strange place to be at fifteen," he muses, "bereft of hope and very nearly of your humanity" (19). If *Beasts of No Nation* ends with the (uncertain) possibility of Agu's return to the social world, read in light of Slaughter's analysis of the incorporative function of the *Bildungsroman* as a process of development into social citizenship, *Song for Night* might arguably be described as an "anti-" or failed coming-of-age story. More than just a matter of a lost or truncated childhood, My Luck is absolutely refused (re)entry into his social community and his backward-moving journey ends when he is instead reunited with his mother in death.

In a sense, My Luck is already dead even before the narrative begins: trained as a manual minesweeper, he is utterly disposable, trained "specifically in the art of dying as

quietly, lightly, and anonymously as possible” (Vening).<sup>162</sup> Throughout his “journey,” he is puzzled that people continually confuse him for a wandering spirit, and as the story develops the landscape becomes populated by ghosts, zombies, dead bodies and other figures of the living dead—“a canoe drifts slowly past, a skeleton piloting it” (76). The reader is eventually faced with the suspicion that My Luck might in fact himself be a spirit, trapped between life and death: “we believe that when a person dies in a sudden and hard way, their spirit wanders confused looking for its body...traditionally a shaman would ease such a spirit across to the other world...now, the land is crowded with confused spirits and all the shamans are soldiers” (109). Like the many confused souls that he encounters throughout his journey, My Luck seems to wander aimlessly. Even his mobility is strangely immobile. Eventually, he meets an old wise man called Peter who appears to him “like a lifeboat” to help him on his journey to recuperate a sense of connection to others through love and the realization of the importance of cultural memory.

Set against the polarized moral landscape of war, the interior voice of the protagonist expresses great moral ambiguity: “If we are the great innocents in this war, then where did we learn all the evil we practice? ...Who taught me to enjoy killing?” (143). My Luck has a “personal cemetery” of crosses carved into his arm to commemorate “each person I have enjoyed killing” (39). Like Agu in *Beasts of No Nation*, My Luck is especially horrified at the enjoyment he gets from the expenditures of

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<sup>162</sup>. My Luck informs his implicated reader that “it’s a particularly cruel way to take out an enemy, but since landmines are banned in civilized warfare, the West practically gives them away at cost” (Abani 47).

violence and pleasure: “Rape or die” orders his commander, and “As I dropped my pants and climbed onto the woman, I wondered how it was that I had an erection. Some part of me was enjoying it and that perhaps hurt me the most” (85). Also reminiscent of Agu, My Luck realizes that his experiences as a child soldier amount to a grotesque parody of coming-of-age: “I have never been a boy. That was stolen from me and I will never be a man—not this way” (143). The narrative arc eventually follows him on a backward-moving journey: “I am retracing my steps through places we passed....I know it has something to do with the chronology of my memories” (57). At one point on this journey he realizes that “something is keeping me here” and that, in order to move forward, he must first move “from one scene of past trauma to another” (65, 147). But the reader is offered no sense of closure in this narrative journey. As symbolized by his broken Timex watch, time is “standing still” for My Luck (53).

The (inner and outer) landscape that My Luck travels through points to a complete failure of community, yet there is still hope: “I remember a group I saw once...all of them holding onto life and hope with a fire that burned feverishly in their eyes. If any light comes from this war, it will come from eyes such as those” (50). Specifically, hope in this narrative comes from the persistence of love, against all odds. In sharp contrast to the act of sex as an act of violence, “while the others were raping women and sometimes the men, Ijeoma and I made desperate love, crying as we came, but we did it to make sure that amongst all that horror, there was still love. That it wouldn’t die here, in this place” (86). My Luck also specifically signals the importance of relationality on a cultural level by recounting his grandfather’s story of the “lake in the middle of the world” which is

“the heart of our people. This lake is love...at the centre of you, because you are the world” (73). The story is paradoxically both “the oldest truth of our people” and “the oldest lie” (69). In a relational and intergeneration vision, My Luck and his grandfather sing “until I couldn’t tell where his voice ended and mine began, and where mine ended and the river began and where the river ended and my blood began” (74). The connection between the voices, the river, and My Luck’s own blood highlights the destruction of landscape and cultural memory that occurs when war tears communities apart.

Despite a focus on My Luck’s interiority, traditional community and (private) love, the structures of address in the narrative still suggest that a larger vision of community is necessary for future healing. In the very first line of the text, the narrator addresses the reader in second-person voice, “What you hear is not my voice”:

Of course if you are hearing any of this at all it’s because you have gained access to my head. You would also know then that my inner-speech is not in English, because there is something atavistic about war that rejects all but the primal language of the genes to comprehend it, so you are in fact hearing my thoughts in Igbo. But we shan’t waste time on trying to figure all that out because as I said before, time here is precious and not to be wasted on peculiarities, only on what is essential. (21).

Addressing us in the second-person, the narrator urges readers of the text not to waste time on “peculiarities,” and instead look toward the universality of human experiences. As a manual minesweeper, My Luck has had his vocal chords severed so that no one can hear his screams; even though he is contained in his own silent world of memories, he says that the “interiority of the head...opens up your view of the world” (21). The very structure of the novella draws attention to the impossibility of representation and each chapter-heading describes a different hand signal for non-verbal communication: for

example, “Silence is a Steady Hand, Palm Flat” or “Death is Two Fingers Sliding Across the Throat.” Schultheis suggests that the narrative reflects a need to reach “across alterity without wanting or believing it possible to domesticate it” (39). She argues that Abani’s text “vehemently” denies “the conventional satisfactions of narrative sympathy or humanitarian intervention within existing power structures,” and “demands instead the reader and author’s joint contract to imagine the unimaginable as an (unattainable) goal in and of itself” (Schultheis 38). Indeed, the voiceless voice of *My Luck* lingers poetically, and calls not for comprehension (understood as “capture” or “seizure”) but for a different kind of imaginative reaching out toward an/other. I suggest that, more than just a project to “imagine the unimaginable” (Schultheis 38), reflected in the poetic imagination of this narrative is a specifically ethical dimension to memory and trauma that has more to do with an awareness of community than with individual memory.

This community awareness is expanded considerably in Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s *Moses, Citizen and Me*. In this Orwell Prize-winning novel the narrator, Julia, travels from England to her ancestral, war-torn homeland of Sierra Leone to visit her uncle Moses for the first time in twenty years and to confront the fact that her 8-year-old cousin—ironically named “Citizen”—has become a child soldier. At the command of the “big soldier man,” Citizen is responsible for the murder of his own grandmother, Adele. Unlike *Beasts of No Nation* and *Song for Night*, which are both narrated in first-person present tense by their child soldier protagonists, this story is narrated in past tense by Julia—in fact, Citizen barely speaks at all throughout the entire narrative. What are we to make of Citizen’s relative silence? In some ways, perhaps this story is as much

about Julia's conflicted loyalties and second-generation cultural identity, an exploration of her double-consciousness and (global) sense of community, as it is about child soldiers.

