The Art of Multiple Plotlines: A Close Examination of Three Generational Novels

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Abstract

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In order to answer the craft question of how multiple timelines and plotlines are handled within a single novel, I perform a close reading and analysis of three multi-generational novels: *Everything is Illuminated,* by Jonathan Safran Foer; *World's End,* by T.C. Boyle; and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao,* by Junot Diaz.

The Art of Multiple Plotlines: A Close Examination of Three Generational Novels

"There was no mystery in the heart of Buendia that was impenetrable for her because a century of cards and experience had taught her that the history of the family was a machine with unavoidable repetitions, a turning wheel that would have gone on spilling into eternity were it not for the progressive and irremediable wearing of the axle."

-- Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *100 Years of Solitude*

Introduction

Why write a generational novel? If a story is determined by the characters within it, why include characters from decades – or even centuries – earlier? As a writer, why would you let your story take wild leaps through time and space? Why not focus on one or two characters? On one event, even?

Why make it so complicated?

These are not the questions I began with, but they are what I came to.

I began with the question of *how*. My goal was this: I wanted to map out the way in which multiple timelines and multiple locations are dealt with within a single novel. This is a question which is important to me as a writer: for whatever reason, I am one of those people who feels compelled to write overly complicated stories, with plotlines that span centuries and characters who never stay still.

Simple enough, I told myself. My plan was to perform a close reading of a few novels with multiple generations and multiple stories, to answer this question of how plot works in such a novel. Clean. Easy. I was going to look at these novels technically, approach this as a craft issue. I thought I would examine transitions, perhaps point out the key words that these authors used to jump in time, make some witty comments about the use of blank space as a transition. Maybe I would even borrow a couple of these transition words for my own novel-in-progress, a sprawling story about a family of carousel keepers, spanning hundreds of years and thousands of miles.

Of course, in my sweeping confidence that this would be a straightforward task, I forgot one key fact: structure mirrors content. The question of *how* a novel is plotted is intimately related to *why* the story is being told. And that answer is neither clean nor easy to articulate.

I grew up in the mountains of Colorado. When I was fifteen, I spent a summer training horses in Bremen, Germany, and decided that, rather than going to college after I graduated from high school, I was going to move to Germany and take an apprenticeship training horses. At seventeen, I stopped riding and decided to go to college in Baltimore instead, despite the fact that two of my good friends did, in fact, go to Germany to do apprenticeships that year.

The next year, I transferred colleges and moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I worked as a tutor at the writing center. One day, bored at work, I told my co-worker James this story.

"You're kind of flighty, aren't you?" he asked, and I laughed, because I was insulted, and because I was afraid it might be true.

What I want to say to James now, all these years later, is self-righteous and priggish. No, I want to say, I just want to make my world as large as possible.

Of course, there are more ways to enlarge your world than geographical distance. It's easy to confuse geography with psychology, to think that physical movement will change your relationships, your life. But what's that old saying? *Wherever you go, there you are.*

Really what I meant to say, what I mean to say here, is that movement – through geography, or through time, or both, as is the case with the three novels I will discuss here – is not always flightiness.

Within a generational novel, movement means something. It is not the inability to sit still, to focus on one character, one event. It is the belief that life is made up of more than here and now. That people and events within the world are connected in ways more intimate and more disparate than you could imagine.

I want to say that understanding the world – for that is why I write, and why I read – requires more knowledge than that of a single life.

The generational novels that I will examine in this paper do not follow a unidirectional, linear conception of time. The structure of these novels is more akin to oral storytelling – beginning in the present and then leaping wildly through time and space, relying on the associative logic of memory. This is how people speak: jumping from *here* to *then* to *over there*, and then back to *here.*

(Perhaps somewhere there exist people who tell stories properly, in a linear, chronological, orderly fashion, people who begin at the beginning and end at the end. But these are not people whom I know or care to associate with.)

Though it would indeed be most logical to tell a story in this way – to begin at the beginning and end at the end (a feat I beg my composition students to strive for) – the truth is that generational novels are striving to do something different. These novels seem to speak to the idea that our present is not only informed by our past, but is in many ways a repetition of that past. The stories told in generational novels arise at the moment of the "progressive and irremediable wearing of the axle," and end only when the axle itself has broken irreparably (Garcia Marquez 364). This is the basis of plot in such novels.

In *The Art of Time in Fiction*, Joan Silber says that plot is "how a writer indicates the ways she or he thinks the world works" (6). It's the way the world fits together, the way the writer might explain our lives to us. Should the world be blown apart, this is how it should be pieced back together.

It is my belief that authors who write stories about multiple generations, and, therefore, with multiple perspectives, have a very specific view of the world, about the interconnectedness of our lives. A story with multiple perspectives elucidates the connections of real life; it lays out a network of all the ways our actions unfold into the world, the ripples they cause, the hearts they break, the lives they save, even as we are only living our lives.

