

Enacting History:
Transnational Literary Historiography in the Neoliberal Age

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	1
2. “A More Creative Approach” to History: The Emergence of Transnational Literary Historiography in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid.....	19
3. The Fictional Travelogue in Transnational Literary Historiography: Michelle Cliff’s <i>No Telephone to Heaven</i>	59
4. Transnational Literary Historiographic Memoir: Edwidge Danticat’s <i>Brother, I’m Dying</i>	85
5. Transnational Historiographic Metafiction: Sandra Cisneros’s <i>Caramelo</i> and Junot Díaz’s <i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i>	113
I. The Historical Dynamic in Transnational Historiographic Metafiction.....	113
II. <i>Caramelo</i> : The Emergence of Transnational Historiographic Metafiction.....	124
III. <i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i> : The Realization of Transnational Historiographic Metafiction.....	132
IV. Transnational Historiographic Metafiction and Universal History.....	144
Cited Literature.....	150
Curriculum Vitae.....	158

Summary

This dissertation argues for transnational literary historiography, a new genre of literature that develops out of postcolonial literature in the mid-1980s. This new genre emerges following the significant shifts in global capitalism toward neoliberal economic policies that occurred in the latter part of the twentieth century, resulting in what we today call globalization. Works of transnational literary historiography critically examine how history has been written as well as artfully rewrite history in relationship to the lives of the actors in their narratives, blurring the lines between fictional and nonfictional literary genres.

In this project I focus on texts that move between the US and Latin America and the Caribbean, respectively. I begin by tracing the emergence of transnational literary historiography through a study of Jamaica Kincaid's body of work. I then examine three subgenres of transnational literary historiography—the fictional travelogue, transnational literary historiographic memoir, and transnational historiographic metafiction—via readings of Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*; Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying*; Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*; and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. While these subgenres each feature uniquely crafted historical narratives, they share a number of primary genre conventions, including polyvocal narration, the incorporation of autobiographical elements from the authors' lives into the narratives, a focus on the interconnectedness of the actors' personal experiences and larger historical situations, and a constellated narrative style that connects seemingly disparate historical moments, often reaching back to the origins of global capitalism in the long fifteenth century.

Ultimately I argue that these conventions constitute a new genre of literature—separate from the postcolonial, transnational, and postmodern genres in which these texts are generally categorized—that is a politicized aesthetic response to neoliberalism.

Chapter One: Introduction

[I]mportant historical transitions alter the way people write, because they alter people's experiences and the way people imagine, feel and think about the world they live in. The shifts in writing, then, will tell you something about the nature of the changes. Such shifts in writing, if they are historically profound, affect more than one genre.

—Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* 4

Where did history go, I asked myself, if it could not be retold?

—Cristina García, *Monkey Hunting* 144

This project takes as its focus transnational¹ literary historiography in the American context from 1988-2007. I investigate the convergences between fictional and non-fictional genres of transnational literature—including memoir, travelogue, and the novel—in terms of their engagement with history both at the level of family/community and nation. All of the texts I explore, whether they present themselves as fiction or nonfiction, perform what I term “transnational literary historiography,”² by which I mean that they critically examine how history

¹ I use the term *transnational* following Inderpal Grewal's concept of the flow of “cultural, political, and economic practices” through “transnational networks” that shape discourses and ideologies in home and host nations (*Transnational America* 8) and Aiwah Ong's claim that a theory of transnationality works in opposition to the often homogenizing tendencies of postcolonial studies, examining “situated cultural practices” which recognize significant historical, cultural, social, political, and economic differences as well as current economic imperialism functioning around the world (17).

² When I embarked on this project in 2009, I found one reference to transnational literary historiography in Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer's *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries, Volume I*. In May 2014, The Centre for the Study of Text and Print Culture and the Association Research Group “Literature and Translation” at Ghent University held a conference entitled “Mediating Translation in Europe from the Early Modern Period to the 20th Century: Translation Studies and Transnational Literary Historiography.” However, both uses of the phrase transnational literary historiography refer to the transnational historiography *of* literature, rather than to a genre of literature that is both transnational and historiographic, as I do in this project.

has been written as well as artfully rewrite history in relationship to the lives of the actors¹ in their narratives. In other words, it is not simply my readings of these texts that are historicist but rather that the texts themselves are concerned with the historicity of their narratives.

This new genre I call transnational literary historiography emerges as a response to the significant shifts that occurred in global capitalism in the latter part of the twentieth century. The period in which the texts I examine were published, 1988 to 2007, follows a significant shift toward neoliberal economic policies that resulted in what we today call globalization. While neoliberalism develops in the 1970s from post-World War II liberalism, both liberalism and neoliberalism are technologies of capitalism instituted during periods of crisis, and, through them, capitalism is able to reinvent itself in order to remain hegemonic. The period I demarcate in this project begins, as I will explain more fully below, immediately following the radical reorganization of global economic relationships, and culminates during the unfolding of the current global financial crisis. Thus the literature I explore in my dissertation is a response to an economic shift in a larger system that has been operating globally since the late fifteenth century.² As David Harvey notes in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, in 1982 the “[International Monetary Fund] IMF and World Bank were designated as the central authority for exercising the collective power of capitalist nation states

¹ Although many of the texts I engage with in this project are autobiographical or incorporate historical figures in fictional narratives, I use the term *actor* to refer to any person within a text, whether fictional or not.

² Immanuel Wallerstein and other world-systems theorists mark the long sixteenth century as the beginning of global capitalism. Wallerstein’s work is significant to this project in that it is premised on the claim that “[i]f we look at globalization and terrorism as phenomena that are defined in limited time and scope, we tend to arrive at conclusions that are as ephemeral as the newspapers. By and large, we are not then able to understand the meaning of these phenomena, their origins, their trajectory, and most importantly where they fit in the larger scheme of things. *We tend to ignore their history*” (my emphasis ix).

over international financial negotiations” as a part of “a struggle to win back for the collectivity of capitalist states some of the power they have individually lost” (170). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri remind us that the IMF and World Bank takeover was essentially an assertion of US hegemony in global capitalist relations, as the US was the largest investor and thus highly influential in these institutions that have “one dollar, one vote” systems, even though member nations are not the only controlling parties in the institutions (172). Closely following this political economic shift, we can observe not only an increase in the publication of literature that moves between various national spaces but also a formal change in the literature itself. In 1983, Jamaica Kincaid published her first book, a collection of short stories titled *At the Bottom of the River*, which depicts the lives of Antiguan after formal British colonialism has ended. Most of Kincaid’s subsequent works—perhaps most notably her 1988 travelogue *A Small Place*¹—chronicle both formal colonialism and current economic imperialism in Antigua. Kincaid’s texts and the others I will explore demand that colonialism not be so easily bracketed off in time by the term “postcolonialism” and they do so by connecting the legacy of the colonial period to the continued influence of foreign powers—most significantly the US—under neoliberal economic policy.

In this project I seek to answer a number of questions, the first of which is perhaps the most important: Why have so many texts that perform transnational literary historiography appeared in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries? Other significant questions include: How have the shifts in the logic of capitalism, or more specifically neoliberalism, that occurred in the early 1980s and continue at present, been accompanied by shifts in transnational

¹ *Life and Debt*, Stephanie Black’s 2001 documentary about the effects of neoliberal economic policies on Jamaica and its people, employs *A Small Place* as the narrative frame for the film, which Kincaid narrates.

literature, especially at the level of form? Why is transnational literary historiography not exclusive to fiction but also common in non-fictional genres such as travelogue and memoir? How does the blurring of genre boundaries in fictional texts—particularly in terms of the incorporation of autobiographical elements from the authors’ lives into narratives that present themselves as fiction—affect the way we read these texts? While the boundary between fact and fiction has always been tenuous in the novel genre, how is this tenuousness exacerbated in transnational literary historiography? How does placing individual or small communities of actors in larger historical situations affect our understanding of the events of the past? Why is polyvocal narration—especially in texts with a primary authorial narrator—so prevalent in transnational literary historiography? And finally, what do these texts have to say about the period of their publication and its relationship to historical events too often relegated to the realm of history?

The 1980s, and even more profoundly, 1990s and 2000s saw a marked increase of transnational narratives in a variety of literary genres that chronicle both migration necessitated by the uneven distribution of capital globally and the effects of structural adjustment economic policies on those living in countries whose economies are controlled by foreign interests via the IMF and World Bank. I see as significant the close historical connection between the World Bank and IMF’s increased power and the surge in texts that present accounts of immigration to the US by citizens of formerly colonized nations affected by present-day neoliberal economic imperialism. What I consider in the following chapters is specifically *transnational* writing—texts that take as their subject the experience of transmigration between the US and Latin America and the Caribbean, respectively, during the neoliberal period. These literary texts respond to the free market mandates of neoliberalism that open national borders for the

circulation of capital but seek to restrict the movement of people. As this project is transnational in focus, I explore the experiences of transmigration as a dynamic, rather than unidirectional and terminal, conduit that impacts culture in both the US and the transmigrants' "home countries."¹

The literary texts I characterize as works of transnational literary historiography are transnational in that the narratives move between geographic spaces, although the actors themselves are not all geographically mobile. Additionally, both my use of the term transnational and the texts I consider to perform transnational literary historiography emphasize the "national" in the term transnational as much as the "trans." Transnational literary historiographies engage with the nation as a powerful influencing force at home and abroad both historically and at present. However, the transnational circulation of people, ideas, and goods under global capital affects all of the actors in these texts, regardless of their mobility or immobility. These texts are concerned with the way capitalism has always been a global system, although its logic has necessarily shifted in order to sustain itself.² The interconnectedness of personal/family and national histories in these texts is immediately apparent in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Díaz's novel is replete with historical footnotes, written by the authorial narrator Yunior, that continuously interrupt the narration yet are essential to the narrative itself. The first of these footnotes, which comes on the second page of the novel, begins, "For those of you who

¹ I employ Basch, et al.'s term transmigrant rather than immigrant or migrant to refer to those who migrate between geographic locales. Basch, et al. developed this term to emphasize the "multiplicity of involvements" sustained by transnational subject in their "home and host societies" (7). I also use the terms *home* and *host* societies and cultures following Basch, et al.

² In "The Real Subsumption of Labour Under Capital" in *Capital, Volume I*, Marx writes, "With the real subsumption of labor under capital a complete (and constantly repeated) revolution takes place in the mode of production, in the productivity of the workers and in the relations between workers and capitalists" (1035). As the editor notes, this is an extension of Marx and Engel's argument in *The Communist Manifesto*, in which they also declare, "The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere" (83).

missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality." This seminal footnote emphasizes the privileging of certain national histories over others in a way that obscures the fundamental connection of these histories, and it answers Édouard Glissant's call to "struggle against a single History for the cross-fertilization of histories" (93).¹ Throughout the novel, Díaz's footnotes pay particular attention to the two US occupations of the Dominican Republic in the twentieth century as well as to the US's support of the Trujillo regime. But history is not relegated to the footnotes of Díaz's novel: later in the text we encounter Trujillo as an actor who significantly impacts the family history of the titular character. Formal elements like the footnotes in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and the setting of the majority of the texts in multiple historical periods and geographic locales, I argue, are all literary responses to shifts in the logic of capitalism. All of the texts I examine in my project engage history in significant ways and, in so doing, disrupt both national and *nationalist* histories by weaving these histories not only with each other but also with the individual and familial histories of the actors.

Transnational literary historiography tends to be rooted in the domestic as it connects to the national. The theme of the inseparability of national history and individual/family/community history and its proliferation across genres of transnational literature suggests that this mode of imagining history as always plural and relational (especially the interrelatedness of different national histories, whether through formal colonization, military occupation, or economic

¹ In his essay "The Known, the Uncertain" in *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant refers to Western history as "History [with a capital H]" and describes it as "a highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone 'made' the history of the World" (64).

imperialism) has larger significance in terms of social discourse.¹ These texts enact the theory of polyculturalism, a response and alternative to multiculturalism, originated by Robin Kelley and expanded by Vijay Prashad: “[M]ulticulturalism tends toward a static view of history, with cultures already forged and with people enjoined to respect and tolerate each cultural world. Polyculturalism, on the other hand, offers a dynamic view of history, mainly because it argues for cultural complexity” (Prashad 66). In eschewing the notion of pure ethnocultural identities that multiculturalism “celebrates,” polyculturalism—and texts that follow the parameters of this theory—works against a static and unsullied notion of culture. These texts necessarily span history, whether in setting or consciousness, in order to trace not only family sagas but also the development of culture through contact.² Transnational literary historiography highlights the tenuousness of multiculturalism as the foundation of the US nation-state as well as foregrounds racialized histories of colonialism and economic imperialism elided from “official” historical discourse in the US. Jodi Melamed employs the term “neoliberal multiculturalism” to describe the current phase of US economic imperialism. For Melamed, neoliberal multiculturalism “sutures official antiracism to state policy in a manner that hinders the calling into question of global capitalism” (14). This US policy of antiracism, according to Melamed, masks the ways in which neoliberalism is predicated on racism, albeit racism based on cultural deviance rather than

¹ Florence Ramond Journey has coined the term “postcolonial (hi)stories” to characterize “narratives that blend colonial history, postcolonial realities and personal stories” (1). While works of transnational literary historiography approach history similarly, their emphasis on transnational migration is a crucial difference from what Journey outlines in her project. Journey focuses her attention on representations of “the island” in the postcolonial hi(stories) she examines (2)—Kincaid’s *A Small Place* and Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*—while I argue that the attention to and movement between multiple geographic spaces is a defining characteristic of transnational literary historiography.

² Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan maintain that any study of cultural difference must necessarily include “a consideration of power, history, and analyses of contact and change” (667).

phenotypic difference (17). The texts I characterize as transnational literary historiographies expose the ways in which such cultural “deviance”—diversion from the sanctioned, supposedly homogenous individual cultures that combine to form the “mosaic” that is official US culture—is connected to those spaces currently under US neoimperial control.

My conception of transnational literary historiography relies on Lisa Lowe’s work on Asian American cultural production. Lowe claims,

Where the political terrain can neither resolve nor suppress inequality, it erupts in culture. Because culture is the contemporary repository of memory, of history, it is through culture, rather than government, that alternative forms of subjectivity, collectivity, and public life are imagined. This is not to argue that cultural struggle can ever be the exclusive site for practice; it is rather to argue that if the state suppresses dissent by governing subjects through rights, citizenship, and political representation, it is only through culture that we conceive and enact new subjects and practices in antagonism to the regulatory *locus* of the citizen-subject, by way of culture that we can question those modes of government. (22)

If history has often been an “official” regulating discourse, then by moving history into the realm of the cultural—of literature—history becomes a field open to interpretation, criticism, and reimagining. The transnational literary texts I examine engage history in order to bring it out of the realm of the official and the meta and enact it on the level of the individual and community. Thus history in these texts is rooted in experience, rather than appearing to emanate from somewhere outside of the actors.¹ History is also recuperated in these texts in their demand to

¹ As Chandra Talpade Mohanty notes, “Franz Fanon [in *The Wretched of the Earth*] argues that the success of decolonization lies in a ‘whole social structure being changed from the bottom up’; that this change is ‘willed, called for, demanded’ by the colonized” (7).

uncover the unknown. We see this in actors such as Chen Fang in Cristina García's *Monkey Hunting*, which, although I do not engage with it in depth in this project, also belongs to the genre of transnational literary historiography. Chen Fang is imprisoned by the Communist government in Shanghai in 1970, and we have no evidence of *how* it is that we are hearing her story. Transnational literary historiography is not a technology of governmentality in the Foucauldian sense, but rather a counterdiscourse for rethinking the present that addresses elisions and amnesias in the Western historical discourse by foregrounding transnational historical connections rather than individual national histories.

This is not to argue, as Carole Boyce Davies does of black women's writing, that these texts "eschew colonial borders, systems, separations, ideologies, structures of domination" (108).¹ Rather than creating a space outside of hegemony, the transnational literature I consider in my dissertation is counterhegemonic in its active engagement with the borders, systems, separations, ideologies, and structures of domination that are shaping forces in transmigrants' lives. Significantly, these texts expose the borders that neoliberal discourse purports no longer exist in a globalized world, exposing the continued power of the nation-state. However, as the logic of capitalism has shifted under neoliberalism, so has the functioning of the nation-state. Inderpal Grewal writes of the changing power of the nation-state under globalization, complicating the claim often made by theorists of globalization that the nation-

¹ Davies is, however, an early critic of postcolonial theorists' focus on the past while ignoring current colonizing forces: "[T]he intellectuals who stay behind the 'posts' reveal an unwillingness to look at these new movements for social change and their specific naming of imperialism. We are clearly operating within hegemonic US imperialist time which imposes its agenda as synonymous with world time. Resisting colonialities, in this context, means resisting dominations of discourse and a parallel advancing of anti-imperialist discourses" (108). Her attention to the role of time in counternarratives of globalization is useful to my theory of the necessary inseparability of the history of nation-states from other national histories.

state is “no longer as relevant as it once was”: “Transnational capital has helped to resuscitate some nation-states while simultaneously reducing the power of others. In addition, nationalism, in its cultural, ethnic, religious, and nation-state manifestations, can neither be ignored nor seen as the localized form of resistance to the global; the local itself is also refigured within these processes” (80). In their oscillation between the US and “Third World” nations, transnational literary historiographies address the problematics of the nation-state and nationalism both in the late twentieth century as well as in earlier historical periods in order to make apparent the differences in the functioning of the nation-state under the various guises of capitalism.¹

This turn to history that is so prevalent in transnational literature in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries seems to point to a need to historicize the neocolonialisms occurring in what Fredric Jameson has famously termed late capitalism. The historiography performed in these texts is neither simply a looking back nor a claim that the present is merely a continuation of the past. Rather, it provides us with a way of rethinking our present moment as not simply a historical eventuality in the sense of linear progress. Certainly transnational migration has changed both quantitatively and qualitatively in recent decades in relationship to the growth and spread of technologies of communication and labor. However, these texts remind us that people have always moved or been moved around the globe. The national cultures that combine to form American culture, currently viewed by proponents of multiculturalism as homogenous and separate, are revealed in these texts as precisely developed—and developing—through contact with other cultures. This is one of the central concerns of *Monkey Hunting*, which follows

¹ For example, Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo* address these shifts by extending their narratives backwards from the late twentieth century to include the reign of Trujillo (following the US’s 1916-1924 occupation of the Dominican Republic) and the Mexican Revolution, respectively.

members of several generations of a Chinese Cuban family, one of whom, Domingo, will eventually settle in the US in the 1960s, enlist in the Army, and impregnate a woman he meets while serving in Vietnam. Significantly, the narrative does not depict the birth of Domingo's child, nor does it confirm the baby's sex. The reader only knows that a child has been born from the family tree included at the beginning of the story. By linking Domingo's name to his lover's with the abbreviation "w/", the tree indicates that a child is born of their relationship. This elision of the child's birth from the narrative leaves the reader with only questions; the answers to these questions are found in our and Domingo's knowledge of the fate of children born to American fathers and Vietnamese mothers during the Vietnam War—a significant instance of US neocolonial intervention. All of the texts I include in my dissertation incorporate such instances into the narratives not only as historical markers but more importantly as determining factors in the actors'—and often their progeny's—lives.

The fictional texts I characterize as transnational literary historiographies differ from historical novels as Georg Lukács defines the genre. For Lukács, the historical novel—epitomized by the works of Sir Walter Scott—is “an artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch” (19). Transnational literary historiographies are inherently transhistorical, and commitment to historical accuracy in the texts varies. This is not to say that the historical situations presented in the transnational texts I examine are entirely speculative or fantastical, although some transnational literature certainly is. Anachronism and the fantastical occur in some, but not all, of these texts. The historical situations we enter into in transnational literary historiographies are not simply a “rewriting” of history from a subaltern—to borrow a term from Spivak—perspective, but rather these instances are strategically chosen to give us perspective on the moment of the texts' inscriptions and how we have arrived at our present historical moment

and condition. At the same time as these texts write history, they constantly question the project of history as universal. Unreliability abounds in these texts. Jessica Hagedorn's novel *Dogeaters* epitomizes this unreliability and, through it, the claim that there are as many stories as there are actors, in Pucha's letter to her cousin Rio, the authorial narrator, at the end of the text. Pucha's claim that Rio has misrepresented their lives and confused the years in which significant events took place points to the subjectivity of any narrative, whether it be historical or literary—or both (248-249). Unlike transnational historical fiction, such as Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* or Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*, transnational literary historiography is less interested in narrativizing particular historical periods or events than it is in making connections between historical periods and events in the time(s) of the texts as well as in the historical moments of the texts' publication.

In my examination of transnational literary historiographies, I would like to extend Grewal's useful construct of “‘transnational connectivities’ within which subjects, technologies, and ethical practices were created through transnational networks and connections of different types and within which the ‘global’ and the ‘universal’ were created as linked and dominant concepts” (3) more broadly across time. In *Transnational America*, Grewal's focus on the production of racialized and classed subjectivities in the 1990s is largely spatial, but, as the texts I explore demonstrate, these networks are transhistorical at the same time as they are transnational. Grewal's work is extremely important in theorizing the flows of people, ideas, and things *back and forth* between spaces that have accompanied global capital under neoliberalism. However, while I recognize that these flows have an immediacy resulting from the compression of time and space theorized by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, I argue that much of transnational literature produced by and producing, as Grewal rightfully contends, these

current circulations of knowledges, is turning its eye to history—the history of conquest and capital—in order to contextualize our present moment. The temporalities in transnational literary historiographies then extend Harvey’s notion of time-space compression across historical periods and constellate events, disrupting notions of continuation or linearity while emphasizing connection.¹

I pay primary attention in this project to why literature has become such a prominent medium for performing transnational historiography. Transnational literary historiography can certainly be viewed as a problematic interdisciplinary undertaking—the wedding of such an imaginative discipline with one inherently concerned with the establishment of “truth”—and it at times explicitly begs us to take the narratives with a grain of salt, as we can see in the disclaimer that opens Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo*: “To write is to ask questions. It doesn’t matter if the answers are true or *puro cuento*. After all and everything only the story is remembered, and the truth fades away like the pale blue ink on a cheap embroidery pattern” (1). The haunting caution of Celaya, Cisneros’s authorial narrator, rather than assuring me of the futility of my project, drives me to answer the questions I’ve raised here. For within the first few pages of her narrative, Celaya provides us with the first of many historical footnotes that will guide our reading—and understanding—of her story, which begs us, her readers, to question the nature of her initial disclaimer.

¹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty succinctly expresses the spatiality and temporality of transnational narrative in her consideration of the formation of political solidarity across difference: “But then the very process of constructing a narrative for oneself—of telling a story—imposes a certain linearity and coherence that is never entirely there. That is the lesson, perhaps, especially for us immigrants and migrants: that home, community, and identity all fit somewhere between the histories and experiences we inherit and the political choices we make through alliances, solidarities, and friendships” (136).

While transnational literary historiography is a global genre, I have chosen to focus my dissertation on anglophone texts that move between the US and the Caribbean and Latin America, respectively, although I make reference throughout to works of transnational literary historiography set in other spaces. The reasons I decided to narrow my project geographically are twofold: The first is that the majority of the texts that I have identified as belonging to the genre of transnational literary historiography are based in the Caribbean and Latin America. The second is that all of the countries outside of the US in which the texts are partially set, while colonized by different European nations, were part of the transatlantic slave trade, and this history is, to varying degrees, part of the texts' narrative focus.

My dissertation is structured roughly chronologically, moving from 1988 to 2007. Chapter Two considers the shift from “postcolonial” fiction to transnational literary historiography through an examination of the works of Jamaica Kincaid. Kincaid's earliest texts —*At the Bottom of the River* (1983) and *Annie John* (1985)—have generally been read as belonging to the genre of postcolonial Caribbean bildungsroman, and in many ways this characterization is accurate. However, her 1990 novel *Lucy* has been located in this category by many critics, when in fact *Lucy* is much more transnational in focus than *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John*. I argue that we can see the shift from postcolonial to transnational in Kincaid's work with the 1988 publication of *A Small Place*, her polemical travelogue of Antigua, which is written in an accusatory second-person voice. The controversy surrounding the publication of the essay—the *New Yorker*, for which Kincaid was then writing, refused to publish it—points to the text's significance as an early literary voice in the questioning of neoliberal economic practices. Drawing on Édouard Glissant's work on literary alternatives to hegemonic Western historiography, I demonstrate how Kincaid's transnational texts are representative of a

more general sea change with regard to the representation of history in postcolonial literature that begins in the late 1980s and continues through the early part of the twenty-first century—a change that constitutes the basis for the new genre I argue for in this dissertation. Through readings of Kincaid’s four semi-(auto)biographical texts—*Lucy*, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, *My Brother*, and *Mr. Potter*—as well as her journal *My Garden (Book)*: and travelogue *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*, I establish the major formal elements and thematic concerns of transnational literary historiography: constellated narrative style, the inseparability of major historical events from everyday lived experience, and emphasis on the personal and domestic as a means of illuminating how women’s voices and realities have been underrepresented in historical discourse. In my study of Kincaid’s work, I show how transnational literary historiography departs from postcolonial literature, particularly the postcolonial bildungsroman, in its insistence on the importance of transnational connectivities prior to and beyond the decolonial moment, which subverts the nationalist ideal of linear historical progression.