The novel also, like Iweala and Abani's texts, encourages the reader to consider what happens to child soldiers after the dehumanizing experience of war. After the Sierra Leone civil war, Citizen returns to Freetown to live with his grandfather, Moses, after a brief time in a rehabilitation camp. However, he is quickly ostracized by his community for his role in the death of his grandmother: "Most people will not even let a child like Citizen near their house after what he's done" because "who wants a child who only knows how to kill?" (20, 21). Estranged from his grandfather, who lives in the same house yet can barely even stand to look at him, Citizen is now a "lost" and "ruined boy" (16). He is "no one's child now," even though he was once a loved and loving only-child of an only-child (81). Echoing his movement from child to child soldier, his name changes from George, to Citizen—or "first citizen of the farm" (195)—to finally nothing more than a serial number etched permanently on the back of his head, "439K." A neighbour, Anita, has called for Julia to travel to Freetown from England with the idea that she is the only one who can act as mediator between Moses and his grandson. Yet, as Julia wonders, can there be "any bridge back to a normal childhood" (15) in the face of such dehumanization?

Julia is emotionally shocked by Citizen's experiences: "Who would have thought an 8-year old's eyes would bear such shadows?" (79). The incomprehensibility of his actions is intensified by the fact that Julia has spent virtually all of her life in England,

and her own reality is very far removed from the warsapes that Citizen has been thrown into. Julia was born in London, yet has cultural and affective ties to Africa: “Freetown, Sierra Leone, was not on my local map. I could not get there on foot, yet it was imprinted on my life, war or not” (5). While her double-consciousness as a narrator is clear, throughout her life Julia has chosen to identify with her Englishness over her Africanness, much to Moses’ dismay: “oh yes, England is my home” (18). Echoing the theme of incommensurable communication in *Beasts of No Nation* and *Song for Night*, upon arrival in Freetown Julia finds it impossible to reach Citizen; they are “torn by distance, communicating with signals and gestures as cold as serial numbers” (80). Julia’s immediate reaction is fear: “I was afraid of him; not because he was dangerous but because I didn’t know him at all, did not know how I could reach his mind” (8-9). In the narrative that follows, Julia attempts to “reach his mind” by bridging the unfathomable chasm of traumatic experience through an empathetic act of imagination.

When she first arrives in Freetown Julia begins the difficult task of understanding what happened during the war by visiting an ex-child soldier camp at Doria, where she meets other former child soldiers who eventually populate her dream-world, including Sally, with a history of sexual abuse, and Corporal Kalishnakov, who is slowly being weaned off of tea laced with marijuana and gunpowder (37). However, at least one half of the novel does not take place in Freetown, but instead in a magical dream-forest. This dream-world is not really a place at all, but more of a state of mind that is first provoked by an act of physical contact: Anita chastises Julia for allowing a “Jamaican girl” to do



her hair in England— “and who is Susan to you?” (50)— and instead emphasizes her connection to Africa:

While she started to work the hair, twisting it into fulsome cornrows, fit for a market woman, I attempted to control my mind. I was observing scenes I had never witnessed before. Her big plaits were a trap, a device for opening up spaces in my head that hadn't been tampered with since I was a girl....My head was a map of Sierra Leone. (51)

This fantasy land that is opened up by Anita's headwork becomes Julia's way of understanding “Citizen's war” (67) in an act of creative empathy. In a series of dream-visions, beginning with a lucid vision of Citizen's room engulfed in flames, reversing his role from terrorizing child soldier —Citizen is a member of the “number-one-burning-houses-unit” (53) —to terrified child (49), Julia is able to imagine a process of creative healing for the former child soldiers. Specifically, she joins her young cousin in the dreamscape of the Gola forest, where they come across a mysterious storyteller/shaman/teacher called Bemba G. After taking care of the children's physical needs, Bemba G. embarks with them on a healing journey by blending European and African oral storytelling traditions, giving “them good stories and good food” (130) within the safe space of the rainforest.

While Bemba G's injunction to tell stories is more embedded in local cultural practices than the market imperative to give an account of oneself that I explored earlier (and occurs within the local context of the forest), the children are still baffled by the expectation. At first they recount the violent plotlines of stories they are most familiar with, which are *Rambo*-type stories of gratuitous violence: “every time you ask child soldiers to tell stories, it leads to trouble” (133). The troubling stories of Hollywood

versions of war must then be replaced with “proper” storytelling, for which “simple guidelines had been agreed: first, true stories about soldier days; second, inventions that everyone could understand” (149). The suggestion is that, in order to overcome their trauma, what the child soldiers need is to impose narrative coherence. One unfortunate boy is “pelted with criticism” for telling “unclear stories” (149).

Victor, his eyes glazed, blurted out something. He was not making sense. Non-sequiturs, babble poured from his lips. Embarrassed by these strange, dark nuggets of a meaningless tale, some moved away. Those who stayed began chanting: beginning, middle, and end! Beginning, middle and end!” (150).

The narrator also points out, though, that such telling is not as simple as it might seem. Like Agu, who feels the pressure of being compelled to “speak speak speak” (Iweala 140) by Amy, this demand for ‘true’ stories about their own experiences leaves them feeling angry and vulnerable. Instead, Bemba G. suggests that they undertake the performance of a Shakespeare play, and the former child soldiers embark upon a hybrid production of both the original Shakespeare text and Thomas Decker’s *Juliohs Siza!* Decker, who in the novel is fictionally cast as a photographer/mentor for Moses, in fact translated and appropriated Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* into Krio in 1964, during the decade of African independence.<sup>163</sup> Julia is sceptical at first of the plan, not sure how to behave “among the child soldiers given that foreign texts were flying about” (143). Concerned with Citizen’s silence, Julia pushes “for him to be given a speaking part” (180), with which he is clearly uncomfortable: unlike the others, who argued over who could hold the text, Citizen

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<sup>163</sup>. Krio is the *lingua franca* of Sierra Leone with its roots in repatriated slave communities. Caulker argues that Decker’s translation of Shakespeare is an “assertion of sovereign linguistic identity” (208). As Lang argues, “if we were able to put ourselves back into Elizabethan’s minds, Decker’s Krio would probably not seem any more peculiar than Shakespeare’s own transmogrification of Plutarch...not for the purposes of travesty, but transformation” (228).

“never claimed” the book to study the script (167). In the end, the other children encourage Julia to realize that Citizen was “brave to break the silence even if it meant only a song” (186), and instead of being forced to speak against his will, Citizen contributes to the play by singing a sweet Malawian love song.

Singing is not the only creative means by which Citizen embarks on his healing journey in the forest. He also carves the symbols “439K,” something that he has committed to memory by feeling the scars on the back of his head, into a block of wood and buries it in the ground; along with this block of wood, he is in part able to begin to bury his dehumanized numerical identity. Citizen’s refusal to speak, despite Julia’s insistence that he do so, leads to questions about alternative ways of working through trauma: perhaps it is not only a matter of telling, but also of singing, drawing, carving — all of which involve a creative shaping of one’s experiences. The narrative suggests that, at least in part, healing comes about by way of “redemption through imagination and art” (Jaggi). The two creative outlets that are explored are theatrical performance and photography. The parallel that is drawn between the two main narrative lines in the text (performance in the Gola forest and photography in Freetown) draws the reader’s attention to history and to spatial relations in order to counter “the dangerous fabrications called geography” (91) and historical amnesia. The physical space of the forest, a place with an “intoxicating magical order” (90), becomes the stage for magical storytelling that seems to be, paradoxically, the only way that “true” stories— such as the one about the history of slavery (124) —can be told. The importance of cultural memory is also clear in the other main storyline of the text: the failure of promises of modernity in (and for)

Africa, which is explored through the trope of Julia looking at Moses's photography of Sierra Leone. As in my analysis of second-generation coming-of-age stories in Chapters 1 and 2, photography here enacts a cultural haunting, only this time what is being haunted is the geographical space of Sierra Leone.

