Rethinking form in postcolonial literature : politics, aesthetics, and formal strategies of resistance

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**NANYANG
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UNIVERSITY**

**RETHINKING FORM IN POSTCOLONIAL
LITERATURE: POLITICS, AESTHETICS, AND
FORMAL STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE**

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I inquire into the viability of approaching postcolonial fiction through an interrogation of literary form, in lieu of reading postcolonial fiction through a *primary* focus on historicity and thematic references to socio-political events. At the heart of my thesis is a consideration of the “contradiction” (Boehmer, “A Postcolonial Aesthetic” 170) between the aesthetic form and political content of postcolonial literature, which frustrates attempts at approaching postcolonial literature through an aesthetic appraisal premised upon the interrogation of form. I begin by examining the ontological complications of postcolonial literature that give rise to the “contradiction” (ibid) mentioned above. Next, I postulate a possible approach to a formal aesthetic appraisal of postcolonial literature consonant with the latter’s function as political art. In particular, I depart from a consideration of (postcolonial) literary form as a mere examination of the way a work appears; instead, I forward the argument that postcolonial literary form operates as an organising strategy that structures the relation between the reader and the subject matter of the text, and which additionally subjects the reader to the political concerns of the text. By extension, I make the suggestion that the aesthetic form of postcolonial literature *itself* does political work. With a close examination of Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008) and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), then, I test the viability of my claim: that the essence of postcolonial literary aesthetics is not situated in the appearance of the work – but that it, more importantly, is situated in the political *work* that the postcolonial text *does*.

Rethinking Form in Postcolonial Literature: Politics, Aesthetics, and Formal Strategies of Resistance

INTRODUCTION

Thesis Focus and Central Argument

In this thesis, I inquire into the viability of approaching postcolonial fiction through an interrogation of its aesthetic, in lieu of reading postcolonial fiction through a primary focus on the historical perspectives and socio-politics that inform the works. At the heart of my thesis is a consideration of the “contradiction” (Boehmer, “A Postcolonial Aesthetic” 170) between the aesthetic form and political content of postcolonial literature – one that frustrates attempts at approaching postcolonial literature through an aesthetic appraisal premised upon the interrogation of form, and which additionally results in postcolonial fiction being valued as “tract, testimony, or manifesto” (171) rather than literary art. I begin by examining the ontology of postcolonial literature that gives rise to the “contradiction” (ibid) mentioned above. Next, drawing upon the writings of Jacques Rancière and Peter Lamarque, amongst others, I postulate an approach to rethinking the functions and relations of form in postcolonial literature, so as to reconceptualise the possibilities of reading postcolonial fiction with a focus on its aesthetic.

To begin with, in my use of the term ‘aesthetic’, I draw upon art philosopher Peter Kivy’s explication that it, “roughly speaking... refer[s] to the ‘sensuous’, ‘phenomenological’, structural, and (perhaps) emotive properties of artworks, in contrast to their narrative and other ‘content’” (14). In reference to Kivy’s words above, I use the term ‘aesthetic’ to refer to the narrative or formal structure of literary works – specifically the structural principles that guide, shape, and influence readers’ experience of the events that unfold as the texts progress. In turn, I use the phrase ‘postcolonial aesthetic’ with a particular focus on the ways in which

the narrative or formal structure of postcolonial works frame and reveal the concerns of the texts to the reader.

In my interrogation of the postcolonial aesthetic, I depart from the conception of the aesthetic as a mere concern with how the work appears to the reader; instead, I pursue the thought that the literary form of postcolonial fiction itself functions as a crucial textual strategy that reformulates the relations between the reader and the subject matter presented in the text. I forward the argument that this process of reformulation (or *redistribution*, to borrow Rancière's term) serves as the pivotal means by which the postcolonial *work* of the text is accomplished – that is, in effect, to “[foreground] a politics of opposition and struggle”, “[to problematise] the key relationship between centre and periphery” (Mishra and Hodge 276), as well as to “undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonisation – the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination” (Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* 3). Altogether, I suggest that the postcolonial literary aesthetic is not merely grounded in determining the appearance of the work; rather, and more importantly, it establishes and determines the political *work* that the postcolonial narrative *does*.

In the following chapters of my thesis, I examine *The White Tiger* (2008) by Aravind Adiga and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by Junot Díaz to test the viability of my claims. The former, briefly speaking, explores the relation between post-independence India and the globalised world, while the latter examines the traumatic repetition of history and violence that haunts the diasporic descendants of the Dominican Republic. I have specially chosen to look at these two works because of the intricate and complex literary form that structures and pervades the texts, and which poses particular problems when examined not as literary works that demand an aesthetic appraisal, but as straightforward political

“tract, testimony, or manifesto” (Boehmer 171), interrogated with a reductive focus on political and thematic meaning.

First of all, both authors employ metafictional narrative techniques that obfuscate and undermine mimetic representations of reality in the texts. Adiga’s novel, for instance, foregrounds the unreliability of its narrator to remind the reader that the text being read is, first and foremost, a literary text that should not be presumed to provide direct access to a portrayal of reality. To a similar effect, Díaz exposes the constructedness of the novel’s central narrative through the insertion of a(nother) narrative that runs parallel to the central, and which compels the reader to question about *whom* the novel actually is, and *what story* the novel is attempting to narrate.

With these metafictional elements in play, these novels fundamentally emphasise their status as literary fiction, and demand attention to be paid to their fictional status. In saying so, I refer to Larry McCaffrey’s assertion that metafiction “undercut[s] the realistic impulses of the work and turn[s] it into a ‘self-reflexive’ creation in that it not only takes art as its subject, but tries to be its own subject” (183). Metafiction, in other words, draws attention away from the ‘world’, and focalises attention to itself as a literary ‘work’. As metafictional works, Adiga’s and Díaz’s novels deny readers access to an illusion of reality that could be politicised and historicised with impunity; here, in their insistence upon their status as literary artefacts, these novels demand an aesthetic appraisal that recognises their literary fictionality. Through an examination of the novels within the larger framework of my thesis, I make a case for greater attention to be devoted to formal or aesthetic approaches to postcolonial fiction. In addition, I suggest that to insist upon the distinction of aesthetic form from the political work of postcolonial fiction is to pursue a false dichotomy at worst, and to settle for a reductive analysis at best.

My decision to interrogate the viability of reading postcolonial literature through a focus on its aesthetic arises, first and foremost, from a desire to understand how postcolonial *literature* distinguishes itself from other forms of non-literary postcolonial publications. My immediate assumption is that written works that posit themselves as literary fundamentally demand a mode of reception *distinct* from other types of non-literary publications. After all, if a mere ‘intended meaning’ or an authorial ‘message’ were the only thing to be communicated through all forms of postcolonial writing, why obfuscate access to such ‘meaning’ or ‘message’ through narrative devices such as imagery or characterisation?

My desire to draw attention to considerations of aesthetic and literary form in this thesis additionally stems from a commitment to reading postcolonial literature as *literature* – that is to say, as works that demand a literary or aesthetic appraisal. Peter Lamarque asserts that

[t]hat readers of literary art should seek symmetries and unity and connectedness of this kind (both formally and through any generalised vision that a work embodies) is not just a contingent aspect of particular interests but is essential to the mode of response demanded by the very practice of literature. Literary works are defined as works that invite and reward such a response. This is at the heart of what makes literature a suitable object for aesthetic appraisal[...]. (26)

Lamarque’s characterisation of the reader’s interrogation of the authorial use of narrative devices in a literary work (which construct and give rise to the ‘symmetries’ and ‘connectedness’ found in the work) as a practice that is *essential* to literary art gestures towards the act of aesthetic appraisal as the fundamental distinguishing factor that differentiates literature – and postcolonial literature, by extension – from other forms of non-literary writing. Derek Attridge points out that

[t]o respond fully to a work that presents itself as literary one has to be embedded in the culture of which literature, and perhaps this literary form, is a part, and one has to deploy one's familiarity with the conventionalised routines of the literary institution... The more this procedure is carried out on a work, the more clearly [literature as] a unique object stands out, different from every other work. (86-87)

As Lamarque and Attridge suggest, literary works fundamentally rely upon a distinct set of 'routines' and devices to communicate with readers; in turn, neglecting to pay sufficient heed to these routines and devices approximates to an incapability to apprehend the significance of such works, and amounts to an inability to engage with the works as literature. Appropriate attention directed towards perceiving the aesthetic and literary elements employed in works of literature, then, not only provides greater insight into the significance and overall concerns of the texts, but also constitutes a mode of reading intrinsic to literary art itself.

Bringing all these considerations into focus, I look into the following questions in this thesis: how does literary form shape the politics of postcolonial fiction? Can literary form help to communicate the political impulses of postcolonial fiction?

CHAPTER ONE

Rethinking Form in Postcolonial Fiction

(I) Setting the Stage: Contradictions in the Postcolonial Aesthetic

In order to rethink the possibilities of an aesthetic of postcolonial literature, I first examine the “contradiction in terms” (ibid) that frustrates attempts at conceptualising an aesthetic approach to postcolonial fiction. According to Elleke Boehmer in the essay “A Postcolonial Aesthetic”, the fundamental difficulty in reading postcolonial fiction through considerations of form and the aesthetic lies in the “the irrefutable fact [that] the postcolonial entails a definition drawn not from the work but from the world; that it first and foremost denotes history, not aesthetic form” (170). Given that postcolonial writing is motivated by an awareness of the inequitable socio-political hierarchies that govern relations between cultures, and is energised by a commitment to contesting these unjust relations for a more equitable future, a critical focus on postcolonial writing’s “politics of opposition and struggle” (Mishra and Hodge 276) seems immediately logical and justified. In relation, a privileging of literary form and the aesthetic in approaching postcolonial fiction understandably gestures towards frivolity, and ostensibly approaches a “contradiction” (Boehmer 170) in interest.

Next, in the essay “Towards a Postcolonial Aesthetic”, Bill Ashcroft amplifies the discussion of the topic by explicating the political implications of aesthetic appraisal that have led to the latter being conventionally “regarded with suspicion by postcolonial theorists” (410). There, Ashcroft draws upon the Eurocentricism implicit in aesthetic discourse as an explanation for the “suspicion” (ibid) with which aesthetic approaches have been regarded in the postcolonial field. “Postcolonial theory”, he explains, “has warily avoided the theory of aesthetics, perhaps for fear that it might contaminate the political integrity of a field that has

remained staunchly critical of the filiative hegemony of English literature” (410). In his essay, Ashcroft reveals that formative critical thought on postcolonial literature had responded to the latter’s “filiative” (ibid) ontology by circumnavigating postcolonial literature’s marginalised relation to the English literary canon, through the characterisation of the former as “writing that aspired to culture as a ‘way of life’ rather than as ‘Art’ – a phenomenon that “led directly to the worldliness of postcolonial writing [and] its affiliation with a social and cultural context” (412). Further, given that “aesthetic judgment can be a form of colonisation” (412) because of “a number of factors that [render such judgment] obviously deeply bound to a European cultural sensibility” (413), it is not surprising that critical thought on postcolonial literature has demonstrated a “suspicion” (410) towards aesthetic appraisal.

Altogether, the various factors discussed above have resulted in postcolonial literature being primarily read as “testimony, tract, or manifesto” (Boehmer 171), and less – if even – as a form of art. In Boehmer and Ashcroft’s essays, the authors attempt to conceptualise a manner of approaching postcolonial literature without neglecting the aesthetic of postcolonial works. First, in commitment to examining postcolonial literature as literary art, Boehmer inquires into the possibility of approaching postcolonial fiction through its “aesthetic, or literariness” (170) – terms she uses “broadly speaking as referring to a concern with the form and structure of a work of art over its raw content, or with form as a critical part of its content” (171) – as opposed to reading such works simply and directly in relation to historical or political frames of reference. She encourages critics of postcolonial literature to “re-vision” postcolonial literature by “setting aside the ‘issues’ that tend to define the postcolonial, and interrogate what its aesthetic, or its literariness, might in fact consist in” (170), so as to “legitimi[se] the study of postcolonial writing *qua* writing, as not simply reducible to testimony, tract, or manifesto” (171).

Boehmer eventually postulates that “[t]he postcolonial aesthetic... is *in* language rather than *of* language; it requires participation from readers; it draws us into a process that makes possible certain kinds of postcolonial understanding” (180). In these lines, Boehmer draws emphasis to the function of language as a medium of mediation between the reader and the text – a medium that, as she continues, “draws in the postcolonial world, imbibes its affect, and constellates and reconstellates its meaning through our reading of it, our participation in it” (180). In her suggestion that the postcolonial aesthetic is *in* and not *of* language, Boehmer essentially gestures towards language’s function as a means to *approach*, not to *prescribe*, the peoples and societies portrayed in postcolonial works. While Boehmer does not further explicate how literary or aesthetic ‘routines’ and categories inform and bear upon the political, she does point out that the aesthetic of the postcolonial is situated within language, and an interrogation of the text’s use of and relation to language (how language is used in engaging the reader, how language shapes the reader’s relation to the text, what sort of language is applied and to what end) is crucial to understanding the text as a work of art – one that fundamentally cannot be reduced to mere linguistic or thematic meaning.

Demonstrating a similar commitment to approaching postcolonial works as art from another point of entry, Ashcroft encourages critics to view aesthetic approaches to postcolonial works “as aesthetic engagement rather than aesthetic judgment” (412). According to Ashcroft, an aesthetic judgment posits, in Kantian fashion, an “ideologically determined ‘inherent value’” (413), whereas an aesthetic engagement inclines towards “giving ‘a value’ to a property rather than demonstrating an intrinsic, universal value” (413). In the Kantian conception, aesthetic appraisal is premised upon *eliminating difference* via an appeal to a presupposed “universally valid” (Kant 58) standard; in contrast, the “aesthetic engagement” (413) proposed by Ashcroft encourages *accommodating difference*, via an

“unspoken commitment” (Ashcroft 415) to evaluate the work of art based on its contextual specificities and on its own merit.

Ashcroft then proposes a “a non-cognitive quality... [that he refers to] as ‘material resonance’” (410) as a possible way to think about the postcolonial aesthetic. Such is an approach that foregrounds the act of “knowing before interpretation” (419), and which facilitates the “know[ing] of the other through the materiality of the text [and through] what we can apprehend beyond meaning” (418). Premising his argument on the possibility of “ways of experiencing, responding to, [and] of ‘understanding’ the world apart from structures of meaning; that is, apart from the kind of interpretation that can be fixed in language” (419), Ashcroft promotes a conceptualisation of the postcolonial aesthetic that privileges the “pre-hermeneutic materiality of art” in the form of an “experience of [the text’s] unmediated presence” (418). This way, by privileging the “pre-hermeneutic materiality of art” (ibid), the reader of the postcolonial text encounters the “otherness of the other” (419) in a way that occludes the confinement or the ‘fixing’ of the other within the reader/viewer’s cultural construct of knowledge.¹

Considered together, although Boehmer and Ashcroft focus on different aspects of the aesthetic encounter in their interrogations of the postcolonial aesthetic – Boehmer’s focus being on the textual encounter in language, and Ashcroft’s on the “pre-hermeneutic materiality of art” (418) – the authors articulate a shared commitment in their search for ways

¹ While I appreciate the ingenuity of Ashcroft’s postulation, I do find his focus on “knowing before interpretation” (419) problematic. I contend that the impulse of postcolonial writing (or even postcolonialism in general) lies in the interrogation of individuals’ complicity in adhering to or reifying structures of thought that facilitated the oppression of – and which continue to oppress and marginalise – peoples and communities subjected to Eurocentric dominance. This way, “knowing” (419) or apprehending the “unmediated presence of the cultural other” (418) is not sufficient, for the crux of the matter of postcolonialism at hand demands that individuals (re)examine the epistemology and ontology of knowledge that continue to structure the present world order. ‘Knowing before interpretation’, in this case, gestures towards a redemption of the historical presence of the cultural other that was un-written through the Eurocentric mapping of the world during the age of colonialism. The implicit matter unaddressed by the redemption of such history through the mere acknowledgement of the presence of the cultural other, is that the cultural dignity effaced by the structures and institutions of colonialism remains unrecuperated. This way, individuals must perform the act of (re)interpreting their relation to the postcolonial work(s) of art that they encounter – “knowing” the presence of the cultural other is simply not enough.

to approach postcolonial literature beyond an immediate reference to external historical or socio-political events. In this thesis, I align myself with the authors' commitment to reading postcolonial fiction as works of art worthy of aesthetic appraisal, and take on board the challenge of further conceptualising ways to approach postcolonial literature that focus on and privilege formal considerations.

In my exploration of a possible approach to reading postcolonial literature through form, I set out on several premises. The first premise I build upon is the “unspoken commitment” (Ashcroft 415) to reading my chosen primary texts with an eye on their possible postcolonial drives – that is, the drive to “undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonisation” (Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures* 3). This is to say that I approach my chosen texts with the fundamental assumption that they work, in one way or other, to contest colonial/Eurocentric structures and politics of knowledge that continue to affect conceptualisations of the peoples and cultures represented in the texts. The second premise I work with is the assumption that there is an intrinsic merit to reading postcolonial literary art through a focus on aesthetic form, as opposed to simply reading such writing as “testimony, tract, or manifesto” (171). In relation, I postulate that reading postcolonial fiction through an examination of literary form unravels deeper insight into the socio-political thrusts of the work, and invigorates critical dialogue on the given work by generating a different – and sometimes contrasting – set of conclusions to the work. In turn, I make the claim that interrogating postcolonial works through their formal structures can uncover otherwise veiled or hidden strategies of opposition and resistance to lingering colonial/Eurocentric epistemological constructs.

I must first clarify that in my pursuit of a viable method to approach postcolonial literary texts through form, I do not posit a distinction between aesthetic form and political/thematic content – for the drawing of such a distinction would be problematic on

several fronts. To start with, Robert Young postulates that the language of postcolonial literature itself is inextricable from the politics of postcolonialism. He articulates that

for [postcolonial writers]... language is a site of anxiety because of having to choose between different languages, and not having that immediate relation to a particular language as the language in which you speak, write and publish without even having to think about it. So, I would agree... that the anxiety of language, of which language, of speaking in another's language, is a characteristic of postcolonial writing... [It] is all about the experience of a certain kind of void before you write. It's the brutal effect of history on a colonised culture. So it's certainly the case that postcolonial literature is haunted by the question of language: of whose language, whose voice. (Young 615)

Young's above discussion of the postcolonial anxiety towards voice and language emphasises that even the choice of language used in postcolonial writing politicises the aesthetics of the work. Indeed, the choice of language determines the perspective of the postcolonial work (the choice of through whose point of view the work is being articulated), and additionally sets the work in negotiation with the socio-cultural forces and hierarchies from which it stems. Further, Young reveals that even beyond the anxiety towards voice and language exists the "void" that permeates postcolonial writing and language, and which arises from "the brutal effect of history on a colonised culture" (ibid). Postcolonial writing, in other words, is haunted by the consequences of historical and political events from the outset, and is inherently implicated in a negotiation with the power structures that underlie and predominate these events.

Moreover, as Boehmer points out in her article on the matter, the aesthetic of postcolonial literature is ultimately politicised: "it requires participation from readers; it

draws us into a process that makes possible certain kinds of postcolonial understanding” (Boehmer 180). As a medium to (re)shape subjectivities to “[make] possible certain kinds of postcolonial understanding” (ibid), a central aspect of the postcolonial aesthetic has to include its facilitation of the reader’s interaction with wider forces of culture and discourses of power. This way, for postcolonial literature, the aesthetic is inextricable from politics.

In this thesis, I pursue the view that aesthetics – commonly associated with one’s perception of and engagement with the aesthetic or formal structure of art, and in particular the “properties of artistic structure” and “properties of a structure as a whole” (Kivy 48) – is not necessarily severed from historical and political reality, and solely confined to the domain of *l’art pour l’art*. First of all, in the essay “The Ideology of the Aesthetic”, Terry Eagleton highlights that “the ‘aesthetic’, at least in its original formulations, has little to do with art. It denotes instead a whole program of social, psychical and political reconstruction on the part of the early European bourgeoisie” (327). Eagleton elaborates that “the [conceptualisation of the] aesthetic... marks an historic shift from... coercion to hegemony, ruling and informing our sensuous life from within while allowing it to thrive in all its relative autonomy” (328), and further informs us that “[w]hat matters in aesthetics is not art but this whole project of reconstructing the human subject from the inside, informing its subtlest affections and bodily responses with this law which is not a law” (330). As a matter of naturalising particular modes of sensing and feeling, the aesthetic – at least in its conception, as Eagleton postulates – is inherently implicated in regulating the subjectivity of individuals in European bourgeois society and is thus already a political medium, even as it posits itself as “disinterested and free” (Kant 52).

In a similar vein, in *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno suggests that “[a]s long as the perception of art is confined to art, the work of art is not adequately perceived. In order to be so perceived, the inner composition of a work calls for an external referent which is not part

of art, yet mediated by it” (478). In these lines, Adorno highlights the interrelation between the aesthetic and the world that exists beyond: if the significance of a work of art is to be apprehended, the external forces that surround its production have to be contemplated as well. The work of art is thus, in part, a registry of the external forces that bear upon it.

