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Confronting the Strange

Slipstream Literature around the Millennium

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INTRODUCTION

Looking at the last decade or two of literary production (in America and elsewhere), we can find a number of texts that are not easy to slot into traditional genres, as they cross some boundaries that are deeply entrenched in our traditional understanding of literary categories – high and low literature, realistic and fantastic fiction, “genre” and “mainstream”.

Admittedly, the attempts at tracing the contours of this kind of writing suffer from a great deal of vagueness. On the one hand, the label “genre fiction” in this context is used mostly in reference to science fiction and fantasy, but is sometimes extended to encompass all those kinds of fiction that deal with the fantastic, or even any form of popular writing with some easily recognized set of traits, such as crime fiction or western. The other side of the coin, “mainstream”, is no easier to define, as it is used as a shorthand for “everything that is not genre” or, in an equally nebulous expression, “literary fiction”.

Yet, despite the lack of clear definitions, many critics and authors feel that there is something going on; that this form of writing that does not quite belong in either camp is gaining relevance. This sort of “in-between” writing has been a topic of reflection in the circles of genre fiction; at the same time, in the last few years several works of fiction written in this style, by authors not commonly associated with genre fiction, have gained both critical and public acclaim.

Several critics and authors have tried to lay out a definition, or to claim this kind of writing as their own through manifestos, or to use it as the basis for an anthology. This has led

to the existence of many conflicting definitions, often overlapping, sometimes used interchangeably in scholarly works, for this kind of literature: New Wave Fabulism, interfictionality, weird fiction, slipstream and so on. Furthermore, scholars involved in this debate not only do not agree on the terminology, but also on whether to consider it a new genre, or a literary effect, or something else entirely.

The matter remains open to this day. The complexity of the discourse, if not its very existence, signals the presence of a nucleus of interest, of that “something” that is going on. However, the preoccupation with definitions, especially among those coming from a genre background, has too often taken up the whole span of critical reflection, without entering in relation with other critical instances that traversed the same recent years.

In the first part of my work I will retrace some key points of this debate, both from a historical and from a, for lack of a better word, taxonomic perspective. I will focus in particular on one of the many definitions that have been proposed: slipstream. I have elected slipstream as my reference point because, among many competing definitions, it can claim a longer, and more articulate, critical history. As we will see, no consensus has been reached on the matter; but the fact that slipstream has been observed and analyzed more in depth than most of the alternatives allows us to identify a set of traits to better orient ourselves in this in-between category of writing.

However, it is not my objective to present yet another reflection on the validity of one term rather than another; the taxonomical effort is not an end in itself. Perhaps the greatest limit of the discourse on slipstream and its counterparts is that it has only rarely been brought past the issues of definitions and genealogies, remaining mostly confined to the circles of science fiction criticism. On the opposite side, scholarly works focused on the most visible examples of slipstream often don't seem to be aware of that long-going conversation, and

struggle with the lack of an agreed-upon terminology for the multifaceted generic nature of these novels.

The core traits of slipstream, as laid out by the foundational anthology *Feeling Very Strange* – the violation of the tenets of realism, the admixture of languages and tropes from different genres, the centrality of the idea of strangeness – can serve not only as tools for classification, but also as an entrance point to interact with other issues of the current critical discourse, in particular those dealing with the disruption of established paradigms. To test this hypothesis my starting point will be the essay by Richard Gray, “Open Doors, Closed Minds”, in which the author raises the argument that American writers after 9/11 have retreated into familiar narratives, and do not deal enough with the changes brought by the new millennium – in other words, that they fail to confront the strange. Gray's article denounces the limits of mainstream literary fiction and suggests an alternative in immigrant narratives – yet his call for new imaginative structures, for the enactment of a new language, finds some resonance in recent slipstream literature, which is not part of his analysis.

The claims in Gray's article will serve as the lens through which to examine slipstream in search for a point of contact between two discourses in contemporary literature that have mostly been circumscribed to separate circles. To do this, I selected three novels from the first decade of the 21st century, novels by authors who have gained some recognition in the “mainstream” audience. These novels use fantastic elements and the languages of genre fiction in different ways: to play with ideas of familiarity, or to symbolize the consequences of trauma, or to represent the interplay between different cultural identities. The various effects they achieve are a possible answer to Gray's claims about post 9/11 literature.

Slipstream is a small part of the contemporary literary landscape, and it's hard to say to what conclusions the critical discussion on the kind of literature it stands for will arrive. That

said, I believe that once the critical discourse manages to move past the stage of definitions, it could be a source of useful insights on the ongoing literary discourse.

A HISTORY OF SLIPSTREAM

The first decade of the 21st century has seen a certain interest in works that play around traditional literary categories, by blending together tropes and themes of different genres, and in particular by bringing fantastic elements (usually associated with science fiction and fantasy, but not exclusively so) in what would otherwise be realistic narratives. While works of this kind are by no means dominant in the literary landscape, a number of them has gained important literary awards and popularity within mainstream channels. The recent achievements of this “genre-bending” literature, however, do not mean that this is a recent phenomenon. In fact, the question of how to define it exactly has been going on for three decades, and more than one solution has been proposed by authors and critics, especially those operating in the circles of genre fiction. One thread of this conversation is, in my opinion, particularly interesting in light of finding points of contact with other instances in present-day literary criticism: slipstream.

“Slipstream” entered the literary discourse for the first time in 1989. Bruce Sterling, noted science fiction author and critic, was at the time authoring a column (titled *Catscan*) for the amateur magazine *Science Fiction Eye*. The July issue column was titled, indeed, “Slipstream”.

The piece opens with a scathing commentary on the state of science fiction at the time, characterized with such strong expressions as “brain-death” and “the sprawling possessor of a

dream that failed” (“Slipstream”). Considering Sterling's involvement in the cyberpunk movement, and the kind of artistic stance promoted by *SF Eye*, both directed at overcoming the limits of “traditional” science fiction, this starting point is not surprising. The crux of Sterling's argument is that science fiction had become too entangled in commercial mechanisms, and had lost sight of the cultural role it could, and should, have served, of its ability to describe its times. In opposition to this, however, Sterling traces the contours of an emerging kind of writing, one that is not precisely committed to the aesthetics of science fiction, and neither belongs to sci-fi as a marketing category:

Instead, it is a contemporary kind of writing which has set its face against consensus reality. It is a fantastic [*sic*], surreal sometimes, speculative on occasion, but not rigorously so. It does not aim to provoke a "sense of wonder" or to systematically extrapolate in the manner of classic science fiction.

Instead, this is a kind of writing which simply makes you feel very strange; the way that living in the late twentieth century makes you feel, if you are a person of a certain sensibility. We could call this kind of fiction Novels of Postmodern Sensibility, but that looks pretty bad on a category rack, and requires an acronym besides; so for the sake of convenience and argument, we will call these books "slipstream". (“Slipstream”)

The term “slipstream”, Sterling explains, is formed as a sort of counterpoint to literary “mainstream”. Then, he proceeds to list what he believes to be the fundamental traits of slipstream: “an attitude of peculiar aggression against "reality"” (“Slipstream”); fantastic elements inserted in everyday narratives, aimed not at speculating on the possibilities of the future as in science fiction, but at commenting on the lack of sense of the present day; frequently, but not necessarily, the fantastic content goes hand in hand with the employment of postmodern techniques that “screw around with the representational conventions of fiction”

("Slipstream") in order to reinforce their effect. Slipstream makes ample use of references juxtaposes different languages and generic conventions, but also subverts them; this mixture of genres is another fundamental principle:

These are fantastic elements which are not clear-cut "departures from known reality" but ontologically *part of the whole mess*; "'real' compared to what?" This is an increasingly difficult question to answer in the videocratic 80s-90s, and is perhaps the most genuinely innovative aspect of slipstream (scary as that might seem). ("Slipstream")

It appears clear from the beginning that, despite the author's strong stance on the matter, the definition of slipstream is not easy to pin down. Sterling himself acknowledges the possibility that this kind of writing will never reach the status of an established genre, with a stable presence on bookstore shelves. A lot is left to the individual reader's sensibility:

These are books which SF readers recommend to friends: "This isn't SF, but it sure ain't mainstream and I think you might like it, okay?" It's every man his own marketer, when it comes to slipstream. ("Slipstream")

On the other hand these definitions, as wide and open to interpretation as they are, are enough for Sterling to compile a first list of slipstream reading. This list (simply dubbed "The slipstream list") includes more than one hundred authors and almost twice as many titles, and is striking in its heterogeneity: it ranges from affirmed post-modern authors such as Thomas Pynchon and John Barth, to commercially successful genre writers such as Michael Moorcock and Anne Rice, to then-upcoming authors who would later gain relevance, such as Jonathan Franzen and William T. Vollmann.

It is, in fact, hard to extrapolate a coherent set of features from such a motley list. Sterling himself, in the closing passages of his column, defers a more in-depth look at

slipstream to the hypothetical critics (and, possibly, booksellers) that will follow.

References to slipstream in the 1990s are few and far between. A brief entry was included in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, that however notes a possibly derogatory connotation of the term, and prefers to use Fabulation for that same kind of writing (Clute, “Slipstream”). Sterling’s article was mentioned in passing in publications concerned with postmodernist science fiction (see, for example, Luckhurst), but there was no article-length work about it. In fact, it was Sterling himself who, in 1999, returned on the issue with a self-ironic article that from the opening lines apparently defuses the previous argument:

Slipstream was a literary term that needed to be coined, but the phenomenon doesn’t actually exist. Back in the 1980s, I noticed that there were a lot of books being written and published that had fantastic elements, or nonrealistic elements, or (and maybe this is the best term) antirealistic elements. They had none of the recognition symbols of genre science fiction or genre fantasy. (“Slipstream 2”)

Sterling went on describing how what he calls slipstream has not actually become a genre, neither in a literary nor in a commercial sense. The central part of this piece is a list of what slipstream *is not* – which is an equally important part in the effort of mapping such an undefined territory. In brief, the list touches upon some of the most common tropes of science fiction that are not part of slipstream’s purview. It is not just “well written science fiction”; it is not futuristic, or aimed at the extrapolation of some scientific or technological idea. It is also not the same as magical realism, a genre that Sterling feels is similar in terms of intent but that didn’t quite achieve its goals.

When it comes to saying what slipstream *is*, however, Sterling skirts the question, focusing more on the cultural instances that, for him, drive this kind of writing than on the characteristics of the writing itself:

It would have to be a literature with no central dogmas, that was polyvalent and de-centered. It would not be about alienation; it would be very much at home in the mess that we have. It would be a native literature of our cultural circumstances. I think it would probably be mostly about subjectivity fragmentation, because that is the postmodernist mindset. (“Slipstream 2”)

By the end of the 20th century, it appeared that slipstream as a critical designation had not gained much critical momentum, and was just one of the many attempts to put a label on (and maybe appropriate) that area of the literary system that could not be fully included neither in genre fiction nor in mainstream literature (more on these in Chapter 2). However, possibly as a result of its origins from the sci-fi “side” of the genre divide, it did not completely disappear.

In fact, in the first decade of the 21st century, another science fiction writer, James Patrick Kelly, recovered the term and gave new life to the debate, with two brief articles in the magazine *Asimov's Science Fiction* in 2003 and 2004.

In 2006 Kelly, together with John Kessel, edited an anthology of slipstream short stories for Tachyon Publications, with the title *Feeling Very Strange*. The anthology includes 15 short stories, all but one previously published in the years between 1972 and 2004.

The critical introduction by the two editors is possibly the most in-depth attempt at defining slipstream as a genre after Sterling's original article. It touches upon the issue of definition, and with it that of the selection of texts; and also upon the relationship between genre, mainstream and the place in-between them. Kelly and Kessel claim here that the hybrid nature of slipstream is something that should not really be defined, but nonetheless determine three criteria for recognizing the category:

1. Slipstream violates the tenets of realism.

2. Although slipstream stories pay homage to various popular genres and their conventions, they are not science fiction stories, traditional fantasies, dreams, historical fantasies, or alternate histories.

3. Slipstream is playfully postmodern. The stories often acknowledge their existence as fictions, and play against the genres they evoke. They have a tendency to bend or break narrative rules. (introduction, xii)

To these three tenets, the authors add another trait, quoted from Sterling's first article: the feeling of strangeness that is engendered in the reader, which they identify with cognitive dissonance. The theory of cognitive dissonance was formulated in 1957 by psychologist Leon Festinger. The theory rests on the idea that individuals normally favor a state of consistency within themselves; thus, when presented with conflicting or incoherent cognitions – a term that encompasses “any knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, about oneself, or about one's behavior” (Festinger 3) – they experience dissonance, that is, a feeling of psychological discomfort. It is assumed that in such situations individuals would strive to reduce this kind of feeling or to avoid its causes; for this reason, the theory has found applications in the study of decision-making processes.

Instead, Kelly and Kessel argue that slipstream is the literature of “cognitive dissonance *triumphant*” (xi, emphasis in the text), that embraces the dissonance generated by texts that are at the same time realistic and fantastic, instead of trying to reduce it. Following from this, the authors conclude that it would be more correct to think of slipstream as a mode of writing rather than a literary genre.

Running parallel to this introduction, *Feeling Very Strange* reprints, under the title “I

Want My 20th Century Schizoid Art”, a long exchange between a number of young authors and genre aficionados on the theme of slipstream, that had taken place on an Internet blog. Despite the playful tone that is to be expected from the original context, this conversation offers some interesting insights on the processes and categories of science fiction writing, as well as the usefulness and limits of slipstream as a genre definition. One of the key points of the discussion is the distinction between categories based on content, associated with the genre-fiction market, and categories based on process or effect, as in Sterling's 1989 article.

As for the texts included in the anthology, the selection is quite diverse. The editors made an effort to include authors that had mainstream recognition (Michael Chabon, Aimee Bender, George Saunders) along with others who were established in science fiction circles. The stories had appeared on a number of genre magazines and anthologies, but also on *The New Yorker*. Contentwise, the key elements outlined by Kelly and Kessel are enacted in a variety of ways. For example, Jeffrey Ford's “Bright Morning” is about a writer who becomes obsessed with a (fictional) lost story by Franz Kafka and in which, in a meta-fictional twist, the author himself makes an appearance; Michael Chabon's “The God of Dark Laughter” is a pastiche between a detective story and a supernatural tale in the mode of H. P. Lovecraft; and M. Rickert's “You Have Never Been Here” is a jarring you-narrative with undertones of physical and psychological distress. In the effort to be wide-ranging, however, the editors occasionally seem to undermine the criteria they had outlined, by including short stories that play with the generic aspects but in which the estranging effect is not really present – such is the case with Sterling's own “The Little Magic Shop”, that mixes fantastic and historic elements, but is not particularly noticeable from a stylistic standpoint nor plays around cognitive dissonance. In a sense, however, even the inclusion of these not-quite-slipstream stories can serve as an ulterior yardstick in the efforts of categorization.