Moses is assembling an archive of Sierra Leonean photographers, and the documentary photos that he collects hearken back to a day when "there was no sign of despair, death, war and mutilation, not a gesture to our utter degradation" (44). The failed promise of modernity (or a failure to recognize alternative modernities) is embodied in failures of technology: like *My Luck*, Moses' watch "does not work well" (12) and his camera (ostensibly given to him as a gift from Decker himself) belies the haunting nature of historical memory by producing tainted photographs. Moses is commissioned by a politician called Harris to take these photographs, documenting only celebratory aspects of the (in fact corrupt) government. However, upon developing the prints, a stain in the shape of a "small boy holding a gun" (119) is revealed on each photograph. Instead of whitewashing the truth, Moses realizes at that moment that he is "not a politics man" but a photographer, whose job it is to "help them see the truth of who they are. That's what I do" (116). In his hands, photography can be an artful instrument of truth by drawing attention to the connections between past and present and suggesting that another future is possible. Harris requests that Moses "avoid more contamination" and keep his "hands clean" (119), so Moses wipes the camera lens "so lovingly that the future tears of the boy soldier were gradually wiped away" (121). Still, the truth had "appeared as a shadow on the print," like "scar tissue to a wound" (119), and this ghostly soldier boy that has been

wiped away reappears to haunt him later in the form of his own grandson, a chillingly personal return of the repressed neo-colonial history of Sierra Leone.

The child soldier performance of *Julius Caesar/Juliohs Siza!* provides a critical parallel for social and political realities in Sierra Leone. For example, the process of preparing for the performance allows the children to work out “how much they had learned about negotiating power” in modern states (179). Peter attempts to lead an uprising for a “powder fix” because, clearly, “Ceasar has gone to his head” (174). Importantly, Jarrett-McCauley addresses the pressing issue of gender inequality and rape as a weapon of war. The figure of Miriam plays an important role in the text, and it is she who leads Julia into the forest in the first place. Despite her importance for the story, and the visible presence of her “Baby” as physical evidence of her experiences in war, because she is a girl she is not afforded the same agency as the boys: “Will there be a part for me?” (146). When she is eventually given the minor role of Portia, the wife of Brutus, she wonders aloud, “is all the big parts for men and boys?” (148). On the opening night of the play the reader is allowed a glimpse into the repressed realm of sexual violence.<sup>164</sup> During the performance, Miriam finds her own voice improvising the role of Portia, identifying with the text and finding within it the truth of her own experiences:

The audience had no notion of what was to come. Departing from the script, she lifted her toga, to reveal the cuts, bruises and lacerations from years of torture during the civil war. “Here in the thigh; can I bear that with patience,/And not my husband’s secrets”...Miriam gave all the clues she could of how the act of love and the acts of war had combined. (204)

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<sup>164</sup>. Miriam’s child, conceived in the context of sexual slavery, is merely called “Baby”: by the end of the narrative, in the closeness of their own little community of women, Julia insists that “Baby should have her own name” and “be somebody, not an enigma” (189).

The fact that Julia, Bemba G. and the others had all thought until then that Miriam was the “least tormented soul” (204) among the child soldiers, illustrates the invisibility of certain kinds of suffering. Through Shakespeare’s words, Miriam is able to publicly reveal a personal truth in a way that she might not have otherwise been able to. Carolyn Nordstrom argues in *A Different Kind of War Story* that it is in “creativity, the fashioning of self and world, that people find their most potent weapon against war” (4). Again, it is more than just a matter of telling, but of creative shaping through the words of another, self-production in the process of taking another’s words.

Most importantly, the experience of rehearsing and performing the play in a company or collective illustrates the important role of community in the healing process. Instead of focusing merely on individual trauma, Bemba G. emphasizes the relational experience of working collaboratively. The child soldiers begin to see themselves reflected in the characters and situations in the play, and creatively and playfully adopt the circumstances as a way of working through their own experiences as well as their relationships with one another. At a rehearsal close to the opening day, Julia has a vision of the true scope of the community they have created in the forest:

Call it an ending of amnesia, if you like, or some collective unconscious that I did not know existed....they understood their place in the scheme of things. I suddenly felt that we could not be alone in this...The ancestors must be looking on —the generations of men, woman and children who had led us to this place, this moment. (159)

Working through the scene where Caesar’s ghost appears, hungry for revenge—“Mmm, dead people like to come back” (185) —the company realizes that there is a larger connection here, signalling the need to work through collective trauma: “There was

something we did not touch: those other dead, our victims. An invisible thread runs between the hungry empty ghosts and our earthly selves. As time passes, the veil between our worlds thins” (185). In addition to the inclusion of ghostly “victims” and “ancestors” in this community torn by civil war, the narrative suggests the importance of a much larger vision of community. The audience members who come to watch the performance form a “mixed bunch,” including “British and American soldiers in uniform,” “village people,” “Freetown elites,” more child soldiers, schoolgirls, “representatives from one of the international agencies,” “South African actors and musicians” and a German director (201). By the end of the performance, everyone present has participated actively in the group energy, creating a magical moment of suspension where “the world was being ruled by reverse laws” (209). However, the healing potential of the communal experience of the performance is somehow undermined when, immediately following the performance, the children are “discovered” by swarming journalists— “Can I interview you here?”— and are whisked away on “UN peacekeeping trucks...why does this ending seem so abrupt, so sad?” (211). Still, even “if this performance will not last forever” (209), during a brief moment there is a connection with a global humanity on the common ground of the stage: “we needed this international community with us and there was no going back” (202). Imagining new models of global relations is a project that needs to be undertaken in collaboration.

