NEW GEOGRAPHIES OF THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL:
SCALE, BORDER, SEMI-PERIPHERY, WORLD

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

New Geographies of the Contemporary Novel:
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Working at the intersection of comparative literature and novel theory, my dissertation is a comparative study of how the formal and spatial coordinates of the contemporary novel have changed in the last decades in relation to transnational migrations and to the acceleration of capitalist uneven development. I argue that the combination of these world-historical forces has led to the emergence of a new global realism that, in originating from peripheral and semi-peripheral areas of the world literary system, can more lucidly diagnose social and economic inequalities across multiple scales. I focus on texts and authors that activate multiple geographies, either through multilingualism (Igiaba Scego, Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, and Junot Díaz), multilayered narrative structures (Nuruddin Farah and Roberto Bolaño), and expansive political horizons (Vivek Shanbhag and Nicola Lagioia). Coming from diverse linguistic and cultural traditions, the authors and texts I study challenge us to develop a more historically attentive vocabulary to discuss how the contemporary novel has engaged with cultural and linguistic displacement, postcolonial diasporas, and the legacies of colonial modernity.

Each of the four chapters is centered on a spatial concept: scale, border, semi-periphery, and world. I suggest that each concept functions simultaneously as a formal
device, an interpretive key, and a mode of organizing the narrative space. My dissertation thus explores how the contemporary novel circulates across multiple geographies in today’s globalized marketplace, but also how it discursively incorporates them. I discuss dynamics of circulation, publishing networks, and economies of cultural prestige; at the same time, I focus on how the texts I analyze foreground their own multilingual histories and their attachments to multiple locations. In so doing, this dissertation shows that the study of contemporary works of fiction requires a spatially flexible framework in which multiplacedness is used to register colonial histories, the irruption of neoliberal forces into peripheral spaces, and the geopolitical rearrangements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In exploring how works of fiction articulate a consciousness of the world that is spatially grounded and historically determined, my dissertation approaches contemporary novels as indexes of the conditions of the world we inhabit—both imaginatively and materially.
A Federico Corallini (1986-2016),
che mi ha insegnato a rifuggire la banalità.
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This dissertation is dedicated to Cora; you are always with me.
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Introduction

The last two decades of literary scholarship have been marked by numerous and ambitious attempts to rethink the critical vocabulary and objectives of literary studies. In the early 2000’s, concepts that had been foundational to any discussion of works of fiction—form, circulation, prestige, power, inequality, unevenness—begun to coalesce around two terms, world and literature, whose conjunction has revived heated debates about the status and objectives of literary scholarship, if not of humanistic inquiry more broadly. And yet, if one were to ask the hackneyed yet inevitable question “What do we talk about when we talk about world literature?,” the array of answers would be as fascinating as utterly dismaying. In a recent assessment of such glaring lack of consensus, Gloria Fisk lists some of the referents that have been attached to this concept: “the aesthetics of toothless globalism evidenced in bad novels and Miramax movies; the homogenization of local cultures under global capital; the blindness of critics to the interpretive complexities that attend literary translation; and a methodology that comes with a profit motive, for maximizing the sale of textbooks in a global market” (158). To these we could add—among many other definitions that have been proposed—a canon of the best literature produced in human history, a deterritorialized network of interconnected agents and institutions, an invention of the US academy to buttress its cultural hegemony.

Given this semantic amplitude, this study proposes to consider—as the basic point of departure for any engagement with world literature—the acknowledgment that, as Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen write, it “de facto exists” (1). This might seem a banal consideration to make, but I take it more as an exhortation than as a verdict that would prevent further discussion. In other words, recognizing the existence of world literature as a
field of study, as a highly contested critical methodology, and as a body of globally circulating texts means going beyond the implicit requirement of having to declare and support a position in favor or against this concept. My dissertation thus starts from the fundamental premise that, after two decades of debates on the critical viability of this concept, it is today not particularly fruitful to choose one of the many theorizations of world literature and dismantle it in order to advance yet another scholarly or pseudo-political agenda. We are at a point in which the concept, with all its connotations and incoherencies, should be accepted as part of a critical discourse on literature that has tried to respond, in more or less successful ways, to the massive socio-economic, political, and infrastructural changes of the post-Cold War era. It seems fair to say that this has been possible also because the largest scale conceivable, the world—with its semantic cognates: globality, planetarity, *mondialité*—has become the central reference and cognitive horizon for studies that want to develop methodologies to read literature in a global perspective.

My main concern is therefore to explore how contemporary works of fiction articulate—by employing various formal strategies—a consciousness of the world that is aimed at drawing attention to global histories of oppression, migratory movements, and the geopolitical rearrangements of the twentieth and twenty-first century. At the same time, I propose that, first, these formal changes originate from a renewed and more historically attentive idea of the world, understood as a complex and deeply uneven system; and second, that this consciousness is manifested in the dynamics of interaction between novelistic form and space. The corpus of contemporary novels I study thus reveals that writing about the interlocked political histories and the socio-economic conditions of a seemingly unrepresentable entity such as the world requires thinking about it spatially, as a complex and hierarchically structured network of locations and geocultural spaces.
To be sure, world literature and space have been discussed together since the revival of this concept at the end of the 1990’s. On the one hand, there seems to be a critical consensus on the fact that location, space, and geography can provide sharper tools for thinking globally and systemically about contemporary fiction. On the other, there are two central questions that have not been sufficiently addressed: the first, scale, is structural; the second, realism, is formal. In discussing them together, my study wants to go beyond debates about close and distant reading to propose multiscalarity and multiplacedness as the most fruitful ways of engaging world literature, and literary realism as the most adequate mode of representation of the historical present.

As for scale, theorizations of the world literary space of the last two decades have been explicitly or implicitly opposing a master scale, the world, to smaller units—usually, the nation. This model, despite the widespread suspiciousness among literary scholars of nation-based frameworks, can still be seen in the dichotomic structure of most theories, where the global stands against various forms of the local (the nation, the region, the city, etc.).

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1 See for instance Pascale Casanova’s “world literary space” (“Literature as a World” 72), or David Damrosch’s and Franco Moretti’s space-based accounts.

2 An exception to this privileging of space is Pheng Cheah, who sees in “the spatial understanding of worldliness” (“What is a World (Literature)?” 308) a flattening of its normative power, which he believes can only be achieved in a temporal dimension and in the quasi-mystical idea of literature’s ability to impose its “ethico-political horizon” (309).

3 Consider Casanova’s influential account, where she argues that writers are always “twice situated” (351): in relation to the “World Republic of Letters” and in relation to their national-linguistic space. Equally framed around the opposition of world and nation is Moretti’s “Conjectures on World Literature.” Alexander Beecroft, unsatisfied with the rigidity of Casanova’s and Moretti’s paradigms, has proposed a more flexible paradigm, framed around literary ecologies, which acknowledges the possibility of multiple scalar configurations beyond the nation versus the world. At the same time however, his theorization is founded on ecological couples that are always “mutually constitutive” (71), the first representing a local mode of expression and circulation, the second a wider one. In other words, the model is still strictly binaristic, so that, for instance, “cosmopolitan ecologies” (Beecroft 34) can be understood only in relation to “vernacular ecologies” (34), just as the contemporary global ecology emerges in opposition to the national.
propose instead is a spatial model that centers on how contemporary works of fiction not only exist as cultural and artistic objects in several spaces at the same time, but also how they mobilize multiple scales of representation and integrate them formally. This means that the world as a system of interrelated geographies remains the master scale of analysis, but also that there are multiple levels underneath it that merit equal attention. The corpus of novels I study are therefore both world-oriented and multiplaced, that is to say, they mobilize multiple geographies and different scales while articulating a cohesive idea of the world as deeply unequal system. It is also crucial to stress that being world-oriented does not necessarily imply the diegetic representation of several locales. In other words, a text might have a restricted spatial focus and at the same time engage with historical or political processes that can only be understood in a global perspective. This is the case, for instance, of Nicola Lagioia’s *La Ferocia* and Vivek Shanbhag’s *Ghachar Ghochar*, two novels I discuss in Chapter 3: although they are set respectively in Southern Italy and Southern India and have a seemingly narrow thematic focus, their central political horizon is neoliberalism—a specific phase of global capitalism that has had the direst impact in world semi-peripheries and reshaped their social and affective structures. Other texts use different formal strategies to activate multiple geographies and articulate a consciousness of the world, from juxtaposing more than one language—as in the case of Junot Díaz’s fiction, discussed in Chapter 1—to devising narrative structures that require continuous comparisons among the places being represented—a prominent feature of Roberto Bolaño’s novels and short stories, particularly *Los detectives salvajes*, as I show in Chapter 4.

My work is thus founded on the hypothesis that only comparative and spatially flexible gestures, when they are attentive to contextual specificities, can account for the complex ways in which the contemporary novel frames globality. This means that, first, it is
necessary to investigate how the geopolitical histories of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the socio-economic hierarchies of the world system have affected the very form of contemporary novels and their spatial dynamics—both in the Anglophone sphere and in peripheral literary spaces. Secondly, my study suggests that it is crucial to analyze how multiple ideas of the world can offer compelling ways of drawing attention to the uneven relations among these literary and cultural geographies, beyond the monolingual purview of Anglocentric criticism.

The texts I engage in this study articulate an idea of the world through multiplacedness because they discursively incorporate multiple geographies and draw attention to their interlocked histories. At the same time, as literary objects that circulate in the global literary marketplace through translation, they are part of publishing networks and economies of cultural prestige that determine if and what audiences they can reach. My spatial analysis thus takes into consideration not only the formal and structural ways through which these novels represent and comment on the configuration of today’s world, but also how extrinsic dynamics affect their circulation and literary lives in different cultural spaces. In this sense, their multiplacedness as literary objects in never a given, but, as I show in detail for each author I discuss, it depends on a series of interrelated factors that need to be studied case by case and in conjunction with specific publishing trends, implicit or explicit expectations, and cultural variables that are highly context specific. As scholars of postcolonial fiction have convincingly argued, authors and texts coming from peripheral areas of the world literary system are part of dynamics of recognition that often rely on exoticizing practices (Huggan 2001). At the same time, in being highly conscious of the rules of the literary game, these writers have developed strategies to reflect on their own position and on the position of their readers, thus deploying exoticism strategically (Brouillette 2007).
In a globalized market of literary goods, where the mediating power of agents and institutions has become a *sine qua non* for their circulation and visibility (Helgesson and Vermeulen 2006; Marling 2016), the writers and texts I study are particularly interesting points of access for grasping the dynamics of symbolic recognition that determine how peripheral literatures reach or fail to reach the world stage.

Consider for instance Roberto Bolaño, whose work and trajectory of consecration cannot be understood without mobilizing not only Latin America and its literary and political relations to the United States, but also the global Hispanophone space (where Bolaño was considered a major author years before his “discovery” by US critics), the idea of Europe as both imagined and concretely historical, a series of transnational publishing networks and its myth-making agents, and finally, the world as the ultimate horizon of meaning-making that contains without erasing all these other scales. A similarly intricate and multiscalar picture emerges when we look at the circulation of another literature that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2 and 3, contemporary Italian fiction. First, it must be noted that it would be impossible to understand its dynamics of translation and circulation in recent years without taking into account the global success of Elena Ferrante’s quartet. In reshaping the expectations and perception of Italian literature on a world scale, this literary and publishing phenomenon has been instrumental to a renewed attention and interest not just for literary texts coming from Italy, but particularly for those focused on Italy’s South (*meridione*). As a consequence, the nation-based framework in which Italian literature was studied a cohesive entity and expected to fulfill specific literary and cultural expectations has proved to be inadequate. Instead, the work of contemporary authors writing in Italian can be better understood in terms of, for instance, their regional focus in relation to world-historical forces. Ferrante’s Napoli in *L’amica geniale*—just like Nicola Lagioia’s Bari in *La Ferocia*,
which I analyze in Chapter 3—are first and foremost spaces that reveal dynamics of uneven development in the Italian South and thus allow us to grasp the history of capitalist modernization in world semi-peripheries. The national frame of reference is still present, but it is definitely not the decisive one.

This renewed attention for Italy’s *meridione* and its history can be also be seen in recent editorial endeavors. Jumpa Lahiri, whose choice to begin a new artistic phase as a writer in Italian has been coupled with concrete efforts to promote the translation of Italian literature in English, has recently edited an anthology of Italian short stories (*Racconti italiani*) in which the regional focus is once again Central/Southern. As she writes in the Introduction: “My connection to Rome and my love for Southern Italy have influenced my choice [of authors]” (22, my translation). At the same time, this regional scale needs to be expanded to Italy’s “own” Souths and to the colonial histories that connect them, as it has been forcefully done by writers with cultural or biographical ties to Somalia (one of Italy’s colonies in East Africa), who have been writing about their ambivalent relations to the Italian literary field and to global postcolonial literature. These examples, which will be discussed in further details in the following chapters, testify to the need of approaching world literature through a framework that takes into consideration extrinsic forces and that is at the same time attentive to the flexible and context-specific nature of spatial categories and scales of analysis.

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The other central linchpin of this study is literary realism. Although I engage with short stories and other genres when relevant for my argument, my main focus remains the
novel, and particularly the realist novel. Much has been written about the evolution of this genre and about its relevance for the study of the present. In turn, some scholars have pointed out that the critical hegemony of the novel runs the risk of obfuscating other genres and forms of aesthetic expression that would deserve equal attention. Although I understand the risks of a novel-centered criticism, this study primarily focuses on this genre because it is founded on the premise that the realist novel has a distinctive ability to formally register evolving social and historical dynamics. In claiming this, I follow a long tradition of scholars of literary realism, but more specifically recent critical interventions on the diagnostic potential of realist texts coming from semi-peripheral and peripheral areas of the world system.¹

On the one hand, my contention is that the novel remains a crucial tool for grasping how social and historical dynamics are mediated in narrative form. This is primarily due to its formal suppleness and to its openness to the present—features that have been famously theorized by Bakhtin. Furthermore, as the Lukácsian tradition of novel studies has repeatedly argued, the novel is also peculiarly interested in representing social collectivities and in understanding their dynamics of interaction with historical and political forces. In other words, the novel is inherently social, it is the genre of the collective. On the other hand however—and here current scholarship on literary realism becomes crucial—classical theories of the novel have failed to attend to questions that can be understood only when the purview is extended to the world, and when we pay closer attention to the unequal interaction of its geographies. As Joe Cleary has powerfully argued, one of the fundamental blind spots of classical realism was whether it “could ever intellectually grasp the totality of

¹ See for instance the special issues of Modern Language Quarterly and NOVEL on “Peripheral Realisms Now” and “Worldling Realisms Now.”
capitalist social relations without intellectually addressing imperialism in both its domestic and geographically distant manifestations” (259). To the question of imperialism that Cleary identifies as a decisive absence in classical realism and its theories, my study adds several others that equally require a different kind of historical and spatial consciousness, from transnational migrations and colonialism, to neoliberalism and uneven development. In this sense, the contemporary novels I analyze are engaged in an effort to realistically represent the world in order to draw attention to its inequalities and the histories that have produced them.

I am quite aware of the definitional problems raised by the idea of “realistically representing the world,” where the adverb realistically encapsulates the decisive question of establishing what realist representation ultimately means. Indeed, recent contributions to the theory of the realist novel have stressed that, in Colleen Lye’s words, “there is so little agreement as to what we mean by realist” (343). Lye further suggests that perhaps realism has transitioned from being “an attribute of the object” (343)—that is, a set of identifiable formal features—to an interpretive method that is more interested in the underlying structures that govern a socially constructed reality. Recent critical studies have therefore approached realism not as a series of narrative techniques (narratorial omniscience, linearity of the plot, mimesis of everyday language, focus on social dynamics) but rather as a mode of reading, cognitively grasping, and artistically representing a reality that is always historically and socially determined. In the context of my analysis, this approach is particularly fruitful in that it disproves, by analyzing what we might call the “realist impulse,” well-known critiques of realism as being naively transparent or merely photographic—and realist texts alternatively naïve or deceptive. Instead, if realism is more a method than a series of textual characteristics, it follows that what realist texts are really interested in showing is not a series
of static attributes, but the dynamic relations that make up a social totality. More concretely, in the contemporary novels I study, realism is used to illuminate spatial connections as embedded in concrete histories; networks, movements, and migrations; and relations among collectivities as determined by social and economic conditions.

In drawing into conversation theories of world literature to theories of realism and postcoloniality, my study thus focuses on the fictional and critical corpus that Jed Esty has termed “new global realism” (320). In my understanding of this formation, new signals a focus on contemporary works of fiction that build upon the central premise of realist representation—a interpretive method and a way of grasping reality—while drawing on other traditions with regard to formal instruments and strategies that depend on the cultural and literary influences each author foregrounds. Global is equally crucial, as it identifies the spatial and political compass of the contemporary novel, whose interpretive and cognitive horizon—no matter its diegetic focus—is always the world. At the same time, the concepts of world and globality belong to the same semantic and epistemological realm of another idea that lies at the critical core of old and new theories of realism: totality. The critical history of the concept of totality—both in the social and economic sciences and in literary criticism—is as complex as it is fraught with misunderstandings. Lukács was the first theorist to translate this notion from Marx’s economic philosophy to literary theory. If totality, in its most basic definition, is “the subordination of every part to the whole unity of history and thought” (Lukács History 27), the fundamental question for literary theorists has been to understand if and how works of fiction can represent it in mediated form. Lukács famously argued that the novel, because of the socio-historical conditions in which it emerged (i.e., capitalism), could only approach totality indirectly. In his most famous and nostalgic formulation, he maintained that “the novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive
totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality” (Theory 56).

One of my goals in this study is precisely to understand how the contemporary novel still thinks in terms of totality, that is to say, how it deploys totality as a crucial heuristic to represent social, historical, and political conditions of the world we inhabit. Thinking in terms of totality today means privileging relations among collectives and connections among geographies rather than individual representativity. It also means expanding the spatial horizon to spaces that literary scholarship has implicitly deemed incapable of realist totalization. Finally, it means understanding that the contradictions and inequalities that define the present are structurally connected to world-historical forces that are global in nature. In turn, these forces can be represented only by adopting a point of view in which the whole (totality) emerges through the relations among its parts. More concretely, the work of authors of Somali origin that I discuss in Chapter 2 reveal how the diasporic experience can only be grasped by approaching it as a unified entity—a totality of aesthetic expression—while analyzing its articulations and the historical and political forces that determine how diaspora has been given form artistically. For instance, in the work of Italian-Somali authors, the totality of Somali diasporic experience becomes visible through the interconnection of its parts: the historical-colonial relations between Somalia and Italy, the authors’ trajectories as migrant subjects, and the intra-diasporic connections among the Somali communities scattered around the globe. Totality is a principle that operates within the fictional text as mode of interpretation, and it is the text itself that requires it as a mode of analysis.

If realist totalization registers—in mediated form and by being conscious of this mediation—the structures and processes that make up historically experienced reality, my
discussion also shows that the contemporary novel can capture not only these visible processes, but also those tendencies that are not fully formed or that are stifled by dominant forces. In other words, contemporary novels are able to seize, in Fredric Jameson’s words, History “at the moment of emergence” (“Antinomies” 480). To be sure, Jameson believes that totality as History cannot be directly grasped, because it is ultimately not available for artistic representation, being an absent cause. In his reading of Lukács, he argues that “[Lukács’] conception of realism had to do with an art whereby the narrative of individuals was somehow made to approach historical dynamics as such, was organized so as to reveal its relationship with a history in movement and a future on the point of emergence. Realism would thus have to do with the revelation of tendencies rather than with the portrayal of a state of affairs” (“Antinomies” 479). This is a useful distinction in that it implies that realist mimesis is not static, but it involves the complex representation of heterogeneous forces, always in the process of changing. For the purpose of my discussion, this means that the contemporary realist novel is engaged in what Jameson calls “the revelation of tendencies” both on the historical-diachronic level and spatially. For instance, Roberto Bolaño’s fiction—and in Los detectives salvajes in particular—illuminates the historical emergence of the avant-garde in Latin America, its absorption within political movements, and its ultimate neutralization. At the same time, this historical trajectory gets spatialized across multiple geographies. Similarly, Nicola Lagioia’s La Ferocia and Vivek Shanbhag’s Ghachar Ghochar, in portraying the transition to neoliberalism in semi-peripheral spaces, illuminate the combination of elements that predate neoliberalization with tendencies that are peculiar to this phase of capitalist development.

In this sense, the novel continues to be the most adequate means for staging the complex and never-solved interactions of—to borrow another useful distinction from
Raymond Williams—the dominant, the residual, and the emergent. As Williams intuited, it is in the category of the emergent that we can see most clearly the historical tendencies that will determine future social configurations. My discussion thus focuses on how moments of emergence are represented in contemporary works of fiction, and how this representation always involves a peculiar attention to space. Ultimately, it is at the intersection of a temporal axis—whereby sociohistorical tendencies are revealed—and a spatial one—which results in a world-oriented perspective—that the contemporary realist novel offers powerful instruments for understanding the present.

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Navigating contemporary fiction can be a daunting task, particularly when it comes to selecting texts and organizing the critical materials in a way that is attentive both to the regional and local histories these texts figure and to the spatial dynamics that point to their global dimension. I have chosen two recently canonized authors—Junot Díaz and Roberto Bolaño—to open and close the arch of my study. This choice has been dictated by two main reasons, the first analytical and the second strategic. I view the fictional production of Díaz and Bolaño as particularly relevant to my analysis because, in the panorama of contemporary literature, no other writers have articulated with comparable urgency how literary form is inextricably tied to space when it comes to representing the world as a geopolitical whole. In other words, their significance for my overall argument rests on the fact that their fiction epitomizes how the contemporary novel’s cartographic and multiplaced consciousness has resulted in formal changes that current criticism has not properly addressed. And this seems

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5 See Marxism and Literature, in particular pp. 121-127.
to be the case in spite of the substantial and continuously growing body of scholarship about their work.

On the one hand, it is reasonable to argue with Hector Hoyos that we need to go “beyond Bolaño.” Yet, it is also my contention that the very means to do that are to be found within Bolaño’s own work—which is exactly what Hoyos himself does when he uses Bolaño to set the theoretical foundation of his study and the premises for discussing other, more marginal Latin American authors. This consideration is connected to the second aspect—which I have called strategic—of my choice of Díaz and Bolaño, who have reached global success by coming from marginalized positions in the literary field. In bringing them in conversation with lesser-known figures and texts, my goal is to leverage their critical prestige in order to draw attention to other peripheral writers who have employed—with equal cogency—spatial concepts, but who have not been recognized for their significance in rethinking the form of the contemporary novel. These writers come from linguistic and cultural positionings that are often neglected because deemed not worldly enough or too locally focused. In studying their work, I want to offer a corrective to the idea of world literature as a collection of tokens, where only canonized figures can be considered world literary authors. The central chapters of this study are therefore aimed at encouraging a methodological shift towards an approach that seriously considers how contemporary novels retain their localized idiosyncrasies and foreground their own peripheral positionality while envisioning a spatialized and inherently global consciousness of the world.

This kind of critical work is extremely important today, especially within US academia, where debates about the future of comparative literary studies have been particularly tense. The question here is not to determine whether world literature will substitute comparative literature, nor to propose nostalgic arguments about comparative
literature’s supposedly more serious engagement with linguistic peculiarities and formal
dynamics. As Simon Gikandi has pointed out, if world literature runs the risk of “take[ing] us
everywhere and nowhere (1200), comparative literature, a discipline that still has not come to
terms with “its historicist or foundational anxieties” (1200), seems equally in need of
rethinking its objectives and methodologies, which often presuppose the stability and
homogeneity of national traditions. In this study, I draw from the formal, linguistic, and
transcultural tools that a formation in a Comparative Literature Program has provided me
with; at the same time, I aim to go beyond some of the nation-based premises of this
discipline in order to stress other spatial configurations, historical connections, and global
orientations.

The texts I analyze were originally written in English, Italian, Spanish, and Kannada. For
Kannada I had to rely on an English translation—a choice that I decided to make
because the kind of argument I develop for Shanbhag’s *Ghachar Ghochar* is primarily based on
structural and historical elements rather than on linguistic or stylistic dynamics. The other
languages (English, Italian, and Spanish) mirror quite faithfully my own academic and spatial
trajectory which, similarly to the text I analyze in this study, has been informed by power
structures and economies of cultural prestige that cannot be easily dismissed. Having joined
the economic core of the West from one of its fringes, I am deeply aware of the power
dynamics that regulate academic conversations, the formation of canons, and language
politics. On the one hand, this study aims to give visibility to authors and texts that
foreground their attachments to marginalized cultural or linguistic locations. On the other, I
cannot ignore what it means to do so from the North American academic space. Any
attempt to theorize contemporary world literature is involved in complex geopolitics of
knowledge production, whereby critical works originating from hegemonic spaces
participate, with a higher degree of influence, in the regulation, distribution, and reproduction of cultural capital—through dynamics that displace other forms of power in the aesthetic and institutional realms, as John Guillory has famously argued. At the same time, in a historical conjuncture in which the humanities are struggling to articulate their relevance amid an increasingly hostile political climate, studies that aim to connect the analysis of literature to social and economic conditions are always also advocating for the importance of humanistic work and for a more even distribution of resources among academic disciplines and fields. In Gloria Fisk’s words, “The claims we make for world literature become legible, then, as claims for the relevance of that work—not only to our colleagues, but to the administrators and legislators who fund it, often grudgingly” (168).

It is not my intention here to provide a detailed argument for the significance of humanistic studies today, nor to identify where the relevance of literary scholarship ultimately lies. Yet, this study hopes to demonstrate that reading and carefully analyzing works of fiction can be instrumental to a larger social and political project that Jameson once defined as cognitive mapping. Although Jameson developed this concept at a time in which his main concern was theorizing the political, economic, and epistemic coordinates of postmodernity, the idea that aesthetic objects can provide us with cognitive instruments to understand the global structures and unevenness of capitalist modernity remains today particularly cogent. In this sense, no matter how we want to define the contemporary—post-postmodernism (Nealon 2012), cosmodernism (Moraru 2011), or the age of world literature (Walkowitz 2015)—artistic objects that participate in the project of cognitively mapping the
present, as Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle writes, “enable individuals and collectivities to render their place in a capitalist world-system intelligible” (7).

The concept of cognitive mapping is then particularly fruitful for my discussion, as it involves the effort to understand global historical and political processes through the study of artistic objects and, most importantly, through a critical approach that is constitutively spatial (hence the reference to mapping). Jameson explains that, in his choice of this metaphor—which he borrowed from Kevin Lynch, an urban planner—he wanted to stress that, just as “urban alienation is directly proportional to the mental unmappability of local cityscapes” (“Cognitive Mapping” 353), so “the incapacity to map socially is…crippling to political experience” (353). In other words, an aesthetic of cognitive mapping makes it possible to grasp the social and historical conditions of our world, and to consequently develop a political consciousness about it. Furthermore, whereas Jameson’s use of this spatial idea remains metaphorical (mapping as knowing), my study employs cognitive mapping in a more literal sense, since it aims to discuss how a consciousness of the world can be articulated through relations among spaces as encoded within fictional works. In this sense, one of my claims is that contemporary novels are not only making visible “the correlation between culture and political economy” by revealing that “each epoch develops cultural forms and modes of expression that allow it, however partially and ideologically, to represent its world—to ‘totalise’ it” (Toscano and Kinkle 8). Most significantly, they are doing so by articulating in narrative form the spatial, historical, and political relations that connect actual spaces and world geographies.

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For a thorough discussion of cognitive mapping in relation to aesthetic practices that aim to map capitalist modernity, see Toscano and Kinkle’s “Introduction” to *Cartographies of the Absolute*. 
Jameson’s project of cognitive mapping was primarily aimed at extending his study of aesthetic forms in Western capitalist societies to cultural objects coming from non-Western spaces, as evidenced by his widely critiqued article on “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.” Despite the controversial results, his intuition that cognitive mapping is critically nugatory if it does not engage with the world as a whole through spatial comparison remains a fundamental premise of my work. This effort to discuss global economic conditions in relation to localized aesthetic expression resonates in the work of The Warwick Research Collective, whose intention is to study world literature “as the literature of the world-system—of the modern capitalist world-system, that is” (8). In other words, we can identify in these critical works two major conceptual hinges: global capitalism and literary expression—the latter always registering the former. This premise seems reasonable, yet it is also insufficient for the kind of analysis my study develops. In fact, my approach, because of its multiscalarity and attention to more localized dynamics, requires a more nuanced understanding of the historical forces, political conditions, and cultural forms that are foregrounded in contemporary novels. To give a concrete example, my study of Vivek Shanbhag’s *Ghachar Ghochar* and Nicola Lagioia’s *La ferocia* demonstrates that these two texts do register dynamics that are peculiar to capitalist modernity, but also that there are other decisive elements involved. First of all, the two texts are interested in a specific phase of capitalist development, neoliberalism—a concept that transcends economic principles to shape social structures and gender relations, if not the very definition of human development. Secondly, their semi-peripheral positionality becomes a prism through which the two novels entangle regional contexts to global outlooks. And finally, *Ghachar Ghochar* and *La ferocia* reveal the combination of neoliberalist principles with the social and cultural substrata of Southern India and Southern Italy. The same interaction of heterogenous pulls
can be seen in all the other texts this study analyzes, from the work of Somali diasporic authors to the fiction of Junot Díaz. This is why, to the hypothesis that world literature is the literature of the capitalist world system, my discussion adds that each local space of the same system will determine how its aesthetic and literary practices engage with a diverse array of social, cultural, and political forces.

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My study thus starts from the hypothesis that recent accounts of world literature, even when they rely on a spatial framework, have not sufficiently addressed how contemporary novels engage with space and location as a way of foregrounding the histories of the places they represent and the political, economic, and cultural forces that shape the uneven relations among them. In doing so, my aim is to bring into conversations, on the one hand, critical models that view the world as a system of interrelated literary and cultural spaces whose asymmetries are given form aesthetically, and on the other, approaches that stress the diversity and multiplicity of literary expression, as well as its possibility to articulate multiple world-views.7 Drawing together these two methodological perspectives seems to me crucial for addressing the central problem of scholarly debates about world literature, that is, the idea that systemic approaches are incompatible with models that are more attentive to contextual specificities and language. It is my conviction that these two approaches are not only not incompatible, but, when integrated, mutually enriching.

7 This opposition is best exemplified by the world-systemic approach championed by the Warwick Research Collective in Combined and Uneven Development and the “significant geographies” framework proposed by Francesca Orsini, Karima Laachir, and Sarah Marzagora and others scholars in “The Multilingual Local in World Literature” and in “Significant Geographies: In Lieu of World Literature.”
In my analysis of contemporary world literature, a world systemic approach
complementary to the careful analysis of political, linguistic, and symbolic geographies
mobilized by texts and authors, together with their heterogeneous formal strategies. This
model is best suited to analyze both the dominant field of expression, circulation, and
reception in which contemporary literature exists, as well as other imaginative, material, and
symbolic spaces that texts engage. Indeed, today the most pressing critical endeavor of
literary studies is to investigate how all these ways of articulating the world interact within
the uneven system in which they circulate. My contention is that the group of authors and
texts I study, in being conscious of their own position within such system, are able to
illuminate, on the one hand, how writing is a world-making activity in which the imaginative
is constantly engaging the real and, on the other, that there are very concrete structures and
constraints in which this activity is exercised. In this way, mobilizing the category of world
literature becomes a measure of timeliness and, in Eric Hayot’s apt phrasing, “a totem of
responsibility to the historical present” (37).

To be able to reach a methodological balance between the spatial expansiveness of
world systemic paradigms and a close attention to textual and stylistic features, authorial
trajectories, and localized spatial dynamics, I had to develop an approach that would hinge
on concepts possessing this kind of elasticity and critical width. Scale has been the first and
most immediately comprehensible choice, and it should be understood as the theoretical
foundation of this study. World is equally indispensable, given the importance of two of its
many connotations: the world as a narrative, imagined, and formally intricate totality that
texts construct; and the world as the actual system of relations (economic, historical,
political, and literary) among the places they represent. The third concept that allows me to
illuminate macro- as well as micro-dynamics is the border. The choice of this notion has been
dictated by the fact that, just as multiple scales define the spatial compass of world literature, processes of border production and contestation determine its internal dynamics. Finally, I focus on the intermediate formation of the semi-periphery. This is an important notion that critics have regrettably disregarded in favor of the more immediate binary center/periphery. Precisely because of its in-between position, the semi-periphery, as a space of deep social contradictions, is better suited to explore the interactions among contextual conditions and global forces, where the latter are most dramatically experienced. My study is thus structured around scale, border, semi-periphery, and world: four spatial concepts that function simultaneously as formal devices, aesthetic rationales, and modes of diagnosing and historicizing the present.

By centering each chapter on one of these four conceptual hinges, my study further reveals that the analysis of the locations of the contemporary novel and of the imaginative cartographies they produce can also become a corrective to literary monoculture, which has been often associated by critics to world literature itself. Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan has drawn attention to “the virulent centrisms that have axiomatized themselves as imperatives and preconditions for the worldling of the world” (1398), resulting in the exclusion of marginalized geographies and cultural spaces from participating in this worldling activity. This kind of centrism can take the shape of an imposed monolingualism—what Jonathan Arac has called “Anglo-globalism”—or of the chronological centrism described by Arjun Appadurai’s as “Eurochronology” (30). In analyzing texts that foreground multiple locations and interlock diverse political histories, my aim is therefore to expand the frame of reference, the spatial and temporal compass, and the forms of cultural expression associated

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8 For an expansion of this concept to Asia and Africa, see Beecroft’s discussion of what he terms “Eurafrasiachronologies.”
with concepts such as modernity, colonialism, neoliberalism, or the very notion of the world. The texts and authors I discuss thus encourage us to rethink how we discuss the contemporary and its aesthetic practices by paying attention both to its multiplicity and to its hierarchies. In this sense, the formal strategies that contemporary novels deploy to articulate a critical consciousness of the world are as varied as the cultural geographies they entangle: if Junot Díaz uses multilingualism to draw attention to histories of migration and to the global reach of colonial modernity, Roberto Bolaño focuses on structural elements in order to illuminate the historical and political connections among Latin America, Europe, and Africa. Other writers, such as Nicola Lagioia and Vivek Shanbhag, demonstrate the importance of discussing a socio-economic phenomenon that has been analyzed mostly in relation to Western societies, i.e., neoliberalism, as a much wider idea that has had particularly devastating consequences in world peripheries and semi-peripheries. Finally, through imaginative cartographies and by referring to the work and symbolic prestige of Nuruddin Farah, Somali-Italian authors (Igiaba Scego, Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, Kaha Mohammed Aden, and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah) articulate new ways of belonging to language and space that are grounded in the acknowledgment of Italy’s colonial past. The array of formal solutions and world views that these text and authors foreground testify to the multiplicity of worlds that contemporary literature produces, but also that a common yet supple spatial framework is best suited to illuminate their interactions.

The most significant merit of the resurgence of world literature as an analytical category and a field of study is that it has provided a common critical ground for scholars working in different linguistic traditions and disciplines, from comparative literature to postcolonial studies, from literary sociology to novel theory. It is precisely in the dialogue among these various approaches and methodologies that the challenges and complexities of
studying the contemporary novel forcefully emerge. My study thus wants to acknowledge such complexity by illuminating different aspects of two fundamental questions: how contemporary works of fiction envision and articulate an idea of the world through relations among geographies, and what these relations can tell us about the social, historical, and economic conditions that have made the contemporary world so unequal. Ultimately, my contention is that the study of aesthetic form can continue to provide us with compelling answers to these questions, and thus foster a critical consciousness of the present.
Chapter 1

Junot Díaz’s Place-Based Imagination and the Scales of World Literature

This is how Dominican-American author Junot Díaz has described the impasse he had to overcome before writing *Drown*, his literary debut, published in 1996: “I still hadn’t mapped out what it meant to be living in central New Jersey. We were one of the first Dominican families in the area and we grew up around a predominantly African-American community, with some poor whites, most of them Irish immigrants. I couldn’t figure out how to scale a family that existed in this really dense Dominican world at home” (Danticat, “Junot Díaz”). One need not be minutely familiar with Díaz to recognize some of his fiction’s central themes: the realist depiction of immigrant communities in New Jersey and New York, the economic hardships of diasporic subjects, the pervasive racial and ethnic tensions in American society, the struggle to define home. What is crucial to note here is that Díaz frames these problems spatially, thus suggesting that mapping and scaling are tactics necessary not only to the articulation of thematic units, but to the very organization of narrative form. If writing is inseparable from locating, we should pay close attention to dynamics of space and scale production that undergird contemporary texts. Doing so can change how we analyze and discuss world literature, and raise decisive questions about the location of the contemporary novel.

This chapter aims primarily to rethink Díaz’s position in contemporary literary studies in two directions: first, in relation to dynamics of canonization involving authors whose perceived locality motivates global recognition. And consequently, by analyzing the narrative strategies he deploys to prevent his fiction from being deterministically attached to a single locale, as well as from being read in reductively dichotomic terms. Díaz’s insistent
evocation of Dominicanness within the context of the United States has been used as the central paradigm for interpreting his writing, following a critically established model based on spatio-cultural or linguistic binaries (American-Dominican; native-migrant; English-Spanish). This has led scholars to focus on how his work can challenge representational regimes and discursive practices premised on different forms of exclusion—racial, economic, or gender-based. However, what critics have not properly addressed is the significance of his fiction for theories of contemporary world literature. In order to redress this shortcoming, this chapter proposes a different spatial and formal approach to Díaz’s texts by attending to the transitions among scales of representation defining his narrative universe, and by offering a close analysis of how his fiction articulates in complex and original ways the relation between location, literary form, and history.

If we shift the focus to the question of how texts produce and interlock multiple scales, debates that seem to require categorical answers will look less absolute. I am thinking here at how, in the last two decades of scholarship on world literature, pressures to declare one’s allegiance to practices of close or distant reading have obscured the much more nuanced ways in which the very texts being analyzed mobilize flexible scalar configurations. Aiming to move beyond this hackneyed controversy, this chapter proposes closeness (to the text and to its formal dynamics) as a methodological premise that is not incompatible—in fact, conducive to—the articulation of a distant, or better, systemic perspective. As I engage in a close reading of Díaz’s texts, I also show that scaling up to wider frameworks is the only interpretive gesture that can account for the global political histories that his fiction unceasingly foregrounds, as well as for the disparate literary and formal repertoires it mobilizes. Ultimately, my contention is that, rather than viewing closeness and distance as

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9 See in particular the comprehensive collection of essays *Junot Díaz and the Decolonial Imagination* (2016).
mutually exclusive approaches, it would be more fruitful to examine how contemporary fiction is itself involved in the production of the spatial frameworks necessary to analyze it.

In the most immediate sense, Díaz’s texts belong to world literature (world being the widest scale imaginable) because they circulate globally. But most decisively, they do because their main interpretative horizon is the modern world-system—an historically specific configuration structured around economic inequalities and racial hierarchization. If we had to pinpoint the spatio-temporal origin of this kind of historical imagination, it would coincide with the inception of colonial modernity in 1492—as the prologue of The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2008) makes explicit. On the one hand, Díaz’s fiction can be most productively approached through the conceptual category of the world because it is self-consciously aimed at heterogeneous audiences, because it mobilizes multiple literary geographies, and because it gives form to capitalist modernity and its longue durée history. At the same time however, this global perspective is complemented by a peculiar attention to the places in which the effects of world-historical forces are experienced. It is then through the constant movements from the world to smaller scales that Díaz is engaged in redefining the vexed opposition between the global and the local, together with the symbolic connotation of this binary. Indeed, Díaz’s fiction does not celebrate locality as a cultural bastion of authenticity against a homogenizing globality—as regionalist literature would do—nor does it propose a compromise through a third, hybrid term, such as glocality, which, despite its stress on the co-presence of global and local determinants in the

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10 This is the hypothesis advanced by the Warwick Research Collective against theories of world literature that underestimate its material foundations in a global system of economic unevenness. For an agile recapitulation of the key tenets of world-systems theory, see Wallerstein. For a comprehensive discussion of the intersection between world-systems theory and literary scholarship, see also Palumbo-Liu, Robbins & Tanoukhii.

11 In Wendy Griswold’s analysis of regionalist literature, the urban agent represents the threat to the local lifestyle and values (21). As worldwide processes of economic and cultural integration accelerate, the menace of a culturally flattening globalization has been portrayed as both more dangerous and more abstract.
production of social spaces, postulates a local that is spatially circumscribable and culturally homogeneous. In Díaz’s writings, the local is not only stratified in terms of economic status, cultural or linguistic belonging, and racial hierarchization, but it also gets inscribed in multiple sites whose boundaries and scales are continuously reshaped. This means that locality can be associated to various affective microgeographies: from the housing complex in which Yunior, the omnipresent narrator, grows up, to the network of small towns in New Jersey that all the characters navigate. In other instances, the local is mapped onto intermediate scales, such as the cultural and linguistic space of the Dominican Republic, or the economically uneven metropolitan area around New York City. In this way, Díaz articulates a complex spatial imagination that encourages us to approach spatial movements and scale production as crucial narrative tactics, aimed at articulating the intersections and conflicts among different linguistic and cultural geographies. In so doing, Díaz offers a third option for contemporary fiction that rejects cultural nativism without falling into abstract non-belonging. In the concluding section of this chapter, drawing on recent theorizations of world literature, I suggest that Díaz’s imagination is place-based but not place-bound, being rooted into specific locales of variable size, yet not deterministically attached to them. On the one hand, rejecting place-boundedness means contesting the organic correlation among locality, monolingualism, and cultural homogeneity: Díaz’s local is always multilingual, culturally stratified, and economically uneven. On the other hand, the articulation of place-basedness starts from the premise that a deep entrenchment into place is essential for grasping historical and political processes that extend—geographically—to the world, and—temporally—to the beginning of modernity.

Perhaps counterintuitively, it is precisely this kind of site specificity and local groundedness that allows for the transition to broader scale of analysis. As Matthew Hart
and David Alworth have remarked, “[just] as, in the Marxian analytic, the commodity congeals labor, so too do sites congeal social and political narratives of various kinds” (488).

And the narratives congealed in Díaz’s multiple sites, while being structured around geographical and cultural specificities, function as hinges that open the text and its imaginative universe to the global forces and political histories of the world-system. In this sense, Díaz’s fiction frames globality not as a conceptual abstraction or an aesthetic escape, for the contradictions of the global always get subsumed in the narrative organization of the local. To put it more specifically, globality comes to be identified with the planetary system of capital accumulation that has produced economic peripheries, compartmentalized societies along race, and engendered massive migrations towards core areas—in other words, a totality of functions and determinants that are concretely experienced in multiple, interconnected locales, and whose relentless reproduction of unevenness refuses to be resolved through an aesthetic compromise. Crucially, the process whereby this global system gets mediated and made visible in its localized effects is novelistic form giving. In this way, Diaz’s fiction demonstrates not only that the novel form remains the most adequate medium to register the longue durée history of the capitalist world-system, but that it also cannot but do it through a multilayered configuration of spatiality, particularly when it adopts a peripheral perspective. Ultimately, this chapter aims to show that, if we want to navigate the formal complexities of world literature, we need to start from redefining how contemporary works of fiction construct location, so as to devise interpretative practices attentive to their spatial dynamics and scalar flexibility.

Redefining the Binary Global/Local
The entanglements between place-basedness and global scope emerge immediately when we look at Díaz’s current position in the North American literary field and at his rising trajectory in the world literary system. All of his fictional works—*Drown* (1996), *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012)—have been published by Riverhead Books, a New York publishing house that is part of the Penguin Group. The latter, after merging in 2013 with Random House, has become the major trade book publishers in the world (“Global Publishing”). Díaz’s books belong to the New York-based publishing sector that dominates, both symbolically and economically, the national publishing field. At the same time, their worldwide circulation has been facilitated by the material advantages of being published by a global conglomerate that can guarantee access to international channels of promotion and distribution. As for his institutional affiliations, Díaz holds an MFA degree from Cornell University, has founded the “Voice of Our Nation” writing workshop, and has taught, since 2002, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. If we add to this brief profile the McArthur Fellowship he received in 2012 and the Pulitzer Prize he was awarded in 2008 for *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, it seems fair to argue that the institutional and publishing geographies in which he is located are primarily North American, and that his symbolic and material recognition has depended on localized, nation-specific dynamics of consecration.

At the same time, his explicit invocations of multiple readerships open his texts to networks of circulation and reception in the world literary system. Consider the prologue to *Oscar Wao*, where he envisions a reader “who missed [the] mandatory two seconds of Dominican history” (2). This is the same imagined reader that, as he reiterates in a chapter section unambiguously titled “A NOTE FROM YOUR AUTHOR,” expects him to be “writing Suburban Tropical” (284). Yet, two pages later the “you” becomes someone who
has lived “as long as [Yunior] did in the heart of fukú country” (5), that is, the Dominican Republic. Similarly, in the opening story of This Is How You Lose Her, Yunior addresses himself, first, to an audience that ignores the social and political reality of the Dominican Republic, and then to a “you” that is highly conscious of it and would presumably refuse to participate in forms of neocolonial tourism.\(^\text{12}\)

The contradictory oscillation between a cognizant and an ignorant reader, between one that knows Spanish and the history of the Dominican Republic and one that consumes literary objects as anthropological souvenirs has two major objectives. First, it is a way of creating and legitimizing an authorial figure in relation to an envisioned readership, what Sarah Brouillette calls a “defensive [construction] of figures of reading that are by turns self-exempting or self-implicating” (27). This is a form of “strategic exoticism” that establishes an ideological affinity between author and readers, both aware and trying to come to terms with the demands of their “touristic conscience” (43).\(^\text{13}\)

By strategically evoking incongruous readerships, Díaz uncouples his writing from the requirements of cultural authenticity prescribed to “ethnic” literature and anticipates the trajectory of his texts in the global literary marketplace. At the same time, he makes it impossible to determine whether the readerships he is constructing are regional or national, transnational or metropolitan, as well as complicating their criteria of identification.