In 2007, at ReaderCon, a major science fiction conventions held in London, a panel consisting of eight writers and critics (among whom was John Kessel) established another “Canon of Slipstream Writing”. Through a process of voting, the panelists selected a total of 112 titles and 3 complete works of authors to form the “Core Canon of Slipstream”. Like Sterling's original canon, the list includes a wide variety of authors from different years and parts of the world, from Toni Morrison to Gabriel García Márquez to Jonathan Lethem; and the complete works of Kafka, Beckett and Pynchon (even though individual works are also listed separately at different positions). The top positions are held by Borges' *Collected Fictions* and Calvino's *The Invisible Cities*.

After these two landmarks, slipstream seems to have gained some more traction in critical discourse, at least in the circles devoted to science fiction. References appear more frequently, but its use keep oscillating between the discussion of the merits of such an undefined category, and the use of it as an established term. For example, slipstream receives a brief mention in the 2009 *Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, in a four-page piece by Victoria de Zwaan that once again raises all the unsolved questions surrounding it. Notably, the analogous *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* touches on the matter of science fiction and post-modernism, but its arriving point is the cyberpunk movement (of which Sterling was a proponent) in the Eighties.

The matter was important enough to warrant a special issue of *Science Fiction Studies*, perhaps the most important academic journal on science fiction, whose issue 38 (March 2011) is entirely dedicated to slipstream. The issue in question offers an exhaustive analysis of the discourse surrounding slipstream, both in general and in reference to specific works of fiction – and, generally speaking, encapsulates the ambivalent attitude towards it.

The issue opens with a “Symposium on Slipstream”, a collection of short contributions by a number of critics and authors associated with slipstream and science fiction in general. The elusive nature of the term is one of the recurring themes of the Symposium, as evidenced by the contributions of Victoria de Zwaan and Neil Easterbrook:

At age 21, its ostensible “age of maturity,” the slipstream has stood the test of time for the sf critical community, but not because it refers to or engages a stable set of objects/texts. Rather, in my view, slipstream discourse continues to be active because it reflects, or at least signals, in complex ways the current state of sf discourse ... (12)

Last year in an essay for *Fifty Key Figures in Science Fiction*, I said this: “Initially coined by Bruce Sterling to denote when mainstream writers appropriate SF tropes, images, and themes, I invoke the term in its loosest sense as designating any non-sf literature that contains many sfnal elements—in short, a liminal genre in-between mainstream and sf.” Most of us use the term this way, as a general marker for any text (or textual economy) that is generically hybrid or genetically heterogeneous. (13)

Some authors involved in different forms of cross-genre experimentation, such as Lance Olsen, voice their disagreement with the notion that slipstream is a useful category:

Sterling has misread the crossbreeding of sf tropes with postmodern strategies as a unique gesture, when in fact it is simply one manifestation among others of a much larger tendency in experimental writing to generate what Jonathan Culler dubs “non-genre literature”. (16)

Another idea that recurs through these contributions is that the reasons for the creation of the slipstream label, and its persistence despite its lack of definition, can be traced to a vaster discourse about the recognition of genre literature. This idea is expanded upon in Pawel

Frelik's article "On slipstream and others". In short, Frelik recognizes an historical tendency of science fiction criticism to "enforce the borders" of what constitutes the genre, as a tool to assert an identity and to claim recognition; a tendency that, however, has been destabilized by the post-modernist attitude towards genre. In this view, Frelik defines slipstream not in terms of content but of relations:

I see slipstream as not so much a body of texts sharing certain narrative parameters but, rather, as a discourse that is reflective of sf's internal politics as well as of its changing status in the larger literary landscape. (21)

However, despite all the doubts raised in these introductory texts, the longer contributions to the journal analyze works of fiction referring to slipstream, and in particular to Sterling's original essay, with the ease of an established category. Among the novels cited, we find *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz and *Against the Day* by Thomas Pynchon.

It's not surprising that this issue would close with a reading list. In the vein of Sterling's idea of book recommendations – "This isn't SF, but it sure ain't mainstream and I think you might like it, okay?" ("Slipstream") – a number of contributors and correspondents to *Science Fiction Studies* provided short lists of their favorite slipstream works. The most cited are Robert Powers' novels and China Miéville *The City and the City*, and once again Pynchon, among other American and international writers from the 21st century.

To summarize, in the 27 years since its first appearance, slipstream has managed to be a constant, if not definitive, presence in the discourse about genre borders in post-modern fiction, and to gather a decently-sized corpus of texts that are considered canonical by its proponents. However, it still shares space with a number of other terms, which I will present briefly in the following chapter.

ALTERNATIVES TO SLIPSTREAM

One of the issues concerning slipstream, that has reared its head from time to time in its history, is that the kind of contemporary fiction it refers to – characterized by not being easily slotted in existing generic categories, and still having some (admittedly) vague literary qualities that bring it close to “mainstream” literature – has been, in fact, the object of interest for several authors, critics and movements with diverse backgrounds. As can be expected, there is quite a lot of overlap in these arguments, as many of the personalities involved and reference texts are quoted, cross-referenced, and compared; in some cases, these many different labels are even lumped together or used interchangeably.

Predating Sterling's essay by a few years is Rudy Rucker's “A transrealist manifesto”, that appeared in *The Bulletin of the Science Fiction Writers of America*, #82, in 1983. Rucker, a mathematician and science fiction writer associated with the cyberpunk movement (and who, in fact, later wrote some short stories with Sterling himself), detailed what he believed was “not so much a kind of SF as ... a kind of avant-garde literature” (“Manifesto”), that was centered around the idea of using the tools of fantasy and science fiction to give new strength to a weakened realistic fiction.

The familiar tools of SF — time travel, antigravity, alternate worlds, telepathy, etc. — are in fact symbolic of archetypal modes of perception. Time travel is memory, flight is enlightenment, alternate worlds symbolize the great variety of individual world-views,

and telepathy stands for the ability to communicate fully. This is the “Trans” aspect. The “realism” aspect has to do with the fact that a valid work of art should deal with the world the way it actually is. Transrealism tries to treat not only immediate reality, but also the higher reality in which life is embedded. (“Manifesto”)

The manifesto expounds not only an artistic instance, but also an ethical one: the function of this new kind of writing is to “break down consensus reality”, against the escapist and reactionary modes of traditional science fiction. Rucker reprinted his manifesto in several of his collections of short stories, and even titled one *Transreal!* [*sic*].

Another writer and critic, Damien Broderick, returned to it in 2000, in his volume *Transrealist Fiction: Writing in the Slipstream of Science*, where he traces an intriguing, if often inconclusive, history of science fiction and its relation with realism, through the analysis of a number of novels. In his work Broderick cites often Sterling's essay, usually playing on the original meaning of the word slipstream, and describing this kind of fiction as something that moves along the “current” created by the advancements of science. Broderick considers slipstream as a counterpart, or sometimes a predecessor, of transrealism, but in his work he does not set very precise chronological or thematic limits. Outside of the works mentioned here, however, transrealism received very little critical attention, and excluding the use of the same word by other unrelated movements, most references point back to Rucker's works.

In 1993, Mark Amerika published on his website Alt-X the “Avant-Pop Manifesto – thread baring itself in ten quick posts”. Amerika urges artists and the public to embrace a new sensibility, and to leave behind the borders between mainstream and what he calls the margin. In this idea for a new mode of writing, a fundamental role is to be played by technology, that should open the possibility of direct interaction between author and receiver, cutting all the

middlemen and breaking out of commercial schemes. The “Avant-Pop Manifesto”, in his briefness, claims a certain cultural space, made of TV shows, punk musicians, art, cinema and much more, as the ground for the literature that is to come after Postmodernism. Less interested in the specifics of one genre than in pop culture in general, there are nonetheless parallels with Sterling's piece, and in fact he (along with William Gibson) are counted among the Avant-Pop writers in Amerika's manifesto.

In a case of parallel evolution with slipstream, in 2002 the literary journal of Bard College, *Conjunctions*, devoted its issue no. 39 to what was termed “The New Wave Fabulism”. In the introductory words by co-editor Peter Straub,

It is not really accurate to say that over the past two decades the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror have been, unnoticed by the wider literary culture, transforming themselves generation by generation and through the work of each generation's most adventurous practitioners into something all but unrecognizable, hence barely classifiable at all except as literature. Even evolution doesn't work that way. The above process did take place, and it was completely overlooked by the wider literary culture but it did not happen smoothly, and the kind of post-transformation fictions represented here owe more than half of their DNA and much of their underlying musculature to their original genre sources. (“Guest editor's notes”)

This issue anthologizes some 20 short stories, among which we can find contributions by authors who would later appear in *Feeling Very Strange* (including one of the curators, John Kessel) and in other publications concerned with the issue of genre, such as China Miéville and Kelly Link. Along with these, *Conjunctions* proposes two companion articles that provide a programmatic basis for the collection, one of which by John Clute, who had

previously elected “Fabulation” as the go-to term in his contribution to the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. The thrust of the two articles is to trace a genealogy of notable works that could be considered a precedent for the validity of New Wave Fabulism, and of fantastic literature in general. Notably, no mention is made of slipstream nor of other preceding works in the same vein.

New Wave Fabulism was later taken as the operative word by Ken E. Keegan and Rusty Morrison, who edited in 2009 an anthology titled *Paraspheres*. In a sense, it could be said that slipstream and New Wave Fabulism are the same thing, or at least that they mirror each other very closely; the difference is that the former originated, and was mostly discussed, within the circles of genre authors, while the latter developed outside, but with an eye on the same circles. In fact, the editors of *Paraspheres* have expressed in several occasions their point of view on generic positions:

At present, there are basically three major categories of fiction: genre fiction, literary fiction, and a third type which has had no commonly accepted name. This third type has cultural meaning and artistic value, which means it does not fit well into the escapist formula genres, yet it also has non-realistic elements and settings which exclude it from the category of literary fiction. We knew from the start that we wanted to publish this third type of fiction, but what would we call it? (Keegan and Morrison)

The assumption at work in *Paraspheres* seems to be that New Wave Fabulism is genre fiction with “cultural meaning and artistic value”, something that “regular” genre fiction lacks. However, the close parallels with slipstream did not escape many of the reviewers of the volume: “I confess that this whole discussion makes me a little tired—anyone who has been committed to sf of the highest order (i.e. me) has heard these arguments—has *made* these arguments—hundreds of times, and the result never seems to change” (Kessel).

Other evolutionary parallels can be drawn between slipstream and “New Weird fiction”. The term was popularized by author China Miéville around 2003, and refers to a sub-genre of fantastic fiction that rose to prominence in the first years of the 21st century, and is characterized, again, by the intermixture of “genre” and “literary” fiction, with the difference that New Weird identifies clearly its antecedents in a group of 20th-century authors (such as H. P. Lovecraft) and, more generally, is closer to the horror genre instead of science fiction. Despite the thematic differences, the kinship with slipstream is evident:

This definition presents two significant ways in which the New Weird can be distinguished from Slipstream or Interstitial fiction. First, while Slipstream and Interstitial fiction often claim New Wave influence, they rarely if ever cite a Horror influence, with its particular emphasis on the intense use of grotesquery focused around transformation, decay, or mutilation of the human body. Second, postmodern techniques that undermine the surface reality of the text (or point out its artificiality) are not part of the New Weird aesthetic, but they are part of the Slipstream and Interstitial toolbox. (VanderMeer, introduction)

As with slipstream, New Weird received a canonization of sorts in an anthology published in 2008 (*The New Weird*, also by Tachion Press) – and as with *Feeling Very Strange*, the anthology includes an in-depth introduction by the curator Jeff VanderMeer (who was also included in the roster of the slipstream anthology), and the transcription of a crucial internet message board discussion that sheds some light on term. Perhaps the most important point of distinction between the two is the fact that New Weird has been owned and used by a small group of like-minded authors (in particular China Miéville), and thus avoided the long debate on the validity of the term at the cost of becoming another sub-generic label.

Weird fiction has been claimed as the territory of another group of young writers, gathered under the banner of Bizarro fiction. Spearheaded by three independent publishing houses, Bizarro fiction represents another way of engaging weirdness in fiction, and of growing from and with a community of aficionados. It is also an interesting case of a group that tried to find its own definitions. In fact, the movement has a central hub, BizarroCentral.com, complete with an “About” page, that shows this definition:

Bizarro is literature’s equivalent to the cult section at the video stores. Like cult movies, Bizarro is sometimes surreal, sometimes avant-garde, sometimes goofy, sometimes bloody, sometimes borderline pornographic, and almost always completely out there. (“About Bizarro”)

Bizarro lacks an explicit manifesto, but the way the community is organized shows a unifying aesthetic direction. In fact, a part of it is admittedly borne out of commercial interests, out of the desire to respond (and appeal) to a specific audience. The colorful language often used by Bizarro writers can be found also in the closest thing they have to a manifesto, “So What the Fuck is this all about” by Kevin Dole 2:

On the Venn diagram of literature I place us at the point where all the disreputable (and some reputable) genres overlap. We’re kind of sci-fi, but more concerned with the aesthetics of technology than material prediction; magical realism with a little too much of the former and not enough of the latter; horror more interested in the grotesque than the macabre; stuff that would be pornographic if it were in any way an attempt to be sexually titillating. Very dark, but often funny, and while not always in consensus with objective reality, making sense when taken on its own terms. This stuff embraces the elbow room won by post-modernism while tending to be entirely unacademic. (Dole 2)

Theodora Goss and Kelly Link are two writers who featured prominently in the conversation on slipstream, and participated to the 2007 panel on the establishing of a canon, which included many of their own works. These two artists are involved in the Interstitial Arts Foundation, a not for profit organization interested in border-crossing art. Widening the focus from literature to all forms of art (visual arts, music, theater and so on), the IAF has been working since the early 2000s on the same issue of works that cross genre and media boundaries in any form. The Foundation is behind academic courses and the publication of a number of anthologies that go under the name of *Interfictions*. The Foundation maintains a website with a quantity of reference materials and explanations of their intent, and the authors involved seem to consider it as a past step of an evolutionary path that led to “interfictionality”:

Once again, Slipstream is an historical document, describing something that was already firmly entrenched by the time it was defined. And “slipstream”, like “magic realism”, at one point was very specific in its application but has been watered down beyond all recognition by over-application. Both terms are now tossed off by reviewers and critics who have no idea where they came from or, really, just what they mean. So here’s Frost telling you that slipstream is now an all-but-meaningless term, regardless of how much we talk about it, and that talking about it isn’t going to do any good. How are we supposed to talk about this weird non-classifiable fiction, then? (Frost)

It should be noted, however, that this quote is from a 2004 article, and thus precedes many of the works on slipstream cited in the previous chapter. In fact, the Interstitial Arts Foundation's activity is contemporary with the renewed interest in slipstream: the first anthology by the IAF saw the light in the same year as *Feeling Very Strange*. The programmatic intent for interstitial arts can be considered less as an attempt to define a genre

and more as an approach to literature (if not arts in general), but there are many formal and thematic similarities between the two.