The chapters that follow examine three outstanding subgenres of transnational literary historiography: the fictional travelogue, memoir, and historical metafiction. In Chapter Three, I read Michelle Cliff’s 1987 novel *No Telephone to Heaven* as a fictional travelogue, a departure from previous critical interpretations that largely locate it within the bildungsroman tradition. Chronicling protagonist Clare Savage’s transmigration between Jamaica, the US, and Europe, Cliff transforms the colonial travel narrative form in which *No Telephone to Heaven* is rooted into a hybrid genre that makes starkly apparent the connections between late-twentieth-century neoliberalism and formal colonialism. Cliff’s revolutionizing of the travelogue form—which as Mary Louise Pratt and Carl Thompson demonstrate has been and remains a vehicle for

maintaining Western hegemony through its production of a sense of readerly propriety over non-Western spaces (3; 155)—repositions the genre as one that performs historiography. Drawing on Simon Gikandi's work on travel writing and the creation of English subjectivity in the nineteenth century ("Englishness"), I argue that *No Telephone to Heaven* performs a historiography that eschews reliance on preconceived notions of colonized vs. colonizer, proposing rather that transmigration has been and continues to be integral to the production of Jamaican culture. The historiography in *No Telephone to Heaven* incorporates personal and family narrative, ethnographic research, and scholarly inquiry, resulting in a narrative written from the point of view of the "othered" subjects of hegemonic travel writing that makes apparent not only the long trajectory of colonial and neoimperial conquest but also the intricacies of power in the neoliberal age.

Chapter Four focuses on the role of memoir in transnational literary historiography via Edwidge Danticat's 2007 *Brother, I'm Dying*. In this text, Danticat incorporates elements of both fiction and history writing into a collective memoir that constellates her own experiences with those of her father and late uncle within the larger narrative of Haitian history, particularly with respect to US-Haiti relations. Building on Chandra Talpade Mohanty's claim that personal experience is inextricable from theory (191), I explore how Danticat not only documents family and national history in *Brother, I'm Dying*, but also theorizes how that history, both distant and recent, affects the lived experiences of contemporary Haitians in their home and host countries. As a work of nonfiction, *Brother, I'm Dying* exposes how all writers, particularly those of history, must incorporate imaginative invention in their texts when faced with an absence of evidence. Through my reading of *Brother, I'm Dying*, I argue that works of transnational

historiographic memoir strengthen the truth claims of their fictional counterparts while calling into question the boundaries between genres and disciplines. *Brother, I'm Dying* reclaims a place for memoir in both literary studies and history—both of which, as Helen Buss points out, have eschewed the genre (xv)—but more importantly makes clear the necessity of interdisciplinary work in the neoliberal age.

In Chapter Five, I read Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* (2003) and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) as works of transnational historiographic metafiction against the grain of previous criticism that has classified them as postmodern. Both texts are self-consciously novels, and the authorial narrators “write” the text as they narrate. However, their authority is disrupted in several ways throughout each text, including the interruption of the narration by other voices and the movement of both novels between time periods and locations to events for which the narrators could not have been present. At the same time, the novels' truth claims are strengthened by their grounding in history, which is linked to the fictional plots by historical footnotes throughout both novels. I borrow the term “historiographic metafiction” from postmodern critic Linda Hutcheon but distinguish works of transnational historiographic metafiction from their postmodern counterparts, arguing that the formal elements that constitute transnational historiographic metafiction are politicized and suggestive of the possible in ways that postmodern historiographic metafiction is intentionally not. Engaging with Kumkum Sangari's work on marvelous realism in postcolonial fiction and Susan Buck-Morss's retheorizing of universal history, I explore how the marvelous functions within the new historiography proposed in metafictional works of transnational literary historiography.

Ultimately, in this dissertation I argue that transnational literary historiography is an immediate and widespread response to neoliberalism by writers of transnational literature around

the turn of the twenty-first century. The proliferation of subgenres within transnational literary historiography, as well as the generic hybridity produced through this shift in writing, constitutes a unique body of work deserving of critical attention.

Chapter Two: “A More Creative Approach” to History: The Emergence of Transnational Literary Historiography in the Works of Jamaica Kincaid

[A] memory cannot be trusted, for so much of the experience of the past is determined by the experience of the present.

—Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother* 214

The past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present. The duty of the writer is to explore this obsession, to show its relevance in a continuous fashion to the immediate present.

—Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 63-64

In “The Quarrel with History,” a much-celebrated and widely cited essay in *Caribbean Discourse*, from which I take my second epigraph, Édouard Glissant establishes the necessity of and framework for the merging of history and literature by Caribbean writers. In the opening of this essay, Glissant points to the disconnection many Caribbean peoples face when following the methodologies of hegemonic Western historiography “because the lived circumstances of this daily reality do not form part of a continuum, which means that its relation with its surroundings (what we would call its nature) is in a discontinuous relation to its accumulation of experiences (what we would call its culture)” (61). According to Glissant, official historiography cannot “make the link” between the two, and, as such, he calls for “a more creative approach.” Glissant’s emphasis on the *lived circumstances* of Caribbean peoples’ daily reality—which I read as encompassing the social, political, and, importantly, domestic—is significant, as these daily realities are what are so often missing from historical accounts. For Glissant, the writer rather than the historian is most capable of reconciling daily life with accumulated experiences in order to simultaneously recuperate Caribbean peoples from historical marginalization, and even erasure, and create a more coherent narrative.

I find Glissant's theory of a reimagined Caribbean historiography most clearly at work in the transnational literary texts of Caribbean writers, and this chapter traces the emergence of transnational literary historiography in Jamaica Kincaid's major literary works¹ in order to establish the formal features and broader implications of the genre. Transnationality and deep engagement with history are fundamental to Kincaid's demonstration of the relationship of the neoliberal era to the centuries of colonialism that precede it. The movement away from the formerly colonized homeland to the neoliberal center that is at the core of works of transnational literary historiography brings into relief the problematic nature of colonial historiography, that powerful tool of domination. Glissant writes, "History [which he demarcates 'with a capital *H*,' and which I define as the product of hegemonic Western historiography] is a highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone 'made' the history of the World" (64). The neoliberal era ushers in a new governmentality while still remaining on the continuum of the quest for Western global control, although now primarily more American in origin than European, that begins in the long fifteenth century. This shift marks an opportune moment for a new form of historiography—one that is inherently literary—to critique both this new form of domination and the colonial historiography on the back of which it was constituted. Transnational literary historiography develops out of postcolonial literature to look beyond the decolonial moment, connecting the neoliberal present with the colonial past, and employs a constellated narrative style that vacillates both geographically and historically in order to gesture

¹ In this chapter I do not consider *Talk Stories*, a collection of Kincaid's columns originally published in *The New Yorker*; *My Favorite Flower*, a collection of essays on gardening edited by Kincaid; or her short pieces published in magazines or literary journals not included in book-length texts. Jana Evans Braziel, whose work I draw on later in this chapter, has written about Kincaid's "own 'Quarrel with History'" (183). However, Braziel's analysis of Kincaid's work in connection with Glissant's focuses on beginnings and genealogy, points that are, while compelling, ultimately quite different from my own.

toward a possible future. Working against imperialist historiography, transnational literary historiography incorporates not only so-called major historical events but also everyday lived experience. In emphasizing the personal and subjective, transnational literary historiography both counters the presumed objectivity of History and illuminates the ways in which women have been largely excluded from that discourse.

Lucy, Kincaid's second novel and first work of transnational fiction, illustrates the failures of hegemonic Western historiography through the eponymous protagonist's refusal to narrate her own experiences according to its conventions: memories of Lucy's youth in an unnamed part of the West Indies continually interrupt the *chronos* of her first year in the United States, and Lucy's narrative does not move beyond her domestic space. Kincaid's constant deviation from the main narrative into memory demonstrates that the explanatory information into which she delves is not ancillary to the central focus of the text. By refusing to subordinate some pieces of information to others, Kincaid resists a hierarchy of information that historical texts establish through the use of footnotes. Although several authors of transnational literary historiography subvert official historiography in the opposite manner through the use of footnotes, as I discuss in Chapter Five, the historical digression within the main body of the narrative in Kincaid's work creates a constellated narrative form. This form, which is characteristic of transnational literary historiography, is both nonlinear and, perhaps more importantly, relational. Constellated narratives not only disrupt the notion of time as moving continuously from point A to point B, the backbone of traditional historiography, but they also draw connections between time periods. In this way constellated narrative form is different from the nonlinear narrative form often employed in postmodern and postcolonial literature, which often shifts temporally but does not always clearly demonstrate the relationship of the moments between which the narratives move.

The transnational movement of *Lucy* and a number of Kincaid's later texts exhibits this constellated form, as the actors' transmigrations provide the groundwork for the vacillation between and blending of historical moments.

Although the references in *Lucy* to the British colonization of Antigua from 1632-1981 are subtle rather than overt—Lucy, for example, attended Queen Victoria Girls' School but does not identify it as part of the British colonial education system—the childhood memories that punctuate the novel bear the mark of colonialism, an indelible aspect of Lucy's past that influences her relationship with her current employer, Mariah, in whose home Lucy both works and lives. As Helen Scott argues of *Lucy*, "This text does not accentuate colonialism, but it leaves us in no doubt but that the colonial system inflicted much damage, even beyond its formal reign" ("Dem tief" 982). One of the first of these memories imbued with colonialism pertains to Lucy's cousin, who Lucy mentions several times in the narrative. This cousin, a Seventh Day Adventist, gifted Lucy a Bible upon the latter's departure for the US (8). Lucy recollects time spent with the cousin when they were young, "terrify[ing] and torment[ing] each other by reading out loud passages from the Book of Revelation." This familial memory imbued with the Christian mission that accompanied colonial domination is followed just a few pages later by perhaps the most iconic reference to British colonialism in the novel. In this memory, Lucy recounts having to memorize "an old poem"—Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (also called "The Daffodils")—in response to Mariah's inquiry as to whether Lucy has ever seen daffodils blooming in the spring (17-18). Mariah responds to Lucy's infuriated telling of this story with the remark, "What a history you have," to which Lucy replies, "You are welcome to it if you like" (19). Lucy's renunciation of her history, sparked by the envy she thinks she hears in Mariah's words, is certainly related to the distance she wishes to put between

herself, her place of birth, and her family, but it can also be traced to a sense of historical displacement resulting from a colonial education in which the history taught to the students was not their own.

When Lucy does express an interest in history, it is a critical one. Lucy takes issue with historiography, arguing that it habitually leaves out information in which she is keenly interested. While recalling her mother reading the Bible to her and first hearing the story of Jesus and the loaves and fishes, Lucy tells us that she asked her mother how the fish was served: “boiled or fried?” (38). The absence of this information from the Gospel of John, to which she significantly does not refer by name, affects Lucy’s understanding of the story, which she connects to the fishermen who sold fried fish on the beach in her hometown. The omission also leaves Lucy feeling disconnected from the author of the story, whose relationship with Jesus, as noted in the following quote, was domestic in nature: “It was a pity that *the people who recorded their life with Christ* never mentioned this small detail, a detail that would have meant a lot to me” (emphasis mine 38-39). Several other times in the novel, Lucy identifies lacunae in history that she finds problematic, and this imaginative amending of missing information continues in Kincaid’s later works, as we will see. During one dinner with Mariah’s family, as Mariah and her husband Lewis’s marriage is deteriorating, Lucy remarks, “In the history of civilization, they mention everything; even the water glass shattered on the floor—something is said about that—but there is not one word on the misery to be found at a dining-room table” (*Lucy* 75). The information in which Lucy is most interested—largely of a domestic and emotional nature—is often too quotidian to be included in the official historical record, and the focus on such information throughout the novel, coupled with the knowledge that Kincaid herself spent her first year in the US working as a governess in New York, blurs the line between fiction and memoir.

Although there has been debate over just how autobiographical Kincaid's work is, Kincaid said of her writing in a 2002 interview with Kay Bonetti, "I write about myself for the most part, and about things that have happened to me. Everything I say is true, and everything I say is not true. [...] I don't aim to be factual. I aim to be true to something, but it's not necessarily the facts" (125). What *is* worth noting is the effect her focus on the fine details of families and domestic situations has on her work, resulting in her fictional texts *Lucy* and *Mr. Potter* reading more like memoirs than novels; this blending of genres is typical of works of transnational literary historiography, which posit that truth is a highly subjective notion. Like Kincaid, Lucy emphasizes what she finds to be relevant, rejecting the notion that some information is unworthy of being preserved. Upon seeing Lewis in an intimate embrace with Mariah's best friend, Lucy observes, "But here was a picture that no one would ever take—a picture that would not end up in one of those books, but a significant picture all the same" (80). In *Lucy*, and in her other works, Kincaid delves into the information that otherwise might be omitted from history, recontextualizing history as the mundane made exceptional.