Does this performance in front of an international community represent more than just an incorporative response to the injunction to perform, to prove to NGOs and aid

agencies that, yes, “we can be rehabilitated” (Beah 169)?<sup>165</sup> I suggest that, more than simply a redemptive narrative, there is something interesting in the fact that the recuperative performance only takes place in the space of Julia’s imagination. At Moses’s home in Freetown, Julia searches “for a way to build a relationship with Citizen” (40) that is non-obtrusive and gentle. She eventually recognizes the importance of unlimited access to “sheets of A4 pages of paper” and crayons, singing, and being allowed to play with other children. Not only offering a repetition of the *Bildungsroman* as incorporation into society or a rehabilitation model, this narrative emphasizes the relational aspects of creativity.<sup>166</sup> Is Julia’s daydream empathy merely another kind of narrative imposition onto the silent Citizen? Or can the dream narrative be read as the only way for her (and by extension, us as readers) to be able to come to terms (however imperfectly) with Citizen’s experiences? As in *Song for Night*, reaching out to understand an/other is to be understood as more than comprehension as epistemological violence— a “peepshow of their experiences” (127) — and more as a creative recognition of relationality. In the process of Julia learning this lesson, we as readers are encouraged to consider it as well. In Freetown, Anita’s daughter Elizabeth’s new boyfriend Olu, who is a nurse at the reception centre for child soldiers, is the one who first takes care of Citizen. Embodying the function of Cavarero’s relational narratives Olu is eventually able to fill in, at least

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<sup>165</sup>. In *A Long Way Gone*, Beah recounts how he performs a monologue from *Julius Caesar* in front of “visitors from the European Commission, the UN, UNICEF, and several NGOs” (168) as well as a hip-hop play about the redemption of child soldiers (169). In fact, he says, even before the war, “I always recited speeches from Macbeth and Julius Caesar, as those were the adults’ favorites. I was always eager and excited to read them, because it made me feel that I was really good at the English language” (Beah 105).

<sup>166</sup>. In a *Wizard of Oz-esque* narrative move, the same child soldiers who appear in the production in the forest appear as auto mechanics, rebuilding cars in a Freetown garage (223).



provisionally, the gaps of Citizen's story for him: "Here at last was someone who could help position the fragments, who could tie on the beginning and middle to the end" (218). At the rehabilitation centre, Olu nourishes Citizen on milk, songs and kindness. Importantly, like the function that Esther performs for Ishmael Beah, through feeding his story back to him, the narrative suggests that Olu can help lead Citizen to (self)forgiveness.

One of the outcomes of the radically individualising forces of violence and social disintegration is to delegitimize collective power since, as Nordstrom suggests, "violence is about the destruction of culture and identity in a bid to control (or crush) political will" (4). The last two dreams of Julia's narrative, one that takes place in Sierra Leone and one in England, are juxtaposed to envision two possible future visions of community healing. First of all, Julia dreams of building an archive of all of Moses' photos in Freetown: "we could do this together. And we should add those shameless scenes from which we always want to shield our eyes" (Jarrett-McCauley 225). This dream of what "could" be (in the conditional future tense) not only places emphasis on the political recovery of repressed elements of history for a healthy future, but it is also a collective vision: it is "a daydream that could shape our lives. Follow it and there would be a home for Moses, Citizen and me....Follow it and see how the veil thins between one world and another, one persona and another" (225). At the end of the narrative, the spaces between the three names of the novel's title, "Moses," "Citizen," and "Me," are complimented by more names, "Moses, Anita, Elizabeth, Olu, Citizen, Sara, and me" (222) suggesting an expansion of family to include neighbours as well. On the other hand, a diasporic extension of community is

suggested in the dream sequence that closes the text, one that describes an imagined outing to Citizen's swimming competition in England: "Clare and Chloe, Citizen and me; we jumped into the car and headed for a cafe off Lavender Hill. We had burgers with extra cheese, followed by apple pie. Perfectly made with English apples" (226). The "English apples" that are "green and red and unashamed, like everything in primary school" (226), are contrasted to the "pink apples" in Sierra Leone: this is especially significant since Adele has put one of these pink apples in her pocket to show her grandson on the day she is murdered by him.<sup>167</sup>

Especially given that the narration of this dream occurs in second person, addressed to the "you" of Adele, why does the narrator revert to this specifically English view of childhood, even going so far as to allude to "a Dickens novel" (226), in the last paragraph of a text about an African child soldier who has killed his own kin? Does this rather odd ending suggest that the narrative be read as a fantasy of Citizen's re-incorporation into a universal vision of childhood as a time of innocence? Is Citizen's only hope to be incorporated neatly into his new role as diasporic citizen? Perhaps the fact that this is only a dream, that Julia has not yet decided whether to take Citizen with her to England, or even whether to return to England at all, might cast doubt on this interpretation of the ending of the novel. Again, the novel is in many ways a meditation on Julia's second-generation ambivalence and conflicted loyalties. At one point in the novel, she tempts Elizabeth to visit her in England by saying, "you could have it all"

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<sup>167</sup>. Like the reference to the apple that the American soldier in Trinidad gives to young Adele (Chariandy, *Soucouyant*) the appearance of this historically Western and non-tropical fruit in Sierra Leone draws attention to the complex history of transnational transplantations.

(217): however, for the reader this possibility is tempered by the fact that Elizabeth is just beginning a new relationship with Olu who, as a loving nurse, is dedicated to caring for former child soldiers at the reception centre, and thus represents a positive force of social and political healing in the wake of Sierra Leone's civil war. The open-endedness of the text asks the reader to consider whether both of Julia's dream endings seem equally plausible and, if they are, what are the implications of this undecidability? In fact, a sense of unfinishedness or lack of closure haunts all three texts: in the end, Agu may or may not be rehabilitated with the help of Amy; My Luck is most likely dead (along with all of the people that he loves); and Citizen still does not speak, but there is a suggestion that he will either be recuperated by his local community or become a global citizen through immigration to the U.K. What do these three open-endings suggest when read alongside the importance placed on global relationality in the narratives? Perhaps instead of asking whether it is possible to reincorporate dehumanized child soldiers into community structures, it is more important to ask: what visions of humanity are we talking about here, and what kinds of community?

### **Reimagining (Affective) Global Citizenship**

How can we begin to rethink globality away from our own forms of sanctioned ignorance?

—Diana Brydon, "Cross-Talk"

Perhaps even more important than what these texts have to say about child soldiers is what they suggest about the shifting notions of home, community, and citizenship in an era of globalization and transnational mobility, whether it be of capital, people, goods, or affect. If coming-of-age occurs within a network of relations, entailing a

complex renegotiation of community, what anxieties about relationality are being registered in narratives about child soldiers? Narratives about children in such extreme circumstances of vulnerability signal a complete failure of adult protection in the face of social disintegration.<sup>168</sup> Mehari's insistence that "none of us was responsible for all that happened as a result of the war" (110) is echoed throughout autobiographical and fictional child soldier narratives, acquiring the uncertain character of a question more than of a reassurance. The recurring "it's not your fault" line is not only a strategy to enable former child soldiers to come to terms with their past: the reader is invited to imagine the unspoken follow-up question, "so, why/how has this happened, then?" If the "choice of audience is political" (Egan 122), then the structures of address in these narratives (the "you" of the implicated reader) force the reader to consider complicated questions about shared ethical responsibility for the state of the world's most vulnerable populations of youth. It is important to recognize vast networks of responsibility and complicity that reach far beyond the borders of African nations, especially given that, as "highly organized mechanism of predation...war machines forge direct connections with transnational networks" (Mbembe, "Necropolitics" 32-33).<sup>169</sup> Ferguson and Gupta argue that the "precarious situation of African states" and "transnational governmentality in Africa" (991) means that the very transnational institutions that are ostensibly there to

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<sup>168</sup>. A total breakdown of community is signalled when Beah says that "the war had destroyed the enjoyment of the very experience of meeting people. Even a twelve-year-old couldn't be trusted any more" (48), or when Jarrett-McCauley says that "war came and greeting near-strangers became a fool's pastime" (1). Specifically, the complete failure of parental protection is illustrated by the "woman who carried her baby on her back...her child had been shot dead as she ran for her life...her eyes were still open, with an interrupted innocent smile on her face" (Beah 13), and more extremely (and disturbingly) in *Song for Night's* old women and their "gory feast" (Abani 28) of roasted baby.