Alongside the kind of structured contributions, anthologies and manifestos presented here, the discourse on the traditional categories of genre, and on the works that leave those categories behind, surfaces from time to time also in other, looser, forms. In fact, many authors whose production belongs to this category, but who are not personally associated with slipstream or any other of the mentioned movements, have found themselves wrestling with the topic in interviews, blog posts and the like. A very recent example is a conversation between Neil Gaiman and Kazuo Ishiguro, two fairly popular authors who have often played around with different genres, that was published in the *New Statesman* in 2015, following the publication of Ishiguro's unconventional fantasy novel *The Buried Giant*. Ishiguro himself states about the mixed reactions received by his novel:

“I felt like I’d stepped into some larger discussion that had been going on for some time... I didn’t anticipate this bigger debate. Why are people so preoccupied? What is genre in the first place? Who invented it? Why am I perceived to have crossed a kind of boundary?” (Gaiman and Ishiguro).

Ultimately, the matter is not settled. At the core of the issue is a corpus of books that trespass the traditional classifications of genre, and that have in some cases been fairly successful both with the general public and in their critical reception. However, the in-between nature of these books results in a problem of terminology. On the one hand, many competing definitions have been proposed by theorists directly involved with the category, resulting in a confusing map of a literary space, with many overlapping areas and few fixed

points. In fact, some of the later sources (see Evenson and Morrow, or Hicks and Young) seem to have given up on the attempt, and list three or four different terms strung together with the implication that they are more or less interchangeable. On the other hand, this conversation has been mostly confined in the circles of science fiction, a field that has little points of contact with the wider world of literary criticism. The result is that in many occasion “mainstream” critics not aware of the preceding discourse find themselves in need to come up with generic labels for slipstream works, or to confront the limits of traditional genre categories; I will give some examples in this sense in the following chapters.

The lack of an agreed-upon terminology is a serious limit for the critical observation of these contemporary texts. It is my opinion that, in this sense, slipstream has some advantage compared to its alternatives. First of all, the term has been discussed in a larger group of critical sources, so that, even if there is no definitive statement on the matter, it can be better understood. This corpus includes also works that establish some defining traits: slipstream breaks the conventions of realism; it pays homage to different genres but does not precisely belong to any one; it often uses the stylistic techniques of postmodernism; and more specifically, it evokes in the reader a sense of strangeness. As an additional point, slipstream also has the benefit of being a single word, avoiding the confusion that might stem from other terms that have been used in different contexts (such as “fabulation”) or from opaque constructions.

This is, of course, not a conclusive statement. The ongoing critical discourse might very well arrive to a different choice, be it one of the categories presented here, or some other definition taken from the many suggestions that appear occasionally in the secondary sources about this kind of literature (some of which will be mentioned in my later analyses). As Umberto Rossi put it:

We might eventually discover that all these terms might be useful, “slipstream” indicating a more subtle form of genre hybridization, “New Weird” being a more blatant form of that, and “Avant-Pop” emphasizing the avant-garde, experimental component of such a trend. All these terms could be varieties of an encompassing critical category which might be labeled “cross-genre fiction” or “hybrid fiction.” ... I am also aware that these categories are fluid, and that the literary field they try to name is itself essentially hybrid in nature and, as such, tremendously unstable and hard to grasp and map. (357, note 16)

With this in mind, I will elect “slipstream” as the reference point for any further analysis, in order to avoid unwieldy locutions and to have at least a starting set of tools to work with. With this marker, as provisional as it is, the discussion on this kind of literature can move beyond the mere topography, and find ways to interact with other critical instances that have been raised in recent years.

SLIPSTREAM AND LITERARY CRITICISM

In the previous chapters, I illustrated the main points of a discourse about recent developments in contemporary literature on the matter of genre classifications, a discourse that for the most part took part inside the communities and academic circles already devoted to genre. This discourse, particularly active in the first decade of the 21st century, has been generally focused establishing parameters for classification, and only in few cases it has been related to other critical instances that interested the wider literary world. In other words, as many scholars have observed, “*there is something new in town*, even though it is quite difficult to say *exactly* what it is” (Rossi 355, emphasis in the original; but similar formulations can be found also in de Zwaan and others); however, the discussion has not moved past the stage of trying to say what it is exactly, with only a few exceptions (in practice, the already mentioned special issue of *Science Fiction Studies*).

It is my belief that, while it might not be an *exact* definition, as Rossi emphasizes, there are enough fixed points to establish a provisional one, that allows to leave behind the matter of definitions and move towards other avenues of reflection; in other words, we know more or less what slipstream *is*; it would be interesting to see what it can *do*. The question then becomes to see if, and how, the techniques and traits typical of slipstream have been used to address issues relevant to the “mainstream” literary discourse of recent years. My objective in this thesis is to explore this question, in order to find some possible points of contact between two discourses that have been mostly separated, and to make them interact. To do this, I have

identified a small selection of essays that I think are representative of some of the most important topics of reflection in the last few years, and a number of slipstream works from the same period that could be related to the same topics.

The first essay, *Open Doors, Closed Minds: American Prose writing at a time of crisis* by Richard Gray, was published in 2009, in the Oxford journal *American Literary History*. Observing the historical events occurred in the previous two decades, and the ensuing shifts in global and national dynamics, Gray asserts there are two key factors of change in 21st century America. The first one is the transformation of the demographic composition, due to non-European immigration; a transformation that caused “the disappearance of the boundary between the “center” and the “margins”” (129). The second is the change in the common consciousness brought by the traumatic events of 9/11, and in particular the way in which narratives are part of the process to heal from that trauma.

According to Gray, these two crucial issues had too often received an inadequate treatment in the literary production of the new millennium. Speaking of the trauma of 9/11, he criticizes a number of writers for not having engaged that trauma past the preliminary stages of the aftermath. To summarize his argument, a traumatic event on the scale of the attacks on the Twin Towers should have generated a change in the collective consciousness, which required in turn new forms of expression to be testified. What happened instead, Gray says, was that the need for new imaginary structures was recognized by many authors, but was not followed by an actual change in those structures; the traumatic event, acknowledged as a turning point, in reality becomes nothing more than the backdrop for what are ultimately personal, familiar narratives:

The irony is that, relying on a familiar romance pattern—in which couples meet, romantic and domestic problems follow, to be concluded in reconciliation or rupture—

books like [*The Emperor's Children*], and, for that matter, *The Good Life, A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, and *Falling Man*, simply assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures. The crisis is, in every sense of the word, domesticated. (134)

Gray highlights another shortcoming in these novels, what he calls “the encounters with strangeness”. Confronting the strange (admittedly used here in the sense of foreign) poses new challenges for writers, as they have to consider the aftermath of the terrorist attacks and the changing demographic composition of the United States:

Facing the other, in all its difference and danger, is surely one of the challenges now for writers. ... There is the threat of the terrorist, but there is also the fact of a world that is liminal, a proliferating chain of borders, where familiar oppositions—civilized and savage, town and wilderness, “them” and “us”—are continually being challenged, dissolved, and reconfigured. (135)

This last quote is particularly important because it signals what is, for Gray, the best way to proceed. Where some authors have failed in their attempt to engage with the central issues of the 21st century, others have been more successful; the reason for their success can be found in their position between geographic and figurative borders.

Bearing witness to the culturally other may, for entirely understandable reasons, remain a problem for many of those writers struggling to confront the trauma of a post-9/11 society. But just such a bearing witness is at the heart of those fictions offering variations on the immigrant encounter: writing about and, in many instances from, a position of liminality. (140)

To support his thesis, Gray cites a number of novels by Hispanic-American and Asian-

American writers, centered on the theme of immigration. These novels, he asserts, have what is missing from many 9/11 novels: “a strategy of deterritorialisation” (142). Their strength rests in their ability to represent the encounter between different cultures, a trait that has always been part of the American identity and that is particularly relevant in light of the social and political changes of the recent years. This is, however, not to be taken exclusively as concerning immigration. In his final considerations, Gray takes the idea of the encounter between cultures to a wider perspective, that of different social groups and “the conflicting interests and voices that constitute the national debate” (147). His conclusion is an invitation of sorts for all writers to take an active part in the historical processes:

What this offers to American writers, and particularly novelists, is the chance, maybe even the obligation, to insert themselves into the space between conflicting interests and practices and then dramatize the contradictions that conflict engenders. Through their work, by means of a mixture of voices and a free play of languages and even genres, they can represent the reality of their culture as multiple, complex, and internally antagonistic. (Gray 147)

The same issue of *American Literary History* hosted a response to Gray's essay, titled “A failure of the Imagination: Diagnosing the post-9/11 Novel”, by Michael Rothberg. In his shorter piece, Rothberg agrees with Gray about his assessment of the central issues of post-9/11 America. Literature has the potential to engage those issues, the “questions of difference, otherness and strangeness” (152) raised by the events of the turn of the century. However, he states, what happened was not the change in imaginative structures that this issues required; instead, there was “a failure of the imagination” (153).

Rothberg's position is generally in line with Gray's, but with a further argument: that the

conclusions put forward in “Open Doors, Closed Minds” are “both necessary and not entirely sufficient” (153). If the solution to the limits of post-9/11 literature is to be found in deterritorialization, then the kind posited by Gray, based on immigration and multiculturalism but still US-centric, is not enough; the focus has to move also outside the national borders: “In addition to Gray’s model of critical multiculturalism, we need a fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship” (153). According to Rothberg, Gray was correct in his assessment that the response to the traumatic turn of the century resulted in a too familiar fiction; but the alternative he proposes, immigrant fiction, while potentially useful for breaking out of these domestic narratives, is still too grounded on the American soil, and is thus at risk of being in turn domesticated. For a better understanding of the present state of the world, and the reasons that lead to it, American writers should not limit themselves to what is happening on their native soil, but also consider the international reach of the United States: “What we need from 9/11 novels are cognitive maps that imagine how US citizenship looks and feels beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, both for Americans and for others.” (158)

To summarize the content of these essay, the authors thus identify the main issues of contemporary American literature in two themes: the elaboration of the trauma of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the acknowledgment of changes in the composition of the US as a multicultural and multiracial nation. Both these themes have been, according to them, treated inadequately in recent novels, still too tied to old forms and familiar narratives to enact the change in imaginative structures that the time would require. The authors suggest possible solutions to respond to these perceived inadequacies, finding them in immigrant narratives and in the possibility to move the focus outside of US borders and to international relations. This analysis ends with an appeal to writers to engage these issues.

At this point, some preliminary observations can be made. I selected these two concomitant essays as a representation of a thread of mainstream critical discourse; while these are not the only issues that can be raised, the essays are clear in their assessment of problems and possible solutions. This is not to say that there are no objections that can be raised.

Some such objections can be found in another essay by Catherine Morley, titled ““How Do We Write about This?” The Domestic and the Global in the Post-9/11 Novel”. This essay deserves a mention here because it helps contextualize the previous articles outside of the rigid time frame centered on 9/11: according to Morley, while they “offer perfectly reasonable observations, many of which have been previously acknowledged by scholars, literary reviewers and cultural critics” (719), they do not give sufficient consideration to the fact that the process of cultural change were already in place in the 1990s, and concludes with “the unarguable fact that 9/11 simply did not mark the great shift in American literature which so many thought it would” (731). To reinforce her point, Morley offers some counter-examples of novels that, according to her, actually address the wider perspectives evoked by Gray and Rothberg while still allowing for a familiar dimension. Furthermore, Morley responds to the excessive emphasis Gray, and even more so Rothberg, place on the social and political value of literature, neglecting that “many writers prefer to examine how art itself expands to accommodate the traumas of recent history” (722). Morley, then, while not challenging the issues identified as central by Gray, brings a wider perspective in the response to those issues, by extending the time frame to literary trends preceding the fixed point of 9/11, and allowing for an approach that is not strictly political.

A further objection can be made on the selection of texts cited in the essays (and, for that matter, also in Morley). The vast majority of the novels commented on, both positively and negatively, are realistic narratives. The most relevant exception is Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, nominated by Gray as an example of contemporary literature able to successfully confront the issues of the new millennium; he states that *The Road* works as a symbolic narrative, one that represents the difficulty of testifying a traumatic experience through the allegoric narration of a journey across a devastated landscape that leaves many things unsaid: "The point is that McCarthy both says and remains silent. The unnameable remains unnamed, except in its human consequences" (Gray 137). Only a brief nod is given to *The Road*'s treatment of themes usually found in genre literature: "Many reviewers have referred to the setting of the book as post-nuclear. One can see why" (Gray 136). *The Road* could be another candidate for the slipstream canon, and in fact does get the occasional mention in the critical literature; after all, it is a novel that is regarded highly in terms of public and critics (as evidenced by the many literary awards it gained), it was written by a celebrated (and decidedly not associated with genre) author, but it also sparked some discussion about its genre classifications.

Taken on their own, several of Gray's assertions in "Open Doors, Closed Minds" can be understood as referring to a wider range of possibilities than just immigrant narratives. The call for renewed imaginative structures, for "writing about and ... from a position of liminality" (140) and for "a free play of idioms and genres" (147) seem able to accommodate forms of writing that, in the same years as those referred to by Gray, were exploring similar matters from the standpoint of genre literature. Particularly striking is Gray's comment about the limits of literature in the "encounters with strangeness" (135), when we consider that strangeness is one of the central themes of slipstream.

Could it be, then, that a different way to access the issues of trauma, liminality and the encounter with the other is possible? Tentatively, there seem to be some promising possibilities. For one, the encounter between fantastic and realistic elements could be used to stage the encounter with a fictional other; and liminality, the condition of being between two states, resonates with a kind of writing that has been called “interstitial”. The connection with trauma narratives is decidedly less obvious, but an example has already been given in *The Road* and the use of post-apocalyptic motifs; additional answers could be derived from the idea of slipstream as the narrative of cognitive dissonance put forward by Kelly and Kessel. As the hybrid between multiple genres, slipstream has the ability to access multiple sets of tools to enact the change in imaginative structures requested by Gray.. These are, however, preliminary considerations based on the general descriptions made of slipstream, that have to be confirmed through the analysis of texts.

Thus, to explore the possibilities offered by slipstream to interact with the issues identified earlier, I selected three slipstream novels from the first decade of the 21st century: *Specimen Days* by Michael Cunningham, *Chronic City* by Jonathan Lethem, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. The selected novels, while quite different from one another, have some traits in common. First of all, the authors are of a somewhat high profile, and can count a number of important literary prizes and achievements; this reinforces the idea that slipstream is not a phenomenon confined to the circles of genre publishing, but one that also has some resonance in the wider literary world. Second, all three use a blend of languages and themes taken from different genres as a tool to directly engage some of the issues raised by Gray. *Specimen Days* and *Chronic City* show two different approaches to the processes of confronting a traumatic experience, with references (more or less direct) to the events of 9/11; *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is an immigrant novel that tackles the

question of the encounter between different cultural traditions, and also addresses Rothberg's call for international awareness.