Toward the end of the novel, Lucy asserts, "History is full of great events; when the great events are said and done, there will always be someone, a little person, unhappy, dissatisfied, discontented, not at home in her own skin, ready to stir up a whole new set of great events again. I was not such a person, able to put in motion a set of great events, but I understood the phenomenon all the same" (147). Instead, Lucy, like Kincaid, looks again at the great events that constitute history, reevaluating their significance and considering them from different standpoints, but never claiming her version as definitive. Of totalizing narratives, Avery Gordon writes in *Ghostly Matters*, "The whole story is always a working fiction that satisfies the need to deliver what cannot possibly be available" (174). Lucy participates in multiple acts of

reinscription as she transitions from living in Mariah's home to sharing an apartment with her friend Peggy, including photographing pieces of art in museums and beginning a journal. Gordon defines this inherent instinct for storytelling that Lucy and many other of Kincaid's characters demonstrate as a primary aspect of complex personhood: "Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society's problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as story and what their imaginations are reaching toward" (4). Lucy's consideration of her personal history grows out of her transmigration to the US to escape the weight of the past: "I felt that if I could put enough miles between me and the place from which that letter came, and if I could put enough events between me and the events mentioned in the letter, would I not be free to take everything just as it came and not see hundreds of years in every gesture, every word spoken, every face?" (31). Ultimately her relocation makes her personal past—so entwined with the history of the Caribbean—much more immediate: "I used to think that just a change in venue would banish forever from my life the things I most despised. But that was not to be so. As each day unfolded before me, I could see the sameness in everything; I could see the present take a shape—the shape of my past" (90). History always, in Gordon's terms, reaches toward a coherent explanation of the past, an explanation that is ultimately unattainable but no less important to strive for. Lucy sees her future as history unwritten: "My life stretched out ahead of me like a book of blank pages" (163). The novel ends by emphasizing the unfixed nature of meaning, as Lucy's tears blur the first words she writes in her journal, rendering them illegible, although the reader is left with the sense that Lucy's past, present, and future will continue to be (re)written (164).

Lucy, like Kincaid's work more generally, is usually classified within the genre of postcolonial literature. Beginning in the mid-1980s, around the time Kincaid began to publish book-length works, transnational literary historiography develops out of postcolonial literature, a genre largely concerned with nation building, and instead focuses on the diasporic movements of subjects between the so-called Third and First Worlds. This is not to say that the nation is an unimportant factor in transnational literary historiography; rather, works in this genre examine nations' relations with one another more closely than they participate in the project for national autonomy. In *Haunting Capital*, Hershini Bhana Young points to the problematic nature of much historical reinscription: "Often, retellings of alternate histories have assumed the form of linear progressive, *national* counternarratives. Not only do these national counternarratives duplicate Western gender formations, but they perpetuate the misconception that political and economic subjugation remains within the artificial borders of the nation-state" (italics original 180). While transnational literary historiography maintains some features of postcolonial literature—such as critiques of power, hegemony, identity, knowledge production, and the Western canon—this genre distinguishes itself from postcolonial literature through transnational movement and deep engagement with history and the domestic, which disrupt linear progression and subvert nationalism. Ileana Rodríguez, in her study of postcolonial Latin American women's literature, argues, "'House,' 'garden,' and 'nation'...constitute some of the terms a disenfranchised majority employ to enter the ongoing [revolutionary] struggle and to signal the appropriation by women of ever-larger social spaces in the organization and reorganization of privatized spaces and in the territorial administration of the globe" (19). Moving beyond the often geographically bounded perspectives and focus on the de/colonial period of postcolonial literature, works of transnational

literary historiography point to the ways in which political and economic subjugation, particularly of women, transcends borders via neoliberal practices.

In the mid-1980s, at the same time as neoliberalism is becoming both the *de facto* and *de jure* governmentality of international capitalist relations, as I discuss in the introduction to this project, Kincaid's oeuvre transitions rather rapidly from the "postcolonial-postmodern" (Scott, *Caribbean* 55) aesthetic of her collection of short stories *At the Bottom of the River* (published in 1983; individual stories were published in *The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review* beginning as early as 1978) to the postcolonial bildungsroman of *Annie John* (1985) to the scornful treatise on the ills of globalization in the travelogue *A Small Place* (1988). Kincaid described *At the Bottom of the River* as a sort of purging of the aesthetic influences instilled by her British colonial education in her interview with Bonetti:

One of the things that inspired me to write was English poets, even though I had never seen England. It's as if I were a blind person too. When I was about ten years old I read *Jane Eyre*, and at one point she describes the evening as the "gloaming." She's describing something English, something I would never see until I was thirty-odd years old. I got stuck on that word, and eventually found a way to use it in *At the Bottom of the River*. Then I was free of it. It was important for me to have written those stories, because it freed me of an obsession with a certain kind of language. I memorized Wordsworth when I was a child, Keats, all sorts of things. It was an attempt to make me into a certain kind of person, the kind of person they had no use for, anyway. An educated black person. I got stuck with a lot of things, so I ended up using them. (130)

Kincaid agrees with Bonetti, who suggests that writing the stories that comprise *At the Bottom of the River* was a cathartic act: “These things were a big influence, and it was important for me to get rid of them. Then I could actually look at the place I’m from.” *At the Bottom of the River* stands apart from Kincaid’s other works as a collection of multi-genre pieces that do not engage history as a topic of inquiry. Much of Kincaid’s looking at her homeland in her work from the late-1980s to the present happens from within the US, or the narrative moves between the US and the Caribbean. Transnational literary historiography is uniquely positioned to critique the West from both inside and outside—betwixt and between the West and the non-West—as Kincaid demonstrates in her presentation of her colonial education in Antigua in *Annie John*, *A Small Place*, *Lucy*, and *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Western cultural tradition does not exist solely within the borders of the US or British nation-states. Rather, as Gauri Viswanathan illuminates in the case of India in *Masks of Conquest*, the dissemination of Western tradition was fundamental to the implementation of formal colonization. While I certainly don’t want to universalize the particularities of British colonization in different geographical contexts, Viswanathan’s illumination of how “certain humanistic functions traditionally associated with literature...were considered essential to the processes of sociopolitical control by the guardians of the same tradition” can be seen in Kincaid’s work as functioning similarly in Antigua (3).

Authors of postcolonial and transnational literature, as Kincaid’s discussion of British literature above demonstrates, often have a deep and complicated relationship to Western tradition prior to emigration that can become exacerbated, which we’ve seen in Lucy’s reaction to daffodils, in the West.

Although both texts are set entirely in the Caribbean, the contrast between the short fiction that makes up *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John*, Kincaid's first novel, is striking. We see significant formal experimentation, a characteristic of transnational literary historiography, throughout the stories in *At the Bottom of the River*—most famously in the prose-poem “Girl” that opens the collection—however there is an almost complete lack of explicit historical allusion in the collection; Kincaid acknowledges Antigua as a former British colony only through occasional references to England. While *Annie John* is the first of Kincaid's texts to be historically referential, it follows the bildungsroman form common in much postcolonial literature written in the decolonial period, which often played a strong role in postcolonial nation building.² *Annie John* follows its eponymous protagonist from ages ten to seventeen, focusing largely on her schooling and her relationship with her mother. Kincaid abandons the traditional bildungsroman form in her later writings, instead preferring nonlinear narration achieved largely through flashbacks. Even works of transnational literary historiography that might be considered bildungsromane, such as Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which I discuss in Chapter Five, significantly alter the form, if not subvert it completely. *Annie John* is important in the development of transnational literary historiography in that the novel ends with Annie's departure to attend nursing school in England.

Beginning in 1988 with *A Small Place* and continuing through her 2001 novel *Mr. Potter*, Kincaid's work, both fiction and nonfiction, becomes predominantly transnational, a marked difference from her earlier work. The origins of Kincaid's transnational turn are found in the concluding chapter of *Annie John*. This focus continues through *Among Flowers: A Walk in the*

² See as example Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*.

Himalaya, published in 2005, which chronicles Kincaid's travels in Nepal, where she collects seeds to plant in her Vermont garden. Not only individual works but in fact Kincaid's oeuvre itself moves transnationally between the Caribbean and the West, with sojourns to Asia in recent years. It is the turn to history as a subject of analysis and transformation spurred by this transnational movement that I argue is characteristic of transnational literary historiography. Because these texts are deeply rooted in place, by which I mean that the settings of works of transnational literary historiography are of major importance in the narratives, they engage with the histories of the different geographic spaces they inhabit and explore the multiple ways these histories intersect. Transnational literary historiography, however, does not break from completely or replace postcolonialism as a genre but rather morphs the literary conventions of postcolonial texts in order to more fully respond to the particular political, economic, and social conditions of globalization that immediately follow or, as in the case of Antigua, coincide with decolonization. As we will see in my discussion of *Lucy*, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, *My Brother*, and *Mr. Potter*—Kincaid's four texts based on the lives of herself, her mother, her brother, and her father, respectively—Kincaid transforms the postcolonial bildungsroman form through nonlinear narration in order to move away from the protagonists' lives serving as metaphor for national formation and instead more clearly situate the actors in a broader historical context.

One of the primary ways transnational literary historiography differs from postcolonial literature is in its concern with the neoliberal present. Inderpal Grewal uses the term "transnational connectivities" to define the constructs "within which subjects, technologies, and ethical practices were created through transnational networks and connections of many different types and within which the 'global' and 'universal' were created as linked and dominant

concepts” (3). Although for Grewal “the term ‘connectivities’ reveals that the transnational connections...produce groups, identities, nationalisms,” I am particularly interested in the ways in which such connectivities point to how neoliberalism, of which globalization is a direct result, evolves out of colonialism to become the current hegemonic politics (23). While postcolonial literature often focuses primarily on colonialism and decolonization, transnational literary historiography looks forward even further, past decolonial nationalism and into globalization, and continues to delve into the colonial past, often further than postcolonial literature, which tends to be more narrowly historically focused. In order to incorporate this more expansive historical breadth into texts, authors of transnational literary historiography generally draw on family history, either real or invented—and often both. In *Caribbean Genesis*, a study of the role of auto/biography and the Bible in Kincaid’s texts, Jana Evans Braziel writes, “Kincaid’s alterbiographical texts are not just about the imbrications of autobiography (or the autobiographical form) or biography (or the biographical form); nor are they just about the interweaving of autobiography with genealogy or filiation; but they are also about the inherent entanglement of autobiography with history” (3). I argue that to limn this inherent entanglement in literature necessitates a new narrative form: transnational literary historiography.

In works of transnational literary historiography writers weave not only autobiography and history but also the socio- and geopolitics of the present. Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, the first of her works that I identify as transnational literary historiography, embodies this in its examination of Western tourism in Antigua, of which Kincaid asserts, “In Antigua, people cannot see a relationship between their obsession with slavery and emancipation and their celebration of the Hotel Training School (graduation ceremonies are broadcast on radio and television)” (55). The

Hotel Training School, according to Kincaid, “teaches Antiguan how to be good servants.” In *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalization*, Helen Scott illuminates how Kincaid’s work, particularly *A Small Place*, “lays bare the fundamental continuity of imperialism as an integral feature of capitalism” (65). Kincaid explores this history of imperialism most explicitly and deeply in *A Small Place* and *My Garden (Book)*. Of the latter, Scott argues, “History is understood in terms of class exploitation and the accumulation of profits through unpaid and underpaid labor” (*Caribbean* 61). To Scott’s salient claim, I add that history in *My Garden (Book)*: and Kincaid’s work more generally is also understood as an open-ended network of events whose meanings are in continual flux. The colon in the title of *My Garden (Book)*:, which is not followed by a subtitle, reinforces the notion that this text does not fix the meaning of Kincaid’s garden.³ Meaning is not the only thing in flux in works of transnational literary historiography. Notably, Kincaid’s texts move back and forth not only in geographic space but also in historical time, both literally and metaphorically. As Kincaid writes in *Mr. Potter*, a novelization of her father’s life, “Mr. Potter’s lifetime began in the year fourteen hundred and ninety-two but he was born on the seventh day of January, nineteen hundred and twenty-two” (177). The event of Mr. Potter’s birth cannot be extracted from the history of colonialism that was made possible by fifteenth-century exploration.