<sup>169</sup>. Today many countries in Africa are ruled by "transnational organizations that are not in themselves governments, but work together with powerful first world states within a global system of nation-states," a kind of "internationalized imperialism" (Ferguson and Gupta 992).

“help” may in fact be part of the problem, and they must be placed under critical scrutiny. For example, it is important to recognize “the role played by NGOs in helping Western development agencies to get around uncooperative national governments” (993). On top of ruthless transnational machinations of resource extraction, efforts to ‘save’ Africans in the name of humanitarianism may in fact do more harm than good, and only serve to continue colonialism under neo-liberal, neo-imperial guises.<sup>170</sup>

With this in mind, what might be the significance of the repeated relational figure of the white woman as post-conflict surrogate mother in these texts? Aside from *Beasts of No Nation*’s fictional white American rehabilitation worker Amy, at the conference that Beah attends in New York City he meets Laura Simms, a white storyteller from New York who later “became my mother” (197), and Jal is similarly adopted by a *khawaja*, British aid worker Emma McCune, who takes him away to Kenya and insists that he receive an education.<sup>171</sup> In some ways, these narratives participate in the “ideology of

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<sup>170</sup>. Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog* presents a searing critique of Western NGOs, press, aid agencies, and other foreign organizations in Africa. At one point in the narrative, one of the protagonists, Laokole, finds herself in the compound of an international relief agency, being interviewed by foreign journalists who promise to rescue her and her friend Melanie. When the compound is suddenly attacked by militia troops, an evacuation of all foreigners begins. Melanie runs after a Belgian journalist who has promised to help her, and is struck by one of the fleeing vehicles: after having to turn back to save a hysterical woman’s “little poodle, its curly coat neatly manicured” instead of Melanie, “the vehicles took off like a shot, rolled over Melanie’s mangled body for the third time, and rejoined the others. Led by the tank, the three military transports and their white passengers left the HCR compound. They were saved” (161). Later in the novel, Laokole finds herself lost in the rain forest, alone and hungry, when helicopters drop down: “Suddenly I realized these people weren’t mercenaries but ecologists working to save engendered species. Well, by that point I considered myself an endangered species” (281). They refuse to help her, citing the “poor, innocent animals.” “Why them and not me?” asks Laokole, to which the ecologist responds: “Because the extinction of the apes would be a great loss for humanity” (282). The woman, appropriately named “Jane,” tosses her “a packet of biscuits” before closing the doors of the helicopter (283). It is interesting that in both of these passages animal lives are of more value to foreigners than (African) human lives.

<sup>171</sup>. In an interview, Beah recounts how he was allowed to make one overseas phone call from the Sierra Leone embassy in Guinea, and only to a ‘relative’: this is the beginning of how Simms—who then mobilized to get him to New York to live with her— became his “mother.” Jal’s literal journey through the war is figured as a metaphorical story of redemption: throughout the text his faith in a Christian God and his

rescue by white people of non-white people” (Briggs 181) that play out in the context of transnational and transracial adoption.<sup>172</sup> As Eng points out, the entanglements within “transnational flows of human capital” means that transnational adoption represents “one of the late twentieth century’s most privileged forms of immigration” and complicates “the borders between exploitation and privilege” for the child who has been so ‘rescued’ (1,7,6). The narrative is asking the reader to self-reflexively consider what to make of the emphasis on white —or, in the case of Julia, not white but definitely ‘Westernized’ — women rescuing black boys. What is the resulting vision of community that is being imagined through their adoption into the global community? These narratives draw attention to the need to remember that “when all has been said and done, the responsibility for the future of Africa rests with Africans....no one else can bring it home” (Okolloh, “The Potential”). In these stories of transnational migration, certain subjects are incorporated into larger citizenship, or ‘rescued’ in an arbitrary fashion, while thousands of others are left behind and sacrificed as disposable populations, urging us to

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mother’s love are linked. The temptation to commit cannibalism while on the brink of starvation is explicitly figured as a Christian temptation: “I lay awake as my body and mind fought a war inside me” (172). The narrative then immediately jumps to Machar’s camp, where he meets British aid worker Emma McCune, who renames him “Emmanuel.” Reborn and taken back from the brink of death by “the bird I had eaten on the day God saved me” (174), he is doubly “saved,” both by the faith in God that was instilled by his mother, and also by his new “mother,” the *khawaja*, Emma, who adopts him and takes him away to Kenya. He later dedicates a song called “Rescue Me” to Emma, who was killed not long after she adopted him. According to Jal, “thousands of children were educated thanks to Emma’s efforts” (177) and he recently underwent a hunger strike in order to raise funds for a school in southern Sudan that has been built in her name.

<sup>172</sup>. Briggs explores the visual cultural logic of 1950s images of “need,” in particular the way that images of third world mothers and their “starving waifs” draw “attention away from structural explanations for poverty, famine and other disasters, including international, political, military and economic causes” and mobilize “ideologies of ‘rescue’” (180). Eng’s analysis goes one step further to argue that transracial and “transnational adoption has proliferated alongside global consumer markets, becoming a popular and viable option not only for heterosexual but also—and increasingly—for homosexual couples and singles seeking to (re)consolidate and (re)occupy conventional structures of family and kinship”(1).

consider what visions of collective responsibility for the future of Africa can emerge after this kind of abandonment.

Autobiographical and fictional child soldier narratives draw attention to the inadequacy of universally applied Western frameworks, pointing to other ways of telling and healing. This includes viewing storytelling—as a communal, world-making enterprise— as something other than an individual act of confession/ artistic expression, one person’s privatized tale of trauma or healing. Relational, creative storytelling is a way to claim identities and “assert participation in the public sphere,” and is also a “way of maintaining communal identity in the face of loss and cultural degradation” (Shaffer and Smith 19). Recognizing a difference between “juridical and non-juridical truth-telling” (30) these texts suggest that, in the absence of adequate legal structures to deal with the aftermath of violence and trauma, literary efforts might play a role in imagining different pathways to healing. Since reconciliation does little to secure redress and compensation for victims of violence, it is important to recognize the difference between restorative, retributive, and redistributive ideas of justice, and look to community-based strategies to restore and redefine children’s roles within them. Critical claims for participation within a global human community draw attention to the need to combat the amnesia of race and spatiality/geography, and may help to imagine alternative models of justice —moving beyond the “universal-relativist model” (Shaffer and Smith 229) and recognizing an ideal of redistributive justice (especially in a neoliberal economy) —in order to challenge

private/individualized notions of forgiveness and look towards local and indigenous forms of healing.<sup>173</sup>