When I was a senior in college, I decided to take a drawing class. My grandmother is a painter, and my father was a cartographer before he became a teacher, and I was certain that some of those artistic genes should have been passed down to me. As it turned out, I did not inherit a talent for drawing.

Our first assignment was trees. I struggled through, sweeping broad strokes across the page, erasing and re-drawing, again and again. Finally, my professor, Keiko, came over. Keiko was a tiny Japanese woman, with ink-stained hands and beautifully twisted English. To draw honestly, she told me, you have to draw what can't be seen: the connections between parts. Branches don't emerge from trees in straight lines; each branch is connected to the tree by a joint. So when you draw a branch, you have to imagine what it would look like if you cut that branch off. That joint is what gives the branch shape and direction.

Because I am, at my core, drawn to people first, because I am a relationship-driven person, and a character-driven writer, I apply this same logic to people: the only way to understand people honestly is to draw what can't be seen: the connections between people.

Content determines form. This is the answer, ultimately to both of my questions: how and why. In each of the three novels which I examine in detail here, the *how* – how they shift in time, where it happens – is determined by the content of the story. And *why* are these novels so complicated? Well, because the story demands it, of course.

The Memory of Memory (and other mysteries of *Everything is Illuminated)*

> But children had it worst of all, for although it would seem that they had fewer memories to haunt them, they still had the itch of memory as strong as the elders of the shtetl. Their strings were not even their own, but tied around them by parents and grandparents – strings not fastened to anything, but hanging loosely from the darkness.
>
> -Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated* (260)

> *But first*, Didl said, assuming the authority of a rabbi, *we must review last month's entries. We must go backward in order to go forward.*
>
> -Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated (*37)

In the movie version of *Fried Green Tomatoes,* the elderly Ninny Threadgoode begins to tell housewife Evelyn Couch the story of her sister-in-law Idgie's exploits as a young girl. She begins the story *in media res*: "I remember the day they pulled that truck up out of the river. That same rainy summer day Idgie Threadgoode was arrested for the murder of the owner of that truck." "Idgie was arrested for murder?" Evelyn asks incredulously. "Well," Ninny says, backtracking, "I guess to understand Idgie, you'd have to start way back, with her brother, Buddy."

Generational novels take a similar tack: to understand the life and happenings of the present-day characters, you'd have to go back to their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents – or perhaps even further. Memory is a subject ripe for exploration within the novel. After all, what are novels but memory enacted? Novels are, necessarily, stories told from the future, from a place *after* the events of the novel. Generational novels are no exception – in fact, these novels are almost exclusively concerned with memory, with what families remember, what they know, what they have forgotten or buried. In generational novels, these factors often

drive the action – it is not necessarily what will happen in the *future* that is the question, but what has happened in the *past*.

Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything is Illuminated* begins in 1997, and then tracks back to 1791, working to uncover a family's history. The story works with a braided narrative split between the character Jonathan Safran Foer, an American author who is writing a book about his family history; the (written) stories and histories of Jonathan's family; and Alex, the Ukrainian tour guide who takes Jonathan to the site of his grandparents' town.

The very premise of the story makes it immediately clear *why* the novel will traverse back into time: the character Jonathan Safran Foer is writing a book about history. So if what has happened in the past determines the plot, how are those past elements folded into the story? In what order do they appear, and how do moments of the past create a forward-moving plot?

To begin to answer these questions, we have to first talk about how time is dealt with within the novel. Time is complicated here: the true present of the story is Jonathan writing the book *after* the journey, in 1997 - 1998. Alex acts as our main narrator, speaking in first-person and narrating the journey in what we later discover are letters to Jonathan. Jonathan, in turn, is writing out the story of his family and sending it to Alex. We as readers see the sections as they are written and received by Alex and Jonathan, which does not necessarily work chronologically; we are watching the *book,* not the story, unfold.

It is a book about memory, about stories, about Judaism -- at its heart, this is a story about the Holocaust, about the ways in which trauma is passed down over generations, the same story told over and over, so that what remains is not just the memory of trauma, but in some ways actual trauma. This is a story that both eschews the pain of remembering and insists that we *must* remember. "The only thing more painful than being an active forgetter is to be an inert

rememberer," Jonathan Safran Foer (the character) writes (206). If the plot truly hinges on remembering, on re-telling stories (or, perhaps, re-telling truths), then this structure (the writing of a book, enacted in a book) is a mirror of that theme.

Before I dive into the question of how this kind of chronology actually works, I'd like to examine some of the ways in which the sections are differentiated from one another. There are three kinds of chapters, distinctive mainly in voice.