As for Díaz’s global circulation in the world literary market, the seventeen languages in which his novels and short stories have been translated seem a good indication of his

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\(^\text{12}\) The two passages I am referring to are: “You’ll have to take my word for it. Santo Domingo is Santo Domingo. Let’s pretend we all know what goes on there” (10), which implies that the reader does not know it. Later on, while describing the heterotopic space of a tourist resort on the Dominican coast, Yunior claims: “Let’s just say that my abuelo has never been here, and neither has yours” (14). From now on, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao will be referred to as Oscar Wao.

\(^\text{13}\) The concept of strategic exoticism was first introduced by Graham Huggan in The Postcolonial Exotic. Sarah Brouillette adopts it with some crucial revisions (16-26).
global visibility. In this case too, his position oscillates between local groundedness and international circulation. This might seem perfectly consistent with James English’s analysis of the dynamics of recognition involving writers whose perceived locality facilitates global recognition. And yet, Díaz proves to be less easily approachable from this dichotomous paradigm. In the last chapter of The Economy of Prestige, English discusses a crucial “ambiguity” arising from “a conscious strategy aimed at honoring writers of world literature who could nonetheless and simultaneously be identified with local roots or site of production, and indeed whose place within world literature was a function of their particular relation to those local roots” (303, italics in original). English is here analyzing a general model according to which symbolic capital is generated on the international stage through a dialectic between local attachment and global success. This model generally works for texts that clearly circumscribe locality. But what happens when the scale of the local cannot be unequivocally determined? In Díaz’s fiction, should locality be mapped onto a nation, the Dominican Republic? Or does it coincide with its capital city, Santo Domingo? Or with the hyper-local of the campo and the barrio, where several characters spend their youth? Would it be more accurate to associate the local to the regional geography of New Jersey, which Díaz constantly evokes? Or with the confined space of London Terrace, the affectively charged space that represents the new American “home?” Whether Díaz’s global circulation depends on one of these scales, which encompass urban, regional, and national configurations, would be difficult to assess. And this is because his fiction calls for reading and interpretative practices that take into account these variations and divergent attachments. To postulate a fixed dialectic between a single locale and the world would mean ignoring the ways in which

14 The list of foreign editions of Díaz’s text is reported in his website: junotdiaz.com/books-and-translations/.
Díaz mobilizes overlapping and conflicting spaces, transitions across scales of representation and meaning-production, and entrenches the global into multiple locales.

**Diegetic Geographies and Extra-Diegetic Connections**

If one wanted to pinpoint the locations of Díaz’s diegetic universe, the most immediate gesture would be to look at where his texts are set. In *Drown*, three of the ten stories take place in Santo Domingo and its surroundings (“Ysrael,” “Aguantando,” and “No Face”), six in New Jersey and New York (“Fiesta, 1980,” “Aurora,” “Drown,” “Boyfriend,” “Edison, New Jersey,” and “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie”) and one, “Negocios,” in Santo Domingo, Miami, and New York, since it traces the narrator’s father emigration to the United States. *This Is How You Lose Her* seems instead more U.S.-centered, for only the first of the nine stories contained in the collection is set in the Dominican Republic (“The Sun, the Moon, the Star”). All the others are specifically tied to a New Jersey geography (except for the last one, “The Cheater’s Guide to Love,” set in Boston). A single correlation story-location is inconceivable for *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, in which Díaz constructs a narrative world where the Dominican Republic and the United States are relentlessly connected by the migrating trajectories of all the major characters (Oscar, Belicia, Lola, and Yunior).

But what can this brief recapitulation illustrate about the geography of Díaz’s fictional world, except for the rather conspicuous fact that his texts portray more than one place? In order to begin answering this question, we need to look at the formal strategies through which Díaz creates a relational space in which locations are mutually constitutive: the United States and the Dominican Republic, and all the other larger and smaller spaces he...
evokes, cannot in fact be thought in isolation, since they form an entangled narrative totality, as well as a geopolitically cohesive system that has emerged from a shared history.

Before delving into Díaz’s diegetic geographies, however, a methodological clarification is necessary: the sense of systematicity that structures Díaz’s narrative project make his texts, despite differences in genre and time of composition, a coherent whole (coherent in being riddled with contradictions articulated through space) that stems from the same impulse of spatial and narrative consistency. I will therefore approach his oeuvre as such, contrary to the tendency in recent scholarship that separates his short stories from The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao in a kind of developmental narrative, according to which formal strategies and thematic nuclei are fully realized only in the Pulitzer-winning novel that has consecrated him.¹⁵ This stadial approach is problematic because, first, Díaz has not stopped writing short stories while he was laboriously composing Oscar Wao, and, most important, because the seed of what would have become his first novel was first published as a short story in 2000.¹⁶

Inhabiting the world of Díaz’s fiction means navigating the spatial expanse of the locales he portrays so as to register their global integration under a shared and uneven modernity. Díaz thus envisions his fictional world as a deeply interrelated system, spatially and temporally expansive. Formally, this system is kept together by a specific narrative choice he made at the beginning of his writing career: devising a fictional persona and

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¹⁵ Maria Lauret, analyzing Díaz’s multilingualism, argues that, whereas in Drown Díaz uses Spanish “ethnographically” (499) and in This Is How You Lose Her he accommodates the monolingual reader, it is only with The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao that Díaz radicalizes his “translingualism.” Elena Machado Sáez, too, sees Díaz’s writing trajectory as stadial. Comparing Drown and The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, she writes: “the relationship between the resident and immigrant diasporic communities therefore goes from one of egalitarian marginalization in Drown to a hierarchical power structure of dictatorship in Oscar Wao” (533).

¹⁶ Furthermore, This Is How You Lose Her, published in 2012, contains stories that were written and published both during (for instance, “The Sun, the Moon, the Stars” first published in 1998) and after (“Miss Lora” in 2012) the eleven years it took Díaz to complete Oscar Wao. See Díaz’s interview with Olga Segura. For a detailed chronology, see Christopher Gonzalez’s Reading Junot Díaz.
narratorial authority, Yunior, whose recurrence guarantees the coherence necessary to move from the personal stories involving the narrator and the network of characters gravitating around him, to the political histories of the places they traverse. The single narrator fulfills—formally—two crucial functions: first, it entangles the personal to the systemic, thus blurring the boundaries between a narrative space that is presumably private, if not monologically despotic, and the global system of modernity that unceasingly encroaches into it. Secondly, it transposes on the level of character organization a recurring structure through which Díaz emplots globality into marginal narrative spaces. Yunior is therefore crucial for Díaz’s articulation of place-basedness, as he formally operates according to the same logic of entrenchment and planetary outlook, diegetic groundedness and geographic expansiveness.

Structurally, Yunior can be viewed as a centripetal force, which always draws back to the Yunior-centered saga every narrative thread that could potentially disrupt it. Of the nineteen short stories of Drown and This Is How You Lose Her, only in three he is not the homodiegetic narrator. In “Aurora,” an episodic recollection of a troubled relation between a drug dealer, Lucero, and his heroin-addicted girlfriend, the first-person narrator is Lucero, and Yunior does not appear. The last story, titled “No Face,” is narrated from a third-person omniscient perspective (an hapax in Díaz), and is focalized on Ysrael, a young Dominican kid who was disfigured by a pig. Although Yunior is not present, both stories are brought back into his narrative sphere: Lucero is mentioned in the titular story of the collection as Yunior’s homologue in their neighborhood drug dealing activities: Yunior sells “dope,” Lucero crack (Drown 93). Similarly, Ysrael had already appeared in the opening story (“No Face”) as the victim of Yunior and his brother Rafa’s cruelty. Finally, the other story in

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17 For a discussion of centripetal and centrifugal narrative elements that work together in the consolidation of a particularly expansive type of contemporary novels, which Stefano Ercolino calls “maximalist,” The Maximalist Novel, pp. xv-xvi.
which Yunior does not appear, “Otravida, Otravez” (contained in *This is How You Lose Her*) is narrated by Yasmin, who is Yunior’s father girlfriend. This is to say that, despite rare discontinuities in narrative voice and form, we always remain within Yunior’s imaginative and social domain, to the point that Díaz himself has declared that all of the stories he wrote, even those in which Yunior does not appear, should be read as emanating from a unique, albeit unreliable, voice.  

In *Oscar Wao* too, Díaz employs a single narrative authority to orchestrate a complex and intertwined fictional world. Here the multigenerational history of three families—the Cabral, the de León, and the de Las Casas—is mediated by Yunior’s writing “I.” As Elena Machado Sáez has rightly noticed, “the novel appears to have a polyvocal structure, but Yunior is the individual consciousness filtering the narrative of other characters, regardless of whether they are in first, second, or third person” (528). This is why Sáez calls for a reconsideration of Yunior’s narratorial and ideological force, more akin to the oppressive monologism of dictators than to diasporic polyphony. This common misunderstanding, Sáez continues, is due to “the dangerous lure” (552) of the novel’s happy ending, in which Oscar’s sexual realization partially shadows Yunior’s narrative authoritarianism. This seems right; yet, more than the ending, the determining cause for the novel’s monologism masked as polyphony is peculiarly formal, and has to do with Díaz’s subtle structuring of the novel’s

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18 This is what Díaz told Hilton Als in this regard: “One of the things about Yunior is that he loves to destabilize a reader’s sense of who he is and who his family is, and he loves breaking up any kind of authoritative narrative about his family or himself. So he will actually tell different versions of a story. In my first book, *Drown*, you have a version of the story, where his father abandons the family, and goes and lives in the United States, a story called “Negocios.” This is a second iteration of the story, told from the point of view of the woman whom his father almost leaves the family for. He keeps the father’s name, but changes everything around, because this way it’s hard to tell which story is true. Yunior is so not about truth.” (“Junot Diaz & Hilton Als”)

19 For an opposite argument according to which Díaz, by invoking different genres, counteracts “the conformity and univocality insisted upon by the national power structure” (500), see Monica Hanna’s “Reassembling the Fragments.”
“character-system,” in which the “character-space” occupied by Yunior is inconsistent with his ideological function.20 Whereas the narrative space allotted to him is not substantial (he is indeed a minor character compared to Oscar, as the title already suggests), Yunior never stops controlling the discursive space. His quasi-dictatorial centrality is confirmed by the fact that, at the end of the novel he succeeds in “reinstating the very standards of masculinity and Dominicanness that alienate Oscar and himself” (Sáez 527). In other words, Díaz constructs a narrative space that is superficially polyvocal: Yunior is kept obliquely in the background while the narrative is focalized on other characters, and yet, he is never deprived of his monologic authority.21

By centering his fictional world on Yunior, Díaz warns against the dangers of authoritative single-voicedness, while constructing a narrative geography that, in coalescing around a single character, operates on two concomitant movements of contraction and expansion. Readers are thus asked to move seamlessly from the fictional space gravitating around the narrator and back, from the mediating voice of Yunior to the external world. This double movement is rendered explicit in Oscar Wao through the use of metalepsis, that is to say, by drawing attention to the fictional nature of the narrative.22 Usually through footnotes, Yunior adds information, qualifies or contradicts what he had said before, or

20 In using “character-system” and “character-space,” I am employing a vocabulary Alex Woloch takes from formalist analysis (via Bakhtin) to explore the dynamics that govern the discursive space of the novel, premised on the distribution of attention that differentiates between major and minor characters, and determines the reader’s perception of their relevance. See Woloch, The One and the Many, pp. 12-42.

21 Jennifer Harford Vargas, who also employs Woloch’s categories, reaches the opposite conclusion, and argues that Yunior’s mode of narration is “counter-dictatorial” (209), since it makes (discursive) space for marginalized characters. Yunior, being conscious of his own authority, Vargas continues, uses it to “dictate without dictating” (220). In order to propose this kind of argument, however, Vargas has to transform Yunior into an inert narrative vehicle of other characters’ stories. In doing so, she underestimates his discursive weight and ideological function, which is anything but counter-dictatorial.

22 In Gérard Genette’s canonical definition, metalepsis is “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse” (The Narrative Discourse 234).
plays with the reader’s expectation. This traditionally postmodern strategy, canonically interpreted as a reminder of the contingency and relativity of any narration, is instead employed by Díaz to make visible the movements from the diegetic to the extra-diegetic space; yet not with a ludic or self-referential intent, but in order to stress the entanglements between the fictive, the personal, and the historical. In this sense, Yunior’s metafictional interruptions belong to Díaz’s larger narrative project that, as Ramón Saldívar has argued, “[performs] the critical work of symbolic action, denoting the public work of the private imagination” (“Historical Fantasy” 595). It is thus impossible to separate the private dimension—formally tied to Yunior’s authoritative monologism—from its social significance and worldly connections. Indeed, one is never sure when autofiction stops and history begins.

This integration is articulated, in all of Díaz’s works, in peculiarly spatial terms, that is to say, through the juxtaposition of personal histories and global forces that are experienced in localized settings of variable amplitude. In the very first story of Drown (“Ysrael”), Yunior recounts a summer in the Dominican Republic, when “Mami shipped [him] and Rafa to the campo” (Drown 3), that is, the economically and infrastructurally destitute countryside, a space Díaz describes in Oscar Wao in these terms: “the urban dropped off, as precipitous as a beat, one second you were deep in the twentieth century (well, the twentieth century of the Third World) and the next you’d find yourself plunged 180 years into rolling fields of cane.”

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23 Here is what Yunior writes in a footnote about a club in Santo Domingo: “A favourite hangout of Trujillo’s, my mother tells me when the manuscript is almost complete” (114). In another one he informs the reader that his “girl Leonie, resident expert in all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa” (132), and that this prompted him to substitute Jarabacoa with an actual seaside town, Samaná. See also the passage I have already mentioned in which he warns: “I know what Negroes are going to say. Look, he’s writing Suburban Tropical” (284).

24 When asked to explain how his “personal experience and history [fits] into [his] fictional cosmos,” Díaz replied quite categorically: “I never understood history without making it personal” (“Fiction is the Poor Man’s Cinema” 905).
The layering of worlds is here framed as a systemic interdependence of different spaces: the world of the “twentieth century;” the periphery of the world-system that Díaz self-consciously calls the “Third World” and that belongs to the same uneven modernity; and the fields of cane, which are the historical residuum of a plantation system through which the wealth of the “First World” has been accumulated. Within the limits of a single sentence, Díaz condenses centuries of world history. Moreover, he does so through spatial linking, first, within the diegetic universe through Yunior’s movements, and then by connecting the fictional universe to its historical, extra-diegetic referents.

Díaz’s writing is thus founded on a localized imagination that simultaneously looks inward to local dynamics, and outward to an overdetermining globalized space. Locality, intimacy, and expansive totality constantly converge. In “Ysrael,” for instance, although we are not told how old Yunior is at that time, we can infer he is younger than nine, since, as he writes in “Aguantando,” he is taken to New Jersey at that age. Yet, the looming presence of the United States is perceivable even before he migrates there, within in the highly local space of the campo. Here Yunior learns that the kite Ysrael is flying “had been manufactured abroad” and purchased in “Nueva York.” Upon hearing the name of a city that is central to his imaginative horizon—as a distant space of affective investment—Yunior exclaims: “No shit! Our father’s there too!” (Drown 16). In this brief and marginal scene, which occupies only a few lines in the story, Díaz points to the system of free circulation of commodities (symbolized by Ysrael’s kite), as well as to the restricted circulation of people: his father is in New York, while Yunior, his brother and his mother are waiting for him to come to the

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23 This is the opening sentence of “Aguantando:” “I lived without a father for the first nine years of my life.” (69) Díaz, on the other hand, moved to the US when he was seven. This major incongruence confirms that Yunior De las Casas’s narrative status as a fictional alter ego, not perfectly juxtaposable to Junot Díaz, who has stressed in various interviews that the ambiguity is purposeful.
Dominican Republic and take them to the United States. The presence of an overdetermining total system is perceivable in Yuniór’s familial space as well as in his social environment.\footnote{Another example of systemic-personal enmeshment, from the same story, involves Yuniór mentioning in passing his uncle’s obsession with “Proxyl Feed 9” (15) a “supergrain” for cattle recently introduced in Ocoa, most likely from the United States.} It is even more significant that this happens in a locale that has supposedly not yet experienced “twentieth century” modernity.\footnote{For a throughout analysis of how cultural and socio-economic differences are mapped onto space in \textit{Drown}, see Ylce Irizarry, “This is How You Lose It.”} What Díaz is suggesting here is that there is no place or private space untouched by world-systemic forces.\footnote{It might be argued that I am here claiming the opposite of what Yuniór himself believes; in a footnote, the narrator explains that “modernity indeed has its limits in Santo Domingo,” past “the city limits, where the streetlights end” (154). However, the lack of visible signs of infrastructural and technological development does not mean that those areas—apparently outside modernity—are not participating in it. They are on the contrary necessary to the production of global wealth, which is then unevenly distributed, as the absence of streetlights indicates.} Furthermore, he does so through the condensation of networks of unequal circulation in a space that remains narratively and geographically confined. This concurrent movement of contraction and expansion therefore operates on different planes: from Yuniór’s singular narrative perspective to the voices he filters and remediates, from the diegesis to the world, and from the localized spaces he traverses to the system of globality that overdetermines them. Whether it is the campo, the New Jersey barrio where Yuniór moves, or Santo Domingo, described as “a cosmology of battered cars, battered motorcycles, battered trucks, and battered buses” (\textit{This Is How You Lose Her} 9), the narrative construction of the local always subsumes the contradictions of the global.

We can think of this formal option in terms of what Hector Hoyos, in a recent study on “the global Latin American novel,” has described as the logic of \textit{multum in parvo} (\textit{Beyond Bolaño} 2), that is to say, the narrative emplotment of globality. The expression is taken from a short story by Borges, in which the protagonist discovers the Aleph, “the place where,
without admixture or confusion, all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist” (Borges, qtd. in Hoyos 2). Hoyos interprets this imaginary space that can contain the entire world as the idea, “carried to its final logical consequences” (2), that the very small can contain the very large. This conceptualization of the Aleph as a way of narrativizing globality powerfully illuminates the formal features of Díaz’s fiction. Yet, with one important caveat: if the mechanism of much in little is, in Hoyos’ discussion, the structuring principle of the novel, understood as a cohesive unit of analysis, Díaz further reduces the scale within which this logic can be narratively productive. That is to say, the structure of multum in parvo functions at level of the smallest narrative unit, the word.

This is a brief passage from “Nilda,” the second story of This Is How You Lose Her. Rafa, Yunior’s brother, has just broken up with his latest girlfriend, Nilda. Díaz writes: “A week later he was seeing some other girl. She was from Trinidad, a cocoa pañol, and she had this phony-as-hell English accent” (39). One immediately notices the hallmark of Díaz’s style, that is, the seamless insertion of non-italicized Spanish words into English.29 Differently from other passages in which the unintelligibility of the Spanish to the monolingual reader is meant to signal the interruption of transparent communication, in this case the expression “cocoa pañol” might be easily overlooked. Confined within two commas, it is syntactically marginalized in the sentence, a piece of information given in passing. Yet, it is precisely in these marginal spaces of the discourse that the multum inheres in the parvo. According to the Dictionary of the English/Creole of Trinidad & Tobago, a cocoa panyol (also cocoa payol, or cocoa paynol) is “a person of Spanish Venezuelan descent living or working

29 This is how Díaz has explained this highly conscious choice: “…allowing the Spanish to exist in my text without the benefit of italics or quotation marks was a very important political move. Spanish is not a minority language. Not in this hemisphere, not in the United States, not in the world inside my head. So why treat it like one? Why ‘other’ it? Why denormalize it?” (Céspedes 904). For a technical discussion of Díaz’s multilingual ingenuity, see Casielle-Suárez’s “Radical Code-switching.”
in the cocoa-producing area of Trinidad.” *Cocoa panyols* were mixed-race laborers (with Spanish, African, and Amerindian blood). Moreover, the term is still used derogatorily in the Caribbean, “in much the same way as ‘nigger’ or ‘coolie’” (225). As strata of colonial histories intersecting in the Caribbean accumulate, “cocoa pañyol” condenses multiple geographies, regional and transoceanic migrations, colonial and contemporary forms of oppression. It is also striking that the spelling reported by the dictionary is different from Díaz’s, who hispanicizes the word *panyol* by substituting the “n” with the Spanish “eñe” (“pañyol”). In the transference from the linguistic and cultural space of the English-based Trinidadian creole to the idiolect of the Dominican-born, Jersey-raised narrator, yet another layer is added to the word: the historical and geographical scale further expands from the Caribbean archipelago to include more recent histories of migration (from the Caribbean to the US), as well as another linguistic remediation (from English to Spanish). In doing so, Díaz traverses the linguistic spaces of Trinidadian creole and Dominican Spanish to contest the boundaries of American English, and to suggest the systemic interdependence of seemingly disparate linguistic and cultural geographies.

The insertion of “cocoa pañyol,” however, does not prevent the reader from grasping the overall meaning of the passage, in which Yunior voices his criticism for social distinction through linguistic posturing—the “phony-as-hell English accent” of the Trinidadian girl. It is then true that comprehensibility, despite the unexplained syntagm, is not completely thwarted here.\(^{30}\) In this sense, Díaz hides, in plain sight as it were, the structure of *multum in parvo* that the reader can disentangle, but does not have to, as one of

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\(^{30}\) Silvio Torres-Saillant claims that the ignorance of geographical and cultural references does not impede a deep reader’s investment. This kind of reader’s investment seems not to be impaired by the insertion of Spanish either. Although Torres-Saillant analysis is not exactly reliable in terms of statistics, based as it is his personal experience of teaching Díaz, it seems right that “the uniquely auspicious sort of reception accorded to *Drown* by reviewers and critics” (“Artistry, Ancestry” 131) indicates a successful communication author-reader, at least superficially.
the potential interpretative paths. By withholding how the word and the world get
inextricably interlocked, Díaz thus practices a sort of explanatory economy reminiscent of
the “scrupulous meanness” James Joyce declared to have aspired to while writing Dubliners.  
However, whereas Joyce’s dense realism was meant to produce a moral effect through
allusiveness and symbolism, and despite having recognized historical and political affinities
with the Irish modernist, Díaz has a different aim: rather than rehearsing Joyce’s austere
moralism, his parsimony of explanation and stylistic stinginess are used to instantiate,
formally, the structuring principle of much in little, where the much is purposefully retained.
Furthermore, this passage suggests, it is in the narratively marginal, in what might be
ignored, that historical depth and geographic expansiveness are concealed.

Single narrator and tactical marginalization are thus narrative strategies Díaz employs
not only to draw attention to dynamics of discursive exclusion, but also as a way of
registering the place-basedness and localized impact of planetary forces. “Cocoa pañyol” (the
little) is locatable in several linguistic spaces and is equally ungraspable outside the
framework of capitalist modernity (the much). Both in the monologic domain of Yunior’s
narration and in a marginalized expression uttered in passing, the principle of much in little
condenses long processes of systemic integration, the interactions among disparate spaces,
and their hierarchical structuring. Furthermore, Díaz’s creative use of these strategies, in

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31 This is the notorious self-exegetical passage: “My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my
country, and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis. I have tried to
present it to the indifferent public under four of its aspects: childhood, adolescence, maturity, and public life.
The stories are arranged in this order. I have written it for the most part in a style of scrupulous meanness and
with the conviction that he is a very bold man who dares to alter in the presentment, still more to deform,
whatever he has seen and heard.” (Selected Letters 83). The connection to Joyce’s scrupulous meanness has also
been noted by David Cowart in Trailing Clouds, 195. For another take on the influence of Joyce’s aesthetics and
politics of self-invention in Oscar Wao, see Joori Joyce Lee, “Invoking Joyce, Avoiding Imitation.”
32 In an interview with Edwidge Danticat, Díaz has declared: “I’m a Joyce fanatic—the Irish have had a
colonial relationship with the English a long, long time and that’s one reason they’re so useful to immigrant
writers of color in the US” (“Junot Díaz”).
throwing into sharp relief the systemic interdependence of multiple locales and linguistic geographies, demonstrates not only that aesthetic form giving is predicated upon the entanglements between spatial movements and historical dynamism, but that these connections become particularly stark at the margins and peripheries of the world (and of the text). As I discuss in the next section, similar intersections between place and cultural or political histories inform Díaz’s mobilization of divergent literary repertoires.

**Shifting Literary Geographies**

Díaz’s linguistic and literary affiliations constitute a complex network of what Francesca Orsini, in an article that discusses multilingual literatures that do not circulate beyond their originating locale, has termed “significant geographies” (“The Multilingual Local” 346). Although Díaz’s books do circulate in the contemporary literary system, Orsini’s model, in which multilingualism is analyzed within a system of real and imaginary connections to places, languages, and institutions, can illuminate in quite productive ways Díaz’s formal strategies and their purpose. Indeed, multilingualism, one of the most distinctive traits of his prose, rather than simply being the mimetic representation of a particular vernacular, is a way of formally registering the frictions among different languages, genres, and literary spaces.

On the one hand, the insertion of a hispanicized expression from the English-based Trinidadian creole into American English allows Díaz to point to a historically and geographically expansive system of migrations and socio-linguistic contacts that get condensed in a marginal narrative passage. On the other, the constellation of connections that “cocoa pañyol” unravels is accessible only to a limited group of readers, who can grasp the wanderings of the word across geographies and languages without the exegetical and
etymological research I had to undertake. Díaz’s parsimony of explanation, together with the impossibility for the monolingual reader to access untranslated Spanish words (canonically, this would be done through a glossary), have been interpreted by critics as purposeful strategies of exclusion. Marie Lauret claims that “cultural outsiders like [her] should (presumably) feel affronted by *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*” (507) since the resonance and contextual connotations of Dominican Spanish remain inaccessible. Lauret argues that, consulting dictionaries, or even the collectively compiled *Annotated Guide to the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which is freely accessible online, does not prevent the monolingual reader from feeling (at least partially) estranged from the text. She thus views Díaz’s “translingual aesthetic practice” (508 italics in original) as a language-based interruption of transparent communication. To use Roland Barthes’ categories, these moments of denied intimacy are conscious breaks of the narrative contract, in which the reader is supposed to exchange her attention and time for knowledge, within the economy of desire that governs narration. When the reader’s desire to cognitive and linguistic mastery is frustrated, the narrative pact is broken. Nonetheless—as we have seen in the case of “cocoa pañyol”—these breaches never result in utter incommunicability. On the contrary, Díaz employs them to play with different

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33 The online guide, which can be accessed at annotated-oscar-wao.com, was compiled by a person called “Kim,” with the help of the community of readers who sent her comments and clarifications. For a discussion of how this crowd-sourced, exegetic project began and how it has fostered readerly engagement and “populist multiculturalism,” see Ellen McCracken’s *Paratexts and Performance*, 24-27.

34 In a similar vein, Rune Graulund suggests that Díaz’s “exclusionary strategies” (32), in being alternatively directed to different groups of readers, implement a “politics of inclusion through exclusion”, since they turn “all of his registers into minor discourses” (37). In stressing their democratizing effect, however, Graulund has to presuppose a direct homology between aesthetic strategies and political effects.

35 In Barthes’ famous dissection of Balzac’s novella *Sarrasine*, he writes: “Narrating is the (economic) theory of narration; one does not narrate to ‘amuse,’ to ‘instruct,’ or to satisfy a certain anthropological function of meaning; one narrates in order to obtain by exchanging” (*S/Z* 89). We have seen how the reader’s desire to know fully and transparently is constantly frustrated, but what about the narrator’s object of desire? At the end of the introduction to *Oscar Wao*, Yunior reflects retrospectively on the book he has written. When he finally asks himself if *Oscar Wao* is his “very own counterspell” (7) to the fukú, what he seems to be hoping for is a personal redemption through writing, desiring to be absolved for having failed to save Oscar Wao.
groups of readers’ expectations, and to achieve a partial estrangement—which is first and foremost a form of aesthetic pleasure.

For one thing, Díaz is certainly engaged in the project of “provincializing English,” as Simon Gikandi, paraphrasing Dipesh Chakrabarty, has argued about fiction written in English by postcolonial writers. According to Gikandi, these writers perceive English as the language of colonial oppression, but also as one language among many that, when subjected to “the power of localities” (13), can become a versatile tool of literary expression. Although Díaz was not born in a formal colony, his experience of language acquisition after migrating to the United States, was, in his own words, “a violent enterprise.” Commenting on his idiolect, he explains: “by forcing Spanish back onto English…I’ve tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page” (Céspedes 904). Provincializing English thus means, for Díaz, recognizing its hegemony and at the same time showing its fluidity and impurity. As Gikandi reminds us, it also involves the recognition that “that there are many varieties of English, each with multiple registers” (13), which is what Díaz himself has called “the endless array of vernaculars” (Celayo 13) he had to learn in his youth. Yet, it is important to stress that the coexistence of these vernaculars is not meant to obliterate their different status or to aesthetically transcend their hierarchized perception. Take, for instance, the role of science fiction, fantasy, and comic book culture—what Monica Hanna has defined the “nerd genres” of Oscar Wao (“Reassembling the Fragments”). Díaz has declared that these genres can best capture “the hidden histories and terrible scars of the New World” (Moreno 541), its excessive and hyperreal violence, and are thus central to “what we call ‘America’,” even though, he adds, they “are completely ostracized” (Celayo 15). Yet, by

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36 Wondering about Oscar’s “love of genre,” Yunior speculates: “It might have been a consequence of being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?)” (Oscar Wao 21).
reclaiming their centrality through constant allusions and references throughout *Oscar Wao* (and partially in *This Is How You Lose Her*), Díaz paradoxically throws into sharper relief Oscar’s marginalization as a devotee of these same genres. That is to say, the nerd genres might be literary redeemed but not socially redeeming; indeed, their stigmatization within the sociality portrayed in *Oscar Wao* highlights how aesthetic practice and social or political change do not coincide.

This is even more striking when we consider the discrepancies between Díaz’s linguistic legerdemain, which critics have widely praised, and its meaning and consequences within the discourse of the novel. In the fourth chapter of *Oscar Wao*, Yunior explains the origin of Oscar De León’s nickname. While at Rutgers, one Halloween Oscar unsurprisingly chooses to dress up as one of his science-fiction heroes, Doctor Who; upon seeing him, Yunior comments: “I couldn’t believe how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde, and I told him so.” Oscar’s doom is later sealed by another friend—not versed in British literary history—who wonders “Oscar Wao, quién es Oscar Wao” (180). This scene condenses several aspects of Díaz’s style and objectives: the linguistic coexistence of English and Spanish, which are not simply languages, but cultural and literary geographies unevenly circulating among their speakers; the provincialization of English and its literary mythologies; and, most important, the dissonance between aesthetic effects and discursive implications. The appreciation of Díaz’s linguistic ingenuity should not in fact erase the narrative context in which it is performed. Indeed, this nicknaming scene is first and foremost an act of ideological interpellation through which Oscar’s social milieu sanctions his exclusion as a science-fiction-loving “fat homo.” The reference to a hispanicized Oscar Wilde thus functions simultaneously—and antithetically—in the aesthetic register, where it gratifies the
reader with formal and linguistic inventiveness, and in the discursive space, where it buttresses Oscar’s marginalization.

Through the use of the “nerd genres” and in the relation between English and Spanish, Díaz articulates “significant geographies” that are multilingual and multigeneric but not intrinsically conducive to a level playing field. And even if he has declared that using non-italicized Spanish words to formally equalize English and Spanish “a very important political move” (Céspedes 904) within the Anglophone publishing world, Díaz seems very conscious that processes of socio-linguistic othering do not cease to be effective, as Oscar’s isolation demonstrates. Furthermore, once leveled between Spanish and English, exclusionary practices can get displaced within each language. In fact, just as English possesses a deeply hierarchized set of vernaculars, Spanish too is shown to be internally stratified. In “The Pura Principle,” Rafa’s girlfriend Pura is first described as “guapísima as hell” and “lost in her pulchritude;” this is Díaz’s characteristic mixture of Spanish (“guapísima”), colloquialisms (“as hell”), and poetic register (“pulchritude”). However, Yunior adds: “A total campesina, from the way she held herself down to the way she talked, which was so demotic I couldn’t understand half of what she said—she used words like *deguabinao* and *estribao* on the regular (This Is How You Lose Her 103, italics in original). In this case, the Spanish spoken by Pura *is* italicized, for in the economy of belonging of this story, she is excluded twice: first, as a recent emigrant—a “fresh-off-the-boat-didn’t-have-no-papers Dominican” (102)—and, secondly, as a member of the linguistic and cultural space of the *campo*, which, as we have already seen, is peripheral to the periphery. Language here becomes an index of social hierarchization, which Díaz signals formally through italics, as if to suggest that drawing attention to the variety of vernaculars and registers of Spanish—and not only of English—is also “a very important political move.”
Some of these multilingual and internally layered geographies are purposefully invoked by Díaz in the epigraphs to his texts. Epigraphs, being part of the paratextual materials described by Genette as “thresholds” that surround the text “to make it present, to assure its presence in the world” (Paratexts 1, italics in original), are crucial not only in guiding the reader’s approach to the text, but also in framing the imaginative affiliations of the author to a specific literary repertoire. *Drown* opens with a passage of a poem by the Cuban-American poet and scholar Gustavo Pérez Firmat, with whom Díaz shares the sense of uneasy belonging to English that allows him, as we have seen, to feel both its violence and its appropriability: “My subject: / how to explain to you that I / don’t belong to English / though I belong nowhere else.” In *Oscar Wao*, Díaz immediately makes clear his narrative intent by coupling lowbrow comics culture—with a quotation from the *Fantastic Four*—with a long passage from “The Schooner Flight,” a poem written by the Nobel laureate, Saint Lucian poet Derek Walcott. Finally, through the epigraph of *This Is How You Lose Her*—seven lines from a poem by Sandra Cisneros—Díaz establishes ideological and cultural connections with Chicano literature.

Perhaps less explicitly but equally significantly, several other literary geographies are mobilized. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, as Díaz himself has confirmed, is a reference to Hemingway’s short story “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” (“Conversation”), and arguably also to the *Brevisima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* by Bartolomé de Las Casas (not incidentally, de Las Casas is also Yunior’s last name). *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Dominican-American writer Julia Alvarez is explicitly invoked as a model for the Trujillato novel (83). The same happens with Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The Feast of the
Moreover, just as Oscar Wilde is appropriated and resignified, the same happens with Édouard Glissant, the Martinican theorist of Créolité, whose quoted words coexist—in the same sentence—with “Uatu the Watcher” (92), a character from the Fantastic Four of the epigraph. Díaz’s strong affiliation to Caribbean’s writing is confirmed by his use of footnotes throughout Oscar Wao, a device he borrows from Patrick Chamoiseau’s Texaco, and by the title of a chapter section—“The Condensed Notebook of a Return to a Nativeland” (Oscar Wao 272)—which alludes quite explicitly to Aimé Césaire’s Notebook of a Return to the Native Land. The same cannibalization of the literary repertoire can produce neologisms, as when Yunior says of his girlfriend: “A lot of the time she Bartlebys me, says, No, I’d rather not” (This Is How You Lose Her 7). Other times Díaz reports exact quotations without specifying the source: “a terrible beauty has been born” (Oscar Wao 91, italics in original) is a line from William Butler Yeats poem “Easter, 1916.” Similarly, “The Moronic Inferno” (19) which is how Oscar defines his high school, is a quotation from British novelist Martin Amis, who had in turn borrowed it from Canadian-American writer Saul Bellow.

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37 Díaz considers The Feast of the Goat novel a lumbering precedent, given the prestige of Vargas Llosa, and has voiced his disappointment for the undeserved enthusiasm of Dominican elites about that novel. See his interview with Edwidge Danticat, “Junot Díaz.” For a comparison between the two novels, see Figueroa’s “Disseminating ‘El Chivo’.”

38 Díaz has made clear that, when he wrote the thirty-tree footnotes of Oscar Wao, he was not thinking of “postmodern white-boy gang” who has used this technique. The gang would be composed, according to him, by “Vollmann [sic!] and Danielewski” (Danticat “Junot Díaz”)—that is to say, American writers William T. Volmann and Mark Z. Danielewski—to whom I would add David Foster Wallace. Díaz’s distancing obviously does not prevent a reader familiar with these writers—particularly since the U.S. remains the main market of Díaz’s books—from drawing the connections he seems to be resisting here.

39 Melville is evoked again, in Oscar Wao, when Yunior compares the persistence of Belicia to Captain Ahab’s monomaniacal quest, and the whiteness of her (human) prey to that of the whale: “Beli…set out to track down Jack Pujols with the great deliberation of Ahab after you-know-who. (And of all these things the albino boy was the symbol. Wonder ye then at the fiery hunt?)” (95).

40 And the chain of borrowings goes on. Amis specifies: “I got the phrase ‘the moronic inferno’, and much else, from Saul Bellow, who informs me that he got it from Wyndham Lewis” (The Moronic Inferno x).
This incomplete but indicative list projects Díaz in a linguistic and literary sphere of affiliations that encompasses British, North American and Latin American literatures, Caribbean and diasporic poetics, written in English, Spanish, and French. Yet, just as the textual structures of his fiction opened planetary and systemic perspectives beyond the trans-American hemisphere, the evocation of several other geographies through more or less explicit references further expands Díaz’s literary and cultural affiliations, both spatially and temporally. There is Classic Greek mythology and literature: “Penelope” of the Odyssey and “Elysium” (Oscar Wao 109), the eternal kingdom of Greek heroes; Japanese drama: “Noh” (108), a traditional Japanese musical performance; the Hebrew Bible: the “Whore of Babylon” of the Book of Revelation (109); Christian doctrine: “I will not serve” (103), with its Miltonian and Joycean echoes; Afro-Caribbean spiritualism: “Oyá-souls” (79), a reference to the Yoruba deity Oya; postcolonial Anglophone fiction: Salman “Rushdie” (97); pre-Colombian mythology and history: “caracaracol” (108), a goddess of the Taíno pantheons, the indigenous inhabitants of the Dominican Republic; and “Anacaona” (244), a Taíno chief whose story Díaz chronicles in a long footnote; and a mention of the Nation of Islam’s doctrine: “yacoub” (286), a reference to Yacub, the scientist who is believed to have created the white race.

The extensiveness of this constellation of references, as well as Díaz’s irreverent appropriation of disparate literary, religious, and philosophical traditions, might be interpreted as a self-congratulating pastiche, typical of certain postmodernist aesthetic. However, just as Díaz uses metatextual interpolations to draw attention to the entanglements between Yunior’s narrative and its collective dimension, the evocation of disparate literary

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41 For an analysis of the cult of Oya, from Africa to the Americas, see Gleason’s Oya: In Praise of an African Goddess.
geographies is meant to emphasize the very concrete historical conflicts that have brought them side by side—and that have consequently shaped his position as a writer: references to British and American literary traditions and postcolonial aesthetic narratively recasts Díaz’s own history of migration and North American education; allusions to pre-Columbian cultures and of Afro-Caribbean mysticism give form to intersecting colonial histories in Central and Latin America; and the evocation of multilingual Caribbean aesthetic point to movements—of people, cultures, and poetics—between metropoles and colonies.

This attention to literary-historical connections means also that Díaz’s posture towards the repertoire is not of disengaged detachment and playfulness, but a quite serious attempt to transpose textually that which has been shaped historically. If we can talk about irony in Díaz, it is a type of irony more akin to historical tragedy than social satire. That is to say, an irony that is not simply aimed at commenting, through novelistic discourse, on the polyglossic multiplicity of the social, in a Bakhtinian sense. Rather, Díaz’s stance originates from the consciousness of the weight of history and the inescapability of its legacies: in a novel that tries to exorcise the ghost of Rafael Trujillo and the culture of oppression that has survived him, it is indicative that Oscar’s sister’s last comment is: “Ten million Trujillo is all we are” (Oscar Wao 324). In this sense, as György Lukács has put it, “irony is the objectivity of the novel” (Theory of the Novel 90); yet not, as Lukács Hegelianly believed, because the novel cannot reproduce the organic totality of history, but because it cannot provide an aesthetic solution to its wounds.

42 Díaz also contrasts historical accuracy and a strong moral compass with suspiciousness and over-interpretation, features he attributes to postmodernist thought and considers politically dangerous. While describing the man that will condemn Oscar Wao’s to premature death, a violent police captain who had spent his youth persecuting and killing political activists in the Dominican Republic, Yunior comments: “Also one of those very bad men that not even postmodernism can explain away” (294).
The same dialectic between conscious evocation of the literary tradition and ironic but serious reflection upon the connections between fictional imagination and history is visible in Díaz’s use of fantastic elements in *Oscar Wao*. The mythical-historical force that he introduces at the beginning of the novel—the “*Fukú americano*” (1)—which might have been just a wink to magical realism, is used a narrative linchpin to address the systemic interconnections of modernity, as I will discuss in more detail later. That is to say, it is imagined and narratively experienced as a tangible historical force. Just as he does with the postmodernist cannibalization of the literary repertoire, Díaz grounds magical realism into historical concreteness, both in the sense that the fantastic elements he employs are historical in nature, and because the poetics to which they are associated is itself historicized, by framing it as belonging to a specific cultural space to which Díaz explicitly affiliates himself while obliquely refusing to be ensconced into it.

Díaz evokes the fantastic of magical realism through the fukú and its counterspell—the “*zafa*” (*Oscar Wao* 7), through the recurrence of “an amiable mongoose” with “golden lion eyes” (149), which magically appears and saves Oscar and his mother Belicia, and by concocting a temporal structure that alternates cyclical to linear progression. At the same time he endows these elements with an almost scholarly historical specificity: the fukú the zafa are the understructures for the entire narrative, and connect personal trajectories to planetary forces; the mongoose’s world-systemic historicity is explained in a footnote, in which Yunior details its travel across Africa, Europe, India, and “the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean” (151) and makes it a symbol of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist resistance. Here

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43 As Monica Hanna rightly points out: “the history he relates is cyclical. With echoes of Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* [One Hundred Years of Solitude], successive generations, each ignorant of the history of its ancestors, seem doomed to re-live the violence and evil wrought by the family’s curse” (“Reassembling” 500).
too, Díaz’s seriously ironic tone is consistent with the historical and geopolitical weight he assigns to fantasy. In this sense, it is fair to define Oscar Wao—as Ramón Saldívar has proposed—a “historical fantasy,” which “requires us to read the story of the histories of conquest, colonization, diaspora, and struggle for social justice in the Americas by forging links between the fantasy of the imaginary and the real of history” (“Historical Fantasy” 592). More significantly, however, Díaz’s preoccupation for historicity involves magical realism itself, which is ambiguously evoked and rejected when Yunior, referring to the supernatural properties of the zafa, comments: “It used to be more popular in the old days, bigger, so to speak, in Macondo than McOndo” (7). Here the reference to the polemic against epigonic uses of magical realism is meant to acknowledge his literary debt to this tradition while refusing to be bound to the expectations and unstated requirements associated to it.

For Díaz, going beyond postmodernist and magical realist aesthetic is also a way of drawing attention to his fiction’s relation to the geocultural spaces to which these traditions have been canonically associated. In this respect, Claudia Milian has argued that Oscar Wao “seems ‘weirdly’ out of place in the United States and Latin America” (“Latino/a Deracination” 185), and has attributed its “unhousability” (175) both to intrinsic elements—the portrayal of what she calls “deracinated Latin bodies” (191)—and to extrinsic determinants—critical attempts to include Díaz in the contemporary Latin American canon. Milian is right in arguing for Díaz’s unhousability, yet I would expand Díaz’s affiliations further, beyond Latinness and the trans-American space, within which her discussion remains confined. The absorption and resignification of disparate literary geographies, as well as the insistence on the historical contacts and conflicts that have shaped their interjecting trajectories, cast Díaz’s fiction onto a world dimension. With this I do not mean
to propose that its aim is to encompass and imaginatively grasp—quite unrealistically indeed—the entire world. Rather, the stress is placed on the interconnected histories, both political and literary, that have brought about today’s unequal system of globality, which constitutes the central historical and geopolitical referent of all of Díaz’s works. In this sense, we might qualify Milian’s claim that Díaz’s fiction is unhousable: it is insofar as its proper space is the world, and yet, not abstractedly. As I have suggested before in relation to the articulation of the diegetic space and the formal structures of his texts, Díaz’s “significant geographies,” too, remain deeply entrenched into the literary spaces they have emerged from and traversed. That is to say, they are place-based but not place-bound. By juxtaposing and bringing into dialogue Oscar Wilde and Aimé Césaire, American literature and Antillean poetics, Afro-Caribbean mysticism and Latin American magical realism, Díaz draws attention to the places and ideological spheres to which these literary geographies are attached, to how they have clashed and intertwined in the longue durée of history, and to the ways through which they open the text to the world without drifting into the abstractedness of a non-place where their frictions would be aesthetically solved. Díaz’s shifting housability thus depends on the simultaneous activation of all of these geographies and their interlocked histories rather than on processes of literary and cultural hybridization. Indeed, by approaching Díaz’s texts through the lens of hybridity, one would have to flatten the real and imaginary spaces he evokes into a level playing field that could presumably neutralize their unequal interactions, which Díaz instead places at the core of his narrative project—

44 Díaz himself has acknowledged the literary and cultural geographies he feels indebted to. When asked if he saw himself “partaking of a literary tradition,” he declared: “I have multiple traditions, like anyone else. I’m part of the mainstream ‘American’ literary tradition. I’m a part of the Latino literary tradition. I’m a part of the African Diaspora literary tradition as well as the Dominican literary tradition. But there’s also the oral tradition and the rhythmic tradition of the music I grew up with which deeply influence how I write a sentence and how my work sounds. And then there must be plenty of other traditions I’m a part of which I can’t identify yet” (“Fiction is the Poor Man’s Cinema” 904).
both linguistically, as I have shown, and structurally, by constantly transitioning among different scales of representation.