In contemplation of the authors views articulated above, I reiterate the sentiment that the field of aesthetics does not exist in an autonomous realm impenetrable by social or political forces. In turn, I contend that any conceptualisation of the postcolonial aesthetic cannot be divorced from the writing’s fundamental engagement reflection of and engagement with overarching power structures, as well as its interaction with external social, cultural, and historical realities.

(II) The Politics of Form

Bridging the Gulf Between Politics and Aesthetics

Postcolonial literature, as I have discussed in the section above, is haunted by the divisive line drawn between aesthetic and political concerns. In consideration of the “politics of opposition and struggle” (Mishra and Hodge 276) that both pervade and inform the conception of postcolonial literary art, I postulate that in reading postcolonial literature, the aesthetic encounter has to accompany, and take place simultaneously with, the encounter with the politics of the text.

In order to approach postcolonial literature with an eye on both its aesthetic and politics, I first turn to art philosopher, Peter Lamarque, and his remark that “what makes [literary] narratives a focus for aesthetics [are] the modes by which the ‘world’ is presented and the lack of transparency in fictional description” (37); consequentially, “points about fictional worlds and characters are crucial to aesthetics”, for “[t]hey show that appreciation of narrative content is not (merely) a factual investigation into what is true in a possible world but an imaginative reconstruction of an artefact of language” (38). In these lines, Lamarque

draws attention to the act of “imaginative reconstruction” (ibid) – or, in other words, the imaginative *reorganisation* of elements adopted from reality – that the literary work is built upon. The world presented in a literary text, therefore, has to first of all be understood as a *fictional construct*, to be perceived in distinction from the real world.

In Lamarque’s view, the “lack of transparency in fictional description” (37) is a crucial feature of literary art that problematises a view of literary work as what Boehmer terms “testimony, tract, or manifesto” (“Postcolonial Aesthetic” 171); for, according to Lamarque, “[t]o read and understand a fictional narrative, on reductive views [as is approaching literature as ‘testimony, tract, or manifesto’], is to grasp the ‘facts’ about a fictional world either through ‘make believe’ or by projecting... worlds... where the fiction is ‘told as known facts’” (Lamarque 37). This is, in essence, to say that “reductive” (ibid) approaches to literature fail to take into account – and additionally undermine – the significance of the author’s act of imaginative reconstruction and reorganisation. In turn, “reductive” (ibid) readings as such fail to apprehend the gap or distance deliberately established between reality and the world of the text, that is put in place *through* the author’s formal reorganisation of elements in the text. Here, I suggest that apprehending this gap between reality and the world of the text is of particular importance in understanding the ‘significance’ or ‘meaning’ of the text – not simply because it frames the ‘message’ of the text, but more crucially because it articulates the politics of the text.

At this point, to further facilitate my discussion, I draw upon the interpretation of the term ‘politics’ endorsed by the philosopher Jacques Rancière. To begin with, in Rancière’s perception, politics is not necessarily or merely “the exercise of, or struggle for, power”; instead, in his view, politics is “a form of experience” (*Politics of Aesthetics* 13). Central to the “form of experience” (ibid) that politics takes place by is what Rancière terms “the distribution of the sensible” – the process by which hierarchies between peoples and elements

are drawn up, one delineated by “the distribution and redistribution of places and identities, th[e] apportioning and reapportioning of spaces and times, [and] of the visible and the invisible” (*Aesthetics and its Discontents* 24). In Rancière’s thought, then, the defining feature of political activity is the “reconfigur[ation] of the distribution of the sensible” (25) – the reconceptualisation of the ways and hierarchies in which “places and identities”, “spaces and times” as well as the “visible and the invisible” (24) are organised, such that new perspectives and debates could be articulated about the “common of a community” (25).

Rancière’s interpretation of politics and political activity is pivotal to his theorisation of the common and overlapping function shared by politics and art (one that I adopt as a frame of reference for this thesis) – namely, that politics and art fundamentally occur as processes that structure and organise experience. Rancière elaborates that just as political activity revolves around the “configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, [and] of objects posited as common and as pertaining to a common decision” (24), art draws upon the same processes of “configuration” and “framing” (ibid) in its interaction with its spectator or reader. As he writes,

[w]hat the term ‘art’ designates in its singularity is the framing of a space of presentation by which the things of art are identified as such. And what links the practice of art to the question of the common is the constitution, at once material and symbolic, of a specific time-space, of a suspension to the ordinary forms of sensory experience. (23)

Rancière’s elaboration above draws particular attention to the notion that the impact of art does not so much reside in the *content* presented in the work of art, as it does in the *experience* structured (or re-structured) in and by the work. Importantly, Rancière highlights that

[a]rt is not, in the first instance, political because of the messages and sentiments that it conveys concerning the state of the world. Neither is it political because of the manner in which it might choose to represent society's structures, or social groups, their conflicts or identities. It is political because of the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples in this space. (23)

Art, then, does not occur simply as an abstract medium through which an authorial 'message' or 'meaning' is conveyed; more crucially, it occurs as a mode of experience structured by the *possibilities* of different social and power relations – presented in and through the work of art – which could otherwise exist between the various groups and individuals in a given society.

Significantly, in Rancière's view, the presentation of such possibilities of different social and power relations in art contributes towards art's inherent proclivity and capacity to intervene in politics. He remarks that "[a]rt's radicality... is the singular power of presence, of appearing and inscription, power that tears experience away from ordinariness" (19), particularly since "the specificity of art consists in bringing about a reframing of material and symbolic spaces" (21). In turn,

the relationship between aesthetics and politics consists... in the way in which the practices and forms of visibility of art... intervene in the distribution of the sensible and its reconfiguration, in which they distribute spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular. (25)

Contemplated this way, art and aesthetic practices can be conceived of as inherent acts of politics, and are certainly not divorced from political articulations and work. Indeed, as "aesthetics can be understood... as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience", because it entails "a delimitation of spaces and times, of the

visible and invisible, of speech [that which is to be listened to] and noise [that which is ignored]” (13), art and aesthetic practices inherently present themselves as phenomena that can be analysed for political implications. Considered altogether – and here drawing my discussion back to the main focus of my thesis – the “contradiction” (Boehmer, “A Postcolonial Aesthetic” 170) posited between the politics and aesthetic of postcolonial literature ceases to be a gulf that cannot be bridged. Indeed, the artistry and formal structure of the world presented in the literary text – the “imaginative reconstruction” (Lamarque 38) of elements in reality – themselves become objects simultaneously open to political interpretations.

Postcolonial Literature through the Lens of Formal Politics

I begin the section that follows by harking back to Lamarque’s and Rancière’s comments on the aesthetic. First, commenting specifically on the relation between literature and politics in the volume *The Politics of Literature*, Rancière suggests that “literature intervenes... in the relationship between practices and forms of visibility and modes of saying that carves up one or more common worlds” (4). Literature, in other words, is a medium that “intervenes” (ibid) in the social and power hierarchies that exist in reality, as it compels the reader to experience – through the author’s act of “imaginative reconstruction” (Lamarque 38) in the story of the text – a fictional world structured upon a worldview and social relations that diverge from the norms of the reader’s reality. Literature thus gestures towards a reconceptualisation and reformulation of socio-political hierarchies, as it compels the reader to witness, and *participate in the imagination of*, a world informed by a divergent or contrasting perspective.

Rancière’s words resonate with Lamarque’s insistence upon the aesthetic, formal appreciation of literary works – or, in other words, the apprehending of the “modes by which

the ‘world’ is presented [in the literary text] and the lack of transparency in fictional description” (Lamarque 37). Indeed, apprehending *how* the fictional world of the text is conceived of and structured would be crucial to understanding both the aesthetic *and* the politics of the text (which, in taking Rancière’s words as a premise, are fundamentally and inherently linked).

Lamarque additionally suggests that “[i]f we are to pursue the possibility of an aesthetics of literature it will be necessary to move beyond a focus on utterances and their meanings” (34). He elaborates that venturing beyond a mere “focus on utterances and their meanings” (ibid) necessitates the act of “indicat[ing] not the meaning of the work but *how it works and where its interest lies*” (38, emphasis mine), by drawing attention to the “the significance of the descriptive content and the interconnectedness of [the narrative] elements” (38). In relation, he declares that “a fundamental aspect of the literary aesthetic effect [is] the consonance of means to end” (33). This is, in essence, to say that a crucial aspect of reading literature aesthetically hinges upon grasping the ways in which the formal structure and the overall ‘meaning’ of the work illuminate and reinforce each other. Lamarque then concludes that it is “always legitimate to ask what function [any narrative] element is performing” (38), so as to be able to examine *how* the fictional world of the literary work is reconstructed and reorganised, and to derive a more informed understanding of the overall significance of the work.

Lamarque’s conceptualisation of literary aesthetics – namely, as the interrogation of the “consonance of means [form] to end [effect]” (33), and of “how [the text] works and where its interest lies” (38) – is one that I take on board in this thesis. However, I seek to move beyond the sole consideration of literary aesthetics *in general* (which Lamarque discusses above), to a more specific consideration of *postcolonial* literary aesthetics. Here, I draw upon postcolonial scholar Sam Durrant’s postulation that postcolonial literature’s

“principal task is to engender a consciousness of the unjust foundations of the present and to open up the possibility of a just future” (Durrant 1). According to Durrant’s observation, the essential premise underlying postcolonial writing is an interrogation of, and a contestation against, the “unjust foundations of the present” (ibid) that perpetuate inequitable hierarchies and hegemonic relations between peoples and cultures. In turn, if such is the “end” (Lamarque 33) of postcolonial writing, a consideration of postcolonial literary aesthetics would have to draw attention to how the struggle to “open up the possibility of a just future” (Durrant 1) manifests itself in, and through, the means or formal structure of the text.

To further facilitate this discussion, I draw upon Rancière’s postulation that “all political activity is a conflict aimed at deciding what is speech or mere growl; in other words, aimed at retracing the perceptible boundaries by means of which political capacity is demonstrated” (*Politics of Literature* 4). Here, his words fundamentally suggest that all political activity is an act of enforcing or contesting hierarchies, and of (re)organising relations between particular subjects and social actors. In contemplation of Rancière’s words together with the specificities of postcolonial literature delineated by Durrant, I explore postcolonial literary form as a political structuring principle that manipulates readers’ sensibilities, and which organises readers’ relation to the subject matter of the given text. Further, in consideration of the colonial/Eurocentric paradigm, where “[t]he colonised do not have epistemic privileges... [as] the only epistemic privilege is on the side of the coloniser” (Mignolo, “Delinking” 459), I look at postcolonial literary aesthetics as a part of postcolonial writers’ effort to reconstruct readers’ relation to the Eurocentric epistemic paradigm – a paradigm that continues to de-privilege the cultures and peoples that the writers seek to represent.

More importantly, I suggest that beyond looking at “how the work appears, what impact [the appearance of the work] has, what is salient in it” (Lamarque 30), an aesthetic

approach to postcolonial literature has to be reconceptualised in terms of how the aesthetic form of the text reorganises readers' relation to the subject matter of the text, examines the political implications of the text's *re*-construction of relations, and scrutinises the text's contribution to the contestation against inequitable hierarchies of power that characterises the project and continuing struggle of postcolonialism. Contemplated this way, considerations of aesthetic (formal) principles are no longer solely applied to a discussion of how the work appears; instead, they hold implications for *what* political work the text accomplishes, and *how* such work is accomplished.

Literary Form as Forms of Relation

Arriving at an understanding of the implications or effect (in Lamarque's terms, the 'end') of postcolonial literature then necessitates a discussion of the aesthetic property that facilitates these implications – that is, the 'means' or form of the postcolonial work. In earlier paragraphs, I suggested that rather than thinking of form as a structural principle that merely affects the way the work appears to the reader, form can be (re)conceived of as a political structural principle that organises readers' relation to the text. This is to say, in consonance with the political work that the postcolonial text does, the formal structure of the text can be conceived of as an exercise of textual power, which functions by actively subjecting readers to the text's (re)organisation of and contestation against the hierarchical relations that predominate external reality.

In making the above assertion, I draw upon literary critic Caroline Levine's postulation that "attending to the affordances of form opens up a generalizable understanding of political power" (7). To start with, Levine draws a parallel between literary form and political power. Asserting that "there is no politics without form" (3), Levine posits that "'form' always indicates an arrangement of elements – an ordering, patterning, or shaping"

(3); in relation, “[p]olitical struggles include ongoing contests over the proper places for bodies, goods, and capacities” (3), and thus “politics also means enforcing hierarchies” (3). Levine then concretises the parallel between form and politics by concluding that, akin to form, “politics involves activities of ordering, patterning, and shaping” (3). Altogether, in Levine’s view, literary politics and literary form are inherently interrelated, and shape each other mutually.

Next, Levine explains that “formal constraints... matter politically” (11), because “it imposes powerful controls and containments” (3). Further, as “[f]orms matter... because they shape what it is possible to think, say, and do in a given context” (5), forms limit the conclusions that readers could draw from the text, and, by extension, manipulates readers’ points of view on the given subject matter. Considered this way, narrative form functions as an epistemological structural principle that subjugates readers to the socio-political motivations of the work, as it regulates and manipulates readers’ perceptions of and conclusions about the subject matter at hand.

Levine’s theorisation above is of particular interest to my present discussion of postcolonial literary aesthetics, as it facilitates a conceptualisation of form that collapses the distinction between the “work” and the “world”, and between “history” and “aesthetic form” (Boehmer 170). Looking at aesthetic form this way – in terms of its function as a political structural principle within the “imaginative reconstruction” (Lamarque 38) that makes the world in the text – circumnavigates “the irrefutable fact [that] the postcolonial entails a definition drawn not from the work but from the world; that it first and foremost denotes history, not aesthetic form” (Boehmer 170). After all, built upon Levine’s conceptualisation of form, a formal reading of postcolonial literature would equate to an interrogation of the author’s attempt to re-structure and organise the reader’s experience of the given subject matter in the text. Such an approach to postcolonial literary aesthetics enables form itself to

be seen as a political response to the socio-political realities of the world; then, discussions of aesthetics and literary form do not have to be seen as a retreat away from the historical and socio-political realities of the world, and can instead be seen as a continuation of – and an intervention into – these external realities.

In articulating the above, I first refer to Levine's suggestion that "[l]iterary form does not operate outside of the social but works among many organising principles [derived from the social]" (7), and also her postulation that "literary form [is] epiphenomenal, growing out of specific social conditions that it mimics or opposes" (12). Levine's words here evoke the thought that postcolonial literary form can be perceived as being derived from, and interacting with, the socio-political forces at large that influence and motivate the production of postcolonial art. Levine's observations resonate with Rancière's remark that "an aesthetic politics always defines itself by a certain recasting of the distribution of the sensible, a reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms" (Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics* 63) – that is to say, the politics of aesthetics function through the author or artist's re-working of given aesthetic forms into a manner that communicates the author's particular interests and concerns. Considered together, the authors propagate the view that aesthetic and literary forms work intrinsically and dynamically *in relation* to socio-political realities. Finally, bringing the focus back to the specificities of postcolonial literature, I reiterate my stand that reading postcolonial texts simply as "testimony, tract, or manifesto" (Boehmer 171), without a close examination of *how* form re-works and re-structures socio-political relations in and through the text, contributes to a reductive practice of reading; in turn, I also suggest that insisting upon the separation of aesthetics from socio-politics in postcolonial fiction ultimately amounts to the pursuit of a false distinction.

(III) Postcolonialism and Rewriting Relations

There appears to be in [the academic study of literatures and writings from the global South] far greater interest in the colonialism of the past than in the imperialism of the present.

- Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory* .

We live in neo-colonial, not postcolonial times... The withdrawal of the colonisers from their erstwhile colonial territories is by no means adequate for the settling of old scores.

- Graham Huggan, "The Neocolonialism of Postcolonialism".

Before I move on from this chapter and into an examination of my two primary texts, I seek to return once more to the matter of the postcolonial aesthetic, this time by inquiring more closely into the qualifier 'postcolonial'. I first draw upon Ella Shohat's reflections upon the prefix 'post' in the word 'postcolonial':

'postcoloniality' marks a contemporary state, situation, condition or epoch... [that signals] the notion of a movement beyond [the previous]... [More specifically,] the 'post-colonial' implies both going beyond anti-colonial nationalist theory as well as a movement beyond a specific point in history, that of colonialism and Third World nationalist struggles. In that sense the prefix 'post' aligns the 'post-colonial' with another genre of 'posts' – 'post-war', 'post-cold war', 'post-independence', 'post-revolution' – all of which underline a passage into a new period and a closure of a certain historical event or age[.] (Shohat 101)

In the lines above, Shohat highlights a crucial point about the prefix 'post' – a point that she, in her article, accurately terms "slippery" (100). As a prefix that "underline[s] a passage into a new period and a closure of a certain historical event or age", the 'post' in

‘postcolonial(ism)’ understandably and inevitably communicates the notion of “going beyond” (101) the issues and disputes that characterise the age of colonialism – which are, in essence, in the words of ‘decolonial’ scholar, Walter Mignolo, the “erasure, devaluation, and disavowing of [the peoples, communities, and cultures subjected to European colonialism], [as well as their] ways of thinking, ways of living, and of doing in the world” (“Decolonial Options” 198). Then, as a term that signals “a closure of a certain historical event or age [that is, the event and age of colonialism]” (Shohat 101), the prefix ‘post’ inadvertently suggests that the postcolonial – and by extension, the category of postcolonial literature – is focused on an act of remembrance and redemption that is primarily committed to memorialising and redressing the injustices of the past.

The writers whom I quote in my epigraph above, however, are clearly troubled by the exclusory tendency – the tendency to present the past as separate from the present, and vice versa – of the prefix ‘post’. In the lines from *In Theory*, Aijaz Ahmad gestures towards a link and continuation between “the colonialism of the past” and “the imperialism of the present” (93). In “The Neocolonialism of Postcolonialism”, Graham Huggan amplifies Ahmad’s sentiment in his postulation that “the withdrawal of the colonisers from their erstwhile colonial territories is by no means adequate for the settling of old scores” (20); in his view, the “contemporary state, situation, condition or epoch” delineated by the term “postcoloniality” (Shohat 101) is more accurately “neo-colonial”, rather than “postcolonial” (Huggan 19).

Ahmad and Huggan’s comments on the troubling significance of the ‘postcolonial’ find resonance with Mignolo’s explication of the pervasiveness of the “epistemic privilege of hegemonic [colonial/Eurocentric] knowledge” that “controls knowledge... through the categories on which thought is based” (*Darker Side* 20) – a notion that accounts for the what Ahmad terms the “imperialism of the present” (93). Firstly, upon the premise that

“‘modernity’ is a complex narrative whose point of origination was Europe; a narrative that builds Western civilisation by celebrating its achievements while hiding at the same time its darker side, ‘coloniality’”, Mignolo argues that the “global modernities” that coincide with and characterise the postcolonial era “impl[y] ‘global colonialities’” (3). In his theorisation, the condition of coloniality – a term delineating the “very foundational structure of Western civilisation” (16) that “eras[ed], devalu[ed], and disavow[ed]” (“Decolonial Options” 198) the peoples and cultures subjugated to colonial rule – reproduces and reifies itself through the hegemony of Western/Eurocentric knowledge, upon which the present world order of ‘postcoloniality’ is ultimately founded.

Next, Mignolo proposes, that “if knowledge is colonised, one of the tasks ahead is to decolonise knowledge” (“Delinking” 451). Specifically, he suggests that a process necessary for moving beyond the principles and ideologies of the colonial era which circumscribe the present involves “reali[sing] that... your mind, your body, your senses, your sight, your hearing have been modelled by the colonial matrix of power” (“Decolonial Options” 207), and “undoing [the] particular kind of aesthesis, of senses, that is the sensibility of the colonised subject [and of the peoples and cultures brought up in the rhetoric of Western/Eurocentric epistemology]” (201). According to Mignolo’s words, then, an integral aspect of bringing the present world order into a truly *post*-colonial condition necessitates a continuing contestation against and detachment from the hegemony of Eurocentric epistemology, which influences and determines the way in which the peoples of the global South are perceived by others, and by which these peoples also perceive themselves and the world around them.

Considered altogether, the term ‘postcolonial’ is one that has arrived ahead of time, for the worldview mapped by the enterprise of colonialism is not yet one that can be neatly consigned to the past. The anti- and decolonial struggles that have led to and qualify the term

‘postcolonial’, therefore, remain a process that has to be continued. The term ‘postcolonial’, then, more accurately signifies an on-going process of resistance and contestation against the inequitable and oppressive worldview mapped by and during the colonial era, and which is still reproduced under the present hegemony of Western/Eurocentric epistemology.

In the volume aptly titled *The Colonial Present*, Derek Gregory posits that

[p]ostcolonialism reveals the continuing impositions and exactions of colonialism in order to subvert them: to examine them, disavow them, and dispel them... Postcolonial critique must not only counter amnesiac histories of colonialism but also stage 'a return of the repressed' to resist the seductions of nostalgic histories of colonialism. (9)

Expressing the commitment to *remembering* and *tracing* the effects of the (colonial) past upon the present, Gregory’s words above serve as a crucial reminder of the *persistent* relevance of postcolonialism’s effort to resist and contest the legacies and injustices inherited from the past – this not only means to resist and contest any inclinations towards forgetting the past, but also to repel tendencies to compartmentalise the past and to declare it irrelevant to the realities of the present. Even as the first political struggles that catalysed the postcolonial epoch took place more than half a century ago, the contestation against the legacies, hierarchies, and injustices of the past remains pertinent and on-going today.