My analysis will proceed from the themes of each novel, and then relate them specifically to the points raised in the essays presented in this chapter. The intention is not to argue with their assessment of the most relevant issues, but to approach the same issues from a different angle, one that is too often overlooked.

SPECIMEN DAYS

The first case in my research is the 2005 novel *Specimen Days* by Michael Cunningham. Cunningham was already known as a literary author, in particular for his previous novel *The Hours*, for which he had received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. *Specimen Days* was met with mixed reviews; in part, this is because it bears cursory similarities to *The Hours*, in that both novels are composed of three separate sections and both feature a prominent literary figure (Walt Whitman in *Specimen Days*, Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*).

Among the three novelists in my research, Cunningham is the least involved in the circles of genre fiction; *Specimen Days* stands out in his production as the only work with explicit genre remnants. This is not to say that he does not know how to handle the conventions of genre. On the contrary, he too has weighed in with his considerations on the current state of genre, in an interview with science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin:

Although I don't have a name for it—I'll trust history to provide that—I feel like the most prominent aspect of this period is what I suppose I'll call "broadening." I believe that some of the most innovative, deep, and beautiful fiction being written today is shelved in bookstores in the Science Fiction section. That that section probably contains more fascinating books than does the... what to call it?... mainstream fiction section... [T]he breaking-down of the barriers between "genre" books and the books that are generally piled on the front tables at Barnes & Noble [...] is especially

important to me, in that I'm always trying to talk readers into venturing into genre fiction, and still encounter a surprising degree of resistance. The line, "I don't read science fiction" emanates from a surprising number of well-educated, erudite mouths. (*Electric Literature*)

Specimen Days is composed of three long sections, set in different time periods and, for the most part, in New York. The plot of the three sections is autonomous, and each one follows the conventions of a different genre. In fact, the three sections could be considered separate novellas; the author himself explained the genesis of the book along those lines:

What I originally set out to do was write a series of short novels each in a different genre... the first one is a ghost story, and it seemed right to set in the past. I knew I wanted to write a science fiction story, which is by definition, set in the future. And so there I was. (*Extended Books*)

The three sections, respectively a ghost story, a detective story and a science fiction story, are linked together by a number of internal references and over-arching themes. The application of generic labels should of course be taken with the due caution, especially because there are factors in play that blur these definitions; it is enough to compare some reviews to see how different labels have been from time to time suggested.

The novella that opens *Specimen Days* is "In the Machine". Set in 19th-century New York, the story follows Lucas, a boy of Irish descent who, after the accidental death of his brother Simon, takes his place in a metalworking factory to provide for his invalid parents. Lucas often visits Catherine, Simon's former fiancée, who is a seamstress in another local company. The conditions of the characters as working-class immigrants in an industrial-era

New York are particularly dramatic. Lucas is a peculiar character: he is afflicted by physical deformities, and he is obsessed with what he calls “the Book”, *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman. The Book is the only consolation for Lucas in the difficult environment he lives in, but is also the cause of a peculiar mannerism, as he often recites without control lines from the poems. In the span of a few days, Lucas has to come to terms with the shocking reality of the working conditions at the factory, and in fact after a while he begins to hear voices from the machines. It is unclear if the voices he hears originate from the machines themselves, if they are a sort of message from his brother, or simply a form of alienation caused by the stressful circumstances. In any case, Lucas comes to believe that Catherine is in danger, and the only way to save her is to keep her away from the machines. To do so, he injures himself with the metal press he is working on, thus forcing Catherine to leave work and assist him at the hospital. Lucas escapes from the hospital, followed by Catherine; the novella closes with the two of them in proximity of the sewing factory, as it is being consumed by a fire.

The second section, “The Children's Crusade”, moves to present-day New York. Cat, an African-American forensics psychologist, works as a call center consultant for the Police. The city is threatened by a series of strange terrorist attacks, in which children detonate themselves along with random people in the streets. Cat manages to establish a contact with one of these children, and takes part in the investigation. In the meantime, she is also struggling with personal issues – the relationship with a rich, younger man named Simon, and the memories of her son, dead years earlier. These issues, however, are set aside when she gets in contact with one of the terrorist children, a weird, deformed boy with no name, who was raised in an isolated house with *Leaves of Grass* as his only education. In a moment of compassion, Cat decides to take the matter in her hands and escape with the boy, who she names Luke, hoping for a new beginning away from the city.

The last section, “Like Beauty”, is set in the future, with New York turned into a theme park version of itself. The characters are Simon, an android with an exceptional degree of self-consciousness; Catareen, a lizard-like alien from planet Nadia; and Luke, a weird mutant kid. Simon, who possesses a “poetry chip” that forces him to recite Whitman's poetry at random moments, embarks on a journey to reach his creator and obtain from him some explanations on his being. The trio traverses the desolated landscapes of a post-apocalyptic North America, until they reach Denver, their destination. There, they find that Simon's creator and a company of humans and Nadians are preparing to depart from Earth on a run-down rocket ship, looking for a new beginning on a remote planet. Ultimately, Simon decides to stay behind with Catareen, who is dying of old age.

From the summary of the contents it is possible to make some preliminary observations on the obvious repetition of some repeating elements. The main characters, in fact, always sport similar, if not identical, names, and share some traits throughout the three stories. Lucas/Luke is a young man with some sort of physical deformity; expressions such as “changeling” and “goblin” appear in the first two sections to describe him. Catherine/Cat/Catareen displays a protective side and is associated with motherhood but also with loss – Catherine is carrying a child that might or might not be Simon's; Cat is still recovering from the death of her child, which in the end makes her form a connection with the terrorist boy; as for Catareen, it is revealed that after leading a rebellion on her planet, her family was executed and she was deported to Earth. Simon is described more sparsely in the first two novellas, but enough is said about him to understand that he is a compelling character for those around him:

He was so unassailably young and fit. He was a Jaguar, he was a goddamned parade

float rolling along, demonstrating to ordinary citizens that a gaudier, grander world—a world of potently serene, self-contained beauty—appeared occasionally amid the squalor of ongoing business. (118)

It could be objected that despite the similarities the characters are not exactly identical, and in particular the relationship between the three of them varies from one section to the next. However, there are definite connections between the different incarnations of the characters. For his part, Cunningham commented that he “wanted it to be clear that these are the same essential people morphed to fit the time and the demands of the genre in which each story is set. But the characters remain constant” (*Extended Books*).

Besides the characters, another apparent motif is the use of Walt Whitman's poetry. In all three sections, lines from *Leaves of Grass* are recited by characters. The poem is also a recurring element of the plot. Both Lucas in the first part and Simon in the last display a peculiar trait: from time to time they utter quotes from *Leaves of Grass* instead of what they actually meant to say, in what has been likened to “a literary Tourette's” (Landon 68; see also Cain); the terrorist children in the second part, having been raised in an isolated environment with the poem as the only source of education, often incorporate quotes in their speech. For these characters, the use of Whitman is more than just a habit; poetry functions for them as a surrogate for some missing human quality: to be infused with a soul (13), to “understand about beauty” (205), to give a moral sense (306). Finally, Whitman-like figures appear in all three sections, albeit with different roles. Lucas encounters real Whitman in “In the Machine”, and the poet gives him some cryptic advice; the leader of the terrorist children is a woman who goes by the name of Walt; and finally, Emory Lowell, the creator of the androids in the future, resembles the poet in some traits of his description.

It should be noted that the use of Whitman and *Leaves of Grass* is possibly the major source of disagreement between the reviewers of the novel, with opinions ranging from “clumsy” and “contrived” (Kakutani), to more positive ones (Faber). Moreover, reviewers identified very different thematic remnants for the selection of quotations: death, industrialization, otherness, democracy, and many others. Ultimately, the seemingly chaotic, out-of-context quotes from a work as complex as *Leaves of Grass* leave ample room for interpretation; if a theme can be detected in a specific verse, it is not necessarily in proximity of a similar theme in the narration. What is more important is the fact that quotes are present, and sometimes repeated, throughout the three sections.

The trio of main characters and the poetry of Walt Whitman are the most visible examples of recursion, but by no means the only ones. Many other minor elements reappear throughout the three sections: objects, dates, places, even the occasional figure of speech. In a novel that could be considered a composition of standalone short stories, these repeated elements form a lattice that holds them together in a single narrative. At the same time, these elements make the classification of the sections along the lines of genre less satisfactory, because they bring into each story motifs that are outside of the expected genre formula.

Let's consider, as an example, one of these minor motifs: a simple white porcelain bowl, that passes through the hands of the characters of all three chapters. In “In the Machine”, Lucas buys the bowl from a street vendor with what little money he has, in order to attract Catherine's attention:

Lucas examined the bowl. Was it false? Had it turned to wood? No, it was in fact a bit of finery. It seemed, in his hands, to emit a faint white light. The figures inscribed along its rim were mysterious. They appeared to be tiny blue suns, icy disks from which rays

emanated, finer than hairs. (52)

Catherine, worried about the boy, manages to sell the bowl to a strange little shop to get some money back. In “Like Beauty”, Cat finds herself in that same shop more than a century later, and buys the bowl as a gift for Simon:

The bowl was, in fact, something. Anyone could see it. It was about the size of a sparrow’s nest, luminous; it seemed to amplify the room’s stagnant illumination. Cat took it from the woman. It was lighter than she’d expected it to be, almost weightless. Even up close, she couldn’t tell what the symbols painted along its outer rim were meant to be. They didn’t look Chinese. Each was different from the others, but all were variations on the same design: a circle that emanated slender spokes, some straight and some wavy, some long and some short. (174)

Lastly, the characters in “Like Beauty” encounter the object once again, in the hands of an old woman who happens to bear the same name as the shop from the earlier sections:

“It looks old,” Simon said.

“If it got down to Gaya’s level, it’s junk. Believe me.”

“What is commonest and cheapest and nearest and easiest is Me,” Simon said. (296)

The bowl itself could carry a possible symbolic significance, considering the strange undecipherable symbols that cover it, or its remarkable features despite it being a very humble object; the Whitman quote uttered by Simon in the preceding passage could shed some light on its meaning. All thing considered, the meaning of the bowl in itself is of minor interest in the general context of the novel; what is more interesting is that it raises the possibility of a continuity between the three stories that is more than just thematic. The three stories are put in relation by things that exist in the story, and with which the characters themselves interact. As

the genres to which each novella belongs allow for different degrees of fantastic, the apparent subdivision becomes somewhat less rigid. This is particularly true for the central section: as a crime fiction set in the present day, one would not normally expect remnants to more overtly fantastic stories such as the other two sections. This discrepancy is acknowledged in the text. It has been suggested that for slipstream to work the estranging effect has to be in place both for the reader and within the text: “Slipstream needs to be considered not just as a reader response to fictional semblances but also as a reaction by characters within those semblances to phenomena that challenge their expectations and understanding” (Landon 69). Staying on the example of the bowl, Cat's encounter with it takes place close to the exact center of the book, and is immediately followed by the encounter with another recurring motif, that of the horse, that for a moment destabilizes the reality of the scene: “For a moment, the world tipped on its axis. Something dreadful and impossible was happening. And then the world righted itself again” (175).

The idea that the world in which the characters move is the same, in different time periods, is reinforced by a number of intratextual references. Cat in the present time makes a reference to the fire “that killed all those women” (161), with enough vagueness that someone not versed in the history of New York (a fire actually occurred in a sewing factory in 1911, and subsequently New York University re-purposed the building) could easily associate with the scene that concludes “In the Machine”. Later, in “Like Beauty”, the characters discuss the catastrophic events that led to the state of the world they are traversing, mentioning the Children's Crusade as one of the possible causes. And still in that section, Simon's dreams often involve allusions to events or images from the previous chapters: for example, “a woman who wears a secret around her neck” (229) refers to Catherine in the first section,

while “a train that flew over a golden field, bound for some unutterably fabulous destination” (256) alludes to Cat's escape at the end of “The Children's Crusade”.

It is in light of this web of recursive elements that *Specimen Days* is able to address the issue of domestication of the traumatic event put forward by Gray. Traumatic events appear on the background of each of the three sections: the gruesome death of Simon in “In the Machine”, the premature loss of Cat's child and the terrorist attacks in “Children's Crusade”, the apocalyptic events that led to a depopulated America in “Like Beauty”. In addition to these fictional events, the attacks of 9/11 cast their shadow on the whole book. The most direct references, as can be expected, can be found in the section set in present-day New York. The absence of the Towers from the skyline of the city is noted (“Even now, it was impossible not to be struck by the emptiness where the towers had stood” (113)), and for the inhabitants of the fictional terrorist attacks of the Children's Crusade call to mind a sense of menace: “The danger that had infected the air for the last few years was stirred up now; people could smell it” (113). But allusions to 9/11 are not limited to the central chapter. For example, the scene that closes the first section, the fire at the sewing company, evokes the famous images of the people trapped in the Twin Towers:

A woman appeared at a window, seven stories up.

The woman stood in the window, holding to its frame.... The square of brilliant orange made of her a blue silhouette, fragile and precise. She was like a goddess of the fire, come to her platform to tell those gathered below what the fire meant, what it wanted of them. From so far away, her face was indistinct. She turned her head to look back into the room, as if someone had called to her. She was radiant and terrifying. She listened to something the fire told her.

She jumped. (98)

As traumatic events, both personal and historical, form the background of the narration, the question of how to approach them, of what imaginary structures deploy in the telling, comes to the fore. The recourse to genres, with their established and recognizable forms, seems to be a turn towards familiar forms of narration. By building the book as three separate novellas with distinct generic identities, the author establishes a set of expectations that bring the reader into what should be a recognizable, familiar territory. This recognition is further established through a number of explicit allusions to other works in the genre: Cat mentions by name the heroine of a hard-boiled film, and “Like Beauty” references among the others *Star Wars* and *Blade Runner*. In other words, the reader is led to expect the familiar development of a ghost story, a detective story, or a science fiction story.

The familiar narration, however, is disrupted through the use of repetition. As I have commented earlier, the repeated inclusion of specific motifs across the three novellas has in part the effect of breaking the expectations that come with each genre. In addition to that, the act of repetition itself can be seen as a signal of disruption, as a sort of symptom of a traumatic experience.

In an essay titled “Uncanny Repetition, Trauma, and Displacement in Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days*”, Aris Mousoutzanis suggested that this recursive quality of the text, together with other themes such as the tripartite structure and the numerous references to dreams and visions, invites a psychoanalytical reading of the novel, according to which these occurrences can be described as symptoms of post-traumatic distress (131). Following this kind of approach, Mousoutzanis underlines, repetition brings us to the Freudian concept of the Uncanny.