First, there is the family history that Jonathan is in the process of writing. These stories are the meat of the novel. Accordingly, they take up the most space: of the thirty-four chapters, seventeen are the family myths. The language of these stories is lively, the plot and characters fantastical. The stories begin as a history of Trachimbrod, the town where his great-grandparents lived during the Holocaust: "It was March 18, 1791, when Trachim B's double-axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River" (8). Right from the beginning, it is made clear that these are stories, that the writer himself has no certainty about the truth of these events.

As Stacey D'Erasmo points out in her book on writing relationships, *The Art of Intimacy,* "language [is] uniquely suited to holding open the simultaneous possibility that an event is occurring and not occurring, that this or that might happen if it were to occur . . . The *if* is a wonderful device, because it simultaneously alerts the reader that what is to follow did not happen and allows the reader to engage in the narrative as if it were happening" (D'Erasmo 14). Indeed, Safran Foer plays with this relationship between fact and fiction, and it is in the interplay between the two that we arrive at the truth. In the novel, Jonathan's journey across Ukraine with Alex and Alex's grandfather is certainly more realistic than the family histories, though if it is more real is difficult to say. The truth has a habit of sounding made up: when the three heroes

finally arrive at the location where Jonathan's family used to live, they find only one house for miles and miles. The woman living there tells them "There is no Trachimbrod anymore. It ended fifty years ago" (154). How made up this sounds. But also – how true.

The family stories are playful, inventive – they have the feeling of an archive, a museum of family history made up of the material of a fairy tale. At times, the chapters take on the forms of other documents: encyclopedias, Bible verses, books of dreams, diaries, scripts, documents "found" in Trachimbrod.

> BROD'S 613 SADNESSES
> The following encyclopedia of sadness was found on the body of Brod D. The original 613 sadnesses, written in her diary, correspond to the 613 commandments of our (not their) Torah. Shown below is what was salvageable after Brod was recovered. (Her diary's wet pages printed the sadnesses onto her body. Only a small fraction [55] were legible. The other 558 sadnesses are lost forever, and it is hoped that, without knowing what they are, no one will have to experience them.) The diary from which they came was never found.
>
> *SADNESSES OF THE BODY*: Mirror sadness; Sadness of looking like or unlike one's parents; Sadness of not knowing if your body is normal . . .
>
> (211).

Importantly, here is the written memory, the idea that language transcribed holds more power than oral storytelling. The preservation of memory relies on physical artifacts. The diary of sadnesses was never found. The sadnesses which were preserved were literally printed on Brod's body, the body dragged from the river. The rest were "lost forever."

As the family history chapters move through time toward the present, Jonathan himself shows up in these chapters of family history, writing suddenly in first person: "Because my grandfather and his bride were Slouchers, the ceremony under the chuppah was extremely short"

(141). However, Jonathan never stays present in the writing for long: he appears quickly, for a sentence at most, to remind us of his relationship to these seemingly fictional characters, before excusing himself and letting the story play out in scene. In the midst of the myth-like family stories, his is a grounding presence, a welcome reminder of who these people are and where we are in time.

The other two kinds of chapters are the same in voice, though different in structure. Both come in the voice of Alex: there are Alex's narrated sections, easily distinguishable through his garbled English: "My legal name is Alexander Perchov," he says in the very first narrated section. "But all of my many friends dub me Alex, because that is a more flaccid-to-utter version of my legal name." And then there are Alex's letters to Jonathan, which are the same in voice as his narrated sections, but take the format of a letter. In these sections we hear Jonathan most clearly, as Alex references things Jonathan has written before, keeping an ongoing conversation alive. It's a bit like listening to a one-sided telephone call.

> I toiled very hard on the next section. It was the most rigid yet. I attempted to guess some of the things you would have me alter, and I altered them myself. For example, I did not utilize the word "spleen" with such habituality, because I could perceive that it made you on nerves by the sentence in your letter when you said, "Stop using the word 'spleen.' It's getting on my nerves."
>
> (54)

It is in these letters that we begin to realize that Alex's narrated sections are not happening in real time, but are, rather, memories that he is documenting and sending to Jonathan for use in the book.

Here we come to the question of chronology, of how these three types of chapters are woven together. The sections are meticulously ordered. The letters from Alex to Jonathan (of which there are exactly eight) are written once a month, from July 1997 to January 1998.