The view of the authors above, of the not-quite postcolonial condition of our present, is one that I espouse in this paper, and which provides a point of departure for my examination of Adiga’s *The White Tiger* and Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Adiga’s and Díaz’s novels are of particular relevance to this thesis – firstly because of the authors’ sophisticated use of form in these works that provokes an aesthetic appraisal, and secondly because of their interrogation of themes and issues that stimulate deeper reflection into the condition of postcoloniality – the milieu within which these novels were produced.

Significantly, *The White Tiger* and *Oscar Wao* are not texts that explicitly discuss the experience or aftermath of empire, as compared to quintessentially postcolonial novels such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) or Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). While Achebe's and Rhys' novels examine the oppressive relations that existed between the European colonialists and the subordinated subjects of the colonies during the age of Empire, Adiga and Díaz's novels interrogate the histories and legacies of the colonial era that continue to haunt the contemporary and ostensibly *post*-colonial period within which they were produced.

The story of *The White Tiger*, for instance, is set in 21st century globalised India, and exhibits a focus on the socio-economic prejudices and injustices of present-day India. It is an epistolary novel, consisting of a series of letters written by a man named Balram Halwai (known later, at the culmination of the novel, as Ashok Sharma), and addressed to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao.

The narrative fundamentally charts Balram's upward socio-economic movement – from his boyhood years spent in poverty (while he was called “Munna”), through his years spent in servitude as a driver to a wealthy American-educated Indian master (under the name “Balram Halwai”), to his later years as a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore (renamed “Ashok Sharma”). In the narrative, Balram tells his “life's story”, which he equates with “the truth about Bangalore” (Adiga 4). The story goes as follows: Balram comes from the rural village of Laxmangarh, where one day, against his will, he was withdrawn from school by his family, and sent instead to work in a tea-shop in order to repay the family's debts. While working in a tea-shop, he overhears the enticing salary that drivers earn (“One thousand seven hundred rupees a month!” (44)), and decides to train to be a driver. He then enters into the employment of a rich man's son named Ashok Sharma (from whose name his own is derived). Later on, he murders his employer Ashok, steals the latter's money, escapes to

Bangalore, and sets up his own business there. In the process, the narrator assumes his previous employer's name; it is under his identity as Ashok Sharma (revealed only on the narrative's final page) that his series of letters to the Chinese Premier is written, and under which we – the readers – unwittingly come to know him.

In a similar vein, Díaz's *Oscar Wao* does not overtly focus on the experience and immediate aftermath of colonialism. The novel is primarily centred upon the experiences of the diasporic Dominican-American characters, Yunior and Oscar, who shuttle between their homes in New Jersey and their ancestral homeland in the Dominican Republic.² The main narrative of *Oscar Wao* takes place in the last quarter of the 20th century, and fundamentally charts the diasporic, fat, and nerdy titular character's quest for romantic love – a quest that he steadfastly pursues and fails in his hometown in New Jersey. Oscar's quest for romantic love brings him to his family's ancestral homeland in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, where he eventually meets and falls in love with an older woman named Ybón. Unbeknown to Oscar, Ybón's has a powerful – and unscrupulous – Dominican police captain boyfriend known as the capitán. The capitán finds out about the affair, and when Oscar refuses to leave Ybón even after having been warned, the capitán has Oscar murdered.

At first glance, the plot and thematic concerns of *The White Tiger* and *Oscar Wao* appear remote from the classic issues of postcolonialism that pervade works like *Things Fall Apart* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Nevertheless, as I demonstrate in the following chapters, *The White Tiger* and *Oscar Wao* continue to probe and contest the injustices and oppressive constructs propagated during the age of colonialism, by exposing the contemporary ways in which these unjust and oppressive legacies mask and reproduce themselves.

I suggest that through their use of form, the novels reveal their commitment to contesting and undermining the hegemony of Western/Eurocentric knowledge, particularly in

² A more thorough and in-depth summary of the novel will be provided in Chapter 3.

the latter's classification of peoples and cultures of the global South as fixed, predictable, and knowable Others. In particular, I postulate that the formal structures of the novels anticipate and undermine Anglophone readers' Eurocentric assumptions about the characters portrayed, in a bid to reformulate the ways in which such readers relate to and conceive of the peoples and cultures depicted in the texts.

Postcolonial scholar C. L. Innes articulates that "[t]he concepts of 'writing back' and rewriting are well established, both in postcolonial literature itself and in writing about it", and "many authors had made explicit their concern to correct the misrepresentations of their culture and history which were produced by, and in turn helped to produce, colonial attitudes" (56). Innes' remark on postcolonial literature's effort in "writing back", "rewriting", and "correct[ing] the misrepresentations of [the colonised's] culture and history" (ibid) does indeed provide a useful overview of postcolonial literature's general aims. However, in my examination of the novels – and having taken a leaf out of Rancière's book – I posit that *The White Tiger* and *Oscar Wao* venture beyond "rewriting" and "correct[ing]... misrepresentations" (ibid); instead, I suggest that through their use of metafictional strategies, these novels re-structure the ways in which readers relate to the characters and issues presented in the texts, especially by eluding readers' impulse to objectify and view the texts as matter that can be fixed and owned through the privilege of 'knowing'. Thus, I postulate that the postcolonial work at hand in these texts is not simply about "rewriting" (ibid) textual misrepresentations; rather, it is about using formal strategies to rewrite the *relations* between readers and the peoples and cultures represented in the texts.

(IV) Overview of Following Chapters

In the next chapter of this thesis, I interrogate Adiga's *The White Tiger* as a novel that sets out to subvert Anglophone readers' assumptions and expectations of the Indian novel,

and interrogate the formal strategies through which the novel's act of subversion is effectuated. Next, in Chapter Three, I examine Díaz's *Oscar Wao* as a work that inquires into the psychological impact wrought upon the descendants of previously-colonised societies, particularly by the history of violence, conquest, and oppression that characterised the colonial enterprise. In particular, I focus on the novel's use of form to compel readers into witnessing the (neo)colonised subject's process of decolonisation, and discovering the decolonising narrative that lays latent in the novel's frame narrative. Next, in Chapter Four, using the conclusions I have derived from the previous two chapters, I draw the discussion back to the topic of the postcolonial aesthetic, by evaluating the possibilities and implications of aesthetic form in performing the political work that postcolonial literature seeks to do. Finally, in my concluding chapter, I discuss the limitations of this present paper, and consider the ways in which the subject matter discussed in this paper could be expanded in a larger and longer project.

CHAPTER TWO

The Indian Strikes Back:

Formal Structures of Subversion in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice.

- John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

What gave the Oriental's world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West.

- Edward Said, *Orientalism*

(I) The Argument

Aravind Adiga's 2008 novel, *The White Tiger*, begins with this cryptic sentence: "[n]either you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English" (1). With this paradoxical opening statement, the novel's narrator, Balram, hints at the futility of reading his work as a treatise on contemporary India. Here, while purporting to reveal the "truth" (2) about India, Balram compels readers to probe the stylistic ways in which he both conceals and discloses the 'truth' of the story he wishes to tell. From the outset, thus, Balram intertwines the form and content of his narrative, and encourages readers to conscientiously consider the interrelation between the two.

In this chapter, I examine *The White Tiger* as a postcolonial work that exposes – and subverts – the homologising Eurocentric assumptions and discourses about the contemporary Indian novel. I begin by interrogating the novel against the critical discussion – the term 'discourse' might also be applied here – generated by the novel, by bringing my interpretation of the novel into dialogue with some of the critical analyses in place. Next, I

examine the novel in relation to the issue of Anglophone Indian literature's "current appeal" as a "literalised consumer item" (Huggan, *Postcolonial Exotic* 59) in the Euroamerican alterity industry wherein Anglophone Indian literature circulates, and wherein the latter has been questioned for its production of "consumable cultural difference" (Huggan, "Neocolonialism of Postcolonialism" 22). Upon the argument that *The White Tiger* subverts homologising Eurocentric assumptions about India and the Indian novel, as well as undermines its commodification as conveniently "consumable cultural difference" (ibid), I explore the novel's narrative techniques and formal structure as a strategy of resistance to Eurocentric objectification, both in terms of homologising critical discourse and cultural commodification.

In the paragraph above, I use the term 'homologising' consciously and carefully. To homologise, as the *Oxford Dictionary* tells us, is to "[m]ake or show to have the same relation, relative position, or structure" ("Homologise"). To homologise in the practice of reading, then, is to read any given text with the *assumption* of what the text would say, with the expectation of *anticipating* a given set of themes or concerns from the text. This is, by extension, to say that a homologising practice of reading is a reductive practice of reading, where a reader reads with the purpose of uncovering his or her anticipated set of themes or concerns from within the text, while potentially neglecting or ignoring other textual elements that may contradict the reader's expectations. Neil Lazarus, in *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, even suggests that "leadily reductive" (Lazarus 22) reading practices and homologising critical analyses as such are not uncommon within the postcolonial scholarly field. He expresses concern over the "formulaic evocations" prevalently applied to postcolonial literary criticism, with "the same questions asked, the same methods, techniques, and conventions being used" (22). "Formulaic evocations" (ibid), as Lazarus delineates in the line above, have generated a practice of reading where "[f]or some scholars in the field, evidently, all that is

required of the texts evoked is that they permit - which is to say, not actively disallow - a certain, very specific and very restricted kind of reading to be staged through reference to them” (22).

“Leadently reductive” (22) approaches to critical analysis, as that which Lazarus keenly identifies, inevitably neglect the finer formal and thematic concerns of the given postcolonial work on the one hand, and risk fixing the given postcolonial work within a formulated discursive template about what it is ‘supposed’ to do or discuss on the other. In this sense, critical dialogue on postcolonial works runs the risk of transforming itself into a *discourse* on the subject. Here, I draw upon Stuart Hall’s analysis of the use and formation of discourse in representing the relations between cultures:

By "discourse", we mean a particular way of representing "the West," "the Rest," and the relations between them. A discourse is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about - i.e. a way of representing – a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. When statements about a topic are made within a particular discourse, the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed. (Hall, *Formations of Modernity* 291)

Discursive practices, which fix and regulate both the topics and the expected trajectory of discussion, fundamentally serve to homologise the theoretical directions with which a given topic might be acceptably viewed and pursued. It is my contention that given the prominence and specificities of the formal narrative techniques starkly employed in the novel (which the following sections will interrogate), critical discussion that leaps into explorations of the novel’s ‘third world’ themes and issues – all the while ignoring the

constraints imposed by the novel's narrative form – veers away from critical analysis, and lapses into a production of discourse on literary cultural otherness.

In this chapter, I structure my argument upon the premise that *The White Tiger* is not directly concerned with the experience and immediate aftermath of the colonial process. Rather, I postulate that the novel's postcolonial thrust emerges in its contestation against the Eurocentric gaze – whether of critics or readers – that attempts to 'fix' the novel within discursive formulations of what the contemporary Indian novel should do, or is expected to be invested in. I follow the premise delineated in the thesis' introduction, and shall venture to examine the novel through form instead of content. It is my contention here, that readings of *The White Tiger* without considerations of form amount to an unintentional misreading of the novel. In relation, I propose that when the novel is approached through careful analysis of form, it reveals a stark commitment to the on-going project of postcolonialism, but in a less discursive and more palpable manner.

Troubling Form, Troubling Criticism

With Balram's assertion that "[n]either you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English" (Adiga 1), *The White Tiger* is a work that seeks to perplex its readers from the outset. Yet, in spite of the narrator-protagonist Balram's proclamation of his (and his reader's) inability to speak English, he goes on to deliver an eloquent narrative in the very same language he purports not to be able to speak. Balram's deliberate exposure of his inherent narrative unreliability in these opening lines serves as a warning to his readers against taking the content of his narrative too seriously, and without thorough consideration. Balram reiterates his thinly-veiled warning about his narrative unreliability some pages later, when he asserts that "[one] fact about India is that you can

take almost anything you hear about the country... and turn it upside down and then you will have the truth about that thing” (12); for, even while purporting to narrate the “truth” (4) about his country, he double-crosses his words and undermines the reliability of his narration.

Balram’s simultaneous candour and duplicity – his openness about his double-dealing – immediately leads his narrative to slip between the categories of reliable fact and unreliable fabrication. The novel’s slippage between these categories is further underscored by its use of metafictional techniques. Metafiction, first of all, dispenses with any pretence of portraying reality. Highlighting “metafiction’s defining characteristic as its attention to its own constructedness” (129), R. M. Berry elucidates that any given work of metafiction “does not describe its world; it constructs it” (129). Berry’s explication of metafiction’s self-reflexive insistence upon its “constructedness” (ibid) finds resonance in *The White Tiger*’s formal structure. From the start, the novel presents itself to readers as a narrative *in the process of being written*. Its chapters, for instance, are simply (and deliberately) labelled “The First Night” up to “The Seventh Night”, in the sequence of their being written. Balram additionally never allows the reader to forget the constructedness of his narrative: through constant reminders that “[he has] to stop this story for a while” (166) and that “[he]’ll resume the story exactly where [he] left off” (79), he denies the reader the privilege of relating to the narrative as to a tract about reality, and communicates the crucial need for readers to pay attention to the novel’s metafictional form.

Balram’s metafictional mode of narration in *The White Tiger* additionally resonates with Patricia Waugh’s definition of metafiction, that “[m]etafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh 2). In the lines reproduced above, Waugh draws attention to metafiction’s insistence upon its transgression, as a fictional construct, from portrayals of reality. By extension, in his use of

metafictional narrative techniques, Balram communicates the status of his narrative as an artefact, and conveys an insistence upon his narrative to be regarded as *fiction*. A consideration of Balram's narrative unreliability, together with his underscoring of his narrative as metafiction, leads me to conclude that any analysis of the novel has to proceed, first and foremost, from a consideration of the novel as fictional art, and not as a socio-political "tract, testimony, or manifesto" (Boehmer 171) conveying thematic 'facts'.

In spite of the novel's insistence upon its status as fictional artefact, however, it has gone on to stimulate substantial critical discussion – one might even call it 'discourse' – on the novel's treatment and representation of India. A number of critics have drawn attention to the novel's concern with "corruption, inequality and poverty" (Sebastian 230) and its engagement with subaltern politics, with a focus on the "Manichean duality of rich/master/powerful and poor/servant/oppressed" (Schotland 1) portrayed in the novel. In the paragraphs that follow, I identify the particular critical analyses of the novel, at the interstices of which I situate my argument, and with which I seek for my argument to engage in dialogue.

I first refer to the essay "Can the Indigent Speak", in which Barbara Korte locates *The White Tiger* in the line of "novels emerging from a postcolonial context that destabilise preconceptions about poverty and the poor" (304), and proposes that the novel "undermine[s] readers' preconceived notions about the poor and their 'probable' capabilities" (298-299). First of all, formulating a pun on Spivak's famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak's answer being a negative), Korte substitutes the term 'subaltern' for 'indigent' to facilitate her insistence upon "the narrator's sense of power" (303) – which, to Korte, stems from the subaltern poor (represented by the narrator Balram) in the novel being conferred narrative agency.

To Korte, the fundamental postcolonial thrust of the novel stems from its redemption of India's subaltern from silence, as well as from reductive stereotypical categorisation. Focusing on literary narrative's "special capacity to present poverty as the multi-faceted experience of individual human beings rather than in the form of anonymous statistics" (293), Korte asserts that the novel "disturb[s] preconceptions which their readers might have about poor people", and that it articulates "a spirit of resistance to [the poor] being victimised and sweepingly categorised" (301). Altogether, Korte concludes that the novel "endows the indigent [or, in her articulation, the poor in India] with conspicuous agency and powers of enunciation" (297).

Next, responding to Korte's essay from a contrasting point of view, Miriam Nandi situates *The White Tiger* "within an elite discourse on postcolonial Indian identity", which leads her to suggest that even as the "'indigent/subaltern' are instrumental for [Adiga's] discourse", the novel does not confer "lent 'powers of enunciation' in any uncomplicated manner" (154). For Nandi, a consideration of Adiga's middle class perspective is crucial in unravelling the novel's masked denunciation of India's subaltern poor. She proposes that "Adiga... indeed re-writes 'our' middle class preconceptions about the poor, but does so within an already existing intellectual discourse about the disenfranchised" (156). Citing examples in the novel of Adiga's conflation of subaltern India with "'the abject', with disgusting things, people, and deeds" (155), Nandi leans towards the idea that Adiga "writes against middle class stereotypes about the poor, but he is still (and he has to be) invested in th[e] discourse [that stigmatises the poor]" (156).

Additionally, in consideration of the protagonist's "articulat[ion of] a strong sense of disgust and even hatred for subaltern India" (166), Nandi suggests that "Adiga's novel is much less about subaltern agency and voice and more about middle class worries about 'the condition of India'" (158) – a phenomenon that is altogether "a far cry from endowing the

subaltern with agency” (166). Nandi then concludes that “*The White Tiger* is a social-critical novel, but its criticism is still invested in the very discourse it seeks to undermine” (167), since “what we are hearing here is the voice of a diasporic middle class subject who may care for the disenfranchised but is still invested in the very discourse which stigmatizes them” (162).

While I appreciate the fervour of Korte’s and Nandi’s arguments, I do find their arguments troubling: neglecting the narrator’s inherent unreliability and insistence upon his narrative’s status as fiction, these critics overlook the fictional nature of his narrative, and approach the novel as a “tract, testimony, or manifesto” (Boehmer, “Postcolonial Aesthetic” 171) on Indian society. At this juncture, I draw upon Salman Rushdie’s comments on his novel *Midnight’s Children* – one which, like Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, employs an unreliable narrator and metafictional techniques, and which has incidentally won the Man Booker Prize as well – in justification of my insistence upon privileging Adiga’s novel as a work of art and fiction, and less, if at all, as a socio-political tract on India.

First of all, in reflection of *Midnight’s Children*’s international success in the book market and the criticism that the novel has generated, Rushdie clarifies that in his novel, the protagonist “Saleem Sinai is an unreliable narrator, and... *Midnight’s Children* is far from being an authoritative guide to the history of post-independence India” (22-23). Rushdie then adds on to elucidate that the protagonist’s

story is not history, but it plays with historical shapes. Ironically, the book’s success—its Booker Prize, etc—initially distorted the way in which it was read. Many readers wanted it to be the history, even the guidebook, which it was never meant to be... These variously disappointed readers were judging

the book not as a novel, but as some sort of inadequate reference book or encyclopaedia. (25)

Rushdie's lines above sheds light on several important aspects that should be respected in critical analysis of *The White Tiger*. Like Rushdie's Saleem Sinai, Adiga's Balram employs the technique of unreliable narration, and the latter's narrative should not be regarded as an "authoritative guide" (23) to India, upon which insight into India can be depended upon. Rushdie's elucidation of the distinction between "historical shapes" and "history", and his corresponding insistence upon his work's status as a "novel" instead of a "reference book or encyclopaedia" (25), underscore the primacy of his work – and postcolonial literature in general – to be approached as literary art that necessitates critical appreciation, and not merely subjected to socio-political analysis. Importantly, Rushdie's articulation of the distinction between his "book as a novel" and the erroneous reception of his novel as a "guidebook, which it was never meant to be" (25) resonates with my present discussion of Adiga's novel: *The White Tiger*'s prominent assertion of its fictional status discourages readers from drawing from it sustained arguments about "agency" (Korte 297) and "the condition of India" (Nandi 158), and instead calls for attention to be directed to the fundamental literary or narrative techniques present in the text.

I examine *The White Tiger* as a playful work of postcolonial metafiction that challenges readers' expectations through careful and crafty revelations of its constructedness. I explore the novel's use of an unreliable narrator as a strategy of occluding the novel's knowability, and of obstructing its absorption into predominant Euro-American discourses that homologise India. Next, I examine the novel's interspersed of craftily concealed subtexts that exist within the surface narrative, as a device which questions and undermines the reader's complicity with Western discourses that objectify India under the Western gaze. Altogether, I suggest that the novel's postcolonial aesthetics is centred upon its manipulation

of the reader. In particular, I argue that the novel's aesthetics play upon the compliancy and complicity of the reader in seeking to identify with familiar Euro-American discourses of India, and compel the reader to examine his or her attitude in approaching the novel as a cultural text.

Here, I seek to respond to both Korte and Nandi by interrogating the novel's resistance against discursive templates of knowledge commonly produced about India. Firstly, building upon but diverging from Korte's argument that the novel "endows the indigent with conspicuous agency and powers of enunciation" (297), and Nandi's postulation of the novel's middle-class concern with the "condition of India" (158), I suggest that the novel grants the *indigenous* Indian narrator "conspicuous agency and powers of enunciation", insofar as the "agency and powers of enunciation" (ibid) relate to contesting Eurocentric, orientalisising and totalising discourses that construct India as a wholly knowable object of analysis in the eyes of the West.