This brings me back to the potential role of literature as a catalyst for an understanding of global citizenship based on feeling for others, as something other than the kind of “empathetic globalization” that Barnard identifies. As I have suggested throughout this chapter (and my dissertation as a whole), the comfortable space of humanitarian consumption is complicated by implicating the reader his/herself in indirect and ironic ways. Building upon Spivak’s notion of reading as a form of “critical intimacy” as a way of moving past our inevitable forms of “sanctioned ignorance,” Diana Brydon points to the importance of working through “cross-talk” —which the OED defines as “unwanted transfer of signals across communication channels” — that occurs when communicating across difference. As a reading practice, this would involve a mode of careful, empathetic reading (putting oneself in the place of another) while “paying close attention, not just to another person’s voice in a given text, but the way in which that voice is embedded in cultural history...a kind of cross-talk between the cultural location of the reader and the voice of the text” (Kamboureli and Miki 41). Like Tsing’s image of “friction,” while such contacts are prickly and imperfect the reader is compelled to respond. The only thing guaranteed in the ethical movement toward the other is the certainty of misapprehension, understood as a failure to apprehend. Not a matter of comprehension or understanding, what is being foreground here is a sense of connection

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<sup>173</sup>. Consider, for instance, Desmond Tutu’s famous elaboration of the importance of the notion of *ubuntu* for reconciliation: “a person is a person through another person,” and “my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. When I dehumanise you, I inexorably dehumanise myself. The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms and therefore you seek to work for the common good because your humanity comes into its own in belonging.”



that calls upon the reader to examine his or her own position within the global market for such narratives. Within the “field of human rights,” these narratives must be understood as “balancing acts, directed back to a past that must be shared and toward a future that must be built collectively” (Schaffer and Smith 8). The makeup of the contemporary global order means that geographical/political/ecological/cultural spaces are not finite or self-contained, and in order to avoid self-estrangement a recognition of these fundamental entanglements is necessary: “Perhaps the task is to learn to live with those we have never known and never chosen, and to understand what obligations emerge for us from the region of necessary and inextricable ties” (Butler, “Frames”). The troubled representations of the troubling figure of the child soldier in these texts points to the importance of registering an awareness that a much larger, multi-valent understanding of community is necessary. This kind of affective citizenship is more than simply sympathy or empathetic identification, but is rather an engaged form of global ethics.

## CONCLUSION ~ COMING-OF-AGE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: REIMAGINING KNOWLEDGE, RESPONSIBILITY AND BELONGING

[T]he ethical dilemmas that we face in the present moment amount to a failure of the comparative imagination.

— Sophia McClennen, “The Humanities” (9).

The process of growing up for young people in the contemporary world occurs within vast networks of relations, entailing complex renegotiations of identity and belonging. Contemporary coming-of-age narratives, as current manifestations of the *Bildungsroman* genre, reflect these shifting global relations in ways that are critical of (even as they inevitably participate in) them. Technologies of writing and literacy have historically been employed as tools/weapons of domination as well as of resistance.<sup>174</sup> Especially given the seismic shifts that have been brought about by the arrival of the so-called ‘digital age,’ I posit that one crucial area for further study is to consider the role that new technologies play in the coming-of-age of contemporary youth: arguably, for young people all around the globe, book-based literacy is being competed with (if not entirely replaced) by the priority that is being attached to computer literacy and, indeed, future research into twenty-first century coming-of-age must explore alternative transnational spaces where emergent young voices might be identified, used, theorized and critiqued. For example, the staggering growth of (former MIT Chairman) Nicolas Negroponte’s One Laptop per Child (OLPC) foundation attests to the fact that, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, literacy —still being conceived of as a ‘gift’ to the

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<sup>174</sup>. Within the “discourse of development,” the book is a “singular technology in which, as the UNESCO Charter of the Book, which was adopted in 1972, asserts, ‘information and knowledge’ and wisdom and beauty’ reside” (Slaughter, *Human* 282).

youth of ‘less enlightened’ nations—is increasingly computer-based. Access to new technologies empowers global youth to tell their stories in new ways, suggesting the possibility of contesting corporate-imposed ideas of youth, bridging the digital divide that currently exists between the global North and South, and of promoting planetary citizenship as a form of empowerment and as a forum for critical dialogue. As my analysis of child soldier narratives in the last chapter suggests, storytelling and creativity play a pivotal role in community healing. Therefore, it is important to query how young people’s narrative strategies, creative imaginations and forms of self-fashioning change with the advent of globalized information and communication technologies.

On the other hand, if coming-of-age implies a process of individualization it also implies the forging of a larger web of relations. What kinds of relations are being encouraged through the individualizing and privatizing language and logic of networking and what are the larger social and cultural implications of redefining literacy on such a global scale? It remains to be seen how vast ‘democratized’ access to these technologies interacts with already existing structural inequalities and transnational corporate interests—as can be evidenced in the popularity of Vaseline’s Facebook “face-whitening” app for youth in India (Winter), or the reinforcement of destructive gender stereotypes in children’s use of computer games in Uruguay, the first country to universally adopt the OLPC laptops for children (Canoura). To be sure, the social transformation that comes with embracing a knowledge-based society as the way of the future for developing countries comes with untold environmental and social consequences. For example, Ghana is currently a testing ground for the “One Kindle per Child” initiative, a strategy to

provide eBooks to students in order to boost literacy, yet this same African nation is rapidly turning into a graveyard for the world's electronic waste.<sup>175</sup> Furthermore, resource extraction in Africa focused on mining for minerals such as Coltan (columbite-tantalite)—which are necessary for producing the laptops, cell phones and gaming consoles that are so in demand by young people of the global North—is in fact fuelling the very conflicts that ensnare child combatants in the global South. Clearly, despite claims about the role of technology for advancing human rights and (computer) literacy, the basic human rights of countless children are being trampled upon on the production *and* the consumption end of the world's appetite for computer technology.

Arguably, a sense of crisis pervades discourses about the future of the majority of the world's youth in the twenty-first century: while these types of anxieties are far from being a new phenomenon, they manifest themselves in unique ways in contemporary coming-of-age narratives, as stories about growing up within contexts of mobility and dispossession in an era of globalization and neoliberal logic and ethics. These critical iterations draw attention to the need to combat the amnesia of race and spatiality/geopolitics, as well as to imagine alternative ethical and political frameworks for reconceptualising the way we think about knowledge, responsibility, and belonging in twenty-first century planetary relations. Throughout this dissertation I have focused on contemporary examples of coming-of-age narratives that explore and mobilize the protagonists's contradictory relationship to cultural norms in order to produce and sustain

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<sup>175</sup>. See the UBC's Graduate School of Journalism's Emmy Award-winning *Ghana: Digital Dumping Ground*, aired on PBS Frontline/World Documentary in 2009, which traces the health and environmental impacts of e-waste in poor areas of Ghana and China.

a critical dynamic of unsettlement. I have drawn upon and expanded Slaughter's argument that social and cultural norms are "both naturalized *and* contested" in contemporary coming-of-age narratives (*Human* 314, my emphasis). To reiterate, while the traditional *Bildungsroman* represents a conservative, incorporative genre of modernity (charting the individual's movement from subject to citizen), postcolonial coming-of-age stories tend to perform a double movement, critiquing exclusions while at the same time plotting the protagonist, if often imperfectly, into the social world. Through explorations of several contemporary coming-of-age stories I suggest that, while many narratives work hard to mask these kinds of contradictions in the interest of narrative closure, these texts employ specifically spectral and relational narrative strategies in order to allow for such contradictions to remain in play, challenging—while at the same time inevitably participating in—generic and market expectations.