Directly after the letter chapters come Alex's narrated chapters, leading me to believe that these are the stories Alex has transcribed and sent to Jonathan as attachments to the letters. These are, of course, a record of Jonathan's journey with Alex and his grandfather to Trachimbrod, so in actual time they cover about a week. There are also eight of these sections. The sections of the family myth – or, the myth of Trachimbrod, as it were – are a little different in chronology. Here Safran Foer plays it fast and loose with time, moving over hundreds of years in two, three pages, sometimes backwards, sometimes forwards. The sections (in order of their appearance) are as follows:

(Chapter 2) March 18, 1791
(3) 1791
(6) 1791
(7) 1791-1796
(8) 1791
(11) 1791 – 1803
(12) 1791 – 1943
(13) 1804 – 1969
(16) 1941 – 1804 – 1941
(19) 1941
(20) 1941 -1924
(21) 1934
(24) 1934 – 1941
(27) 1934 -1941
(30) 1941
(31) 1941
(32) 1941
(33) 1941 – 1791

If you look closely at these chapter timelines, you'll notice that they are also carefully ordered. For the first half of the book, the timelines of these chapters move forward in time, even if only incrementally. At Chapter 16, the literal center of the book, the timeline does a full circle, moving from 1941 – 1804 – 1941. As with the rest of the book, the movement in time here is facilitated by stories told or heard: the chapter begins in 1941, on Jonathan Safran Foer's

grandfather's wedding day. He is about to touch the Dial, a statue in town that all bridegrooms touch on their wedding day, and he feels at this moment, his place in a long line of married men: "Each [bridegroom] had been told a thousand times the story of the Dial, the tragic circumstances of its creation and the magnitude of its power" (121). With that, the chapter swoops back to 1804 to tell the story of the Dial.

Indeed, each move in time is precipitated by a story told or heard or remembered or written. As the main character is a writer, and the story takes the format of a book being written, composed through letters, this method of jumping through time makes perfect sense.

As a matter of craft, it's tricky to present so much material to a reader, to expect them to hold it all in their head. In Safran Foer's piece, this is where the playfulness of invention, and the uncertainty of reality comes in: because these stories may or may not have happened, the reader is not expected to remember every character, every detail – rather, it is the themes that the reader holds to. This alleviates some of the pressures of reading – you do not need a family tree, you do not need to intimately understand each character mentioned (and there are many). What you need to remember, what is central to the narrative, is the discoveries which are happening along the present-day journey. From the beginning of Alex, Grandfather, and Jonathan's journey, we are tasked with the question which will act as the driving force of the book: Alex and his grandfather share a hotel room, and neither can sleep. Alex says, "I knew why he could not repose. It was the same reason that I would not be able to repose. We were both regarding the same question: what did he do during the war?" (74).

The climax comes in the final third of the book, when Alex, Grandfather, and Jonathan have reached Trachimbrod. Notably, this is when the timelines of the two journeys finally converge: Grandfather relates his memories from 1941, and the family histories remain in 1941

for three consecutive chapters. The horrors of the war intertwine inseparably at this point: Grandfather reveals that he is from the town of Trachimbrod, a place that he has never before spoken of to Alex (even, as he and Alex began their journey with Jonathan, a place he did not acknowledge ever having heard of). On the eve of World War II, Grandfather allowed his best friend, a Jew, to be murdered in order to save his wife and child (Alex's father).

> I knew I had to change everything to leave everything behind and I knew that I could never allow him to learn who I was or what I did because it was for him that I did what I did it was for him that I pointed and from him that Herschel was murdered that I murdered Herschel and this is why he is how he is he is how is he because a father is always responsible for his son and I am I and I am responsible not for Herschel but for my son because I held him so much force that he cried because I loved him so much that I made love impossible . . . and Jonathan where do we go now what do we do with what we know Grandfather said I am I but this could not be true the truth is that I also pointed at Herschel and I also said he is a Jew and I will tell you that you also pointed at Herschel and you also said he is a Jew… (252)

In the next chapters (the family myth) the town of Trachimbrod is bombed, destroyed forever. Thematically, this makes perfect sense: in refusing to speak, Grandfather has erased the town completely from memory. The following chapters erase the town in physicality.

And then, there is one more kind of chapter, a kind that happens only once: the very last chapter is a letter written to Jonathan by Alex's grandfather, and translated by Alex:

Dear Jonathan,

> If you are reading this, it is because Sasha found it and translated it for you. It means that I am dead, and that Sasha is alive. (274)

This final chapter acts as an answer to the question which has been asked implicitly throughout the book: how do we live with ourselves when we have done terrible things? The answer, simply, finally, awfully: we don't. We cannot. And in this novel about memory, structured in the form of a book being written (a physical artifact, intended to preserve memory), the question could be re-phrased as such: can we bury history and survive? Can we live our lives unaffected by that which has happened in the past? No, the ending would suggest. The truth always comes out, in the end.