I suggest that Balram's double-crossing enables him to portray a façade of complicity with prominent discourses about poverty and the subaltern in India, all the while destabilising the politics of knowing, and mocking readers who are too ready to use his narrative as a lens to objectify India. Here, I diverge from Korte's focus on the novel's recuperation of voice for the subaltern and Nandi's stand on the novel's stigmatising gaze. Instead, I propose that the unreliability of the narrator's voice and text acts as an obstruction to the totalising gaze of the reader, and in doing so, grants the novel an extent of autonomy from being objectified as a knowable Other in the eyes of the Western/Westernised reader. My wider suggestion is that the novel is not about redeeming the subaltern from silence and anonymity, nor is it a reflection on the 'condition of India' from a privileged perspective. Rather, the novel presents an attempt to decolonise literary conceptions of India from the objectifying gaze of Euro-American discourse, and in the process, regain an extent of epistemic privilege.

An essential part of my argument is derived from the analysis that Walter Mignolo forwards in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*. In the first place, in that volume, Mignolo explains that as part of the colonial process, “[l]and and people became ‘packaged’” by the institutions of colonialism and underlying imperialist thought, leading to the invention/production of “colonial difference” (85) between the colonisers and the colonised. According to Mignolo, under this process of ‘packaging’, “knowledge is managed and controlled” (85) by the colonisers. This production and regulation of knowledge during the era of colonialism enabled the colonisers to self-reflexively be “defined through the epistemic privilege of hegemonic knowledge”, while the colonised are rendered under the same logic “as the difference – more specifically, the epistemic colonial difference” (85). This is to say, that in addition to colonising land, the colonial powers regulated the production of knowledge in order to colonise subjectivities, and to justify their colonial privilege as natural and just. As he sums up, “the colonised do not have epistemic privileges... the only epistemic privilege is in the side of the coloniser” (“Delinking” 459).

Here, I also refer to Edward Said’s comments on the centrality of knowledge control and production in the colonial enterprise. In the seminal volume *Orientalism*, Said argues that “supremacy in [the] mind [of the coloniser] is associated with [their] knowledge [of the colonised]” (32). He elaborates that in the rhetoric of the colonisers,

[k]nowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant. The object of such knowledge is a ‘fact’ which, if it develops, changes or otherwise transforms itself in the way that civilisations frequently do, nevertheless is fundamentally, even ontologically stable. To have such knowledge of a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for [the colonisers] to deny autonomy to [the colonised]... since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it. (32).

In the above passage, Said points out an integral aspect of colonial epistemology: that is the assumption of an “ontologically stable” (ibid) other, who remains perpetually knowable in spite of potential changes. Thus, knowledge can be perceived as a medium for the reduction of the cultural Other, as well as a guise for the assimilation of the Other into the totalising discourse of the hegemonic group.

Said’s revelation of the homologising and totalising gaze of colonial/imperial discourse, as well as Mignolo’s suggestion that epistemic privilege rests in the hands of the beneficiaries of the European colonial enterprise, bears particular relevance for the consideration of the novel in the postcolonial marketplace of today. To begin with, a central thesis in Mignolo’s book is that colonial/imperial discourses of knowledge persist even after the institutions of colonialism have been dissolved; under the logic and politics of modernity and globalisation - both of which Mignolo argues sprang from the vestiges of colonialism - the epistemology of difference produced during the colonial era persists even today. As he argues, “[g]lobalisation has two sides: that of the narrative of modernity and that of the logic of coloniality” (*Darker Side* 5); also, “there cannot be modernity without coloniality, [thus] there can neither be global modernities without global colonialities” (3). According to Mignolo, globalisation is the “darker” (85) face of modernity that disseminates and perpetuates the knowledge constructs that founded colonialism, but it does so under a guise of benevolence. Eurocentric discourse thus remains prevalent, but is softened under the guise of a benevolent globalisation.

A crucial point to be considered at this juncture is whether, as a cultural good in the global English-reading marketplace, *The White Tiger* participates in the reification of Eurocentric discourse, or if it resists or undermines the dominance of the Western gaze. Thus, does the novel concretise Euro-American objectification of India by offering

Western/Westernised readers familiar images of India (as exotic/backward/corrupt), or does the novel offer an antithesis?

Setting the Scene: Narratives on India

To answer the question above, it would be prudent to first chart some of the familiar images of India popularised by the Western gaze. The narrative itself in *The White Tiger* identifies several, first beginning with a reference to a book titled “Exciting Tales of the Exotic East” that Balram encounters

on the pavement, back in the days when [he] was trying to get some enlightenment by going through the Sunday secondhand book market in Old Delhi. This book was mostly about pirates and gold in Hong Kong, but it did have some useful background information too: it said that you Chinese are great lovers of freedom and individual liberty. The British tried to make you their servants, but you never let them do it. (Adiga 3)

In consideration of the above, I posit that the narrative’s early mention of the “exciting tales” of the “exotic east” (ibid) constitutes a self-conscious metafictional reference to its ontological context in the global literary marketplace, and its possible reception as yet another exciting and exotic account of the east. In describing and satirising his purported search for “some enlightenment” (ibid), Balram’s ironic tone and factual misrepresentation (considering the fact that Hong Kong was ceded as a colony to the British until the year 1997) further act as a meta-textual suggestion to his readers that narratives that premise themselves as “Exciting Tales of the Exotic East” (3) are inherently unreliable, and should not be taken as “guidebook[s]” (Rushdie 25) to the lands that they purport to elucidate.

However, making a pun on the same book title above in the critical essay “Exciting Tales of Exotic Dark India” Ana Mendes postulates that

[j]udging from the title of the [*The White Tiger*], the reader might reasonably expect to encounter a tale about a rare and exotic character; furthermore, given that the tiger is a symbol of power and might, the title *The White Tiger* also alludes to India’s rise as a tiger economy, and thus conflates ideas of exoticism and unstoppable economic growth. (276)

In alignment with Huggan’s thoughts on the postcolonial exotic, she continues,

Adiga’s novel contributes (even if unintentionally) to sustain [the postcolonial] alterity industry. The marketing potential of *The White Tiger* lies in two distinct but nevertheless related ideas – that of ‘the exotic’ and that of the ‘dark’ – which are in turn associated with cultural difference. (277)

In Mendes’ view, Adiga’s staging of “cultural difference” (ibid) hints at his participation in the alterity industry, which reifies the discourse of India as an exotic Other that is yet within Western/Westernised readers’ expectations. It is my contention, however, that *The White Tiger* plays into the exoticisation of India, *but only to undermine* the very act of exoticisation. I argue that against the backdrop of “India... [being] transformed... into a consumable” (Huggan, *Postcolonial Exotic* 59) in the global literary marketplace, the novel’s manipulative narration creates a space of autonomy within the narrative through its formal narrative techniques, which ultimately serve to resist the narrative’s blatant consumption and commodification by Western/Westernised readers, as well as to obstruct the novel’s absorption into popularised Euro-American discourses of India.³

³ A point I will take up in the following sections of the chapter.

Another identifiable narrative of India that the novel contests is the simplifying account of India as the land of spiritual native devotees and “enlightenment”, popularised by tales like that of “Bodh Gaya – the town where the Lord Buddha sat under a tree and found his enlightenment and started Buddhism” (Adiga 15), and commodified by the “hundreds of American tourists [who] come each year to take photographs of naked sadhus at Hardwar or Benaras” (12). The novel additionally points out the reductive narrative of Indian servility, exemplified by the account of Hanuman, “the faithful servant of the god Rama [who is] worship[ped]... in [the] temples because he is a shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion” (16). I contend that the novel deliberately undermines the expectations of the “hundreds of [Western readers]” (12) by satirising the narrative of servile “fidelity, love, and devotion” (16) and challenging, in the process, the simplifying and reductive discourses of India under Western objectification. In the following sections of the chapter, I interrogate the novel’s narrative techniques as strategies of resistance against simplification and objectification as such.

(II) Against Western Eyes: Irreverent Aesthetics

Unreliable Form

From the outset, *The White Tiger* undermines its objectification by readers through its epistolary form. The novel consistently toys with its – and our – positions as subject and object of the text. I begin by reproducing a quote from Patricia Meyer Spacks’ discussion of the epistolary novel:

[e]pistolary novels can generate special awareness of the processes of reading and writing. Novels are by definition products of writing, but we don't always think about this fact. Reading a novel couched as correspondence, we can

hardly do otherwise. The imagined writers of the letters are specifically imagined as writing, often also as reading. The letters are produced, as it were, before our eyes. As a result we may become more aware of ourselves as readers, as well as vividly conscious of the novel's characters as writers. (Meyer Spacks 94)

As the writer of the narrative, Balram is the subject of his writing - i.e. he is the subject who writes. Throughout the novel, Balram emphasises his position as the subject-writer of his text. Deliberately creating breaks in his narrative with phrases like “to explain to you what was going on... that will have to wait for tomorrow” (Adiga 78), and “[i]t will be good for me to stop here... [w]hen we meet again, at midnight, remind me to turn the chandelier up a bit” (95), Balram highlights the constructedness of his narrative, and undermines the appearance of his narrative as objective fact. Further, his opening sentence “[n]either you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English” (1), as well as his playful reminder later on that he *does* in fact know English (“Perhaps more than I’ve let on so far!” (39), he declares), reinforce his control of the narrative. These lines additionally concretise the power dynamics of the narrative - with Balram dominating as the producer of knowledge, and with us, the readers, subordinated as passive recipients of the narrative.

From his opening page, Balram reveals the inherent unreliability of his story, in spite of his reiteration that he is telling the “truth” (2, 4, 98), and also in spite of his invitation for us to “trust [him]” (4). Balram’s playful deceit is a strategy that resonates with the postcolonial aesthetic (epistolary) form that he employs. Meyer Spacks further informs us that

[e]pistolary fiction implies special challenges to the reader. For one thing, there is the matter of dependability... Recognition of the contrivance implicit in real letters readily carries over into the reading of their fictional equivalents.

Such recognition implies suspicion about the dependability of narration conveyed by letters. (Meyer Spacks 93)

In consideration of the above, I suggest that an appreciation of the novel's playful and irreverent aesthetics is contingent upon our - the readers' - awareness of both the constructedness and unreliability of the narrative. With repeated reminders of his control of the narrative, Balram emphasises his consciousness of his position as subject and writer. His consciousness as writer *should* correspond with our consciousness of our position as the readers of his letters - semantically, as the indirect *object* of his actions. In the power dynamics of the novel, the potential joke is on us, the readers. For, the more we are *aware* of the narrative's constructedness and unreliability, the less we fall prey as the object of his narratorial manipulation. Correspondingly, the less we are aware of that, the more we are objectified as prey in his manipulation. Meyer Spacks says of the epistolary novel form, "[t]he possibility of their [the writers'] deviousness... keeps the reader alert" (94) – our alertness is all the more required in our reading of *The White Tiger*, if we are to enjoy the postcolonial aesthetics that it offers.

The power dynamics of the narrative thus presents a reversal of the colonial objectification of the cultural Other. Since, as Said articulates, "[t]o have... knowledge of a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it... [and] to deny autonomy to it" (32), Balram's narratorial unreliability and ultimate control over the narrative enables him to retain autonomy of and authority over the cultural scenes that he portrays. This way, by denying readers the capacity to attain full knowledge of his self, society and culture, Balram resists objectification and othering of the above under the Western/Westernised gaze. As a consequence, Balram also redeems an extent of the epistemic privilege that had been denied to him under the imperial process.

Dividing the Text: Destabilising Sub-texts

In addition to undermining our capacity to objectify the narrative in our reading experience, *The White Tiger* further questions our compliancy in following dominant Euro-American discourses of India, as well as our complicity in reproducing them. I suggest that Balram narrative engages the poststructuralist textual politics articulated by Roland Barthes. Firstly, Barthesian textual theory suggests that the text is a dialogic space, wherein the reader interacts with the given narrative to produce his or her own meaning through the medium of the text. Barthes articulates that “[t]he reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but its destination” (“The Death of the Author” 148). This is to say, narratives interact with the reader’s subjectivity to produce meanings unique to the reader. The politics of Barthesian textual theory emphasises the role of the reader as co-producer of meaning. Considered this way, Barthesian textual politics help bring into focus readers’ prejudices and biases.

I suggest that a part of the novel’s artistry is in its staging of itself as a medium that unmasks the prejudices of the reader in the spirit of Barthesian textual politics. I profess that multiple readings of the novel are possible – I do contend, however, that while the novel deliberately allows for multiple readings to be taken away by readers, it mocks readers who attempt to search the novel for familiar portrayals of India simply to readily categorise India within Western discursive constructs. In the following paragraphs, I attempt an examination of the novel’s postcolonial aesthetics, in demonstration of a *possible* reading of the novel’s resistance against Western discourses about India.

The first chapter of the novel establishes an important thematic focus that runs throughout the text: that is, the obfuscation of the seen and the unseen. The first time Balram introduces his setting to us, he lets us in on the following:

there's no one else in this 150-square-foot office of mine. Just me and a chandelier above me... It's a huge thing, full of small diamond-shaped glass pieces... Though it's cool enough at night in Bangalore, I've put a midget fan – five cobwebby blades – right above the chandelier. See, when it turns, *the small blades chop up the chandelier's light* and fling it across the room. (5, emphasis added)

The imagery of “the small blades chop[ing] up the chandelier's light” (ibid) communicates to readers an important premise for the parts of the novel to follow: readers are given an image of Balram under the light, but the very image itself is interpenetrated with flashes of darkness (as the stream of light from the chandelier is interrupted by the fan's chopping blades). By the same logic, even as Balram gives the appearance of rendering himself visible to readers by claiming to tell the “truth” about his “life's story” (4), readers ought to bear in mind the darkness (the *less* visible, at least at first glance) that interpenetrates his narrative.

The novel reiterates its thematic obfuscation of the seen/light and unseen/darkness beyond Balram's description of his setting. After his murder of his employer Ashok, Balram describes his circumstance as “[a] man in hiding, and yet... surrounded by chandeliers!” (98). He elaborates on his “secret to a successful escape”: following the murder, the police “searched for [him] in darkness; but [he] hid [him]self in light” (98). A consideration of Balram's proclamations here reveals a central trope in his narrative: light enables Balram to remain hidden, yet the fact of his hiding is awash with light. By the same vein, in consideration of his narrative at large, we may glean that what the narrative renders immediately *visible* provides a hiding space for the less visible; correspondingly, what is *less visible* can be exposed by an interrogation of the visible. Keeping this in mind, I now apply the framework of analysis developed here to an examination of Balram's narrative.

As I mentioned earlier in the essay, the surface narrative of *The White Tiger* charts Balram's upward socio-economic movement, from his boyhood spent in poverty, to his adulthood as a successful entrepreneur. This narrative of personal development is one that is immediately obvious to readers, and can thus be perceived as the narrative "in [the] light" (98). Interspersed in this surface narrative is, however, a sub-text that reveals Balram's veiled concerns that he attempts to hide "in light" (ibid). I argue that this sub-text serves as a critical component of the novel's playful aesthetics of resistance.

A prominent sub-text, revealed upon closer scrutiny of the surface narrative, is that of the *Murder Weekly* pulp magazine that is popularly read by the "servants" (104) of India. In the novel, Balram's narrative is interrupted by the *Murder Weekly* captions as follows:

MURDER WEEKLY

RUPEES 4.50

EXCLUSIVE TRUE STORY:

'HE WANTED HIS MASTER'S WIFE.'

LOVE – RAPE – REVENGE! (170);

also,

MURDER WEEKLY

RUPEES 4.50

EXCLUSIVE TRUE STORY:

'A GOOD BODY NEVER GOES TO WASTE.'

MURDER. RAPE. REVENGE. (104)

These captions are only depicted in the narrative twice, but the mention of the magazine *Murder Weekly* reverberates in the narrative – like stirrings of the narrative's subconscious, as it were. As Ashok articulates, "drivers and cooks in Delhi are reading *Murder Weekly*" (104); "[n]ow, what happens in your typical *Murder Weekly* story[?]" (269); "I remembered a

story from *Murder Weekly*... Where was that copy of that magazine – if only I had it with me now” (151). I suggest that Balram’s repeated mentions of *Murder Weekly* reveal his subconscious preoccupation with the actual topic of his narrative: that of his homoerotic relationship with his employer Ashok, and his subsequent “revenge” in the form of the latter’s “murder” (104). By extension, I also propose that as an aspect of the novel’s playful aesthetics, this particular sub-text serves to undermine and tease readers who attempt to take the content of the surface narrative too seriously.

To begin with, according to Balram’s account in the surface narrative, his murder of his employer Ashok is motivated by the desire to claim the latter’s “seven hundred thousand rupees” (241), which Balram pictures could buy him “a house. A motorbike. And a small shop. A new life” (241). Underlying this surface narrative, however, is Balram’s sexual fetishizing of his employer – a pivotal factor, I contend, behind Balram’s eventual motivation to kill his employer. First of all, Balram’s depictions of his employer are often laced with sexual connotations. For one, he refers to the murdered Ashok as his “ex” (38) – a term usually connotative of a previous romantic partner. Further, Balram sexualises descriptions of his encounters with his employer: as he recounts,

I [Balram] stopped the car, and then moved to my left, and he [the original Ashok] moved to his right, and our bodies passed each other (so close that the stubble on his face scraped by cheeks... and the cologne from his skin – a lovely, rich, fruity cologne – rushed into my nostrils for a heady instant, while the smell of my servant’s sweat rubbed off onto his face), and then he became driver and I became passenger. (94)

Balram reiterates this sexualised depiction later on the same page: “[o]ur bodies crossed each other again, our scents were exchanged once more” (94). In these instances,

Balram's diction exposes the sexual gaze with which he views Ashok. Balram's following portrayal of their servant-master encounter reinforces the exposure of his sexual gaze:

[t]his little rectangular mirror inside the car... has no one ever noticed how *embarrassing* it is? How, every now and then, when master and driver find each other's eyes in the mirror, it swings open like a door into a changing room, and the two of them have suddenly caught each other naked? (169)

Balram additionally moves on to discuss his employer in more explicit sexual diction: "my beak [an euphemism for his penis] was getting stiff as I was driving... Because *he* [the master Ashok] was horny. And inside that sealed car, master and driver had somehow become one body that night" (169). On one level, Balram's fetishizing of Ashok satirises the Hanuman-led narrative of docile and passive servility, by answering the call to serve with "absolute fidelity, love, and devotion" (16) through the lens of sexual fetishism. Additionally, Balram's fetishized depictions of his employer additionally expose his *imagined* possession of the latter's body: he proclaims, "I saw the room with *his* eyes, smelled it with *his* nose, poked it with *his* fingers – I had already begun to digest my master!" (67-68). As the term "digest" (68) suggests, in his fantasy, Balram assimilates his employer into one flesh, the ultimate symbolic uniting of two bodies in the act of sex. Balram's "love" and "fidelity" to his master thus caricatures the Hanuman narrative of servility, by taking the element of "devotion" (16) to an extreme.

Balram's fetishizing of his employer bears particular implications for our understanding of his control over textual events as the subject-writer. E. L. McCallum informs us that "fetishism [is]... an act of interpretation", for "the fetishist comes to know the world and to construct a sense of self in relation to that world" (1). In the "act of interpretation" (ibid) that accompanies Balram's fetishizing of his employer, the latter becomes Balram's frame of reference through which Balram comes to view his world. At this

point I do suggest, for the clarification of the section of analysis that follows, that the ‘sanctity’ of the employer Ashok’s body comes to be an important narrative element that determines Balram’s worldview and, accordingly, the plot action of the narrative.

The turning point in the servant-master relationship between Balram occurs when Ashok participates in a tryst with a Ukrainian prostitute. Shocked that his master would even have sexual relations with a prostitute – since, in his opinion, “whore[s]... [are] for people like [Balram himself]” (Adiga 185) – Balram sits in the car “hoping [his master]’d come running out, arms flailing, and screaming, *Balram, I was on the verge of making a mistake! Save me – let’s drive away at once!*” (187, emphasis original). This incident is significant in leading to Ashok’s death; for, just moments before the murder, Balram tells his employer, “[e]ver since that night, sir, nothing has been the same with [us]” (243), thus highlighting thus the centrality of Ashok’s tryst as an impulse for Balram’s act of murder.

The sub-text of Balram’s homoeroticism, as well as his fetish-driven motivation for the killing of his employer, are foregrounded in the surface narrative; they are, however, veiled under the captions of the *Murder Weekly* magazine: “A Good Body Never Goes to Waste” (104); “He Wanted [to be] his Master’s [symbolic] Wife” (170). In this work of metafiction, the *Murder Weekly* magazine serves as an undercurrent to the surface narrative, and contests the surface narrative’s veneer of textual authority and veracity. In its self-proclamation as an “exclusive true story” (170), the *Murder Weekly* sub-narrative challenges the “truth” (12) that the surface narrative purports to convey. Above all, it pre-empt the reader eager to “consum[e]” (Huggan, *Postcolonial Exotic* 59) India against readily subsuming the narrative of *The White Tiger* within familiar Western discourses of India. Cleverly, the novel teases the careless reader eager to objectify India under the Western gaze: instead of a novel about “exciting tales of the exotic east” (Adiga 3), the reader holds in his or her hands a narrative consonant with the pulp magazine *Murder Weekly*, a form of reading

“very popular... among all the servants of the city” (104). Thus, through its manipulation of the reader, *The White Tiger* nullifies the Western gaze by adroitly redirecting it to a pulp fiction narrative read by the masses in India.