**Scalar Transitions**

Díaz’s shifting housability raises important questions about the most appropriate scale of analysis needed to grasp world literature’s confines and internal dynamics, and can help us rethink how and within which spatial domains contemporary fiction can be located. It is not my intention here to recapitulate more than a decade of critical debates around Franco Moretti’s proposition of distant reading. To be sure, the grand program of world comparativism he envisioned in 2000 has not gone past its conjectural phase. Nonetheless, his short essay has had the merit of encouraging comparatists to think carefully about the units of analysis they employ; whether one does or does not agree with Moretti when he writes that distance “is a condition of knowledge” (“Conjectures” 57, italics in original), it is today impossible for scholars of world literature to ignore that the choice of any conceptual range or focal amplitude is already a decision about the goals, boundaries, and scope of whichever knowledge one intends to produce. We then must consider very carefully the implications of using particular scales and spatial metaphors for the analysis of literary objects, especially if we want to pursue, in Nirvana Tanoukhi’s words, “a literary phenomenology of the production of scale” (95). This means that, since the scales we choose to approach literary objects are not inert tools of knowledge production, nor mere methodological equipment, it is crucial to understand how we move from texts to broader literary-historical claims about
them. To do so, we might start by looking at how texts themselves are involved in scale-making, and devise interpretative frameworks capable of accounting for continuous shifts among scales of representation. We would then need not choose distance over closeness, the world over the word, or systems over constituents. These are methodological disputes arising from critical positionings that often underestimate the flexibility of the very text they attempt to schematize, as Díaz’s scalar dynamism demonstrates. In this sense, my contention is that only a close analysis of the formal strategies deployed to scale up to wider frameworks can reveal how texts themselves, as “mode[s] of knowing” (Kornbluh 309), generate their own analytical paradigms.

I have suggested that the most pertinent scale to approach Díaz’s diegetic and literary geographies is the world and its systemic consolidation. However, this does not imply the excision of smaller configurations; quite the contrary indeed, for the transitivity among linguistic and cultural spaces is mirrored in the production of variable scales of representation. Consider Oscar Wao, in which, as the bildungsroman of the protagonist unfolds, the focus is narrowed to the regional geography of New Jersey. Oscar Wao, the “GhettoNerd” (Oscar Wao 11) who dreams of becoming an acclaimed writer, grows up in Paterson, a town Díaz did not choose casually, as it evokes the high literary precedent of William Carlos Williams’ Paterson and the deep entanglements between literary expressivity and locality that lie at the core of Williams’ epic, as well as of Díaz’s place-basedness. Yet, the Paterson of Oscar Wao is not the city of rarified beauty sung by Williams; rather, it is part of a larger regional geography, economically uneven and spatially structured along the color

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45 Tanoukhi is rather critical of world comparativism for making a “cartographic claim to scale” (78, italics in original), where by “cartographic” she means a process of abstraction that imposes conceptualizations and categories over a concrete landscape, which progressively disappears from view. Since this concrete landscape is to geographers what the literary object and its contextual determinants are to scholars of literature, what she warns against is the risks of privileging abstract metaphors and laws of literary evolution over the very “process of scale-making” (94) on which these metaphors depend.
line. Díaz’s specificity in circumscribing this space is telling: from Paterson, “roll south and there’d be Newark, Elizabeth, Jersey City, the Oranges, Union City, West New York, Weehawken, Perth Amboy, an urban swath known to niggers everywhere as Negropolis One” (Oscar Wao 26). On the one hand, Paterson belongs to the most economically powerful nation of the contemporary world, which has been the recipient of multiple diasporas, including that of Oscar’s family. On the other, this town is also part of a peri-urban agglomerate, a racially compartmentalized periphery that remains nonetheless internal to a world-dominant core. The double perspective needed to locate this geography produces two conflicting scales that must be kept simultaneously active. In a way, this is a narrative and geographical transference of the same scalar mobility that informs Drown, where the campo on the outskirt of Ocoa and Santo Domingo were first contrasted within a specifically Dominican city-country divide, and then set against “First World” modernity.

But the regional geography of New Jersey shapes the imaginative space of Díaz’s fiction so deeply that it gets emplotted in another short story, in which Yunior is holding a map and trying to guess where he will be delivering pool tables the next day (Drown 139). In portraying this guessing game, Díaz is diegetically replicating the scale-making process that structures his fiction as a whole. Tellingly, the story’s title is “Edison, New Jersey,” whose referential precision does more than simply confirming the dense realism of this narrative.46 First, it produces a stronger veridic, rather than realistic, effect. And second, it stands as an indication, or a symbolic reminder, of the microgeographic specificity needed to navigate this narrative universe. A specificity that becomes more pronounced when we look at the range

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46 In Oscar Wao too, the title of the second chapter, which chronicles Lola’s (Oscar’s sister) escape from Paterson, is the name of a town on the Atlantic coast of New Jersey, “Wildwood” (Oscar Wao 51).
of geographies produced at scales that are smaller than the region or its urban, peri-urban, and suburban components.

In *Oscar Wao*, the “all-boys Catholic” high-school Oscar attends, “Don Bosco Tech” (19), represents the institutional space where he first experiences the social and racial exclusion that will forever haunt him, as “a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto” (22). Oscar has to face the same racially inflected ostracism when he leaves for college. At Rutgers, “white kids [looks] at his black skin and his afro and [treats] him with inhuman cheeriness,” while “kids of color” questions his Dominicanness, which he is unable to perform linguistically or physically (49). By framing these institutional spaces as yet another scale—internal to the regional geography—Díaz draws attention to how processes of social stratification and racial hierarchization operate vertically, by cutting through and producing effects within both large and small spatial configurations. Consider, for instance, the space of family, whose corresponding geographic referent—which recurs throughout Díaz’s short stories—is London Terrace, the residential complex in Parlin, New Jersey, where Yunior grows up. London Terrace, where Díaz himself spent his youth after moving to the United States, is an affectively charged space that is first mentioned in “Negocios,” the last story of *Drown*. While the complex is being built, Yunior’s father Ramón, upon hearing that one of his friend might get him a rent-free apartment and a job there as a superintendent, comments: “Here was the place to move his familia if it came from the Island” (195). Which is what happens, as we learn in another story from *This Is How You Lose Her*, “Invierno.” Here, Yunior explores the traumatic experience of migration and displacement to an unfamiliar space. Whereas London Terrace is, to Ramón, the culmination of his “American Dream,” the tangible symbol of a hard-fought stability and rootedness, in “Invierno”—narrated from the estranged perspective of a young Yunior—the aura of
homeness disappears and is replaced by the grim reality of social and affective alienation.\textsuperscript{47} London Terrace thus becomes a familial microcosm of profound symbolic significance, a space Yunior begins to explore despite his father’s prohibition to leave the apartment—“You’ll go out when I say you’re ready” (127), Ramón commands. Yet, what seems to be confined to the familial dimensions requires the transition to larger frames of analysis, which, once again, entangles the personal to the systemic. After narrating his escape from the apartment and his snowball fights with two kids from the neighborhood, Yunior comments: “In less than a year they would be gone. All the white people would be. All that would be left would be us colored folks” (142). In another story (“Miss Lora”) in which Yunior is recounting a love affair with Miss Lora, a middle-aged woman also living in London Terrace, he notes: “What happens is that in the end she moves away from London Terrace. Prices are going up. The Banglas and the Pakistanis are moving in” (175). Processes affecting the geographical and social structuring of the regional scale are here replicated in the symbolic space of home. If the departure of the white families points to the larger phenomenon of suburbanization of the white American middle class,\textsuperscript{48} the arrival of wealthier groups of immigrants further layers the economic geography of London Terrace and testifies to the dynamism of spatial and socio-economic patterns that progressively stratify immigrant communities.

These continuous transitions from the microgeography of home to the urban communities of New Jersey and from the regional space to the nation require a scalar

\textsuperscript{47} In the other story (“Otravida, Otravez”) in which Yunior reconstructs Ramón’s life in the United States before he is joined by the rest of his family, there is a small but significant variation. Here, Ramón purchases a house, rather than renting it; in the symbolic and affective economy of his bildungsroman, this has an even greater significance. He affirms: “To own a house in this country is to begin to live” (This Is How You Lose Her 71).

\textsuperscript{48} For very useful collections of essays on suburbanization in the United States, see “Suburban Communities,” particularly Part II, which focuses on minorities and immigrant groups, and the essay by Judith J. Friedman (“Suburban Variations”) on the case of New Jersey.
flexibility that makes any attempt to locate Díaz’s fiction within a unique geography an approximation. Is it more pertinent to privilege the hemispheric, trans-American macrocosm linguistically evoked through “cocoa pañyol” and exemplified by Yunior’s migration from the Dominican Republic to the U.S.? Is Díaz an exponent of a New Jersey regional or vernacular culture of Hispanophone immigrants, or should we restrict the focus to the Dominican community? And if we stay within the boundaries of Dominicanness, should we differentiate between the Americanized Yunior and other, supposedly more authentic Dominicans from more recent waves of immigration?

Indeed, Dominicanness cannot be understood as a stable and coherent category, for Díaz purposefully disrupts the presumed homogeneity of the Dominican diaspora. In a story from This Is How You Lose Her, Yunior makes clear that his brother’s girlfriend Pura was “[not] Dominican like my brother or me but Dominican Dominican. As in fresh-off-the-boat-didn’t-have-no-papers Dominican” (This Is How You Lose Her 102 italics in original). If in this case Dominicanness seems to depend on legal status and on having been socialized in the Dominican Republic, in other instances it is mapped onto language. For instance, when Yunior tells a Dominican woman he is dating “If I’m not Dominican then no one is,” she challenges to repeat this in Spanish, and “of course [he] can’t” (This Is How You Lose Her 197). Ultimately, even the heteronormative idea of Dominicanness so insistently performed by Yunior has to recede in front of distinctions that are internal to the diasporic.

Going beyond Dominicanness, Díaz’s narrative universe could be approached from yet another scale, the archipelagic. Indeed, Díaz constantly evokes this geographical and conceptual configuration, both by making specific references to the interlocked histories of the Antillean archipelago and by addressing its multiple diasporas within the national space of the United States. Particularly in the footnotes of Oscar Wao, Díaz expounds upon real
and fictional connections among the Caribbean islands and continental America: he either mentions historical events and figures, or he imaginatively links seemingly unrelated episodes, as when Yunior interprets the Cuban revolution as a nerd revenge against the assassination of the intellectual and political activist Jesús de Galíndez by Trujillo’s henchmen cooperating with CIA agents (*Oscar Wao* 97). This and other intra-Caribbean links get then expanded to Latin and North America, so that the continent becomes inextricable from its archipelagic system. For instance, when Yunior introduces Arquimedes, a student in Santo Domingo in the late fifties, he locates him historically and intellectually within the space of “Latin America whipped into a frenzy”—in a vertiginously rapid sequence—“by the Fall of Arbenz, by the Stoning of Nixon, by the Guerrilla of the Sierra Maestra, by the endless cynical maneuverings of the Yankee Pig Dogs” (*Oscar Wao* 110). In the successive footnote he recounts Trujillo’s attempt to “assassinate the democratically elected president of Venezuela: Rómulo Betancourt!” (110), and then admonishes: “Venezolanos: Don’t even say we don’t have history together” (111).

Borrowing a term from Brian Roberts and Michelle Stephens’s “Introduction” to a recent collection of essays on archipelagic studies, it can be argued that Díaz’s fiction is engaged in “decontinentalizing” the Americas by reframing their position within a transhemispheric space. In this sense, the subjectivities he portrays, when transposed in the regional geography of New Jersey, stand also as reminders of the continent’s archipelagic history.

It should be now clear that Díaz’s narrative universe simultaneously activates and lends itself to be approached from multiple scales: among them, the urban, the regional, and the national; the world-systemic, the hemispheric, and the archipelagic. If the construction of

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49 As for North America, several times Díaz mentions the United States’ first and second occupation of the Dominican Republic, in 1916-1924 and in 1965: in *Drown* (69, 146), *Oscar Wao* (4, 19, 111, 211, 294), and *This Is How You Lose Her* (65).
microgeographies reinforces its attachment to locales that are historically or affectively charged, scaling up to wider frameworks enhances the opposite process of spatial distancing. It is nonetheless crucial to stress that all these critical approaches, based as they are on frameworks that presuppose representational and analytical scales that are either stable or mutually exclusive, can only partially capture the scalar variability that is so central in Díaz’s fiction. In this respect, the most emblematic device for flexible scale production is the *fukú americanus*, the conceptual and narrative linchpin he introduces in *Oscar Wao*.

**Place-Basedness and World Literature**

This is the abrupt opening of *Oscar Wao*:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, *fukú*—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. Also called the fukú of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its greatest European victims; despite “discovering” the New World the Admiral died miserable and syphilitic, hearing (dique) divine voices. In Santo Domingo, the Land He Loved Best (what Oscar, at the end, would call the Ground Zero of the New World), the Admiral’s very name has become synonymous with both kinds of fukú, little and large; to say his name aloud or even to hear it is to invite calamity on the heads of you and yours.

No matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of the Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we’ve all been in the shit ever since. (1)

The fukú, or the “Doom of the New World,” is pivotal to Díaz’s narrative design, for it unravels the constellation of historical events, systemic determinants, and epistemic forces that his fiction gives form to: the extermination of the indigenous populations of the
Americas, the genocide of African slaves, the triumph of, to use Sylvia Winter’s apt phrasing, the “historical-existential perspectives” (12) that have structured the world since 1492, and finally—in a sweeping association so characteristic of his style—the rebalancing of power that inevitably follows old and recent destructions: the ground zeros of world history. The fukú thus epitomizes spatio-temporal expansiveness of Díaz’s fiction, its groundedness into specific locales, and its shifts among geographic and analytical scales.

Critics have wondered whether this doom that traverses generation is one of Díaz’s linguistic inventions, or if it is a concept that has been actually used by African and Afro-Caribbean communities, and, if this is the case, where exactly it comes from.50 These are legitimate questions, yet the egregious allure of the fukú resides precisely in its mythico-mystical yet concretely historical nature, which makes it rather irrelevant to trace its origin or claiming ownership over it. Indeed, Columbus himself is both bearer and victim of the curse; as for Trujillo, the Dominican dictator who Díaz identifies as yet another product of the doom, Yunior explains: “No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master, its agent or its principal” (Oscar Wao 2). What matters is that the fukú, brought to Hispaniola in 1492, is framed as the mythical origin of a historically identifiable global system of exploitation that, as Aníbal Quijano has powerfully argued, was founded on two concurrent processes: racialization of power and capitalist division of labor (“Coloniality of Power” 532). This world-systemic reading of Oscar Wao has been convincingly proposed by José David Saldivar. Drawing on the concept of “Americanity,” a neologism coined by Quijano and Wallerstein to underline the geographical coordinates of the modern world-system, Saldivar argues that “fukú americanity” (125)—instead of americanus—is used in the

50 For a recapitulation of the different interpretations and etymological hypotheses that have been proposed so far, see Maria Lauret (“Your Own Goddam Idiom” 509).
novel to resituate the Americas as a crucial space for the conceptual and economic constitution of modernity, and “to reveal and displace the logic by which Europeans have represented their others” (134). In other words, the unleashing of the fukú coincides with the beginning of the modern world-system of dominant metropolitan cores and colonized peripheries, which could not have been possible without the cognitive mapping and economic conquest of the Americas.

Thus, in crossing Europe, Africa, and the trans-hemispheric orbit, this conceptual and narrative catalyst connects the macroscopic perspective of the world-system to its constituents. And it does so by arising from a specific locale, Yunior’s narratorial domain, which mediates the loci of enunciation of all the characters to whom he gives voice. The fukú is simultaneously the doom of the world-system, of the island of Hispaniola (hence of two nation-states, the Dominican Republic and Haiti), of Africa, and of Europe; it is tied to Spain’s colonial expansion, but also to the United States’ neoimperialist interventions in the Caribbean and in Latin America. It is the curse of Paterson, New Jersey, where Oscar grows up, and of the cane fields in Santo Domingo where violence is cyclically perpetrated. The fukú thus blurs the boundaries between the personal and the systemic, between the fantastic and the historical, and produces effects at an almost excessively wide range of scales.

Furthermore, by positing this force as the structuring device for the entire novel, Díaz is able to portray its impact across multiple generations of the Cabral family, from Abelard—Oscar’s grandfather killed by Trujillo—to his daughter Belicia—almost killed by Trujillo’s henchmen, and finally to Oscar, who, although he might not have liked his life to become a “fukú story,” as Yunior reminds us (6), is nonetheless part of a larger narrative and

51 Saldívar is mostly concerned with Oscar and “his own loci of enunciation” (127), thus underestimating the authorial and ideological control Yunior retains, as I have shown earlier.
historical design that transcends the span of his brief and wondrous life. Thus the “Great American Doom” (5) not only encompasses multiple geographies, but it stretches temporally too. It is then quite pertinent to view it, as Saldivar does, as a world-systemic force that has to be approached from a Braudelian longue durée perspective, beginning with the inception of the capitalist world-system in the 15th century and reaching the Trujillato era in the 20th. By connecting the long history of modernity with the spatial extension of its effects, Díaz conceives the fukú as a chronotopical force, an agent of production of historical and narrative space-time, whereby time and space unceasingly coalesce. Yet, and crucially, the fukú does not represent an agent of hybridization, a narrative expedient aimed at synthetizing disparate materials for artistic purposes. Instead, in setting the novel’s geographical coordinates and by foregrounding its temporal depth and scalar variability, the fukú challenges a purely aesthetic or linguistic understanding of the notion of hybridity, as it has been famously theorized by Homi Bhabha.52 Rather than positing the preeminence of the linguistic sign with its discursive disjunctions over the historical and material conditions that substantiate cultural formations, Díaz introduces the fukú as a narrative expedient whose primary function is to register the dynamic unfolding of the history of the world-system and the spatially distributed reproduction of unevenness that define it—without celebratory intents and without providing any form of aesthetic compromise.

I have been suggesting that Díaz’s texts traverse geographies, interlock political histories, and broaden the narrative focus to a world-systemic purview; in so doing, they formally articulate the long process of production of economic unevenness and racial hierarchies that characterize transnational globality. This might not seem particularly original

52 Benita Parry, critiquing Bhabha’s notion of hybridity, writes that, in his theorization, the concept “is descriptive of the textual processes and effects held to constitute social forms and conditions, and not of those forms and conditions as articulated in social practices” (64).
or path-breaking, and for good reasons: after all, although the kind of paranoid imagination typical of postmodernist aesthetic seems today exhausted, contemporary fiction still thematizes various forms of global connectivity. In Díaz however, the articulation of a planetary outlook emerges from a narrative space constructed around historically and socially specific locales, in which a globally produced unevenness is formally substantiated through variations in the scales of the local. This then leads to the necessity, dramatized in all of his works, to contextualize locality both historically and geopolitically, so as to register its concretely experienced inequalities by decoupling it from immutable or intrinsic values.

To conclude, I want to suggest that this combination of spatial entrenchment and global purview offers a third option beyond a possessive attachment to place and a vacuous disengagement from it. Since the enlargement of the narrative horizon to the world does not imply the severance of affective and political ties to specific locales, Díaz articulates a kind of spatial and temporal imagination that is place-based without being place-bound. This distinction was first proposed by Arif Dirlik, who, in trying to redress a misunderstanding of anti-essentialist discourses, argued: “Groundedness, which is not the same thing as immutable fixity, and some measure of definition by flexible and porous boundaries, I suggest, are crucial to any conceptualization of place and place-based consciousness” (22). Place-based consciousness refuses place-bound essentialism, but it is also an alternative to what Dirlik calls “those placeless abstractions such as capital, the nation-states, and their discursive expressions in the realm of theory” (23). Dirlik’s more complex and decidedly

53 Consider for instance David Mitchell’s _Cloud Atlas_ (2004). Although the novel is structured around a principle of spatial and trans-historical interconnectedness, it ends up reiterating a rapid opposition between a nebulous idea of evil (variously associated to abstract forms of global oppression) and a consolatory faith in individual, localized agency.

54 Dirlik concludes his essay, which was published in 2001, by criticizing scholars of postcolonialism and postmodernism for ignoring the unequal relations of exchange of cultural and material goods that determine the interactions among economic cores and ex-colonized peripheries. Apart from the rather uncritical conflation of postmodernity and postcoloniality, it is fair to say that, since Pascale Casanova’s _The World Republic_
polemical intervention is here useful insofar as it is premised on an analytical framework in which locality and groundedness do not preclude the access to planetary forces and networks; networks that, rather than constituting an abstract idea of globality, ought to be thought as systems of localities. In Díaz’s fiction, the characters’ (and even the fukú’s) connections to concrete locations enhance, rather than impeding, the reader’s awareness of an overarching global structure: as we have seen, the systemic is always experienced locally. At the same time however, the continuous transitions among historically determined spaces ensure that the local itself is not perfectly circumscribable. In this way, Díaz’s fiction advances a crucial distinction between two understandings of globality: the first globality—which is a form of bad abstractedness—is immaterial, lives in the realm of theory, and can be used (negatively) to celebrate locality or (positively) to praise cosmopolitan openness. The second, governed by laws that are abstractable rather than abstract, resides in concretely lived history and inhabited space, and refuses to be immediately available for political appropriation.

This distinction between grounded globality and disengaged abstractedness—thorized by Dirlik in the field of social and human geography—resonates in two recent studies of novel theory that approach world literature from fairly divergent perspectives: Aamir Mufti’s Forget English! and Rebecca Walkowitz’s Born Translated. In the propositional turn of their arguments, both Mufti and Walkowitz envision a literature that rejects nativist attachments to place, together with the fantasy that the world literary space might become a level playing field exempt from hierarchies of power. In other words, both critics theorize the kind of systemic imagination and place-based consciousness that Díaz’s fiction

of Letters, asymmetries of power and unequal transactions have not been utterly ignored by cultural and literary scholars, as Dirlik seems to imply.
narratively instantiates.

Mufti is rather critical of world literature because he believes that “hidden inside [it] is the dominance of globalized English” (13), which he calls the “vanishing mediator” (16 italics in original) of today’s literary culture. Yet, his hasty equation between the dominance of English and world literature obscures the internal diversity of English itself—which Díaz’s variations in register powerfully highlight—as well as the complex interactions among dominant languages, displayed through Díaz’s use of Dominican-Spanish, a vernacular tied to colonial oppression that is refunctionalized to draw attention to the instability of American English. Furthermore, practices of place-basedness can be premised on language but are not reducible to it, and English too can be used to register forms of hegemony, including its own. This last point is central in Walkowitz’s analysis of what she calls “born-translated” fiction, that is, texts that “[engage] in a project of unforgetting” (23, italics mine): unforgetting their own foreignness, the multilingual history of the language they are written in (English), as well as its own hegemonic status. The fundamental question that Walkowitz and Mufti frame around language is whether literature, in being attached to multiple geocultural spaces, can imagine an alternative to exclusionary belonging, as well as to the vacuous abstractedness of globalism. Mufti identifies a solution in Eric Auerbach’s exilic ethos, in which the acknowledgement of the inescapability of positionality is coupled with the deliberate gesture of treating every place as a place of exile, so as to become conscious of “the symbolic fabrication of place as such” (225, italics in original). Similarly, Walkowitz proposes that born-translated novels offer an antidote to the naturalization of constructed places, whose supposed homogeneity is premised on cultural and literary place-boundedness, while simultaneously rejecting “global disarticulation”—what she defines as “belonging to nowhere” (28). Beyond monocultural or monolingual uniformity and non-belonging,
contemporary works of world literature are thus engaged in rethinking the links and affiliations that connect collectivities, languages, and literary objects to places, as well as different cultural and linguistic geographies to an overdetermining and unequal system.

Díaz’s texts articulate these interactions formally, in order to construct a world-attentive, place-based, yet not place-bound imagination. They do so by creating a densely intertwined fictional universe in which the movements from the narrative space to the world—and vice versa—are filtered through the localized voice of the single narrator, enhanced by the global networks triggered by the fuku, and connected to multiple literary geographies and internally layered linguistic spaces. Moreover, not only the entrenchment into the local becomes the necessary prerequisite for the apprehension of the systemic, but the variations in sites and scales where the local gets inscribed produce a narrative universe that is attached but not unchangingly bound to its referents. Through the progression from a formal impasse framed in spatial terms—“how to scale a family”—to the redefinition of the interactions between scale and literary form, Díaz’s place-basedness ultimately challenges us to rethink the narrative scope and socio-historical significance of contemporary fiction.
Chapter 2

Rethinking Diaspora through Borders: Contemporary Somali Literature in English and Italian

There is no production space that does not involve the production of borders. As instruments of spatial regulation, borders structure the social and political configuration of the places we traverse every day and determine if and how different subjects can move across them. Modern state apparatuses have relied on the creation of borders to construct what Deleuze and Guattari defined “striated space,” in which mobility is policed by devising “fixed paths in well-defined directions, which restrict speed, regulate circulation, relativize movement” (386). These processes, which used to define the spatial coordinates of national governmentality, have—in the last decades—progressively adapted to transnational dynamics without losing their regulatory force. Most importantly, the unrelenting integration of the world economy into a capitalist system has not led to the triumph of the nomadic subjectivities that the two French philosophers had hailed as agents of border disruption. On the contrary, we are witnessing today an unprecedented “proliferation of borders” (Mezzadra and Neilson 1)—flexible tools that have not only become necessary to the management of economic flows of increased magnitude, but that are constantly mobilized to define political communities, regulate mobility, and hierarchically differentiate subjectivities.

Drawing new borders is an activity that, when understood in its most immediate, that is, territorial sense, has traditionally been the prerogative of cartography. In turn, modern cartography has relied on literature to validate its structuring of space. During the nationalization of European vernaculars, because the territorial boundaries of the nation-state were thought to encompass the national language, literature became the central
imaginative scaffolding for the demarcation of the political space of the nation. As Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued, the normative process of bordering that began with the rise of European nationalisms strengthened the ties between literature and cartography (“Boundaries” 520); as a consequence, writers and literary scholars started to address with more urgency the multiplication of boundaries of and among cultures, whether to buttress or contest them. Progressively, literature has developed a preoccupation with borders—what we might define a border consciousness—that the current rise of new forms of nationalism has made even more pronounced. Particularly in diasporic literatures, narrativity and cartography have proven to be inseparable; as Karen E. Bishop has argued, there is “a constitutive relationship between exile and mapping that requires we reconsider what we know about how the world is drawn, made up, and invented in text and image as well as what we understand by exile and how it is lived in a world whose boundaries are continuously shifting.” Bishop captures this situation through a powerful expression, “the cartographical necessity of exile” (1), an idea that strikingly resonates with Appiah’s assertion that, today, “the condition of so much contemporary fiction and poetry, accordingly, involves a kind of cartographic crisis, an emergency in the map room” (520). In order to delineate this crisis, locate it historically, and analyze how contemporary literature has engaged with it, this chapter turns to a literature—that of the Somali global diaspora—which has placed borders at its political, imaginative, and symbolic core.

The coupling of the two adjectives Somali and diasporic already highlights the contradictions of bordering as a definitional practice. Whereas Somali refers to a locatable territory with presumably homogenous linguistic and cultural features, that is to say, to an entity that could be intuitively circumscribable, diasporic involves a movement of dispersion, and evokes a global dimension that is more problematic to delimit. The tensions inherent to
the juxtaposition of these two antithetical designations are of course common to any literature of diaspora, but they become particularly glaring in the Somali case. This is due to the fact that the post-independence history of Somalia, up to these days, is a testament to the vulnerability of the postcolonial nation-state: given Somalia’s political and territorial instability, the assumed coincidence between a geographical domain and its cultural and literary expressions is particularly tenuous. Therefore, when I propose to speak of Somali diasporic literature, it is crucial to consider the contradictory pulls that characterize any attempt to delimit its purview. If, on the one hand, the question of Somaliness involves the definition and difficult construction of a minimally coherent identity through cultural and linguistic attachments (due to the absence of a stable political entity), on the other, diaspora points to the imperative of framing that identity in a transnational perspective. In this sense, transnationality problematizes the presumed cultural homogeneity of Somaliness, and highlights the cross-cultural overlappings with the locations in which this literature has been produced and received during and after its diasporic dispersal.56

Drawing from a crucial point made by Brent H. Edwards in *The Practice of Diaspora*, I approach Somali diasporic literature at the intersection of an abstractionist aspiration to unity and a concrete, differential understanding of diasporic experience. In order to analyze the multiple and often competing practices of black internationalism, Edwards introduces, via Stuart Hall, the concept of “articulation” (11), which allows him to stress both the “functional unity” (11) of diaspora, as well as its divergent actualizations, which depend on variable contextual determinants, such as cultural positioning, class, and gender. In my

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55 On the troubled history of postcolonial Somalia, see I. M. Lewis (2003).
56 For a discussion of the critical scope and political divergences in the use of the notions of diaspora and transnationalism, see the meticulous introduction by Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani in *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*. 
analysis of literature written by Somali authors I focus specifically on two of those articulations, removed from one another both in time and space, yet unified by structural and narrative continuities deriving from a shared attempt to narrativize the diasporic experience through an engagement with practices of border production. The first articulation consists of two novels written in English by Nuruddin Farah, *Maps* (1986) and *Gifts* (1992)—book one and two of the *Blood in the Sun* trilogy; the second includes a series of texts (novels and short stories) published between 1994 and 2015 and written in Italian by authors born in Somalia or of Somali origins: Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, Cristina Ubah Ali Farah, Kaha Mohamed Aden, and Igiaba Scego.

To understand how these two articulations of Somali diasporic literature participate in the contemporary literary system we might resort to a metaphor that Alexander Beecroft has used to characterize the interactions of cultural, aesthetic, and socio-political factors in the constitution of world literature—a system that, he argues, function like an ecology. In a book tellingly titled *An Ecology of World Literature*, Beecroft argues that only by considering texts as part of larger environments can we account for the impact of multiple factors that determine where and how literature is produced, its circulation, and its symbolic underpinnings. Dissatisfied with previous theorization of world literature that relied on economic metaphors and vocabulary, Beecroft introduces the ecological lens because, he believes, “ecology is more comfortable accepting that the complexity may be inherent to the system” and better suited to describe the “interactive nature” (18) of external inputs. In contrast to economics which, he claims, “tends to simplify our understanding of complex system in order to make them easier to understand” (18).
that shape literary form and content. At the same time, understanding contemporary world literature as a system does not necessarily lead to flattening its complexity. Therefore, in my analysis of Somali diasporic authors, I will refer to the collectivity of their texts as a literature within a world literary system, while using Beecroft’s theorization as a cautionary warning against privileging one determinant (whether literary, political, or historical) over the others.\footnote{In the case of Somali diasporic literature this would mean, for instance, considering Somalia a “failed state” (political condition), whose lack of literary and cultural institutions has prevented the formation of a national literature—in the modern/hegemonic/European sense. A claim only partially acceptable, since it completely neglects Somalia’s millennial tradition of oral poetry (literary-historical condition).}

Acknowledging the interactive nature of diverse forces on literary expression is particularly important in the Somali case, since the political instability of the nation, the recurrent flows of migration to other countries, and the composite dynamics of affiliation among its writers have contributed to producing a literature heavily shaped by geopolitical determinants and historical conditionings.

Most decisively, this methodological approach complicates an objectionable binary that Beecroft himself proposes in his discussion of contemporary literature. In the frameworks he constructs, in fact, world literature is currently split into two divergent paths: while the first is a monocultural, standardized, and market-driven version of literary globalization, the second encompasses texts that are formally intricate, post-national, and multicultural (279-299). In this respect, my contention is that Somali diasporic literature cannot be classified according to this reductive dichotomy, which, despite Beecroft’s compelling critique of Pascale Casanova’s paradigm, is an updated version of one of Casanova’s central tenets in \textit{The World Republic of Letters}. Indeed, in her foundational study of the world literary space, Casanova had proposed an equally stark opposition between, at one hand of the spectrum, an autonomous realm of aesthetic production that has emancipated
from externally imposed pressures and, at the other, a rearguard space overdetermined by political interests and objectives—the former being home to an international coterie of modernist writers, the latter harboring conservative realists promoting chauvinist political projects.\footnote{In her discussion of “National Aesthetics” (196-200), Casanova argues for “the essential heteronomy of literary realism” (196).}

I want to propose instead that Somali diasporic literature defies this paradigm. To describe the position of Nuruddin Farah, for instance, one would need to invoke features of both poles. He enjoys international recognition, has been formed in the modernist tradition of Beckett, Joyce, and Woolf, and his formal experimentations have been often defined postmodernist.\footnote{In an essay in which he retraces his literary education, Farah writes that, as a young student bombarded by an increasingly nationalist rhetoric, his “favourite authors” were “James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Virginia Woolf,” and adds: “in my naivety I thought of their writing as apolitical” (“Why I Write” 1595).} Nonetheless, not one of his fourteen novels fails to address the tragically unresolved question of Somalia as a political entity and social collectivity. This is done not because of a kind of monocultural myopia, as the above dichotomy might suggest, but with a commitment to explore the historical and political vicissitudes of the Somali nation from an exilic perspective that is both transnational and nation-oriented. As for Somali-Italian authors, their main literary field of activity is national, and their principal mode of expression is realist: Seego and Fazel have written autobiographies, Aden’s collection of short stories often chronicles small episodes of life in the Italian province, and Ali Farah has claimed to be mostly interested in seemingly insignificant everyday events.\footnote{Ali Farah, when asked why she often stages narration in form of telephonic interviews, has answered that it is a way of expressing the importance of the telephone for Somalis scattered around the world, and added that their conversations do not revolve around “important existential passages.” Instead, what Somalis are most interested in is a kind of minute realism, that is, “the details of everyday life” (Comberiati 48). Unless otherwise noted, translations from Italian are mine.} Literary mimesis, which would place them among the conservative-realists, is instead coupled with the overt
aesthetico-political project of drawing attention to Italy’s colonial past, and to relate it to contemporary global migrations.

An analysis of Somali diasporic literature that is attentive to its complex dynamics of political and literary affiliations can thus complicate current theorizations of the world literary system. Furthermore, from a literary-historical perspective, it can lead to a better assessment of how the postcolonial novel negotiates its position simultaneously across national, global, and diasporic geographies. Ato Quayson, discussing what he calls the “mimetic conundrum” (1) in African fiction, argues that, whereas in the second half of the twentieth century the central question in African literary history had been the representation of the postcolony by authors that, despite their material and affective adherence to diaspora, were identified through their national affiliation and expected to write about their respective national communities—to name just the most celebrated examples, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Kenya, Chinua Achebe and Nigeria—, around the turn of the century this paradigm has been supplanted by a different mode of diasporic writing, one that is primarily concerned with what it means to be an African “within the racial economy of the West” (5). As a consequence, the mimetic question has been progressively displaced outside Africa, and the compass of African literary history has been expanded to include the cultural geographies in which African writers operate or are in close dialogue with. Somali diasporic literature, I want to suggest, conforms to this model only partially. Because it possesses features not reducible to a choice between nation or world, formal experimentation or naïve realism, the transition from a nation-oriented paradigm to a transnational one, as theorized by Quayson,

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62 These remarks are part of an unpublished talk, titled “On African Literary History: From Nation-and-Narration to the Diasporic Imaginary and Science Fiction,” that Quayson delivered at the 2018 Modern Language Association meeting in New York, in a panel titled “Literary History After the Nation?” I am grateful to Quayson for allowing me to read and quote his essay.
should be qualified by stressing the elements of transnationality—thematic and formal features, global circulation—that characterize the first articulation represented by Nuruddin Farah’s novels, as well as the importance of Somalia as a decisive historical referent and imaginative foundation in the transnational writing of Somali-Italian authors.

To put this more specifically, on the one hand, *Maps* and *Gifts* investigates the formation of Somali individual and political identity in relation to the progressive dissolution of the nation-state, bringing, as Simon Gikandi has aptly noted, “the tradition of nationalist literature into productive confrontation with the art of postcolonial failure” (“Nuruddin Farah” 753). On the other however, Farah’s reflection on the boundaries of selfhood within Somali sociality is coupled with a peculiarly transnational preoccupation for Cold War geopolitics and for the global economy of international aid, which casts African nations as passive receiver of Western philanthropy. Similarly, Somali-Italian writers combine a self-conscious investigation of the boundaries delimiting their participation in the Italian cultural field and in a racially compartmentalized society—what Quayson calls the “racial economy of the West”—with a cross-cultural exploration of the intertwined histories of Somalia and Italy, from the seventy years of Italian colonial occupation between 1880 and 1960 to post-Cold War migrations.

Somali diasporic literature is thus particularly suited for an analysis that considers multiple exogenous forces defining the structural limits of literary expression, and determining, to use Pierre Bourdieu’s vocabulary, the “objective potentialities” (235) and “space of possibles” (234) available to writers at specific historical moments. This space of possibles depends on constraints internal to the literary field, but also—most remarkably in the Somali case—on historical or political pressures that transcend the specific rules of the literary game, and that respond to cultural dynamics, political pressures, and colonial
histories. Consider Farah’s decision to adopt English as his main language of literary expression. After a period of bilingual writing, he stopped using Somali in 1973. On the one hand, this choice—rather common among writers that opt for a dominant language over a marginal one—was dictated by conditions specific to the world literary system, in which visibility and symbolic capital depend heavily on the language chosen for aesthetic expression. On the other, however, it is equally necessary to consider non-literary factors: first, the fact that the publication of his Somali novel, *Tallow Waa Talee Maa*, which began to appear in serialized form in a government newspaper, was discontinued because of political censorship in 1973 (Why I Write” 1596). Secondly, the socio-linguistic conditions in which he grew, which led to his fascination for the written word at the expenses of an oral tradition that, as he has declared, “was everywhere around me” (“Celebrating Differences” 710). Finally, and relatedly, the very history of the Somali language, which was alphabetically codified only in 1972, and could not provide Farah with literary models for fiction writing. A similar system of interconnected determinants has informed the adoption of Italian for literary expression by Somali-Italian writers: the fact that they were educated and/or socialized in Italian; the symbolic prestige of the colonial language and their own social position as children of the native intelligentsia; the politically motivated intention of being recognized as active cultural participants in Italy; and, once again, the status of Somali, not only as a language of orality, but also one in which aesthetic prestige and literariness are prerogatives of poetry.

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63 Casanova rightly places Farah among those “translated men” (254-265) that had to forgo their mother tongue—along with its affective attachments and political sensibilities—to achieve literary existence in a dominant language.

64 This is how Ali Farah explains her choice of Italian: “Not only is Italian my mother tongue (or the tongue of my mother), but also the language of my formal education. Somali was formally codified less than fifty years ago, and its most prestigious literary form is poetry, not prose” (Jacobson, “Between Two Worlds”)
To all these interlocked forces that have shaped the literary choices of Somali
diasporic writers, we must add their own heterogeneous trajectories as exiles and migrants.
In this sense, biography must be considered a decisive factor in and of itself. Nuruddin
Farah was born in Somalia in 1945, obtained a bachelor’s degree in India, returned to
Mogadishu and lived there until 1974, when the dictator Siad Barre declared him persona non
grata. He has lived in exile since. And although he has recently declared that he now visits
Somalia “quite often” (Garuba 5), he has never gone back permanently, not even after
Barre’s fall in 1991. During his forced and later self-imposed exile, he has established
residency, at various points of his life, in England, Italy, Germany, Nigeria, Sudan, Uganda,
the United States, and South Africa. His novels have been widely translated, he was
awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1998, and he has received ample
critical attention by postcolonial scholars. Because his first novels were published by
Heinemann in the African Writers Series—the imprint through which African authors
entered the world literary stage in the 1960s and 70s—Farah has enjoyed both global
visibility and symbolic recognition. He embodies an exilic condition that, as Edward Said
repeatedly clarified, involves the heightened lucidity and intellectual curiosity of the writer
forced to reflect on his or her displacement; and yet, it is first and foremost a “condition of
terminal loss” (137) a “truly horrendous” (138) experience of material and affective
estrangement from one’s perceived home. These antinomies emerge in Farah’s inflexible
commitment to writing about Somalia: in spite of, or perhaps because of his physical

65 For a detailed inventory of his wanderings until 1998, see the “Chronology” in the World Literature Today’s
issues dedicated to him.
66 Derek Wright, one of the major critics of Farah’s work, edited a voluminous anthology in 2002—Emerging
Perspective on Nuruddin Farah—collecting several essays that testify to an increasing critical attention towards
Farah among postcolonial scholars, particularly after he was awarded the Nuestadt Prize in 1998.
removal from the place he famously defined “a country of my imagination” (“A Country in Exile” 713), Somalia has never ceased to be his main affective and narrative horizon.  

The ethical responsibility of keeping Somalia imaginatively alive expressed by Nuruddin Farah becomes, in the writings of Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, Cristina Ubah Ali Farah, Kaha Mohamed Aden, and Igiaba Scego, a catalyst for reconsidering Somali identity and its national history in relation to Italy’s colonial past, linguistic space, and cultural politics. Differently from Farah, who is a widely known male authors writing in a hegemonic language, Fazel, Farah and Scego are migrant women who have experienced intertwined forms of exclusion based on race, gender, and cultural belonging. The thematic continuities of their work emerge in spite of their divergent biographies and backgrounds. Shirin Ramzanali Fazel was born in Mogadishu to a Somali mother and a Zanzibari father in 1953, fled Somalia in 1971—two years after Barre seized power—and moved to Italy. Like Nuruddin Farah, she has resided in several countries (Kenya, the United States, Saudi Arabia) and now lives in England. Cristina Ubah Ali Farah was born in Italy to a Somali father and an Italian mother in 1973, moved to Mogadishu in 1976, where she lived until the outbreak of the civil war in 1991. She then returned to Italy and lived there until 2013, when she moved to Belgium (Brioni 7). Kaha Mohammed Aden was born in Mogadishu in 1966 and fled the country after her father became a political opponent of Barre’s dictatorship. She reached Italy in 1986, and has lived there since. Igiaba Scego was born in Italy to Somali parents who had too escaped Barre’s political persecution, and, unlike all the other writers, has resided in Italy all her life.

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67 Farah has even criticized contemporary African writers living abroad because they have “no commitment to back home,” whereas for him, he goes on to say, that commitment has always been the principal source of his literary inspiration (Garuba 5).
68 For a thorough discussion of the relevance of race and gender in the work of Somali-Italian women writers, see Contarini.
Because of the colonial relations between Italy and Somalia, Fazel and Ali Farah attended Italian schools in Mogadishu; Aden earned a degree in Italy, and Scego was raised in a bicultural environment in Rome. For all of them, Somali identity is conceptually and affectively foundational, but it is also coupled with an equally strong sense of belonging to the social and cultural domain represented by their second mother tongue. Understanding this ambivalence is crucial for assessing their position in the Italian literary field: if, on the one hand, Somali-Italian writers are still struggling to reach a wider reading public and to be recognized as an integral part of contemporary Italian literature, on the other, their perceived or imposed outsidedness has been leveraged to obtain symbolic recognition and has contributed to validating their presence in the national field. Furthermore, it is important to stress that all these authors, just like Nuruddin Farah, belong to an educated group of migrants who possess the cultural means to give form, aesthetically, to the trauma of uprootedness. As Farah himself has remarked, “a writer is not a refugee” (50) because a writer still possesses “the privilege to create another country out of his or her sense of displacement” (*Yesterday, Tomorrow* 49), and, it should be added, to receive cultural and symbolic recognition for having done so.

The central premise of this chapter is therefore that the entanglements of literary-specific strategies and extrinsic conditions, both responding to national dynamics and global pressures, determine the heterogeneity of Somali diasporic literature, where diaspora remains the central invariable, the definitional axis around which these authors negotiate their investment in—and the boundaries of—different social, political, and affective frameworks. It is in this sense that distinct articulations of Somali experience, in being linked by the same attempt to aesthetically rethink diasporic experience, can be seen as instantiations of what Brent Edwards calls “difference within unity” (11). At the same time, I want to suggest that
such unity is not dependent solely on a biographical or imaginative association to diaspora, but it is also determined by a fundamental preoccupation—both thematic and formal—with practices of border production. Because the notion of diaspora itself is premised on the delimitation, whether territorial or cultural, of a domain from which one has been forcibly removed, Somali authors give form to their diasporic condition by exploring the notion of border in all its semantic and epistemological modulations. Farah’s Maps investigates the formation of personal and political identities in Somalia during a time of geopolitical turbulence, and connects this territorial instability to the social unrest internal to the nation, as well as to the psychic collapse of its subjects. In Gifts, he moves from a socio-political dimension to a literary-sociological one, by self-consciously staging the postcolonial novel within the limits imposed to cultural products coming from world peripheries. Aden focuses on linguistic misunderstandings that arise when the unwillingness to transcultural dialogue relegates migrants to overdetermined social positions. Fazel’s engagement with the condition of meticciato (“mixed racial identity”)—first tolerated (if not encouraged) and then legally repressed during Italy’s colonial occupation of East Africa—addresses the interrelated productivity of legal, cultural, and ontological boundaries during long historical cycles. Finally, Scego and Ali Farah challenge the material and imaginative separation between Somalia and Italy by remapping the intersecting geographies and histories of Rome and Mogadishu.

In all these texts, borders are shown to be crucial in the constitution of political subjectivities and for regulating the interactions of social constituents. In Étienne Balibar’s words, they fulfil a “world-configuring” (79) function by actively determining the limits of agency and the possibility of movement for different classes of subjects. Furthermore, they do not simply separate territories, spheres of sovereignty, and legal domains, but deeply
affect mental processes of self-perception. In Farah’s *Maps*, territorial conflicts fought to determine the boundaries of the nation—specifically, the war waged by Somalia against Ethiopia in 1977 to annex the region of Ogaden—are integral to the psychic distress of the main character, Askar, who is invested by a process of border internalization. But the pervasiveness of practices of border production is not just a thematic concern, for processes involving delimitations, fragmentations, and attempted reconstructions of a narrative totality are transposed to the level of form. This can lead to the multiplication of narrators, as in the choral narratives of Ali Farah’s *Madre Piccola* [*Little Mother*], or to the episodic chronicle of a migrating experience in Fazel’s *Lontano da Mogadiscio/Far from Mogadishu*. It can fragment the utterance of the narrating voice, as in *Maps*, or redefine the linguistic boundaries between Somali and Italian, as in Scego’s *La mia casa è dove sono* [*My Home Is Where I Am*]. In all these texts, formal boundaries point to ideological struggles and competing interests that animate not only the societies that these texts portray, but the very meaning of diasporic experience.