Simultaneous Storylines: The Ever-Present Ghosts of History

***or,* The God of Genetic Determinism**

> In the absence of God, we have science, or more specifically, biology. And the very genetic determinism I posited in *World's End* as a way of perhaps shaking off my inherited demons – and I'm talking a tendency towards drugs and alcohol here – is being proven in fact as we map out the human genome.
>
> -- T.C. Boyle, in an interview with *The Paris Review*

> Do you start out painting one woman and end up painting another? This is what happens to me. I start out being myself and end up being my mother. It isn't something I try to do. In fact, I try hard not to. That is the crucial difference: I don't want to end my life, but I can't keep myself from trying.
>
> --Amy Hempel, "Tumble Home"

"On the day he lost his right foot, Walter Van Brunt had been haunted, however haphazardly, by ghosts of the past." So begins T.C. Boyle's sprawling, rollicking, adrenaline-fueled, and drug-addled novel, *World's End.* The novel then leaps into a Proustian evocation of said ghosts as the senses draw forth the past: Walter wakes to "the smell of potato pancakes, a smell that reminded him of his mother . . . he remembered her chiefly for her eyes, which were like souls made flesh, and her potato pancakes, which were light, toothsome, and drowned in sour cream and homemade applesauce" (3). The next ghost summoned that day is Walter's grandmother, who appears as Walter unwraps his liverwurst sandwich and is transported back to a day in his childhood, sitting in the kitchen with his grandmother and listening to her tell a story of the even further back – a story of the Kitchawanks and the Mohawks, the original Native American tribes of their land in upstate New York. This sets up the pattern of the entire book, which is composed of the present, memories of the past, and stories of the further past.

The story Walter's grandmother tells him, which is summoned forth by the liverwurst, is the original story of the curse of Peterskill: the Kitchawanks are a peaceful tribe who "owe fealty to the fierce Mohawk to the north" (4). One day, the Mohawk sent to collect tribute from the Kitchawanks falls ill. He is cared for and nursed back to health by Minewa, daughter of Sachoes, the chief of the Kitchawanks. When the Mohawk recovers, he demands Minewa, saying that he "would take her to the north country and make her a queen". Sachoes relinquishes his daughter, but two weeks later, a group of Kitchawanks "come across the smoke of a cooking fire" in a clearing nearby. And what they saw – "what they saw was the Mohawk and Minewa, what was left of her. She was nothing from the waist down . . . nothing but bone" (5). The Mohawks, you see, were known for eating people.

The next ghost to appear to Walter, not two paragraphs later, is his grandfather, Harmanus Van Brunt. It is not as clear why this ghost appears – "Perhaps," Walter thinks, "it was a matter of association: once the pattern [of remembering] is established, one thing gives rise to another and the mind plays out memories like beads on a string" (5). The ghost of Harmanus arrives while Walter is at work at the factory where he does – well, something with a lathe. The memory that Harmanus evokes in Walter is that of Harmanus' death: one afternoon, while fishing together, "the old man's face went numb and the stroke folded him up like a jackknife and pitched him into the bait pen, where the mass of killifish closed over him. By the time Walter could get help, the old man had drowned" (5).

The final ghost of that day is Walter's father. This is a ghost who is always with Walter, has been since he disappeared from Walter's life when he was eight. Walter goes to the bar after work, and "he could have sworn he saw his father standing at the bar." His father seems to appear when Walter is feeling particularly guilty: he drives to the river with a girl from the bar,

thinks of his fiancé and his family at home, and his father "peered in [the car window] with that mad, tortured look he'd brought with him when he appeared out of nowhere for Walter's eleventh birthday" (9). Again, while Walter is swimming in the river, he appears – this ghost is always present, skulking in the shadows.

This first chapter, complicated as it is, sets up the rest of the novel, both thematically and structurally. The driving question of *World's End* is what has happened in the past -- what will repeat now. As in Garcia Marquez's Buendia, "the history of the family was a machine with unavoidable repetitions" (Garcia Marquez 364). Boyle's novel is rife with such repetitions: within that first chapter, everything that will repeat is set before Walter.

Indeed, the ghosts are not haphazard at all. The cabin where the Mohawk devoured Minewa turns out to be the very cabin that Walter's family, the Van Brunts inhabit when they arrive in 1663. Accordingly, it is the site of their downfall: the original Harmanus Van Brunt, patriarch of the family, goes crazy not long after the family arrives and suffers from a terrible hunger, eating everything in sight, until he has depleted the family's entire store of food. Over the years, several generations of Van Brunts will suffer from this terrible hunger, nearly destroying their family each time.

Thematically speaking, the rest of the ghosts – in fact, the rest of the first chapter – present the events which will haunt the entirety of the storyline. The heart of the story, both present and past, is the search for Walter's father, Truman Van Brunt. This is both a physical search (eventually Walter will travel to Alaska to find his lost father) and an emotional one, to uncover the family history that both made Truman who he is and made him disappear. Walter's mother, Christina, the first ghost to appear that day, "[died] of sorrow after the Peterskill riots of 1949," the very riots that drove Truman to disappearance.