Anamorphic Forms

At this point, to facilitate the next part of my analysis, I draw attention to the concept of anamorphosis. First of all, according to Jacques Lacan, an anamorphic work

is an object that embodies an anamorphosis... It is any kind of construction that is made in such a way that by means of an optical transposition a certain form that wasn't visible at first sight transforms itself into a readable image. The pleasure is found in seeing its emergence from an indecipherable form.
(135)

In Lacan's analysis, an anamorphic work premises itself on the manipulation of the seen and unseen – the significance of the anamorphic work, then, depends upon the exposure of the hidden or veiled aspects of the work, and the transposition of these otherwise obscured aspects of the work onto the plane of the visible.

Jennifer Boyle's explication of the anamorphic effect upon the viewer/reader further sheds light upon the dynamics of anamorphic works: as she writes, “anamorphosis produces a rupture in the viewer's gaze and disrupts the stability of the object under view” (Boyle 1). Additionally,

[t]he impact of anamorphosis depends on the inscription of two images or portraits within a single viewing area. Typically, a viewer would be required to shift their position physically in order to see an alternate image within the

portrait or scene, usually rendered along a second perspective geometrical plane. (Boyle 1)

According to Boyle's observation, given the presence of two distinctive images within an overlapping area, the final object that the reader/viewer is able to perceive rests upon his or her viewing angle. Without shifting from his or her viewing position, the reader/viewer would be denied insight into the less obvious image that is at first glance obscured. Considered this way, an anamorphic work demands a concerted effort from the viewer/reader to alter his or her viewing position – to decentralise his or her viewing position, as it were – so as to enable the hidden or obscured elements of the work to come into visible alignment. Thus, in such a configuration, the work itself controls and constructs the gaze.

With its use of unreliable narration and metafictional techniques, as well as with its interspersed of obscured sub-texts, *The White Tiger* manipulates its portrayal of the visible and the hidden in order to construct an added layer of significance to its narrative. In relation, with its inclusion of a second, obscured layer of significance that is not immediately discernible at first sight – and which is additionally not immediately discernible without careful and thorough analysis of form – *The White Tiger* can be considered an anamorphic work that draws attention to, and throws into question, readers' attitudes in approaching the novel.

In his study of the relation between anamorphosis and the gaze, Daniel Collins postulates that “[a]namorphic projection seeks to deny the usual conventions of 'looking' in which an observer views an image frontally from a limited range of viewing angles [and it thus] is a technique of disruption and distortion” (Collins 73). According to Collins, an anamorphic work only reveals itself to “an observer who is willing to sacrifice a centric vantage point for the possibility of catching a glimpse of the uncanny from a position off-

axis” (73); such a work rewards “an observer who literally stands apart and is self-aware of the process of seeing” (74).

Collins’ observations here resonate with the formal aesthetics of *The White Tiger*: with its irreverent manipulation of form, the novel interrupts critical analyses that proceed to read its narrative like a “testimony, tract, or manifesto” (171), without respecting it as a literary work fundamentally premised upon literary form. From the outset, with the cryptic opening statement “[n]either you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English” (Adiga 1), the novel presses for its “truth[s]” (2) to be taken with a pinch of salt. In addition, after leading readers through the course of the novel under the persona of ‘Balram’, the narrator-protagonist finally signs off the epistolary narrative with the following lines:

Yours forever,
Ashok Sharma
The White Tiger
Of Bangalore[,] (Adiga 276)

With these lines, while it is not implausible to suggest that the narrator has murdered Ashok and simply usurped his name, it would certainly be useful to consider the implications of the sudden name-change in relation to the anamorphic literary form and consequential manipulation of vision that the novel employs.

Firstly, the narrator’s sudden and shocking name-change – after more than 250 pages of identifying himself to his readers as Balram – can be read as a narrative strategy that serves to deflect the gaze of the reader. Under this deflection, especially in consideration of his deliberation imposition of identity slippage under the newly-revealed name, the narrator eludes objectification (or, the state of being ‘fixed’, to use Homi Bhabha’s term) by the

reader as a subject that can be neatly or easily apprehended and categorised.⁴ The narrator's strategy of deflection in his name-change is additionally consonant with his manipulation of the seen and unseen with the imagery of "the small blades chop[ping] up the chandelier's light" (5), which he introduces at the start of the novel. Even as the persona of Balram positions himself in the "light" by telling (exposing) his story, the actual persona writing the narrative remains closet, until the very last page, in the darkness created by the "chop[ping]" (ibid) up of the light. Thus, even as readers are presented with the perceived privilege of familiarity with the persona of Balram through his revelation of his "life's story" (8), he distorts and undermines the perceived privilege by lapsing into the identity of another persona.

At this point, the actual identity of the narrator slips into obscurity: is the persona of Balram *really* the writer of the narrative, or is that the persona of Ashok? Then, finally, when the narrator seals the narrative by signing off under the name of Ashok, he occludes readers' privilege of hermeneutic insight into his identity, as he circumvents any effort on the part of the reader to subject his persona as Ashok under analysis. Altogether, with the name-change, the narrative destabilises yet again the 'object' being viewed – that is, the characterisation of the narrator – in an act of anamorphosis, and disrupts the totalising, consuming gaze of the reader.

(III) The Indian Strikes Back

I draw attention, at this point, to the quotes I have cited in my epigraph, and by which my analysis in this chapter is implicitly guided. First of all, John Berger's assertion that "[w]e only see what we look at[, for to] look is an act of choice" (Berger 3) resonates with the

⁴ I refer to Bhabha's comment that "colonial discourse produces the colonised as a fixed reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible. It resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognisable totality" ("The Other Question" 23).

irreverent and anamorphic formal aesthetics of *The White Tiger*. Adiga's use of a cryptic and unreliable narrator in the novel fundamentally problematises critical efforts to take the novel as a "guidebook" (Rushdie 25) into the "condition of India" (Nandi 158), or as a sustained inquiry into the circumstances of India's poor. I reiterate, that from the start, Adiga's crafty and playful narrator premises his narrative upon the concepts of metafiction and narrative unreliability. The narrator's deliberate revelation of and insistence upon these narrative techniques *should* compel the reader to consider the novel as *literary art* that is first and foremost organised by literary form. Critics who ignore the compelling structures of form employed in the novel are perceivably, to paraphrase Berger's words, choosing where they want to look, to derive *what* they expect to see from the novel, instead of looking at *where* the novel directs attention to through manipulations of form.

Edward Said's observation that "[w]hat gave the Oriental's world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West" (40) additionally resonates with critical attitudes towards this novel. In view of Huggan's questioning of whether "postcolonial studies [could] be described... as inadvertently neo-colonial... in its assumptions about foreign cultures [and here I extrapolate to include "foreign" writing as well] (Huggan, "Neocolonialism of Postcolonialism" 21), it certainly appears plausible that some postcolonial critics *may* have fallen into complicity in subscribing to "knowable manipulations by which the Orient [comes to be] identified by the West, while ignoring the "efforts" (Said 40) of the non-Western writer to insist upon being heard on his or her own terms.

Against the backdrop of "postcolonial studies... [being accused of being] inadvertently neo-colonial" (Huggan, "The Neocolonialism of Postcolonialism" 21), this novel intervenes with its formal literary anamorphosis to insist upon being taken on its own

terms, as well as with its insistence upon resisting easy subsumption into critical discourse that regulates expectations of the Indian novel. The novel's use of anamorphosis fundamentally distorts and decentralises the viewing position of the reader, and enables itself to retain control over the reader's hermeneutic privilege. Thus, one can say that this Indian novel has struck back against its objectified status in the global literary scene, as it obfuscates the gaze of readers who refuse to make the choice to "look" (Berger 3) where the novel directs.

In these pages, I have pursued a formal analysis of the novel, in demonstration of the different – and even contradictory – reading that can arise from a formal approach. In *The White Tiger*, literary form proves itself to be a crucial strategy through which the novel's postcolonial political thrust emerges. Through the organising principles of form, the novel discernibly disrupts and subverts the hermeneutic privilege of the reader, and resists attempts by critics and readers to contain it within reductive and simplifying tropes of India, Indian peoples and Indian literature.

CHAPTER THREE

Forms of Recuperation:

Negotiating Postcolonial Identity in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

... how indissolubly our identities are bound to the regimes that imprison us.

- Junot Díaz, "The Search for Decolonial Love".

Ten million Trujillos is all we are.

- Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

(I) The Argument

Just as *The White Tiger*, as discussed in the previous chapter, uses literary form to stimulate further introspection into the position of India in the contemporary globalised era, Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) employs its metafictional narrative structure to compel readers to more thoroughly question and interrogate the ostensibly *post*-colonial milieu that surrounds the Dominican-American characters portrayed in the text. As the quotes from Díaz in my epigraph above point out, the prefix 'post' in the term 'postcolonial' is one that has been prematurely assigned, for the legacies of the past continue to haunt and imprison the characters in the present.

In this chapter, I examine *Oscar Wao* as a narrative that exposes the cyclical, traumatic repetition of history and violence in the aftermath of colonialism. I primarily approach the novel through its metafictional formal structure, which I posit engages the reader to participate in the act of re-working, together with the characters depicted, the traumatic cyclical (hi)stories of violence and oppression that engulf the text. I see the novel

as a ‘writing cure’ that posits the act of writing as a form of therapy, in alignment with the psychoanalytical ‘talking cure’ premised upon talking as therapy. Just as the ‘talking cure’ in oral trauma therapy depends upon a listener to serve as “the blank screen on which the [traumatic] event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (Laub 57), I suggest that the ‘writing cure’ underlying this novel demands of the reader to function as the canvas upon which the (hi)stories of trauma are recounted, and through which the trauma is worked through. Then, premising my analysis in this chapter upon the dynamics of psychotherapy, I postulate that the novel implicates and engages the careful reader – as therapist – in (re)writing the violent (hi)stories portrayed in the narrative, as a means of working through the trauma that is at the heart of the novel. In relation, I suggest that the novel situates the careful reader as the fundamental locus of its postcolonial work – for, the reader, as therapist, emerges as the medium through which the ‘cure’ that intervenes in the cyclical repetition of history and violence is articulated.

Oscar Wao begins, on the opening page in the prologue, with an elaboration of the “*fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, *fukú*”, “generally a curse or doom of some kind”, and “specifically the Curse and Doom of the New World” (Díaz 1).⁵ The central narrator Yunior reveals that the colonial process that began with “the arrival of the Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the *fukú* on the world” (1-2), and the *fukú* resurfaced in prominence during the repressive dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo in the 20th Century, where “[n]o one kn[ew] whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master, its agent or its principal, but it was clear that he and it had an understanding, that them two was tight” (2). Yunior’s elaboration establishes the *fukú* as a structural metaphor for the structural oppression and cyclical violence first initiated by the colonial encounter in the 15th century, and which

⁵ I leave the words ‘*fukú*’ and ‘*zafa*’ non-italicised, as this is the way Díaz - and, by extension, the central narrator Yunior - uses these terms.

continue to haunt the socio-politics of the Dominican Republic, even in the contemporary and supposedly *post*-colonial period.⁶

Further, Yunió's insistence that "we've [the Dominicans] all been in the shit ever since" (2), and that the Dominicans are "all of [them] its children, whether [they] know it or not" (2), suggest that the *fukú* – complete with its forms and effects of hegemonic oppression and cyclical violence – continues to reproduce itself in the lives of contemporary Dominicans, even after the demise of historical colonialism and the Trujillo dictatorship. Considered altogether thus, the *fukú* not only symbolises the form and effect of violence perpetrated by unjust and oppressive structures of power – such as that which the Spanish colonial enterprise in the Americas and the Trujillo dictatorship were orchestrated by – but it additionally points to the cycle of trauma that entraps individuals within the act of *reproducing* such violence and oppression in and through their lives.

In the novel's prologue, Yunió wonders about the possibility of mitigating the *fukú* curse through the writing of his narrative, musing that "[e]ven as [he] write[s] these words [he] wonder[s] if this book ain't a *zafa* of sorts. [His] very own counterspell" (7). The *zafa*, in the first place, stands as a metaphysical antidote to the *fukú*, a "surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe" (7). As Yunió articulates, "[n]ot surprisingly, it [is] a word. A simple word" (7). Here, the "word" (*ibid*) that is the *zafa* functions on a symbolic level both as a literal word and as a synecdoche of the written word that is "this book" (7) – the novel – itself. With these clues, Yunió conveys the understanding that the "counterspell"

⁶ The colonial encounter in the Dominican Republic and Trujillo's dictatorial reign can be perceived as nodes in the same cycle of hegemonic oppression and violence. According to Yunió in the prologue, the colonial encounter brought "the screams of the enslaved" and became "the death bane of the Tainos" (1), while Trujillo's reign effectuated a "mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror; treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master" (2). Yunió's use of the term "plantation" (*ibid*) to describe the milieu of Trujillo's reign evokes the idea of colonial-era slavery in the Caribbean – where, "[b]y the fifteenth century, sugar plantations increasingly became not one form but *the* form of colonial exploitation in the Atlantic" (Solow 53). Yunió's diction thus establishes the fundamental link between historical colonialism and Trujillo's reign, and posits the two as contributing to the cyclical repetition of oppression and violence.

(7) to the “Curse and Doom” (1) of hegemonic colonial cyclical violence is, in essence, both the act of writing that makes the novel, as well as the physical text that the novel constitutes.

The novel’s postulation of the centrality of writing as a “counterspell” (ibid) to hegemonic structures of oppression has not been ignored by literary critics. First, commenting on Yuniór’s narration as a means to “present a nation with a history, filling a historical void” (516), Monica Hanna suggests that the novel “strives for a ‘resistance history’ which acts as an alternative to traditional histories of the Dominican Republic by invoking a multiplicity of narrative modes and genres” (500). Next, writing from a similar perspective in the essay “The Writer as Superhero”, Anne Mahler posits that through the portrayal of “Yuniór [who] becomes a superhero in the novel, one who attempts to keep the forces of tyranny in check” (132), Díaz

evinces a self-consciously post-colonial sensibility in suggesting that the way to combat the fukú, or the curse of colonialism that haunts his characters, is for those under the curse to take the pen in their own hands, using the written word to create a counter-discourse. The writer must speak into the silences that the hegemonic power has imposed. (Mahler 131)

Hanna’s and Mahler’s analyses of Díaz’s novel raise valuable points about the novel’s use of the postcolonial trope of ‘writing back’ to intervene in the spaces of history overwritten by colonial/Eurocentric hegemonic discourse. However, I do find problematic that the “resistance history” (Hanna 500) and “counter-discourse” (Mahler 131) which the novel makes up is fundamentally fragmented in form. The novel is, first of all, peppered with “página[s] en blanco” (80),⁷ and contains within its narrative two missing manuscripts – first, that of the “Lost Final Book of Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral [the grandfather of the titular

⁷ Blank pages. See also pages 93, 124, 155, 253, 313, 332, 335 in the novel.

character Oscar]” (256), and second, that of “the new book [Oscar] was writing [in the Dominican Republic], a book that he was sending under another cover” (343), but which “never arrived”, because it “either got lost in the mail or [Oscar] was slain before he put it in the mail, or whoever he trusted to deliver it forgot” (344).

In consideration of the novel’s metafictional formal structure – specifically, the various manuscripts contained within the text that is *Oscar Wao* itself – these blank pages and missing documents render Yuniór’s narrative fragmented and incomplete in form, as they leave the narrative literally riddled with gaps and missing manuscripts. Yuniór’s fragmented narrative form is consonant with what literary critic Daniel Taylor terms “a broken story” – a story that “no longer adequately explain[s a person’s] experience” (Taylor 3). In fact, nearing the close of the novel, Yuniór reflects upon the events in the narrative and attempts to “say words that could have saved [his relationship with Oscar’s sister, whom he genuinely loves but had mistreated]”, but Yuniór’s words emerge instead as a series of dashes that emphasise his inability to account for himself: “----- ----- -----” (Díaz 337). Yuniór’s ultimate inability to account for himself through his narrative fundamentally points to the story that he narrates as a “broken story” – one that cannot be used to “explain” (Taylor 3) or negotiate his experience in the present.

In relation, Taylor postulates that “[t]he best cure for a broken story is another story” (3). Here, I build upon Taylor’s postulation to suggest that the fragmented form of Yuniór’s narrative invites the reader, as both witness and therapist, to assume the task of symbolically writing another narrative on behalf of Yuniór, to replace his existing “broken” (3) story. It is my contention – a line of thought I pursue and shall presently demonstrate in the following sections – that the novel’s fragmented and gap-riddled metafictional form encourages the reader to re-construct a counter-narrative from the fragments of the “broken” (3) story Yuniór narrates. I argue that the novel’s fragmented metafictional form compels the reader to

symbolically ‘fill in’ the gaps and blank spaces so as to render Yuniór’s zafa whole, and to produce a (re)new(ed) narrative of healing from, and to replace, the fragmented stories of violence and oppression that predominate Yuniór’s sense of self.

Here, I draw upon trauma theory to better frame my discussion of Yuniór’s narrative as one that enables him to work through the historical trauma that he inherits. I first refer to psychoanalyst Dori Laub’s remarks on the “vicissitudes of listening” (57), which he discusses in relation to trauma narrative. To begin with, Laub asserts that the “testimony to the trauma... includes its hearer”, for he or she is “the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (57). The need for the listener to function as the “blank screen” (ibid) emerges due to the circumstance that, even when the narrative recounting the incident of trauma is articulated by the victim, the trauma itself remains “not... taken cognizance of” by the victim, and exists “simply as an overwhelming shock” (57). Laub’s words here suggest that the experience of trauma disrupts the victim’s narrative agency – such is, in essence, a disruption of the victim’s capacity to order the traumatic event in memory into a coherent narrative, as well as an interruption of the victim’s ability to generate a sense of self-agency through narrative.⁸ The victim thus is, in the words of Cathy Caruth, unable to allow the event to be “integrated into a completed story of the past” (Caruth 153).

By this consideration, the listener of the trauma narrative has to facilitate the victim’s process of “knowing” (Laub 57) and working through the traumatic event, by ordering the

⁸ In speaking of self-agency, I refer to psychoanalyst Harlene Anderson’s delineation of the term as “the ability to behave, feel, think, and *choose* in a way that is liberating, that opens up new possibilities or simply allows us to see that new possibilities exist” (231). She elaborates that “[a]gency refers not only to making choices but to participating in the creation of the expansion of possible choices. The concept of agency can be likened to having a voice and being free to use that voice or not to use it” (231). In her discussion, Anderson draws attention to the fundamental role that narratives and the act of self-narration play in the generation of self-agency: as she observes, “[o]ur self-narratives can permit or hinder self agency... they create identities that permit us to do or hinder us from doing what we need or want to do” (233). Considered altogether, the accumulation of *narrative agency* – the capacity to produce narratives from, and which reflect, the narrator’s point of view – is intrinsically linked to the evocation of self-agency.

traumatic event within the “completed story of the past” (Caruth 153). Laub fundamentally characterises the listener as the “enabler of the testimony” (58) and a “participant and co-owner of the traumatic event” (57), one who is additionally “a part to the creation of knowledge [for the victim] *de novo*” (57). This is, altogether, to say that the production of the “completed story of the past” (Caruth 153) is partially dependent upon the listener, and the process of the victim’s working through the trauma, via the act of narration, necessitates the listener’s participation as well.

Laub’s above elucidation of the listener’s role in facilitating the production of oral trauma narratives can be translated into an understanding of how we, as readers, should situate ourselves in approaching Díaz’s text. Just as the listener in Laub’s terms functions as the “enabler” (58), as well as a “participant” and “co-owner” (57) of the testimony, we, as readers, serve as the very same for Yuniór’s *zafa*. We readers, are called to re-order and work through the events depicted in his narrative to produce on his behalf a coherent “completed story of the past” (Caruth 153) – a story which, fundamentally, allows us to witness his self-negotiation within the present from the ashes of the past, even as he has “not [consciously] taken cognizance of” (Laub 57) this process. This is, by extension, to say that the actual thrust of Yuniór’s *zafa* resides in readers’ co-responsibility in producing the “counterspell” (Díaz 7) *for the Yuniór who writes*, from the “broken” (Taylor 3) stories within which the Yuniór being written about (i.e. the self-image held by the Yuniór who writes) is trapped. The *zafa* – the healing “counterspell” (7) to the traumatic reproduction of violence – thus emerges not as a finished textual product, but as a process, facilitated and symbolically produced through readers’ engagement with the metafictional form of the novel.

In this respect, I postulate that the “resistance history” (Hanna 500) and “counter-discourse” (Mahler 131) of the novel is ultimately incomplete without the reader’s engagement with the metafictional formal structure of the novel. The fragmented formal

structure of the novel essentially tasks readers with the role of filling in and writing on the páginas en blanco that riddle Yuniór's novel, locating the lost manuscripts belonging to Oscar and Abelard within the novel, and compiling and reading the unnamed manuscript that is Yuniór's ultimate testimony. Yuniór's testimony, by this consideration, can only be actualised by readers' effort in "enabling" (Laub 58) it, through a careful consideration of and engagement with the text's formal structure.