The works of Farah and of Somali-Italian authors thus suggest that borders—rather than being simply geographic or territorial artifices—are first and foremost “epistemological device[s]” (Mezzadra and Neilson 16) that shape the configuration of social spaces and simultaneously establish mental and cognitive hierarchies, which are in turn used to reinforce material inequalities. Somali diasporic literature can thus be defined as a literature of the border, in which the combination of historical conditionings, geopolitical transformations, and aesthetic strategies generate highly complex literary artifacts that, in addressing the contemporary relevance of border epistemologies, ought to be more visible in contemporary accounts of world literature.

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[^69]: For an analysis of the entanglements of geography, social sciences, and epistemology in the foundation of capitalist modernity, see Mezzadra and Neilson’s discussion of “*fabrica mundi*” (the conceptual and material production of the world) in relation to dispossessive accumulation (30-43).
Self, Nation, and Postcolonial Literary Economies in Nuruddin Farah’s *Maps* and *Gifts*

Nuruddin Farah’s engagement with practices of border production for the imagination of the self within a political collectivity is the narrative and conceptual fulcrum of the *Blood in the Sun* trilogy, comprised of *Maps* (1986), *Gifts* (1992), and *Secrets* (1998). Already in the precedent trilogy (*Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship*), Farah had explored how various forms of bordering—whether in terms of gender, political allegiance, or biological affiliation—had been exploited during Siad Barre’s dictatorship to impose a state of permanent violence. It is however with the first novel of his second trilogy, *Maps*, that the reflection on identity and borders—or identity as borders—becomes so prominent that it encompasses and blurs multiple fields of meaning production, generating what Derek Wright has defined “a puzzling indeterminacy” (“Mapping Farah’s Fiction” 100) through which the novel purposefully confuses the literal and the metaphorical, the physiological and the spatial, the personal and the national.

*Maps* retrospectively chronicles the story of Askar, a young Somali intellectual torn between his deep affective attachment to his Oromo-Ethiopian (and Somali-speaking) foster mother, Misra, and his political dream of an ethnically homogeneous Somali nation from which she would be excluded. Set during Somalia’s reconquest of the Ethiopia-controlled Ogaden region in 1977, *Maps* entwines the cartographic and political stakes of this failed attempt to reconstitute Greater Somalia with the personal and corporeal bonds between
Askar and Misra. In the first half of the novel their physical intimacy is of such intensity that images of symbiosis, if not fusion, abound, as when he, tucked into “the oozy warmth between her breasts” or between her opened legs, feels as if he was her “third breast” or “third leg” (24). Progressively, Askar distances himself from Misra: he enters adulthood through the circumcision ritual, is sent from Kallafo in Ogaden to Mogadishu to escape the imminent war, and finds in the motherland a substitute for his foster mother. Askar’s journey is an intellectual maturation towards the nationalist dream of a united Somalia, which in turn involves the metaphorical murder of Misra—who had warned him: “you might even kill me to make your people’s dream become a tangible reality” (99)—as well as the possibility of his complicity in her actual assassination—of which the reader is informed towards the end of the novel—after her alleged betrayal of the Somali National Front.

Critical appraisals of Maps have focused on its allegorical structure, whether to unveil it or to contest it; on the connections between nation, gender, and traumatic testimony; and on its critique of postcolonial ethnocentrism in favor of a third space of political empowerment. Building on these studies, I want to shift the focus on the problematic of bordering—a question that most critics discuss but fail to identify as the structuring device of the novel. The centrality of borders, I want to suggest, allows Farah to articulate two

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70 Simon Gikandi argues that, in line with postcolonial fiction of disillusionment, the central triad that structures the novel—without leading to a compensatory solution—is “nation, body, and text” (“The Politics and Poetics” 457). For an astute Foucauldian reading of the tensions between the corporeal and national body politic, see also Masterson’s “From the Carceral to the Bio-political.”

71 For an allegorical reading, see Derek Wright, “Parenting the Nation.” Peter Hitchcock, in “The Exotopy of Place” (90-139) complicates the analogical associations to theorize a space outside the dyads text/nation and personal/political.

72 The crisis of gender and sexual identity experienced by Askar is connected to the socio-political disorder of the postcolonial nation by Rhonda Cobham (“Misgendering the Nation”). Along similar lines, with a stress on the representation of gendered and racialized bodies, see Michelle Lynn Brown, “Bleeding for the Mother(land).”

73 On the Somali national construct and its myth of ethnic purity, see Derek Wright, “Nations as Fictions.” On the ways Maps envisions an Fanonian national consciousness that includes rather than erasing the Other, see Francesca Kazan, “Recalling the Other Third World.”
different practices of border production so as to register their respective failures: in the first case by way of Askar’s psychic-formal collapse, in the second by diegetically foreclosing a political option that had been historically suppressed. I thus re-read Farah’s work not only as a formally complex exploration of identity, as it has been often interpreted, but as a foundational text that continues to shape Somali diasporic literature in its engagement with border epistemologies.

When Askar arrives in Mogadishu to live with his uncle Hilaal and his wife Salaado—fictional personifications of the Somali native intelligentsia—he is given a map, a calendar, and a mirror (Maps 152). As these instruments acquire symbolic valence, they trigger his active production of borders in the three domains each object represents: the corporeal, the temporal, and the cartographic. Rejecting his bodily intimacy with Misra, Askar constructs a gendered and ethnic other that cannot be contained in the political body of the nation-state. He further negates his past and the nurturing that Misra had provided him outside blood and biological ties in order to pursue his self-reinvention into a mythico-national conception of the future where, as his uncle Hilaal hopes, he would become “an ‘epic’ child of modern times” (Maps 22). Finally, these bodily demarcations and teleological visions are interlocked to his redrawing of the map of Somalia in an anxious attempt to categorically establish its cultural, linguistic, and political borders.

Throughout the novel, Askar’s main preoccupation is to locate himself in a stable ontology—in a dream that precedes his political awakening he asks himself “Who am I?” (45)—through the delimitation of a national geography: defining who he is thus becomes inseparable from answering the question he candidly asks Misra when the two are living in the peripheral region of Ogaden: “Misra, where precisely is Somalia?” (Maps 116). As news that the Somali forces have launched the Ogaden’s invasion, Askar’s identification with the
newly discovered motherland translates into the material gesture of redrawing the map of Somalia: “And so, with his felt pen, using his own body, he redrew the map of the Somali-speaking territories, copied curve by curve, depression by depression” (Maps 101-102).

Farah’s insistence on the bodily dimension of this scene, in which territory and being merge into each other, makes explicit what Mezzadra and Neilson define as “the ontological moment of production connected with tracing borders” (35). In devising a world that coincides with his national and linguistic affiliations, Askar is simultaneously producing a political self and naturalizing the cartographic fabrication of the nation-state.

This gesture finds its explanation in Askar’s conversations with his uncle Hilaal, who provides him with the political and cultural rationale for the invasion of Ogaden. Because, during and after the Scramble for Africa, the Somali-speaking area of Western Africa was divided and occupied by the British, the Italians, and the French—and the Ogaden was later assigned to another imperial power, Ethiopia—the Somali nationalist cause embraced by Hilaal might be interpreted as an anti-colonial struggle, and Askar’s cartographic redrawing as the cultivation of a Fanonian national consciousness.74 The problem is that the truth produced by Askar’s map, just like the truth of the colonial map-makers, is a cartographic inscription of his ideological dispositions, which need not correspond to the social and linguistic reality being mapped. When Hilaal asks him the definitive question of the novel—“Do you find truth in the maps you draw?” (227)—Askar is forced to reconsider the distortions of his border-making activities. Despite Hilaal’s insistence on the Somali cultural and linguistic homogeneity, as Derek Wright rightly points out, “there are actually a few ‘pure’ Somalis in the novel and those who exist are surrounded by people of Oromo, Qotto,

74 Hilaal explains: “The Somali are a homogeneous people; they are homogeneous culturally speaking and speak the same language wherever they may be found” (Maps 174).
Boran, Adenese, Arab and Ethiopian extraction” (“Parenting the Nation” 180). Maps is thus giving form to the nationalist dream of reconstituting Greater Somalia, only to show that its cartographic invention is premised on the erasure of the material conditions of the Ogaden region, whose cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity throws into sharp relief the erasures on which Askar’s ideological war is premised.75

The collapse of Askar’s certainties is formally rendered through the alternation of first, second, and third person narration in each chapter of the novel. By employing this formal strategy, in which critics have rightly detected the decisive influence of modernist experimentation, Farah transforms Askar from an agent of border production to a fragmented subject, striving but unable to constitute the national self he theorizes. Hence, Askar as a character is made to contain both the impulse towards what Farah himself envisioned as a “complete African subject” (qt. in Sugnet 743), as well as the structural impossibility to become one. This is a consequence of what John Masterson defines as the “psycho-political schizophrenia” that makes Askar “never quite able to live with the indeterminacies of his situation” (152). The cartographic, corporeal, and political borders that he tries to erect throughout the novel, rather than fostering his psychic and narrative stability, end up triggering his own collapse.

But Askar’s inability to locate himself within stable geographies of meaning is as narrative and formal as it is a consequence of specific historical and socio-political conditions. His breakdown depends, from a historical perspective, on the complicity of the colonized bourgeoisie with dictatorial figures, a risk Frantz Fanon had vigorously warned

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75 Ethiopia’s claims over Ogaden are no less problematic, as most of the Somali-speaking community perceives Ethiopian rule as an imperial domination. The region was formally annexed to the Ethiopian Empire in the late 19th century, later colonized by the Italians and the British, who returned it to Ethiopia at the end of World War II. See I. M Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, (56-62, 130-131).
against: in a novel in which Siad Barre is never explicitly mentioned, it is Hilaal, the bourgeois intellectual, who voices the political project, championed by Barre’s regime, of reunifying Greater Somalia. Askar’s psychic instability is further heightened by a kind of geopolitical schizophrenia peculiar to Somalia’s history. When Barre launched an offensive in Ethiopia-occupied Ogaden, the Soviet Union, which had economically supported Barre’s regime up to that point, decided to switch side and to provide military aid to Ethiopia. In a typical Cold-War domino effect, Barre sought military support from Western powers, to no avail. By alluding to these events throughout the novel, Farah correlates Askar’s border anxiety to the geopolitical and territorial rearrangements affecting the Horn of Africa as a consequence of Cold War disputes. At the same time, it is not coincidental that the novel is set in Kallafo, the Ogadenese town where Farah himself grew up. As he has repeatedly declared, being a Somali-speaking subject in a region materially and culturally colonized by several imperial powers (Arabs, British, Italians, Amharic-Ethiopians) meant perceiving himself “as the unnamed, the divided other, a schizophrenic child living in the age of colonial contradiction” (“Childhood of My Schizophrenia”).

Just as this first practice of border production is framed at the intersection of historical, geopolitical, and biographical determinants, Maps articulates a second option, associated with Misra, as a potential alternative that gets diegetically foreclosed. Misra’s trajectory stands as a synecdoche for what this novel, as well as Somalia’s and Ethiopia’s

76 See, from The Wretched of the Earth, the section titled “The Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness,” particularly pp. 113-115.
77 The final defeat of Somali forces is referred to as “the Tragic Weekend” in which “Soviet, Cubans, and Adenese generals (with a little help from the Ethiopians) masterminded the decisive blow which returned the destiny of the Ogaden and its people to Ethiopian hands” (Maps 162). For a detailed analysis of the Ogaden War, Lewis (231-242).
78 A concept Farah has elaborated upon, by retracing his multilingual and alienating education, in “Why I Write” and in his Neustand lecture (“Celebrating Differences”). For further discussion of how this displacement is formalized through the shifting pronouns, see Kazan (263-264) and Masterson (158-161).
respective nationalisms, must eradicate from their imaginative and political purview. The
offspring of a damoz union between an Oromo servant and an Amharic nobleman who
abandons them after she is born, Misra grows up speaking Amharic, learns Somali, and—at
the time she is raising Askar—frequents two men, the Ogadenese Somali Uncle Qorrax, and
Aw-Adan, a Qotto teacher of Arabic. As Derek Wright’s points out, Misra “has access to
and concourse with all of the fertile neighboring microcultures and tribal nationalisms by
which the Ogaden is hedged around and diversified, in spite of its narrowly ethnocentric
efforts to resist them” (“Parenting the Nation” 180). As a member of the Oromo minority,
alternatively oppressed by Ethiopians and Somalis, she is forced to assume, as Hilaal
acknowledges, “Somali or Amhari identity,” despite the fact that, for instance, “Oromo form
over sixty per cent of Ethiopia’s population” (Maps 170). At the same time, she cannot be
included in Askar’s nationalistic fantasy because she is also partially Amharic. As her
corporeal connection to Askar is severed, she is progressively exiled from the diegetic space,
and we are informed about what happens to her during the war mostly through hearsay.
Falsely accused of having betrayed a group of Somali fighters, she is gang raped, and
subsequently flees Kallafo for Mogadishu, where she is hospitalized and undergoes a
mastectomy. At the end of the novel, her body is found on the shores of Mogadishu, her
heart having been removed before the murder. Indeed, the excision of Misra from the
narrative space of the novel and from Askar’s ideological project could not have been more
literal. In Maps’ scheme of symbolic correspondences, Askar’s psychic reaction to historico-
political uncertainty finds its counterpart in the way in which Farah literally maps on Misra’s
body the mutilations required by ethnicist fantasies, which progressively deprive her of her
breast, her heart, and her life. Commenting on these events, Mandelson offers a compelling
biopolitical reading: “Askar entertains the idea of destroying his adoptive, ‘other’ mother as a
means of purifying and purging both himself and Somalia’s wider body politic” (134). Once again, the fantasized integrity of the body is inseparable from the boundaries of the *bios* of the nation, from which Misra must be eradicated.

Most of the critical appraisals of *Maps* concur that Misra represents a narrative and ideological space that Askar, Somalia, and the novel itself cannot comprehend. For Hitchcock, she is “exorbitant” (101); Cohbam and Brown both claim that she defies the norms of “gendered nationalism” (Brown 126); Wright sees her as a “floating signifier, zoned into many stereotyped figures” (“Nations” 202); Kazan argues that she belongs to the “third world’ of the nurturing body” (260). All these characterizations of Misra are reasonable. However, they do not satisfactorily address the very premise of her incommensurability, that is, the fact that she is continuously produced and redefined by processes of bordering. Misra is—both figuratively and materially—a space to appropriate through the inscription of boundaries—in forms of territorial claims over the Ogaden or through ethnic purifications of her identity.

“I am a border woman” famously wrote Gloria Anzaldúa in her Preface to *Borderlands*. “It’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions,” she continued, “No, not comfortable, but home” (19). The Ogaden, similarly to the area between Northern Mexico and Texas where Anzaldúa grew up, is portrayed in the novel as a borderland, a contested space alternatively defined and subdued by colonial, nationalistic, and imperialist claims. And Misra, just like Anzaldúa (and unlike Askar) is the only character capable of negotiating the contradictions inherent to her condition, which the Somali nation-state cannot accommodate. When she flees Kallafo to take refuge in Mogadishu, Askar wonders if she will be considered an “unperson” (*Maps* 175), a term that perfectly captures the link between political invisibility and ontological dispossession. And despite the subtle
hint that Misra’s proper dimension, potentially devoid of borders, is cosmological—her name means “the foundation of the earth” and Askar defines her as “the cosmos” (*Maps* 185)—the question posed by her presence and subsequent erasure from the space of the novel is eminently political.

Misra represents a possible community that the nation-state has been historically unwilling to recognize. Her eradication registers not only the specificities of the Somali diaspora to which Farah belongs, but, more broadly, the ideological premises of a particular (and destructive) kind of nationalistic imagination. Rather than aprioristically condemning the nation qua fiction—as Wright suggests in his reading of this novel (“Nations as Fictions”)—Farah suggests that it is the state itself that should guarantee legal existence to a diverse spectrum of subjects, as well as fostering inclusive modes of citizenship. Consider how Askar reacts when he receives from Hilaal his new Somali “*carta d’identità*”:79 “From the way he gave it to me, you would believe he was entrusting to me a brand-new ‘life’. Here you are, he seemed to say, with another life all your own, one that you must take good care of, since it is of paper, produced by the hand of man, according to the law of man” (*Maps* 171). This legal rebirth is precisely what Misra is being negated because of her ethnically and linguistically marginalized status. In stressing Misra’s exile outside the legal boundaries of political existence, Farah is thus making another crucial distinction. As several scholars of border studies have repeatedly stressed, practices of border disruption are not intrinsically virtuous, nor necessarily conducive to greater equality.80 In turn, it is often the case that social visibility depends on legal processes of inclusion and recognition of juridical status. As

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79 The fact that, even though Somalia has achieved independence more than a decade before, Italian is still the language used for legal documents, testifies to the endurance of the principle that only the colonial authority had the right to define political subjectivities.

80 On the contrary, they can facilitate the flows of global capital and buttress economic hierarchies. For a useful recapitulation of this argument in relation to African contemporary fiction, see Dustin Crowley, *Africa’s Narrative Geographies* (9-19).
a corrective to well-intentioned but myopic arguments for borderlessness, Farah is drawing
attention to a finer distinction between, on the one hand, practices of border production
aimed at establishing monocultural hegemony, and, on the other, composite projects that
involve the contestation of ethnic or linguistic boundaries, as well as the creation of a legal
framework that would guarantee social inclusion and redress socio-economic unevenness. In
giving literary form to these two divergent possibilities, *Maps* locates them within a system of
environmental forces that ultimately determine their outcomes: the first option is correlated
to geopolitical schizophrenia and psychic collapse, while the second gets delineated and
gradually neutralized in the diegetic space as a way of registering its historical foreclosure.

Farah’s sustained interest in the boundaries of the self in relation to the territorial
and ideological limits of the nation continues in the second and third book of his *Blood in the
Sun* trilogy, *Gifts* and *Secrets*. These novels follow a trajectory that the author has described as
a transition from the “outward explosion” (Niemi 332) that had been portrayed in *Maps*—
through the nationalistic war against Ethiopia—, to the progressive internal collapse of the
social fabric of the Somali state. But whereas in *Secrets* this implosion gets mapped on blood
affiliations and divisions that will lead to clan conflicts and warlordism (and to a civil war
that began in 1990 and continues today), in *Gifts* the internal unrest becomes the historical
background that the author uses to interrogate the position of Somalia as a periphery of the
world-system. *Gifts* interrelates the instability of the nation-state to international aid and
humanitarian endeavors. In exposing the logic of dependency between First and Third
World that these activities enforce, the novel not only interrogates the boundaries imposed
to Somalia’s economic self-determination, but self-consciously stages the postcolonial novel
as a cultural object in the world literary system; a system that is shown to be governed by the
same principle of uneven reciprocity.
Following a structure similar to *Maps*, the narrative of *Gifts* proceeds in two parallel threads: the first centers on the story of Duniya, a widowed nurse whose main preoccupation is, as she repeatedly makes clear, “to resist all kinds of domination, including that of being given something” (*Gifts* 242). This tenet, which Duniya strives to follow in all her social and affective relations, becomes the central critique that the novel wages against the apparatus of international donations, which deprive Somalis of human dignity and defeat any possibility of collective political resistance. As ethically certified instruments for preserving global inequality, these humanitarian efforts set the boundaries to—and concretely impede—Somalia’s self-determination.\(^81\) By interrogating the limits of agency and dependency, both at the personal and at the political level, Farah seems to offer Duniya’s parable as a corrective to the degradation of gift giving from which the nation-state seems unable to escape. Such interpretation could be corroborated by the *Bildungsroman* structure of the novel, in which the female protagonist emerges from a state of dependency—she is literally given as a gift to an old man and forced to marry him—to a progressive autonomy that transforms her into a self-conscious giver—the last two sections are titled “Duniya loves” and “Duniya gives.”\(^82\) According to Francis Ngaboh-Smart, Duniya’s actions “constitute an alternative configuration of human relationship” (150), that is to say, one based on a logic of free expenditure without the expectation of restitution. However, this reading is problematized, first, by Duniya’s own implication in the logic of dependence that the gift engenders; and second, by the very form of this novel, through which Farah draws a

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\(^{81}\) Within the extensive literature on the failures of the aid industry, Michael Maren’s *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity* is particularly relevant for this discussion, as it focuses on Somalia during Syad Barre’s dictatorship.

\(^{82}\) In this sense, Farah replicates the structure of his first novel, *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), in which he had chronicled the struggle of the young protagonist Ebla against Somali’s patriarchy. Farah’s attention to gender oppression prompted Ngugi wa Thiong’o to affirm, in 1998, that “he is probably the leading writer in Africa in feminist consciousness” (“Nuruddin Farah” 716).
clear distinction between the fictional (Duniya’s narrative) and the historical (the humanitarian crisis), and self-reflexively foregrounds the postcolonial novel within the same system of uneven reciprocity.\(^83\)

In the socio-anthropological study—*The Gift* (1925)—which Farah uses as the main conceptual framework for his narrative, Marcel Mauss had analyzed the complex ceremony of gift exchange (the potlach) through which indigenous groups in the American Northwest created a complex system of obligations meant to establish social boundaries and define hierarchies among neighboring communities.\(^84\) The fundamental premise of this ceremony was that the gift being received bounded the beneficiary to reciprocate; this duty made those unable to give back socially stigmatized because perpetually dependent. In Farah’s *Gifts*, no one seems to be able to escape from these obligations. At the end novel, despite all her efforts to avoid receiving, even Duniya ends up acquiescing to a similar unequal relation established by her brother Abshir, who, after having migrated to Italy, has sustained the family through remittances and lavishly showered Duniya’s children with imported gifts. In establishing a parallel between international aid and Abhsir’s remittances, the novel suggests that dependency cannot be completely eradicated.

But even if we concede that Farah frames Duniya’s refusals as potential alternatives, it seems significant that Duniya’s story is explicitly staged as an imagined correlative to the historical crisis of the postcolony, or better, as a fictional compensation that does not solve the humanitarian crisis of Somalia. Crucially, in the very last page of the novel Farah reveals

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83 Jacques Derrida has elaborated on the fundamental aporia of the gift, which, as soon as it is recognized as such, it implicitly requires restitution or recognition, thus ceasing to be a gift. See *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*.

84 Farah, aware that literary exchanges function according to the same logic, opens the book with this dedication: “In writing this novel, I have incurred many debts, the most important of which is owed to Marcel Mauss, author of *The Gift*, translated into English by I. Cunison” (1). For a discussion of the specific correspondences between Mauss’s study and Farah’s novel, see K. H. Petersen, “Charity Wounds Him Who Receives.”
that the entire narrative takes place in Duniya’s head, that it is a purely imaginary journey.\footnote{In an interview, Farah has confirmed that “the narrative is imagined, the gift is real” (“Witnessing Contemporary Somalia” 334)} We might want to recall here Fredric Jameson’s famous formulation in *The Political Unconscious*, that “the individual narrative, or the individual formal structure, is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of real contradictions” (77). In other words, fictional narratives compensate in the realm of the symbolic that which cannot be solved in the domain of the concrete historical. In making this process explicit, Farah suggests that the alternative, ethically sound mode of gift giving that Duniya is partially able to achieve can function only in the space of the symbolic. This becomes clear as the author redoubles the novel’s own fictionality with the self-conscious exhibition of the imaginary nature of the narrative contained in it. In so doing, i.e., by juxtaposing and making visible the different modes of operation of the fictional and the historical, the represented and the real, Farah distinguishes between the prerogatives of imaginary resolutions offered by cultural products and the concrete historical phenomena that this kind of compensation can in no way alter.

The contrast between Duniya’s auspicious self-narration and the material conditions in which it takes place is further highlighted formally, through the insertion of heterogeneous materials that interrupt her narrative: a series of press releases and news from the radio, detailing the various types of aid provided by the European Union, the United States, and the United Nations to Somalia, and a newspaper article written by her ex-husband Taariq, in which he carefully analyzes the damages of such humanitarian efforts. These non-fictional and pseudo-journalistic interpolations are thus meant to counter the explicitly fictional narrative they continuously disrupt: their bleak and objective outlook reinforce the idea that,
in the concrete historical domain, a solution to the perpetuation of global unevenness imposed through aid dependency seems quite a distant prospect.

Furthermore, in tying international aid as gift and the boundaries of self-determination to the formal properties of the Somali novel, Farah shifts the question of borders from the socio-political to the literary-sociological level. Whereas in *Maps* the conceptual hinge was the territorial and ideological delimitation of self and nation, *Gifts* stages itself as the prototypical postcolonial novel, and interrogates the limits to the expressive possibilities of cultural products coming from the peripheries of the literary world system. Peter Hitchcock, in his discussion of this novel, rightly stresses that “the question of address is here crucial” (111). He points out that Taariq’s article, which oscillates between the indictment of the Western do-gooder and a call for political consciousness aimed at the African subject, replicates the double vocative structure on which the novel as a whole is premised, being addressed simultaneously to an African audience and to a global reader of postcolonial fiction. He further notices that the last line of the narrative—“The world was an audience, ready to be given Duniya’s story from the beginning” (*Gifts* 246)—is meant to frame what he defines “an imagined Somali dialogicity” (119) between the postcolonial novel and the world literary system.

The novel’s double address seems further confirmed by its publication history: originally written in English, *Gifts* was first published in Finnish translation in 1990, and two years later—in English—in Zimbabwe. If, on the one hand, Hitchcock is right in stressing this novel’s dialogicity—which is both imagined and concrete—on the other, his idea that Farah constructs Duniya’s narrative as a proof that “the novel gives differently” (119)—thus

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86 Farah has declared that the *Blood in the Sun* trilogy, which was written between Nigeria, Gambia, Sudan, Uganda, and Ethiopia, had “allowed [him] to enter into a debate with my fellow-Africans” (“Why I Write” 1599).
implying that pure narrativity can escape the all-pervasive logic of reciprocity—misses the crucial point this novel is making about its own status as a postcolonial text. Indeed, by staging Duniya’s story as a Somali cultural product given as a gift to the world, Farah suggests that this novel too is participating, qua literary object, in an uneven exchange in which the material deprivation of economic and social stability is compensated by symbolic recognition. The narrative of Duniya is unequivocally exposed as fictional because it is purposefully staged as a literary product of the African imagination. “The world was an audience,” reflects Duniya; an audience ready to celebrate cultural diversity while overlooking the social collapse of Somali state and the economic unevenness reinforced by international aid.

Farah is thus literally offering the postcolonial novel to the world. At the same time, through the non-fictional insertions and by highlighting its own fictionality, he is drawing attention to neocolonial logic of dependency in which the African novel is implicated: humanitarian relief in exchange for literary gifts to be praised. In this sense, Gifts articulates a larger critique of a certain kind of culturalist discourse. As Bruce Robbins has remarked: “[I]t is little short of obscene to talk about cultural liberation if diverse and imaginative cultures, once liberated, have so little effect on the hierarchical order of power and wealth in which those cultures are obliged to scratch out a living” (“Blaming the System” 53). This kind of liberation, Gifts ultimately suggests, is implicated in, if not complicit with, the system of distribution of resources and power that consigns the postcolonial novel to the sphere of symbolic recognition while reinforcing patterns of uneven reciprocity.

87 Robbins, in his latest book (The Beneficiary), rather optimistically identifies a possible path towards a more effective humanitarianism in the recognition, by those who benefit from the world’s structural unevenness, of the direct, casual connections that tie them to seemingly distant suffering.
The first two books of Farah’s *Blood in the Sun Trilogy* encourage us to reflect on the pervasiveness bordering processes for the construction of the Somali postcolony and on the environmental forces that have shaped the position of its literature in the contemporary world literary system. Using two different frameworks—the political unit of the nation in *Maps*, and the global system of cultural and economic exchange in *Gifts*—Farah juxtaposes different modes through which the postcolonial novel engages with the epistemological productivity of the border: from its most immediate cartographic manifestations to the demarcation of what belongs to the domain of culture and is deliberately kept within it; and from the ideological space of self and nation to the implication of literary and cultural products in a global economy of structured inequality. All these modulations of border production are articulated from a position of outsidedness, a biographical and ontological condition that constitutes another crucial determinant that affects Farah’s thematic and formal choices. Kazan aptly notes: “to be a Somali outside Somalia, writing prose rather than poetry, and in English rather than Somali, is to be triply outside” (256). Farah thus embodies a diasporic consciousness developed simultaneously along form, language of expression, and geocultural positioning. It is at the intersection of these axes that his novels give form, in Edward Said’s terms, to a contrapuntal imagination derived from “a plurality of vision” (“Reflections on Exile” 148). But although Farah’s exilic consciousness offers a vantage point from which to observe Somalia’s modern history and literary imagination, it would be simplistic to posit a radical outsidedness and neglect how, as *Gifts* self-consciously illustrates, literary postcoloniality and diasporic expressivity have been incorporated into a global literary system that thrives precisely on transnational inclusivity. It is within this

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88 Hitchcock, starting from the same premises, prefers to the term “outsidedness” the more Bakhtinian “exotopy” (90) and connects this condition to the openness and indetermination of Farah’s writing.
system that Farah has acquired the symbolic authority that allows him to aspire to reconstruct the unity of the Somali diaspora, as he has done both through fiction writing and in the non-fictional *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices From the Somali Diaspora*, where he has collected the testimonies “of a nation of narratives held to ransom” (viii). This imaginative work is possible because, as Quayson and Daswani note, one of the decisive features that transforms the dispersal of a population into a collectively recognized diaspora is the presence “of an elite group of cultural and political brokers,” whose work “give the homeland ultimate salience within diasporic consciousness” (3). Within the literary networks of the Somali diaspora, Farah’s brokerage and symbolic recognition have become a model for Somali-Italian writers, who have been negotiating their position within the Italian literary field and their contribution to Italy’s culture according to similar dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, imposed or claimed outsidedness, and ambivalent incorporation.

**The Somali-Italian Articulation: Between Inclusivity and Alterity**

Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, Cristina Ubah Ali Farah, Kaha Mohamed Aden, and Igiaba Scego give form to a Somali diasporic consciousness that varies according to their diverse biographical trajectories, linguistic education, and expressive intentions, but that shares an ambition to unity and a strong sense of intra-diasporic connection. Because they have been struggling to emerge from a peripheral position, Farah’s recognition as a cultural broker and a representative of Somaliness in the world has been a strategic opportunity for them to gain aesthetic legitimation and visibility. Aden, in her collection of short stories *Fra-intendimenti*, inserts short (and italicized) historical notes that resonate with Farah’s non-fictional excerpts in *Gifts*. Scego quotes Farah’s *Yesterday, Tomorrow* in her epigraph to *La mia casa è dove sono*,
thus aligning her work to Farah’s imaginative reconstruction of a homeland ravaged by decades of civil strife.  

Ali Farah too has used a passage of *Yesterday, Tomorrow* as one of three epigraphs of *Madre Piccola*; moreover, when asked about her literary models, she has declared: “I still remember when I first listened to Nuruddin Farah at a conference in Rome. At the time I was still a student and I didn’t know anything about postcolonial writers, let alone Somali writers. So I started devouring his novels, I read them all” (Hassan 3). This comment is particularly significant in that it captures the symbolic relevance of Farah’s work for the articulation of the Somali diasporic experience, as well as the transnational networks that his literary and institutional activities have fostered (Farah has held academic positions in Africa, Europe, and the United States, and has travelled extensively for conferences and book presentations).

Overt references to Farah’s fiction and declarations of literary indebtedness thus testify to the transnational dimension of the Somali diaspora and to the pivotal roles played by mediating literary authorities. At the same time, Somali-Italian writers have deployed strategies that are specifically tailored to seeking recognition in the Italian literary field. The most widely practiced is the explicit engagement with writers that any Italian reader would unmistakably perceive as part of the national canon. Fazel, in *Lontano da Mogadiscio*, stresses her familiarity, acquired during her colonial education, with symbolic figures Italy’s national-...

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89 The passage that Scego quotes appears in Italian translation: “Ho preso dimora in un territorio dai confini incerti che sono solito definire il paese della mia immaginazione” (10). [“I have dwelt in the dubious details of a territory I often refer to as the country of my imagination” (*Yesterday, Tomorrow* 48)].

90 This process of legitimation works in the opposite direction too: in Nuruddin Farah’s 2004 novel *Links*, two characters debate the merits of Fazel’s *Lontano da Mogadiscio*, one of them being “pleased that Somalis were recording their ideas about themselves and their country, sometimes in their own language, sometimes in foreign tongues” (226). For an intelligent discussion of this reference in relation to Farah’s literary affiliations, see Lorenzo Mari, *La resistenza dei legami* (302-310).

91 Ugo Fracassa (“Strategie di Affrancamento”) identifies three main strategies: the transition genres with greater editorial appeal (particularly noir fiction), “intertextual dialogism” (181) with institutionalized writers, and an intense translation activity.
political unity—Garibaldi and Mazzini—and with Italian classics—Pascoli, Dante, Pirandello, Pavese (42, 57, 58). Scego, in her latest novel Adua, models her style on an established tradition of literary expressionism, inaugurated by Dante’s Divina Commedia; the highest authority in Italian letters is also explicitly evoked through a direct quotation from the Inferno.92 Finally, in Ali Farah’s Madre Piccola, the last chapter is written in the form of a letter the protagonist sends to her psychoanalyst—the device around which Italo Svevo, the most renowned Italian modernist, had constructed La coscienza di Zeno (1923) [Zeno’s Conscience].

These strategies have wider implications for the fraught dynamics of reception of Somali diasporic literature in the Italian literary field, where it is usually analyzed as part of a highly contested body of writing that has been variously termed by critics letteratura della migrazione, italofona, minore, postcoloniale, afroitaliana (“literature of migration, Italophone, minor, postcolonial, Afro-Italian”). The emergence of this literature at the beginning of the 1990’s—when Italy transitioned from being a country of emigration to a destination for migrants and experienced massive transformations of its social fabric—has triggered a heated debate about the status of contemporary Italian literature and the unstated criteria of admission into its canon.93 As disagreements about the most pertinent definition for these writings already suggest, the central critical predicament involves the delimitation of an epistemological space of expression for authors that thematize migration and diaspora from a position of multiple belongings. It is, in other words, a question of borders. But it also,

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92 This is the tercet quoted by Scego: “Through me is the way to the city of woe / Through me is the way to the sorrow eternal / Through me is the way to the lost below” (Adua 27).

93 This is an incomplete list of critical studies and collections of essays on letteratura della migrazione: Quaquarelli, ed., Certi confini. Sulla letteratura italiana dell’immigrazione (2010); Pezzarossa and Rossini, eds., Leggere il testo e il mondo. Vent’anni di scritture della migrazione in Italia (2011); Contarini, Pias, Quaquarelli, eds., Coloniale e postcoloniale nella letteratura italiana degli anni 2000 (2011); Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, eds., Postcolonial Italy (2012); Rosanna Morace, Letteratura mondo italiano (2012); Chiara Mengozzi, Narrazioni contese (2013); Domenichelli and Morace, eds., Immaginari migranti (2015).
crucially, a question premised on a fundamental ambivalence, for the creation of definitional and expressive boundaries oscillates between two opposing tensions: strategic convenience and reproduction of marginality.

On the one hand, by delimiting letteratura della migrazione, critics have reinforced its exclusion from the domain of literary fiction; this has led to a regrettable disinterest for its formal properties in favor of its supposedly ethnographic or anthropological value. Following a logic of exoticist curiosity through which postcolonial fiction is often marketed and read in the West, the literary production of Somali-Italian writers has been often used to promote a kind of neoliberal multiculturalism that carefully ignores, first, the racial hierarchies and power imbalances that structure the relations between native and migrant communities, and second, intersecting inequalities along lines of class and gender.94 When not excluded from serious analysis because of a presumed lack of aesthetic refinement, these writings have been, in Giuliana Benvenuti’s words, “repressively tolerated” (70), that is to say, subjected to an inclusion that is really “a mere ploy for a kind of ‘hospitality’ that reinforces—like a self-serving mirror—[Italy’s] colonial image” (70). This has led to dubious editorial choices: Fazel’s Lontano da Mogadiscio, when it was first published in 1994, was prefaced by an introduction written by an Italian journalist whose main intent was to applaud Italy’s patronizing hospitality.95 Similarly, Scego had to abide by her editor’s decision to include, at the end of her first novel Rhoda, a list of Somali recipes, which—she has

94 This is what Graham Huggan calls the “anthropological exotic,” which “invokes the familiar aura of other, incommensurably ‘foreign’ cultures while appearing to provide a modicum of information that gives the uninitiated reader access to the text and, by extension, the ‘foreign culture’ itself” (37). Rhiannon Noel Welch, in her analysis of Fazel’s Lontano da Mogadiscio, further notices that texts themselves can contribute to the reproduction of a “rhetoric of hospitality” (216) in the name of neoliberal tolerance.
95 Prefaces by Italian journalists and writers, as well as co-authorships, were widely employed in the first phase of this literature’s emergence. Lontano da Mogadiscio was republished in 2013—in a bilingual electronic edition. For a careful reassessment of this novel twenty years after its publication, see the postface to the new edition written by its editor Simone Brioni (“A Dialogue that Knows no Border”).
claimed—“devalued the novel and had nothing to do with the story I had written.”

Furthermore, she has complained about the lack of serious editing in *Oltre Babilonia* [*Beyond Babylon*], and criticized the habit—widely employed by publishers of texts written by migrants or so-called second-generation immigrants like her—of placing a picture of the author on the book’s front cover.

Although these practices have contributed to the marginalization of Italian-Somali writers, claiming a literary and cultural identity that is radically other has had unquestionable benefits in terms of visibility and access to publication. In this respect, Chiara Mengozzi has argued that migrant authors currently writing in Italian are caught in a structurally inescapable “double bind,” deriving from the simultaneous desire and impossibility to sidestep socially produced expectations or to challenge the mechanisms that have led to “the reproduction of a stigma” (80) while securing channels of expression and publication venues. This ambivalence—one of the defining features of Somali-Italian literature—is visible in the contradictory attitudes that authors themselves have voiced towards *letteratura della migrazione*, a moniker that has been alternatively claimed and refused. Scego has been the most vocal against this designation, which, she has written, “risks reducing complex texts to the level of testimonies” (“L’incursione”). Interestingly, her hope that this literature will be granted full “artistic citizenship” in Italian letters is framed within an international competition against the most dominant literary space (Anglophone literature), which has already incorporated postcoloniality as mode of aesthetic expression: Italian literature, Scego wishes, will be finally able to boast its own Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith. With this position-taking, Scego

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96 These remarks are part of an unpublished interview with Brioni, which can be accessed at http://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/6165/.
97 For a discussion of the role of small publishing houses in the promotion of Somali-Italian literature—and in the dissemination of exoticist and stereotypical portrayals of Africa—see the fourth chapter of Vivian Gerrand’s *Possible Space of Somali Belonging* (123-149).
rejects a definition that is perceived as limiting in the Italian context, but that can be transformed into a symbolic vantage on the world stage. In aspiring to become literary spokespersons of a condition of diasporic postcoloniality, Somali-Italian writers are thus acknowledging the violence implicit in the expectations that a writer will be able represent and give voice to heterogeneous communities and unevenly experienced phenomena (such a migration), as well as the responsibility and symbolic gains that this role entails.  

Circumscribing Somali-Italian literature—and ambivalently appealing to its outsidedness—has certified its literary existence while simultaneously hindering its full inclusion into contemporary Italian literature. As a consequence, Somali-Italian writers have often demanded, in Ugo Fracassa’s words, “the neutralization of qualifying adjective (*migrant*) in favor of the absoluteness of the substantive (*writer*)” (183). Yet, the experience of uprootedness remains the fundamental premise of their literary activity—and one of the reasons why they have been generating critical interest and divergent reactions in the first place. Whether in the contested space of writing and migration, or in the oscillation between a desired inclusivity and the recognition of alterity, the Italian articulation of Somali diasporic literature is centered around the production or contestation of boundaries. Bordering processes determine the position that Somali-Italian writers occupy in the literary field, as well as the ambiguities inscribed in the desire for an inclusivity that would not flatten a symbolically profitable alterity. At the same time, as I discuss in the next section, geographical separations, ontological and legal zones of liminality, and linguistic margins are constantly thematized as strategies for drawing attention to Italy’s colonial occupation of the Horn of Africa, the central historical determinant that ties the political histories of Somalia and Italy, and that defines these writers’ diasporic consciousness.

98 This point has also been made by Ali Farah. See her interview with Comberiati (47-68).
Remapping the Interlocked Histories of Somalia and Italy

Italy’s colonization of Somalia began with commercial treaties in the last decade of the 19th century and reached its military and political peak during the Fascist era, up to 1941, when Britain took control of all the Italian colonies in the Horn of Africa. After the fall of Fascism, the United Nation entrusted the newly elected Italian government with a mandate of trusteeship (known as AFIS, Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana in Somalia) over the former colony. Colonial relations between the two countries were thus prolonged for another decade (1950-1960), under the disguise of cultural and economic guidance. It is not my intention here to delve into the complex history of Italy’s colonial occupation of the Horn of Africa, which has been rescued from historical oblivion thanks the groundbreaking work of Angelo Del Boca. Suffice it to say that, as of today—and despite an increasing influx of migrants from formerly colonized countries, a collective and serious reflection on the meaning and legacy of Italy’s colonial experience has not occurred (and does not seem to be part of the agenda of any major political party, educational initiative, or cultural institution). Scholars have conceptualized this reluctance to revisit a decisive period of Italian history by evoking Italy’s “colonial unconscious” (Ponzanesi 52) and “colonial amnesia” (Mellino 91), that is, a deliberate repression, instrumental to the perpetuation of racial, economic, and epistemic hierarchies that had been enforced during the colonial period and were never deconstructed after it. Within this framework, the writings of Somali-Italian

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99 Del Boca published, between 1976 and 1984, a four-volume monograph on Italy’s imperialist expansion in Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia (Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale). This study remains a cornerstone for contextualizing a still understudied period of Italian history. In 2002, Del Boca’s work has been revisited by Nicola Labanca in Oltremare. Storia dell’espansione coloniale italiana.
authors articulate a diasporic imagination premised on the peculiarities of Italy’s postcoloniality deriving from, first, Italy’s history of intra-national unevenness (the never-solved Southern Question); second, the massive impact of post-War migrations and contemporary refugee crises that have reshaped Italy’s social fabric; and third, Italy’s geographic position in the semi-peripheral European South and at the center of the Mediterranean cultural basin. Coming from a border space that has been traversed by converging routes of “migrating modernities” (Chambers and Curti 387), the literary works of Somali-Italian authors suggest that to give form to a diasporic condition means to engage with the world-constructing function of the boundaries that regulate the interactions among social communities. This is done along three main axes: identity, language, and urban cartography.

In relation to identity, a key figure that several of these writers mobilize in order to explore the ontological implications of bordering is the *meticcio*, a term that, during the colonial period, was used to identify the child of an interracial union between an Italian colonist (typically male) and a Somali citizen. As Giulietta Stefani has carefully detailed in *Colonia per maschi*, these mixed-raced children found themselves in a position of social liminality, rejected by the native community and not recognized as legitimate children by the Italian parent. Their situation became particularly dire during the Fascist era: whereas in the first wave of colonial expansion, Fascist propaganda encouraged interracial unions in the name of a patrilineal propagation of an imagined Italianness, the progressive diffusion and endorsement, among Fascist ideologues, of theories of biological racism led to a series of laws—between 1937 and 1940—that prohibited any relation between colonized and colonizer.

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100 On the conceptual peripheralization of the European South for the ideological invention of Europe, see Dainotto’s *Europe (In Theory)*. For a thorough discussion of the features of Italy’s postcoloniality, see Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo’s “Paradigms of Postcoloniality in Contemporary Italy” (1-29).
colonizer, and to an “aggressive media campaign” (Stefani 159) against the condition of meticciato. This new legislative framework further aggravated the isolation of mixed-race children, and—even after the fall of Fascism—the social stigma did not disappear.

Shirin Ramzanali Fazel’s Nuvole sull’equatore (2010) [Clouds Over the Equator (2017)], chronicles the bildungsroman of a meticcio girl during Italy’s trusteeship administration of Somalia (from 1950 to 1960), and shows the historical continuities that tie the Fascist period to the successive decades, when metici (plural for meticcio) were sent to Catholic missions and shunned from civil society. As a character in Ali Farah’s Madre Piccola explains, meticci were also called by Somalis “cyaal missioni” (227), a bilingual epithet created by combining the Somali word for “children” (cyaal) with the Italian word for “missions” (missioni): as the material space of exclusion gets inscribed into the linguistic expression, the latter becomes in turn a marker of identity. Giulia, the protagonist of Fazel’s novel, embodies the liminal condition of a subject who, similarly to Misra in Nuruddin Farah’s Maps, has been traversed by epistemic boundaries that sanction her marginalization from multiple social collectives. Abandoned by her Italian father and reluctantly sent to a remote Catholic mission by her Somali mother, Giulia navigates the construction of her unassimilable identity, as Simone Brioni has pointed out (“The Forgotten Italians” 197), through nonlinear movements across different cultural spaces. At the end of the novel, and after having completed her colonial education in another Italian school, she joins the Somali diaspora in Rome, as a “Italian girl with a dark skin […] wondering what would become of her” (181). This connection with the postcolonial moment—when the enthusiasm for a newly gained independence (in 1960) was shattered by Siad Barre’s military coup (in 1969)—is not casual, as it is meant to trace a historical trajectory that starts with the Fascist rule in the Horn of Africa and reaches the present moment of global migrations. In this sense, as Miguel Mellino has argued, “the
coloniality of the Italian national formation prepared the terrain for the contemporary racialization of international migration” (88). By interlocking the histories of Somalia and Italy through the bildungsroman of a meticcio girl, *Nuole sull'equatore* thus draws attention to the legacies of racialized narratives in the construction of Italy’s colonial other. These narratives, which had been disseminated and legally enforced during Fascism, were never eradicated from the national consciousness in the post-war period.