Columbus’s “discovery” of Antigua and Dominica is a recurring trope in Kincaid’s work.⁴ However, while she makes continued reference to the moment privileged by Eurocentric

³ Curiously, this colon, which is included in the Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication record, is often left out of the title in reviews and scholarly publications.

⁴ Kincaid and her father, Roderick Potter, were born in Antigua. Kincaid’s mother, Annie Victoria Richardson, was born in Dominica, the setting of *The Autobiography of My Mother*.

history as the Caribbean's moment of origin, Kincaid simultaneously points to other origins, calling into question the very possibility of definitive beginnings. Kincaid draws attention to the Carib Indians who inhabited the Caribbean prior to Columbus's stumbling upon it and also emphasizes the history of Antiguans' African ancestors who would not be brought to Antigua for nearly another century-and-a-half, the descendants of whom now constitute the majority of the population of the Caribbean. In *The Autobiography of My Mother* Kincaid writes:

Who are the Carib people?, or, more accurately, Who *were* the Carib people? for they were no more, they were extinct, a few hundred of them still living, my mother had been one of them, they were the last survivors. They were like living fossils, they belonged in a museum, on a shelf, enclosed in a glass case. That these people, my mother's people, were balanced precariously on a ledge of uncertainty, waiting to be swallowed up in the great yawn of nothingness, was without doubt, but the most bitter part was that they had lost, and lost in the most extreme way; they had lost not just the right to be themselves, they had lost themselves. (197-198)

By writing the mother of Xuela, the protagonist of *The Autobiography of My Mother*, into existence in the novel, Kincaid works to resurrect an ethnic group largely missing from the historical narratives of the Caribbean, which is predominantly focused on Europeans and Africans. This is not to say that Kincaid privileges the Carib people over other groups. Rather, Kincaid emphasizes that the Caribs inhabited the Caribbean prior to European colonization, and, though Carib society is now virtually extinct, individuals like Xuela who are aware of their Carib ancestry preserve their historical existence and continue some of their cultural traditions. Kincaid similarly draws attention to the historical circumstances of African Caribbean people like her

father, who she notes “was all alone...in the world that refused to bear any trace of the capriciousness of history or the capriciousness of memory” (*Mr. Potter* 40). Despite the fact that her texts from *A Small Place* through *My Garden (Book)*: are not only steeped in but also critically examine the history of the Caribbean, Kincaid seeks not to produce an immutable historical record but rather to rectify the erasure or marginalization of the “vanquished,” a term that recurs throughout her writing. However, Xuela’s declaration in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, “I am not a people, I am not a nation” (216) points to Kincaid’s refusal to produce a nationalist literature, as does her critique of political corruption in the post-independence Antiguan government in *A Small Place*.

The genre of transnational literary historiography distinguishes itself from hegemonic Western historiography in a number of ways, one of the most important being narrative style. Kincaid’s move away from the linear narration that characterizes *Annie John*, the postcolonial bildungsroman, and toward a constellated narrative style allows her to develop a form that mimics the way history functions outside of works of Western historiography, which traditionally employ chronological narration. Kincaid’s narratives post-*Annie John* vacillate between the present of the text and the past of the actors and their families and often consciously point toward the future; in Kincaid’s writing, it is not uncharacteristic for multiple shifts in narrative time to occur in a single chapter. Young argues,

Any attempt at foraging and disfiguring History, or brushing it against the grain, contests its naturalization—the process whereby any and all evidence pointing to its discursive production is erased. The “objective,” all-seeing Eye that merely records “things as they are,” located everywhere and nowhere, dissolves as alternative polyphonic histories speak to and within it, in order to demonstrate

how *all* history is narrativization—interested in and inextricable from structures of power. (181)

Nonlinear narration calls into question the taken-for-grantedness of chronological time in Western historiography. The effect of the periodic temporal shifts in Kincaid's writing is the feeling that these historical moments are not separate or discrete but rather something much more nuanced: history in Kincaid's works is continuous without being chronological, and, at moments, simultaneous. Such a mode of time as well as different modes of knowing are not only apparent throughout Kincaid's work, they are also explicitly explored. Xuela embraces coalescent historical time, telling us,

[T]o me history was not a large stage filled with commemoration, bands, cheers, ribbons, medals, the sound of fine glass clinking and raised high in the air; in other words, the sounds of victory. For me history was not only the past: it was the past and also the present. I did not mind my defeat, I only minded that it had to last so long; I did not see the future, and that is perhaps as it should be. Why should anyone see such a thing. And yet...and yet, it made me so sad to know that I did not look straight ahead of me, I always looked back, sometimes I looked to the side, but mostly I looked back. (Kincaid, *Autobiography* 138-139)

The title of Xuela's narrative—*The Autobiography of My Mother*—encapsulates such a means of experiencing historical time. If colonial historiography is always already looking back at its subject, transnational literary historiography problematizes the notion that history is exclusively "the past." Coalescent historical time, a product of constellated narrative style, presents an alternative way of knowing that eschews history as bracketed off from the present, a matter of record and therefore fixed and immutable.

This alternative mode of history is necessitated by a way of knowing that European colonialism attempted to eradicate. Early in her narrative, Xuela recounts walking to school with her classmates and witnessing one of them, a young boy, drown in a river after swimming toward a beckoning female figure. While the children all know they had “witnessed” (an important choice of verb) the same thing, they also know they could not speak the truth of what they’d seen aloud because it violates the logic of their colonial education:

We had seen that boy drown in the mouth of the river we crossed each day. If our schooling was successful, most of us would not have believed we had witnessed such a thing. To say that we had seen this boy float out to meet a woman surrounded by fruit, and then vanish in the swollen waters in the mouth of the river, was to say that we lived in a darkness from which we could not be redeemed. (Kincaid, *Autobiography* 48-49)

In the history into which Kincaid’s texts delve, resurrecting lost modes of time and knowing are of pivotal importance. This is, it seems, linked to Kincaid’s experimentation with nonlinear form, which she discussed with Bonetti:

I just write. I come to the end, I start again. I come to the end, I start again. And then sometimes I come to the end, and there is no starting again. In my mind there is no question of who will do what and when. Sometimes I’ve written the end of something before I’ve written the beginning. Whatever a novel is, I’m not it, and whatever a short story is, I’m not it. If I had to follow these forms, I couldn’t write. I’m really interested in breaking the form. (126)

Breaking narrative form makes way for other ruptures with European tradition that permeate Kincaid’s work after *At the Bottom of the River*. While Kincaid’s texts range from short fiction to

novels to memoir to travelogue and beyond, none of her works are so easily categorized as embodying completely the features of a single genre and all cross genre boundaries, particularly through the incorporation of auto/biographical and historical elements. Glissant calls for such a trans-generic literature, one that engages particularly with history, in concluding “The Quarrel with History”:

As far as we are concerned, history as a consciousness at work and history as lived experience are therefore not the business of historians exclusively. Literature for us will not be divided into genres but will implicate all the perspectives of the human sciences. These inherited categories must not in this matter be an obstacle to a daring new methodology, where it responds to the needs of our situation. (65)

By enjoining Caribbean writers to create a productive new form out of those that bolstered centuries of European hegemony in the region, Glissant gestures toward a bold claim with regard to the nature of history. As Glissant implies and Kincaid demonstrates, history, as opposed to History, holds the potential for rethinking not only the past but also the present. Multi-genre literary texts, like those of transnational literary historiography, are able to encompass and explore this broad historical canvass through the blending of fictional and/or biographical family narrative with history.

Glissant’s emphasis on history as lived experience throughout “The Quarrel with History” is significant, as it points to a different kind of history, one that contains as many narratives as there are actors and that more fully explores the movement of people that is easily glossed over in historical narratives with a limited geographic focus. While it is of course not possible to fit all of these narratives into one text, it is possible to subvert a narrow focus on “key historical features,” and Kincaid achieves this through the incorporation of family into her texts.

One constant element in Kincaid's writing from *At the Bottom of the River* through *Among Flowers* is family. All of Kincaid's texts draw heavily from the events of her life and the lives of her family members, particularly those of her mother and father. Through recounting her family's history—her mother's birth and childhood in Dominica and her paternal grandparents' migration to Panama, where her grandfather worked on the building of the Panama Canal—Kincaid demonstrates that transnationality is not a new phenomenon; while the globalization of our current era may be larger in scale than it has been before, transnationality is a necessary product of global capitalism and, as such, has been common since the fifteenth century. Emma Pérez, in *The Decolonial Imaginary*, problematizes the tendency of Western historians to declare definitive temporal and spatial boundaries:

Historians assign names to epochs and regions that reflect the spatio-temporal characteristics: the Trans-Mississippi West, the frontier, the Renaissance, the Progressive Era, the Great Depression, the sixties. Within these categoric spaces, we continue to conceptualize history without challenging how such discursive sites have been assigned and by whom. One fundamental result of such traditional approaches to history is that these spatio-temporal models enforce a type of colonialist historiography. (4)

By eschewing spatio-temporal historical models in favor of a constellated narrative, Kincaid breaks from hegemonic Western historiography to look for connections rather than chronologies. Kincaid not only challenges the unprecedentedness often assigned to “globalization” by linking phenomena of the late twentieth century to the capitalist processes of the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, but also by disputing the arrival of Columbus as the historical origin of the present-day Caribbean. Simultaneously, Kincaid illuminates the elisions and euphemisms that such

categorization allows. In *My Garden (Book)*:, Kincaid provides an excerpt, illustrative of historical glossing, from *The Oxford Companion to Gardens*, published in 2006, regarding the origins of the plants Carolus Linnaeus encountered in George Clifford's glasshouse in the 1730s. Clifford had come to possess the plants, according to the *Companion*, due to “the influence of the world trade being developed by maritime powers such as The Netherlands and Great Britain” (Kincaid, *My Garden* 151). Not only does this statement conveniently ignore the colonization and conquest that accompanied the development of world trade, but it also renders invisible those places, like the Caribbean, pivotal to such trade, glorifying instead the might of European nations.

In *My Garden (Book)*: Kincaid says of such marginalization of non-European people and places, “My world...entered human imagination...as a footnote to someone just passing by. [...] In almost every account of an event that has taken place sometime in the last five hundred years there is always a moment when I feel like placing an asterisk somewhere in its text and at the end of the official story making my own addition” (158; 164). In *Annie John* we can see this urge to footnote, to provide commentary, to amend significance, in the eponymous narrator, who adds the addendum “The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and Go” to a picture of Christopher Columbus on his return to Spain in 1500, under arrest for acts of torture as governor of Hispaniola (78). However, Kincaid's experiments with form in her works subsequent to *Annie John* allow her to move beyond providing footnotes to history and instead develop a structure that brings the footnotes into the narrative. Kincaid's four texts, with the exception of *Annie John*, that are most grounded in her life and the lives of her family members—*Lucy*, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, *My Brother*, and *Mr. Potter*—all exhibit a narrative structure that continually conflates the narrative present of the text with the moment of the text's inscription

and the historical past of the actors' family members and places of birth. At the same time that they are about the function of history and memory, these texts are also at their foundation about writing. Each contains analysis of the act of inscription: the intentions behind pieces of writing and the consequences of this writing in the life of the writer and in the larger world. While I specifically consider memoir as a genre in Chapter Four, Kincaid's oeuvre is a telling example of the pervasiveness of personal narrative in transnational literary historiography more generally. Personal narrative, which is often domestic in nature, provides the everyday lived experience, and significantly women's experience, that is often elided from the official historiography on which colonial and neoliberal domination is predicated. Such subjective experience, which constitutes personal narrative, is a powerful destabilizing force against the supposed objectivity of History, as Glissant terms it.

The instability of meaning established in *Lucy* is developed in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, set entirely in Dominica, the place of Kincaid's mother's birth and childhood. Xuela narrates the seemingly linear tale of her life from birth to old age from a later perspective, allowing her to illustrate how her understanding of the meaning and significance of events shifts over time. We see this in the opening lines, where Xuela remarks that she only realized the reality of her circumstances as a motherless child when she was an adult. Xuela also punctuates the narrative with information about her mother's life, so that the present of the narrative action remains anchored to both the past and the future. The first extended discussion of Xuela's mother's life beyond the telling of the circumstances of her death comes in the second chapter of the novel, after Xuela reveals her mother's full name, Xuela Claudette Desvarieux, to the reader (Kincaid, *Autobiography* 79). Xuela shares her mother's first and middle names, while her last name is Richardson, after her father. Her name and her mother's name, Xuela tells us, is "history

recapitulated and abbreviated.” Historically contextualizing names of both people and places, as well as the physical appearances of actors in the novel, becomes a trope through which the present of the novel remains rooted in the past. Dominica as Xuela knows it was shaped by the Carib people who originally inhabited the island, the Europeans who colonized it, and the Africans who were brought to work on it, and this is not a history that Xuela allows to remain uncommented upon. In describing her half-sister Elizabeth, Xuela compares her skin to their father’s, describing it as “a mixture of people—not races, people,” emphasizing their African, French, and Scottish ancestry (Kincaid, *Autobiography* 117).