(II) Layers of Narrative: Voices Hidden in Form

In the prologue, Yuniór subtly draws attention to two particular narratives that he attempts to produce through the novel: a "fukú story" that has "got its fingers around [his] throat" (*Oscar Wao* 6), and a "zafa" narrative, "[his] very own counterspell" (7) to the fukú story. As the two narratives – the fukú and the zafa – are staged *against* each other, it is important, at this point, to make a distinction between the two narratives that Yuniór produces. First of all, with the remark that "[Yuniór's] not entirely sure Oscar would have liked [the story of his – Oscar's – life to be under the] designation [of f]ukú story" (6), Yuniór links the fukú story to the titular character Oscar Wao. In turn, the central narrative that spans the novel, and which is framed in part through the supporting stories of Oscar's grandfather Abelard and his mother Beli, can be perceived as the fukú story that Yuniór narrates.

At this point, I draw attention to one of Yuniór's footnotes in the middle of the novel, where he abruptly exposes the fictional quality of the central narrative on Oscar and directs attention to the novel's metafictional status, by articulating that

[i]n my first draft, Samaná was actually Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie... pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa... Leonie was also the one

who informed me that the perrito... wasn't popularised until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn't change, just liked the image too much. (137-138)

Yunior's deliberate exposure of the factual unreliability of his narrative – this is, in fact, an exercise of narrative privilege, since he sacrifices historical accuracy for narrative fancy – fundamentally reveals to readers that, even while he purports to be writing the “*true* account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” (296, emphasis original), the narrative on Oscar that he produces is Yunior's own work of fiction.⁹ Yunior's exposure of Oscar's story as a fictional construct fundamentally acts as a technique to displace readers' attention on Oscar, and to compel readers to re-evaluate the significance of the narrative in terms of *whose* experience the narrative really portrays and interrogates in the final analysis. In turn, Yunior's underscoring of the novel's metafictional quality suggests to readers to pay greater attention to the metafictional structure of the text, and encourages readers to interrogate the multiple layers of narratives that exist *beyond* the frame narrative of “Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” (ibid), which the title misleadingly draws attention to.

In these pages, I argue and shall demonstrate that the novel's fundamental postcolonial stance is unveiled and manifested through the characterisation of the central narrator, Yunior – a stance which can easily be overlooked if the novel is read primarily for content and authorial comments on socio-politics, and without close attention paid to its metafictional formal structure. Here, I premise my analysis upon the assumption that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is, in fact, not about the titular character Oscar. To borrow a term from literary critic Terence Dawson, I identify Yunior as the “effective protagonist” of

⁹ I do suggest that, in an act of metafictional narration, the character Oscar, together with his family members Lola, Beli, and Abelard, are fictional people created by Yunior as a means to recover and work through the structures of Dominican history. I further make the claim that the (hi)stories articulated about them in Yunior's narrative function as metaphors of Yunior's own perspective on Dominican history and socio-politics.

the text – the character who “undergoes an even more significant change” (257) than the purported ‘main character’. According to Dawson,

[i]n order to identify the effective protagonist of the novel, one needs (1) to compare the situation at the outset of the work with the situation at its conclusion and (2) to ask which of the characters is most radically changed by the events described. If this is the obvious hero, there may be no need to enquire any further. But very often one finds that another character - and this might indeed be an apparently minor character - undergoes an even more significant change. If all the events of the novel can be convincingly related to this apparently less central character, then he or she will be its effective protagonist. (257)

In light of Dawson’s emphasis, that the question of “which character is most radically changed by the events described” (257) has to be asked in order for the effective protagonist of the text to be identified, Oscar is *not* the effective protagonist of the narrative, for he changes remarkably little through the course of the text. In the first chapter of the novel, Yunior reveals that Oscar is “the passionate enamorado who fell in love easily and deeply” (*Oscar Wao* 24);¹⁰ at the end of the novel, Oscar remains the “passionate enamorado” (*ibid*) who is killed for his steadfast and foolhardy commitment to his illicit love for Ybón. Oscar’s relative lack of character development leads me to the conclusion that he is *not* the effective protagonist of the novel.

In contrast, Yunior starts out in the narrative as a “typical Dominican male”, whose “Higher Powers” (21) involve “pulling in the bitches with both hands” (25). When Yunior first focalises attention upon himself in the chapter “Sentimental Education”, he prides

¹⁰ Lover.

himself as a “sucio” (175)¹¹ – a proud Dominican “fucking not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches at the same time and that wasn’t even counting the side-sluts [he] scooped at the parties and the clubs”, and one who “had pussy coming out [his] ears” (192). However, at the novel’s culmination, Yunior muses, “I have a wife I adore and who adores me, a negrita from Salcedo whom I do not deserve” (336). Further, he “do[esn]’t run after girls anymore... [for he l]earned that from Oscar” (336). In Yunior’s own admission, he’s “a new man, you see, a new man, a new man” (336). Here, Yunior’s dramatic change – to an extent much greater than Oscar’s – is consonant with Dawson’s conceptualisation of the effective protagonist. This is a consideration that leads me to identify Yunior as the effective protagonist of *Oscar Wao*.

Yunior’s position as the novel’s effective protagonist renders it clear that analysis of the novel has to centre upon him. In saying so, I build my argument upon Santiago Vaquera-Vásques’ suggestion that “through telling his story, Yunior... asks us to understand the trauma that he himself cannot name... [an aspect of which being] the trauma of a metaphorical rape that... is structured within *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*” (186). I additionally take into account Díaz’s own assertion that “Yunior’s telling of this story and his unspoken motivations for it are at the heart of the novel and can easily be missed” (“Questions for Junot Díaz”). With the words of Vaquera-Vásques and Díaz in mind, I postulate that the attention directed towards Oscar in the title *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is used by Yunior as a veil, through which to work through the trauma that “he himself cannot name” (Vaquera-Vásques 186). I further suggest, that through the writing of the narrative, Yunior interrogates the oppressive hegemonic structures of relation inherited from the history of colonialism in the Dominican Republic, which he compulsively reproduces as both the form and effect of trauma.

¹¹ Literally ‘dirty’; in this case a man who sleeps around.

Here, I borrow two more terms from Dawson's discussion of the effective protagonist in literary analysis: that of the "surface structure" and the "deep structure" (Dawson 257).¹² In Dawson's view, the "surface structure" relates to the "story told", and serves as a "projected representation of a 'deep structure'" (257). In relation, the "deep structure" points to "the events described in the surface structure when viewed in relation to the effective protagonist" (257). In the context of *Oscar Wao*, the 'surface structure' can be perceived as the story that concerns the life and history of Oscar, which spans the length of the novel following the prologue. The 'surface structure' additionally includes the extended stories about Oscar's grandfather and mother, which Yunior weaves into Oscar's romance plot as a frame for Oscar's story.

The 'deep structure' of the novel, in contrast, revolves around Yunior's character development as the novel's effective protagonist, *as it relates* to the thematic concerns explored in the 'surface structure' that is Oscar's romance tale. Dawson elaborates that "the events described in the 'surface structure' offer a projected representation of a dilemma confronting the effective protagonist at the outset", and that "the events [of the 'surface structure'] describe how [the effective protagonist] deals with the challenge implicit in this dilemma" (257). In relation, here, the 'deep structure' of the novel can be interrogated by examining the ways in which Yunior responds to – and is changed by – the events depicted in the story that centres upon Oscar.

¹² On a side note, in my examination of *The White Tiger* in the previous chapter, I used the terms 'surface narrative' and 'sub-texts'. For purposes of clarification, I draw a distinction between my use of the term 'surface narrative' and Dawson's use of the term 'surface structure'. Dawson's formulation of the 'surface structure' and the 'deep structure' primarily concerns an "inquir[y] into the possible psychological implications of a literary text" (257). Such analysis is particularly suited for my examination of *Oscar Wao*, as I am interested in interrogating the psychological changes (relating to identity) that Yunior undergoes, in support of my argument that Yunior's character development is the primary way through which the novel's postcolonial thrust is revealed. In contrast, my analysis of *The White Tiger* largely concerns the politics of the narrator Balram's manipulation of narrative form; Dawson's theoretical lens would not have been appropriate for my analysis of *The White Tiger*.

In consideration of Dawson's conceptualisation of the 'surface structure' and the 'deep structure', I further suggest that these two structures encapsulate, respectively, the "fukú story" (6) and the "zafa" (7) that Yuniór attempts to write through his production of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. At this point, building upon but moving away from a mere identification of the 'surface' and 'deep' structures of Yuniór's frame narrative, I seek to question Yuniór's motivations for writing the narrative that is *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In the first place, Yuniór underscores that through the novel, he seeks to produce his "very own counterspell" (7) to the fukú that has "got its fingers around [his] throat" (Díaz 6). Yuniór's words suggest that his motivations for writing the narrative are personal, and the story depicted in the 'surface structure' (the fukú story) is one that he has a personal investment in. Given that Yuniór has designed for *both* the fukú story and the zafa to centralise upon himself – since, I emphasise, the fukú personally has "got its fingers around [his] throat" (6), and the zafa is his "*very own*" (7, emphasis mine) counterspell – the narrative that makes up *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* can be perceived, in the final analysis, to be Yuniór's work of self-narration, and his own deflected work of first-person articulation.

I refer to historian Peter Heehs' postulation that "first-person writings are tools of self-construction: not just accounts of what happened but ways of moulding the stuff of the past into models of what the writers wish to be... [this is to say that] writing an account of one's life is an act of self-creation" (6). Heehs' explication of the dynamics of first-person writing fundamentally resonates with Daniel Taylor's remark that telling stories is an act that "link[s] past, present, and future in a way that tells us where we have been (even before we were born), where we are, and where we could be going" (1). Considered together, Heehs' and Taylor's words reveal that first-person storytelling functions as an act of "self-creation" (Heehs 6) – an act effectuated *through* the process of recovering the past and assessing

oneself within the present, to the effect of symbolically producing a more desirable or pleasing self (“of what the writers wish to be” (6)) for the future. In turn, to return to the question that I brought up previously, Yuniór’s act of self-narration through the writing of *Oscar Wao* can be conceived of as a process and means for him to arrive at a self that he “wish[es] to be” (6). In alignment with my line of argument in this thesis, in the following sections, I demonstrate that Yuniór’s act of creating the self he “wish[es] to be” (ibid) – wherein the novel’s postcolonial thrust is revealed – can only be perceived and understood via a close study of the novel’s form, and can be overlooked if insufficient attention is paid to the novel’s use of form.

The Surface Structure: Fukú Story

I start by interrogating the ‘surface structure’ – what is, in actuality, Yuniór’s fukú story – that focalises on the life and family history of Oscar. In the first place, the narrative that focuses on Oscar is fundamentally premised upon the motif of repetition, of “the similarities between Past and Present” (*Oscar Wao* 312). Yuniór uses the structural metaphor of Oscar’s “family curse” (33) – otherwise known as Oscar’s “family fukú” (162) – to establish the traumatic repetition of oppression and violence that haunts Oscar’s family across generations.

Chronologically, the cycle of oppression and violence that is the “family fukú” (162) begins with Oscar’s grandfather, Abelard, whose story takes place in the Dominican Republic during the brutal reign of the dictator Rafael Trujillo.¹³ Trujillo’s reign, as the narrative reveals, is one structured upon the dictator’s hyper-sexual and hyper-masculine socio-politics.

¹³ Trujillo ruled over the Dominican Republic from 1930-1961.

Yunior reveals that in the milieu of Trujillo's regime of "culocracy" (226),¹⁴ "hoarding your women was tantamount to treason; offenders who didn't cough up the muchachas could easily find themselves enjoying the invigorating charm of an eight-shark bath" (226).¹⁵ In this climate, Abelard is persecuted and falsely imprisoned for refusing to allow Trujillo to rape his eldest daughter Jackie. Abelard's persecution and imprisonment then "precipitated an unprecedented downturn in the family fortune" (257), and sets off the family curse that reverberates in the lives of his progeny.

The next cyclical phase of the family curse takes place a generation later, and befalls Abelard's third daughter and Oscar's mother, Beli. Growing up with "despised black skin" (82) in the Dominican city of Baní, a "city famed for its resistance to blackness" (80), Beli spends her prepubescent years as an outcast in the prestigious school she attended, "one of the best schools in Baní" (84), where "the majority of the pupils were the white-skinned children of the regime's top ladroanzos" (85).¹⁶ After suffering a devastating rejection from her first love – the "handsomest" and "whitest" (92) boy in her school – Beli pursues an affair with "a flunky for the Trujillato" (124) named the Gangster, who incidentally happens to be the husband of Trujillo's sister. While Beli commits herself with "pure uncut unadulterated love" (131) to the Gangster, the latter sees Beli's post-pubescent hyper-sexualised body – with "tetas [like] globes so implausibly titanic"¹⁷ and a "supersonic culo" (95) – as compensation for his political failures. Yunior explains that at the time of the Cuban revolution, which threatened the Gangster's personal and political ambitions,

[I]f, it seemed, had struck the Gangster a dolorous blow [...] and he sensed his own mortality [...] in the fall of Cuba. Which might explain why, when he

¹⁴ The term 'culo' translates, literally, to 'ass'.

¹⁵ Girls.

¹⁶ Thieves.

¹⁷ Breasts.

met Beli, he jumped on her stat. I mean, what straight middle-aged brother has not attempted to regenerate himself through the alchemy of young pussy. [...] What [the Gangster] wanted was to suck Beli's enormous breasts, to fuck her pussy... to spoil her senseless so that Cuba and his failure there disappeared. As the viejos say, *clavo saca clavo*, and only a girl like Beli could erase the debacle of Cuba from a brother's mind. (128-129)¹⁸

Failing to see that "she'd been tricked [...] and that] she'd been played, by the Gangster" (154), Beli remains steadfastly devoted to him. Her devotion to the Gangster, however, incurs the family curse of violence, in the form of Trujillo's sister's wrath. Under the orders of Trujillo's sister, Beli is brutally tortured in the Dominican canefields and left for dead. Eventually, having survived the ordeal but fearing for her safety, Beli flees the Dominican Republic for the United States.

The final phase of the family curse in the "fukú story" (6) centres upon Oscar, and takes place in the last quarter of the 20th century. Yuniór's frame narration charts Oscar's quest for love – a quest that he, whom his Dominican-American peers (including Yuniór) scorn as a "gordo asqueroso" (17) and "mariconcito" (16),¹⁹ steadfastly pursues and repeatedly fails in his hometown in Paterson, New Jersey. From the outset, Yuniór establishes Oscar's non-possession of the "Higher Powers" of the "typical Dominican male" (20) that involve "pulling in the bitches with both hands" (25) – essentially, Oscar's non-performance of Dominican hyper-masculinity – as the reason for Oscar's repeated failure to find romantic love. Oscar's relentless quest for romantic love brings him to his family's ancestral hometown of Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic, where he eventually meets and falls in love with an older woman named Ybón. Unbeknown to Oscar, Ybón's has a powerful

¹⁸ Literally 'nail removes nail' – one trouble counters another.

¹⁹ Disgusting fatty; sissy.

– and unscrupulous – boyfriend in the Dominican police force (the capitán). The capitán finds out about the affair and the “family curse” (33) sets in: when Oscar refuses to leave Ybón even after having been warned, the capitán has Oscar brutally murdered in the Dominican canefields.

Considered altogether, through the depiction of Abelard, Beli and Oscar’s experiences in the fukú story, Yúnior draws attention to the oppressive relations of power that are reproduced in each generation, in varying forms and manifestations.²⁰ The “fukú story” (6) centred upon Oscar’s family can then be perceived as a story about – and which bears witness to – the *longue durée* of violent and oppressive relations that entraps the Dominican characters over time and space, as well as the collective trauma inflicted upon the psyche of the Dominican community, which occur as a result of the oppressive socio-political constructs that frame Dominican history and collective identity.

It is crucial, at this point, to inquire into the conclusions generated above against Yúnior’s act of self-creation through self-narration. I first draw upon literary critic Nicola King’s assertion that “identity, or a sense of self, is constructed by and through narrative: the stories we all tell ourselves and each other about our lives” (2); in turn, “[c]onsistency of consciousness and a sense of continuity between the actions and events of the past, and the

²⁰ Literary critic Jennifer Harford Vargas has rightly identified the oppressive relations that plague Oscar’s family as the “coloniality of power” (10) that underlie relations of “imperial domination in the Americas” (9-10). The ‘coloniality of power’ is, first of all, a term used by decolonial thinkers, and “refers to the colonial undersides of modern regimes of power and processes of subjectification and identification” (Láo-Montes 147). The concept of the coloniality of power is distinct from colonialism, which, in decolonial thought, “refers to a specific form of coloniality that is defined by a political and military relationship of domination by metropolitan nations and dominant classes over colonised territories and populations” (147). Importantly, the ‘coloniality of power’ stresses that the underlying epistemological and socio-political structures of colonialism have neither perished nor been diminished after the collapse of historical colonialism; rather, it emphasises that these structures permute and emerge in different manifestations. In the novel, the Trujillo regime and its hyper-masculine culture are depicted as a continuation and a permutation of colonial relations. As Díaz himself articulates, “[t]he rape culture of the European colonization of the New World... becomes the rape culture of the Trujillato (Trujillo just took that very old record and remixed it)” (Díaz, “The Search for Decolonial Love”). I postulate that the interrogation of the continuation, permutation, and *reproduction* of these oppressive relations fundamentally constitute the subject matter of this novel.

experience of the present, would appear to be integral to a sense of personal identity” (2). King’s words fundamentally draw attention to the notion that recounting the events that make up one’s past, through the act of narration, facilitates the construction of identity. Considered this way, Yuniór’s act of narrating the fictional stories of Oscar, Beli and Abelard – and, by extension, of interrogating the form and effect of the *longue durée* of violence that entraps these characters – can be understood as Yuniór’s own process of locating himself within the socio-politics of the Dominican Republic, as well as his means of interrogating his relation to the Dominican history into which he was born, and which stands as the past that he inherits as a descendant of the Dominican Republic.

I also draw attention to King’s assertion that “narrative accounts... are made possible by memory; they also reconstruct memory according to certain assumptions about the way it functions and the kind of access it gives to the past” (2). By this consideration, in Yuniór’s act of self-narration, the fictional stories of Oscar, Beli, and Abelard serve as a medium for Yuniór to imagine, remember, and reconstruct the traumatic and violent history of the Dominican Republic – a history that, as Yuniór emphasises, manifests as the fukú “Curse” (*Oscar Wao* 1) that has “got its fingers around [his] throat” (6). More importantly, the fictional stories of Oscar, Beli, and Abelard can be understood as a means for Yuniór to *account for* his present self-image – to account, in other words, for the Yuniór depicted in the novel, who still suffers under the curse of the fukú.

In the narrative of the ‘surface structure’, Yuniór emphasises the interminable repetition of violence that the characters he depicts are unable to break out of. Oscar’s story – or, in other words, Yuniór’s own fukú story articulated under the guise of the former – is ultimately a narrative about the pervasiveness of history that entraps the characters within an endless cycle of violence: Abelard perishes in jail after fourteen years of false imprisonment; Beli is brutally tortured and forced to flee the Dominican Republic for the United States,

where she eventually dies of cancer; Oscar is murdered. Charting the fukú story through the endless cycle of violence that plagues Oscar's family and against the backdrop and structures of Dominican history, Yunior is able to metaphorically communicate his own inability to free himself from the clutches of the violent historical past that he inherits. At the end of the fukú story, Oscar's violent death is of particular significance, as it illustrates Yunior's inability to envision a way to break free from the traumatic repetition of violence that characterises and is reproduced in Dominican socio-politics, and which additionally informs Yunior's own construction of identity. The fukú story that has "got its fingers around [Yunior's] throat" (6) thus is one that entraps him within the form and effect of the endless repetition of violent relations that plagues Dominican socio-politics.

Furthermore, as I have briefly touched upon earlier in this chapter, the fragmented metafictional form of the fukú story that Yunior tells – in particular, with his constant reference to the "página[s] en blanco" (80)²¹ in his narrative – points to his inability to fully recover the "full story" (253) of traumatic violence and oppression that delineate Dominican history. In her discussion of postcolonial writing, Aurélia Mouzet draws attention to the desire of postcolonial writers to "reclaim a voice that has been silenced by decades of domination", and to "reclaim their own history and set it free from imperial remnants" (161). In alignment with the postcolonial trope of 'reclaiming' the past, Yunior's writing of the narrative that constitutes *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* serves as an attempt to "reclaim [the] voice" and [the] "history" (ibid) of the Dominican community from the oppressive shadow of the Trujillo past. However, in precisely attempting to do so, Yunior's narrative attests to his impossibility of reclaiming these; for, in the process of attempting to articulate himself and to recover the history of his diasporic Dominican community through

²¹ Blank pages. See also pages 93, 124, 155, 253, 313, 332, 335 in the novel.

his recounting of Oscar, Beli, and Abelard's stories, Yunior encounters and foregrounds the "silences" and "páginas en blanco" (155) that obstruct his attempt at recuperating the past.

In his narrative, Yunior gestures towards "folks' lingering unease when it comes to talking about the [Trujillo] regime" (124) as a reason for his inability to obtain a "full story" (253). In discussing his attempts at recovering the past, Yunior resignedly laments to his readers:

The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you'll have to decide for yourself... We are trawling in silences here. Trujillo and Company didn't leave a paper trail... And it's not like the fukú itself would leave a memoir or anything. The remaining Cabrals [Oscar's maternal family] ain't much help, either... there is within the family a silence that stands monument to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction. A whisper here and there but nothing more.