The figure of the meticcio is crucial for this kind of historical revision, as it epitomizes the intersection of racial, legal, and social boundaries that have prevented a collective reflection on the shared histories of Somalia and Italy. Furthermore, the temporal trajectory traced by Fazel’s novel activates a series of correspondences between the past and the historical present that testify to the cross-temporal and epistemic compass of bordering practices. Indeed, the convergence of linguistic, legal, and ontological coordinates used to delimit the condition of meticciato can be compared to the mechanisms of exclusion through which children of migrants are currently negated full participation in the social and political construction of Italy’s national community—Italy’s legislation on citizenship being still based on *jus sanguinis* (literally, “the right of blood”), a biological conception of national belonging premised on the organic connection between blood, ethnicity, and culture. The legal hurdles that children of migrants have to face to be granted Italian citizenship—and their consequent exclusion from the body politic of the nation—must then be understood within a wider framework founded on persistent yet historically flexible bordering practices, which Somali-Italian writers constantly thematize in order to register their political genealogies and contemporary repercussions for the organization of the social.

The same trajectory that entangles the racial categorizations of Italy’s colonial episteme to the present moment is explored by Kaha Mohamed Aden in her collection of
short story *Fra-indendimenti*, particularly in “Nonno Y e il colore degli alleati” [“Grandpa Y and the Color of the Allies”]. The story seamlessly moves from Somalia during Italy’s trusteeship in the 50’s to provincial life in Italy today, where the protagonist, a Somali woman, is approached by a truck driver who mistakes her for a prostitute. This traumatic encounter prompts the narrator to reflect on various forms of ideological interpellation to which she has been subjected: by “an enlightened feminist,” who considered her “a girl oppressed by his countrymen, obviously in urgent need of her help” (13), and by “a leftist fellow,” who, believing that—as a black migrant woman—she must be always right, has deprived her “of the risk one takes when is able to choose: that of being wrong” (14). The story then moves to the struggle of the narrator’s grandparents in the 50’s to send their daughters to Italian school, a decision that the Italian official interprets as an acknowledgment of their racial inferiority. On the one hand, this story suggests that the imposed identifications to which the narrator is subjected in the present cannot be understood without considering their common matrix, located in the colonial past. And, most importantly, Aden emphasizes how these interpellations derive from a structure of thought and feeling that is so ingrained in the national unconscious to traverse the entire political spectrum—from the blatantly racist truck driver to the well-meaning liberal.

These continuous interpellations aimed at locating Somali diasporic identity outside the racial and cultural boundaries of a presumed national homogeneity become decisive for the linguistic strategies that Somali-Italian writers have adopted in order to link the circulation of languages in their texts with the urban geographies and the political histories of Somalia’s and Italy’s capital cities, Rome and Mogadishu. By engaging with practices of border production along the interlocked axes of language and cartography, I want to suggest, Somali-Italian literature challenges paradigms of linguistic and spatial belonging in order to
rethink Somali diasporic consciousness within social and material geographies of non-possessive inhabitation.

This is done, first, by enplotting moments of linguistic mediation through the figure of the translator, a topos of postcolonial fiction that gets resignified in order to explore the affective and political implications of the vexed and etymologically inaccurate equivalence of *tradurre* and *tradire* (“to translate, to betray”). Igiaba Seego’s latest novel, *Adua*, centers on a Somali interpreter, Zoppe, who collaborates with the Fascists to secure an alliance with a warlord during the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. Similarly, the protagonist of Ali Farah’s *Madre Piccola*, Domenica-Axad, in reflecting upon her own bilingual upbringing, frames translation as affective dissimulation. Against the truism that posits translators as cultural and linguistic ambassadors, both authors investigate the gray area of mediation as either collaboration or anguished alienation—a space of uprootedness that is the linguistic correlative to the existential condition of *meticciato*. But the contradictory implications of negotiating linguistic borders—thematized in the ambiguous positionality of translators—are given form also through multilingualism, a defining feature of Somali-Italian writing that has been widely analyzed.101 What it is crucial to stress here is that the juxtaposition of Somali and Italian is meant to construct a space of linguistic and material inhabitation that cannot be organically possessed, and to entangle bordering processes that map identity onto language to the concrete geographies in which these languages circulate.

*La mia casa è dove sono* [My Home is Where I Am], Seego’s fictionalized autobiography, explores her fraught relation to the two linguistic and cultural spaces in which she was

101 See in particular Simone Brioni’s *The Somali Within* (chapter 1), and Maria Grazia Negro’s *Il mondo, il grido, la parola*, an extremely detailed study of the multilingual interactions of Somali and Italian—but also Arabic, Amharic, Tigrinya, Spanish, Portuguese, English, and various Italian dialects—as well as of the different forms of internal translation these writers adopt (parenthetical, contextual, through a glossary, etc.) for divergent narrative and symbolic purposes.
educated and socialized, and frames her own literary self-positioning through a profound metalinguistic consciousness. This is the novel's opening paragraph:

Sheeko sheeko sheeko xariir.
Story story oh story of silk.

All Somali fables begin with these words. Fables my mother used to tell when I was a kid. Mostly *splatter* fables. Fables of tarantism, coming from a nomadic world that did not care for sophistication. Fables rougher than a cedar chest. Hyenas drooling, babies disemboweled and recomposed, survival tricks.102

Right from the very first lines of her narrative, Scego draws unexpected connections between the languages and cultural traditions she is mobilizing. This is done, first, through the reference (in English) to a foreign film genre (*splatter*) that has become part of global film culture. But most importantly, she interlocks Somali’s orature, its fables, and the vernacular tradition of tarantism—an oral, pre-Christian set of rituals from Southern Italy that, after being rediscovered and popularized in recent years, stands as a reminder of the internal unevenness and fragmentation of Italy’s own cultural traditions.103 Therefore, as the boundaries between what is supposedly alien to Italian and what has been absorbed into it get blurred, Scego emphasizes the spuriousness of Italian, its foreignness to itself as it were.

The fundamental aporia inscribed in Somali-Italian authors’ linguistic choices can be understood by drawing Jacques Derrida’s reflections on language and belonging: because a language cannot ultimately be owned, Derrida suggests, it “exists asymmetrically, always for the other, from the other, kept by the other.” (40 italics in original). The asymmetries that

102 “Sheeko sheeko sheeko xariir. / Storia storia oh storia di seta. / Così cominciano tutte le fiabe somale. Tutte quelle che mia madre mi raccontava da piccola. Fiabe splatter per lo più. Fiabe tarantinate di un mondo nomade che non badava a merletti e crinoline. Fiabe più dure di una cassapanca di cedro. Iene con la bava appiccicosa, bambini sventrati e ricomposti, astuzie di sopravvivenza.” (11)

103 Although dated (it was first published in Italian in 1961), the essential scholarly monograph on tarantism, written by its major scholar Ernesto De Martino, is *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism.*
structure the relation between Somali and Italian are interrogated by constructing a language that has come from the other—traumatically received as a colonial “gift”—and that has been resignified to show the impossibility of possessing it. In so doing, Somali-Italian authors reject, on the one hand, the canonical paradigm of postcolonial fiction, in which the colonial language is appropriated and used to “write back” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989).

Because linguistic production and exchange happen relationally, and because the speaking and writing self cannot claim possession of a language, it would be futile to speak of appropriation. At the same time, going beyond an oppositional stance for the creation of a shared space of non-possessiveness is functional to the transformation of linguistic relationality into aesthetic and symbolic capital—a narrative tactic that mirrors the ambivalences between outsidedness and demand for inclusion that operate at the level of field dynamics.

As a consequence, while categories such as native, foreign, citizen, and immigrant cease to be defined by boundaries of linguistic identification, the reader is asked to approach the narrative space thus constructed as uneasily inhabitable. The metaphor of inhabitation seems to be particularly adequate here for two reasons: first, because of the etymology of the verb “to inhabit”, which derives from the Latin habitare, the frequentative form of the verb habere (“to possess”). In this sense, Somali-Italian literature severs this etymological tie by articulating ways of inhabiting a language without possessing it. But this verb is crucial also because this call for dispossession moves from language to the concrete places where language circulates, thus linking linguistic inhabitation to the contingent, historical dwelling in space.104

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104 For a discussion of inhabitable spaces as symbolic sites where migrant writers negotiate language and belonging, see Fulvio Pezzarossa’s “Una casa tutta per sé.”
In “Rapdipunt” [“Punt Rap”], a short story by Cristina Ubah Ali Farah, the juxtaposition of Italian and vernacular expressions from the Roman dialect through the voices of Somali-Italian diasporic characters mirrors the dense realism of the setting, a series of marginal sites in Rome being traversed by subjects that are engaged, as Caterina Romeo has noted, “in remapping urban spaces as loci of cultural signification” (102). Just as the title of this short story combines through a neologism the northeastern region of Somalia, Puntland, with the underground hip-hop culture of Rome’s peripheries, Ali Farah’s latest novel, Il comandante del fiume (2014) [The Captain of the River] entwines the mythical river of a Somali legend to the Tiber in Rome. As the young Somali-Italian protagonist Yabar embarks in a transnational journey to shed light on his family’s past, the Tiber becomes the central point of reference for the interrogation of his diasporic identity—a symbolic geography for meaning production as well as a lived, social environment.

Like Ali Farah, Igiaba Scego too aims to locate the Somali diasporic experience in the concrete geographies of contemporary Rome. The fictional pretext for writing La mia casa è dove sono is in fact a sort of mapping exercise she performs during a dinner with her cousins, who are also part of the Somali diaspora. Trying to imaginatively reconstruct Mogadishu, a city that has been devastated by a twenty-year-long civil war, Scego follows her mother’s suggestion and draws a map by retracing the places and memories of a lost city. Significantly, what might have been simply a recuperative and nostalgic project is transformed by a world-producing gesture. As she starts sticking on the original map of Mogadishu Post-it notes with the names of places in Rome, the two cities get juxtaposed: “[…] I wrote names of neighborhoods, piazzas, monuments: stadio Olimpico, Trastevere, stazione Termini, and so on. I glued everything around my paper-made Mogadishu. Then, although I can’t draw well, I tried to draw my memories. I traced lines, shapes, profiles. I cut newspapers. I wrote
sentences” (36). This imaginative space in which the two cities are inextricable from each other counters the repression of the historical presence of Rome in Mogadishu, and of the Italian language and culture in the former colony. By making Italy’s colonial occupation of Somalia traceable on the material surface of her map, Scego interlocks two geographies and their shared histories, so as to question assumptions about feeling at home in them: just as in Mogadishu “Italy was everywhere, in the names of the streets, in the eyes of the meticci that had been disowned” (30), so Rome vibrates with visible traces of its colonial past and imperial ambitions during Fascism.

To remap these two affective and material spaces together means to estrange the reader from Rome, and—metonymically—from the geography and history of the nation and their symbolic fabrication. Each chapter of the autobiography is dedicated to a place in Rome to which Scego feels emotionally attached, and each of these sites, which the reader might perceive as familiar and recognizable, is transfigured as a space constructed and inhabited by several others, continuously resignified through accumulating layers of history. Consider for instance the fifth chapter, titled “Roma Termini,” the main train station in Rome: its name evokes the pomp of the Roman Empire—Termini being a reference to the nearby baths (termi) of the emperor Diocletian—its architecture was redesigned during Fascism in a nostalgic, pseudo-imperial style and, in the 1990’s, the station and its surroundings became a social space where the Somali diasporic community would gather.106


106 After La mia casa è dove sono, Scego wrote a non-fiction book, in collaboration with a photographer (Rino Bianchi), titled Roma negata. Percorsi postcoloniali nella città [Denied Rome. Postcolonial Routes through the City]. The book is a mixed-media experiment: essayistic sections are interrupted by a series of photographs in which the bodies of contemporary migrants and refugees are visually superimposed on the forgotten symbols of Rome’s colonial and imperial past.
The works of Ali Farah and Seego thus reconfigures the cultural and material geographies of the Somali diaspora as spatio-historical records resurfacing in the urban palimpsest of Rome. They do so in order to contest the boundaries that fictitiously separate Somalia from Italy, Rome from Mogadishu. In so doing, they also aim to decolonize the spatial coordinates that structure the naturalized perception of the city, thus signaling the transition, as Graham Huggan has argued, “from a colonial framework within which the writer is compelled to recreate and reflect upon the restrictions of colonial space to a post-colonial one within which he or she acquires the freedom to engage in a series of ‘territorial disputes’ which implicitly or explicitly acknowledge the relativity of modes of spatial (and, by extension, cultural) perception” (“Decolonizing the Map” 134). As a consequence, Somali-Italian authors construct a reader-dweller, who is asked to recognize the impossibility of possessive inhabitation: Rome, a city that is perceived as transparently and quintessentially Italian, is shown to be foreign to those who are unable to read the traces of its colonial histories. Inhabitability, Somali-Italian writers ultimately suggest, depends on a sensibility that is simultaneously spatial and historical: the spatiality of remapping practices links diaspora to concrete sites of social negotiation; in turn, these sites become necessary for apprehending the contemporary moment of global migrations within a longer historical trajectory.

Reaccentuating Diaspora

Through the spatial entanglement of linguistic, cultural, and political geographies, Somali diasporic literature shows that bordering processes operate on multiple representational and analytical levels, and that addressing the complex negotiations deriving from the contestation
or redefinition of those boundaries means engaging with the histories that have determined their production and enforcement. Furthermore, just as the cartographic dimension of bordering gets formalized through imaginative remapping, so too the boundaries that fragment the multiplicity of the social are transposed formally into narrative and textual structures. This happens in *Maps*, as I have shown, through a process of border internalization that results in the fragmentation of the narrating voice into three pronominal modulations (first, second, and third person). What is crucial to highlight is that, rather than being simply a solipsistic meditation about the narrative or epistemic instability of the speaking subject, this formal solution responds to the need of relating external, environmental forces to the very form of the novel. Askar’s fractured individuality thus congeals the conflicts between different social and ideological formations that have shaped the history of Somalia and the trajectories of its diasporic communities—from the dream of an ethnically unified nation-state to the geopolitical schizophrenia caused by erratic affiliations during the Cold War decades. Similarly, Farah formalizes dialogicity in *Gifts* in order to interrogate the position the postcolonial novel in the contemporary world literary system, and to draw attention to the logic of dependency to which cultural products coming from the literary peripheries are subjected.

The same dynamics of interaction between form and socio-historical determinants inform the literary production of Somali-Italian authors: in their texts too, the borders that separate or remEDIATE different narrative voices are formal instantiations of conflicting interests and struggles that shape social reality. In this sense, Somali diasporic literature gives form to the social heteroglossia that Mikhail M. Bakhtin had identified as the key feature of novelistic imagination. But my evocation of Bakhtin—arguably the founding figure of modern novel theory—requires a crucial gloss, prompted by the fact that the critical toolkit
proposed by Bakhtin in “Discourse in the Novel” has been either overused to the point of analytical exhaustion, or narrowly adopted to emphasize—in a quite uncritical celebratory disposition—the capacity of the novel to represent social multiplicity and to frame the interactions of different voices, discourses, and social components. Instead, in order to grasp the formal dynamics of Somali diasporic literature, I suggest we turn to the theoretical foundation of Bakhtin’s theories, and specifically to a study written by a scholar that deeply influenced him: Valentin Voloshinov’s *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, first published in Russian in 1929. Voloshinov, aiming to synthetize Saussurean linguistic and psychological theories of language, had argued that the linguistic sign and the individual utterance, rather than being the expression of an isolated subjectivity, are saturated by socio-ideological forces. Because language and literary expression are intrinsically social, Voloshinov adds, social reality is refracted in language “by an intersecting of differently oriented social interests within one and the same sign community, i.e. by the class struggle.” (23, emphasis in original). Voloshinov’s argument was crucial to Bakhtin’s theorization of the novelistic discourse, for it allowed him to transfer the socio-political dimension of the linguistic sign to the novel as a genre, which, Bakhtin claims, is “a dialogized representation of an ideologically freighted discourse” (333).

These are the two central tenets of Bakhtin’s novel theory that could not have been developed without Voloshinov’s socio-linguistics: the social represented by the novel is a battlefield of competing ideological interests expressed linguistically; and its dialogism is the formalization of historically determined conflicts. In the context of Somali diasporic literature, what’s at stake is the very definition of diaspora as an ideologically saturated category, together with its narrative possibilities and symbolic relevance for fiction writing. The text that most acutely captures these fraught dynamics is Ali Farah’s *Madre Piccola*, a
diasporic epic that formalizes, on the one hand, the “social multiaccentuality of the ideological sign” (Voloshinov 8), and on the other, the boundaries that circumscribe the Somali diasporic experience, as well as those that fracture it internally.

_Madre Piccola_ is a formally intricate investigation of diaspora as a cognitive and affective absolute, which the alternating narrators acknowledge to be impossible to fully render following a logic of detached and sequential narration. Although focused on the intersecting lives of two cousins, Domenica-Axad and Barni, who grow up in Mogadishu but are forced to escape at the beginning of the civil war in 1991, the novel entangles the lives of several other diasporic subjects, aiming to delineate a self-sustaining narrative totality through continuous refractions of words, voices, and accents. Each chapter narrativizes dialogicity both internally and in relation to all the other chapters. There are three main characters that alternate as narrators, and each of their chapter is framed as a dialogue—either oral or epistolary—with a different interlocutor: Domenica-Axad writes to Barni and to her psychologist; Barni talks to an Italian journalist reporting on the Somali community of Rome, or she writes to Domenica-Axad; and Tageere (Domenica-Axad’s husband) talks on the phone with his ex-wife Shukri and with an American interpreter investigating the disappearance of a Somali woman.

In all these chapters, we can identify two types of dialogic reaccentuation. The first one happens in the oral dialogues between narrator and interlocutor: because the latter is always diegetically silent, the reader has access to his or her comments and oral interjections only when they are reported by the narrating voice. Moreover, each narrator constantly draws attention to the medium of communication (letter writing, oral conversation, or phone call) and often tries to justify a perceived lack of clarity, if not intelligibility. As a result, misunderstandings, hidden motives, and conflicting interests often prevail over the very
content of the narrative exchanges. This kind of dialogization not only literalizes the
continuous reaccentuation of the linguistic sign in the novel—a process that Bakhtin calls a
“spectral dispersion in an atmosphere filled with alien words, value judgements and accents”
(277)—but self-consciously suggests that diasporic dialogicity happens in a narrative space of
conflicting voices that are continuously silenced or misconstrued in a struggle for narrative
and symbolic hegemony.

The second type of reaccentuation involves the novel as a whole, as each narrating
voice—Domenica-Axad, Barni, and Tageere—reevaluates by retelling, thus inevitably
transforming, past events of their youth in Mogadishu and their trajectories of Somali
migrants dispersed around the globe. This process of multiperspectival diffraction is both
geographical and narrative: as the reader apprehends the intersections, gaps, and
contradictions among these narratives—as well as the spatial, affective, and formal
boundaries that separate them—the experience of diaspora emerges simultaneously as
unified by a shared sensibility of uprootedness, but also as deeply fractured along class,
gender, racial categories, and linguistic affiliations. If the chapters narrated by Tageere center
on the sense of alienation of the communities of Somali men unable to reconstruct effective
modes of socio-cultural belonging, Barni’s and Domenica-Axad’s narratives oscillate
between the difficult creation of affective and material pattern of solidarity premised on
gender and the obstacles posed to their psychic stability by politics of race (in the West) and
by clannish affiliation (in Somalia). Particularly for Domenica-Axad, who carries in her own
name the liminality of her meticcio identity, the process of coming to terms with her personal
history and bicultural affiliations takes the form of an unresolved dialogue in which multiple
ideological pulls converge and compete with one another—from the pressures to define her
identity by choosing monolingualism, to her desire to preserve Somali cultural traditions and transmit them to her child.

*Madre Piccola* thus formalizes three crucial aspects of Somali diasporic literature: first, the social and ideological boundaries that fragment different understandings of the experience of diaspora; second, the dialogic reaccentuation in which every attempt to articulate it linguistically is involved; and third, the historical forces, ideological pulls, and social contradictions that get crystallized in novelistic representation. These processes of differentiation and fragmentation of the social operate at the scale of the single text as well as in Somali diasporic literature understood as a whole. And, most importantly, it is through the impact of variable contextual determinants and external forces that the Somali diasporic experience is continuously resignified. Analyzing these processes requires a peculiar attention to how these texts engage with and work through practices of border production, enforcement, and contestation. In turn, the same bordering practices inform Somali writers’ self-positioning and their relation to multiple geographies of knowledge production. In this sense, what makes the Somali case particularly relevant for current theories of world literature—is its textured way of illuminating how borders are constituted and continuously negotiated at the messy convergence of aesthetic, political, and ideological vectors. This ultimately means that any discussion of the current configuration of the world literary system has to carefully consider not only how practices of border production and contestation affect the very conditions of possibility of literary expression, but also that contemporary literature is challenging our naturalized perception of territorial, linguistic, and cultural boundaries in order to articulate new and historically conscious modes of belonging.
Chapter 3

The Semi-Peripheral Novel: Narrating the Neoliberal Present from Southern India and Southern Italy

In the last decade, the concept of peripherality has proved to be particularly useful to literary scholars aiming to explore how aesthetic form responds to socioeconomic and political changes. Unlike previous critical terms that were highly discipline-specific, peripherality, as Jed Esty and Colleen Lye have argued, seems to be better suited to providing a common analytical ground to disciplines that have traditionally focused on marginalized artistic objects and subject positions (from postcolonial studies to ethnic and area studies).\(^{107}\)

Furthermore, thinking in terms of peripherality allows to critically engage with a fact that is often acknowledged but not sufficiently analyzed in literary scholarship—that the economic configuration and cultural transactions in today’s world are determined by increasingly stark conditions of unevenness. This means also that the qualifier *peripheral* should be preferred to *alternative*, because the latter has failed to address “the global integration under an imperialist world-system” (Esty and Lye 273) and the consequent unequal interactions among its geographies.

The notion of peripherality, it must be noted, was developed by Immanuel Wallerstein within the larger framework of world-systems theory. This theory is still looked at with suspicion in some sectors of literary scholarship that consider it reductionist because inattentive to non-economic dynamics and to the subtleties of cultural expression.\(^{108}\) In the

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\(^{107}\) Esty and Lye suggest that, in addition to peripherality, the other key concept (and expressive mode) that should be reevaluated for its creative and diagnostic potential is realism, which will be the topic of my next chapter.

\(^{108}\) For a thorough recapitulation of these divergent positions, see Palumbo-Liu, Robbins, Tanoukhi, 1-26 (2011).
course of this chapter, I instead suggest that the analysis of peripheral spaces and subject positions allows, on the one hand, to investigate the impact of capitalist forces in areas whose social and cultural dynamics cannot be understood outside a global framework, and on the other, to consider the contextual forces that make literary expression particularly apt for analyzing localized narrative responses and their formal specificities. The critical use of peripherality must then be understood within the wider concept of an integrated system that functions precisely on the perpetuation of unevenness and on the continuous production of marginal zones.

Although I draw upon a critical framework founded on the opposition between core and periphery, this chapter aims to complicate such dichotomy by focusing on the intermediate concept of the semi-periphery through the analysis of two novels set in Southern India and in Southern Italy. In doing so, I show that, if we want to think about how the spatiality of the contemporary novel can illuminate the historical, social, and political complexities of the present, we need to reconsider critical paradigms that rely on binary oppositions. In this sense, the advantages of looking at the intermediate formation of the semi-periphery are multiple: first, this approach problematizes, and ultimately rejects, the notion of alternativeness and its consequent and reductive assumption that there exist two cohesive entities (the West and “the Rest”). I instead show that semi-peripheral areas can exist within nations that are considered part of the West (Italy) as well as in economically emerging nations that have traditionally been thought as “the Rest” (India). The process of peripheralization can happen in any area of the world-system and does not imply alternativeness or exclusion from that system. On the contrary, as the Warwick Research Collective has argued, peripherality “names a modality of specific inclusion within a system: a given formation is ‘peripheral’, that is to say, not because it is ‘outside’ or ‘on the edges’ of a
system, but, on the contrary, because it has been incorporated in that system precisely as ‘peripheral’” (123-124 italics in original).

Similarly, my analysis of literatures from semi-peripheral areas suggests that the notion of the global South is more complex and more nuanced than how scholars of literary and cultural studies have mobilized it. As Roberto Dainotto has argued in his analysis of the rhetorical invention of Europe (Europe (in Theory)), the construction of Europe’s cultural and epistemic hegemony has been premised on the erasure of its internal other—a South that belongs to the North only as its obliterated counterpart. At the same time, categorizing India as part of the global South involves an oversimplification of its specificities, from its rising economic trajectory to the linguistic and cultural multiplicity that make this regional system difficult to grasp within canonical theorizations of world literature. Finally, semi-peripherality draws attention to a series of narrative strategies that are peculiar to the novel—a form of artistic expression that, because to its formal suppleness and disposition to grasp the dynamic unfolding of history, is able to register the full range of social transformations engendered by the irruption of capitalist modernity in marginal spaces.

In order to develop a new spatial and theoretical framework for the analysis of texts that cannot be satisfactorily approached by current critical paradigms, I engage two very contemporary novels, Vivek Shanbhag’s Ghachar Ghochar, published in 2013 in Kannada and translated in 2015 into English by Srinath Perur, and Nicola Lagioia’s La Ferocia [Ferocity], published in 2014 in Italian and translated in 2017 by Anthony Shugaar. As I analyze these two texts and discuss how they powerfully stage the impact of neoliberalism in two geographically distant but systemically comparable areas, Southern India and Southern Italy, I suggest that the position of these regions in the contemporary world-system affords

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109 On the peculiarities of India’s literary field, see Orsini.
Shanbhag and Lagioia a vantage point: in making seemingly contradictory yet perfectly integratable forces generative of narrative form, *Ghachar Ghochar* and *La Ferocia* articulate the combination of traditional social formations and capitalist modernization in semi-peripheral areas.\(^{110}\)

Although I am attentive to the specificities of these two regions and acknowledge their irreducible histories, cultural forces, and political genealogies, I do believe that there are elements that allow for this kind of comparison and that make it fruitful for a larger reconsideration of the contemporary novel’s engagement with space in relation to social, economic, and cultural dynamics. At first glance, *Ghachar Ghochar* and *La Ferocia* seem to be formally uncomparable, the former being a short novella narrated in first-person, the latter a lengthy social epic narrated by a traditionally realist third-person narrator. Yet, both texts use their semi-peripheral settings to articulate formally—and with divergent outcomes that depend on different local substrata—historical and economic processes that can only be understood when seen from a comparative perspective. As Franco Moretti has argued, “world texts”—that is, texts whose imaginative horizon is the world as a whole—come from areas “where historically non-homogeneous social and symbolic forms, after originating in quite disparate places, coexist in a confined space” (*Modern Epic* 50). Three elements thus contribute to the emergence of this kind of systemic imagination: semi-peripheral structural positioning, convergence of discordant elements, and circumscription of space. In *La Ferocia* and *Ghachar Ghochar*, it is precisely this compression and combination within a limited space

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\(^{110}\) In a 1976 article tellingly titled “Semi-Peripheral Countries and the Contemporary World Crisis,” Wallerstein had intuited that it was in those intermediate spaces that new configurations of the world-system could emerge. As U.S. hegemony was waning and the Socialist Block was breaking apart, Wallerstein saw in semi-peripheral nations a dynamism that was absent elsewhere: because of the distinctiveness of “their internal politics and their social structure,” Wallerstein argued, “their ability to take advantage of the flexibilities offered by the downturns of economic activity is in general greater than that of either the core or the peripheral countries” (463).
of different forms of social organization and symbolic expression that transforms these novels’ “intermediate and dynamic position” (Moretti “World-Systems” 68) into a heightened lucidity.

In this sense, the restricted geographical focus of the two novels (La Ferocia is set mostly between the cities of Bari and Taranto, Ghachar Ghochar is entirely set in Bangalore), rather than being a limit, is a spatial requisite for articulating a narrative framework in which world-historical phenomena—the transition to neoliberalism and the consequent reconfiguration of social and affective structures—are given novelistic form. More specifically, through the analysis of these texts’ formal strategies, I suggest that semi-peripheral novelistic expression is premised on the exploration of how residual forces—patriarchy, familism, and gendered violence among others—intersect with processes of market neoliberalization and environmental destruction. Within this spatially confined setting, the semi-peripheral novel, because of its more pronounced diagnostic potential, is thus able to capture historical transformations where and when they are most dramatically experienced.

The central transformation that La Ferocia and Ghachar Ghochar register with tragic clarity is a specific moment of capitalist modernity in semi-peripheral areas, that is, the consolidation of neoliberalism. In both texts, neoliberalism is framed not only as a series of economic principles and social regulations, but, most decisively, as a new modality of being in the world. As these two novels register how the neoliberal episteme integrates with social and symbolic structures that preceded it, they produce formal outcomes that reveal the spatial, temporal, and epistemic horizons of neoliberalism while diagnosing its impact on the social fabric of world semi-peripheries.
In its broadest definition, neoliberalism refers to “state policy interventions in the economy such as the privatisation of state or public resources, the curtailment of state welfare provisions, deregulation of trade and labour markets, and state initiatives to weaken organised labour” (Johansen and Karl 203). Yet, in areas of the world-system that have been gradually peripheralized, it also involves a series of structural adjustments coordinated by global policy-making institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization. Particularly in these areas, the social and environmental effects of neoliberal reforms have been disastrous. Nonetheless, and despite the increasing availability of fictional and non-fictional works interested in exploring neoliberal transitions from peripheral perspectives, critical attention is still asymmetrically distributed. Consider for instance the recent collection of essays Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture (2017), which, although it offers an excellent frame of analysis and a series of acute close readings, restricts its purview to novels from the United States and Great Britain. This is a decisive limitation, for it reinforces the false assumption that neoliberalism is a Euro-American invention, and that, as such, is best understood and analyzed in texts coming from its supposedly originating contexts. This chapter argues instead that we need to focus on peripheral locales and on texts written in non-hegemonic languages that offer a more complex perspective on the impact of neoliberalism across multiple geographies and cultural-literary contexts. As Sarah Brouillette has pointed out, “in setting up a critique of the marketization and economization of things that were ostensibly nonmarket, what it is too often ignored […] is the total global picture in its dynamic historical emergence” (277).

111 For a discussion of the geographically uneven effects of neoliberalism, see Harvey (2005), chapter 4.
112 On the contrary, as David Harvey argues, neoliberalism is an economic, political, and conceptual apparatus developed in globally diffused institutional and academic circles, and first concretely enforced in Chile, after Pinochet’s coup in 1973. When it was exported to the U.S. in the 80’s, “a brutal experiment carried out in the periphery became a model for the formulation of policies in the centre” (9).
Semi-peripheral novels thus compel us to consider the “total global picture” and to approach texts from a systemic perspective. Most importantly, they encourage us to write histories of the literary present in light of the global effects of neoliberalism in areas that have been peripheralized economically and in terms of critical attention, despite the fact that their literatures can offer powerful diagnostic tools for understanding contemporaneity. Only thus will it be possible to rethink how the location and spatiality of the novel are not merely geographical indicators, but strategies to illuminate how the unevenness and power imbalances of the world system get mediated in narrative form.

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My discussion hinges on two interlocked concepts—semi-peripherality and neoliberalism—and shows their centrality for rethinking where and how we locate the contemporary novel. Of these two concepts, neoliberalism seems the most unambiguous and yet is the most problematic. Indeed, recent literary scholarship has been debating its usefulness for investigating the current conditions of cultural production and the attending changes in literary form. Mobilizing neoliberalism seems today both too easy and too hard: too easy because the fuzziness of the term and its oftentimes unspecific use risks transforming it into “a cross-disciplinary buzzword” (Elliott and Harkins 2), or into an empty signifier; too hard because its critical traction seems to be dispersed among its multiple ramifications across very disparate spheres of individual and socio-economic life. Indeed, in the last two decades, neoliberalism has been defined as: a free-market economy aimed at verticalizing the concentration of wealth, a reactionary political project, a new form of subjectivity, a set of non-ideological, technical principles of governmentality, and a
political theological formation. If, on the one hand, too many referents can make the use of this concept ineffectual, on the other, restricting the field of inquiry to a specific literary genre has its advantages. This is due to a formal predisposition that enables the novel, and particularly the semi-peripheral one, to bring together and narratively unravel all these different strands. In *La Ferocia* and *Ghachar Ghochar*, this operation entails interlocking the economic framework with transformations in socio-political structures, which in turn shape affective relations at the microscale of the family unit. Both novels start from a rather traditional family plot and use the family unit as a lynchpin for exploring the intersections of economy and affect, capital and violence, tradition and neoliberal modernity. Specifically, in *La Ferocia*, this is done through spatial and narrative movements orchestrated by the omniscient narrator, whereas in *Ghachar Ghochar*, it is in narrative gaps and omissions—which are thrown into sharp relief by its narrow focalization—that the reader is asked to recognize the convergence of neoliberalism, gendered violence, and familism. The structural principle of entwinement emerges already in the title of the novel, an untranslatable expression invented by a character to qualify something that has been irreversibly entangled. “*Ghachar ghochar*” is a neologism that, as I discuss in more detail later, moves from the level of the story, where it is introduced as an expression of intimacy and affective bonding, to the discourse of the novel, in which it becomes a conceptual key used to illuminate the entanglements of traditional social structures and capitalist modernity. Within this framework, *La Ferocia* and *Ghachar Ghochar* show how the global dynamics of neoliberalism are experienced and given form to depending on the contextual specificities of semi-peripheral spaces.

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113 For an agile account of these divergent takes, see Huehls and Smith (2017), 2-3. On neoliberalism as a totalizing political-theological system, see Kotsko (2018).
If neoliberalism relates to the referent (what is being represented), semi-peripherality complements it with positionality (where) and representational mode (how). By bringing together these three elements, this chapter seriously considers, as Estry and Lye write, “the possibility that peripheral standpoints themselves afford distinctive epistemic advantages in descriptions of global capitalism in the post-Cold War period” (280). Yet, with one crucial caveat. Although the elitist, Western-centric dismissal of writings produced by historically marginalized subjects is today rightly considered a position anachronistic at best and ludicrous at worst, it would be equally wrong to claim that these texts as intrinsically valuable, as if their mere existence would necessarily entail a process of literary democratization. In other words, the relevance of texts coming from the margins of the system is not a kind of ontological a priori, but resides in their distinctive ability to formally register evolving social dynamics and, in Fredric Jameson’s words, “to seize [History] at its moment of emergence” (480). And it is during moments of emergence, Jameson continues, that “the Real might appear without warning, and disappear again if we are not alert to catch it” (480). If it is true that historical transitions are more pronounced in semi peripheral spaces because of their specific structural conditions, there also needs to be a kind of alertness, which depends precisely on the novel’s semi peripheral positionality and locus of enunciation.

On the one hand, by foregrounding their own position as a cognitive and epistemological foundation, La Ferocia and Ghachar Ghochar are engaged in the wider project that Franco Cassano has called pensiero meridiano (“southern thinking”), in which the semi peripheral South becomes a “subject of thought,” so as to “interrupt a long sequence in

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114 The first position found its most famous expression in Harold Bloom’s polemic against what he termed “the school of resentment” (The Western Canon 1994). For a discussion of how this controversy is implicated in the struggle for the acquisition of cultural capital, see Guillory, chapter 1 (1993).
which it has been thought by others” (5 my translation).\textsuperscript{115} On the other, becoming a subject of though does not imply alternativeness to the workings of capital and to the logics the neoliberal present. Consider \textit{Ghachar Ghochar}, a novella that, in chronicling the economic rise of a family and its resulting disintegration, ends up idealizing a past of imagined rather than real social cohesion. The kind of reactionary and pauperist ethos that pervades this text, however, does not preclude the narrative from lucidly exposing the combined effect of traditional social structures and neoliberal forces in the transformation of Bangalore.\textsuperscript{116} To better understand this seeming contradiction, we might recall Frederick Engels’ comment that Balzac, despite “his own class sympathy and political prejudices,” was able to portray the evolution of 19\textsuperscript{th} century French society better than “all the professed historians, economists, and statisticians of the period together” (168). An observation that was famously taken up by György Lukács, who proposed a crucial distinction between a writer’s “own conscious ideology” (in the case of Balzac, conservative royalism) and “the objective dialectic of form,” which is ultimately “an historical dialectic” (55 italics in original). It is in the semi-peripheral South, this chapter ultimately suggests, that the historical dialectic of capitalist modernization, with its consequent restructuring of social spaces and affective economies, emerges with arresting clarity and disastrous force.

Recognizing this diagnostic clarity means also revisiting the defeatist position that the novel is unable to critically investigate the spaces, institutions, and social formations that structure the contemporary world-system—an endeavor that might seem today impossible

\textsuperscript{115} This proposition resonates with a foundational principle of decolonial theory, which Walter Mignolo has expressed through the reformulation of the Cartesian \textit{cogito ergo sum} into “I am where I think.” This new “epistemic principle,” Mignolo argues, “legitimizes all ways of thinking and de-legitimizes the pretense of a singular and particular epistemology, geo-historical and bio-graphically located, to be universal” (81).

\textsuperscript{116} For a thorough discussion of the social and infrastructural consequences of the economic boom Bangalore has experienced in recent years, see the interventions from the international symposium in Goldman et al. (2017).
because of the total subsumption of every artistic form into its overdetermining socio-economic conditions. Thinking from the South means instead coupling a specific location in the world with an attempt to narrativize the present by taking advantage of the novel’s “sociability,” and particularly of its “sociability under capital” (Johansen and Karl 202). Crucially, the novel’s sociability entails, on the one hand, a formal predisposition for mapping major historical transitions, but also its own imbrication in the same transformations, which have in the last decades redefined the spaces where literature circulates. Just as any other aesthetic object in today’s literary marketplace, the meaning and value of semi-peripheral novels are determined by symbolic transactions and institutional validation. The analysis of their diagnostic potential cannot thus fail to consider the current configuration of the world literary system and its contingent dynamics of production of literary prestige. *La Ferocia* is a case in point in this regard: in 2014, when the book came out, Lagioia had written three novels that were praised in academic and literary circles but struggled to reach a wider public. In the year after its publication, the novel received mixed reviews and seemed to be destined to the same literary niche of Lagioia’s previous books. When, in 2015, it was awarded Italy’s most prestigious literary prize (Premio Strega), reprints started to come out at bestselling rates (Turrini 2015). Having established a strong presence in its national field, *La Ferocia* was translated in French in 2016, and in German and English a year later.

But in order to understand how Lagioia was able to reach Anglophone audiences (and the largest literary market in the world), three interrelated factors needs to be considered: first, the progressive opening in the last years of a traditionally monolingual

117 For a positive appraisal of the novel, see *Illetterati* (2014). Other critics, while commending Lagioia’s for his exactness and verisimilitude, expressed concerns about the novel’s overreliance on cumbersome literary models. See Marchese (2014).
publishing field to translated works.\textsuperscript{118} Secondly, the fact that Italian remains a powerfully symbolic language—in 2014, it ranked fourth in the most translated languages in the U.S. market for literary fiction (Ban 162)\textsuperscript{119} Lastly, and most decisively, the exceptional success of Elena Ferrante’s *Neapolitan Novels*, which has become a driving force in the consolidation of favorable conditions for translated fiction. Not incidentally, *La Ferocia* came out in 2017 for the same publishing house that launched Ferrante, Europa Editions and its sister Italian company Edizioni E/O—an imprint that, in just two years (from 2014 to 2016), saw its sales grow by 277\% (Milliot and Kirch 2017).\textsuperscript{120} This means that *La Ferocia’s* connection to Ferrante’s *Neapolitan Novels* is not only due to formal and thematic affinities (as I will discuss later), for its publishing trajectory too is concretely tied to the reconfiguration of the Anglophone field that Ferrante’s quartet has catalyzed. The semi-peripheral novel’s diagnostic potential cannot therefore be disentangled from global publishing networks that determine their level of visibility and sociocultural impact. But the publishing history of *La Ferocia* also shows that it is not sufficient to reiterate that the symbolic recognition from dominant centers heavily shapes the possibility of global circulation for literary works coming from semi-peripheral spaces, for it is equally crucial to track the shifting circumstances whereby literary value is produced at different scales and in interrelated but distinct literary fields. In this sense, whether the circulation of these texts can lead, in Jacques Rancière’s words, to a new “partition of the sensible and the sayable” (10)—that is to say, to new modes of apprehending and narrating the world—depends on a complex mix of

\textsuperscript{118} Particularly thanks to independent publishing houses and online literary journals (such as *Asymptote* and *Words Without Borders*).

\textsuperscript{119} For a detailed analysis of Italian to English translations between 2000 and 2008, see Fina (2015).

\textsuperscript{120} Daniela Petracco, director of Europa Editions UK, declared in a 2015 interview: “Ferrante’s success has changed the perception of Europa Editions. My job now is to really push the whole list so that people who come to us by Ferrante stay with us. That’s definitely happening in the US; there are bookshops where customers ask: ‘What’s new from Europa?’” (Page 18).
concrete and historically contingent conditions, from shifts in cultural and literary
dispositions to hardly predictable publishing trends.

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_Ghachar Ghochar_ first appeared in 2013 in Kannada, a language that is currently spoken by
more than 50 million people in the Karnataka region of India. It was the titular novella of a
collection of short stories authored by Vivek Shanbhag, who at the time was already a fairly
established writer in the Kannada literary field, having been writing for thirty years (Kuruvilla
2016). The novel received positive reviews in _The Hindu_, a major English-language
newspaper with a determining role in promoting texts written in vernacular languages and
increasing their intraregional visibility. Although some of Shanbhag’s previous work had
already been translated into English, it was the success of _Ghachar Ghochar_ that granted him
access to the world literary stage. The novella was translated by Srinath Perur, journalist and
writer, who worked in close collaboration with the author. In 2015, the British literary
journal _Granta_ published an excerpt in a special issue dedicated to contemporary Indian
writing; the same year the novella came out as a stand-alone book for Harper Collins India
and Faber & Faber, widening its readership to English-speaking audiences in India and in
the United Kingdom. In 2017, it “reached American shores,” (Sehgal 27) as an enthusiastic
_New York Times_ reviewer put it, after Penguin had acquired its publishing rights. The opening
of the U.S. literary field to works in translation is not a sufficient condition to explain

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121 Deepa Ganesh writes that Shanbhag’s “control over style and technique…open up his vision of life” (“To
See Beyond Sense” 2013), and that he “marks the quiet human aspiration to move towards a cosmopolitan
identity, but at the same time longs to reclaim the creative energies embedded in the past” (“Beyond Space and
Self” 2013).
Ghachar Ghochar’s circulation among Anglophone audiences. First, because, unlike Italian literature, whose symbolic prestige has been a decisive factor in the translation of *La Ferocia*, Kannada literature, despite its millennial history, rarely reaches readerships outside India—before the translation of *Ghachar Ghochar*, only one Kannada novel was ever published in the United States.\(^{122}\) Secondly, because Kannada literature remains underrepresented even in path-breaking collections of vernacular writing. Consider in this sense Amit Chaudhuri’s *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (2001). The anthology has certainly contributed to redressing the tendency, common among Euro-American literary scholars, to discuss Indian postcoloniality only through fiction written in English. However, and despite the breath of languages and traditions it encompasses, Chaudhuri’s anthology includes only one Kannada writer, U. R. Ananthamurthy.

In this context, the wide circulation and positive reception of *Ghachar Ghochar* point to important changes in the dynamics of consecration of semi-peripheral novels in the contemporary world literary system. In a 2002 article that critiqued Pascale Casanova’s unitary paradigm of world literature, Francesca Orsini noticed that “the global does not incorporate the regional literatures of India. It cold-shoulders them” (87).\(^{123}\) In privileging fiction written in English in the polymorphic and effusive style inaugurated by Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Orsini argues, what remains invisible and unavailable to global readerships is a complex and multilingual tradition of vernacular writings less focused on national

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\(^{122}\) The novel was U. R. Ananthamurthy’s *Samskara*, published by Oxford University Press in 1976. For a careful reading of this text in relation to the reception of Western modernism in post-independence Kannada literature, see Manavalli (2012). For an introduction to Kannada writers of the 20th century, see Prasad (1987).