Proposed by Freud in 1919, the Uncanny is “that class of the frightening which leads

back to what is known of old and long familiar” (220). In the original German, the term *Unheimlich* is constructed as the opposite of *heimlich*, that is, homely or familiar. The Freudian uncanny can thus be summarized as a sense of disquiet that arises from something that is familiar and yet, at the same time, strange. Among the possible catalysts for this sense of unease, Freud cites also “involuntary repetition which surrounds what would otherwise be innocent enough with an uncanny atmosphere, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and inescapable” (237). In keeping with the psychoanalytical definition of the term, it should be noted that the root of this feeling is implied to be a displaced or repressed trauma of some sort. Following this definition, Mousoutzakis argues that “it seems only plausible to see narrative repetition in *Specimen Days* also as a form of traumatic repetition, since all three novellas interweave together narratives of death and disaster, personal loss and historical trauma” (132). The traumas in the past of the characters, and the historical trauma of 9/11, manifest in a narrative full of repetitions; for that reason, otherwise familiar narratives become uncanny.

The Uncanny in the Freudian sense is a concept that does not appear often in the literature surrounding slipstream, but it deserves a mention, as there are some noticeable points of contact with the idea of cognitive dissonance that Kelly and Kessel put forward as the defining trait of slipstream: both concepts describe the sense of unease derived from the contrast between a familiar setting and strange elements that feel out of place.

Another motif could be linked to the idea that the novel represents symptoms of post-traumatic distress. Lucas, Cat and future Simon display in their respective sections another trait, that of uncontrollable expressions. The Whitman quotes blurted out by Lucas and Simon have, in fact, been compared to symptoms of a post traumatic illness (Cain). With Cat, the parallel becomes somewhat less precise; in her sections, the Whitman quotes are left to

another characters, but she from time to time makes lists. These lists appear as a sort of automatic writing, and are always composed by three elements, words or jumbled sentences that do not immediately, if ever, make sense in the context (and to the best of my research, neither are they citations). Cat acknowledges the weirdness of this habit, and wonders herself if it is linked to post-traumatic stress: “Had it started after 9/11? She hoped so. Cause and effect were always comforting” (116). These accidents of expression are outside of the control of the characters, and are generally unrelated to the situation in which the characters find themselves. However, from time to time, a citation or note is revealed to be surprisingly fitting to the situation; for example, this is how Lucas drives Catherine to reveal that she is carrying a child that might or might not be Simon's. The effect of these utterances is particularly striking because of the disconnect between the lack of intention from the speaker and the fact that they reveal hidden information; I suggest that this could be considered another example of cognitive dissonance.

The approach to the topic of trauma thus involves the narrative rendition of symptoms of distress, that destabilize the familiarity of genre conventions. This could be an alternative to the familiar narratives denounced by Richard Gray. Where Cunningham falls into domestication is the treatment of the other issue highlighted by Gray, the encounter with the other.

Ideas of identity, belonging and marginalization appear in each of the three sections. All three triplets of main characters (with the exception of the present-day version of Simon) find themselves, in their respective chapter, in a position at the margins of society.

In the first section, Lucas is the son of Irish immigrants, but he does not feel a particular bond for neither his parents' homeland nor New York:

Lucas had no soul at all. He was a stranger, a citizen of no place, come from County Kerry but planted in New York, where he grew like a blighted potato; where he didn't sing or shout as the other Irish did; where he harbored not soul but an emptiness sparked here and there with painful shocks of love... (13)

Later, when Lucas starts working at the factory, his particular imagination makes him visualize the oppressive spaces of industrial revolution as some sort of nightmarish "world within the world": "The men of the works had relinquished their citizenship; they had immigrated to the works as his parents had immigrated to New York from County Kerry" (32).

At the opposite end of the novel, the theme of immigration is rendered through the plight of the extra-terrestrial lizard-men from planet Nadia; it's not hard to see a parallel with some real episodes of migration in the descriptions of the aliens camped in abandoned buildings, or working in unpleasant conditions: "The Nadians must have hoped for more when they migrated to Earth. They must have imagined themselves as something better than servants, nannies, street sweepers" (238). This version of Simon, as an android, is also concerned with questions of identity, and that is in fact the reason for his journey: to understand what makes him different from humans. "I feel like there's something terrible and wonderful and amazing that's just beyond my grasp" (253).

Not even Cat from "The Children's Crusade" is exempt from this considerations. As an African-American woman, independent and with a good education level, she feels treated as an "exotic specimen" (180), not really at home in the city:

You'd admit that we're emigrants, that our native land is too barren for us, too hard; that what we should really and truly do is buy a good reliable used car and drive out into the continent and see what we can find for ourselves. (168)

With such an array of diverse experiences of otherness, what is the meeting point? A way to address this question is through the use of Whitman quotes. According to some critics, Cunningham “sees Whitman as the inclusive, expansive, loving and slightly crazed spirit of what’s best about America”, who “refused to acknowledge the differences of sex, race and class as differences in people’s worth” (L. Miller). This view is supported by the quotations from *Leaves of Grass* that indicate inclusion; in particular, the verse “Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” appears 8 times in the text, albeit sometimes in an altered version. However, I have already mentioned that the quotations are too scattered and decontextualized to permit an unambiguous interpretation; inclusion is only one of the many themes supported by the quotes, so Whitman alone is not a sufficient answer.

Another promising avenue for the exploration of the theme, the Nadians, falls short. The alien as metaphor for immigration is a staple of science fiction, and the last novella moves in that direction with the descriptions mentioned earlier and Simon's musings on his travel companion. However, the section is packed with a number of different science fiction references and themes that pull the story in different directions and often require exposition; the colonial metaphor is never explored in depth.

In truth, in each section the three main characters (when available) are drawn to each other, “both brought together and estranged from one another by their sense of being outsiders” (Kakutani). However, the characters interact for the most part only within the intimate sphere of their closest acquaintances. The idea of otherness is rarely brought up outside the characters' reflections on the self; this is not without benefits, as it adds depth to the characters and is also useful for reinforcing the connections between the different sections. Ultimately, this confines the matter of otherness to the sphere of the personal and the familiar, which, in Gray's parlance, does not meet the challenge to “represent the reality of [the

writer's] culture as multiple, complex, and internally antagonistic" (147).

To summarize, *Specimen Days* takes the established structures of different genres as a starting point to build what appear to be three separate narratives, in a move that creates expectations of familiarity. Then, through the use of the tools of repetition, uncontrolled expression, and misplaced generic elements, a strategy of destabilization is enacted. This strategy can be seen as a literary equivalent of symptoms of post-traumatic distress, resulting from the personal traumas of the characters and, through a narrative that spans different time periods, also from an historical trauma, that of 9/11, explicitly placed at the center of the novel but reflected also in the past and in the future. On the other hand, the novel takes a more intimate approach to the matter of otherness: it's true that the characters acknowledge their condition of marginalization, in part through the use of generic themes, but this condition is not really enacted outside of their personal reflections.

CHRONIC CITY

Of the three authors analyzed here, Jonathan Lethem is the one whose name appeared more frequently in the discourse about slipstream. In fact, the first part of Lethem's production belongs in the camp of genre fiction: his first novels, published before 2000, are generally considered science fiction, and in that same time frame he also published a number of short stories on dedicated magazines such as *Asimov* and the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. The turning point in his production is considered his novel *Motherless Brooklyn*, published in 1999, that gained him the National Book Critics Circle Award, and marked an increasing interest outside the circles of genre.

Lethem has often talked openly about the influences on his writing, among which there are many genre fiction writers (such as Philip Dick and Rod Serling) and also several others who are part of the slipstream canon (Kafka and Calvino) – and, perhaps most importantly, comic books. This kind of influence can still be found in Lethem's later works, in a way that has been defined “comic-book magical realism” (Hoberek 236) and that occasionally raised criticism (in a review of another of Lethem's novels, *The Fortress of Solitude*, John Leonard wrote “it is time this gifted writer closed his comic books for good”).

Lethem has also been an active part of the debate on genre. In an essay titled “Why Can't We All Just Live Together?: A Vision of Genre Paradise Lost” in 1998, he talked about the crossing over of the boundaries between the two categories; short stories by Lethem were included both in *Feeling Very Strange* and in *Conjunctions*. It should be noted that more

recently the author has expressed criticism on the matter of defining genre borders, both about specific ones (“Brand new nomenclatures, apparently expressing the yearning for brand new self-referential politics of exclusion, defiance, caste-shame, and resentment: why on earth not avoid those?” (Symposium 15)), and more in general as an approach to literature:

I used to get very involved, six or seven years ago, and before that, in questions of taxonomy of genre, and in the idea – which is ultimately a political idea – that a given writer, perhaps me, could in some objective way alter or reorganize the boundaries between genres. This was a waste of time, not least because I knew (though I could never get anyone else to agree) that there were no boundaries between genres that meant anything very deep or interesting about the books in question. Nowadays, I've come to feel that talking about categories, about 'high' and 'low', about genre and their boundaries and the blurring of those boundaries, all consists only of an elaborate way to avoid actually discussing what moves and interests me about books – my own, and others'. (Lethem, *Failbetter*)

Lethem's profile as an author could be taken as a case study for the complex interaction between different currents of literary criticism. For my thesis, I will focus on one of his more recent works, the 2009 novel *Chronic City*. Returning once again to Richard Gray as a lens for interpretation, *Chronic City* shows how fantastic elements can subtly intrude in what would otherwise be a familiar narrative, in order to upset its comforting effect.

Chronic City follows Chase Insteadman, a minor celebrity living in Manhattan, as he moves between New York's high society and a more private circle of recently acquired friends, among which stands out the eccentric Perkus Tooth. Tooth is a curious man with a talent for making connections between the touchstones of popular culture, which he usually

exposes in long-winded rants; he also is something of a paranoiac, as he sees deeper meanings and hints of conspiracies in his web of popcultural references.

A number of other colorful characters complete the circle: worthy of mention are Oona Laszlo, sarcastic ghostwriter and eventual love interest for Chase; and Richard Abneg, a former activist now part of the mayor's staff.

Chase serves as the first-person narrator for most of the novel, with the exception of the occasional chapters focused on some other character, told in the third person. Chase is used to moving among New York's socialite circles, where he is well received for his generally unassuming character (“you’ve gotten by to this point by being cute, haven’t you, Chase?” (10)), that will merit him monikers such as “puttylike” (80) and, in one of the exchanges most frequently quoted in reviews, “Chase Unperson” (182).

Chase is a former child actor, who still enjoys a measure of celebrity not only for his role in a popular sitcom as a teenager, but most importantly for the peculiar circumstances of his love life: Chase's fiancée, Janice Trumbull, is an astronaut, currently stranded on an international space station with a team of American and Russian colleagues; a field of mines deployed by China impedes their return, as that would kill them on reentry. The only channel of communication between the couple are Janice's letters from space, that get regularly published in the newspapers, and chronicle the progressive worsening of the conditions of the astronauts, until their eventual death. This troubling situation is one of the reasons that drive Chase more and more in his new circle of friends: while he privately struggles with his emotions, as his feelings for Janice suffer from the distance and the one-way communication, his private life is made public (“My heart’s distress was daily newspaper fodder. Yes, I loved Janice Trumbull, the American trapped in orbit with the Russians, the astronaut who couldn’t come home” (11)), and it feels to him like some sort of role he has to play for the benefit of

the city.

In order to escape from his worries, Chase retreats in a number of comforting activities. He actively avoids the spotlight of interviews and public events, and for the most part we see him either alone or in the company of Perkus and his friends. He spends a great amount of time at Perkus' home, mostly watching old films and smoking marijuana, and trying to keep up with his friend's obsessions, in what is almost a juvenile routine (as Oona pithily comments, "watching old Brando movies together in the afternoon, then deconstructing the universe for dessert. It's like you're helping Perkus with his homework" (46)). Later, he embarks in a secret liaison with Oona, a relationship that raises in him confused feelings (he is after all still publicly known as "the astronaut's boyfriend") but that gives him another outlet for everyday activities.

Chase's retreat into his domestic life seems to echo the words with which Richard Gray censured American literature after 9/11: "all life here is personal; cataclysmic public events are measured purely and simply in terms of their impact on the emotional entanglements of their protagonists" (134). For Chase, the impact of what appears to be an international crisis is never considered if not in terms of his personal relationship with one of the involved astronauts, and a number of incidents taking place in the city are mostly an excuse to retreat in the comfort of friendly relations:

This felt natural, in a life-during-wartime sort of way. Seeing the company assembled here for the first time ... I believed I was seeing my present life complete for what it was, or what I wished it to be. Like a foreign correspondent in a zone of peril, a Graham Greene protagonist, I was secretly thrilled that chaos had rearranged a few things. I had my people around me. (241)

However, shifting the focus away from the characters and towards the city they live in,

many details reveal that there is something else going on; that Manhattan in *Chronic City* doesn't exactly coincide with "real-world" Manhattan. A number of strange occurrences cross the city, remaining in the background of the character's daily activities but still affecting them.

First of all, the tiger. We learn, early in the novel, that an impossibly large tiger is roaming the city, blocking traffic and causing destruction. The tiger at first gets mentioned as the cause of logistic inconveniences for the characters, something that from time to time seems to be the cause of some event in the city, but is never brought into focus ("I'd heard of the tiger perhaps three or four times now myself, yet found it difficult to bring into focus as a real and ongoing problem, something capable of bollixing traffic on Lexington" (36)). And yet it gradually becomes part of the everyday life of the city and the characters, as a remote menace against which to plan one's movements through the city. As this enormous but unseen tiger causes the destruction of entire buildings (a water main at first, then a Korean market, and so on), the city grows scared but also fascinated by the creature:

"So let it devour a small-businessman's livelihood now and again. People like distraction. They live on it, gobble it up."

I had to interrupt. "You're saying they... encourage the tiger?"

He shrugged. "Tolerate maybe. Encourage maybe. It's not mine to say. What they don't do is *catch*." (113)

The tiger is occasionally mentioned, often only in passing, as a strange but constant presence in the life of Manhattan. As doubts on the real nature of the thing grow on the characters, an explanation is given early on by Richard Abneg, the character who works for the city administration:

"It's pretty goddamn funny that everyone calls it a tiger in the first place," he said.

“Even those of us who know better have fallen into the habit... a testament to what Arnheim likes to call the power of popular delusions and the madness of crowds...” [...]

“You’re saying the tiger is a *machine*?” said Perkus.

Richard nodded glumly, and sipped from his juice glass. “A machine, a robot, that’s right, for digging a subway tunnel. I guess some old lady saw it and told the news that it was a tiger and the image just colonized the public imagination. It happens that way sometimes, we don’t control all this stuff, Chase, no matter how Machiavellian you might think we are.” (146)

Thus, an explanation is given early on for the mysterious events; an explanation that, while only marginally more believable than the original hypothesis, is easier to accept for the narrator, and frames the matter of unmotivated destruction through the city within a context of public delusion and manipulation. People like a distraction; the city administration furthers its own goals while providing a story good enough to be that distraction, and even counts on it (by setting up a Tiger Watch website, that results in a public involvement in the movements of the so-called tiger). And when the events hit close to the character's lives, when the tiger destroys the area near Perkus' home, setting in motion the events that would lead to the story's conclusion, Chase is left wondering on the part this plays in the city's plans (“The tiger was a city operative, hadn’t Abneg confirmed it?” (336)). Things, however, are not so simple. Abneg's version, that the tiger is actually a machine – autonomous, but still a part of the city's plans – has been accepted by the narrator, and presented to the reader as acceptable; but towards the end of the book Chase crosses the path of the actual tiger.