Which is to say, if you're looking for a full story, I don't have it. Oscar searched for it too, in his last days, and it's not certain whether he found it either. (253)

On the one hand, Yunior draws attention to "folks' lingering unease" (124) and the "silence" of the Cabrals that "sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction" (253) as a means to bear witness to the historical trauma that the Dominican Republic suffered under the tyrannical Trujillo regime, and which still reverberates in the Dominican cultural psyche. On the other hand, Yunior's depiction of the characters' silence gestures towards his incapacity to recover and re(-)member the past. In his portrayal of the páginas en blanco, which embody the historical trauma of the Trujillo regime that plagues the Dominican Republic, Yunior attests to his inability to order the events of the past into a complete narrative. Yunior's depiction of Dominican history under the Trujillo regime fundamentally approaches the form

of traumatic memory, where due to the “unassimilated nature” (Caruth 4) of trauma, “the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, not available to its own speaker” (Felman 15). By extension, through his revelation of the “unassimilated” (Caruth 4) gaps that puncture his recollection of the past, Yuniór exposes his inability to draw upon the traumatic past to produce a coherent narrative, through which to account for himself in the present. If, as Harlene Anderson suggests, narrative “constructs our experiences and, in turn, is used to understand our experiences” (213), and if “self-narratives can permit or hinder self-agency” (232), Yuniór can be perceived to have exposed his fractured self-agency and his inability to wholly apprehend his experiences in the present, due to his incapacity to fully recover the history that informs his present.

Considered altogether, the *páginas en blanco* that riddle Yuniór’s *fukú* – the latter being a symbol of Yuniór’s inability to recover the full history that would enable him to work through the collective trauma that he inherits – can be perceived as a significant impediment to his reclamation of self-agency through narration. At this point, I refer once again to Daniel Taylor’s remark on “broken stor[ies]”: as he elaborates, “[i]ndividuals and whole societies struggle to live by stories that cannot sustain them. Stories that no longer provide the meaning and sense of purpose that life stories must provide are failed stories” (Taylor 3). In addition, Taylor suggests that “sometimes... stories are not merely broken or fragmented, they are profoundly flawed. They cannot be healed, only replaced” (125). I suggest – and will presently demonstrate in the following section – that through his manipulation of the novel’s formal structure, Yuniór gestures towards his acknowledgement of the *fukú* story as a “failed stor[y]” (3), and implicates the reader in the symbolic (re-)writing and production of another story – the *zafa* narrative – to replace the *fukú* story that he realises is no longer able to account for the person he wants to be.

Interrogating the Deep Structure

Before I venture into a discussion of Yunior's zafa, I refer back to Dawson's discussion of the 'surface structure' and the 'deep structure', where he emphasises that "the events described in the 'surface structure'... offers a projected representation of a dilemma confronting the effective protagonist at the outset", and "the events [of the narrative in the surface structure] describe how this character deals with the challenge implicit in this dilemma" (Dawson 257). In relation to the novel, Dawson's words underscore the notion that in order to understand the form and effect of the "Curse" (*Oscar Wao* 1) upon Yunior – which Yunior's zafa attempts to mitigate – an interrogation of the 'surface structure' to locate the "dilemma confronting [him]" (Dawson 257) is necessary.

Earlier on, in identifying Yunior as the effective protagonist of the text, I drew attention to Yunior's conversion, through the course of the narrative, from a "sucio" (*Oscar Wao* 175) to a "new man" who "do[esn't] run after girls anymore" (336). Upon immediate consideration, Yunior's compulsive performance of the oppressive hyper-masculinity that intersects with and is reminiscent of Trujillo, the Gangster, and the capitán emerges as the form of violence that entraps Yunior, and which Yunior reproduces in his life as the form and effect of trauma that he inherits from Dominican history.

Importantly, the hyper-masculinity – the hyper-sexual "culocracy" (226), as Yunior terms it – espoused by Trujillo, and reproduced by the Gangster and the capitán, is an expression of machismo, a masculine gender ideology that "has sexual and aggressive implications, which are paralleled with manliness" (Sequiera 8). The ideology of machismo is fundamentally premised upon "the man's sexuality, especially extramarital, and other activities that indicate a phallic preoccupation" (8). It is pertinent to note that Yunior primarily conceptualises and investigates the Trujillo regime through the socio-politics of

machismo. Literary critic Paul Jay acutely observes that Yuniors portrays “the brutality of the Trujillo regime through the lens of sexual violence” (185). Building upon Jays words, I suggest that, more significantly, Yuniors produces a tale that centres upon Trujillo’s (and, by extension, Dominican) machismo to examine his inheritance of, as well as his implication and complicity in, the relations of “sexual violence” (ibid) implicit in the ideology of machismo that are naturalised and perpetuated in the Dominican socio-cultural ethos.

In the novel, Yuniors first interrogates the machismo that he inherits and reproduces through his depiction of Oscar, and then through his revelation of *his own attitudes* towards Oscar. In the first chapter “GhettoNerd at the End of the World”, Yuniors establishes Oscar as a “mariconcito” who is “not one of those Dominican cats everybody’s always going on about – he wasn’t no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock... dude never had much luck with the females” (11). From the outset, Yuniors focalises on the character of Oscar through the latter’s (non)performance of Dominican male identity. Further, through the course of the narrative, Yuniors consistently fixes Oscar as a transgression of Dominican male identity, through assertions that Oscar “[h]ad none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male” (20), and that Oscar “no [es] nada de dominicano” (186).²²

In his act of narrating Oscar’s life, Yuniors conceptualises ways in which to discipline Oscar for the latter’s transgression of Dominican masculinity. When Oscar comes home “llorando por una muchacha”²³ – thereby failing to live up to the “aggressi[on]... paralleled with manliness” (Sequiera 8) valorised in Dominican machismo ethos – Yuniors imagines a solution to Oscar’s emasculating tears through Beli’s words: “[d]ale un galletazo... then see

²² Is nothing like a Dominican.

²³ Crying over a girl.

if the little puta respects you” (Díaz 15).²⁴ In another scene, where Yuniór discusses Oscar’s “triple batting average with the ladies” (24) – or, in other words, inability to harness the “Higher Powers” of hyper-sexuality that characterise the “typical Dominican male” (21) – Yuniór offers Oscar the following advice through Oscar’s uncle Rudolfo: “[L]isten, palomo: you have to grab a muchacha, y méteselo.”²⁵ That will take care of everything. Start with a fea.²⁶ Coje that fea y méteselo!” (25).²⁷

In these two instances, Yuniór postulates the disciplining and rehabilitation of Oscar’s emasculating non-performance of Dominican identity through the objectification of women, first via Beli’s suggestion of violent aggression towards women, and then via Rudolfo’s remark about objectifying women through hyper-sexual male callousness. In these instances, Yuniór draws to attention the naturalisation of oppressive gender relations within the Dominican socio-cultural milieu. Further, he creates a parallel between his ideas of Dominican male identity and that particularly espoused by Trujillo and the Gangster in their attitudes, respectively, towards Jackie (Abelard’s eldest daughter) and Beli. In doing so, Yuniór exposes the traumatic, compulsive repetition of oppressive and symbolically violent gender relations that he reproduces as a result of his inherited Dominican culture. The compulsive repetition of oppressive and violent relations as such is, I assert once more, the fundamental “Curse” (1) that has “got its fingers around [Yuniór] throat” (6). In the narrative, Yuniór declares that “[t]en million Trujillos is all we are” (334). Indeed, the curse of Trujillo (that is, the inheritance of the oppressive structures of relation that characterised his regime) is the fundamental concern underlying Yuniór’s writing. Here, I suggest that this curse is fundamentally what the zafa is intended to mitigate.

²⁴ Give her a big slap; prostitute.

²⁵ Dove, figuratively, a ‘loser’ who can’t get laid; give it to her.

²⁶ Ugly girl.

²⁷ Grab.

(III) Counterspell to the Colonial Curse

Yunior's Zafa

In his narrative, Yunior establishes Oscar as the fundamental *difference* – the repudiated antithesis – to his own identity. Just as Yunior prides himself as a “sucio” (175),²⁸ the “biggest player of them all” (192), a “*weight lifter*” (177, emphasis original), and a hyper-masculine Dominican who “never met a little white artist freak he didn’t want to smack around” (176), he denounces Oscar for the latter’s “desper[ation]” (48),²⁹ “virginity” (195) and “[lack of] aggressive and martial tendencies”, where “[a]ggression and intimidation [are] out of the question” (15). In fact, in a punitive measure, Yunior describes Oscar with the terms “parigüayo”,³⁰ “disgusting” (183), and “gay-hay-hay” (178). Yunior in fact names him Oscar *Wao* – Oscar’s actual surname is de León – after “that fat homo Oscar Wilde” (187). Here, I suggest that even the title of the book itself – namely, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* – encapsulates and ultimately refers back to Yunior’s contempt for Oscar’s emasculated identity as a “fat homo” (187).

Yunior’s repeated and emphatic references to Oscar’s emasculated Dominican identity in a story meant to be his [Yunior’s] own fukú story essentially beg the questions *why* Yunior chooses to use a character like Oscar to frame his (Yunior’s) own self-narrative, and *what* Oscar stands for in Yunior’s own negotiation of identity. In relation, I propose that Yunior uses the character of Oscar in his self-narrative to conceptualise and concretise his own anxieties towards Dominican masculinity. I suggest that the character of Oscar is, in fact, a representation of the aspects of Yunior’s own self that he fears to acknowledge.

²⁸ Dirty; figuratively, a man who sleeps around.

²⁹ Yunior emphasises that “you never met a kid who wanted a girl so fucking bad... no one was into [girls] the way Oscar was” (179).

³⁰ Weak male

To explicate the above, I draw attention to the concept of the ‘shadow’ in Jungian psychoanalysis. In Jungian thought, as scholar Joseph Henderson elucidates,

the shadow cast by the conscious mind of the individual contains the hidden, repressed, and unfavourable (or nefarious) aspects of the personality. But this darkness is not just the simple converse of the conscious ego. Just as the ego contains unfavourable and destructive attitudes, so the shadow has good qualities – normal instincts and creative impulses. Ego and shadow, indeed although separate, are inextricably linked together in much the same way that thought and feeling are related to each other. (Henderson 110)

Jungian scholar M. L. von Franz adds another dimension to our understanding of the shadow, when she explicates that the shadow “represents unknown or little-known qualities of the ego”; in addition, “[w]hen an individual makes an attempt to see his shadow, he becomes aware of (and often ashamed of) those qualities and impulses he denies in himself but can plainly see in other people” (174). Here, Henderson’s and von Franz’s discussion of the Jungian shadow self reveals the fraught relation that the shadow shares with the conscious ego: the shadow exists as part of the overall self that the ego denies, repudiates, and refuses to acknowledge, even as these elements together constitute a part of the psyche. Von Franz’s words further indicate that the ego, which frames the individual’s worldview, often causes the individual in question to adopt a critical attitude towards others who may share traits with his/her shadow self.

Just as “[e]go and shadow... are inextricably linked... [and] are related to each other”, but the latter is “hidden”, “repressed”, and deemed “undesirable” (Henderson 110), Yuniior inadvertently drops hints of his similarities to Oscar across the narrative – similarities that he

attempts to “hide” (*Oscar Wao* 22). In a passage describing Oscar, Yunió establishes the following:

[Oscar c]ould write in Elvish, could speak Chakobsa, could differentiate between a Slan, a Dorsai, and a Lensman in acute detail [and] knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee... Perhaps if like me he’d been able to hide his otakuness maybe shit would have been easier for him, but he couldn’t. Dude wore his nerdliness like a Jedi wore his light saber or a Lensman her lens. (22)

On an immediate level, Yunió *could not have* been able to describe Oscar’s interest in “nerdiness” (24) and “speculative genres” (45) in such acute detail if Yunió himself had not first been familiar with these. Further, even as Yunió terms an interest in these genres “mad corny” (45), his narrative is abundantly peppered with references to these genres.³¹ From a wider perspective, Yunió’s descriptions of Oscar’s interest in these genres might just well be descriptions of *his own*. Finally, Yunió reveals that, unlike Oscar, he makes an effort to “hide his otakuness” (22).³² Yunió, in other words, recognises his similarities to Oscar, but struggles to mask them. In consideration, I suggest that while Yunió may not *necessarily* have deliberately designed for Oscar’s character to function as the shadow of his unconscious personality while writing the narrative, Yunió’s conceptualisation of Oscar as the fundamental opposite to his character, together with his articulation of his contempt (and his anxieties) towards Oscar’s “nerdiness” (24) and lack of “aggressive and martial tendencies” (15), inadvertently and inevitably cause Yunió to project onto Oscar his shadow qualities -

³¹ For a more comprehensive analysis of Yunió’s use of these ‘nerd genres’, see T. S. Miller’s “Preternatural Narration and the Lens of Genre Fiction in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*”.

³² Enthusiasm for “nerdiness” (24) and “speculative genres” (45).

the “those qualities and impulses [Yunior] denies in himself but can plainly see in other people [namely, Oscar]” (von Franz 174).

Next, von Franz reveals that “[t]he [Jungian] shadow usually contains values that are needed by consciousness, but that exist in a form that makes it difficult to integrate them into one’s life” (178). She further elaborates that

[w]hether the [shadow] comes up at first in a helpful or a negative form, after a time the need usually arises to re-adapt the conscious attitude in a better way to the unconscious [shadow] factors – therefore to accept what seems to be ‘criticism’ from the unconscious. (171)

Just as in Jungian thought, an acknowledgement and integration of the shadow aspects of one’s self is integral for character growth and personal development, I suggest that for Yunior, an appreciation and integration of the values and attributes embodied by Oscar are crucial to his self-development. In turn, I postulate that Yunior’s process and act of embracing these values and qualities form the basis of his *zafa*.

In the frame narrative, Yunior pits his behaviour as a “sucio” (175) against the emasculating “desperate” (*Oscar Wao* 48) “virginity” (195) of Oscar as a means for him to interrogate his own unconscious struggles with the ideology of machismo. To begin with, through the act of staging sexual intercourse as *the* fundamental form of expressing – and recuperating – Dominican male identity, Yunior imagines Oscar’s redemption onto “the proper path of Dominican male-itude” (294) through Ybón Pimentel, a “semiretired puta” (289).³³ From Yunior’s perspective, Oscar’s relation to Ybón is conceptualised solely in terms of sexualised objectification: as Yunior comments,

³³ Prostitute.

[d]id they ever kiss in her Pathfinder? Did he ever put his hands up her supershort skirt? Did she ever push against him and say his name in a throaty whisper? Did he ever stroke that end-of-the-world tangle that was her hair while she sucked him off? Did they ever fuck? (301)

The lines above fundamentally reveal and highlight Yúnior's machismo thinking: that relations between Ybón and Oscar *have to be* sexualised, and *have to be* articulated in terms of recuperative sexual conquest.

In the story, however, Oscar conceptualises of the relation between him and Ybón through the lens of intimacy and commitment:

[h]e... began to go over to her house nearly every day, even when he knew she was working, just in case she'd caught ill or decided to quit the profession so she could marry him. The gates of his heart had swung open and he felt light on his feet, he felt weightless, he felt lithe. (297)

Additionally, even after having been beaten by the capitán's henchmen for his relentless pursuit of Ybón, Oscar persists in his commitment to her, and tells her "that he was in love with her and that he'd been hurt but now he was alright and if he could just have a week alone with her, one short week, then everything would be fine in him and he would be able to face what he had to face" (326). Finally, Oscar reveals that

what really got him was not the bam-bam-bam of sex – it was the little intimacies that he'd never in his whole life anticipated, like combing her hair or getting her underwear off a line or watching her walk naked to the bathroom or the way she would suddenly sit on his lap and put her face into

his neck The intimacies like listening to her tell him about being a little girl[...]. (343)

Considered against Oscar's revelations above, Ybón's identity as a "semiretired puta" (289) gains particular significance, especially since the profession itself is one that facilitates the objectification of women for the gratification (the masculinisation) of men. In spite of Ybón's profession, however, Oscar defies the oppressive politics of relation inherent in prostitution by refusing to sexualise and objectify Ybón's body as a recuperative property in the "bam-bam-bam of sex" (343). In other words, Oscar eschews the machismo politics of relation that could have recuperated him onto "the proper path of Dominican male-itude" (294), and chooses instead to pursue his relationship with Ybón through a genuine act of love.

In his commitment to Ybón, and in his valorisation of the "little intimacies" (343) that he encounters with her, Oscar essentially conceptualises and expresses a different kind of love that Yuniór's machismo prevents him from experiencing. Yuniór, significantly, reveals that his adherence to the hyper-masculine and hyper-sexual relations of machismo were the central factor that prevented him from sustaining a relationship with the girl – characterised in the novel as Lola – "who knew [him] best", and whom he "can't seem to forget, even now, after all these years" (205); for, in the story, even while Lola was "pregnant" with his child, he "was cheating on her with some girl" (279), and was unable to "keep [his] rabo in [his] pants" (321).³⁴

Then, in the final conversation that Yuniór imagines himself having with Oscar, Oscar gently confronts Yuniór about the latter's compulsive infidelity towards Lola:

She loves you.

³⁴ Penis.

I know that.

Why do you cheat on her, then?

If I knew, it wouldn't be a problem.

Maybe you should try to find out. (323)

Yunior's imagination of this conversation fundamentally gestures towards his process of acknowledging his desire for intimacy and commitment, which is "repressed" (Henderson 110) by the predominance of the machismo ideology that frames his identity. In staging Oscar's act of confronting his machismo in the narrative, Yunior subconsciously acknowledges the possibility of change within himself. More importantly, he inclines himself towards the possibility of integrating aspects of Oscar's (in other words, his own shadow) personality within his self, and "[l]earn[ing]... from Oscar" (336) the "beauty" (345) of intimate, committed love, shorn of the oppressive relations that characterise the machismo inherited from Dominican history.

(Re)Writing the Zafa

Some pages earlier, I emphasised that Yunior's fukú story and his zafa are staged against each other – the zafa being a "counterspell" (7) to, or a negation of, the former. This way, as *mutually exclusive* constructs, the fukú and the zafa cannot be situated in the same narrative. Thus, if the fukú story (with the relations of oppression and machismo that characterise it) are located in the frame narrative on Oscar, I posit that the zafa has to be found somewhere else in the novel.

Earlier, I also briefly mentioned that the novel contains within its narrative two missing manuscripts: the "Lost Final Book of Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral" (256), as well as "the new book [that Oscar] was writing... [and which] he was sending under another cover"

(343). In the final chapter of the novel, Yuniór introduces to us the “new book” that Oscar writes just before his death, which Yuniór describes as containing “the cure to what ails us... The Cosmo DNA” (343). There, Yuniór transcribes how he imagines Oscar would describe his new book:

[t]his contains everything I’ve written on this journey [where Oscar returns to the Dominican Republic even after having been beaten up by the capitán’s henchmen, and where he finally has sex for the first time in his life, with Ybón]. Everything I think you will need. You’ll understand when you read my conclusions. (343).

Importantly, Oscar’s postulation that the “cure to what ails us” is to be found in the “conclusions” of his lost manuscript intersects with that fact that Oscar’s “new book” is located in the concluding chapter of Yuniór’s frame narrative. Given that – as I have previously established – Oscar serves as a fictional construct through which Yuniór articulates his own fukú story, I suggest that Oscar’s “new book” (343) serves as a metafictional reference to the zafa narrative that Yuniór has been working on since the start of the novel, and which he is only able to actualise at his “conclu[ding]” (343) chapter.

Significantly, Oscar highlights that the book that he writes on the “journey” (343) where he experiences intimacy and love – and where he refuses to use Ybón as a mere recuperative tool to exercise the politics of machismo – contains the “cure to what ails us” (343). In turn, I suggest that the “cure” (ibid) that Oscar gestures towards, and which Yuniór desperately needs, is fundamentally a way to pursue relations that neither perpetuate nor reproduce the oppressive politics of machismo inherited from Dominican history. In turn, learning to appreciate the “little intimacies” (344) between individuals, as opposed to the

“bam-bam-bam of sex”, is the lesson that Oscar’s “new book” teaches, and which Yunior learns at the end of the novel.

Yunior recounts that in one of the dreams in which Oscar appears,

We’re in some kind of ruined bailey that’s filled to the brim with old dusty books... Dude is holding up a book, waving for me to take a closer look... I want to run from him, and for a long time that’s what I do. It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar’s hands are seamless and the book’s pages are blank.

And that behind his mask his eyes are smiling.

Zafa. (335)

In this scene, with the mention of the book which “pages are blank” (ibid), Yunior makes a reference to another missing document that he references in his text: the “Lost Final Book of Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral” (256). Yunior has suggested that the “Lost Final Book” (ibid) contains “an exposé of the supernatural roots of Trujillo’s regime” (255) – it is, understandably, a book that demythologises the authority that Trujillo exercises, and which, by extension, undercuts the legitimacy of his rule and legacy. Speaking of Abelard, Yunior additionally remarks that “[it is] strange that none of Abelard’s books, not the four hundred he authored or the hundreds he owned, survive... All of them [had been] either lost or destroyed... [Trujillo has] got to fear a motherfucker or what he’s writing to do something like that” (256). Significantly, the “old dusty books” (335) in the bailey where Oscar meets Yunior in the dream are reminiscent of Abelard’s books that were destroyed by the Trujillo regime. The content of these books are, however, symbolically preserved through Yunior’s act of writing his narrative. Additionally, the “Lost Final Book” (256) of Abelard is recovered

through the character of Oscar, since it has become “seamless” with “Oscar’s hands” (335). From a metafictional perspective, the character Oscar has *become*, or otherwise has become *synonymous with*, the lost book(s) of Abelard – documents, once again, that contest the authority, legitimacy, and legacy of Trujillo.