\(^{123}\) Orsini criticizes Casanova’s theorization because it cannot account for “the exceptional complexity of [the Indian] national field,” which functions according to “competing, sometimes overlapping distinctions of region, culture and class, each with its own sphere of literary production, and with multiple sets of artistic mediators” (82). Orsini is right in pointing out the reductionism of Casanova’s dichotomy between, on the one hand, the monolingual/national/realist pole, and on the other, the multilingual/international/modernist option. Yet, she sometimes underestimates the fundamental logic of competition that structures (although in non-homogenizable ways) both spaces.
allegories and more interested in “small-town tedium, frustrated youth, couples incapable of communicating with each other, the impossible gulfs between aspirations and reality” (87). If this analysis was accurate in 2002, today there seems to be a shift towards a kind of vernacular writing that is precisely what Orsini had described: minutely realist and interested in the everyday life of middle-class subjects. The translation and success of Ghachar Ghochar is one of the most cogent instances of this broader phenomenon, which is affecting both the literary space of the subcontinent and the world literary system. After being published in English, the novella was translated from English into Marathi, Tamil, and Hindi. In this sense, English remains the most powerful means of global consecration, but it is also as a catalyst, within the Indian field, for inter-vernacular mobility.125

Semi-peripheral novels, in circulating within distinct but interrelated systems in which cultural and symbolic capital is unevenly distributed, are therefore crucial for grasping the dynamics of production of literary value at the intersection of different scales. At the same time, they can illuminate unexpected connections among literary spaces that share the same structural position of semi-peripherality within the world system. In Ghachar Ghochar, this inter-peripheral dialogue, both thematic and formal, is made explicit and deployed for symbolic gains in the paratext. The Penguin edition in fact comes with a telling blurb on the cover, penned by New York-based, Gujarati-speaking, and English-writing author Suketu Mehta, who declares: “Vivek Shanbhag is an Indian Chekhov.” Metha, here personifying the consecrating mediator and precursor of contemporary urban realism, evokes Chekhov as a literary authority for the novella and as the canonized master of concision and authorial

124 This new attention for vernacular writing has been analyzed also in relation to genre fiction (Gupta 2013). As for the emergence of a localized and stylistically bare literary sensibility in contemporary Indian fiction written in English, see Anjaria (2016).
125 For a discussion of the status of the Indian literary field with regards to vernacular-to-English and intervernacular translation—where English and Hindi have become increasingly crucial as bridge languages—see the collective interview with Indian publishers and editors by Kuruvilla (2017).
reticence, achieved through restricted focalization. These formal features of Chekhov’s writing, together with the thematic interest in unheroic and inept characters, are indeed central in *Ghachar Ghochar*. In this sense, a literary affiliation that seems to have operated unconsciously for the author is made patent by a mediating agent. Even more significantly, the connection between a contemporary Kannada writer and a Russian classic from the late 19th-century points to a transhistorical dialogue between literary semi-peripheries, as spaces that have responded in comparable ways to the massive transformations brought by evolving phases of capitalist development. Chekov’s social and political horizon was Tsarist Russia, a state that, in Louis Althusser’s analysis, epitomized “the accumulation and exacerbation of all the historical contradictions then possible in a single State” (95-96)—that is to say, a semi-peripheral space in which the production of economic and social unevenness can be compared, *mutatis mutandis*, to the verticalization of wealth in Indian society under neoliberalism. What emerges in this link then is not only the non-linearity and cyclicity of capitalist expansion—which produces similar effects at different historical times and in culturally heterogeneous areas—but also the formal affiliations that semi-peripheral writers establish when giving form to analogous conditions of unevenness. This kind of inter-peripheral dialogue can be further explained by drawing on a crucial point made by Pascale

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126 On India’s “New Urban Realism,” see Singh (2018).
127 I say unconsciously because, when asked about his literary models, Shanbhag has named Kannada writer Yashwant Chittal (Kuruvilla 2016), Kannada classic and modern literary traditions more generally, and—as for Western writers—“Isaac Bashevis Singer, Tolstoy, Melville, Katherine Anne Porter, Jose Saramago, Hemingway, Joyce” (Rajan 24). Chekhov is never mentioned.
128 These are the major contradictions Althusser lists: “Contradictions of a regime of feudal exploitation at the dawn of the twentieth century… Contradictions of large-scale capitalist and imperialist exploitation in the major cities and their suburbs, in the mining regions, oil-fields, etc. Contradictions of colonial exploitation and wars imposed on whole peoples. A gigantic contradiction between the stage of development of capitalist methods of production…and the medieval state of the countryside. The exacerbation of class struggles throughout the country, not only between exploiter and exploited, but even within the ruling classes themselves…” (96). To Althusser, the accumulation of these contradictions could not but lead to revolution, which was overdetermined by them. For a thorough analysis of India’s transition to neoliberalism, see Mazumdar (2018).
Casanova in her analysis of the relevance of Faulkner for marginal authors seeking to gain symbolic recognition, where she argues that semi-peripheral writers tend to establish formal affinities with authors who occupy homologous positions and who have reached global prestige after representing situations of heightened contradictions between traditional forms or social structures and capitalist modernity.\(^{129}\)

In *Ghachar Ghochar*, the expressive emergence of the historical contradictions of neoliberalization occurs through spatial compression. First, because in terms of narrative geographies, the novella rarely ventures outside contained spaces (the coffee shop, the household); and secondly, because the basic unit through which the reader apprehends the transition to new economic modes and structures of feeling is the family—with its internal power hierarchies and complex affective transactions. The novel’s temporal structure too is perfectly circular, as if it was meant to define the narrative arch by restraining divergent paths and truths that cannot be uttered. *Ghachar Ghochar* opens (and closes) with the unnamed narrator sitting at the table of his secular temple, the Coffee House, a café in Bangalore where he spends the greatest part of his day. As soon as the narrative contract is established at the end of the first chapter—“…I’m desperate to unburden myself” (9)—the narrator deftly announces—the novella chronicles the vicissitudes of a lower-middle class family that, after successfully launching a business selling spices, rapidly climbs the social and economic ladder and joins the ranks of the new rich. Leveraging the established model of the rags-to-riches plot, Shanbhag condenses in little more than one hundred pages a commentary on Southern India’s economic transformations in the last three decades, a

\(^{129}\) See Casanova’s discussion of the “Faulknerian revolution” (336-347). Casanova’s analysis of this interperipheral dialogue is analytically impeccable; however, it becomes problematic when it is used to buttress a teleological narrative about literary modernity—whose attainment, in her view, is formally dependent on the choice of modernism and on the consequent rejection of realism.
psychological portrait of a family, and an investigation of different forms of violence (gendered and economic). Except for the first and last chapter, set in the narrative present, the rest of the novella recounts in non-chronological order a series of brief scenes that get progressively arranged into a rather straightforward plot: after the narrator’s father (Appa), who is the sole provider of a family living on the brink of poverty, loses his job, he invests his retirement benefits and joins his brother (Chikkapa) in a business venture consisting in buying spices in bulk and reselling them. The unexpected economic success of the business (called Sona Masala) allows the family to buy another house in an upmarket neighborhood, to lavishly spend on the marriage of the narrator’s sister (Malati), and to create a salaried position for the narrator—“director of the firm” (69)—exempting him from the obligation to perform any actual work. Tension ensues when Anita, an outspoken woman who joins the family through a semi-arranged marriage with the narrator, brings to the surface the structures of power that govern the household. By the end of the narrative, a series of implicit and more overt cues suggest that Anita has been killed, possibly by the same mobsters the family regularly hires to punish the insolvent clients who might jeopardize their violently secured economic status.

_Ghachar Ghochar_ has been praised for its formal rigor—a reviewer defines it “crisply plotted” (Sehgal 27)—and for its stylistic austerity—another applauds the “marvelous brevity of [its] writing” (Rajan 24). Yet, the same formal features that make it compellingly readable are also indices of a structure of obfuscation (or utter erasure) that undergirds its narrative and ideological core. The story is told from a rigidly focalized perspective, which generates a sort of formal claustrophobia that subtly invites the reader to sympathize with the narrator’s feelings, grievances, and worldview. Shanbhag’s choice of this restricted point of view has two main—and antithetical—consequences: on the one hand, it emphatically directs the
reader’s attention toward the narrator’s discontent about the affective collapse of his family—a process that he imputes to their newly acquired wealth. At the same time however, the narrator’s insistence on this ideological critique obfuscates what the novel’s narrow focalization and formal structures actually reveal, that is, the combination of familism, violence, patriarchy, and ruthless pursuit of capital accumulation that have defined the experience of neoliberalism in world semi-peripheries.

It is then through the co-presence of divergent economic and social formations that Ghachar Ghochar, as a semi peripheral novel, frames moments of emergence and extreme historical contradictions. Take for instance familism and private entrepreneurship, two principles premised on opposite understandings of how society should be organized (the family and the individual). Indeed, throughout the novel, the narrator frames them as opposing and incompatible forces, praising the kind of solidarity and affective connection that had bonded the members of the family before their economic ascent, and condemning the destructive individualism that progressively takes them apart. In one of the several passages in which the narrator expresses his moral and ideological stance, he comments on Malati’s separation from her husband in his typical, sententious tone: “In the new house, we were locked in the cells of individual rooms, and there was no opportunity to exchange casual confidences. Lying alone in my room, I sometimes wondered if Malati’s happiness would have been better served had Sona Masala not existed at all” (61). In opposing the communal structure of their previous house to the compartmentalized organization of their new one, the narrator spatializes a fairly hackneyed critique that opposes a pre-neoliberal

130 In one of the most ideologically explicit passages, the narrator pontificates: “It’s true what they say—it’s not we who control money, it’s the money that controls us. When there’s only a little, it behaves meekly; when it grows, it becomes brash and has its way with us. Money had swept us up and flung us in the midst of a whirlwind” (53). All quotations are from the Penguin edition of the novel, published in the United States in 2017.
time of social cohesion to the oppressive atomization that the family experiences after they move (rhetorically, this is achieved through the insisted parallel between the house and the prison, emphasized by the choice of “we were locked” and “cells”). If, as David Harvey argues, the foundational principle of neoliberalism is that “human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills” (2), The narrator is here contesting the equivalence between well-being and entrepreneurial individualism, while praising intrafamilial cohesion as both ethically sound and socially desirable. The problem with the narrator’s ideological critique, which the focalization throws into sharper relief by exposing it as myopic and a-systematic, is that, throughout the novel, the family’s preservation of its economic status is shown to depend precisely on familism, that is, on an implicit intrafamilial pact against any external agent that could menace its wealth as well as the reproduction of its structuring hierarchies. Despite the narrator’s convictions, it is actually after the success of Sona Masala that the family discovers a new kind of cohesion, necessary to guard its economic prosperity.

_Ghachar Ghochar_ thus shows the contradictory yet functional integration of entrepreneurial individualism and familism, whereby the family’s status and riches have to be preserved by any means necessary. This seemingly contradictory integration makes perfect sense when seen from a wider historical perspective; as Adam Kotsko has argued, “neoliberalism carries out its own ‘great transformation’ by reconfiguring the relationship between the political and the economic and reimagining the household precisely as a site of indefinite accumulation” (71). Unsurprisingly, indefinite accumulation can involve violence. When Malati wants to recover her jewelry from her ex-husband’s (Ravi), she visits his house with a gang of mobsters who terrorize him and his parents (an unnecessary but highly symbolic performance of power). We later learn that the same gang, whose members
Chikkapa calls “recovery agents” (60), is regularly hired to extort payments from clients of Sona Masala. As the characters’ economic climb progresses, the novel reveals the peculiar combination of a familistic idea of self-preservation with neoliberal entrepreneurship. In this way, one of the central ontological tenets of neoliberalism—the pursuit of well-being through individual achievements—gets integrated into a more traditional understanding of the family as the basic social unit.

But downward mobility and loss of capital are not the only menaces that the discourse of Ghachar Ghochar identifies, for the family has to guard itself also against external agents that threatens to subvert its internal hierarchies of power. Because—and not coincidentally—these external agents are always women, the novel shows another form of combination in the neoliberalist episteme of semi-peripheral spaces, that between patriarchy, gendered violence, and middle-class upward mobility. Scholarship on gender and nationalism has convincingly shown the centrality of specific constructions of gender for the imagination of national identities and the enforcement of unequal societal arrangements.131 Particularly in the case of South Asian nations, representational and material practices aimed at rigidly defining gender roles and prerogatives have contributed to the construction of an extremely powerful and normative idea of femininity.132 In the case of India, as Rupal Oza has argued, it is impossible to analyze the nation’s transition to neoliberalist forms of social and economic organization without understanding how, starting in the 1990’s, anxieties about globalization and loss of national sovereignty have caused the progressive fortification of rigid gender and sexual identities: “in the context of India’s intensified encounter with global

131 On the intersections of gender, sexuality, and nation-building, see Parker et al. (1992), McClintock (1995), and Yuval-Davis (1997).
132 Contemporary feminist scholarship on South Asia has shown how current political formations and social movements are, often contradictorily, challenging hegemonic constructions of gender. See in particular Loomba and Lukose (2012) and Roy (2012).
capital,” Oza maintains, “the concomitant loss of sovereignty has resulted in the
displacement of control onto national culture and identity” (2). In other words, the
emergence of a small, affluent middle-class has coincided with the fortification of gender
hierarchies—hierarchies that in turn have guaranteed the reproduction of economic
unevenness, both at the familial and at the societal level.

_Ghachar Ghochar_, in registering how patriarchy and gendered violence intersect with
neoliberalism, also reveals how these forces formally compartmentalize the discursive space
and delimit the agential possibilities of the characters. The novel is in fact very rigidly
structured: of its seven chapters, the first and the last (because of their narratively prominent
position) unequivocally establish the narrator’s discursive authority. Starting with the second,
the narrator explicitly links the chapter division and sequence with the power hierarchies in
the family: in the second chapter, he introduces Chikkapa, “the central figure in [the]
household” and “the family’s sole earner” (11); the third chapter is focused on his father,
Appa, Chikkapa’s business partner and, as such, second in the hierarchy; the fourth opens
with these words: “Amma, Malati, and I—we’re tied for third place in the household
hierarchy” (39); the fifth chapter focuses on Malati’s failed marriage, while the sixth
chronicles the semi-arranged marriage between the narrator and Anita and how her arrival in
the family starts disrupting its precarious equilibrium by calling into question the distribution
of power among its members. Because the formal organization of the narrative mirrors the
inflexibly defined space of action and agency of each character, _Ghachar Ghochar_ clearly
identifies the potential agents of narrative and economic disruption: three women—Chitra,
Suhasini, and Anita—who come to represent the central discursive and ideological threats to
the neoliberal episteme that substantiates the novel’s historical and political background.
Chitra, the narrator’s ex-girlfriend, appears in the very first pages and is allotted an extremely limited discursive space, exactly four paragraphs. The couple, we soon learn, used to meet at the Coffee House, where the narrator is sitting at the beginning of the novel as he recounts their brief friendship. In a few pages, we learn that Chitra is a political activist, works for an unnamed women’s welfare organization, and often reports to the narrator stories of women she is passionately trying to protect from domestic abuse and violence. Crucially, the narrator notes that “the things she said about men I took as applying to myself. I could only sit there mute, feeling vaguely guilty” (6). When he decides to stop going to the Coffee House at their usual meeting time, Chitra disappears from his social and affective network as well as from the novel’s discursive space, which the narrator firmly controls throughout the narrative. Despite her brief and seemingly negligible appearance, Chitra has a crucial role in Ghachar Ghochar’s narrative economy for three main reasons. First, because she sets, right from the start, the historical and ideological coordinates that will guide the entire narrative: in her allusions to episodes of violence perpetrated by family members against women who did not abide by gender hierarchies, she provides a blueprint for interpreting the upward trajectory of the narrator’s family as inextricable from the reproduction of patriarchy. Furthermore, the narrator’s reaction to her comments highlights his acceptance of the status quo and his middle-class bêtise, which is both ideologically functional to the neoliberalist project and allusive to a series of notorious precedents, from Monsieur Homais in Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary to the protagonist of Robert Musil’s The Man Without Qualities—that is, literary embodiments, just like him, of bourgeois mediocrity. Finally,

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133 On the intersections of gender, economics, and sexuality in India, see Legg & Roy (2013) and their theorization of contemporary “hetero-sovereignties” (466).
Chitra’s rapid excision from the discursive space draws attention to the relevance of her threat to the novelistic economy.

The threat becomes more urgent in another decisive scene involving Suhasini, Chikkapa’s lover. In the second chapter, the narrator recounts a troubling episode he had witnessed a few weeks before, when a woman unknown to the family had come to their house carrying a container of masoor dal curry and looking for Chikkapa. As soon as he is informed of the visit, Chikkapa, who is hiding in his room, instructs Amma to tell her that he is not at home. What follows is a tense confrontation between Sushaini, who makes clear that she just wants to see her friend, and Amma and Malati, who refuse to let her in. The scene culminates with Amma throwing to the ground the container of food Sushaini had brought and aggressively yelling invectives against the helpless visitor. From his perspectival vantage, the narrator comments: “The woman had not abused us. She had not come here to pick a fight. We were thrown off balance by her love for one of us, and so we tore into her with such vengeance that she collapsed to the ground, sobbing” (17). Immediately after, he adds: “on that day I became convinced that it is the words of women that wounds other women most deeply” (17). This completely misguided interpretation, which explains away the family’s rage with a gendered theory of linguistic aggressiveness and with a self-exempting notion of familial love, throws into sharp relief the actual reason behind this excessive show of violence, that is, the necessity to protect the economic assets of the family by preserving its internal hierarchies. What the myopic analysis of the narrator obfuscates is, in other words, the intrafamilial pact in which familism, patriarchy, and safeguarding of capital get combined to violently contain any agent of disturbance. Moreover, because this gendered violence aimed at protecting the sole origin of the family’s wealth is perpetrated by Amma and Malati, this pivotal scene also challenges paternalistic narratives that portray
women simply as victims of gendered violence, and that ignore their central role in the enforcement and reproduction of social and economic hierarchies in the neoliberal episteme.\textsuperscript{134}

But there is yet another character that exposes the novel’s ideological core by violating what the narrator calls “an unwritten rule that all members come to the family’s aid when it is threatened” (18). It is his wife Anita, who is the only one to voice her dissent for how Sushaini has been treated and who, in doing so, comes to embody the most urgent threat to the economic wealth of the family, to its rigidly defined hierarchies, and to the neoliberal structure of feeling that the novel powerfully registers.\textsuperscript{135} A structure of feeling premised on the intersection of capital, power, and affect, as Anita unequivocally makes clear. After Amma’s aggression, she tells her: “You want to ensure that Chikkapa remains unmarried. You can’t stand the thought of anyone else entering this house and challenging your authority” (99). In exposing the personal stakes of Amma in the family’s distribution of power, as well as the tacit understanding that their economic assets need to be safeguarded at all costs, Anita transgresses the inviolable rules that govern the family’s affective economy: in so doing, the narrator prophetically suggests, she “had outdone herself when it came to suicidal forthrightness” (100). Indeed, the same day Anita leaves for Hyderabad where, as the characters’ conversation in the last pages unambiguously suggests, she will be murdered. Yet, Anita’s irruption into the discursive space is crucial not only because she brings to the

\textsuperscript{134} Relatively, Anita Loomba and Ritty A. Lukose note that scholarship on contemporary communal violence in South East Asia “has shown that women are not just targets of violence but also passionate advocates of the ideology of community, honor, shame, revenge, and masculinity that shape such violence” (10).

\textsuperscript{135} Raymond Williams’ expression is particularly adequate here because it stresses the “specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationship” as they are actively experienced in social practices (in \textit{Ghachar Ghochar’s} case, within the microdynamics of the narrator’s family). Williams considers the notion of the structure of feelings—rather than “more formal concepts” (132) such as world-view or ideology—key to his understanding of social experience as affectively lived in a non-fixed, dynamic (and contradictory) process. See \textit{Marxism and Literature} (128-135).
fore the family’s unspoken consensus—based on “selective acts of blindness and deafness” (100)—but also because she represents the tangible reminder of a sense of precarity that haunts the family throughout the novel.

In framing precarity not as a momentary situation or an exception, but rather, in Gabriel Giorgi’s apt phrasing, as “a constitutive condition of subjectivity” (71) under neoliberalism, *Ghachar Ghochar* further registers the social and affective impact of neoliberalism in semi-peripheral spaces. There are two episodes in the first part of the novel—when the family has to rely solely on Appa’s salary as a salesman—in which the condition of precarity, resulting from the lack of labor rights and the disappearance of networks of social care, emerges as the defining condition of the family’s economy and self-perception. The first time is when, because of a counting mistake, Appa discovers a discrepancy of eight hundred rupees, a sum that could completely ruin them. Although the mistake is spotted, the lingering sense of being on the verge of catastrophe remains. And indeed, a little later, Appa is forced into early retirement after his company’s distribution system is outsourced and the union is bribed into compliance. As larger dynamics of neoliberal transformations encroach into the microeconomy of the family, the novel envisions a possibility of social redemption in Sona Masala—a business venture whose launch is described in almost mystical terms. However, as soon as they flee from the class of exploited laborers to join the wealthy upper middle-class, the sense of precarity (previously due to the absence of labor rights and of State-provided safety nets) comes to be associated with the specter of downward mobility. This potential catastrophe is evoked multiple times by Anita, who (in the passage quoted above for instance) had disclosed the real motive behind the family’s treatment of Sushaini, as well as by the narrator, terrified by the mental instability of the other owner of Sona Masala, Appa, who has not yet written a will and could
“become ruinously entangled in some philanthropic enterprise” (23). The same sense of precarity that bonds the family against external threats becomes for the inept narrator—who earns a salary without performing any kind of work—an existential incapacity to embrace the neoliberal rhetoric of hard work and intelligent investment of capital. Such incapacity is unsurprisingly framed, in line with neoliberal-patriarchal dogmas, as the threat of emasculation: in being incapable of fulfilling the role of the male provider, the narrator accepts instead to “[live] off alms” (90) in exchange for a passive acquiescence to the family’s power structures. Once again, the integration between traditional hierarchies and neoliberal modernity is revealed in the gaps of his own myopic account.

Given my discussion so far, it seems relevant that the novel’s title is *Ghachar Ghochar*, a nonsense expression that qualifies something that has been entangled beyond repair. I have been analyzing the narrative and socio-historical coordinates of this novel by mobilizing the concepts of integration, combination, and intersection; in fact, I could have chosen what Shanbhag himself proposes as a paratextual key to access the text, *ghachar ghochar*—an irreversible entanglement. Yet, the diegetic understanding of this snarl that cannot be untied is once again determined by the despotic point of view of the narrator, who connotes this concept in ways that obscure what the novel actually entangles: economy and affect, capital and violence, traditional social structures and neoliberal modernity. The first time the expression *ghachar ghochar* appears in the novel is during Anita and the narrator's honey moon: noticing a knot in the drawstring of her underskirt, she tells him that the string “has become *ghachar ghochar*” (77). She then explains him that this expression was invented by her brother when they were kids and that it is privately used only in the affective space of her own family. The narrator mistakes her sharing this linguistic concretion of emotional bonding for a sign of their newly achieved intimacy. Accordingly, the day after he uses it to
describe their entangled legs after their first sexual intercourse—to the dismay of Anita, who
does not laugh. As the narrator appropriates Anita’s words, “ghachar ghochar” loses the
positive connotation it had for her and becomes a way of describing the forced relationality
that causes continuous conflicts within the narrator’s family—conflicts whose deep causes
he is unwilling to investigate, for that would mean acknowledging his position of privilege as
well as the hierarchies that undergird it.136 “Ghachar ghochar” reappears in the very last
sentence of the novel, when, in a moment of sudden lucidity, the narrator understands his
complicity in Anita’s assassination, which had been decided collectively a few days before
with his passive yet decisive consent. When he finally asks himself “What have I become
entangled in?” the reader has all the elements to answer, “a murder.”

Within the novel’s diegesis, “ghachar ghochar” thus alternatively refers to affective
intimacy (for Anita) and conflictual relationality or moral conspiracy (for the narrator). It is
also connected to a sense of nostalgia for an idealized past that the narrator continuously
voices: in his view, there is the bad entanglement of the wealthy present and the good
entanglement of the indigent past, which he remembers as “a gentler, more leisurely time”
(1), “a simpler time” (107), a time of solidarity and shared responsibility. Once again, the
narrator articulates a misguided critique of the present premised on the idealization of a past
whose lack of safety nets and hierarchical organization he carefully condones. His is
ultimately a reactionary critique—verging on pauperism—that ignores not only his own
privileged status, but most crucially the complex web of economic and ideological
determinants that have transformed semi-peripheral societies and exacerbated their socio-

136 This understanding of entanglement as intrafamilial relationality is perfectly captured in several instances in
which the narrator blames women for breaking the family’s peace, for when he declares: “Now, what can I say
of myself that is only about me and not tied up with the others? Wherever I tried to start, I quickly run into one
of three women—Amma, Malati, or Anita—each more fearsome than the other” (63).
economic inequalities. Rather than the affective entanglement the narrator yearns for as an irremediably lost condition engendered by economic penury, the novel registers the functional entanglement of affective transactions, economic mobility, and power structures in the neoliberal transformation of semi-peripheral spaces. That *Ghachar Ghochar* is narrated from the perspective of someone who has socially and economically benefitted from the same transformations only makes the novel’s diagnostics more glaringly apparent.

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Formally, *Ghachar Ghochar* relies on stylistic concision and restricted focalization to illuminate the ideological motives and forces that the narrator is unable or unwilling to detect as they operate within his family and in broader socio-economic dynamics. Yet, the formal options available to semi-peripheral writers are as varied as the cultural and literary contexts that animate their writing. Nicola Lagioia, who has dedicated his intellectual and writing career to exploring the social transformations of Southern Italy in its transition to the most ruthless and environmentally devastating neoliberalism, writes *La Ferocia* with specific formal and literary models in mind. There is certainly the French realist tradition of Balzac and Flaubert—hence an expansive, florid style, and a third-person omniscient narrator that orchestrates the intersecting trajectories of major and seemingly insignificant characters (as compared to the characterological economy of Shanbhag). One also senses the decisive influence of the Southern Italian school of realism, from Giovanni Verga to Tomasi di Lampedusa, particularly in Lagioia’s acute interest for the Italian South as a social totality whose contradictions cast light on the history of the nation as whole. Finally, at the plot level, the portrayal of *La Ferocia*’s enigmatic protagonist and of the fate of her family
resonate with one of the central tenets of Greek tragedy—that human downfall is caused by a fundamental flaw, a curse, or a moral stain, which no rational effort can eradicate.

As I mentioned before, both Ghachar Ghochar and La Ferocia use the family unit as a central matrix that the novel has traditionally used to scale up to societal questions; yet, if Shanbhag chronicles an upward trajectory, Lagioia focuses on the unavoidable demise of the wealthy and corrupt Salvemini family as an allegory of a South that has chosen ferocity as its main economic, social, and ethical drive. Most importantly however, both novels are animated by the same urge to theorize the semi-periphery from a position that is as invested in its harshly contradictory realities as it is determined to point to their historical and political causes. In other words, Lagioia and Shanbhag understand the semi-peripheral South as a totalizing horizon of meaning-making, yet one that is not framed against a modernity coming from the North—neither as a belated arrival nor as a radically alternative option. Instead, these spaces are integral parts of a globally experienced condition of capitalist modernity and, as areas that have been progressively peripheralized to sustain systems of unequal accumulation, they find themselves in structurally homologous positions of marginality.

Therefore, on the one hand, contextual circumstances and specific literary repertoires push towards different formal outcomes; on the other, spatial homology and particularly intense socio-economic inequalities allow these texts to capture the divergent elements intersecting in the constitution of a global neoliberal present.

La Ferocia begins in medias res with a young woman walking on the roads of a residential neighborhood in Bari “naked, and ashen, and covered in blood” (17). The scene, narrated in a cinematographic style as a continuous long take, introduces the absent center of the novel—Clara, who will be later found dead at the foot a parking building—and sets the
generic and literary coordinates that will guide the rest of the narrative.\(^{137}\) As reviewers have rightly noticed (Sarti 2017, Kennedy 2017), *La Ferocia* is part noir thriller (propelled by the mystery of Clara’s death), part family saga, and part psychological drama. Drawing on detective novel tropes and structures, but deploying high literary markers aimed at distinguishing his novel from genre fiction, Lagioia accumulates multiple generic and formal layers in order to articulate a socio-historical diagnosis of four decades of neoliberalism in the Italian South, from the massive economic growth of the 1980’s to the progressive destruction of its social fabric and ecological diversity.\(^{138}\) He does so by centering the narrative on the Salvemini family and the networks of minor characters that gravitate around it; in this way, the novel envisions a dynamic and intricate social totality whereby the narrative thread moves seamlessly from the political elites and entrepreneurial upper middle-class to the urban *lumpenproletariat* of the city of Bari. Lagioia’s acute focus on the vicissitudes of the Salvemini family is thus a structural device the allows him to open the narrative to wider social and historical forces intersecting in the Italian South. When Clara is found dead, his father and family patriarch Vittorio, who has climbed the social and economic ladder as a ruthless real-estate developer, is under investigation for corruption. The first section offers a complex portrait of the family: Annamaria (Vittorio’s wife), Gioia (their teenage daughter), Ruggero (the other child and famous doctor), and Michele, the youngest child, the consequence of one of Vittorio’s affairs and, like Clara, an enigmatic outcast unwilling to passively accept the family’s moral corruption. As the novel progresses, Michele starts

\(^{137}\) For an analysis of Lagioia’s cinematic style, see Quattrocentoquattro (2015).

\(^{138}\) On the ways in which contemporary authors of literary fiction use tropes and plot devices from popular genres while being deeply invested in signaling the literariness of their own creations, see Rosen (2018), who argues that “as formal experimentation, stylish writing that avoids cliché, and social acumen are prized in the subfield of literary fiction, writers who want to adopt popular genres but gain literary prestige can strategically deploy these features, along with other literary markers such as high degree of allusiveness, a thematizing of readers and reading, and other self-reflexive attempts to distance ‘serious’ literary production from commerce.”
suspecting that Clara’s death, officially a suicide, is actually a murder, and embarks in an
obsessive detective search that will lead to the unearthing of a massive system of violence,
corruption, and omertà—a code of silence adopted from organized crime that is shown to be
functional to the Salveminis’ unregulated accumulation of capital.

Just as Ghachar Ghochar registers the integration of familism, gendered violence, and
neoliberal entrepreneurship in the transformation of Southern India and of its class and
economic hierarchies, La Ferocia can be read as a narrative response to the transition to
neoliberalism in the Italian South, a space being reconfigured by the same combination of
pre-existing social practices and neoliberal modernity. The Warwick Research Collective has
analyzed these combinatory phenomena by recuperating the concept—first developed by
Trotsky in economic analysis—of combined and uneven development, in order to describe
“a situation in which capitalist forms and relations exist alongside ‘archaic’ form of economic
life and pre-existing social and class relations” (11). In readapting this theory to cultural and
literary production, WReC proposes a convincing account of world literature by stressing
that the final determinants of artistic expression are to be found in the dynamic and spatially
expanding development of capitalist modernity. However, their theorization falls short when
they posit that only “irrealist aesthetics” (68) can give form to the ways in which different
literary spaces articulate to the irruption of capital in their specific social and cultural
substratum. Both Ghachar Ghochar—an agile, monofocalized novella—and La Ferocia—a long
and elaborate social epic—demonstrate instead that the “fundamental dissonance in the
structure of reality” (65) engendered by combined and uneven development can be
registered through a realist mode of expression. In La Ferocia, this dissonance leads to a
peculiar framing of temporality as related to different phases of neoliberalism in the semi-
Peripheral South.
It is worth noting at this point that Huehls and Smith, in their discussion of the historical trajectory of neoliberalism, identify four successive phases: the economic (in the 1970’s), the political-ideological (in the 80’s), the sociocultural (in the 90’s and early 2000’s), and the ontological, in which we are currently living and whose central feature is the “extension of market rationality…from a way of thinking…to a way of being” (9). This taxonomy and temporal schematization, as Huehls and Smith convincingly show, helps to explain the representational shifts in the literature of the last half-century. However, although its sequential structure works for British and American literature (their main field of investigation), this model cannot account for the specificities of neoliberalist transitions in world semi-peripheries. As La Ferocia’s articulation of time shows, the emergence of neoliberalism in the Italian South is predicated upon the juxtaposition of these phases; consequently, it is narratively articulated through structures of temporal overlapping and non-sequential repetition. Consider for instance how the novel juxtaposes what Huehls and Smith call the economic and the ontological phases. The former gets manifested in the continuous reference to Ilva, one of the largest and most polluting steel plants in Europe, which becomes the symbol of the system of unregulated and uneven development in the Italian South.\footnote{For an introduction to the history of Ilva and to the environmental impact of its activities, see the dossier commissioned by the European Parliament’s Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (Vagliasindi and Gerstetter 2015). Ilva’s violations of environmental laws and their effects on the local population had been denounced for years by Italian journalist Alessandro Leogrande, whose articles on this issue have been recently collected (Dalle macerie 2018).} The presence of Ilva, in punctuating the narrative and in defining its historical and economic background, functions as a temporal index and interpretative key. The steel plant, a symbol of industrial capitalism that, because of the failure of the state to enforce environmental standards, has been releasing in the nearby areas carcinogenic dioxins causing a peak of lung, kidney, and liver cancer, explicitly appears in the novel only in a few
instances. Yet, its social and environmental effects are everywhere, from the destruction of the social fabric of the city of Taranto (where the steel plant is located), to in the death of migrating plovers and pink flamingoes, unaware that “the nourishing muddy water” of the salt marshes where they are feeding are contaminated with “such elements as cobalt, lead, manganese” (350). Ilva thus symbolizes the system of capitalist production, corruption, and environmental deregulation from which the real-estate activities of the Salvemini family have enormously profited. At the same time, by offering a minute psychological portrait of its main beneficiary, Vittorio Salvemini, the novel also suggests that the kind of ferocity that propels his unscrupulous pursuit of wealth is a mode of being in the world, an ontological foundation tied to the neoliberal episteme that gets juxtaposed to the most immediately recognizable economic mode. In this sense, through the overlapping of the ontological and the economic phases, Lagioia suggests that the neoliberal transition in the semi-peripheral South responds to processes of acceleration and combination—processes that are in turn given form through a peculiar organization of narrative time.

The novel in fact proceeds not in a stable chronological order, but through continuous and often challenging-to-track analepses. This is of course partially due to generic requirements: as we have seen, Lagioia’s relies on formal tropes of noir fiction—flashbacking to the characters’ stories and motives being one of the most canonical—in order to slowly reveal the mystery of Clara’s death. Yet, the novel’s temporal framing responds also to its socio-historical referent, as it formally mirrors the heightened intensity of neoliberalist development in the semi-peripheral South. In contrast with Franco Cassano’s proposition that, against the “absolutization of speed” (xvi) characteristic of modernity, southern thinking recuperates and foregrounds slowness as an antidote, La Ferocia shows that the experience of neoliberalism in semi-peripheral spaces leads to modes of
apprehending time premised on intensified turbulence, rather than on oppositional
deceleration. This emerges in the formally restless use of analepsis and, most strikingly, in
the narrative repetition of several episodes, to the point that, in one instance, Lagioia
rewrites verbatim an entire paragraph at three different narrative moments (354, 368, 411).
If, in *Ghachar Ghochar*, temporal circularity sustains the novel’s claustrophobic focalization,
which in turn reveals its ideological underpinnings, *La Ferocia* connects its narrative
organization of time, on the one hand, to processes of neoliberal acceleration and
juxtaposition, and on the other, to a structure of perspectival diffraction that progressively
reveals the historical and political syntax of the novel.

Although the narrative is firmly orchestrated by a canonical third-person omniscient
narrator, for the most part of the novel the narrator recedes into an organizing entity that
weaves together the voices of its numerous characters. Through long sections of free
indirect discourse and sudden jumps in focalization, Lagioia constructs a kind of
multiperspectivity whose major aim and effect is not a postmodern relativization of truth,
but the nuanced registration of each and every attempt to conceal it. The reader is thus
exposed to the psychological complexity of major and minor characters, to their interests,
bias, and vulnerabilities not in order to prove that each of these perspectives is legitimate,
but as a way of revealing a truth by formally exposing, through the alternation of
perspectives, every interested effort to obfuscate it. In this sense, the noir architecture is
once again useful: most immediately, there is the truth about Clara’s death that Michele
finally discovers—she was beaten to death during an orgy. But on a deeper level, there is the
truth of a system of political corruption, environmental devastation, and violence that
encroaches on every narrative corner of the novel.
The Salvemini family therefore functions as a structuring nucleus through which Lagioia constructs what David Kurnick, writing about Elena Ferrante’s imaginative world, defines as “differently scaled visions of the collective” (“More Talk”). In other words, the dynamics of coercion and the moral standards that govern the family (Vittorio regularly blackmails his own children into tacitly cooperating in his illicit activities) are amplified through the implication of several other characters, whose presence contribute to building a totalizing narrative space. In this sense, the affinities between Lagioia and Ferrante are not just thematic and spatial—their novels being assiduously concerned with the social histories of the Italian South (Naples in Ferrante, Bari and the Apulia region in Lagioia). Most significantly, it is on the formal level—that is, in the narrative principle of an expanding relationality—that their novels often dovetail. Kurnick rightly notes that, in Ferrante, “the central partnership between Lila and Lenù functions as a generator of these narrative totalizations, these widenings of the social and referential frame.” Similarly, in *La Ferocia*, it is through the Salvemini family that, as the narrative expands, its “social and referential frame” comes into view.

The novel’s widenings are narratively propelled by Michele’s investigation on the death of his sister—a device Lagioia strategically uses to explore the intersection of political corruption, market deregulation, and ecocidal ventures that have shaped neoliberal policies in the semi-peripheral Italian South in the last four decades. Just as Clara is the absent focal point in a web of moral depravation, his father Vittorio, the real estate mogul who has leveraged his social capital to gain access to the power cliques of Bari, is at the center of a network that spreads into every form of power, from politics (he exchanges favors with government ministers, mayors, and chairs of foundations) to culture (he sends his lackeys to threaten the chancellor of the University of Bari), to the judiciary system (he blackmails the
chief justice of the Courts of Appeal). By delving into these networks of power and corruption, La Ferocia thus reveals the mechanisms whereby the socio-cultural substratum of Southern Italy is integrated into neoliberal modernity.

The economic downfall of the Salvemini family is in fact spurred by Michele’s decision to defy a totalizing system founded on the combination of multiple elements: first, there is a religious tradition that, in its choice of absolute forgiveness, is complicit in the moral and political corruption that pervades society. At Clara’s funeral, when the Chancellor of the University of Bari (who had been involved in a violent sexual relation with her) caresses her body, the narrative turns into a long interior monologue uttered by the officiating priest, who ponders: “The Pentecostals would have prohibited it, the Adventists detested it,…but the Roman variant, Catholic and Apostolic, knew how to take pity on professors who caressed a dead woman in her coffin, its embrace was broad, its heart boundless, it could feel the heartbeat of a man when he steals from his brother’s pocket, when he counts the cash, when he cheats on his wife, when he swears to a falsehood, when he murders and rapes and sets fires…” (88). Lagioia suggests here that Catholicism, as a deeply ingrained religious ethos, legitimates by forgiving the pervasive misogyny and gendered violence which, parallel to religion, structure the cultural and social foundations of the world La Ferocia portrays. As a prostitute Michele is questioning during his investigation offhandedly remarks, “everyone knows that men like to hit girls” (423). The naturalization of this congenital violence is further registered in a passage in which Alberto, Clara’s husband, is distracted by a noise while reading the newspaper; as he folds the pages, Lagioia writes, “the oil tankers in flames got mixed up with the husbands clubbing their wives with shovels” (66). Benedict Anderson famously described the newspaper as crucial technology for the imagination of a community because of its arbitrary juxtaposition of events connected only
by “calendrical coincidence” (33). Here however, it is not just temporal simultaneity that links an accident involving oil tankers to patriarchal violence. As the rest of the narrative carefully details, these two seemingly unrelated events, which are formally juxtaposed in the space of a single sentence through the mental associations of a rather minor character, are essential components of a total system, in which gendered violence, the oil fineries around Taranto that, just like Ilva, release pollutants in the adjacent areas, and the business activities of the Salvemini family are inextricable rings of a chain that the appearance of a newspaper, in this brief passage, is fleetingly capturing.

In constructing La Ferocia’s narrative totality, Lagioia thus constantly draws attention to how Vittorio’s real-estate empire—a synecdoche for unchecked capitalist development in semi-peripheral spaces—had thrived because of the functional integration of this socio-cultural substratum with neoliberal policies of market and environmental deregulation. Consider Lagioia’s own epigraph to Part One of the novel—“Those who know say nothing, those who speak do not know” (14)—a reference to the widespread culture of omertà in Southern Italy, a code of silence meant to protect criminal interests from state authorities. The most accredited etymology of this word connects it to the Neapolitan word for “humility,” that is, to the hierarchical structure of Mafia organizations (Corso 1935). Other linguists have linked omertà to the Spanish word bombrada (“manliness”), via the Sicilian word for “man” (omu). In capturing the combination of a masculinity, honor, and economic interests, this etymological juncture becomes a matrix for navigating the narrative world of La Ferocia. It is then not coincidental that the Salveminis’ downfall begins when Michele decides to break this code, forcing the director of the Regional Environmental Protection Agency to investigate on the illegal dumping of toxic waste in which his father

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Vittorio has been involved during the construction of a tourist resort. Crucially, the director hints that the Salvemini family might just be a clog in a larger system: as he tells Michele that they will certainly find “something dirty” beneath the tourist complex; he also suggests that Vittorio might have been actually forced to accept the illegal dumping: “Didn’t it occur to you that he might never had a choice? That someone, while they were building that fucking tourist village, might have ever so politely asked him to stop the work. Just for a couple of days. Enough time to come in with an earthmover and a couple of trucks, do what they had to do, and leave” (440). Although it remains an unverifiable suggestion, the allusion to more powerful criminal powers gives a sense of the kind of totalizing framework one needs to envision in order to grasp the intersecting forces and interests that substantiate La Ferocia’s world.

Formally and stylistically, this world is captured through a kind of realism that could be described with the same words Eric Auerbach had used to analyze Balzac’s style and literary sociology: “…every milieu becomes a moral and physical atmosphere which impregnates the landscape, the dwelling, furniture, implements, clothing, physique, character, surroundings, ideas, activities, and fates of men, and at the same time the general historical situation reappears as a total atmosphere which envelopes all its several milieus” (473). In La Ferocia, the central milieu and what Auerbach calls “the general historical situation” emerge in the description of the spaces that the Salvemini family inhabits and moves through, starting with their house, in which centuries of history of the Italian South are solidified, “as if the villa could rejoin,” Lagioia writes, “something that reached back earlier than its own foundations: the Austrian before the Bourbons, and the Aragonese before the Austrian” (39-40). The adjective Auerbach uses to characterize this type of realism in Balzac is “atmospheric” (473), and indeed, with La Ferocia, Lagioia recuperates the Balzacian lesson in
order articulate a narrative and social atmosphere—of which the Salvemini are the most glaring and ruinous instantiation—that encompasses the economy, the judicial bodies, the public sphere, and the religious and cultural substratum. In this sense, it seems fitting that the editor of a local magazine tells Michele that the Salvemini family is “the very incarnation of social injustice” (323), or that a journalist who has been investigating on their shady businesses remarks that they are “one of the physiological consequences of this land” (327). Conscious of the risk of sounding outmoded yet ethically committed to pinpoint specific historical causes, Lagioia articulates a quasi-biological understanding of socio-economic injustice. As a consequence, the same atmosphere of economic unevenness, corruption, and moral degradation spreads from the central narrative nucleus (the Salvemini) to the peripheries of the text, that is, to the plethora of minor characters and socially marginalized subjects that populate this novel, from a driver who has been blackmailed into not testifying on what he knows about Clara’s murder, to Pietro Giannelli, a minor but emblematic character (the reader meets him as he is distributing flyers in a Spiderman costume outside a shopping center), who embodies a growing precariat ignored by the neoliberal state and scraping for survival amidst volatile markets and informal economies.

By ranging from the entrepreneurial class to the urban *lumpenproletariat* and by narratively conjoining divergent social spaces within a single atmospheric totality, Lagioia also establishes a central matrix of interpretation, which in the course of the novel becomes the defining ethos, attitudinal stance, and political drive of the social world he portrays: the titular notion of ferocity. Etymologically, ferocity is linked to the Latin word for “beast” (*fera*) and to the related adjective *ferus* (“beastly”). For the purpose of my discussion, it is worth noting that the negative connotations of savagery and brutality that the concept today evokes have gradually emerged from the more neutral semantic field of fierceness, to which
"ferus" originally referred (Pianigiani 1907). This etymological trajectory that links the word to the animal kingdom and decouples it from negative undertones becomes central to Lagioia’s project of distinguishing between different historical, if not philosophical, understandings of ferocity, as well as for diagnosing their social consequences. First, there is the ferocity of the animals that punctuate the narratives in its most tense moments: quite surprisingly for a novel so acutely interested in human deeds and social dynamics, there is a wide array of animals making continuous, if unexpected, appearance—moths, crickets, snakes, sewer rats, mites, butterflies, migrating birds, flamingoes, cats, and flies. At the most immediate level, animals displace the centrality of the human by shifting the focus to a non-anthropocentric framework. Yet, they also contribute, on a formal level, to the perspectival diffraction that structures the novel. In the opening scene, for instance, the narrator seamlessly moves from a focalization on Clara to sections in which the world is seen from the perspective of nocturnal animals populating Bari’s suburbs. This disorienting technique is regularly employed throughout the novel not simply, as Viktor Shklovsky famously argued, as a “way of seeing things out of their usual context” (9) so as to estrange our perception of the world portrayed by forcing us to apprehend it in a non-automated (that is, literary) way. Most decisively, in focalizing several sections of the narrative on non-human beings, Lagioia aims to differentiate between, on the one hand, a kind of ferocity that is deemed brutal by humans but that is actually neutral, instinctual, and impersonal, and on the other, a calculated and perfectly rational brutality, peculiar to humans, and particularly destructive in the socio-historical context this novel is representing. This distinction is then used to buttress La Ferocia’s ethically motivated indictment of those who recur to the supposedly intrinsic ferocity of the human nature as a way of exempting themselves from the consequences of deeds that are in fact deliberate and lucidly intentional. As Michele ponders towards the end
of the novel: “We blame the mechanism. Like blaming it on nature. If there’s no choice, then there’s no blame either. Doing something instead of not doing it. Doing it” (427). It is precisely in the choice of “doing it,” in the agential nature of the characters' choices that Lagioia locates various forms of human ferocity: there is Vittorio’s acquisitiveness and thirst for social and economic capital, Clara’s paradoxical ferocity in achieving her self-annihilation, but also the ferocious determination of Michele in vindicating his sister’s death and that of Danilo Sangirardi (the journalist investigating on Vittorio’s ecocidal ventures), who is moved by civic duty and community-based political engagement. In this sense, the insistence on the multiple connotations and potential outcomes of this structuring drive becomes a crucial caveat to the quasi-deterministic understanding of social injustice that La Ferocia seems to propose.

Ferocity can thus be seen as the social, political, and economic unconscious of this novel, a way of being in the world that, Lagioia suggests, is coextensive with neoliberal modernity in the Italian South. Within this historical framework and spatial compass, the novel itself mediates, by giving them narrative form, the forces that shape the social landscapes of Italy’s semi-peripheries. In so doing, La Ferocia reactivates one of the central problematic of novelistic representation: the effort of the novel to supersede historically experienced reality, and the consequent acknowledgment of its impossibility. As Lucien Goldman wrote paraphrasing one of the central tenets of Lukács’ novel theory, “precisely to the extent that the novel is the imaginary creation of a world governed by universal degradation, this supersession cannot itself be other than degraded, abstract, conceptual, and not experienced as a concrete reality” (5 italics in original). The ultimate truth of the novel is therefore its self-awareness: an awareness of the degraded nature of the world it is giving form to, but equally of its own failed attempt to transcend this degradation. To put this more
specifically and to understand how these concepts operate in the historical context and novelistic world of *La Ferocia*, we should turn to the last pages of the novel.