At the corner of Eighty-fourth we came upon the giant escaped tiger, moving silently along the side street to cross Lexington there, heading east, away from Central Park. We

froze when its long streetlamp-foreshadow darkened the intersection, so stood rooted like statuary in our deep footprints as the creature padded to the center of Lexington's lanes, under the dangling yellow traffic lights which shaded the great burgeoning white-and-yellow fur of its ears and ruff now green, now red, the procession of timed stoplights running for miles beyond through the calming storm. The tiger was tall, a second-story tiger, though not as enormous as its legend. Still, it could have craned its neck and nibbled the heavy-swinging traffic light which hummed in the whispering silence that surrounded us. ... The tiger had no remotely mechanical aspect to it, nor appeared in any sense to have emerged from underground or be about to return to fugitive excavations, seemed instead to be wholly of flesh and fur, leather-black nostrils steaming above a grizzly muzzle baring just the slightest fang tips and fringed with beaded ice, its own refrozen breath or drool. (433)

This appearance reopens the question of the nature of this mysterious tiger, and even if in the concluding chapter we are informed that "mainstream coverage has fallen off" (464), Chase is left wondering on what he has seen ("Possibly there were two tigers, the famous and chaotic one that lit the tabloid frenzy, and this more dignified one, who showed itself to us alone" (434)). In the end, the nature of the tiger will remain one of several unexplained occurrences witnessed by the characters.

Though not as striking as the tiger, the weather of Manhattan is affected by weird phenomena. In Chapter 10, the city is suddenly pervaded by a smell of chocolate with no discernible origin:

On the street again, you'd see others glancing up, sniffing air, bemused. And soon confirming: yes, they smelled the same thing. It had been downtown, too, someone said, quite nervously. Another said even in the subway. Lexington Avenue sidewalks,

normally muffled in regular hostility, broke out suddenly in Willy Wonka comparisons, one passerby saying, I thought of a sundae, another replying, No, syrup on crepes. Or, a tad melancholy: I haven't wanted ice cream like this in forty years. (173)

This shared sensory disturbance, however, does not affect all the characters in the same way: both Perkus Tooth and a second, less important character describe it as a sort of background noise, a ringing sound as pervasive as the smell. This weird synaesthetic presence disappears in the span of a few chapters, without an explanation being given, or even sought by the characters. After that, Manhattan is subject to heavy snowfall that persists out of season (as Chase reports in the last chapter, "We've only had two snows in August so far" (463))

Another weird phenomenon is an equally mysterious gray fog that has been engulfing downtown Manhattan for what we're told have been several years. In Chase's account of events, the gray fog is accepted as an ordinary fact of life, and signals the limits of a part of the city that he does not visit, with the exception of a singular failed attempt to take part to a radio program.

All these strange, unreal facts form the backdrop for the characters' actions, and while their effects on the city range from the merely puzzling to the lethal, they are often remarked as something that occupies the attention of the population. In contrast, there are no references to the events of September 9, 2001. The Twin Towers are only mentioned twice in *Chronic City*, and never in relation with recent events; however, both references make oblique allusions to an idea of absence. The first instance is a painting, "a crisp architectural-style rendering of a dark pit that plunged between two Manhattan office towers, viewed from above" (30), that is revealed to be a preparatory sketch for something called "Expunged Building", an art installation by the enigmatic Laird Noteless (whose most notable work is the construction of huge fissures in the city landscape). Later, Chase reminisces about "Philippe

Petit crossing that impossible distance of sky between the towers, now unseen for so many months behind the gray fog” (430).

The tiger, the gray fog, enormous holes presented as art installations, strange collective perceptions: all these elements compound the image of a New York that at times looks more like a movie set, or possibly a sort of video-game area whose borders are marked by fog. The characters question themselves on the possibility of everything being only a simulation:

Simulated worlds theory says that computing power is inevitably going to rise to a level where it’s possible to create a simulation of an entire universe, in every detail, and populated with little simulated beings ... who sincerely believe they’re truly alive. If you were in one of these simulated universes you’d never know it. Every sensory detail would be as complete as the world around us, the world as we find it. (228)

It stands to Perkus Tooth to expose the hidden truth. After the events of the novel have hit him personally, his usual rants appear to assume a greater clarity, and as he gets close to the moment of his death, he is able to put before Chase some hints about what is really happening:

Something happened, Chase, there was some rupture in this city. Since then, time’s been fragmented. Might have to do with the gray fog, that or some other disaster. Whatever the cause, ever since we’ve been living in a place that’s a replica of itself, a fragile simulacrum, full of gaps and glitches. (389)¹

Manhattan as presented in *Chronic City* is a fake, the object of a “conspiracy of distraction” (447) meant to hold the attention of the public, to keep it away from some other

¹ At this point Perkus is suffering from crippling hiccups, represented in the text with gaps, in a graphic counterpart to the aforementioned “glitches”.

truth. Ultimately, Perkus' death pushes Chase to look for more answers, and the last few chapters of the novel are full of a series of shocking revelations: we discover that Janice Trumbull is an invention, her letters composed by Oona as a contracted writer; not only that, but Chase himself, while unaware of the fact, is being paid for his role as the astronaut's fiancée. This leads Chase to confront the mayor, an encounter that however gives no explanation and only serves to remark the inevitability of his role in the city's life. Realizing not only that his actions will have no impact, but that he risks losing the few certainties he still has, Chase ultimately falls into the comfort of a different familiar routine.

The blurred line between what is real and what is fictitious is not only a concern for the characters, but also a game of sorts that involves the reader. Through the character of Perkus Tooth, Lethem launches in long-winded catalogs of pop-cultural references, connecting literature, cinema, music, art and so on:

What things? Before I could ask, we were off again. Perkus's spiel encompassed Monte Hellman, Semina Culture, Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces*, the Mafia's blackmailing of J. Edgar Hoover over erotic secrets (resulting in the bogus amplification of Cold War fear and therefore the whole of our contemporary landscape), Vladimir Mayakovsky and the futurists, Chet Baker, Nothingism, the ruination Giuliani's administration had brought to the sacred squalor of Times Square, the genius of *The Gnuppet Show*, Frederick Exley, Jacques Rivette's impossible-to-see twelve-hour movie *Out 1*, corruption of the arts by commerce generally, Slavoj Zizek on Hitchcock, Franz Marplot on G. K. Chesterton, Norman Mailer on Muhammad Ali, Norman Mailer on graffiti and the space program, Brando as dissident icon, Brando as sexual saint, Brando as Napoleon in exile. Names I knew and didn't. (12)

The stunning density of references and dropped names that characterize Perkus' speeches have earned *Chronic City* the definition of “novel in the age of Google” (Waterman), because decoding them requires a search engine and Wikipedia, becoming a sort of game with the reader. These long lists of citations are comprised of many accessible references, as well as several others that are more obscure but still referencing the real world. Among them, however, the author sneaks in some inventions of his own, that have to be interpreted, solved as if they were riddles: the Gnuppets and their director Florian Ib correspond to the Muppets and Frank Oz, for example, or Russ Grinspoon, “the lamer half of a well-forgotten seventies smooth-rock duo, Grinspoon and Hale” (263) who makes an appearance in a few scenes, is an equivalent of Art Garfunkel, or again Ralph Warden Meeker, author of the complex novel *Obstinate Dust*, can be traced to David Foster Wallace. This game of references has the additional effect of raising questions about all the characters – after all, if we are able to decode this or that character, could that not be possible for all of them? Lethem himself carried on this kind of game beyond the novel, in a piece published on his website, titled “So Who is Perkus Tooth, Anyway?”:

Perkus Tooth wouldn't exist without the precedent of the character Rudolph Menthol, from Rufus Firefly's great novel *Years Between Islands*. Each time I lift Firefly's book from my shelf and reread even a page I'm struck by this thought, one I'd be unlikely to mention in public: Tooth wouldn't exist without Menthol.

It should come as no surprise that this reference is another invention (Rufus Firefly was the name of a Groucho Marx's character). Real and fake references, tied together in a way that makes it daunting to recognize which is which, tie into one of *Chronic City's* themes, the search for authenticity; in one of his reflections towards the end of the novel, Chase himself states that “The world was ersatz and actual, forged and faked, by ourselves and unseen

others. Daring to attempt to absolutely sort *fake* from *real* was a folly..." (449)

Emblematic of this theme in the novel is the motif of the "chaldron". In one episode, Perkus visits Strabo Blandiana, a practitioner of alternative medicine with an uncanny (once again, straining the limits of realism) ability to read people. While subject to his therapy, Perkus observes a framed picture of a peculiar vase, a so-called chaldron; an object so beautiful and infused with a sense of materiality that even in photograph it triggers in him a sort of perceptive revolution:

The orange vase spoke to Perkus, simply, of not the possibility but the fact of another world. The world Perkus or anyone would wish to discover, the fine real place where the shadowy, tattered cloak of delusion dissolved. The place Perkus had tried his whole life to prove existed. (90)

Perkus soon enlists his friends in the search for these artifacts, which involves a series of internet auctions for impossibly high sums. These strange, unattainable objects, seen only through a computer screen, manage to have the same striking effect on all of them, and are somehow the catalysts for a deep reflection on reality: "the chaldron interrogated Manhattan, made it seem an enactment. An object, the chaldron testified to zones, realms, elsewhere." (152) The reality of the object becomes even more striking when later, accidentally, the characters encounter one face to face, during a party at the mayor's house:

The real thing retroactively obliterated the recollection of our eBay encounters. More than diminished, these were overwritten, turned into rehearsals, premonitions of a future encounter: this. What the chaldron revealed now, that no image could ever reproduce, was its sublime and superb *thingliness* (again this word came unbidden). (283)

But, keeping in theme of the novel, the distinction between real and fake is rarely a

simple matter, and chaldrons are no exception. After the party, Perkus remains inside the house, and the truth is soon revealed to him: the chaldron he has observed is a hologram, a projected image, because chaldrons actually exist only as rare items within a computer simulation, called Yet Another World (*Chronic City's* equivalent of Second Life). The object whose mere sight caused to question the reality of the world is in truth an immaterial reproduction of a virtual object.

The ambiguous stance between authentic and fictional becomes more relevant when we consider that *Chronic City* is a novel set in modern day Manhattan. In the previous chapter, I've talked about Cunningham's *Specimen Days*, and how he interacted in an open way with the traumatic facts of 9/11. Lethem, here, takes a very different approach.

In his article, Gray states that “the determining feature of trauma is that it is unsayable. What is traumatic is defined by what Caruth has called “the impossibility of ... direct access” (“Open Doors” 136). This is an idea that Jonatham Lethem has confronted himself. In late September 2001, Jonathan Lethem wrote a contribution for the New York Times, titled “9 Failures of the Imagination”. The short piece, an emotional tribute to the city Lethem grew up in, touches also upon his difficulty as a writer to relate those events: “Can I bear to narrate this into normality, 40 hours after they crumbled and fell? To craft a story: and then, and then, and then?” (“9 Failures”) In the wake of of 9/11, he admitted the extreme difficulty as a writer to express the events of that day. To borrow once more from Gray's terminology, Lethem recognized the alteration of imaginative structures, but could not see a way to act on that recognition.

A few years from that moment, Lethem set his novel in Manhattan, an area with which he is well acquainted (despite being more famously associated with Brooklyn). The

geography and the characters of the novel owe much to his personal experiences: several of the places he mentions, from avenues down to specific fast food restaurants and shops, can be found on a map (see Alter). The landmarks are more than just another set of references for the reader, however; they form the familiar, safe space for the character's retreats, the habitual meeting places for Chase and his friends. *Chronic City* “points to the contingent and conditional nature of our own “interior maps,” maps that emerge from encounters with and in space” (Nadell). But there is more to the space of Manhattan than meets the eye; as Chase remarks in one of his first walks through the East Side, “To live in Manhattan is to be persistently amazed at the worlds squirreled inside one another, the chaotic intricacy with which realms interleave” (8), a description that fits the real city (“New York already is the kind of space of hybridity “beyond a boundary” that Gray values” (Rothberg 157)), but that takes a wider, more unsettling meaning when one of the worlds in question are outside the norms of reality. “I'd entered – we'd all entered – a world containing a fresh category of phenomena: the unimaginable fact” declared Lethem (“9 Failures”); if that is the case, it's possible that in an interior map of Manhattan there is room for titanic tigers and fogs that never disperse.

All things considered, calling *Chronic City* a novel about 9/11 would be reductive. After all, no mention is made of the WTC attacks, the towers themselves are mentioned only twice and in passing, and the only one who possibly gets close to understanding what is happening is the paranoid Perkus Tooth, and nothing really comes from his epiphany. There was a rupture in the city, and it's not hard to guess what it was, but the event itself does not appear. What we see is a city that is at the same time fake and real, subject to extraordinary events that are a source of distress but also a distraction from an unstated “something else” (as Chase

gets told by a city representative, “We’re in the coping business around here” (450)). It is possible to escape to a familiar space, but that is at best a temporary comfort; yet another fiction in a world in which it's impossible to discern fiction from truth.

“Do you *personally* believe Manhattan is fake?” asked Claire Carter.

How could I reply? Perkus’s theories proved themselves ludicrous while demolishing any castles of consolation to which I might hope to retreat. They unmade those as they unmade themselves. Our sphere of the real (call it Manhattan) was riddled with simulations, yet was the world at hand. Or the simulation was riddled through with the real. (448)

Confronted with two conflicting notions of the world Chase reacts with confusion, despair and ultimately escape. In other words, he is experiencing cognitive dissonance. The theory of cognitive dissonance also suggests the reason for his behavior in the closing chapter: “A fear of dissonance would lead to a reluctance to take action – a reluctance to commit oneself” (Festinger 31). Seeing no way to reduce the dissonance (“There was no way out, only a million ways back in” (453)), Chase retreats in a set of different but still comforting habits, with a new routine and new acquaintances, and a grudging acceptance of the incidents that disturb the city.

Chronic City does not offer a way to solve the contradiction, to reduce the dissonance. And yet, cognitive dissonance might be the way to approach trauma. Richard Gray holds that “an alteration of imaginative structures is required to register the contemporary crisis” (“Open Doors” 134). The world after 9/11 is a world of “cognitive dissonance run riot” (“9 Failures”), where unimaginable facts can happen. As the literature of “cognitive dissonant *triumphant*” (Kelly xi), slipstreams seems particularly apt to bring testimony of that kind of world.