To be sure, stories of mobility and material and/or epistemological dispossession are circulated within a global market that is hungry for such narratives. I argue that the coming-of-age stories that I have examined in the chapters of this dissertation exhibit tensions between making the story available to readers and forestalling its easy consumption. Specifically, each of the texts that I have focused on here highlights the ghostly processes whereby relational histories, though overwritten by dominant narratives, have a tendency to haunt the present moment. They also emphasize the way that constitutive relationality re-asserts itself despite attempts at individual self-mastery. Throughout, I have put Slaughter's insights about the dissentual *Bildungsroman* into conversation with the theoretical approaches of critics such as Adriana Cavarero, Judith

Butler and Marianne Hirsch in order to illustrate the way that these narratives draw attention to constitutive relationality and cultural haunting, and therefore participate in a “productive unsettlement of dominant epistemic regimes” (Comaroff and Comaroff, “Reflections” 268). Not only do the strategies employed in these stories unsettle assumptions about the (im)possibility of self-knowledge, but the focus on global mobility and spatiality draws the reader’s attention to a critical reevaluation of what Lewis Gordon calls the “geopoliticality of reason” (xi). The ethical contradictions that are gestured toward in spectral, yet insistent, ways lead the reader to consider the ghostly underside of modernity, listening for the voices of the excluded and oppressed who have until now been ignored. From the spectral haunting of dominant narratives by the interruption of diasporic (and relational) histories in the narratives I looked at in Chapters 1 and 2, to the troubling voice of the child soldier in Chapter 3, what emerges is a critical re-evaluation of universality that draws attention to the need to imagine an expanded awareness of the global processes of knowing, and relating to, others. By highlighting the ethical haunting of transnational cultural memory, these narratives contribute to ways of imagining “an alternative historical project to modernity, one in which liberation, not merely emancipation, and radical diversity, not abstract universality, define our goals” (Maldonado-Torres, *Against* 233). The interpretive dilemma that comes with the failure of self-knowledge foregrounds the counter-hegemonic potential of allowing contradictions and antagonisms to remain, hauntingly, instead of seeking resolution.

Adapting the *Bildungsroman* genre to fit contemporary realities, the narrators/protagonists of these texts are not only concerned with plotting themselves

neatly into the social world; they are insistently and profoundly, if often obliquely, dissatisfied with the unjust state of this world and invite us as readers to participate by imaginatively considering ethical alternatives to it. These narratives are not only redemptive, but call upon a globally entangled sense of disappointment and responsibility in a profoundly critical register. The strategies of indirection in these texts—from highlighting the experience of cultural haunting to the literary (and literal) enactment of relational narratives—trouble assumptions about the sovereign, individual subject. What an awareness of constitutive relationality exposes is that there is no subjectivity without response-ability: that is, the ability to respond ethically to others. Crucially, these strategies make it clear that the reader is not only a passive consumer of texts, but that there is a responsibility that comes with that role. In these spectral and relational re-iterations of this long-standing narrative form, the structure of address exemplified in, for example, the second-person voice of Brand's *Quy* or Abani's *My Luck*, directly implicates readers and demands a renegotiated response from them. This implication is specifically directed at readers who are situated geographically and/or epistemologically in the global North. As a reader who finds herself with one (literal and figurative) foot firmly planted in each hemisphere, my reading of these texts is fundamentally informed by my obligation to respond as reader, parent, educator, and as global citizen.

It is tempting to view the emphasis on a renegotiated readerly response(ability) in these narratives as evidence of their complicity with the presumption that contemporary literary forms represent a “culmination of a process of development” (276). Indeed, if as Slaughter suggests, the contemporary *Bildungsroman* can be viewed as a “literary

technology for making human rights claims” (*Human* 314) it is important to recognize the way that the structures of address in these stories participate in modern assumptions that literacy and human rights are mutually constituting symbols of the technological and moral development of humanity. As Slaughter argues, the “sentimental mode of reading” involves “an act of imaginative, affective ‘extension of humanity to hitherto disenfranchised subjects,’ including...a self reflexive extension of humanity to readers themselves” (*Human* 274). This is especially the case when it comes to postcolonial coming-of-age narratives—within which “the subject writes a novel, claims human rights, and thereby joins an imagined humanitarian community of readers”—because the trajectory of modern development that is often implicit in such stories squares well with the view that the “passage from savagery to civility” is the “master narrative of modernity” (276, 107). The affective renegotiation of empathy that occurs in these narratives, by writers and readers alike, in some ways contributes to the assumption that the production and consumption of certain cultural forms reflect more evolved forms of the ethical imagination. Yet, I suggest that a consideration of the ambivalent and contradictory nature of the coming-of-age stories in this dissertation shows that, ultimately, “while the tools may not be able to dismantle the master’s house, they are useful for prying open its doors and windows” (315). Attending to the haunting awareness of the contradictions and limits of contemporary iterations of the coming-of-age genre, and the indirect strategies they employ, might help to mitigate uncritical assumption that such narratives embody a kind of ‘becoming’ of the humanitarian imagination. Addressing an implicated reader, these narratives prompt us to think about just how



*inhuman* contemporary global processes that occur in the name of humanity really are. Unanswered questions such as the one posed by Jal about the West's role in the international arms trade (252), or Quay's wry observations about "stupid new humanitarians" (Brand 288), implicitly urge the reader to confront the complicated matter of vast networks of responsibility and complicity, and to be aware of the need to rethink our sense of global solidarity.

One of the biggest obstacles to the potential of contemporary cultural representations to engage "cosmopolitan solidarity from below and afar" (Gilroy, *Postcolonial* 5) is the "failure of the comparative imagination" alluded to in my epigraph. When it comes to consuming tales of 'otherness,' many of us are tempted to read in terms of either relativism or unbridgeable difference. While it is dangerous (and ultimately impossible) to make equivalences or try to reconcile difference, it is important to find alternatives to postmodern or colorblind commitments to 'neutrality.' SOPHA McClennen suggests that in order to find new, non-imperial ways to engage with other(nes)s, "cross-cultural attention" requires "comparative thinking" but it also needs to be "resolutely conscious of its own tendency to create hierarchies and to reify difference" (13). As I suggested in my brief discussion of suicide bombers and Omar Khadr in Chapter 3, the "other side of the contemporary rhetoric of civilization" is "that of irreducible difference...the people beyond compare: Incomparably other, easily destroyed, disposed of, and forgotten (10). Reading narratives of dispossession through a lens of endless difference makes ethical respons(ibility) impossible for readers. Douglas Crimp suggests that "empathy only gets constructed in relation to sameness, it can't get constructed in

relation to difference” (quoted in Novak 41). I propose that the relational renegotiations that are enacted in the contemporary coming-of-age stories that I have explored distinguish between empathy as sentimental self-projection, and empathy as a self-reflexive and ethically committed awareness of spatial and temporal relations. As I suggested in my last chapter, it is important to differentiate Barnard’s “empathetic globalization” (as narcissistic humanitarian consumption) from the kind of engagement implied by Spivak’s notion of “critical intimacy” as a pedagogical, transnational reading practice. Reading as witnessing, that is, as a critical and intimate engagement, can potentially lead to solidarity across hierarchies of difference. It is not only a question of whose stories are told, who tells them, when, and how, but it is also a question of recognizing and accepting the constitutive relationship between the teller and the listener/reader. It is particularly important to attend to what Brydon calls the “cross-talk” of such critically intimate literary encounters: especially since coming-of-age entails a renegotiation of attachments, the relational demands that are made in these narratives indicate the potential of the literary imagination to shape ethical responses to the predicament of growing up within twenty-first century (cultural, political, social, economic) global contexts.