After Michele decides to deal the final blow to his father’s already crumbling real-estate empire by reporting his environmental violations, Lagioia omits to detail the family’s financial downfall. The reader is thus presented with a temporal gap, a narrative ellipsis that occupies the white space between the last chapter and the “Epilogue”—and this comes as a certain surprise, given the novel’s intense focus on the Salvemini family and on their affective or business networks up to that point. Set in their villa, the spatial correlative to the alternate fortunes of the Salveminis, the novel’s short epilogue describes the arrival of the new owners, a family of nouveau riche whose upward trajectory, Lagioia suggests, has been as sudden and hazardous as that of the previous occupants. Once again, the villa is framed as the repository and spatial instantiation of unending cycles of rises and falls: “It had been the villa of the local podestà. A senator had sold it in the early Seventies. Then the stroke of luck. The last owners had been caught in a scandal, and the ensuing financial collapse had forced them to get rid of it quickly” (445). This is the last oblique mention of the Salvemini family, whose destinies, Lagioia suggests, are not important anymore, because they are not exceptional. Just as their accumulation of wealth was a consequence of much wider—structural, cultural, and economic—determinants, so their downfall is framed as an epiphenomenon of systemic dynamics. Their disappearance from the narrative space and the arrival of the new owners are then proofs of their ultimate dispensability within the economy of the novel; and this, in turn, testifies to the self-awareness of the novel itself, manifesting its incapability to transcend its specific historical real, that is, the seemingly infinite cycles of capital accumulation, the resulting reproduction of unevenness, and its environmental and social consequences. The only way of concretely superseding the reality that *La Ferocia* has
Lagioia ultimately suggest, non-novelistic; in fact, it would involve the disappearance of the spatial and temporal coordinates devised by humans to regulate socio-cultural and economic interactions. In the last paragraph of the novel, as the new patriarch of the house is gazing at the horizon and wallowing in his newly achieved status, the narrator’s voice suddenly intervenes: “Beyond the luxuriant branches of the trees, up above, two ravens chased each other through the empty air. They were plying the same cerulean surface that millions of years ago had been the domain of the flying reptiles” (447). It is in this opening to a cosmic scale that the novel self-consciously displaces its spatio-temporal framework: for a brief moment, as geological eras come to substitute cycles of capital, *La Ferocia* points to non-novelistic, non-human dynamics of historical change. Within the narrative and epistemological coordinates of the novel, the supersession of the neoliberal present can only be conceived in what Goldman calls “a degraded, abstract, conceptual form.” At the same time, it is precisely in this conceptualization through form that we can detect, as Mathias Nilges has argued, “the novel’s ability to make legible the epistemological horizons of that which neoliberalism establishes as our new reality” (108). And because neoliberalism has historically manifested itself with greater and more disastrous clarity in areas of the world-system that were integrated through peripheralizing dynamics, the semi-peripheral novel remains the most powerful diagnostic tool for grasping neoliberalism’s spatio-temporal limits and for making its social dynamics formally legible.

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The peripheries and semi-peripheries of the world-system have historically been subjected to contradictory, yet highly consequential, depictions in the discursive and imaginative realms.
As Franco Cassano has argued, the modern discourse about the South has been dominated by a central antinomy that characterizes it either as “tourist paradise” or a “criminal nightmare;”\footnote{141} two seemingly antithetical aspects that, he continues, “are instead complementary, for they represent the legal and illegal manifestation of the subaltern integration of the South” (6) into capitalist modernity. Not coincidentally, similar antinomies have been historically employed to define conquerable spaces, marginalize subjects, and legitimize oppression by way of representational othering. Consider the discourse about the Orient: on the one hand, this imaginative construction has been understood as the repository of spirituality and tradition, or in Edward Said’s words, as “therapeutic for the West” (271); at the same time, its populations have been described “as mere biological beings” and “producers of family” (312), lacking cultural and political traditions.\footnote{142} Similar contradictory characterizations have been produced about colonized populations, alternatively described as irrationally dangerous and sexually aggressive or meek, passive, and prone to obedience.\footnote{143} This long historical trajectory of epistemological othering via representational practices continues today in ethno-nationalist discourses about the immigrant, a category that can accommodate both excessively ambitious workers—determined to steal jobs from supposedly autochthonous populations—and indolent individuals surviving on welfare or charitable provisions.

\footnote{141} I took the liberty to translate *incubo mafioso* with “criminal nightmare;” the literal translation would be “Mafia nightmare” since Cassano is here specifically thinking about the Italian South and using the Mafia as a paradigmatic criminal organization.  
\footnote{142} Recognizing that this characterization seems incompatible with Orientalist depictions of passive and indolent Arabs, Said notes that “it is in the logic of myths, or dreams, exactly to welcome radical antitheses… The discourse papers over the antithesis. An Arab Oriental is that impossible creature whose libidinal energy drives him to paroxysms of overstimulation—and yet, he is the puppet in the eyes of the world, staring vacantly out of a modern landscape he can neither understand nor cope with” (312).  
\footnote{143} In this sense, we can compare Frantz Fanon’s discussion of the aggressiveness and the “hallucinating sexual power” (136) attributed to the black man with Bartolomé de las Casas’ descriptions of indigenous populations in the Americas as “never quarrelsome or belligerent or boisterous…neither ambitious nor greedy…totally uninterested in worldly power” (10).
What needs to be stressed about all these typifications is that, no matter how conspicuous their logical incompatibility is, they ultimately respond to the same discursive tactics, whose fundamental aim is to correlate a group or a space to an idea of absolute alterity. But what happens when we substitute a differential paradigm with one based on the study of how social forms respond to the same historical forces and economic conditions as experienced in different degrees of intensity? How would novel theories and contemporary literary histories change if we finally acknowledged that, as Roberto Dainotto writes, “rather than difference, the South [is] a concentration of conflicts and contradictions which [are] not, however, peculiar to the South” (49)? The peripheral and semi-peripheral South would cease to be the space where backwardness and underdevelopment can be made to coexist discursively with escapist getaways to exotic paradises, and become instead an index of the effects that worldwide social and economic processes have on literary form and expression.

This change of paradigm, from a differential approach to a systemic one, has three major consequences. First, it encourages the comparison of multiple Souths as areas that have been subjected to the same process of peripheralization. In La Ferocia, as a character is travelling through the coastal, de-industrialized landscapes around Bari, Lagioia writes: “He was crossing a no-man’s land that he would have found, identical, whether leaving Taranto or venturing into the Calabrian plain. He’d have found it identical in Palestine” (386). This does not mean ignoring the contextual specificities of different Souths. Rather (and this is the second major consequence), it entails the recognition that the condition of peripherality is neither a geographical determination nor an essential characteristic, but the consequences of contingent historical circumstances that have shaped the interactions and hierarchies

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144 When presenting his novel, Lagioia has reiterated the same concept, this time linking La Ferocia’s literary spaces to “any South of the world” and citing the literary Souths of William Faulkner, Gabriel García Márquez, and Malcolm Lowry (Lagioia 2014).
among different world regions. In Dainotto’s words, the South is always “the pole of a relation” that “cannot exist, in itself, outside of that relation” (46). Within this dialectic, the semi-peripheral novel, because of its intermediate and dynamic position, is engaged in registering, on the one hand, the global dynamics of neoliberal development that have been responsible for the institution of this very relation, and on the other, their social, cultural, and environmental repercussions. Finally, by replacing a framework based on difference or alternativeness with one more attentive to integration and systematicity, it becomes possible to analyze how texts can register dynamics of peripheralization in spaces that have been traditionally understood as hegemonic—the Italian South of La Ferocia geographically and politically belongs to Europe—or in regions that are currently rising to regional dominance—as in the case of Bangalore and, from a global perspective, India. In other words, the South lives within the North not only, as critics have noticed (Levander and Mignolo 4), because of increasingly intense migratory flows, but most importantly because the condition of peripherality is present and can be given narrative form anywhere unevenness is produced. In this sense, the diagnostic potential of the semi-peripheral novel rests upon a kind of productive deception, in which the South is foregrounded, in and of itself, as a self-contained totality—yet also as a necessary step for scaling up to the global frame that constitutes the novel’s ultimate horizon. As Michele ponders in a passage that self-reflexively addresses the semi-peripheral novel’s narrative and epistemological compass: “The South is also this deception…a part that is greater than the whole that ought to contain it” (La Ferocia 352-353).
Chapter 4

Roberto Bolaño’s “Many Homelands:” Multiplacedness, Social Collectives, and New Global Realism

In his 1999 acceptance speech for the Premio Rómulo Gallegos (known as the Caracas Address), Roberto Bolaño confesses that, for decades, he had mistakenly thought that Caracas was the capital of Colombia and Bogotá that of Venezuela. The confusion was prompted by a misleading phonetic association: Caracas and Colombia share their first letter, and so do (phonetically) Bogotá and Venezuela. Reflecting on the meaning of this clumsy mistake, Bolaño adds that “there might be a method hidden in my dyslexia, a bastard semiotic or graphological or metasyntactic or phonemic method, or simply a poetic method [simplemente un método poético], and that the underlying truth [la verdad de la verdad] is that Caracas is the capital of Colombia just as Bogotá is the capital of Venezuela, in the same way that Bolivar, who is Venezuelan, died in Colombia, which is also [que también es] Venezuela and Mexico and Chile” (Between Parentheses 31). This poetic method is later described as a “confusion of letters [este sobresalto de letras]” and “in some sense an imaginary solution [una solución imaginaria] that demands an imaginary solution” (32). Bolaño’s reflections on his método poético are crucial for the discussion that I develop in this chapter for three main reasons: first, because of his theorization of a Latin American space in which one-to-one links between capitals and nation-states or authors and nationalities lose their indexical attributes. Secondly, because through this theorization Bolaño is also suggesting that, in order to understand the political and literary histories of those locales, we need to imagine a transnational space in which the relations and frictions between multiple geographies take

145 In Spanish, b and v have the same pronunciation.
precedence over a static model of closed-off cultural spaces and literary traditions. And finally because, for a writer of fiction, devising an imaginary solution means looking for a specific form of artistic expression that can most adequately articulate these questions.

My contention is that Bolaño found such solution in literary realism, because only this representational mode allowed him to give form to heterogeneous social collectivities in their historical evolution, as well as to his expansive idea of the world as the novel’s central cognitive framework. This chapter focuses primarily on The Savage Detectives and suggests that in this novel the adoption of literary realism is discernible on three different levels: spatially, in the interactions between hyperlocalization and multiplaceness; characterologically, in the rejection of exceptional individuality; and formally, through a striving towards totalization. The fundamental premise that undergirds Bolaño’s choice of realism is the possibility of representing history and social reality in their complexity while simultaneously making truth-claims about them. As Fredric Jameson has argued, realism is a peculiarly complex representational mode, “a hybrid concept, in which an epistemological claim (for knowledge or truth) masquerades as an aesthetic ideal” (The Antinomies 5). In other words, realism always operate both in the sphere of aesthetic and formal choices and at the level of meaning production about a reality whose deeper structures it aims to represent.

I read Bolaño’s oeuvre as one of the most compelling examples of a phenomenon that, Jed Esty has defined “new global realism” (320). In an article that aims to explore the genealogy of a renewed critical interest for literary realism, Esty links the geopolitical upheavals and the globalizing processes following the end of the Cold War to the aesthetic project of contemporary realism: comprehending our world “even in its multipolarity and flux” (337). In the course of this chapter, I make the case that today’s realism, while reaffirming the epistemological premises of its classic formulation, has been able to respond
to recent historical and political changes by devising new and original formal strategies.

Bolaño’s realism is in this sense new because it frames the dialectic between individuality and collectivity in historically cogent ways. It is also global because it posits the world as its main referential horizon, and multiplacedeness as its spatial foundation. In another crucial moment of self-exegesis from the Caracas Address, Bolaño claims that “a writer can have many homelands [muchas pueden ser las patrias de un escritor]” (34). Bolaño’s many homelands are of course all the concrete spaces where his work has been circulating since his momentous success. But they are also the geographies that his texts mobilize and that illuminate, on the one hand, a spatially expansive narrative system, and on the other, how the social and political conditions of our present have affected the evolution of form and the resurgence of a representational mode, realism, that continues to demonstrate its aesthetic and cognitive relevance.

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No contemporary writer has achieved a canonical, if not mythical, status in world literature as swiftly and momentously as Roberto Bolaño. His rising trajectory started in 1998, when Los detectives salvajes was awarded the Premio Herralde and, a year later, the Premio Rómulo Gallegos—two of the most prestigious prizes in the Spanish-speaking literary space. Enthusiastic critical reviews, a fairly plain writing style, and the aura of poète maudit surrounding his past transformed a little-known writer, who had experienced the most intense political decades of Latin American history and chosen a kind of self-exile in a small coastal town near Barcelona, into a literary star. In 2003, his prestige in the Spanish-speaking world was already secured, to the point that critics and academics did not hesitate to define
him “the most influential novelist of his generation” (Bielsa 165). His premature death (in 2003) and the posthumous publication of his enigmatic and sprawling masterpiece, *2666* (in 2004), have triggered what can be safely described as *bolañomania*, an enthusiasm verging on fandom that is all the more surprising at a time in which the literary sociolect seems to be inexorably shrinking into a residual and classed practice.\(^{146}\)

From the perspective of literary sociology and reception studies, the success of Bolaño’s texts and the construction of his authorial persona are particularly interesting points of access to international networks of publishing, to the politics of translation of texts as well as of their cultural contexts, and to the dynamics of consecration that determine the visibility of contemporary literature on the world stage. Indeed, as Bolaño’s oeuvre was being translated in multiple languages and as its reach was expanding globally, articles—both in academic and popular venues—and monographs began to multiply. Unsurprisingly, the critical consensus about the importance of his texts has not been paralleled by an agreement on the reasons and consequences of his unexpected success. Critics have praised his ability to the revolutionize the contemporary novel and inaugurate a “new world literature” (Corral), decried the perpetuation of stereotypical constructions of Latin America during his reception in the US (Pollack), or suggested that his novels definitively decouple an abstract ethics of cosmopolitanism from the uneven realities of world literature (Loy). For the purpose of my discussion, what seems most relevant about these quite divergent assessments is that Bolaño’s texts have been capable of bringing together different and often conflicting strands of literary criticism while fundamentally expanding their purview to a world dimension. In this sense, they have set new spatial coordinates for literary scholarship and encouraged a fruitful dialogue among, as Sharae Deckard has suggested, “the materialist

\(^{146}\) On the progressive corrosion of the literary sociolect under the pressure of neoliberalism, see Brouillette.
study of production, reception, and dissemination in the market; the study of the evolution of the aesthetics and form in order to represent new ‘global’ content; and the study of the politics and aesthetics of translation” (206).

Bolaño’s fiction testifies thematically, structurally, and in terms of dynamics of reception to contemporary literature’s multiplacedness, further drawing attention to the often unpredictable ways in which literary objects acquire or fail to acquire symbolic capital, audiences, and canonical status. In a chapter from *The Savage Detectives* entirely set in a literary festival in Madrid—one of the publishing capitals of the Spanish-speaking world—several characters offer their takes on the status of the globalized literary market, on the fate of Latin American letters, and on writing as labor and discipline. The chapter is structured as a condensed and parodic compendium of the functioning of the literary field, and it seems today impossible not to read the bitter irony that defines it in light of the critical mythification that Bolaño himself would have later experienced. Each character being interviewed offers a different apodictic claim about the fate of the work of art: “Everything that begins as comedy…” (513)—they claim—either “ends as tragedy” (513), “as tragicomedy” (514), “as a cryptographic exercise” (516), “as a horror movie” (519), “as a triumphal march” (521), “as mystery” (524), “as a dirge in the void” (526), or “as a comic monologue” (530). These potential paths, when appraised in retrospect, read as a paradoxical commentary on the vicissitudes of the Bolaño’s own work, whose rapid ascendance to the heights of literary fame was always accompanied by the self-mocking awareness that, as one character remarks, “the great struggle of all these writers for recognition and readers, hunkered down in their respective asbestos booths, is ludicrous” (*The Savage Detectives* 525). It is therefore quite ironic, as several critics have not failed to notice, that the first part of Bolaño’s writing career and his own mostly unsuccessful struggle for recognition seemed to
destine him to a marginal literary survival on local literary prizes—the condition of the writer Sensini in the eponymous short story from *Last Evenings on Earth*—inexorably followed by literary oblivion, which is precisely the fate of the visceral realist writers in *The Savage Detectives*.

Only a series of interconnected and historically contingent factors, which have been widely analyzed, have transformed Bolaño’s oeuvre and figure into an ongoing literary mythology. My main concern in this section is to stress a few elements of his global reception in order to show, first, that the emergence of what I have called “new global realism” depends on complex dynamics involving the dialogue, exchanges, and frictions among multiple linguistic and cultural geographies; and secondly, that Bolaño’s success illustrates with unprecedented clarity that the contemporary novel’s location has to be assessed simultaneously within the domain of an integrated world literary system as well as in the different locations and scales that constitute and subtend the global contemporary.

The consolidation of Bolaño’s success results from publishing and literary exchanges among Spain, Latin America, Europe, the United States—and consequently the Anglophone world at large. As it is evident from this list, the units of analysis and scales needed to assess Bolaño’s trajectory are highly heterogeneous, being either national literary fields (Spain, the US), regional or transnational linguistic spaces (Latin America, the Anglophone), or cultural-political constructions (Europe). Bolaño’s positive reception and visibility in Spain and Latin America, particularly after the Premio Gallegos, prompted a first wave of translation into languages whose publishing fields have been historically receptive to works written in Spanish, because of geographical or cultural proximity: *Los Detectives Salvajes* came out in German translation in 2002, in Italian in 2003, and in French in 2006. When, in 2007, the novel was translated into English, Bolaño was already being read and celebrated in Spain,
Latin America, as well as in the European countries where his texts had been appearing. This is a crucial point to be made if we want to assess his position in the contemporary literary system and the implications of understanding his works as world literature. There is in fact a tendency among scholars and critics of contemporary literature to discuss authors in terms of “the world” only when they reach the publishing and cultural space of English, often ignoring their presence in less hegemonic literary fields that operate according to specific dynamics of recognition and consecration. In his critique of Wilfrido Corral’s *Bolaño traducido*, Ignacio Echevarría has acutely observed that “to be able to speak of ‘world literature,’ it is [not] necessary that the reception of [an author] in the Anglophone space happens in the same way as the reception of the same author in other languages” (182). And indeed, whereas in Spain Bolaño was praised as “a contemporary exponent of the heroic struggles from which the autonomy of the literary field first emerged” (Bielsa 169), in the UK and the US critics and reviewers mostly stressed his beatnik, rebellious life and drug-fueled nomadism (Pollack). A comparative analysis of Bolaño’s reception thus shows that, before being consecrated in the US, he was already an established writer in multiple and tightly connected literary worlds. In this sense, the question of how and when he reached a world literary status cannot be reductively resolved by relying on an updated version of Pascale Casanova’s model, in which New York and English function as contemporary literary and

147 Translations from articles and secondary sources in Spanish are mine. For the analysis of *Los Detectives Salvajes* I rely on Natasha Wimmer’s translation.

148 Echevarría adds however that, before the consolidation of the bohemian, rebellious figure through which Bolaño’s work has been promoted in the US, the first US reviews actually stressed the political elements of his writing. This was due to a different chronology of translation: the first two novels to be published in the US are in fact *By Night in Chile* (2003, published in Spanish in 2000) and *Distant Start* (2004, published in Spanish in 1996); both texts are set in Chile during Pinochet’s regime.

149 Even in terms of academic attention, there is a temporal lag separating the Anglophone and the Hispanophone reception. The first major collection of critical essays on Bolaño’s work and figure was published in Spain in 2008 (see Soldán), that is, in the same year in which *2666*, which came out in Spanish in 2004, appeared for the first time in English translation.
linguistic meridians that have replaced Paris and French, thus implying that failing to be consecrated in English equals literary insignificance. Rather, the belated discovery of his work by Anglophone readerships increased an already existent visibility, with English functioning as a decisive spatial amplifier.\(^{150}\)

To understand Bolaño’s figure and writing we then need to activate the master scale of the world without foreclosing other spatial frameworks. The expansiveness of Bolaño’s imaginative universe is both thematic and formal, and it is most compellingly actualized through a series of narrative strategies that structure *The Savage Detectives*, as I discuss later. But other, more immediate elements contribute to his world dimension and multiplacedness: consider for instance his peripatetic life, which brought him from his native Chile to Mexico, Europe, and several other countries in Latin America. During one his last interviews, when asked if he felt “Chilean, Spanish, or Mexican,” Bolaño promptly responded: “I’m Latin American” (*Between Parentheses* 357). It is then not surprising that the continental frame in which he self-identified has also been taken up by critics to discuss his position across the geographies in which his works continue to circulate. Sarah Pollack has focused on the dyad Latin America-US and traced the genealogy of interpretive paradigms through which Latin America fiction has been absorbed—and distorted—in the US, arguing that Bolaño’s texts have become “a prism through which other works of Latin American narrative are read, selected, appreciated, and brought to readers in the United States” (“After Bolaño” 661). Whereas Pollack’s goal is to emphasize how this model has reduced the thematic complexity of Latin American fiction to a handful of reassuring motifs, Héctor Hoyos has leveraged

\(^{150}\) As Esperança Bielsa rightly notes (158-159), it would be reductive to understand English and the US as simply agents of dissemination of a homogenizing culture. In fact, Bolaño’s global success points to the decisive role of Anglophone criticism in consecrating more high-brow, autonomous texts. For a discussion of the mediating role of US literary magazines and the importance of South-South exchanges in the reception of Bolaño’s oeuvre in China, see Wei.
Bolaño’s visibility to introduce lesser-known writers and to revert the implicit hierarchy that opposes the world (English) to the region (Spanish), so as “to model world literature after Latin Americanism” (9).

For both critics, Latin America functions as the most productive unit of analysis, one that, as Bolaño himself was well aware of, does not simply denote a spatial formation but evokes tragic political histories and the decisive importance of material and symbolic economies: “identifying yourself as Latin American”—he declared—“is, on the one hand, clearly a political choice and, on the other, clearly an economic one” (qt. in Armenteros 100). This also means that the intersections of politics, social histories, and economic determinants that undergird the aesthetic category of Latin American literature cannot be understood without expanding the critical purview to the hemisphere of the Americas. It also means that Bolaño’s works should be read not only in light of the cultural and publishing exchanges between the United States and the Latin American literary fields, but also within the larger trajectory of US military and economic interventionism in the global South during the long 20th century. As Jeffrey Lawrence has argued, Bolaño is a key figure for a comparative understanding of the evolution of aesthetic representation in the American hemisphere precisely because he represents one of the most compelling instantiations of the historical, cultural, and political connections between its regions.151

Through a logic of endless concatenation that Bolaño’s figure and oeuvre continuously encourage, the framework keeps expanding to include other geographies: as I discuss in more detail later in my analysis of The Savage Detectives, Africa becomes yet another space through which his novels illuminate the structural relations that connect, on the one

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151 In particular, Lawrence argues that Bolaño’s synthetizes the “writer as experiencer,” a figure he associates with the US literary tradition, and the Latin American principle of the “writer as voracious reader” (538).
hand, the Latin American continent to decolonization and postcolonial struggles in Africa, and on the other, North, South America, and Africa to Europe and fascism. Within these geographies, as David Kurnick has noticed, Bolaño devotes an unusual and highly indicative attention to the “imperial everyday,” to marginal spaces where “the developed world’s geopolitical unconscious” (124) emerges most disturbingly. He does so by making extraterritoriality and displacement functional to the project of registering a common history in which seemingly unrelated spaces become part of a narrative and geopolitical whole. In this sense, the world that Bolaño envisions in his novels thus resembles the world in which his works have been circulating and canonized since his premature death, that is, a world in which displacement and exile make the systemic connections among multiple geographies narratively visible. Yet, it is quite ironic that the concept of exile that Bolaño has articulated in his work is diametrically opposite to the ways the same concept has been used to construct his posthumous myth.

Whereas exile was for him a perpetual condition of banishment, a form of displacement that does not inherently lead to artistic achievement—in fact it usually grants his characters perennial oblivion—the notion has been proposed as the very source of Bolaño’s aesthetic merit and recognition. In an essay on this topic, Alberto Medina, while differentiating between “fetishes of exile” (551) and Bolaño’s elevation of exile to “an art of homelessness,” ends up reinforcing a fallacious correspondence between geographical, political, or existential displacement and artistic value. But for Bolaño homelessness was never an art. Being very conscious of the risk of romanticizing exile, in a lecture from 2000 delivered in Vienna—when his international fame was growing—he warned: “I’ve been invited to talk about exile…. I don’t believe in exile, especially when the word sits next to the word literature” (Between Parentheses 38). Later in the lecture, he recounts the tragic death of his
friend Mario Santiago, a fellow poet he had fictionalized in The Savage Detectives: just like him, Santiago had tried to make a living with writing, but, unlike Bolaño, he never emerged from the peripheries of literature and spent his adult life in social isolation. Bolaño considers Santiago’s life and forgotten death a “negative epiphany” (40), the most excruciating illustration of exile, marginality, and literature: Santiago dies unknown in Mexico City, the city that had nurtured and equally banished him, unrecognized in a land where he should have belonged but from which he felt politically alienated and socially rejected. Santiago’s parable suggests that the epiphanic quality of exile, rather than residing in a presumed aesthetic or ethical bliss, lies in its capacity to connect spatial or social displacement to its material roots. And just as the global wanderings of Roberto Bolaño, of his fellow Latin American writers now forgotten, and of the characters he has created in his novels need to be understood within a post-war history of attempted and failed revolutions—political, cultural, and literary—so too the global dissemination of his works, their realized extraterritoriality as it were, depend on the materiality of publishing and translation networks, on the evolution of aesthetic form, and on the politics of today’s cultural and literary exchanges.

Consider for instance the importance of networks of publication and mediating agents for the construction of Bolaño’s success and myth. His texts have been published in Spanish by several houses—Seix Barral, Anagrama, Acantilado, Planeta Chile, Lumen, and Mondadori—and in English by New Directions and Farrar, Straus and Giroux (FSG). The dynamics through which the passage from the Hispanicophone to the Anglophone world has materialized strikingly illuminate the functioning of the international literary market and the

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152 And not just by Seix Barral and Anagrama, as most of Bolaño’s critics mistakenly claim. See for instance Birns and Castro (1). The correct list of publishing houses is provided by Bolaño’s widow, Carolina López (see “La verdad”).
complex transactions involving various forms of capital. In the initial stage, journalistic capital—in forms of positive reviews in Spain and Latin America—catalyzed the attention of US-based critics (Bielsa 173). Then, cultural brokers and writers, in their role of mediators and agents of recognition, contributed to the accrual of symbolic prestige—most famously Susan Sontag, who wrote enthusiastically about *By Night in Chile*. The buzz around a potential reiteration of the 1970’s Latin American Boom prompted a race among New Directions and FSG to secure rights of publication, concluded with a marketing agreement between the two publishing houses (Zavala 80). If we then add the crucial role played by the agent Andrew Wylie, “known as ‘The Jackal,’ an expert in consecration and myth building” (Deckard 204), we get a condensed picture of the intricate exchanges through which Bolaño became and continues to be a literary phenomenon. Indeed, his internationalization is still underway today, with further publishing deals being signed: the market giant Penguin Random House has recently acquired the rights for previously unpublished materials, such as *El espíritu de la ciencia-ficción*, which was published in Spanish by Alfaguara (also owned by Penguin) in 2016, and in 2019 in English translation. When all of Bolaño’s works will be published, it might happen that, as some of his readers hope, his narrative universe will be finally “unbound by the expectations and genre definitions of American and world literature’s publishing cycle” (Cleary). In the meantime, his myth remains deeply anchored to global publishing networks, corporate marketing strategies, and the attending, if regrettable, feuds about his legacy.153

It should be now clear that Bolaño’s works and posthumous literary myth live in overlapping spaces that can be best analyzed through the complex cultural, linguistic, and

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153 Unsurprisingly, the difficult management of Bolaño’s success has caused a bitter controversy between his unofficial literary executor, Ignacio Echevarría, and his widow, Carolina López, in the pages of the Spanish newspaper *El País*. See and Echevarría (“Desmentido”) and López.
market transactions constituting what literary scholars have been shorthandedly calling “word literature.” In spite of the sometimes reductive and Anglo-centric tendencies of this critical paradigm, it is impossible not to engage with the global dimension of Bolaño’s phenomenon from a world perspective. His works have redefined the institutional, formal, and spatial categories we employ to analyze the contemporary novel. Nonetheless, and despite a growing bibliography, scholars have failed to address how Bolaño’s worldliness is fundamentally premised on a mode of expression—realism—that is better equipped to capture the expansive spatiality of the historical present. Realism, I want to suggest, if understood as a narrative method of looking at social and historical reality, is constitutively apt to contain and to formally represent the presumably unrepresentable idea of the world. In the rest of this chapter, I discuss The Savage Detectives as a crucial point in Bolaño’s literary career and as an emblematic example of new global realism by exploring the formal features and the spatial compass of this novel in relation to a few central concepts of literary realist theory (social collectivity, totality, and mediation). The Savage Detectives signals a turning point in the evolution of novelistic form whereby we can track how the contemporary novel responds to major social and historical changes without ceasing to interrogate its own status as an object of artistic mediation.

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In 1998, when Los detectives salvajes came out in Spanish, Bolaño had published five collections of poems and three novels, had written other short novels that would be published posthumously (such as El Tercer Reich and El espíritu de la ciencia-ficción), and was in the middle of an extremely prolific decade that ended with the publication of 2666 (in 2004),
a year after his premature death. Because of this compressed period of creativity and because his works continuously return to a set of recognizable themes (as well as to a series of recurring types and characters), critics have rightly highlighted that Bolaño’s narrative universe forms a multidirectional yet consistent whole, or, in Chris Andrew’s felicitous expression, “an expanding universe.” Therefore, when I suggest that *The Savage Detectives* is a turning point in his literary career, I do not mean to signal a before and an after, nor am I making an evaluative judgment based on the diachrony of publication dates. Rather, since Bolaño’s imaginative universe should be approached as a totalizing unity, my contention is that *The Savage Detectives* encapsulates a series of transitions that can be found in all of his works but that, in this novel, are articulated in their fullest and most compelling form. For the purpose of clarity, I analyze three main transitions in sequence, although it should become clear in the course of my discussion that they are deeply interrelated and that they equally contribute to the kind of expansive realism that undergirds Bolaño’s narrative project. The first transition is spatial and is given form in the representation of a hyperspecific local (whether urban or rural) that can be understood only by activating a world dimension. The second pertains more specifically to characters and narrative voice, and it produces a shift from a literature of the individual to a literature of social collectives. Finally, literary-political questions as reflected in the novel’s form engender a third transition from avant-gardism and modernist ethos to global realism and totalization.

*The Savage Detectives* chronicles the formation and dissolution of a fictional avant-gardist movement, visceral realism, founded in the 1970’s in Mexico City by a group of idealistic young writers with the ambitious project of “chang[ing] Latin American poetry” (8), as the two founders—Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima—tell Juan García Madero, the 17-years-old poet who narrates the first section of the novel in diary form. The novel is divided
in three parts: the first and the third are temporally consecutive, and they are both narrated by Madero. The first is entirely set in Mexico City, while the third recounts a trip made by Belano, Lima, Madero, and Lupe—a young prostitute—to the Sonora desert. The trip has a double purpose since the group is fleeing from Lupe’s pimp while also looking for the mythical founder of the first visceral realist group, Cesárea Tinajero, who had disappeared somewhere the Sonora desert after her literary militancy in the 1920’s. These two parts, which span a period of four months (November 1976-February 1977) are interrupted by the second section—a vertiginously drifting parenthesis and indeed the heart of the book—that covers two decades (1976-1996) and moves across the United States, Guatemala, Israel, Spain, Austria, Italy, Rwanda, Liberia, and Angola, among several other places.

In all three sections, and despite the alternations in narrating voices, the reader can detect a peculiar preoccupation for geographical specificity. The first part of Madero’s diary is replete with precise indications of the visceral realists’ wanderings across Mexico City. Consider for instance this passage (one of many), in which the narrator reports the specifics of their movements with GPS accuracy: “We went walking along Bucareli toward Reforma, then crossed Reforma and headed up Avenida Guerrero” (37). Similarly, in the third section, Madero records with the same painstaking precision the geography of the Sonora desert and the names of its forgotten towns, to the point that his diary, in the last pages of the novel, is reduced to the most essential registration of the pueblos they visit. Spatial specificity turns into pure denotation: “FEBRUARY 10 / Cucurpe, Tuape, Meresichic, Opodepe. / FEBRUARY 11/ Carbó, El Oasis, Félix Gómez, El Cuatro, Trincheras, La Ciénaga. / FEBRUARY 12. / Bamuri, Pitiquito, Caborca, San Juan, Las Maravillas, Las Calenturas”
Another variation of the same principle informs the second section, a collection of oral accounts by several characters who are directly or obliquely related to Belano and Lima and who are always introduced by their geographical position, often complemented by a further spatial specification, as in this case: “Rafael Barrios, in the bathroom of his house, Jackson Street, San Diego, California, September 1982” (364).

Few scholars of Bolaño have commented on this unusually consistent spatial precision. Only Nicholas Birns, when discussing the lack of emotional attachments of the characters to various locales, has argued that “neither Bolaño nor his characters ask anything from their psychogeography,” adding that “[w]hereas magical realists might ground their story in the afflatus of the local, for the visceral realists it is a backdrop, but not one inherently constitutive of meaning” (“Black Dawn” 193). Birns is right when he claims that Bolaño’s characters traverse spaces that are highly particularized without expressing any affective investment in them. And it also might be the case that this kind of geographical hyperspecificity is simply due to generic requirements: in the first and third section, it would reinforce the immediacy of the diary form, while in the second it could be connected to the quasi-journalistic goal of categorizing heterogeneous testimonies by providing their exact coordinates. Yet, although generic pressures are important, they cannot sufficiently explain the novel’s meticulous localization. The local is never simply a backdrop in Bolaño’s fiction, for it contributes to his larger realist intent of giving each and every space being narrativized its full historical, political, and geographical weight, through what David Kurnick has defined a “horizontalizing aesthetic” (131). In this sense, the precise spatial identifiers that Bolaño

154 Other times, Madero’s precision is coupled with narratively inconsequential details (such as “federal highway,” “paved road,” “the name of another town”): “Caborca is a little town northwest of Hermosillo. To get there we took the federal highway to Santa Ana and from Santa Ana we turned west along a paved road. We passed through Pueblo Nuevo and Altar. Before we got to Caborca we saw a turnoff and a sign with the name of another town: Pitiquito” (602).
departs in his description of places he knew very well—as well as of places he had never visited—respond to an almost ethical impulse to narrate everything, and to do so in the most particularized and faithful way. As these spaces multiply without being narratively hierarchized, the novel transitions to a world dimension while preserving its spatial granularity. Particularly in the second section, the amplitude of Bolaño’s narrative world emerges with full force. Here in fact, all the places from which the characters speak during the interviews or where their drifting micro-narratives take them are endowed with a geographical specificity that becomes necessary to maintain a sense of grounded expansiveness. As Héctor Hoyos has put it, the second part of the novel “is about immanence, about a literary movement becoming the world” (12). Hoyos adds that, in their global wanderings, “the characters world as they go” (13)—which is to say, they create narratively semi-autonomous and multiplying worlds that the reader is asked to constantly piece together. Hoyos understands this act of worliding mostly as a formal procedure, but it is equally crucial to stress that this process has do with narrative technique as much as with the political and historical connotations that get attached to the novel’s expansive spatiality.

The transition from the specificity of the local to the world dimension then happens through the incessant juxtaposition of multiple spaces that Bolaño approaches as interconnected parts of the same narrative and geopolitical system. First, there is the hemispheric perspective that ties North, Central, and South America. In this context, no place can congeal the political vicissitudes of the 20th century more dramatically than Cuba.

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155 Notoriously, Bolaño never stepped foot into the United States. Nonetheless, he gave incredibly detailed geographical descriptions of it, such as in this passage on the urban geography of Los Angeles metropolitan area: “Then I started the car and left the hospital. I know I passed the Civic Center, the Music Center, the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. Then I headed for Echo Park and I merged into traffic on Sunset Boulevard. I don’t know how long I was driving. All I know is that I never got out of the Nissan and that in Beverly Hills I got off Highway 101 and meandered along on side roads until I got to Santa Monica. There I got on Interstate 10, or the Santa Monica Freeway, and I headed back downtown, then took Highway 11, passing Wilshire Boulevard, although I couldn’t turn off until further up, at Third Street” (446).
Not incidentally, and even though no character travels to the island in the course of the novel, this space represents a crucial horizon of meaning that Bolaño continues to interrogate. As the paradigmatic example of anti-capitalist uprising and revolutionary utopia, Cuba occupies a peculiar position in the novel’s universe, representing both the hopes a generation and the pitfalls of a genuinely alternative political project. Critics have stressed Bolaño’s repudiation of socialist revolutions in Latin America, expressed most vigorously in the *Caracas Address* as well as through comments made by several characters in *The Savage Detectives*—such as the following: “The dream of Revolution. A hot nightmare” (530).\(^{156}\) However, Bolaño’s bitter critique of the political persecutions and cultural myopia of the Cuban government is part of a more complex and much more nuanced discourse about the history of Latin America in relation to US neoimperialism and to the longue durée of capitalist modernity. This hemispheric approach, which gets often mirrored in the dynamics regulating the cultural and literary fields, is epitomized in a short passage in which Belano and Lima are told that a poem by a fellow writer won’t be published in a Cuban anthology because the author had publicly condemned the Cuban revolution. Lima’s immediate reaction is to utter “bastards,” but, as the narrator and curator of the anthology explains, “he says it sweetly, he really does, not bitterly at all, as if deep down he understood everything the Cubans had been through before they mutilated my book, as if deep down he couldn’t be bothered to despise me or our comrades in Havana” (154). The discourse about Cuba and its revolution therefore functions, on the one hand, as a constant reminder of “everything that Cuban [but also Nicaraguans, Chileans, Puerto Ricans…] had been through,” that is to say, as a historicizing device; on the other, it becomes a spatial connector

\(^{156}\) Julian E. De Castro goes as far as claiming, rather reductively, that “the left is thus presented as responsible for the deaths…of Bolaño’s generation” (68).
that forces the reader to approach the novel hemispherically. As another character, US-born Barbara Patterson, claims during a conversation with her Mexican boyfriend and a Cuban poet they are visiting: “…at the end of the day the three of us are Americans, children of Caliban, lost in the great American wilderness” (342).

To be sure, the above comment implies also a questionable leveling gesture, one that potentially erases the power imbalances among regions of the Americas in the name of mere spatial broadening. In this sense, it is no coincidence that the narrating voice of this passage, Patterson, is an American citizen, seemingly oblivious that the myth of “the great American wilderness” is constitutively enmeshed with US political and economic expansionism in Latin America and in world peripheries. As a corrective to this misguided assessment, the novel establishes other spatial connections with regions that are structurally homologous to Latin America in relation to the United States and its hegemonic policies. This happens particularly towards the end of the second section, which chronicles the vicissitudes of Belano through the voices of people who have met him in Africa, where he travels as a war reporter after having abandoned his literary militancy. We first find Belano in Luanda, Angola, during the civil war that ravaged the country in the 1980’s and 90’s, in a social and political situation that, as another reporter comments, felt like “the edge of the abyss or the edge of collapse” (559). As the spatial purview of The Savage Detectives continues to expand, global histories and hierarchies are thrown into sharp relief.

\[157\] The abyss, a motif that recurs in several of Bolaño’s novels is crucial in this context. As Sharae Deckard has shown, the images of the mine, the void, and the abyss are often deployed by Bolaño to draw parallels between the mechanisms that regulate cultural and literary production and the history of capitalist development and dispossession in world peripheries. In her analysis of Woes of the True Policeman, Deckard argues that Bolaño creates “an uneasy analogy between the symbolic capital represented by the book and the most basic form of physical appropriation, suggesting that they are inextricable interrelations in the large structure of capitalist accumulation” (211).
Belano’s war reporting in Africa is an attempt to reject the literary exploitation of romanticized images of Africa. In fact, by establishing a connection between the failed revolution in Latin America and the civil strives that have plagued many African nations after decolonization, the novel embeds these spaces within larger geopolitical configurations that are founded, 
pace 
Patterson, on the cyclical perpetuation of power asymmetries. After leaving Angola, we find Belano in Monrovia, Liberia, during the First Liberian Civil War, where Jacobo Urenda, a fellow Latin American photographer, upon seeking refuge in the American embassy, comments: “For a Latin American it was odd to associate an American embassy with safety, it seemed a contradiction in terms, but times had changed, so why shouldn’t the embassy be safe?” (564). The comparative gesture that prompts Urenda’s trenchant remark highlights the systemic framework necessary to understand the role of American interventionism in the political histories of world peripheries, with the US alternatively supporting coups d’état against democratically elected governments or acting as the external arbiter of intranational conflicts. The Liberian section thus suggests that Bolaño’s interest in the specificity of the local is meant primarily to reveal the global geopolitical patterns that connect seemingly unrelated regions (Latin America and Africa), but also to give full narrative legitimacy to spaces whose histories are often ignored in the West. Flat spatial descriptors of roads and villages encountered during Belano’s reporting assignment are complemented by allusions to tensions among different ethnic groups, as well as by detailed accounts of the military operations involving the two main factions at war. These are the same historicizing mechanisms that inform the trip across the borderscape of the Sonora desert in the last part of the novel, where the search for Cesárea Tinajero prompts reflections on the location of the mythical Aztec city of Aztlán and on the disappearance of a local indigenous population, the Pápago.
Bolaño’s engagement with the specificities of these marginalized places, rather than simply casting the local as a backdrop or producing what has been called referential illusion, illuminates layers of history and activates connections that are structurally conceived to encompass other spaces into a totalizing project, incessantly ramifying beyond the unity of a single locale or of a single novel. Consider in this sense the role of another decisive (spatial and cultural) unit that is constantly evoked, Europe. In *The Savage Detectives*, several characters variously connected to the visceral realist group end up in Europe, driven by a mix of literary ambition, political convictions, and nomadic ethos. For many of them—usually Latin American writers barely surviving in precarious conditions in some European capitals—Europe represents a political or cultural meridian to which, despite the geographical distance from the countries they have fled, they feel a deep historical connection. These writers’ hopes for a life of literary and political activism engender a sense of naïve enthusiasm that is time and time again undermined by a paralyzing anguish. What they experience is an existential grief that resembles what Jean-Paul Sartre described as nausea, a feeling that can be triggered by seemingly insignificant accidents. One of the poets of the Latin American community in Paris, after describing his doubts about the most appropriate translation of a French poem, reflects: “And it was then that I was suddenly overcome by the full horror of Paris, the full horror of the French language, the poetry scene, our state as unwanted guests, the sad, hopeless state of South Americans lost in Europe, lost in the world…” (243). In this passage and in others from *The Savage Detectives*, Europe is associated with the horror of uprootedness and marginality, an image that is sharply antithetical to the hope for an aesthetic utopia through displacement.

Closely linked to this disillusionment generating existential horror, in other novels Bolaño casts Europe as the origin of a peculiarly historical horror, Fascism. As Federico
Finchelstein has argued, Bolaño’s interest in Fascism as the symbol of historical evil prompts him to draw connections, particularly in *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, between European and Latin American Fascisms and to “[present] a transnational memory of fascism as an active source of ideological motivation” (36).\(^{158}\) Despite moments in which its historical nature risks being overlooked in the name of a metaphysical and abstract notion of evil, Bolaño presents Fascism as the zenith of a “global history of violence” (Finchelstein 34), one that does not cease with the end World War II and that can only be understood systemically. In this sense, the transnationality and historicity of Fascism help answer one of the central questions of Bolaño’s narrative project, articulated by a character in *The Savage Detectives* in this way: “the heart of the matter is knowing whether evil…is random or purposeful” (420).\(^{159}\) “Purposeful” (in Spanish *causal*) would be better translated as “causal” in this context. Evil, Fascism, the horrors of World War II described in *2666*, the brutalities of the Pinochet dictatorship denounced in *By Night in Chile* and in *Distant Star*, and the killings in Santa Teresa obsessively detailed in *2666* are eruptions of violence that do not emerge randomly, but that form a long historical series linked to the dynamics of capitalism’s evolution and to fully conscious choices made in the name of political or social “progress.” These spiraling cycles of violence thus testify to the need of approaching Bolaño’s expansive universe as a system of locales that cannot be thought in isolation. On the one hand, each locale remains “stubbornly and viscerally itself” (Kurnick 128) while being part of larger configurations; on the other, it is precisely through the comprehension of their full historical

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\(^{158}\) For a related discussion on the (un)representability of death in the aftermath of the Holocaust and in the neoliberal postcolonial state, see Farred.

\(^{159}\) As Chris Andrew notes, the Spanish words for “random” and “purposeful” are *casual* and *causal*, and their anagrammatic nature “suggests the difficult of knowing which one indicates the truth” (159).
weight that the reader is asked to draw structural connections and discern global geographies of violence.