The trauma of 9/11 can not be accessed directly; the alternative “to approach it by

circuitous means, almost by stealth” (“Open Doors” 136). *Chronic City* does so by leading the reader to believe he is following a familiar narrative, only to gradually disrupt it with the intrusion of strange and fantastic elements. Cognitive dissonance permeates the atmosphere of New York, sometimes literally: a huge tiger, that might or might not be a runaway excavator, roams the city; the air is filled with a smell of chocolate that is also a buzzing sound. Adding to this, there is subtle strategy of blurring the lines between truth and fabrications that unfolds through the many references in the novel, and contributes to the feeling of dissonance.

On the surface, *Chronic City* appears to introduce a narrative of familiar spaces and activities. The apparition of fantastic elements is a source of cognitive dissonance, that destabilizes the familiar narrative bringing it into unfamiliar territories. The trauma is hidden, only offered in glimpses through the gaps riddling the reality of the city; fictional voids that hint at another, real, absence. To put in Gray's words, “Perhaps the way to tell a story that cannot be told is to tell it aslant” (136).

THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO

The third and final novel in my analysis is *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*² by Junot Díaz. First published in 2007, this novel achieved an impressive recognition in the subsequent years, and received a number of awards and honors, notably the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award. *Oscar Wao*, the first novel-length work of a young author who was mostly known for short stories (many of which published on the *New Yorker*), drew quite a bit of attention not only with the public, but also in critical publications. The novel, an account of the lives of a family of Dominican immigrants to the US characterized by the interplay of different languages and experiences, has proven to be fertile ground for academic discussion. Genre also plays an important part, as the book contains numerous references to notable (and sometimes less notable) works of fantasy and science fiction, comics, games and films.

Oscar Wao is an examples of the limits to the literary discourse caused by the lack of a shared terminology for novels that position themselves across multiple genres. While a secondary literature concerned with the fantastic aspects of the novel (as opposed to that mainly directed at the theme of immigration) exists, there is very little cross-referencing with the ongoing discourse on slipstream and its ilk; in many cases, critics either adopt the approach of inserting *Oscar Wao* in the tradition of South-American magical realism, a classification that is at best partial (more on this later), or they produce some unwieldy *ad-hoc*

2 From here on I will refer to the novel as *Oscar Wao* for convenience.

definition such as “comic book realism” (Bautista) or “post-postmodern neo-fantasy” (R. Saldívar).

Díaz himself, while not taking part in the ongoing discourse inside science fiction circles, has commented on his position on genre in many of his numerous interviews. Showing a remarkable familiarity with the subject matter, he has never denied the role played by “the Genres” (as they are called in the novel) in his own younger years, and has often expressed his admiration for both great and less-known names of science fiction and fantasy; he has also been quoted numerous times on his own desire to try his hand as an author in that camp, though to this day the project was never realized – a novel tentatively called “Monstro” was announced, but after part of it was published as a short story on the *New Yorker*, Díaz has suggested that it has been abandoned.

On the other hand, Díaz has also expressed criticism of other contemporary authors who take inspiration from genre literature:

It seems that the relationship between high literary figures and, let's say, comics is unidirectional. So that Michael Chabon and Lethem can turn around and they're literary figures ... They can go and write comic books, but it's sorta like going slumming; they can always come home to that really great suburb called literary fiction ... In other words, it's like the literary figures can go loot the genres all they want, but they never have to worry about the people who are actually genre-practitioners challenging their literary prerogatives so that the borrowing is unidirectional. (“Talks at Google”)

While the validity of his pronouncements on other writers is debatable, especially in the light of the larger critical discourse presented in earlier chapters, Díaz touches on some interesting points about the interactions between literary mainstream and more marginal forms of writing, as he finds similarities between genre and his experience as a writer of immigrant

origins. *Oscar Wao* is, in some ways, the realization in narrative form of this interaction, unfolding as an encounter of different genres, languages, and traditions.

As a novel so deeply engaged with issues of immigration and the encounter between cultures, *Oscar Wao* could easily have been part of Richard Gray's article. In fact, many of the suggestions he makes in his essay – the mixture of voices and free play of languages and genres – find a realization in *Oscar Wao*. In what follows, I will focus on a specific aspect of the novel, the use of fantastic elements, both as citations and as elements inside the story. This is not intended to discount the fundamental core of the novel; on the contrary, I argue that different approaches to genre are used in *Oscar Wao* as integral parts of a strategy to write about immigration, a tool used to enhance the theme of the encounter with strangeness.

Compared to the works discussed in the preceding chapters, *Oscar Wao* has a different frame of reference in time and space: the action is divided between New Jersey and the Dominican Republic, and the narration moves in a non-linear fashion between 1944 and 1995. *Oscar Wao* is, first of all, the story of a young Dominican man living in the United States. The novel's namesake, Oscar, is a young man growing up in the 80s in Paterson, NJ; he is overweight and socially awkward, and his time is almost completely devoted to what the narrator refers to as “the Genres” - science fiction and fantasy novels, Japanese cartoons, comic books, and role-playing games. Oscar is particularly inept in his interactions with women, a trait that serves to further set him apart from his peers, who live in an environment where, as we are told, *machismo* dominates. After chronicling his teenage and college years, the last part of the novel follows Oscar in a journey to the Dominican Republic, where he meets a prostitute, Ybón, with whom he falls in love; in the end, his involvement with Ybón will be the cause of his murder by the hands of a jealous boyfriend.

Woven together with Oscar's story are the stories of his mother Belicia in the years of her youth, before her immigration to the United States (in the late 1950s and early 1960s), and that of his grandfather Abelard in the 1940s. Both these characters' lives get entangled in the acts of the dictatorial regime of Trujillo, at that time ruler of the Dominican Republic, resulting in terrible encounters with violence and death.

The narrator of the story is Yunior, another Dominican-American character who is interesting on multiple accounts. Yunior, for reasons that are never fully explained, takes it upon himself to recount Oscar's life and, from there, to chronicle the history of his family. Yunior's narrative voice is very diverse, mixing together colloquial and literary registers, Spanish slang, references to “the Genres” but also to canonical literature, and so on. He also provides the text with numerous footnotes, which are employed mainly to supply information on the history of the Dominican Republic (often in a conspiratorial, word-of-mouth sort of way) or, more rarely, to clarify a bit of slang or a reference. We learn that Yunior is an aspiring writer; in his hands, the familiar history of his friend Oscar becomes also a way to revisit the history of the Dominican Republic. However, both the “official” history and the more personal ones are complicated by the existence of numerous gaps and “white pages” (“páginas en blanco” (93 note 9)), that force Yunior to confront silences and omissions, and to pursue different ways to tell his story.

Genre – to use once again the term in the broad sense of “literature dealing with the fantastic” – features in the novel in two ways. The first one, perhaps the most evident, is the wealth of references to science fiction and fantasy literature, role-playing games and comic books that appear in Yunior's narration, as they relate to Oscar's interests but also as terms of analogy for the narrator. The second one, perhaps less visible but no less essential, is the

presence of ambiguous supernatural elements in the unfolding of the events. These two different approaches to genre serve important functions in the narrative, both on their own merits and in their interaction with the other traditions and languages that traverse the novel.

The influence of popular culture is evident from the very first pages of *Oscar Wao*. The first epigraph is a citation from the comic *Fantastic Four*: “Of what import are brief, nameless lives... to Galactus?”. This epigraph is in itself an indication of the kind of role genre references will play in the novel. Galactus, the Devourer of Worlds, here quoted in its first appearance in the comic book canon, is a force of cosmic proportions, uncaring of the lives of mortals. The epigraph raises a question about the title, that instead promises a story of a brief, but not nameless, life; it also foreshadows the kind of dynamic proper of dictatorial regimes (in this case, Trujillo's rule on the Dominican Republic). Díaz has stated that one of the reasons for his interest in genre literature is the possibility of dealing with the theme of dictatorship: “a lot of science fiction novels [are] asking questions about power. There are questions about what it means to have power and what are the long-term consequences of power.” (*Wired*).

References of this kind are a mainstay of the narration. In the sections focusing on Oscar, lists of titles and authors come up frequently. Oscar's intimacy with “the Genres” sets him apart from the other kids in the neighborhood, providing at once comfort and separation. As the story progresses, the references reflect Oscar's moods and feelings, as he moves to and from bleak post-apocalyptic scenarios to more hopeful or adventurous fantasies (“He put away his *Aftermath!* game and picked up *Space Opera*” (173)).

At the same time, the narrator himself displays a considerable familiarity with this kind of materials. As a character, Yunior fits more neatly in the stereotype of the young Dominican male he presents; the majority of the sparse information he gives about himself are related to

his promiscuous sexual life. However, the distance he tries to take from Oscar is a way to dissimulate his own familiarity with the same kind of pastimes: “Do you know what sign fool put up on our dorm door? *Speak, friend, and enter*. In fucking Elvish! (Please don’t ask me how I knew this. Please.)” (178). Thanks to Yuniór's familiarity with them, genre references serve as a tool to frame the events even in the chapters narrating the lives of the other characters. The Trujillo regime is regularly alluded to in terms taken from *The Lord of The Rings*, where he is likened to the main antagonist (“He was our Sauron” (2, footnote 1)), and his lieutenants cast as other characters (“Felix Wenceslao Bernardino, raised in La Romana, one of Trujillo’s most sinister agents, his Witchking of Angmar” (125, footnote 16)). Comic books and role-playing games are also referenced often: the epigraph is an example, as are many episodes in which a numeric notation similar to those used in games is used to describe the physical harm of some character. (“How she survived I’ll never know. They beat her like she was a slave ... About 167 points of damage in total” (153)).

One particular analogy reappears from time to time in the course of the novel. In the introduction, the narrator, at that point still unnamed, casts himself in the role of the Watcher. Another character from the *Fantastic Four* comics, the Watcher is an alien, member of a race tasked with observing from the outside the lives of the inhabitants of a planet. The narrator refers to himself as the Watcher throughout the novel, the last time on page 339, only a few pages from the end of the book. This reference, beside providing a link with the universe of comic books, presents the narrator as a supposed external observer; but it also serves as a link with Oscar, as he too is an outsider removed from the action: a footnote informs us of the Dominican slang-word *parigüayo*, “a corruption of the English neologism ‘party watcher’ ... a word that in contemporary usage describes anybody who stands outside and watches while other people scoop up the girls. The kid who don’t dance, who ain’t got game, who lets people

clown him — he’s the parigüayo” (20, footnote 5). However, the citation has a second meaning for readers versed in the lore of comics: the Watcher, who had sworn an oath of non-intervention; but in the story often transgresses his oath and interacts with the characters, usually to warn them about an upcoming danger. This is perhaps a suggestion that Yunior is more personally involved in the story he is telling than what he maintains to be.

The preceding observation leads to a more general reflection on the kind of effort such references require from the reader. *Oscar Wao* involves the reader in an interaction with very different – and not necessarily accessible – pools of references: mainly the history of Dominican Republic, Spanish language (and by extension, the popular culture of Caribbean immigrants in the US), and genre literature. However, the text makes clear that the reader, often addressed by the narrator, is not expected to be especially familiar with these references: history is preemptively introduced with a “For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history” (2, footnote 1), Spanish remains a foreign language in a text in English, and genre references are underscored as something that is not “Normal” (22). Moreover, the narrator does not make much of an effort in making his references clear; if Dominican history is covered in a few footnotes, often sketchy and clearly biased, slang and genre references are only rarely explained³. The reader is thus required to make his own research in order to navigate the text, or at least to decide how to follow them:

The author and narrator of *Oscar Wao* force readers to decide what is crucial and what is marginal in a book that is explicitly about social, cultural, and historical marginalization – and that is speaking to a traditional Western audience from a marginal (bilingual, bicultural, genre literature-infused) position. (O'Brien 86)

³ It is interesting to note how the Italian translation of *Oscar Wao* was published with two appendices: a glossary of Spanish slang, and one of genre references.

To this I would add that the use of genre references mirrors very closely the way Spanish is used in the novel. In fact, both are inserted in the text flow without interruption on many occasions. Thus, when the reader encounters expressions such as “La Inca ... used the Voice on them” (267) or “The first time ... it hurt bad (4d10)” (103), he can recognize that these are references, but unless he is as well-versed in the Genres as Oscar and Yunior, he is supposed to either guess the meaning from the context or to research them, the same way he would do for Spanish slang expressions such as “his cool-index ... couldn’t have survived that kind of a paliza” (18). Genre references become in the sense something similar to loanwords in the narrator's language, used to support English when that language is insufficient for expressing an idea on its own.

This is part of the novel's strategy of bringing the margins in the spotlight. The character's position, along with immigrants in the United States, is a marginal one in a cultural and linguistic sense. In the same way, genre fiction is itself a marginalized literature, often considered unacceptable both in a literary sense and in the social circles in which Oscar grew up. Thus, it is possible to relate the experience of living at the margins to that of comic book characters, for example mutants shunned by society: “You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest” (23, footnote 6).

The connection between the marginalization of certain groups of people and the marginalization of genres is a point that Díaz has commented upon both in the novel (“What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?” (7)) and in several of his interviews:

In the United States, if you're a writer of color, no matter what you write about, you're

considered a genre anyway ... So, there's this sense that part of the joke for me was that being a writer of color, you're already considered as bizarrely marginalized ... And so, I felt part of the joke was I can't decide who's more of a genre in this book. The parts about the Dominican Republic and the parts about being a Dominican kid at Rutgers, or the parts about the science fiction comic books? Like who gets the better passport?" ("Talks at Google")

If references to published works of genre literature are one side of the coin, the other side consists of the presence of fantastic elements in the story. In fact, the narrator introduces the reader to the supernatural side of the story even before presenting the characters:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Taínos, 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. (1)

After this epic-sounding *incipit*, that would not be out of place in a fantasy novel, the narrator illustrates fukú as a force that is inextricably tied with the history of the Dominican Republic – and the era of Trujillo in particular – but also with the history of the United States. The fukú is a frame of reference that encompasses the experience of the Caribbean people both on their native soil and during migration (or, as Yuniors puts it, the Diaspora). However, the presentation shifts towards a more folkloric approach: “But the fukú ain’t just ancient history, a ghost story from the past with no power to scare. In my parents’ day the fukú was real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in” (2). In other words, fukú might be something with which every Dominican is familiar, but it's not necessarily anything more

than a superstition. Yuniór claims that all the major events in the 20th century history of the US, from the Kennedy assassination to Vietnam, can be ascribed to fukú, but he himself does not fully embrace the claim: “Whether I believe in what many have described as the Great American Doom is not really the point” (5). In fact, for the younger characters in the novel, fukú is considered as part of a cultural tradition, an old superstition (“That’s our parents’ shit” (200)); but by the end of the story, the possibility that fukú is an actual power is at least acknowledged.