The politics of the comparative imagination is in many ways tied to the politics of language, especially when it comes to whose stories are heard and under what circumstances. The spatial poetics of these polyphonic coming-of-age narratives stem from conditions of mobility and dispossession, where growing up occurs under conditions of dislocation and doubleness—linguistic doubleness in particular. As the mother of

bilingual and bicultural children who are growing up in contexts of mobility and ‘trans-locations,’ I am particularly aware of the epistemic and ontological effects of linguistic doubleness. I have, accordingly, focused on the linguistic dominance of English in ostensibly heterogeneous (geographical or imaginative) spaces, casting doubt on the presumed neutrality of language and exposing it as a site of racialization and enculturation. These narratives underscore the need to listen to the ghostly remnants of other languages, especially in first or second generation experiences of migration, loss of parental language, and the simultaneously alienating *and* enabling adoption of English as *lingua franca* in the public sphere: this is illustrated in the code-switching strategies and/or rejection or disgust of the parental language in Chapters 1 and 2, as well as the tragic yet creative ‘adaptation’ of the English language used by *Soucouyant*’s Adele. If, as Walter Mignolo wonders, “one of the strong weapons in building homogenous imagined communities was the belief in a national language,” then how are we to “think about languages (and literature, cultures of scholarship, education, etc.) in a transnational world?” (219). Instead of privileging presumably self-contained national languages, Mignolo proposes a need to envision a process of “plurilinguaging” as a “collective...way of life between languages: a dialogical, ethical aesthetic and political process of social transformation” (265). Since all language needs to be recognized as continually under construction, perhaps it is time to put literature in English into conversation with literatures in other languages in new ways. A self-reflexive process of translation might create “circuits of connection that would have otherwise been impossible,” and as such can help shape a “language that can build a connection, a shared history, a mutual

awareness, and a collective desire to shape political practice” (McClennen 13, 16). As a relational practice, then, translation is always imperfect, provisional, and is by definition continually open to revision. I would like to extend McClennen’s notion of translation as a “contrapuntal” political practice to encompass the global relationships that are being conjured in contemporary coming-of-age stories: I suggest that it is precisely this kind of ‘translational’ model that is being encouraged in the texts I have looked at in this dissertation. As emergent border epistemologies, these narratives represent a “more entangled hermeneutics” as Sandin and Perez put it (3). Whereas critics such as Slaughter and O’Brien have emphasized liberalism and its contradictory legacies at work in the contemporary/post-colonial *Bildungsroman*, my argument highlights a more radical ethical potential. Far from being viewed as objects of study, then, these kinds of narratives represent productions of theoretical knowledge and thus have the potential to provide transnational and transformational spaces—contact zones for continual and contingent negotiation—where critical conversations can and do occur.

Contemporary coming-of-age narratives are motivated by much more than an imperative to establish autonomy from one’s origins in the process of growing up. Instead, they are stories about crafting a new relation to complex origins that, in turn, generate new possibilities for social relations and point to new ways of imagining belonging by way of a transnational imaginary or planetary consciousness. My dissertation brings contemporary instantiations of the *Bildungsroman* genre into view as significant mediations on the unfinished nature of humanity. If, as Slaughter suggests, being incorporated into citizenship status is “the ultimate expression of human sociality

and personality,” it is important to consider what it might mean when “the generic and human rights promise of free and full human personality development remains unfulfilled” (315). The open endings of the narratives that I explore in this dissertation—from the ambiguity of Quy’s identity and fate in *What We All Long For* to the uncertain and unguaranteed future of former child soldiers Agu and Citizen in *Beasts of No Nation* and *Moses, Citizen and Me*—leaves them open to multiple interpretations. Instead of masking or trying to work through the “unfinalizable something in man” (Slaughter 315), the open-endedness and ambiguity in the indirect, yet insistent, rhetorical manoeuvres of these narratives lead us to consider narrative unfulfillment as a virtue rather than a failure. Growing up, by definition, embodies a sense of possibility, but it is important to distinguish between an Enlightenment concept of unfinishedness (as teleological potential) and something more radically relational and hopeful. The future, like Oscar Wao’s blank book, is still to be written.

Contemporary stories that depict growing up under continually shifting global conditions represent “balancing acts” (Shaffer and Smith 8) where confronting ghosts offers the possibility of building new relationships to complicated pasts and possible futures. According to Giroux, “the goal of educated hope is not to liberate the individual *from* the social—a central tenet of neoliberalism—but to take seriously the notion that the individual can only be liberated *through* the social” (“When” 39). Like the eponymous “What” of Dave Eggers’s fictional autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, heeding the unfinished nature of planetary relations might allow for a cautious kind of educated hope, as a critical awareness of future possibilities, when considering global youth’s potential

for creative regeneration and the ability to adapt to extensive and rapid social, cultural and environmental changes.

Strategies to stimulate the ethical comparative imagination must remain attentive to ways of prolonging the “moment of the open door” (Chamber 35), allowing alternative narratives to emerge and dwell. It is not a matter of romanticizing the trans-modern moments that haunt neoliberal imperatives, but to take note of indications that other paths are possible. Encouraging a productive, if unsettling, cross-talk between the conflicting responsibilities and identifications of writers and readers, contemporary coming-of-age narratives invigorate and regenerate the comparative imagination. This regeneration coincides with the notion of “planetary” as a mode of political and ethical consciousness that represents an alternative to neo-imperial, neoliberal forces of globalization (Spivak, *Death*). An awareness of the necessity to find new ways to co-exist with difference encourages larger, multivalent notions of community with multilayered forms of citizenship that respond to global, national, and transnational realities. The sociality at the heart of subjectivity is not to be conceived of primarily in terms of an antagonistic self-other dialectic, but as an ethical dispossession: as a willingness to forego the closure of individualistic self-certainty. Instead of viewing lack of social unity as a failure, it is about learning to live with uncertainty in our unwilled, uncomfortable, and tentative entanglements with others. The planetary consciousness that emerges through such imaginative and engaged forms of global connection has the potential to lead to mutual transformation, to relational ethics as an opening onto the world.

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