These connections operate both spatially, by incorporating distant geographies in a narrative whole, and structurally, through a constant intertextual dialogue. During the search for Cesárea Tinajero, Belano and Lima meet a friend of hers, a teacher named Flora Castañeda, who recounts Tinajero’s life in the 1940’s. Castañeda reveals that, while working in a canning factory in Santa Teresa, Tinajero had drawn a detailed plan of the factory, with annotations in the margins and other illegible comments. We then learn that, when asked why she had drawn this strange plan, “…Cesárea spoke of times to come and the teacher, to change the subject, asked her what times she meant and when they would be. And Cesárea named a date, sometime around the year 2600. Two thousand six hundred and something” (634). In this anticipatory moment, widely overlooked by scholars, Bolaño refers not only to the symbolic date that will become the title of his last work, but he also hints at the economic and social conditions that determine the narrative construction of Santa Teresa in 2666—a fictionalized version of Ciudad Juárez. Two elements are crucial here. First, the fact that Tinajero works in a canning factory in Santa Teresa: several critics have commented on the importance of the long section in 2666 where Bolaño details with excruciating flatness the killings of women working in maquiladoras in Santa Teresa. Nicholas Birns has aptly suggested that “the sameness of the women’s deaths is the reification of the sameness of their lives, and that sameness is itself a product of the mechanistic, market-driven anthropology of neoliberalism” (191). In this passage from The Savage Detectives, it is as if

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160 Scholars of Bolaño usually quote a passage from Amuleto as the first appearance of the date 2666 in his work, thus relying on Ignacio Echevarría’s “Note to the First Edition” of 2666 where he quotes such passage (2666 897). However, Los Detectives Salvajes was published a year before Amuleto. This moment is thus crucial also because it redresses a critical oversight.
Bolaño wanted to draw attention to the genealogy of this capitalist anthropology, by having Tinajero—a woman who has abandoned her literary career and disappeared in the borderlands of the Sonora desert—work in a maquiladora ante litteram in Santa Teresa. The passage confirms that Santa Teresa has always been the physical and imaginative center of Bolaño’s world. And even more importantly, it thematizes one the most decisive formal devices of his narrative project, mapping. By embedding in the diegesis of the novel Tinajero’s annotated plan of the factory—a plan that, just as Bolaño’s works, acknowledges the existence of gaps and unexplainable elements—Bolaño suggests that mapping is a process that goes beyond spatiality to become a cognitive operation. In this way, Tinajero’s plan can be understood as a rudimentary attempt to place the maquiladora system within a long history of capitalist development in world peripheries. And this attention to the economic and social history of Santa Teresa as the spatial correlative of capitalist modernity is all the more surprising in a novel that scholars have traditionally read as the parable of a literary movement.

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In terms of space and socio-historical dynamics, The Savage Detectives delineates a transition from local specificities to geopolitical and economic relations through which those locales participate in an expansive idea of the world. A parallel movement can be tracked on the level of narrative strategies and novelistic form, whereby individualization is deployed to highlight the complex mechanisms involved in the formation of social collectives. This

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161 As a character proclaims in 2666: “No one pays attention to these killings, but the secret of the world is hidden in them” (348). Echevarría adds that Bolaño mentions in his notes “the existence…of a ‘hidden center,’ concealed beneath what might be considered the novel’s ‘physical center’” (2666 896).
second transition is carried out, first of all, by subverting the reader’s expectations about the
detective genre. Right from its title, the novel announces itself as a detective story, thus
establishing a narrative pact with the reader based on a series of generic conventions, the
most prominent being the gravitation of the plot towards a mystery that will be likely
unveiled at the end. The central detective search involves Belano and Lima’s pursuit of
Tinajero, both as a physical person and as a source of literary-political purpose.¹⁶² As J.
Agustín Pastén has noted (435), it is already peculiar that, in a novel in which discovering the
poetic production of the founder of visceral realism seems to be the ultimate goal, we get to
read only one of her poems; one, moreover, that outdoes the most extreme hermeticism.
Except for its title—“Sión” (398)—the poem has no words, consisting instead of three
drawn lines: the first is straight, the second wavy, the third jagged. Floating on each of them
stands a little rectangle. The reading of this very strange composition launches an
interpretive game that involves Arturo, Ulises and Amadeo Salvatierra, one of the founders
of the visceral realist group in the 1920’s. The three propose several interpretations, all of
them reasonable, none of them supported by contextual elements.¹⁶³ In this parody of the
hermeneutic circle, Bolaño frustrates the reader’s expectation that the ultimate meaning of
the visceral realist avant-gardist project might be extracted from the poetic genius of its
mythical founder. Rather than revealing an ultimate Truth distilled from the poem of a

¹⁶² But there are other searches taking place: Lupe, the prostitute who is traveling with them in Sonora, is in
fact being pursued by her pimp. And the second section can be interpreted as the search of an unnamed
interviewer for the traces left by Belano and Lima during their global wanderings.
¹⁶³ This is how Bolaño describes, rather ironically, the endless propagation of meaning as experienced by
Salvatierra: “For a moment, I can tell you, my head was like a stormy sea and I couldn’t hear what the boys
were saying, although I did catch some phrases, some stray words, the predictable ones, I suppose:
Quetzalcoatl’s ship, the nighttime fever of some boy or girl, Captain Ahab’s encephalogram or the whale’s, the
surface of the sea that for sharks is the enormous mouth of hell, the ship without a sail that might also be a
coffin, the paradox of the rectangle, the rectangle of consciousness, Einstein’s impossible rectangle (in an
universe where rectangles are unthinkable), a page by Alfonso Reyes, the desolation of poetry” (424). In
another passage, Belano and Lima’s interpretation is more laconic. As Salvatierra reports: “Then the boys
looked at me and said: there is no mystery, Amadeo [no hay misterio, Amadeo]” (399).
supposedly exceptional individual, the reading of Síon becomes a catalyst of sociality. As the narrative continuously returns to the night spent by Belano, Lima, and Salvatierra talking about poetry and drinking mezcal, we get to know how literary collectives are founded and dismantled, how the avant-gardist utopianism of the 1920’s resembles in its passion and its failure that of the 1970’s, and ultimately how these experiments and the social interactions they engendered are the true object of the detective search.

Not only her poem, even Tinajero herself is emptied of any symbolic or literary weight. Once again, she is prefigured as potentially revelatory individual by the text itself, and yet, as soon as she materializes as a living being, her mystic potential collapses. In the third section, through a protracted and very uncertain riddle-solving quest carried out by Belano, Lima, Madero, and Lupe, the text accumulates the narrative tension necessary to enjoy the introduction of Tinajero. Yet, when the group finally finds her, Madero comments: “Seen from behind, leaning over the trough, there was nothing poetic about her” (639). The shocking disillusionment the naïve Madero experiences might point to the hackneyed trope about the incompatibility of physical appearance and poetic depth. If this were the case, there would be nothing original in Bolanó’s treatment of the old poetess: her elephantine figure—“She looked like a rock or an elephant” (640), Madero comments—as well as her social degradation would be precisely the signs of her aesthetic grandeur. Yet, no hints of poeticity are provided: Tinajero has stopped writing long before, has worked odd jobs, become a teacher, and abandoned that career too. No conversations among the visceral realists and Tinajero are reported, Madero does not say anything about the content of her notebooks (he just mentions that he has read them), and this supposedly mythical figure encounters an utterly asymbolic death when she is killed in a gunfight with Lupe’s pursuer. In the process of continuously frustrating the reader’s expectations about Tinajero’s singular
exceptionality, *The Savage Detectives* thus displaces the novel’s production of meaning from the individual to the social. In so doing, abstract ideas of poetic aurality yield to the investigation of class differences: during the trip, Madero challenges his companions to identify obscure rhetorical figures, poetic meters, and rhythmic structures, but he is immediately followed by another guessing game, this time led by Lupe, who exposes her companions’ scant knowledge of street slang and vernacular expressions.

If, in the quest for Tinajero, Bolaño deprives individuality of any revelatory potential in order to draw attention to dynamics of social grouping, in the vertiginously drifting second part he employs similar strategies in the narrative articulation of the two absent centers, Belano and Lima. Structured as a series of consecutive interviews to a highly heterogenous array of people, this section takes the reader, for more than four hundred pages, across multiple geographies and socio-cultural settings. Because of its sprawling qualities—both in terms of thematic concerns and characterological diversity—it would be impossible to identify a singular focal point. As a consequence, one of the most immediate effects is that, instead of getting a full picture of Belano and Lima through the stories of their acquaintances, the two keep escaping the reader’s grasp. This happens because they are never given the opportunity to narrate their own story and because, when they appear, their voices and psychologies are always refracted through the voices of multiple alternating interviewees.

This very peculiar formal solution can be better grasped by drawing on Alex Woloch’s discussion of the distribution of narrative space among major and minor characters in the classic realist novel. In *The One vs. the Many*, Woloch addresses one of the defining questions of realist representation, that is, “the two contradictory generic achievements” for which the realist novel has been praised: “depth psychology and social
expansiveness, depicting the interior life of a singular consciousness and casting a wide narrative gaze over a complex social universe” (19). This precarious equilibrium between individuality and collectivity, Woloch argues, is continuously threatened by minor characters, who, as they become “competing centers-of-consciousness” (22), need to be kept in a state of minorness by the imperative of protagonicity. As Woloch summarizes, in 19th-century realist novels “any character can be a protagonist, but only one character is” (31).

Individuality, Woloch concludes, ultimately trumps the possibility of a truly democratic representation of social diversity. Drawing on these insights, I want to suggest that Bolaño takes seriously the possibility of minor characters encroaching in the space of the protagonists, thus disrupting the structural equilibrium of that defined classical realism. Bolaño’s contemporary realism proposes an interesting solution to the dialectic between individuality and collectivity: on the one hand, the two presumed protagonists, Belano and Lima, maintain their major status through their refracted presence in the stories of minor characters; on the other however, precisely because of the proliferation of fully-fledged minor characters, they also lose psychological depth—the hallmark of protagonicity.

Belano and Lima in fact regularly appear in the narratives of the myriad characters that report their words, judge their behaviors, and express their feelings about them. However, in preventing them from expressing their own thoughts—for instance, through the canonical device of free indirect discourse—Bolaño makes them fleeting presences that the reader is ultimately unable to fully grasp. In doing so, Bolaño’s realism offers an answer to what Woloch, paraphrasing Roland Barthes’ indictment of the illusory nature of too many details in the realist novel, defines as the threat that “too many people” (19) pose the novel’s structural balance. In The Savage Detectives, this balance is shattered through a process of characterological propagation that, once again, responds to the narrative-ethical ambition to
narrate everything and to give full psychological depth to minor figures, rather than treating them as mere functions within the bildung of the protagonists. Formally, the main effect is what Eliseo Lara Ordenes terms “anatomical destructuring of the novel [la desestructuración anatómica de la novela]” (157), a centrifugal movement that keeps diverting the reader’s attention from Belano and Lima in order to introduce a new narrative thread, a new character, a new story. This potentially infinite drifting is arguably the central feature of Bolaño’s fiction, which can be found in each and every one of his texts but is most thoroughly achieved in the second section of The Savage Detectives. It is here in fact that minor characters keep encroaching into the space of the two protagonists, as if Bolaño was using the pretext of following Belano and Lima in their wanderings as a means of narrating a social totality through the voices of its members.

Consider for instance the numerous self-sustaining stories that constellate this section: in almost all of them, either Belano or Lima are mentioned, but they are never the main focus of attention. It would be impossible to enumerate all the narrative threads that Bolaño opens and often leaves hanging with a sense of indeterminacy. But some of them are particularly relevant in that they transform for a brief span of narrative time a minor character and her story into splinters of meaning-making. There is Mary Watson (253), a British student who travels in Southern Europe doing odd jobs and looking for a sense of purpose; there is a Chilean emigre (406) in Barcelona who wins the lottery multiple times and develops deranged theories about numbers and dreams; there is the story of a lawyer (451) who tries to make sense of his life by maddingly quoting Latin mottos and fails to because, as someone tells him, “we’re all alone and we’re lost” (474). All of these characters seem to be driven by an existential quest to which Bolaño is committed on giving the same narrative dignity as that of the two presumed protagonists. And through these seemingly
unrelated fragments we get a sense of a social collectivity in its historical evolution. At times
the reader can detect moments of parody or didacticism in the articulation of such
collectivity; yet, the central thrust of narration and the attitude that transpires most urgently
in all these stories is a profound interest for any manifestation of the human psyche, without
any moralizing intent.

In one of the most bizarre episodes of the second section of the novel, two
characters chronicle a duel (a literal duel with old swords) between Belano and Iñaki
Echevarne, a literary critic. The scene oscillates between sheer absurdity and tragic
seriousness. Without doubt, there is a quite explicit parody of the feuds and skirmishes of
the Spanish literary field—and of any other national field. Belano challenges Iñaki to a duel
because he wants to defend the reputation of another writer, whom Belano has never
actually met but who was criticized by Iñaki. The ridiculousness of the reason for the duel
and of the duel itself is nonetheless coupled with a tragic sense of solidarity and community,
which a witness to the duel describes with these words: “In a brief moment of lucidity, I was
sure that we’d all gone crazy. But then that moment of lucidity was displaced by a super-
second of super-lucidity (if I can put it that way), in which I realized that this scene was the
logical outcome of our ridiculous lives. It wasn’t a punishment but a new wrinkle. It gave a
glimpse of ourselves in our common humanity” (510). It is precisely this idea of a common
humanity and of a social whole that drives Bolaño’s narrative commitment towards
collectivities rather than exemplary individuals.

In so doing, *The Savage Detectives* reformulates another crucial feature that György
Lukács attributed to literary realism, the notion of typicality. Lukács famously argued that the

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164 There is little doubt that Iñaki Echevarne is a stand-in for the Spanish critic and Bolaño’s friend Ignacio Echevarría. This and other instances in which Bolaño creates fictional alter-egos of living authors and critics have led some scholars to argue that *The Savage Detectives* should be read as a roman à clef. See for instance Trelles.
typical characters are the only ones capable of embodying historical dynamism, as well as of showing the evolution of society as a complex organism. The typical, Lukács never stopped stressing, is thus very different from the stereotypical and the average, which, because they are deterministic and schematic versions of typicality, are unable to capture historical evolution. The realist writer, he claims, “[regards] as typical only figures of exceptional qualities, who mirror all the essential aspects of some definite stage of development, evolutionary tendency, or social group” (71). The typical character, in other words, is endowed with a kind of exemplarism that all the other characters lack. Interestingly, in the The Savage Detectives Bolaño purposefully avoids making Belano and Lima typical characters, and instead displaces typicality to the social collective and to the entirety of the character-system. The emergence of minor characters and the proliferation of narrative threads thus leads to a collectivized and dispersed typicality through which the novel articulates dynamics of interaction among heterogeneous social groups and classes. Because there is no single character capable of embodying the multiplaced histories that undergird this novel, the ultimate cognitive horizon of Bolaño’s contemporary realism is the social collectivity in its characterological complexity.

The main risk of this process of potentially endless propagation of fragments of meaning and self-standing micro-narratives would be to lose sight of the social whole as a structured and meaningful entity. A canonical device to prevent this, which Bolaño himself employs in 2666, is to have an omniscient third-person narrator that guarantees, through its centralizing narrative authority, a counterbalance to the risk of formal chaos. In this way, as

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165 For a thorough discussion of typicality in Lukács’ work, see Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (192-196) and Nilges.

166 Eleni Condouriotis notes that Lukács, at times, “shifts the emphasis away from the capacity of individual characters to capture typicality altogether and argues instead that the whole must be typical” (242).
Deckard writes in her analysis of *2666* and *Woes of the True Policeman*, “if the texts’ semiautonomous parts each correspond to a social formation in a different geography, the reader must dialectically correlate the parts to their corresponding social structures, moving between the particular and the general and back again” (215). In *The Savage Detectives* however, because there is no guiding narratorial authority that can facilitate the process of connecting parts to whole, the reader is asked to link parts (the micro-narratives) to the whole (the social totality) by tracking the movements of returning themes and returning characters, and by detecting the underlying historical situation in the unfiltered voices of its protagonists. Concretely, this means continuously interrupting the reading process to go back and find a missing connection, a forgotten relation among characters, an event that might explain another. In this sense, the realism of *The Savage Detectives* requires a *writerly* engagement with the text rather than the passive reception of a fixed meaning.167

This active participation demanded by the text to the reader, prompted primarily by the lack of a centralizing narrator, is also related to of a specific stylistic tone that Bolaño adopts throughout the novel. The absent narratorial voice seems in fact to be engaging in a controlled and self-imposed withdrawal in order to allow other voices to develop. This leads to an apparent stylistic blankness—a feature that has been noticed by most of Bolaño’s commentators and that conveys a sense of immediate readability. Spanish writer Javier Cercas, one of the first to recognize Bolaño’s stylistic agility, has praised him for being “compulsively readable, immediately cordial, a charmingly attractive [narrator], an inexhaustible storyteller” (4). At the same time, critics have failed to explain the relation between two opposite pulls: on the one hand, this appearance of simplicity and flatness at

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167 Barthes, in *S/Z*, famously develops the distinction between the *readerly* text (which can be only passively received) and the *writerly* text, which demands the reader’s active participation in the production of its meanings.
the level of the sentence and of the micro-narrative, and on the other, the difficulty of piecing together and making sense of all these narratively plain fragments. Birns gets closer to the central issue here: he rightly points out that Bolaño’s voice “is less blank than self-effacing” and adds that “[i]t might be droll. But it is challengingly alert” (198). If, through narrative self-effacing, Bolaño prevents any authoritative voices from emerging—thus adopting a style that gives a false impression of ironic disengagement—he also conveys a keen interest for and an alerteness to the ways in which the interactions of these voices can cast light on the collective history of the visceral realists, on the Latin American youths stranded all over the world, and on the political-literary utopias of a generation.

In other words, the pull towards readability comes from Bolaño’s stylistic choices, whereas the strive towards expressivity about the political histories and social dynamics that undergird the visceral realist experience belongs to the structural level. We can better understand these narrative tensions by framing them in terms of the opposition between pure narrativity and the production of political or historical meaning. The first dimension is what Roland Barthes called “writing degree zero,” that is, “a colourless writing, freed from all bondage to a pre-ordained state of language.” A kind of writing that is “basically in the indicative mode, or if you like, amodal.” In this way, Barthes continues, “writing is…reduced to a sort of negative mood in which the social or the mythical characters of language are abolished in favour of a neutral and inert state of form” *(Writing Degree Zero* 76-77). But what does it mean for Bolaño to resuscitate a degree zero of writing in 1998? Wouldn’t it be an operation as anachronistic as Belano and Lima’s reconstitution of visceral realism, a movement that was already exhausted fifty years before? In Barthes’ formulation, this style—which is indeed a “utopia of language” (84) more than a fully realizable project—undermines any claim to mimetically represent reality, and deprives language of its social
substratum. Yet, because Bolaño has a serious commitment towards the Real and because the sociality of language is never put into question, his kind of zero degree of writing and the flatness or blankness of his voice are coupled with a narrative structure that constantly demands exercises of meaning-making and that highlights sociality and historical depth. In so doing, Bolaño recuperates the degree zero of writing in form of narrativity and compulsive readability, through a style that wants to be neutral, paratactic, deflowered of any visible sign of craftsmanship. At the same time, by portraying a tradition of avant-gardist activism and by structuring the novel around its history and the social interactions of an expansive group of characters, he retains a profound connection to the realist-mimetic project of representing a collectivity in its historical evolution. Therefore, just as characterological propagation implies a commitment towards collective histories, the indicative mood that defines the novel’s style and the horizontalizing movements of the narrative are functional to Bolaño’s larger mimetic project: only thus is his writing able to circumvent the risk of becoming a vacuous duplication of a historically exhausted zero degree mode.

But the dialogue that Bolaño establishes with previous aesthetic modes is not limited to stylistic and formal strategies, since *The Savage Detectives* is in many ways a historical novel, whose main goal is precisely to historicize the recent past so as to understand the roots of contemporaneity. As a text that treats the contemporary and its genealogies as a source of socio-historical knowledge rather than as a flux of ungraspable vectors, this novel is particularly suited for exploring how specific groups at specific times have formed, with what objectives, and following what ideological directions. The novel in fact traces the history of an avant-gardist movement that is born in Mexico in the 1970’s and interacts with a global galaxy of literary collectives, and that finds its ideological motivations in the
connection with the avant-gardist experiences of the 1920’s. Because, as I have shown, one of the central goals of Bolaño’s narrative project is to transition from a focus on individuals to the dynamic aggregation of social collectivities, it is crucial to understand how such collectives frame themselves in relation to the grand narratives of modernity. In an essay from a collection dedicated to the relevance of Lukács’ novel theory today, John Marx notices that Lukács showed a particular interest in social assemblages that could offer an alternative to the typical and exemplary character. Marx goes on to argue that, regrettably, Lukács failed to seriously explore the path delineated by these groups, one that “focuses on narratives of pre- and trans-national affiliation [and] has less teleological momentum” (190). Aiming to fill this gap, Marx analyzes a series of texts that “demonstrate the novel’s abiding interest in the workings of groups, especially those groups whose internal relations involve participants from different cultures, classes and regions of the world” (199). In other words, by displacing the attention from the bourgeois individual and from narratives of nation-based modernity to more complex and less stable social aggregates, this line of historical novels offers a less unyielding picture of the possibilities of novelistic representation today.

Drawing on Marx’s insights, I want to suggest that The Savage Detectives too should be understood as an attempt to register flexible dynamics of social grouping that transcend national borders and stringent class affiliations. Indeed, the entire novel is a testament to the complex and tragically unsuccessful endeavors of a group of young idealist writers to intervene, both aesthetically and politically, in the history of Latin America. But Bolaño uses the experience of visceral realism as a pretext to open the text to wider social collectives, assembled and dismantled in the course of the twenty years narrated in the second section and through the global peregrinations of the two absent protagonists. On the one hand, these groups cannot be easily ensconced in a literary-national narrative of modernity, yet on
the other, they are not at all immune to the workings of capital and to the rules of the literary
game they are playing. This is a crucial point, particularly because Bolaño is often (and
uncritically) praised for being an alternative or resistant voice within the contemporary
market of literary goods. Marx writes that “these groups often appear to reproduce the
unequal relations of capitalism, modifying without overthrowing them” (200) and adds that
none of them “looks like a revolutionary class” (201). The characters and social groups
Bolaño is most interested in and endows with a tragic marginality, even though they
incessantly claim that they want to revolutionize Latin American letters, seem to have two
options: they can either decide to be coopted by political parties and thus hope to secure
symbolic and economic gains, or they can attempt to survive in peripheral, non-institutional
spaces and ultimately be forgotten. In this sense, these groups are close to Karl Marx’s
notion of the lumpenproletariat—what he had dismissively defined as “the whole indefinite,
disintegrated mass” and “the scum, offal, refuse of all classes” (75). However, it is as if
Bolaño had turned Marx’s indictment into a narrative commitment towards lumpenism and
marginal social collectives, whose claimed alternativeness does not exempt them from the
workings of capital, nor from the possibility of cultivating precarious political or literary
affiliations. It is then not coincidental that a character, when hearing that Belano and Lima
sustain themselves through drug dealing, comments that this is “lumpen behavior” (186), or
that an Argentinian writer defines the visceral realist “the literary lumpen proletariat”
(362).168

These considerations can help us redress a tendency in Bolaño’s criticism that views
his work and his success as proofs of alternative configurations to the economic and social
realities of the present, or to the unequal organization of the contemporary world literary

168 Bolaño even wrote a novella titled *Una novelita lumpen* (2002).
system. Consider the critical work of Sharae Deckard, who, despite her acute analyses of Bolaño’s oeuvre, concludes that *Woes of the True Policeman* is “charged with the desire…for a different version of the world” (220).169 A similar vision is shared by Oswaldo Zavala, who enlists Bolaño in the project of rescuing literature from its current marginal status, through the celebration of the aesthetic as an alternative to the economic, and by pursuing the highly aspirational idea of a level playing field in the literary realm.170 This kind of optimism is all the more surprising given Bolaño’s consciousness of the status of the literary sociolect and of the economic determinants that influence the pursuit of symbolic recognition, as he makes unambiguously clear both in his fictional texts and in his critical interventions. For Bolaño has a sociological eye for registering the material conditions of literary production: his awareness, rather than being reductive, casts light on the intricate social dynamics of recognition and acquisition of various forms of capital. In *The Savage Detectives*, a lawyer turned literary entrepreneur makes this quite clear: “…no one inquires as to the source of one’s possessions, but possessions are necessary. An essential truth if one wants to devote oneself to one’s most secret calling: poets are dazzled by the spectacle of wealth” (451). The unavoidable entanglements of literature and aesthetic deeds with capital and money are further explored through the very activities of the visceral realist, whose leaders, as we have seen, start selling drugs because they are unable and unwilling to acquire prestige and capital within institutional literary circles. Money as the most immediate form of capital is a motif throughout the novel: most of the characters express concerns about not having it; money is borrowed and exchanged; lack of money leads to material decay, for instance for Jacinto

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169 For a similar discussion of counterhegemonic temporalities in contemporary fiction, see also Deckard’s “Capitalism’s Long Spiral.”

170 Zavala writes that “…in the limits of modernity itself, Bolaño points to a literary practice that renders impossible the return to a tradition in which the literary field must be somehow destined to reproduce the same verticalities and disparities of the geopolitical struggles of our time” (95-96).
Requena and Lima, who have lost a tooth and cannot afford to replace it. Capital thus determine the visceral realists’ literary lives, but also the affective life of all the characters they are connected to. A nurse who has emigrated to the United States from Mexico, when asked when she last visited her native land, she replies: “Too long…I don’t have money to be nostalgic” (445).

The materialistic imagination of *The Savage Detectives* is partially due to Bolaño’s own biographical vicissitudes—as a writer that for decades had struggled to survive at the peripheries of the literary system. But it is also a consequence of his ambivalence towards the literary vocation: on the one hand, Bolaño never fails to express his admiration for an idealistic, if ill-fated, pursuit and for the “paradoxical grandeur” (Andrews 60) of minor writers and forgotten poets; on the other, there is an even stronger and almost social scientific responsibility towards writing about how the literary field actually functions, without any illusory belief in the essential superiority of literature. Such commitment to the collective endeavor of writing and to its inner workings is something that Bolaño never lost sight of, even when, towards the end of his life, he reached the prestige and literary status that for many years he had unsuccessfully striven for. In a speech he planned to deliver (but never completed nor made public) at conference in Sevilla in 2003, at the height of his fame, Bolaño articulates most lucidly the very material pressures behind the attempts to pursue a writing career in Latin America. At a time in which he was being hailed as the shining example of a second Latin American boom, he polemically wrote: “In theory, and with no input from me whatsoever, the title of my talk was supposed to be ‘Where does the new Latin American novel come from?’ If I stay on topic, my answer will be about three minutes long. We come from the middle class or from a more or less settled proletariat of from families of low-level drug traffickers who’re tired of gunshots and want respectability
instead” (*Between Parentheses* 336). He then adds: “Where does the new Latin American literature come from? The answer is very simple. It comes from fear. It comes from the terrible (and in a certain way fairly understandable) fear of working in an office and selling cheap trash on the Paseo Ahumada” (337). What’s crucial to note here is that, when asked about the origin of the contemporary Latin American novel, instead of talking about literary models, schools of thought, or aesthetic affiliations, Bolaño emphatically shifts a discussion that was supposed to be about aesthetic matters to their overdetermining economic conditions, and relates the latter to their socially destructive consequences. In this sense, his dispassionate comments should be taken as a warning against well-meaning but ultimately futile claims about the possibility of literature to transcend the social and economic conditions in which it is produced and circulates.\(^{171}\) If the discourse on the aesthetic and the literary cannot be separated from the symbolic and material gains that writing might secure, it is quite telling that several aspiring writers portrayed in Bolaño’s work, as soon as they reach the awareness that those gains won’t be available to them, stop writing fiction and poetry—or stop writing altogether. This is the case of Belano, who becomes a war reporter in Africa and abandons his poetic ambition. And since Belano is Bolaño’s own fictional stand-in, his choice is framed as a legitimate alternative to a precarious survival at the margins of the literary field. The same happens to Tinajero, the mythical mother of the visceral realist and a promising poet, according to the judgement of Amadeo Salvatierra: her disappearance in the Sonora desert coincides with a definitive poetic silence.\(^{172}\) This kind of

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\(^{171}\) See for instance Pheng Cheah, who, in seeking to theorize the “normative force that literature can exert in the world” (5), argues rather hopefully that “world literature points to something that will always exceed and disrupt capital” (11) through acts of ethical world-building.

\(^{172}\) Salvatierra too gives up his literary career. He tells Belano and Lima: “Like so many Mexicans, I too gave up poetry. Like so many thousands of Mexicans, I too turned my back on poetry. Like so many hundreds of thousands of Mexicans, I too, when the moment came, stopped writing and reading poetry” (586). The emphatic repetition here seems to signal a sense of regret and an equally strong awareness of the lack of a choice.
pessimism is nonetheless countered by a possible alternative that Bolaño, as he often does, alludes to by offhandedly giving unnecessary information and adding details that carry no clear relevance in terms of plot. When Belano and Lima speak to Flora Castañeda, the teacher who had worked with her, she tells them that she has read her notebooks. In the only remaining trace of Tinajero’s writing, Castañeda had found “mostly notes on the Mexican educational system, some very sensible and others completely inappropriate… There was a plan for general literacy, which the teacher could hardly make out because it was so chaotic, followed by reading lists for childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood” (635). Castañeda then mentions some of the books Tinajero had listed and neither Lima nor Belano make any further comments on the notebook. The reader is thus not explicitly encouraged to draw meaning from Tinajero’s notes: the narrative goes on and the notes are never mentioned again. Yet, if one remembers that, after having quit her teaching job, Tinajero had started working in a maquiladora, and if we consider the importance that Bolaño attributes to maquiladoras in Santa Teresa as symbols of neoliberal modernity, Tinajero’s notes acquire a crucial significance. In referring to her plan for general literacy and to her serious if disorganized commitment towards education, it is as if Bolaño was contrasting, on the one hand, education and the social welfare it could engender in marginalized areas (such as the borderscape of the Sonora desert), and on the other, neoliberal reforms, underaged labor—as in the case of adolescent workers in the maquiladoras—and, ultimately, the social devastation brought by capitalist modernization. Once again, it is only by relating narrative hints to each other and to larger social and economic dynamics that the reader can grasp the expansiveness of Bolaño’s fictional yet historically grounded universe.

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So far, I have discussed how *The Savage Detectives* encapsulates the transition from a hyperspecific local to a geographically expansive idea of the world, as well as how a parallel movement happens in the characterological space, where the serious attention to individual lives undergirds Bolaño’s engagement with larger collectivities and with the social, economic, and historical vectors that determine their composition and interactions. These two transitions are decisive in that they integrate several levels—the spatio-temporal, the stylistic, the formal—into a cohesive and realist narrative project. In this concluding section, I want to expand upon my claim that only literary realism offers the instruments necessary to give form to Bolaño’s narrative vision. In order to do so, I turn to the third and last major transition that informs *The Savage Detectives* on the literary-political and formal levels: the movement from avant-gardism to realist totalization.

In 1999, Harry Shaw published a fundamental work on the realist novel, titled *Narrating Reality*. At the a time when denunciations of realism as either transparent and naïve or coercive and centralizing were finally losing critical purchase, Shaw’s intervention can be seen as the definitive rebuttal of the poststructuralist indictment of realism, as well as the beginning of a renewed critical attention for the diagnostic potential of the realist novel, both in its classical form and in its contemporary and ever-evolving instantiations.¹⁷³ In the introductory chapter, Shaw offers a concise but comprehensive schematization of the different critiques of realism, starting from the fundamental disagreement on whether realism is premised on centralization and totalization or on dispersion and fragmentation (8-30). For the purpose of my discussion, what it is crucial to stress is that, at the core of realism, there seems to be a seemingly unrealizable strive towards the representation of both

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¹⁷³ For a discussion of the alternate critical fortune of literary realism, see Goodlad.
particularized experience (leading to dispersion) and collective reality (through totalization). This is the same problem that Woloch had identified in relation to character-space and that Shaw tackles on a more theoretical level. But rather than siding with a particular critique of realism and choosing totalization or dispersion, Shaw compellingly shows that one pull does not exclude the other and that critiques of the realist novel have often reduced realism to a (deceiving) ideological formation. Writing against these critiques, Shaw suggests that it is the realist text itself that, in self-consciously mediating conflicting pulls and their ideological foundations, encourages the reader to move continuously from the particular to the collective and from the realm of the quotidian to the “interrelated set of structures that inform reality and by so informing it make it potentially comprehensible” (12). Shaw thus identifies the capacity to narratively approximate historical reality by revealing its underlying structures and its complex evolution as the central prerogative of classical realism. And although the realist novel has enormously changed in its form and design since its so-called classical period, my contention is that this foundational ambition has not ceased to define contemporary realism. In this sense, Bolaño’s oeuvre is one of the most successful examples of how the strive towards totalization can be coupled with a serious engagement with individualized experience. In Shaw’s formulation, “[faced] with a world of diverse historicist particularity, realism attempts to give that world some degree of order while remaining true to its concrete specificity” (32). In The Savage Detectives, this dialectic is given form in different ways: in terms of space, it can be seen in the novel’s localized yet multiplaced imagination; formally, it determines the proliferation of minor characters and the rejection of individual typicality; thematically, it makes the economic and social structures of reality apprehensible in their quotidian specificity.
Bolaño thus centers his narrative project around the defining premises of literary realism and reframes them in accordance to the historical conditions he is portraying. Just as the second section of *The Savage Detectives* is a testament to realism’s dispersive qualities—the continuously drifting and ever-expanding narratives, the strands that go nowhere—the novel as a whole is a highly self-conscious attempt to portray a social collectivity through in its spatio-historical concreteness. At the same time, Bolaño is particularly interested a specific time period and a specific literary phenomenon: the avant-gardist experiment of visceral realism in Mexico City in the 1970’s. Although it is true that, as I have shown, this confined experience gets worldled and spatially expanded as the narrative proceeds, the choice of structuring the novel around a forgotten group of writers fascinated by modernist experimentation is not at all casual and needs to be explained in terms of Bolaño’s most pressing narrative and political concerns.

To begin, it must be noted that the reference to “realism” in the group’s name can be misleading, since their poetic and literary activities are more aligned to modernism and avant-gardism—hence, more visceral than realist. This is confirmed by the Spanish original, in which the group is referred to as realvisceralismo and its members as los real visceralistas. Natasha Wimmer’s translation of these terms—“visceral realism” and “the visceral realists”—emphasizes the “realism” part, whereas realvisceralistas stresses authenticity rather than realist poetics: the real/true/authentic visceralists, with an added (ironic) connotation of prestige, since real also means “royal.” In this sense, the defining feature of the group is “visceralism” rather than realism, that is to say, an artistic practice and living praxis in which the boundaries between poetry, sex, and drug-fueled experiences are quite labile, and the pursuit of unmediated emotional-artistic expression is deemed the highest form of aesthetic
The first part of the novel can thus be read as a fictional portrayal of the dynamics through which avant-gardist groups attempt to position themselves in the literary field in a resolute struggle to gain symbolic recognition. Bolaño’s sociological eye is so acute here that oftentimes it seems that the novel is a fictional rendition of the processes that Pierre Bourdieu had analyzed in The Rules of Art. The visceral realists are constantly claiming their nonconformity in relation to other movements, what Bourdieu calls “the dialectic of distinction” (126): they despise institutionalized writers and assert an absolute autonomy, since they feel trapped, as Madero summarizes, “between the reign of Octavio Paz and the reign of Pablo Neruda” (21). Because aesthetic revolution is “the model of access to existence in the field” (Bourdieu 125), the visceral realists aim to overturn the field’s structure and hierarchies. As Belano and Lima tell Madero: “together we would change Latin American poetry” (8). Furthermore, in order to do so, they establish aesthetic affiliations with previous avant-gardist movements (in particular Stridentism from the 1920’s), so as to legitimate their struggle and reinforce their revolutionary position. At the same time, since the fight for symbolic recognition depends on permanent differentiation, internal ruptures are bound to happen. Indeed, very soon Madero is informed that “Arturo [Belano] had ordered the first purge of visceral realism” (96) and adds: “it occurred to me that Mexican avant-garde poetry was undergoing its first schism” (96). These and many other elements testify to Bolaño’s profound awareness of the logic of the field, and most importantly, to his ironic stand towards the rules of the literary game in which all of the visceral realists are deeply invested. This kind of ironic consciousness emerges in form of parodic exaggeration, as when

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174 The first section of the novel narrated by the young poet Madero is a lively and often parodic testament to this kind of artistic ethos. It is not hard to see in Madero a caricatural depiction of an enthusiastic neophyte, one that Bolaño himself might have met during his years in Mexico City when he co-founded the Infrarealist movement, of which visceral realism is a fictionalized version.
Salvatierra provides a three-pages and completely arbitrary list—called “The Directory of the Avant-Garde” (225)—of their models; or through the refraction of the visceral realist adventure in the voices of several characters that consider it a huge joke, if not, as Belano’s ex-girlfriend claims, “[Belano’s] exhausting dance of love for me” (172).

Bolaño’s reflection on the Latin American avant-gardism of the 1970’s thus functions in two parallel ways: in one respect, it is related to his larger concern about recognizing and paying homage, through literature, to the artistic and political struggles of his generation. As he famously claimed in The Caracas Address, “to a great extent everything that I’ve written is a love letter or a farewell letter to my own generation” (Between Parentheses 35)—that is, a recuperative project that aims to draw attention to the fact that “all Latin America is sown with the bones of these forgotten youths” (35). At the same time however, Bolaño’s literary endeavors represent a self-conscious attempt to investigate the reasons of this generational defeat, and to find the most appropriate form to write about them. It is at this level of critique that, I want to stress, Bolaño’s historical and political reflections merge with the choice of literary realism as a mode of expression.

Several critics have highlighted the significance of The Savage Detectives for the literary and political histories of Latin America, and of Bolaño’s oeuvre in terms of the social function of literature. Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott argues that “[Bolaño’s] novels express the exhaustion of the modern articulation between literature and the public space of reading that granted to it a particular social function (illustration, education, moral exemplification, etc.)” (194). Similarly, J. Agustín Pastén reads The Savage Detectives as the registration of “the change that is produced when literature does not have a clear and specific function anymore, that is, when it ceases to ‘relate to’ or ‘build’ the nation…” (426). Juan E. De Castro adds that this leads to the substitution of “political commitment with ethical evaluation” (64) and with an
idea of writing as “an act of mourning” (67). Finally, Emilio Sauri writes about “the exhaustion of aesthetic and political possibility afforded by the literary” (422). All these critical appraisals are reasonable: indeed, Bolaño’s treatment of the avant-gardist experience of the visceral realists provides a rather bleak account of the possibility of literature to intervene in society in politically meaningful ways. And yet, scholars have failed to relate this point to its consequences on the level of form of expression: because Bolaño’s registration of the failure of the avant-garde is co-constitutive with a change in form, the exhaustion of avant-gardism coincides not simply with a different ethical posture, but most crucially with a transition to realist totalization.

Such transition must be understood at the intersection of form and literary-political motivations. In this regard, Sauri offers a compelling argument of how *The Savage Detectives* must be read as a wider reflection on how political ambitions get reframed formally. Expanding upon Salvatierra’s claim that his and Tinajero’s avant-gardist experience was meant to make Latin American letters reach “goddamned modernity [la pinche modernidad]” (488), Sauri relates the neo-modernism practiced by the visceral realist to the political and economic transformations that have affected Latin America in the post-war period. In so doing, he persuasively connects the failed project of reaching literary modernity by relying on modernist models with the experience of “development populism” (421), a political and economic attempt to transform Latin America that was shattered by “the structural adjustment policies of International Monetary Fund and the World Bank” (421). What it is crucial to stress here is that, in *The Savage Detectives*, the seemingly narrow focus on a little-known literary movement functions as a way of accessing larger historical and political
problematics. Because the failure of the avant-gardist experiences coincides with the end of a political and economic utopia, this novel should be read as an attempt to find the formal means to register such failure. Sauri believes that the concluding pages of the last section prove that neither modernism nor realism are capable of doing so. In my reading, I instead contend that Bolaño could not but choose realist totalization precisely because of its capacity to articulate a collectivity in its historical evolution and to highlight the connections between literary dynamics and socio-political transformations.

This is then the third and final transition that defines The Savage Detectives as well as Bolaño’s narrative project as a whole: the registration of the failure of the avant-gardist ethos and aesthetic coincides with the adoption of realism as a mode of social and historical diagnosis. Such failure is signaled in multiple ways in the novel: from the decision of Tinajero, Belano, and Salvatierra to stop writing, to the interviews with publishers and critics that testify to the demise of the visceral realists’ grand ambitions—“Youth is a scam” (480), an ex-member of the group caustically comments—to the fact that not a single poem by Belano or Lima is reported in the novel. Furthermore, it seems that Bolaño’s illustration of the pitfalls of avant-gardism envisages two potential outcomes. The first is exile and literary oblivion. This is the fate of two young writers, a Cuban (who is a fictional stand-in for Reinaldo Arenas) and a Peruvian. Both, Bolaño writes, “believed in the revolution and freedom, like pretty much every Latin American writer in the fifties” (527), and both had their lives and psychic stability shattered because of a mix of naivete, an incapacity to

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175 This kind of homology between the literary and the social field is one of the key insights of Bourdieu’s sociological theory: “More generally, although largely independent of them in principle, the internal [to the literary field] struggles always depend, in outcome, on the correspondence that they maintain with the external struggles—whether struggles at the core of the field of power or at the core of the social field as a whole” (127).
navigate the rules of the literary game, and the historical failure of the alternative modernity project in Latin America.

The second path avant-gardism can take is becoming institutionalized by serving, in most of the cases, fascist political parties. There is in fact a political and ideological affinity, Bolaño suggests, between fascism and avant-gardism. Whether in the story narrated in *Distant Star* of Carlos Wieder, the military pilot turned aerial poet during the Pinochet regime, or in the invented encyclopedia of writers in *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, or in the self-confession in *By Night in Chile* of a literary critic—who is complicit with the tortures of political opponents under Pinochet—the recurring idea is that the deeper nucleus of any revolutionary avant-gardist movement can become fascism (and historically this has often been the case) in the absence of a strong moral and political compass. And because a critique of avant-gardism cannot adopt the same formal means of what is being critiqued, no poems written by the visceral realists, except for the cryptic *Sión* by Tinajero, appear in the novel. Instead, Bolaño opts for an ever-expanding universe of characters and stories, aiming to articulate a narrative and historical totality with its intricate but ultimately apprehensible relations.

Bolaño realist and totalizing efforts are thus based on two crucial premises: first, that the novel can indeed represent history and the “systematic relationships” (Shaw 101) that connect its actors and social collectivities; and second, that articulating a totality means acknowledging its gaps as well as the impossibility of unmediated representation. In *The Savage Detectives*, the narrative strands that go nowhere, the potentially infinite multiplication of characters, the actions and emotions left unexplained suggest that literary representation is necessarily partial and insufficient, and that totality, as Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall have acutely observed, “is not a category that describes a ‘state of affairs’,” but a “principle”
(11) used to *comprehend* such state of affairs. In other words, totality is not what is being represented—reality, history, and their contradictions—but the means of representing it. Totality, as the central heuristic of literary realism, can thus cast light on the relations among a forgotten literary movement in Latin America, the entangled histories of the Americas, Europe, and Africa, and the political and social failure of capitalist modernization in the post-war period. The transition towards this mode of expression is crucial to the structure and form of Bolaño’s two major novels, *The Savage Detectives* and *2666*, which, borrowing an apt expression used by David Kurnick, are examples of “a new form of realist completism” (110).

The critical and social significance of Bolaño’s new global realism lies ultimately in its capacity of being world-oriented and multiplaced while being conscious of its own limitations as an artistic mode of representation. In this sense, it seems relevant that one of the structuring devices of *The Savage Detectives* is the three-times recurring motif of the window—a symbol of mediation which, in the context of imaginative literature, is not at all unreasonable to associate with writing itself as a mediating activity. In the last paragraphs of each of the three sections of the novel a window appears. The first time it is the car window of the Impala, the car that Madero, Lupe, Belano, and Lima are about to launch into the Sonora desert. As they speed away from Lupe’s pimp, Madero comments in his characteristically dramatic tone: “I turned around a through the back window I saw a shadow…All the sadness of the world was concentrated in that shadow, framed by the strict rectangle of the Impala’s window” (139). At the end of the second section, the window returns, this time in the narrative of Amadeo Salvatierra, who explicitly uses this image as a symbol of mediation and distortion. As his night with Belano and Lima comes to an end, he notices that “the one who was reading [Belano] raised his eyes and looked at me as if I were
behind a window or he were on the other side of a window” (588), and later proceeds to open the actual front room window of his house, in a gesture that counters the secluded setting of their conversations. Finally, in the last pages of the novel, again from Madero’s diary, three windows appear, this time as drawings. Each of them is a possible answer to the question that Madero (and the novel) is asking the reader: “What’s outside the window?” (647). In the first drawing, Madero suggests, there is “a star.” In the second, “a sheet” (647). The last window is much more enigmatic: its framing lines are dashed and Madero leaves the question unanswered. The most famous literary precedent of a tripartite work of fiction in which a symbolic element appears at the very end of each of the three section is Dante’s Divina Commedia, whose three Cantos end with an evocation of “the stars [le stelle]”—in the very last line of each of them. But whereas for Dante those stars are related to the ultimate goal of the allegorical journey of humanity towards God and are interpretive keys in his worldview—what Eric Auerbach called “figural-Christian” realism (202)—Bolaño borrows from Dante the formal recurrence of a symbolic device, as well as its contribution to the larger realist project, but deploys it for a different purpose. The recurring window in fact suggests that, first, mediation is the epistemological core of literary representation, and second, that the kind of new global realism Bolaño is proposing is an evolving and ultimately open-ended project. If the first two windows drawn by Madero are framing devices for a reality that remains external to the text and that, as such, can be represented but not fully grasped, the last window—in which the frame has been broken—suggests that writing and representation must be reinvented by letting reality invade, as it were, the textual world. This invitation is in turn coupled with an effort to devise new formal means that are historically adequate to the realist-mimetic project. While the abrupt interruption of Madero’s entries seems to signal that silence might be the only answer, The Savage Detectives as a whole
envisions an opportunity in a different form of realism, one that is as totalizing as it is porous and world-oriented.
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