The riots themselves are thematically important – they take place in the open land behind where the Van Brunts first settled, and are a clash between the "hippie Communists" (of whom Walter's family is a part) and the "patriots" (of whom the Van Wart family, originally the ruling land-owning family, are a part). This clash is repeated from the very beginning – in 1663, the Van Wart family acts as patron of the land, and the Van Brunts must pay a tax. When the original Harmanus Van Brunt goes on his hunger rampage, the family is left with nothing to pay. The next three hundred years are a continual struggle for both money and power between the Van Brunts and the Van Warts.

Even Walter's employment – unbeknownst to him at the time – is a repetition of this struggle. The factory where he works (doing something with a lathe), where he sees the ghost of his grandfather, is owned by the Van Warts. Later, Walter will work directly with Depeyster Van Wart, taking him as a sort of father figure. This is the very Van Wart responsible for the brutality of the riots of 1949, which, you may remember, drove Walter's father away and effectively killed his mother.

The ghost of Walter's grandfather, Harmanus, appears again throughout the story, but it is the nature of his death that is important here. Walter calls to mind the memory of Harmanus drowning in the river before his eyes. Later, in the penultimate scene of the book, Walter will intentionally cut the anchor lines of a boat full of "hippie Communists" (including his wife, Jessica, and his good friend, Tom Crane) and set the boat adrift on the river in the midst of a storm. Of course, fate catches up to Walter here: as he is running away from this scene, he falls and is buried in snow, where he dies: a kind of drowning in itself.

So how does all of this action get told? This novel runs two storylines simultaneously. One timeline begins in the present-day, the other begins three hundred years prior, in 1663, and the timelines alternate each chapter. Both timelines – that of the present and that of the past – move forward chronologically. Though Safran Foer's chapters are clearly differentiated in both style and title, Boyle's sections are neither marked by dates, nor do they employ different voices. The narrator (third-person omniscient) remains the same. The family names are repeated over generations. One of the only ways to distinguish between history and present (beyond flipping to the front of the book to figure out who these characters are and where they are in time) is Boyle's use of language. In the historical sections, there is Dutch: *patroon, schout.* Occasionally Boyle will throw dates into the narration. Otherwise, not much changes between sections.

Plot-wise, this can make for a frustrating read – I found myself continually flipping to the list of characters conveniently located on the front page, trying to remember how all these people fit together. Indeed, when I began to attempt to map out the plot of *World's End,* I found that it does not follow a traditional story arc: cause and effect are much more loosely linked. This is an episodic novel, and in some ways Boyle's novel is carried (and perhaps saved) by the vibrancy of his language, the energy of his voice.

Some of my confusion here emerged from the sheer amount of characters that Boyle places on the page. The novel covers three hundred years, following five selected generations of four families. If it is any indication of the sprawling nature of the text, there are sixty-one *principal* characters listed at the start of the book – which, I might add, is around 450 pages long. As a matter of craft, that is an inordinate number of characters to wrangle in a relatively small amount of space.

Because it is an episodic novel, one filled with dozens and dozens of little adventures, it slowly became clear to me that to understand how plot is functioning within this book, I needed to look at what stays the same, across all of the episodes. The landscape does not change – and perhaps this is Boyle's saving grace. Amidst all of the hubbub of switching timelines and countless characters (or, to be more precise, more than sixty-one principal characters), the land remains exactly the same, in both image and event. Joan Silber, discussing *100 Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, says, "It's clear enough that repetition is a way of anchoring an ornate narrative, of suggesting a grid of order within an overspill of invention" (76). This same is true of Boyle: the landscape remains virtually unchanged over those three hundred years. Important events continue to happen at the same places: the cabin in the woods (which belongs first to the Kitchawanks, then to the Van Brunts, then to the Cranes) is the site of continual struggles between the Van Warts (the *patroon*, the land-owning family) and whoever is living there at the time.

Likewise, the field beneath the cabin, which was first Kitchawank land, and then farmland, leads over and over again to the Van Brunts' destruction, first as they lose all their crops, then again as the site of the 1949 riots, and then again, as the location of Walter's ill-fated wedding to Jessica, who he will cheat on with a daughter of the Van Warts, and ultimately attempt to destroy when he cuts loose the boat in that penultimate scene.

The physical locations hold immense importance for the characters. The land calls to mind unknown and unknowable histories which are somehow embedded deep within the characters. Perhaps this is most directly exemplified in Depeyster Van Wart (the present-day ruling Van Wart), who is in the habit of eating cellar dust from the Van Wart manor as a way of calming himself.

> His hands were trembling as he reached into his breast pocket for the envelope of cellar dust, dipped a wet finger in it and rubbed the fine ancient dirt over his front teeth and gums as if it were a drug. He prodded it with the tip of his tongue, rolled it luxuriously against his palate, worked it over his molars and ground it between his teeth. He closed his eyes and tasted his boyhood, tasted his father, his mother, tasted security. He was a boy, hidden in the cool, forgiving depths of the cellar, and the cellar was the soul of him, avatar of Van Warts past and Van Warts to come, and he felt its peace wash over him till he forgot the world existed beyond it (450).