Further, the book that Oscar presents to Yunior in the dream, of which the “pages are blank” (335), can also be understood to be the “new book” that Oscar himself was writing, and which contains “everything... [Yunior] will need” (343). Crucially, Yunior reveals that the new book Oscar was writing is “almost three hundred pages” (330) – almost as long as the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* itself. Through these metafictional references, Yunior communicates to readers his postulation of *his* own “cure” to what “ails” (343) him. Given that Yunior’s fukú is the curse of reproducing oppressive relations under the ideological constructs of machismo – constructs that incapacitate him from sustaining a relationship with the girl “who knew [him] best”, and whom he “can’t seem to forget, even now, after all these years” (205) – the zafa to his curse has to embody the antithesis to the hyper-masculine sexual relations that delineate machismo. Such is fundamentally the type of committed, intimate love that Oscar endorses and bears for Ybón, and which Oscar testifies to in his “new book” (343).

Elsewhere in the narrative, Yunior laments that with Lola, the representation of the girl whom he loves and “can’t seem to forget”, he would have to be someone [he]’d never tried to be” (205). Through the course of writing the novel (this is to say, through the course of conceptualising the character Oscar and writing about his story), Yunior discovers that he *has* come to embrace the ‘shadow’ qualities – or, in essence, the non-performance of machismo – that Oscar embodies, and which Yunior previously did not have the courage to embrace. As Yunior muses in the final pages of the narrative, “[he] do[es]n’t run after girls anymore... Learned that from Oscar. [He’s] a new man, you see, a new man, a new man”

(336). Yuniór, therefore, has become “someone [he]’d never tried to be” (205) at the culmination of his writing process.

In consideration, I suggest that the blank book that Oscar presents to Yuniór in the dream serves as a reference for readers to acknowledge that the narrative that we read about in the novel is *not* Yuniór’s zafa narrative. When Yuniór suggests that “[y]ou’ll [the readers] understand when you read my conclusions” (343), he posits a call – and a challenge – to us readers, to bear witness to the process of self-decolonisation and personal growth that he documents through his recounting of the story on Oscar. The blank pages in the book that Oscar holds out to Yuniór – and which Yuniór, in turn, holds out to us – are the pages of Yuniór’s zafa that we, as witnesses to his transformation and self-decolonisation, are meant to symbolically write upon *for* and on behalf of him.

This way, the blank pages in that book are a reflection of the “blank screen” (57) that we readers are expected to function as for Yuniór, in order to actualise his narrative of self-decolonisation and growth. We as readers are, in Laub’s words, the “the blank screen on which the event [of Yuniór’s trauma and subsequent recuperation] comes to be inscribed for the first time”, and “a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*” (57). For, at the end of the novel, *the Yuniór who writes* is no longer the same as the Yuniór *being written about* through the course of the novel. The metafictional form of the novel compels us to recognise Yuniór’s self-transformation, and to participate in the actualisation of the narrative of change that he has sought to write from the beginning. This way, we, as readers, help to replace Yuniór’s “broken story” (Taylor 3), and produce a fresh narrative of self-decolonisation and healing on his behalf.

Formal Recuperation

In the essay “Dictating Desire, Dictating Diaspora”, Elena Machado Sáez postulates that “the conclusion of the novel sees the recuperation of Oscar as man and Dominican through the body of Ybón” (537). In her view, sexual intercourse with Ybón normalizes Oscar within the construct of machismo Dominican identity: as she articulates, “Oscar emerges as a devirginised... hero who is delivered into authenticity [of machismo Dominican identity] through Ybón’s body” (538). Building upon Machado Saez’s focus on recuperation but departing from her standpoint, I suggest that through Oscar’s character, Yuniór presents a way to recuperate a *postcolonial* Dominican identity removed from the reproduction of oppressive and violent relations that characterises the *fukú*. Rather than having Oscar recuperate the “authenticity” (ibid) of Dominican machismo through Ybón, I posit that Yuniór uses the characterisation of Ybón to communicate his (re)conceptualisation of gender relations. In envisioning the “intimacies” (*Oscar Wao* 345) of a committed romantic relationship that Oscar seeks in Ybón, as an alternative to the hyper-sexual promiscuity that he had previously espoused, Yuniór distances and detaches himself from the ideology of machismo that formerly circumscribed and shaped his identity. This way, Yuniór decolonises himself from the oppressive structures of relation first perpetrated and perpetuated by the colonial enterprise, and reproduced in each generation of Dominicans thereafter. In turn, he makes his readers aware of the lingering oppressive ideological constructs that pervade our contemporary ‘postcolonial’ society, and makes readers *witnesses* to the possibilities of arriving at a truly *postcolonial* understanding of the world and self.

The metafictional form of the novel functions as an important structuring principle that compels readers to bear witness to the postcolonial Dominican identity that Yuniór quietly but surely acquires through his narrative. Through the use of metafictional narrative strategies, Yuniór situates readers as symbolic therapists to witness his process of self-

transformation, and as co-writers to help the Yuniór who writes to actualise and produce his narrative of self-decolonisation, his *zafa*.

Díaz's novel fundamentally relies upon its metafictional form to effectuate the postcolonial work that it seeks to do – that is, to engender awareness of the continuing process of decolonisation that has to take place on the level of the individual (as exemplified by Yuniór), and to illuminate the possibilities of moving beyond the ideological constructs that were produced by and in turn facilitated the colonial enterprise, so as to venture into a truly *postcolonial* era. Given Díaz's use of metafictional formal strategies that split the narrative into several layers, I postulate that it is imperative for any reading of the novel to closely scrutinise the way in which form and content diverge and intersect, and to carefully interrogate the political work that aesthetic form helps the novel to achieve. Here, form can be construed as a *crucial* medium through which the postcolonial work of the novel is performed; discounting the metafictional strategies employed in the novel would certainly hamper the actualisation of the postcolonial work that the novel seeks to accomplish.

CHAPTER FOUR

Doing Political Work Aesthetically: Implications and Possibilities

(I) Reading *sans* Assumptions, Listening *sans* Prejudice

The novels examined in the previous chapters highlight the importance of the reader's sensitivity and attunement to the concerns and impulses of the texts. The conclusions gathered from these chapters fundamentally resonate with Gayatri Spivak's emphasis on the importance of *listening* for, and *to*, the articulations of the postcolonial writer: as she articulates,

[f]or me, the question 'Who should speak?' is less crucial than 'Who will listen?' 'I will speak for myself as a Third World person' is an important position for political mobilisation today. But the real demand is that, when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously, not with that kind of benevolent imperialism[.] (59-60).

In the lines above, Spivak highlights a critical aspect of reading and approaching postcolonial literature that is pivotal to understanding and participating in the political work which postcolonial writing seeks to do. Drawing a distinction between the writer's act of speaking and the reader's act of listening, Spivak gestures towards the disjuncture that might occur between the reader and the text, when the former fails to 'listen seriously' to what the latter – and by extension, the author of the text – has to say.

Spivak's words fundamentally point to two contrasting modes of approaching postcolonial writing that holds particular significance for my discussion of postcolonial aesthetics in this paper. To begin with, Spivak's underscoring of the mode of reading

delineated by a “kind of benevolent imperialism” (60) reverberates with much of the critical discussion that surrounds Adiga’s *The White Tiger*. Critics perceivably project their own assumptions and categorising expectations of Indian authors and Indian literature when they comment on the novel’s espousal of “ideas of exoticism” (Mendes 276) in sustenance of the “alterity industry” (277), as well as the novel’s “middle class worries about the condition of India” (Nandi 158), even when the narrator clearly reiterates his narrative unreliability, and suggests in turn that his words cannot be taken at face value. Such is a mode of reading that, I posit, fails to “[listen]... seriously” to the articulations of the text (that is, the narrator’s candid declaration of his unreliability), and which rigidly projects the reader’s assumptions and expectations of the text under a “kind of benevolent imperialism” (Spivak 60).

A similar comment could be made about critics who, albeit generously, approach Díaz’s text as a complete and finished “counter-discourse” (Mahler 131) and “resistance history” (Hanna 500), even when the text is riddled with lost and missing manuscripts that hamper the redemption and recuperation of traumatic Dominican history. Here, the assumption of the novel’s effective and independent articulation of a “counter-discourse” and “resistance” (ibid) to the unjust hegemonic relations that structure Dominican socio-politics parallels the “slippery” (100) and presumptuous use of the prefix ‘post’ in the term ‘postcolonial’ that Shohat discusses. Such an assumption, like the use of the term ‘post’ in describing the ‘postcoloniality’ of our time, presumes that the effort needed to move beyond the epistemologies, ideologies and constructs propagated by the colonial enterprise is somewhere already achieved ‘out there’, with little effort further required on the part of the individual. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz pre-empts and undermines this assumption when he articulates, in the closing pages of the novel, that “[n]othing ends... [n]othing ever ends” (341). The work and effort required to herald a genuinely *post*-colonial

world remain incomplete, and need to be actively sought out and engaged in by individuals of each succeeding generation.

It would be helpful, at this point, to place Spivak's comments on the politics of listening in dialogue with Roland Barthes' conception of reading. Spivak's words about readers' reception to postcolonial writing resonate with Barthes' identification of two particular modes of reading: the first being "a comfortable practice of reading" that "comes from culture and does not break with it", and the second being a "discomfort[ing]" practice of reading that "imposes a state of loss" and "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, [as well as] the consistency of his values [and] memories" (*Pleasure of the Text* 14).³⁵ I suggest that Barthes' notion of "a comfortable practice of reading" that "comes from culture and does not break with it" (ibid) amounts to a mode of "listening... with [a] kind of benevolent imperialism" (Spivak 60), which ultimately facilitates the reader's sentiment of dominance over the peoples and cultures represented in a given text; for, the reader approaches the text strictly lodged in the assumptions pre-existent in his or her mind, which hamper him or her from apprehending the subject matter presented in the text *for what it is*. This is to say that the reader approaches the text to reaffirm the ideas, perspectives, and prejudices that stem from the reader's own knowledge and culture, thus enabling the reader to return to the milieu of his or her culture "and... not break with it" (Barthes, *Pleasure* 14).

Correspondingly, I draw a parallel between Spivak's idea of "listen[ing]... seriously" (60) and Barthes' conceptualisation of the "discomfort[ing]" practice of reading that

³⁵ In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes discusses specifically the "[t]ext of pleasure" and the "text of bliss", which give rise respectively to "a comfortable" and a "discomfort[ing]" practice of reading. In my use of Barthes' concepts, however, I seek to venture beyond the topic of texts, and into a discussion of readers' attitudes that determine the way they *perceive* and *respond* to the texts. In this sense, Barthes' delineation of the two modes of reading is of particular help to my analysis, as it underscores the implications that accompany readers' assumptions of any given text – whether as a "text of pleasure" that does not challenge readers' cultural assumptions, or as a "text of bliss" (ibid) that challenges the readers' cultural points of view.

“imposes a state of loss” and which “unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, [as well as] the consistency of his values [and] memories” (*Pleasure of the Text* 14). Barthes’ idea of the “discomfort[ing] practice of reading” (ibid) has been explicated as “what disorients us in a text... in relation to ourselves... [and which] prevents us from looking up and away from the text to relocate ourselves in the world” (Federman 71). Such a mode of reading is, in other words, the springboard from which readers approach the text *on its own terms*, and from which readers listen carefully to the articulations of the text and its author. In consideration, I suggest that a critical prerequisite in approaching postcolonial literature is the readiness to disorient oneself by embracing the articulations and structures of relation espoused by the text, and to evaluate the utterances of the text not in a manner that reinforces our expectations of it, but which, instead, questions the legitimacy and validity of our assumptions of the cultural Other.

(II) Experiencing the Politics of Form

The previous two chapters in this paper highlight that ‘listening seriously’ to the articulations of the author and the text necessitates the act and process of approaching the text *on its own terms* – that is, to understand the text by apprehending *how* the text seeks to be understood. Listening seriously to the postcolonial writer means attending to the forms of relation that the writer establishes in the text, and for the reader to give up, at least in the duration of reading, his or her epistemological assumptions about the subject matter of the text. One of the fundamental ways in which approaching the text on its own terms may be achieved is by paying heed to and engaging with the formal or aesthetic elements of the text, through which the text structures our – the readers’ – relation to its subject matter. Here, I speak of reading the text with a particular sensitivity to the text’s manipulation of form –

which, as I have established in Chapter One, amounts to the text's (re)formulation of our experience of its subject matter.

In my chapter on Adiga's *The White Tiger*, I suggested that by staging destabilising sub-texts and a slippage of the narrator's identity, the formal structure of *The White Tiger* enables the narrative to forge a space of relative autonomy, since the novel and its content elude the objectifying and categorising eye of the reader. A careful engagement with the novel's metafictional structure thus leads readers to the realisation that they cannot assume the privilege of knowing the cultural other portrayed in the text. Instead, readers will have to acknowledge that they cannot use the text to *make assumptions* about Indian writing, peoples, and cultures, as the text consistently resists and eludes attempts at being subjected to the imperative and politics of knowing. This way, the metafictional form of the text (re)formulates readers' experience of Indian peoples and cultures, by situating readers at a position where they *cannot* summon the sentiment of "supremacy" that is fostered by the assumption of "knowledge" (Said 32) about the cultural other. Such is, I posit, the fundamental work that the aesthetic form of *The White Tiger* accomplishes: the subversion and impairment of the Western/Eurocentric eye that "produces the colonised as a fixed reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (Bhabha 23).

Next, in my chapter on Díaz's *Oscar Wao*, I suggested that Yuniórs uses a fragmented and gap-riddled metafictional structure to signal to the reader that the postcolonial work of "engendering a consciousness of the unjust foundations of the present and to open up the possibility of a just future" (Durrant 1), for both the individual and the communities involved, is yet to be complete and over. For, even in the writer's effort to "speak into the silence that hegemonic power has imposed" (Mahler 131), the postcolonial work remains incomplete without the reader's participation in bringing him/herself to the awareness of, and contestation against, the oppressive structures of relation inherited from the colonial past, and

which persist even in the present day. I postulated that the novel's metafictional form additionally situates the careful reader as a symbolic therapist and co-producer of Yuniór's zafa – his narrative of self-decolonisation – in a bid to, first of all, bring the reader to the awareness that individuals are complicit in reproducing these oppressive structures of relation; and, secondly, to encourage the reader to symbolically transform the narrative of trauma and oppression that dominates the surface structure of the text into a narrative of decolonisation and healing. This way, the novel's form places the reader at a position to witness the possibilities of change and transformation that would enable a movement away from the lingering oppressive constructs that structure the present, into a more recuperative post-colonial future.

Postcolonial Aesthetics

In the essay "Aesthetic and Non-aesthetic", Frank Sibley elucidates that

[i]t is important to note first that, broadly speaking, aesthetics deals with a kind of perception. People have to see the grace or unity of a work, hear the plaintiveness or frenzy in the music, notice the gaudiness of a colour scheme, feel the power of a novel, its mood, or its uncertainty of tone. They may be struck by these qualities at once, or they may come to perceive them only after repeated viewings, hearings, or readings, and with the help of critics. But unless they do perceive them for themselves, aesthetic enjoyment, appreciation, and judgement are beyond them. Merely to learn from others, on good authority, that the music is serene, the play moving, or the picture unbalanced is of little aesthetic value; the crucial thing is to see, hear, or feel. To suppose indeed that one can make aesthetic judgements without aesthetic

perception, say, by following rules of some kind, is to misunderstand aesthetic judgement. (34)

In a similar vein, in his discussion of literary aesthetics, Lamarque suggests that

a special kind of discernment is called for which goes beyond mere comprehension of the text and presupposes initiation into a distinctive practice of reading. A reader approaching a text from a literary point of view has expectations about what rewards will flow from giving it that kind of attention. The expectation is of a value-experience. (38)

Together, Sibley and Lamarque's words highlight the notion that what is fundamental in the aesthetics of literature is the reader's personal experience of the *significance* of the text – such is a process of apprehending the subject matter of the text that cannot be reduced to the comprehension of mere linguistic or thematic meaning. The crux of literary aesthetics, then, is not contained within the piece of writing; it is, instead, centred upon the reader's personal discovery of the ways in which the various structural elements of the work come together to *impress* upon him or her the subject matter and underlying impulses imbued in the work.

An aesthetics of postcolonial literature follows the same principles. As I have shown in the previous chapters, the postcolonial impulses of *The White Tiger* and *Oscar Wao* are embedded within the layers of narrative that structure them; the actualisation of these impulses are inherently dependent upon the reader's careful analysis of the literary devices that structure the novels. An aesthetics of postcolonial literature, then, perceivably centres upon the reader's process of personally experiencing, actualising, and coming to alignment with the political subject matter of the text, through an engagement with its formal or aesthetic elements. It is, as Sibley iterates, insufficient to interrogate the piece of writing impassively, with a desire only to uncover the 'message' or thematic meaning of the work.

Drawing upon the articulations of Spivak, Barthes, and Sibley, then, I postulate that a pivotal aspect of postcolonial literary aesthetics is for the reader to personally “see, hear, or feel” (Sibley 34) the impulses of the work, beyond his or her own assumptions about the subject matter and peoples portrayed in the work, and without undermining the (formal) structures of relation and experience put in place for the reader by the author of the text.

In her discussion of the postcolonial aesthetic, Boehmer reminds us that “[i]t remains important... not to lose sight of the sheer variousness of the work that we designate as postcolonial and onto which we are seeking to pin a... ‘postcolonial aesthetic’” (176). While it may be helpful to avoid sweeping the culturally- and geographically-diverse body of postcolonial literary works (e.g. Australian, South African, Caribbean, Indian, Irish writing, etc.) under the single heading of *the* postcolonial that attempts to speak for all, it is useful to consider the common threads that underlie these various categories of writing, and which underscore the gist of both the aesthetic *and* aesthetics of postcolonial literature.

In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I postulated that postcolonialism remains a continuing process that resists and contests the inequitable ideologies and hierarchies inherited from the era of colonialism, which continue to permutate and reproduce themselves in the contemporary period of “global colonialities” (Mignolo, *Darker Side* 3). In this light, I suggest that the postcolonial *aesthetic*, in spite of the diversity of cultural specificities that constitute the postcolonial, is situated in the organisation or structure of textual experience that implicates the reader in a global politics of resistance and contestation, of which the text is a part. In relation, postcolonial *aesthetics*, as a mode of apprehending the motivations and concerns of the cultural other through a process of engaging with the aesthetic of the text, resides in the impulse that is conveyed to the reader, to oppose the tyranny of the ideology that posits some cultures as ‘better’ or ‘more desirable’ than others on a global scale.

In his discussion of postcolonial aesthetics, Ashcroft suggests that “at the heart of the aesthetic encounter [is] a constant invitation to openness, to anticipation, to an expectation of the wonder of the world available through the eyes of the other” (420). Postcolonial aesthetics is, in the final analysis, about a process of experience that reiterates the commitment to perceive and accommodate the histories and perspectives of the cultural Other, and a commitment to participate in the politics of the text, at least in the duration of reading. As *The White Tiger* and *Oscar Wao* suggest, the concerns of postcolonialism – both as a process and as a field of study – continue to (re)surface even in our contemporary era. The transformative potential of postcolonial aesthetics – in its committed striving for more equitable relations between peoples and cultures – thus remain all the more pertinent.

CONCLUSION

Reflections upon the Present Paper

In this thesis, I have sought to circumnavigate the “contradiction in terms” (Boehmer, “A Postcolonial Aesthetic” 170) that complicates attempts at approaching postcolonial literature aesthetically, by postulating a (re)conceptualisation of literary form as not being merely concerned with the appearance of the work, but more importantly, as a structuring principle that subjects readers to the political impulses of the work. My examination of my two primary texts have so far indicated that this (re)conceptualisation of form is viable, and facilitates an engagement with both the aesthetics and the politics of the text. I am, however, aware that the two texts I have chosen overlap in their shared use of metafictional formal strategies.

Metafictional literary form has proven itself to be helpful and useful for my interrogation of postcolonial literary aesthetics here, particularly because of its “self-reflexive turn” that favours a “solipsistic self-absorption” (Stirling 80). In its self-reflexivity – its turning away from beyond and “back... upon itself” (80) – the metafictional form of Adiga and Díaz’s novels draws attention away from generalisations about the texts’ relation to the external world, and focalises attention upon the intricate and complex narrative layers that constitute the novels. This way, I conclude that metafictional narratives encourage, privilege and reward the interrogation of form as opposed to content.

I do, however, concede that for my claims in this paper to be better tested, an examination of a greater variety of literary forms is needed. Such a study, however, is beyond the scope of this paper, particularly due to constraints of space. In a longer and larger project, then, I shall test the validity of my arguments in this paper through an analysis of different types of postcolonial literary works, such as poetry, drama, and even other types of prose, like fictional autobiographies and historical fiction, amongst others.

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