The telling of Xuela’s father’s birth comes late in the novel, opening its penultimate chapter. While Xuela earlier revealed the similarities between herself and her mother, who was abandoned by her own mother at birth, in the telling of her father’s lineage she reveals the differences between them (Kincaid, *Autobiography* 183). One of the primary differences between Xuela and her father that becomes obvious over the course of the narrative concerns the ways they view the world in which they live. Xuela, who is ever cognizant of the historical circumstances that have shaped Dominica, expresses scorn for her father, a police officer, who appears unaware of the contradictory nature of his power and makes the choice, which Xuela marks as false yet unsurprising, to identify with his Scottish rather than African heritage (Kincaid, *Autobiography* 186; 192). This chapter is significant within the novel as it is the only one that breaks the narrative action and instead digresses for the entirety of the chapter into contextual background on a single character.

Told in retrospect, rather than as the events of her life happened, Xuela’s story exemplifies the impact of time on memory. The persistence of history yet the impossibility of fully accessing it is figured in the image of Xuela’s dead mother’s heels, which appear to Xuela

in her dreams. This is the only glimpse she has of the mother she never knew, yet who is still familiar to Xuela in the memories of her mother she has inherited from others. While Xuela scorns the European history taught in schools, she is drawn to the history of her family members, inextricably tied to the history of the colonizer: “At the age of fourteen...I also knew the history of an array of people I would never meet.... [T]his history of people that I would never meet—Romans, Gauls, Saxons, Britons, the British people—had behind it a malicious intent: to make me feel humiliated, humbled, small” (Kincaid, *Autobiography* 59). While, as we have seen, Xuela disparages her father’s identification with his European ancestors, she recognizes his acknowledgment of her Carib ancestors, as well as evidence of his love for her mother, in his naming of her for her mother. Xuela, like her mother, retains connection to the Carib people, largely eradicated by Europeans and left out of their history, through her name. Xuela realizes the futility of the desire to escape history—“Oh to be such a thing [as the sky, the moon, the stars], to be a part of anything that is outside history, to be a part of something that can deny the wave of the human hand, the beat of the human heart, the gaze of the human eye, human desire itself” (Kincaid, *Autobiography* 218)—a state inaccessible to humans no matter what the historical record reflects. While this novel is not itself transnational, it continually reminds the reader of the transnational origins of Xuela, her family, and Caribbean peoples more generally, and this transnationality is key to accessing and reconfiguring historical memory in the novel.

This emphasis on familial memory continues in *My Brother*, Kincaid’s first non-fiction book-length publication since *A Small Place*. A memoir of her brother built around his death from an AIDS-related illness in 1996, *My Brother* explores death and loss through the lens of memory. The narrative opens with Kincaid seeing her brother Devon for the first time since he’d become ill and moves in time between the period of his illness, their childhood, and the months

following his death; it also moves geographically between the US, where Kincaid lives and works, and Antigua, where Devon lived with Kincaid's mother. Kincaid positions herself as family historian, a role that comes without privilege: "This is what my family, the people I grew up with, hate about me. I always say, Do you remember?" (*My Brother* 19). *My Brother* presents a complexity of emotions and attitudes about her family and their collective history. Recounting that her mother had cut down a lemon tree Devon had planted, erasing evidence of his life from their home, Kincaid writes, "I only now understand why it is that people lie about their past, why they say they are one thing other than the thing they really are, why they invent a self that bears no resemblance to who they really are, why anyone would want to feel as if he or she belongs to nothing, comes from no one, just fell out of the sky, whole" (*My Brother* 12-13). Not remembering her brother and the family they shared, however, becomes an impossible option, as Kincaid realizes in the grief-stricken period that followed Devon's death:

What I am writing now is not a journal; a journal is a daily account, an immediate account of what occurs during a certain time. For a long time after my brother died I could not write about him, I could not think about him in a purposeful way. It was really a short time between the time that he became sick and the time he died, but that time became a world. To make a world takes an eternity, and eternity is the refuge of the lost, the refuge for all things that will never be or things that have been but have lost their course and hope to recede with some grace, and even I believe this to be true, though I also know that I have no real way of measuring it. (*My Brother* 92)

Here, as she will later also do in *Among Flowers*, Kincaid points to the complex relationship between the passing of time and the understanding of experience. Through her memoir, the

constructed history of a period of time in her and her brother's lives, Kincaid is able to make meaning out of emotion. Kincaid realizes this act of memory is not one that everyone—particularly her family—will find pleasant or desirable. She notes that her mother, particularly, resented Kincaid's tendency to remember and tell details of stories she had purposefully left out in her own telling (*My Brother* 75). However, as Kincaid conjectures when discussing the multifaceted nature of her brother's persona, aspects of his life that he revealed to some but not others, “[W]ithout memory what would be left? Nothing? I do not know” (*My Brother* 163). Unable to imagine life without memory, Kincaid resolves to remember in a manner that retains both the pain and the pleasure of the past. It is such confrontation of history as both point of nostalgia and point of agony that is at the center of transnational literary historiography. By imbuing history with emotion—the stuff of domestic everyday lived experience—writers move away from the presumed objectivity of hegemonic Western historiography, which turns horror into heroics, and refigure history in more measured terms.

In the middle of *My Brother* comes an oft-cited passage on British involvement in the Caribbean in which Kincaid considers her brother's contradictory feelings toward the “hero-thieves,” as Kincaid terms them, whose stories have been long celebrated in colonial history (94). While Devon recognized the criminal nature of the deeds of figures like Horatio Nelson, John Hawkes, and Francis Drake, he was also able to look somewhat past the illegality of their acts of conquest and instead get caught up in the excitement of the narrative. Helen Scott writes of this passage, “The very people who plundered and enslaved for profit are now remembered as saviors by the descendants of those whose commodification and exploitation were the source of the profits. In constantly reminding us of this history, the text refuses to participate in the process of euphemization that is central to the saccharin version of the past dealt up in textbooks, tourist

brochures, and pageants” (*Caribbean* 63). Extending Scott’s claim that Kincaid denies figures like Nelson, Hawkes, and Drake the title of hero, even as it is linked to thief, I argue that the text instead participates in the *reinscription* of such figures within the historical narrative of global exploration and the Atlantic slave trade—a narrative that is still being written in reference to recent events.⁵ This reinscription ultimately displaces the supposed objectivity of traditional historiography by revealing that the elevation of Nelson, Hawkes, Drake and the like to the status of hero is in and of itself a subjective move on the part of the historian.

In the lines directly preceding Kincaid’s discussion of the hero-thieves, lines generally not considered by critics in their analyses of the passage, Kincaid reveals an early preference for the subjective over the objective. Here she confesses, “[W]hen I was a little girl, living on that small island, I used to steal books from the library...I would not have wanted to steal a book about history; I stole only novels...I was not interested in history then, only so now” (*My Brother* 94). This childhood disinterest in British history, the history she was taught in school, is one Kincaid expresses in a number of her works. While the texts she discusses place the British at the center of the narrative and largely elide the experiences of Carib Indians and Africans, casting them in a negative light if they are mentioned at all, the history Kincaid imagines as a writer in her adult life takes a very different perspective on the age of exploration and the colonial era, not only inverting the point of view but also refusing to valorize “heroes” and instead emphasizing the lives of uncelebrated figures. This is apparent in Kincaid’s decision not to mention the name of the leader of a slave revolt whose monument she and her brother walk past during one of Kincaid’s visits to see him (*My Brother* 76). As we have seen in Lucy’s referral to Wordsworth’s

⁵ See Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007) or Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993).

“I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” only as “an old poem,” Kincaid’s refusal to name is not confined to *My Brother*; when Kincaid discusses her own memorization of Wordsworth’s poem as a schoolgirl in *My Garden (Book)*:, she does not mention the title, only indicating that it was about daffodils (142). She later says in that text, “I do not like daffodils for a reason that is not at all aesthetic, a reason much more serious than that” (*My Garden* 186). While Kincaid’s omission of the slave revolt leader’s name in *My Brother* functions somewhat differently from her refusal to name Wordsworth in *Lucy* or identify the title of his poem in *My Garden (Book)*:, it does not downplay the significance of the slave revolt but instead resists elevating a single figure above the others involved in the struggle. When she does mention the names of well-known figures, it is generally while problematizing their roles in hegemonic historical discourse, as the passage about the hero-thieves quoted above demonstrates. Through discussion of the shrouded gay community Devon belonged to, which she discovers only after his death, Kincaid demonstrates that her brother’s death is not exceptional. Memory, then, in *My Brother* becomes not about isolating individuals from communities but rather about contextualizing the current state of communities via one or a few of their members. While Devon is the focus of her narrative, Kincaid mobilizes his story to demonstrate how his experiences were not unlike those of many other HIV-positive men in Antigua.

The reinscription of British historical figures within Caribbean history and the intense focus on family continues in Kincaid’s novel *Mr. Potter*. Kincaid makes apparent the coercive violence of history in her discussion of Mr. Potter’s first name, Roderick, in a manner similar to the discussion of English hero-thieves in *My Brother*. Mr. Potter’s mother, Kincaid writes, “loved him, and not knowing what to do with such a thing, this love, she then named him Rodney, after the English maritime criminal George Brydges Rodney, a man whose criminal nature and

accomplishments had become so distorted in retelling that the victims of his actions had come to revere him” (*Mr. Potter* 64). This turning of Rodney, a key military figure in maintaining and extending British control in the Caribbean, into a figure worthy of naming Antiguan children of African origin after is the magic trick official history performs through its pronouncement of objectivity: Rodney is a hero because that is how he is presented in history books. However, Kincaid has already established that Mr. Potter was not unique in being named for a problematic figure in the history of Caribbean peoples. Like Kincaid, who Mr. Potter refused to acknowledge as his, Mr. Potter was an illegitimate child who had a number of half siblings. The names of all of the male children of Nathaniel Potter, Mr. Potter’s father, bear the mark of conquest—“Walter and Roderick and Francis and Joseph and David and Trueheart and John and Benjamin and Baldwin and Mineu and Nigel”—“taken,” as Kincaid writes, “from the history that has been captured in the written word and also from the history of the spoken word” (*Mr. Potter* 48). While Kincaid here acknowledges history as both written and oral, in this text she most clearly develops her consideration of the role of the *writer* within historical discourse. We see this focus emerge in the first few pages of the novel, as Kincaid breaks from the narrative to comment on its structure. Having just introduced Mr. Potter’s new employer, Dr. Weizenger, whose ship Mr. Potter was meeting at the dock, Kincaid explains why the next paragraph begins “When Mr. Potter first saw Dr. Weizenger” rather than with a sentence in which Dr. Weizenger is the subject:

This sentence should begin with Dr. Weizenger emerging, getting off the launch that has brought him from his ship which is lying in the deep part of the harbor, but this is Mr. Potter’s life and so Dr. Weizenger must never begin a sentence; I am not making an authorial decision, or a narrative decision, I only say this

because it is so true: Mr. Potter's life is his own and no one else should take precedence. (*Mr. Potter* 8-9)

Here Kincaid implicitly implicates historians who cast Europeans as the central figures and agents of historical accounts of the non-Western world as deviating from a narrative form in which the focus of the story—fictive or historical—remains on the declared subject. Kincaid inverts the form that has become so commonplace—the form of the colonial history with which Kincaid grew up—that places Europeans, particularly Columbus, in the subject position and instead moves them to the object position. In so doing, Europeans are not elided from the narrative but they are not the primary actors either. What is particularly compelling about this metacommentary is Kincaid's insistence that she is not manipulating the narrative form at a syntactical level to suit her needs, and by pointing this out, she draws attention to the means by which history has been mediated in order to maintain power differentials via who is in the subject position and who is in the object position.

Throughout *Mr. Potter* Kincaid makes reference to her role as author of her father's narrative. Illiterate, Mr. Potter was unable to write his own history, and Kincaid is not unaware of the power she exercises in writing it for him:

Roderick Potter...was my father but he could not read or write, he only made me and I can read and I am also writing all of this at this very moment; at this very moment I am thinking of [Roderick's father] Nathaniel Potter and I can place my thoughts about him and all that he was and all that he could have been into words.