The land is not the only thing that remains the same. The characters are also repetitions of one another. In the late 1600's, Jeremias Van Brunt loses his foot in nearly the same location as Walter does, three hundred years later. Wouter Van Brunt, son of Jeremias, betrays his friend Cadwallader Crane, sentencing him to death by hanging. Three hundred years later, Walter sets his friend Tom Crane adrift in a boat in a snowstorm. The Van Warts battle, year after year, for power over the Van Brunts. Each generation of Van Brunts and Van Warts carries out the same fight, until, finally, they have both been all but destroyed. "No use fighting it," Walter's father tells him. "It's in the blood, Walter. It's in the bones" (424).

Associative Timelines

About a year ago, I went to hear Pam Houston read. When it was time for the audience to ask questions, an older gentleman stood up in the back. "I've noticed that you never follow a linear timeline in your stories," he said. "Why is that?"

"Well," Houston said, "I guess it's because I don't believe in linear time. I've never remembered things in that way – I'll be sitting in a café in Taos and suddenly I'll be struck with a memory of being in a café in Minneapolis, ten years earlier."

Of the three authors discussed here, Junot Diaz is perhaps the least structured in terms of chronology. Instead, he works with an associative timeline in his novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.*

The novel opens with this sentence:

> They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, fukú – generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World.

Everything in the story is wrapped up there: curses, history, the course this novel will take.

So in a story this large, with so many little stories wrapped up in it, how does Diaz arrange the stories? How does he transfer from one time period to the next? After the prologue, which paints the world with a wide brush, opening up the entire world of the curse, the novel itself begins much more narrowly: with Oscar, the title character, in New Jersey. The first section tracks Oscar's childhood, his successes and (more often) his failures with romantic love.

We then move to Lola, which makes sense thematically, though it's a jarring transition. The voice shifts, and where before "I" was Junior, "I" now becomes Lola. This section moves geographically, taking Lola to the Dominican Republic. Here again, we see the associative nature of memory: when Lola is in the Dominican Republic, the geography itself prompts another shift in time. The story moves back in the past to follow Lola and Oscar's mother, Beli, as a teenager in the DR.

Thematically, the big events of the family cleave together. Oscar's driving passion in life, the thing he has always wanted but can never get, is romantic love. The other major theme, of course, is the various dictatorships of the Dominican Republic. Diaz works with this. Every major event of each family member revolves around romantic love and its intersection with DR government. The "original Fall" of the Cabral family comes when Abelard Cabral (Oscar's grandfather) refuses to bring his beautiful daughter Jacquelyn to the dictator Trujillo's party, as Trujillo notoriously seduces all the young women on the island with impunity – in fact, "in this climate, hoarding your women was tantamount to treason; offenders who didn't cough up the muchachas could easily find themselves enjoying the invigorating charm of an eight-shark bath" (219).

This, of course, brings us to the question of what the central point of the novel is, the climax, as it were. And here it gets a little trickier. For me, there are, in fact, two climaxes. First, at almost the exact middle of the book, is Beli's near-death in the cane field and her subsequent encounter with the Mongoose.

> So as Beli was flitting in and out of life, there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt. This one was quite large for its species and placed its intelligent little paws on her chest and stared down at her.

You have to rise.

(149)

The creature begins to sing and Beli follows the song out of the cane field, stumbling out to the road, beaten and broken. She is miraculously picked up by a passing truck and returned home.

Later in the book, much later, in fact (only 30 pages before the end), the climax of Oscar's story arrives in much the same form: he is driven out to the cane fields by two government goons, where he is beaten nearly to death and left to die. Through some miracle, his family's driver finds him in the cane:

> "He [the driver] didn't have a flashlight and after almost a half an hour of stomping around in the dark he was about to abandon the search until morning. And then he heard someone *singing*. . . He headed toward the source full speed, and then, just as he was about to part the last stalks a tremendous wind ripped through the cane, nearly blew him off his feet, like the first slap of a hurricane, like the blast an angel might lay down on takeoff, and then, just as quickly as it had kicked up it was gone, leaving behind only the smell of burned cinnamon, and there just behind a couple stalks of cane lay Oscar" (299).

Though it is not Beli's story, it is not necessarily Oscar's either, despite the fact that he is the titular character. No, it is the Cabral family's story. The family is the true center of the novel, and so it makes sense that the climax is repeated twice, in two generations. Beli is nearly beaten to death in the cane field by government goons because of her love affair with an already married government man. Oscar is beaten in the cane field by government goons because of his love affair with the girlfriend of an officer. Beli's beating, the first climax of the book, does not merely foreshadow Oscar's downfall, but, in fact, mirrors it. Here we have Garcia Marquez's

turning wheel. But, unlike Beli who flees the Dominican Republic and her lover and does not return to either, Oscar returns. He goes back to the Dominican Republic, back to see the girlfriend of the officer, the reason for his almost-death – and here is the snap of the wheel's axle – he is found once again by the officer and shot to death.