In addition to the great historical force of doom that directs the lives of Dominicans, fukú can be also understood in a smaller scale, as something that affects a single person or family. In fact, folklore says that the dictator Trujillo possessed mystical powers, and crossing him would incur in a powerful curse. Yuniór's historical notes report several incidents of opponents to the regime who were brutally hit by retaliations; fukú adds a supernatural layer to the real actions of the regime, as if a realistic explanation was insufficient for processing the events.

The story of the fukú enters that of Oscar's family in the figure of his grandfather Abelard Cabral. At some point during the 1940s. Abelard crossed the regime, possibly to protect his beautiful daughter from the attention of Trujillo, or for having made a negative comment on the dictator. Abelard is thus imprisoned and tortured to death; his family dispersed, and hit by a series of misfortunes. The account of the torments inflicted upon him is very detailed, but once again Yuniór allows for a different explanation: “Most of the folks you speak to prefer the story with a supernatural twist. They believe that not only did Trujillo want Abelard’s daughter, but when he couldn’t snatch her, out of spite he put a fukú on the family’s ass” (252). To further bring the story into the realm of the fantastic, Yuniór hints at a different account of events: Abelard might have been hit because he was writing a book on the

supernatural powers of Trujillo, a book that disappeared with him. However, the matter of what really happened remains open: “The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you’ll have to decide for yourself” (253).

If the fukú provides a supernatural frame for the whole story, and possibly the entirety of the Caribbean history, there are also other more specific episodes of unexplained events. In particular, I will mention two figures that appear from time to time through the novel. The first one is a man with no face, who is seen at a distance by Belicia when she is kidnapped and brutalized by agents of the Trujillo family, and later by Oscar when he is similarly assaulted by thugs for seeing Ybón. The faceless man also haunts the dreams of the characters in a few other occasions. While no explanation is given about this figure, that is never more than a flickering apparition, it is clear that the man with no face signals terrible events just about to happen.

As a counterpart to this figure, we find the benevolent Mongoose. The Mongoose appears three times in the novel: once to Belicia, after the aggression, and twice to Oscar, before a suicide attempt and again after he has been assaulted. In all three cases, the creature proves to be a positive figure, linked with the survival of the characters. The Mongoose is capable of speech, and is described as “an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies. Believed to be an ally of Man” (158, footnote 18). As with all the other supernatural elements, the nature of this creature remains equally unexplained; Yunior recurs to the language of genre to suggest that it might come from another planet, or be a divine being of some sort: the Mongoose is described as “Aslan-like” (313) and having “golden lion eyes” (156), referring to a character in C. S. Lewis' fantasy saga *Chronicles of Narnia*, a lion with some explicit connotations as a Christ-like figure.

The presence of these supernatural elements has led some reviewers and critics to link

Oscar Wao to the tradition of Magical Realism, another genre characterized by the coexistence of fantastic and realistic elements; a classification that is made easier by the frequent association of that genre with Latin American literature. However, applying generic labels to works that purposely mix many different genres such as *Oscar Wao* is never a simple matter. The encounters with the supernatural in the novel happen in moments of great distress, if not of near-death experiences, and thus could be explained away as hallucinations or figments of the imagination; and the existence of fukú is put in the context of a folk tradition. This inconsistency has been noted by several scholars, who generally categorize it as “post-magical realism”⁴:

“This signals a departure from traditional magical realist narrative, which naturalizes seemingly magical phenomena. Rather than weaving this magic seamlessly into the narrative as magical realist texts traditionally do, Yuniors calls attention to these moments, initially questioning though later validating them.” (Hanna 510)

“Díaz effectively writes a post-magical realist work, a work of fiction that takes superstitions about the fantastic dimensions of Dominican history seriously at the same time that it slyly questions and pokes fun at that very perspective.” (Bautista 52)

I suggest that, while magical realism is without a doubt one among the many literary traditions incorporated in *Oscar Wao*, framing the novel as belonging or not to that genre in certain terms is a moot point. Díaz himself seems to defuse the question with an explicit allusion, when he says that zafa, a popular apotropaic sign that counteracts the curse, “used to be more popular in the old days, bigger, so to speak, in Macondo than in McOndo” (7). In a single passing reference, for that matter the only one of this kind, Díaz evokes two competing traditions of South American literature: the magic realism of García Márquez, and the break

4 See also R. Saldivar, quoted earlier.

from that very tradition fostered by Alberto Fuguet's "McOndo", a movement that predicated narratives more rooted in the reality of modern life. Moreover, the quote seems to imply that "Macondo" represents an old way of seeing the world, and in fact the urban setting in which Oscar's tale begins seems to reinforce the affinity with the second one; however, as the novel progresses, the movement of the characters between the US and the Caribbean makes a definite position impossible to take. In time, Oscar grows more open to the possibility of a supernatural side, but for the rest of the readers, the question remains open. It is Yunior himself who issues the challenge, to decide whether to accept the stories as true, or to dismiss them as superstition; whether, to put it as Oscar's sister would, there is actually a curse, or if it is simply life (211).

Ultimately, this ambiguous stance defeats the point of classing the novel as magical realism or not. I would posit that the limit of such observations is that they consider a single thread at a time; the techniques employed by Díaz, the insertion of fantastic elements in a realistic story, can be seen as inspired by the South American tradition of magical realism, but have also much in common with the treatment of similar content in other slipstream authors.

To summarize my observations, Díaz deploys genre elements in two simultaneous strategies in *Oscar Wao*. On the one hand, he draws from classic works of genre literature, in order to build a language of references to a marginalized cultural environment in the US that mirrors the use of Dominican Spanish slang as another marginal culture. On the other hand, he casts the entirety of the story in a frame that allows for explanations taken from folklore and the supernatural, and also recalls the South-American tradition of magical realism, while not committing fully to either. These two threads combine with a number of other literary traditions – biography and historiography, clearly, but also the American literary canon, the

novela de la dictadura (Hanna 517), the “secret history” (T. S. Miller 97) and undoubtedly many more – to create a unique approach to the history of a Dominican family in particular, and the Dominican Republic in general. This blend of disparate voices is fitting with the kind of writing that Richard Gray praised in his essay:

Books about these new strangers show us this act of mutual transformation by showing people renewed and renamed out of a frequently savage encounter between their several pasts. They also, very often, enact that same mutuality, that reciprocity of influence, by offering narrative moments, and an overall narrative momentum, that are responsive to the syncretic character of American culture. They reconfigure language, the themes and tropes of American writing, in terms that go way beyond bipolar, biracial models. In the process, they become a lexical equivalent of the immigrant encounter, transforming their literary environs just as they are transformed by them. (140)

Oscar Wao is a story told from what Gray calls a liminal position, on multiple accounts; the characters and the narrator are living in the space between a number of opposites: the United States and the Dominican Republic, past and present, social acceptance and rejection, official and unofficial history, reality and fantasy. Each of this conceptual spaces has its own languages and references, so to tell a story that crosses so many boundaries the narrator has to draw from a great number of sources.

A further observation can be made about Yunior's willingness to tell this story. His involvement with Oscar and his family is, after all, occasional; and yet, in the preamble to the narrative, he states that the story he is going to tell “just happens to be the one that’s got its fingers around my throat” (6). At one point, he implies that he is writing for Oscar's niece, possibly as a way to find a closure after all that's happened: “And maybe, just maybe, if she’s as smart and as brave as I’m expecting she’ll be, she’ll take all we’ve done and all we’ve

learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it" (340)). The problem is, however, that the story resists telling. The narrator has to contend with many gaps, *páginas en blanco* and "a silence that stands monument to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstruction" (253), that cover the many terrible events in the past of the family. The difficulty of reconstructing the story can be another explanation for the coexistence of so many different languages; since no single narrative approach could reach the end of the matter on its own, the narrator has to try several at once.

There is also another possible angle to approach the story, one that calls into question what Michael Rothberg calls "the prosthetic reach of [the US] empire into other worlds" (158). As we have already seen, the first frame through which we access the novel is that of the *fukú* story, an invocation of folkloric curses. But the starting point of that frame corresponds with the beginning of the colonial period in the Caribbean; this *fukú* is The Doom of the New World, "also called the *fukú* of the Admiral [Christopher Columbus] because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its great European victims" (1). Whether we take it as an actual supernatural force, or simply as a superstitious explanation for the consequences of colonialism, the "encounter with the other" seen from the point of view of the other is translated to a curse. In his reconstruction of Dominican history, Yunió does not forget to call out the historical responsibilities of the United States in support to the dictatorial regime, or to comment on American policies of intervention: "You didn't know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when you have kids they won't know the U.S. occupied Iraq either" (20, footnote 5), we are told; "Santo Domingo was Iraq before Iraq was Iraq" (4).

An in-depth analysis of the colonial dimension in *Oscar Wao* is outside the scope of my work. However, I mention this aspect to highlight how the tools of genre fiction offer an

additional strategy to access the themes of post-colonial international relationship. By casting the experience of colonialism and migration under the light of a folkloric curse (“My paternal abuelo believes that diaspora was Trujillo’s payback to the pueblo that betrayed him. Fukú” (6)), Díaz is once again using the language of folklore to complement the testimony of that experience. In keeping with the same folkloric language, however, the act of accessing that history becomes in itself a way to respond to the dynamics that put it in the margins: “Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t a zafa of sorts. My very own counter spell” (7).

In conclusion, a novel like *Oscar Wao*, so diverse in the range of languages used, offers the reader several ways to approach the history of an immigrant family and the history of a nation, in a process that tries to reconstruct those histories despite the many gaps created by personal traumas and the effects of colonial dynamics. Genres are an integral part of this process, as they create links between different cultural traditions and thus open more ways to access these histories.

CONCLUSION

The objective of my thesis was to investigate the possibilities for the category of writing known as “slipstream” to contribute in a wider range of extant conversations in literary criticism besides its most obvious, default, employment, namely, in conversations about generic boundaries and the distinction between pop and mainstream literature.

To do so, I first set out to identify some topics of critical interest in recent literary debates. My frame of reference was the essay “Open Doors, Closed Minds” by Richard Gray. The author of this essay outlines two major issues in post-9/11 American literature: the narrative engagement of trauma, with particular reference to the events of 9/11; and the encounter with otherness, an important topic in relation to the recent changes in the demographic composition of the United States. According to Gray, many works of literary fiction from the period in question failed to engage the topic of trauma. Some kind of alteration of imaginative structures would have been required to testify the event; instead, many authors retreated into familiar forms and intimate narratives. The issue of otherness was successfully engaged by authors of Asian and Latin American origin. A second essay by Michael Rothberg complements Gray's analysis by adding a further suggestion for a successful engagement of the topic of otherness – a literature of international relations that exemplifies the reach of the United States outside its borders.

With these two essays in mind, I set out to find works from the same time period that used the techniques of slipstream to engage at least one of these topics. I selected three

novels: *Specimen Days* by Michael Cunningham, *Chronic City* by Jonathan Lethem, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. The approach to the matter of genre in these novels is very different: from the juxtaposition of different generic forms in *Specimen Days*, to the subtle touches of the fantastic in *Chronic City*, to the polyphonic encounter of cultures in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In spite of these different generic choices, I hold my investigation to be fruitful, as each novel succeeds in the engagement of the central issues of post-9/11 American literature outlined by Richard Gray.

Specimen Days is structured in three novellas, each written following the conventions of a different genre: ghost stories, detective fiction, and science fiction. The use of established genres sets a familiar environment for the narrative; however, the sense of familiarity is disrupted through the use of repetition, uncontrolled expression, and misplaced generic elements, that function as the representation of symptoms of post-traumatic stress. *Specimen Days* also touches on the issue of otherness, and in particular deploys a classic science-fiction metaphor, that of the alien as immigrant; however, this issue is not engaged with the same effectiveness.

Chronic City engages trauma with the tool of cognitive dissonance. Initially, it appears to rely on the sort of familiar narrative patterns criticized in Gray's essay. The intimate narrative that seems to provide the skeleton of the book is disrupted by strange events that question the reality of the character's world. The implication is that a traumatic event – never directly invoked, but still recognizable as 9/11 – caused a failure of the previous imaginative structures, that manifests in the intrusion of fantastic elements in everyday life.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao draws from a wide variety of languages and traditions to retrace the story of a family of Dominican immigrants and the history of the Dominican Republic. The novel engages the theme of otherness by using a very distinctive

writing style, in which references to fantasy and science fiction feature prominently as a sort of veritable language, forming a pair with the use of Spanish slang and thus becoming two parallel languages of marginalized cultures. *Oscar Wao* also uses some motifs typical of magical realism, as a way to form a connection with literary and cultural traditions from South America, and to offer the reader multiple ways to access stories and histories of otherness.

While my analysis is perforce limited to a small number of examples, I believe that the selection of novels offer some suggestions for possible further avenues of exploration. First of all, as it draws from different genres, slipstream can potentially access a variety of established tropes and metaphors to address a number of topics. An example, if not an entirely successful one, would be the use of the alien expatriates as a metaphor for immigration in the last section of *Specimen Days*. Another possibility, exemplified by *Oscar Wao*, comes from the encounter of genres and literary traditions, that could be used to address different kinds of encounters and power dynamics.

These are of course very general observations; only the exploration of texts in relation to specific issues can give useful answers. But in order to do that, the critical discourse has to move past the stage of definitions.

The lack of an established terminology for what I call slipstream is a definite limit for present-day literary criticism. As I have mentioned in the preceding chapters, too often critics approaching a literary work of this kind find themselves faced with the issue of terminology. Aside from the fact that from time to time this results in some particularly unwieldy expressions, the main issue is that this impedes the creation of a web of intertextual links that could be beneficial for understanding the wider context.

I will note once again that I do not necessarily advocate the election of slipstream as the definitive label for this kind of contemporary “genre-crossing” literature. I have outlined in previous chapters the reasons that led me to choose slipstream for my thesis, in particular the longer lifespan of discussion. However, it is undeniable that in more than 25 years of history slipstream has failed to reach a universal acceptance; even the most recent scholarly publications still use the term with some circumspection.

The fact that the matter of definitions is still unsolved is limiting also for a more general approach to the matter. Most of the different threads of discussion about slipstream and its alternatives take their moves from manifestos, anthologies and author interviews, if not less formal contexts such as Internet blogs and convention panels. The corpus of texts with a theoretical approach observing slipstream is limited; I daresay that the near entirety of it is located in the pages of the often referenced journal *Science Fiction Studies*. The exploration of potentially compelling theoretical topics is left aside. For example, the idea of slipstream as the literature of cognitive dissonance has not been explored in depth outside of the few pages of the Introduction to *Feeling Very Strange*; and the similar Freudian concept of the Uncanny, that I mentioned in chapter 4, does not appear in any of the critical sources about slipstream I consulted.

In conclusion, this thread of critical conversation is still in its preliminary stages, despite the fact that slipstream has been in circulation for almost 30 years. However, it is my belief that the discourse has the potential for further interesting developments, both in a theoretical sense and in relation to the current issues of literary criticism.

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