These are all words, all of them, these words are my own. (*Mr. Potter* 48)

Part of the power of writing another person's history, of course, involves presenting what the subject could not see about him or herself. Kincaid presents her father as possessing a narrower

worldview than her own, something she does not fault him for but rather attributes to his class position:

[H]ow indifferent to the world's turbulence was Mr. Potter for he too had memory, something so essential to human existence; but how indifferent to the world's turbulence was Mr. Potter; he could not imagine or know of his importance to all the turbulence in the world, how necessary he was to the world of silks and gems and fields of cotton and fields of sugarcane and displacement and longing for places from which mere people had been displaced and the flourishing centers of cities and the peaceable outlay of villages. (*Mr. Potter* 116)

Because Mr. Potter's knowledge of empire and global capitalism was more limited than Kincaid's, she presents him as unable to position himself within a global imaginary, as she does in this passage. This contextualization is a primary objective of authors of transnational literary historiography, who are uniquely positioned within the self-consciously globalized late twentieth century. Throughout *Mr. Potter* Kincaid links memory not only to immediate personal experience but also to knowledge gleaned in other ways. In a later passage in which she describes her mother and father's relationship, one she never witnessed firsthand, Kincaid writes,

And in my mind, I turn over Mr. Potter and Annie Victoria Richardson, and they are in my memory, though that does seem an impossibility, that I could have known them before I was born of the two of them, and yet it is so: I have in my mind a memory of them from before the time they became my mother and father...I see them in particularity and I see them as specters, possibilities of the real, possibilities of the real as it pertains to me. (*Mr. Potter* 137)

By drawing attention to herself as the author of the account of Mr. Potter's life and, as such, constructing his narrative via sources other than Mr. Potter himself, Kincaid acknowledges both the potentialities and the limitations of her situation. This is perhaps why, unlike Devon's story, Kincaid writes *Mr. Potter* as a novel rather than a memoir or biography. Regardless of genre, however, Kincaid emphasizes the "possibilities of the real" that her various sources of information make available, including the possibility to "remove [Mr. Potter] from the great and everlasting silence" to which colonial historiography would have relegated him (*Mr. Potter* 178).

Kincaid points to both her position as "living in a city that was between thirty and forty-five degrees north of the equator" (165) and the fact that she "can read and can write" (178) as the reasons she is able to recuperate her father from historical erasure. The impact of writing is a theme Kincaid often explores in her texts, and at several moments she characterizes writing as life changing and even life saving. Xuela, upon writing her first letter, the discovery of which leads to public humiliation, makes this realization: "I had, through the use of some words, changed my situation.... From this unfocused, childish expression of pain, my life was changed and I took note of it" (Kincaid, *Autobiography* 22). In the concluding pages of *My Brother*, Kincaid tells the reader what had prompted her to write in the first place: "When I heard about my brother's illness and his dying, I knew, instinctively, that to understand his dying, and not to die with him, I would write about it" (196). The act of recording and interpreting memory that constitutes Kincaid's writing can never be exclusive to one subject, as is reflected in all of Kincaid's texts in which she cannot tell her family members' stories without telling her own, or vice versa. She expresses this most clearly and poignantly in *My Brother*:

I am remembering the life of my brother, I am remembering my own life, or at least a part of my own life, for my own life is still ongoing, I hope, and each

moment of its present shapes its past and each moment of its present will shape its future and even so influence the way I see its future; and the knowledge of all this leaves me with the feeling: And what now, and so, yes, what now. *What now!*

(italics original 167)

This act of remembering that influences not only the present but the past as well—the inability to permanently fix historical meaning in writing—is the narrative project of Kincaid’s work and of transnational literary historiography more generally, as we will see throughout my study.

Kincaid often muses about the function of memory and its role in the present, and the scope of Kincaid’s vision is not limited to the historical and geographic locations of her family. In her two most recently published book-length works, *My Garden (Book)*: and *Among Flowers*, Kincaid explores the subject of historiography most closely, considering how it is that history comes to be written. Kincaid poses history and memory as inextricable from one another and considers how memory impacts past events: “Memory is a gardener’s real palette; memory as it summons up the past, memory as it shapes the present, memory as it dictates the future” (*My Garden* 219). The garden is the primary focus of both texts—not simply Kincaid’s own garden in Vermont but gardens throughout history, art, and literature—including the Garden of Eden, the greenhouses in which Linnaeus developed the binomial naming system for plants, and Monet’s garden at Giverny made famous in his paintings—and creating the garden becomes an alternate way of reinscribing and understanding history. As Kathleen Balutansky writes of Kincaid’s *New Yorker* gardening columns that ran in the 1990s, which were the fodder for *My Garden (Book)*:

Gardening was always a point of departure for reflections about personal, cultural, and historical issues, but gardening was never merely a metaphoric frame.

Beyond reflections on identity, history, and imperialism, the columns always

marked a reverence for the specific botanical history of individual species and a real gardener's love of plants. There were real seeds arriving in the mail, real vegetables growing in the garden, real flowers blooming in the beds. (800)

In writing about gardening and the connections it allows her to make between her own past and that of imperialism, Kincaid demonstrates that history is an exercise in memory, and that it is possible to have memories of events at which the writer was not, nor possibly could have been, present. Such memories of events that the author did not witness are constructed in multiple ways, including via the cultural significance the events have had in the writer's community and how the events have been incorporated into family narratives. Both historiography and gardening function as a way of organizing these memories into a comprehensible order: "This was not the last time that I came to realize that the garden itself was a way of accommodating and making acceptable, comfortable, familiar, the wild, the strange" (Kincaid, *Among* 44). Interestingly, Kincaid writes in *My Garden (Book)*: that the shapes into which she tilled her garden beds were unconventional and only after some time did she realize that they bore similarity to the islands of the Caribbean (7-8). In describing her garden beds, Kincaid uses the term "resembled"; she makes no claims that the shapes of her garden beds are an accurate representation of a map of the Caribbean. What Kincaid makes clear in her discussion of her garden throughout *My Garden (Book)*: is that gardening is a vexing exercise in which the gardener attempts to impose order on plants that continually rebel against her efforts. Just as Kincaid's writing does not follow an established form—and in fact eschews such forms—neither does her garden. Her work on the page and in the garden is at times fraught with the impossibility of the project of history in which she is constantly engaged: to re-member, in essence to reconstruct, the past and make sense of that which is impossible to fully comprehend.

In *My Garden (Book)*;, in which her focus travels from the US to the Caribbean to Europe to China, Kincaid demonstrates how the garden becomes a microcosm of the centuries-long and still-developing history of colonization and neoimperialism that cannot be entirely parsed out geographically or nationally but must instead be constellated:

This is how my garden began; then again, it would not be at all false to say that just at that moment I was reading a book and that book (written by the historian William Prescott) happened to be about the conquest of Mexico, or New Spain, as it was then called, and I came upon the flower called marigold and the flower called dahlia and the flower called zinnia, and after that the garden was to me more than the garden as I used to think about it. After that the garden was also something else. (6)

The “something else” that the garden becomes for Kincaid is in part a living record of the history of colonization. The flowers in her Vermont garden arrived there due to the penchant of colonizing nations to both spread their native flora to the areas they claimed as their own, and plants in colonized lands—such as the dahlia, known in pre-Columbian Aztec society as cocoxochitl and valued for both its beauty and its use in treating urinary-tract disorders (Kincaid, *My Garden* 118)—have been renamed by Europeans and largely stripped of their significance to their environments of origin. As Kincaid writes, “[T]he fact is that the world cannot be left out of the garden” (*My Garden* 82); this is because there is so much of the world in the garden.

Although Kincaid’s work on the garden brings to light much about its ties to colonialism, it also illuminates gardening as a fundamentally domestic endeavor, and Kincaid’s own foray into horticulture was initiated by a Mother’s Day gift of some gardening tools and flower seeds (*My Garden* 1). Just as imperialism deeply impacted the domestic, not simply the political, realities of

colonized subjects, it is through domestic spaces and units—like the garden and, as I have already discussed, the family—that authors of transnational literary historiography can access and reinscribe the past.

This idea that history makes itself visible in ways other than on the written page seems to transform the way Kincaid conceptualizes history in her writing. We can see early evidence of this change in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, written around the time Kincaid began to garden, in which Xuela characterizes gardening as an “act of conquest” (143). While in her previous texts history is primarily, albeit not exclusively, constructed through the lives of her characters, in her later work the garden becomes her primary focus. Of the realization that the flowers in her Vermont garden and the flowers with which she was familiar as a child in Antigua were largely not native to either place, Kincaid writes, “[T]he garden is for me an exercise in memory, a way of remembering my own immediate past, a way of getting to a past that is my own (the Caribbean Sea) and the past as it is indirectly related to me (the conquest of Mexico and its surroundings)” (*My Garden* 8). Memory, the foundation of history, is transmitted in myriad ways, and Kincaid recognizes the importance of incorporating not only written record—the preferred medium of hegemonic Western historians—but also spoken and bodily memory into any account that claims to be historical. In the chapter “In History” in *My Garden (Book)*: Kincaid offers the following consideration: “What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me? Should I call it history? And if so, what should history mean to someone who looks like me? Should it be an idea; should it be an open wound, each breath I take and expel healing and opening the wound again, over and over, or is it a long moment that begins anew each day since 1492?” (166). This passage, as well as the title of the chapter, indicates that history is something we are always a part of and to which there is no outside. Ania Loomba, et al.

write in the introduction to *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* that the globalization resulting from the hegemony of neoliberalism requires us to “recapture a history of transoceanic and transcontinental trade, travel, and conquest so as to avoid a shallow embrace of the contemporary notion of the global” (4). Both Gordon and Young discuss history as haunting and the embodied awareness of the presence of the past, drawing on African diasporic literature to demonstrate their claims. Gordon describes “sensuous knowledge” as an “embodied” apprehension that perceives haunting (205), while Young maintains that “ghosts...embody those stories about the relationships between power, knowledge, and experience that have been repressed” (11). Through the metaphor of the deep wound, Kincaid posits the importance of this concept in literature and initiates a literary form—transnational literary historiography—that is spatially and temporally wide-ranging, capturing the historical past while simultaneously directing attention to the iterations of this history in the present.

Historiography is not simply the writing of history but also the examination of how history is written. Although Kincaid’s recent travelogue *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* delves less deeply into historical specifics than her earlier works, I read it as a meditation on historiography at the level of the personal. Kincaid wrote *Among Flowers* months after returning from a seed-gathering trip to Nepal, and this temporal distance between the experience and her recording of it greatly informs the work. Kincaid makes no pretensions that she is composing a record of her trip that captures it in memory unmarked by what came before or after it, and she periodically muses on how physical, temporal, and even emotional distance from the events of the trip affect her memories of it. Of the feeling of displacement international travel brings about, Kincaid writes: “I only know all of this in retrospect, in sitting at my desk in Vermont and thinking about it, in looking back” (*Among* 11). Although the gap between the experiences of the

trip and the writing of them is brief, Kincaid analyzes the effect of time on memory. In recounting her mood the morning after having camped in a field full of leeches in order to avoid interrogation by local Maoists, Kincaid remembers, “I remained deeply in the experience of the night before: The Moon, The Leeches, The Landslides, The Escape from the Maoists, all of it capitalized” (*Among* 92). For Kincaid, the events of that day and night are heightened and laden with significance because they, up until she experienced them, had lain outside her field of experience. This echoes Kincaid’s interpretation in *My Garden (Book)*: of Christopher Columbus’s writing of his travels to the Caribbean:

[T]his word “marvelous” is the word he uses again and again, and when he uses it, what the reader (and this is what I have been, a reader of this account of a journey, and the account is by Columbus himself) can feel, can hear, can see, is a great person whose small soul has been surrendered by something unexpected. And yet the unexpected turns out to be the most ordinary thing: people, the sky, the sun, the land, the water surrounding the land, the things growing on the land. (157)

Importantly, Kincaid is not particularly vexed by the association of the term “discovery” with Columbus’s travels in the Caribbean: “That it is new only to him, that it had a substantial existence, physical and spiritual, before he became aware of it, does not occur to him. To cast blame on him now for this is childish, immature, small-minded.... When he sees this new world, it is really new to him; he has never seen anything like it before” (*My Garden* 155). Rather, it is the ownership he claims for himself and Spain, through naming Antigua and the other Caribbean islands he landed on or passed by, with which Kincaid takes issue—as well as historians’ extrapolation of what was new to Columbus to being an area without history. Unlike Columbus,

however, the space of time between her travels in Nepal and her writing about them allows Kincaid to recognize why skirting contact with Maoists and sleeping in a leech field struck her as so extraordinary, worthy of capitalization in her journal. Later in the text, Kincaid recalls observing a Nepalese cow herder for the second time in a few days, which causes her to reconsider those events that initially seemed so exceptional: “I recognized the herder as the same one we had seen days ago just at the time of the leech field when we were trying to avoid the Maoists. And this made me understand that while each day had seemed new and separate not continuous with the day before, for some people, for the people living there, life, each day, was connected into one whole” (*Among* 124). Already the significance of the earlier events of the trip has waned, indicated by Kincaid no longer marking them with capital letters. Kincaid’s recognition of how her own experience of her time in Nepal differs greatly from the experiences of those around her is of vital importance to her work and, while she emphasizes the effects that the historical reality of colonization and conquest have had on collective groups, she is careful to recognize the subjective ways those events are viewed in the present.