Of course, Diaz does not wrap up the story neatly here. He could easily have claimed that Oscar's death had broken the curse, given into the logic of fairy tales and claimed it was all over. He does no such thing. The book ends with the birth of Lola's daughter (Oscar's would-have-been niece). The narrator imagines that perhaps one day this daughter will break the curse of the family – but then he doubles back on this dream, quoting from the graphic novel *Watchmen: "*In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends."

The narrator, Junior, is, fittingly, an on-again, off-again lover of Lola's, which seems apt given the subject matter. He is an outsider, a would-have-been member of the Cabral family, a could-have-been father of Lola's daughter, "if I'd been smart, if I'd been –" (329). Similar to Nick in *The Great Gatsby,* Junior stands connected to all of the characters, with a stake in their lives, but still far enough apart that he can tell all of the stories.

With these jumps, Diaz tells the story of geography, the story which cannot be contained inside a single person, a single place, even a single generation. He tells a story that runs rollicking across the world, across time, leaping easily and heartbreakingly over all the borders we were so sure existed. Here is Diaz's version of the world: uncontainable, connected in ways you could never imagine, in ways we can only marvel at.

Perhaps his leaps across time and space are meant to unsettle, to evoke the life of the unsettled immigrant American and their similarly unsettled children. To be American is to leap

between identities, to constantly feel pulled in multiple directions. We are, all of us, the children of immigrants.

Conclusion

Most coincidents are not
miraculous, but way more
common than we think –
it's the shiver
of noticing being
central in a sequence
of events
that makes so much
seem wild and rare –
because what if it wasn't?
Astonishment's nothing
without your consent.

-- Lia Purpura, "Probability"

I initially began this essay with the question of how to create a readable, understandable novel with multiple timelines, locations, and plotlines. What I have come to, in the end, is that it's overwhelming to have too many things different. So if you move rapidly through time, as Boyle does, or through both space and time, as Safran Foer and Diaz do, some things need to remain the same. Therefore: the cyclical nature of these family sagas. The same things happening over and over again – the authentic déjà vu – not just for the characters, but for the reader too. Craft-wise, if there is too much changing, no meaning can ever be made, by either reader or writer. It is in the repetition, the continued examination of the same events, that

meaning is made. This is the trick of literature, no? These repeated events are leitmotifs, the same image in different contexts, each time meaning something slightly different.

The repetition within these three generational novels – and within my own novel-in-progress –does not act as a sort of moralizing force. This repetition does not represent the idea that is bandied about in high school classrooms, that if we do not learn from our history than we are doomed to repeat it. No – it's something else.

In the process of writing this essay, I have also been working on my own novel. Imagine my surprise when one of my characters – the Keeper of Memories and Forgetting, a mythical creature both human and not – began to speak to this idea. Of course we repeat history, she said. Human history – at both the familial and the global level – is nothing but repetition, the same battles played out, on the small stage and the large stage alike, over and over again. The value of learning our history is not so that we do not repeat it, it is so that the world does not seem so meaningless. To understand that things have happened before, that injustice has been wrought, that power struggles have been fought over and over again, is to understand our place in the order of things. We are seeking to make meaning, to draw order out of a chaotic world. In many ways, re-telling history is the same as the impulse toward religion. Surely there must be a plan. Surely there is some order here. Some purpose. Religion puts a God in charge, a higher power that imbues the world with meaning. History–tellers do the same thing: they put a myth in charge, an overarching narrative that explains our lives.

I do not personally feel so impassioned as this, nor so sure. I am, after all, the great-granddaughter of Polish immigrants who passed on no language, no customs, no photos brought from Poland, so that their children might be *American,* and as an American I cling fiercely to the idea that individuals can create change. But there is some truth in the words of the Keeper of

Memories and Forgetting. At a personal level, we do repeat relationships, re-live traumas, both large and small. The world does move in patterns. Life, like literature, has leitmotifs, the same image repeating again and again, each time with a slightly different meaning.

Of course, I also asked *why* – why these stories needed to move so much through time and space. In the case of these three novels, the questions of how and why are inextricably connected. Both movement and repetition are essential to meaning: in Diaz, there is the family curse repeated again and again, in Boyle, the uprisal of history in the present, in Safran Foer, the importance of keeping the truth alive, across centuries, across continents. As I wanted (want) to inform that old co-worker of mine: movement does not always create chaos. Sometimes it serves as a unifying force, demonstrates what stays the same – what is essential – even in the face of changing time and locale.

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