Authors of transnational literary historiography, self-reflexively writing about the past in the present, exploit the space for aesthetic experimentation that literature allows in order to posit a subjective and personal perspective on history not available in works that claim themselves as such. Rather than being caught up in accurately reconstructing the past based on documented *events*, works of transnational literary historiography attend to historical *significances*, particularly as they bear on the present of the text. For, after all, the Western history Kincaid criticizes is predicated on differential significance: “[S]omeone else’s ordinary dreariness is another person’s epiphany” (*My Garden* 156). In a discussion of the binomial naming system for plants developed by Linnaeus, Kincaid writes that the “new plants from far away [to which

Linnaeus gave names], like the people from far away, had no history, no names, and so they could be given names” (*My Garden* 122). The true issue with “discovery” that Kincaid illuminates is the underlying assumption that what is discovered did not exist prior to being seen by the discoverer. Such assumption results in the creation of false origins, and, while not attempting to posit true origins, Kincaid’s writing puts forth other options. As Braziel argues, “Though all origins are based in myth and history, Kincaid shows that some origins, some myths, some histories are more accessible than others” (6). The simultaneous existence of multiple histories is something Kincaid has addressed: “‘To me the truth is that things mean many things at once, and all of them opposed to each other, and all of them true’” (quoted in Gregg 921). Kincaid’s texts, all of them to some extent auto/biographical, demonstrate the impact of the storyteller on the narrative. Elaine Cynthia Potter, the narrator of *Mr. Potter* who bears the same birth name as Kincaid, claims this inevitable impact of the storyteller on the story when she tells the reader, “I...managed to acquire the ability to read and the ability to write and in this way I make Mr. Potter and in this way I unmake Mr. Potter, and apart from the fact that he is now dead, he is unable to affect the portrait of him I am rendering here, the scenes on the bolt of cloth as he appears in them: the central figure” (158). This is not, for Kincaid or other authors of transnational literary historiography, a problematic limit to the historical possibilities offered by literary genres such as fiction, auto/biography, memoir, and travelogue. As Kincaid writes of achieving the garden she imagines, “[C]ertain things can never be realized and so all the more reason to attempt them” (*My Garden* 220). We can apply Kincaid’s statement to the historical project, which can never produce complete and true history. This fact is what makes fiction an ideal venue to attempt such an impossible feat.

Chapter Three: The Fictional Travelogue in Transnational Literary Historiography: Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*

[T]he more I studied the huge corpus of travel literature written by Europeans over two hundred and fifty years, the more aware I became of the participants whose voices I wasn't hearing. There was a huge gap in the archive. What had the people who received these visitors thought of them and the imperial designs they brought with them? How and in what forms of expression had they interpreted the historical process they were living?

—Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* 5

To write as a complete Caribbean woman, or man for that matter, demands of us retracing the African part of ourselves, reclaiming as our own, and as our subject, a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the cane fields, or gone to bush, or trapped in a class system notable for its rigidity and absolute dependence on color stratification. Our past bleached from our minds...It means realizing our knowledge will always be wanting.

—Michelle Cliff, *The Land of Look Behind* 14

In this chapter I read Michelle Cliff's 1987 novel *No Telephone to Heaven* as a fictional travelogue that illuminates the ways in which neoliberal powers capitalize on the colonial past to continue economic imperialism, often via the travel industry, into the future. Travel writing, as Mary Louise Pratt elucidates, emerges as a genre in the mid eighteenth century as European colonization expanded from a maritime to interior venture (11). According to Pratt, as an imperialist genre, "Travel books...gave European reading publics a sense of ownership, entitlement and familiarity with respect to the distant parts of the world that were being explored, invaded, invested in, and colonized" (3). The goals of the travelogue in neocolonial era remain similar, as Carl Thompson notes in his discussion of recent criticism: "[P]roducing images of the Other that reassure Western readers not only of their superiority over the rest of the world, but also of their moral right to that sense of superiority...travel writing remains a genre thoroughly enmeshed in, and contributive to, the neo-colonial networks of power and inequality by which the West maintains its current global dominance" (155). As a fictional travelogue, *No Telephone*

to Heaven employs a fictionalized cast of actors within historically accurate geopolitical settings, exploring the connectivities between them. Cliff's text contains the tale of a journey within a journey in a reverse frame style: The novel's larger travel plot obviously triangulates protagonist Clare Savage's life journey from her birthplace of Jamaica to the US and then Europe (primarily England), and back to Jamaica, where she ultimately dies. This broader narrative is framed by the journey of Clare and the Jamaican revolutionary group she joins as they travel by truck to the scene of their death in a thwarted guerrilla attack on an American film set.¹ Focusing primarily on Clare's travels between Jamaica, the US, and Europe in *No Telephone to Heaven*, I argue that Cliff adopts and adapts the travelogue form, liberating it from its colonial roots, in order to both write history from a Jamaican point of view and demonstrate how this history has brought about the crisis of neoliberalism in the 1980s that Cliff exposes in the novel.

Early criticism on Cliff's first novel, *Abeng*, published in 1984, and *No Telephone to Heaven* has focused on identity—particularly creolism, hybridity, and multicultural subjectivity.² Certainly this is a deep concern in both novels. The three primary descriptions of Clare in *No Telephone to Heaven* all emphasize her multifaceted identifications: "A light-skinned woman, daughter of landowners, native-born, slaves, emigrés, Carib, Ashanti, English" (5); "There are many bits and pieces to her, for she is composed of fragments" (87); "She is white. Black. Female. Lover. Beloved. Daughter. Traveler. Friend. Scholar. Terrorist. Farmer" (91). While the exploration of identity is certainly an important aspect of Cliff's work, I am particularly interested in Cliff's manipulation of form to write history. *No Telephone to Heaven* is a sequel to

¹ The first, second, fourth, and sixth chapters of the novel, as well as the last section of the eleventh and final chapter, all open with narration concerning the revolutionary group's travels in the truck.

² See as example Edmonson, MacDonald-Smythe, S. Smith ("Memory"), and Lionnet.

Abeng. Critics predominantly read Abeng as a bildungsroman, although Antonia MacDonald-Smythe argues it is a *Kunstlerroman* (32), a subgenre of the bildungsroman that concerns the protagonist's artistic development, and Wendy Walters contends it is an antibildungsroman "because the type of education Clare receives is fragmented and multiple and does not progress toward a stable whole at the end of the novel" (28). The genre of *No Telephone to Heaven* is less critically agreed upon; it has been read as a postcolonial postmodern novel (J. Smith, Raiskin), "hybrid narrative" (Sethuraman 252), bildungsroman (Lima, S. Smith in "Memory"), and reworked bildungsroman that problematizes "[t]he development of an autonomous ethical subject" (Moynagh 120). Fiona Barnes discusses *No Telephone to Heaven* as a "hybrid literary form" rooted in both the bildungsroman and the postcolonial "'been-to' narrative, in which the protagonist travels to the center of empire and back, thus gaining a privileged perspective on her country's status in the global power system, but also frequently becoming alienated from both indigenous and imperial cultures in the process" (29). Here Barnes comes the closest of any critic to reading *No Telephone to Heaven* as a travel narrative. However, in its insistence on the significance of the bildungs, Barnes's analysis still foregrounds the interior, personal development of the protagonist rather than the significance of her transnational movement. I argue that reading *No Telephone to Heaven* not as a bildungsroman but instead as a fictional travelogue helps reveal the ways in which Cliff connects contemporary geopolitics with the history of empire, rather than focuses on the development of the individual.

Much has been written about Cliff's engagement with history, particularly women's/matrilineal history, in all of her writing.¹ It is important to note that Cliff is a historian; she holds

¹ See as example Edmonson, Lionnet, Sethuraman, and J. Smith.

a Master's degree in philosophy from the Warburg Institute, University of London, where she wrote her thesis on the Italian Renaissance (Brice-Finch).² Cliff notes, "I started out as an historian, I did my graduate work in history. I've always been struck by the misrepresentation of history and have tried to correct received versions of history, especially the history of resistance. It seems to me that if one does not know that one's people have resisted, then it makes resistance difficult" (Adisa 280). Like Cliff, in *No Telephone to Heaven* Clare also studies Renaissance history at the University of London (117, 193) and later looks both to and beyond academic training when investigating the history of Jamaica. According to Clare during her entrance interview with the leader of the Jamaican revolutionary group,

"I have educated myself since my return. Spoken with the old people...leafed through the archives downtown...spent time at the university library...one thing leads to another. I have studied the conch knife excavated at the Arawak site in White Marl...the shards of hand-thrown pots...the petroglyphs hidden in the bush...listened to the stories about Nanny and taken them to heart. I have seen the flock of white birds fly out at sunset from Nannytown...duppies, the old people say." (Cliff, *No Telephone* 193)

Cliff also, despite her emphasis on oral history in both *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, demonstrates a continued allegiance to academia in her choice of sources to preface the opening chapter of *No Telephone to Heaven*. Situated at the bottom of the title page to the chapter "Ruininate" is a quote from B. Floyd's *Jamaica: An Island Microcosm* discussing ruininate as a "distinctive Jamaican term...used to describe lands which were once cleared for agricultural

² Some biographies report Cliff holds a Ph.D. in philosophy, though the Gale biography cited here seems most authoritative. Thanks to Madeleine Monson-Rosen for locating the source.

purposes and have now lapsed back into ...‘bush’” (Cliff, *No Telephone* 1). The narrative does not specify any details about Floyd, a British geographer whose areas of specialization, according to him, include “African studies, with particular focus upon rural land use in the tropics” (11). Beginning the opening chapter with such a resource on ruinate, a term unique to Jamaica and easily describable from a Jamaican point of view—in fact, a word the narrator claims Clare’s grandmother would have used (Cliff, *No Telephone* 8)—subtly points to a central tension in the novel surrounding Cliff’s and Clare’s struggle between their academic training in historiography and allegiance to other ways of knowing, particularly lived experience. The citation is also unique in that it is the only scholarly citation in the novel. Directly preceding the citation is an excerpt from Derek Walcott’s poem “Laventille,” which serves as the epigraph to the novel, and the other chapter epigraphs are all literary.³ The placement of the citation on ruinate at the bottom of the chapter title page also differs from the positioning of the other epigraphs in the novel, which accompany many of the chapters and are otherwise placed directly below the title.⁴ Placing the definition of ruinate at the bottom of the page situates it more as a non-numbered footnote than an epigraph, meant to provide supplemental information rather than ground the chapter in a literary or cultural context. Because Floyd is a historical figure, it also serves to root the novel in reality. In her 1991 article “Caliban’s Daughter,” in which she references her Clare Savage novels, Cliff discusses ruinate in her own words:

The civilizer works against the constant danger of the forest, of a
landscape ruinate, gone to ruination.

³ These epigraphs include selections from the works of Aimé Césaire, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dionne Brand, and Derek Walcott, as well as Yoruban hymns and a Jamaican proverb.

⁴ The Yoruban hymn that appears above the first paragraph of Chapter IX “De Watchman” rather than on the title page is the only exception, and is so placed because the hymn is directly referenced in the first sentence of the chapter.

*Ruin*ate, the adjective, and *ruination*, the noun, are Jamaican inventions.

Each word signifies the reclamation of land, the disruption of cultivation, civilization, by the uncontrolled, uncontrollable forest. When a landscape becomes ruinate, carefully designed aisles of cane are envined, strangled, the order of empire is replaced by the chaotic forest. The word *ruination* (especially) signifies this immediately; it contains both the word *ruin*, and *nation*. A landscape in ruination means one in which the imposed nation is overcome by the naturalness of ruin. (40)

Cliff's explanation of ruination is more historically referential than Floyd's; however, Cliff includes Floyd's definition without comment or inflection of irony. It serves simply as explanation of the title of the novel's first chapter. This use of a secondary source at the beginning of the novel, which is otherwise free of academic citations, signals to the reader that the novel is not dismissive of scholarship despite its obvious project of correcting the historical record.

Although Floyd is the only academic quoted in the novel, *No Telephone to Heaven* is deeply concerned with historiography and historical representation. According to Cliff, the novel's "subject is the political upheavals of the past twenty years," and in it she has "mixed time and incident and space and character and also form to try to mirror the historical turbulence" (*Land* 14). Despite being set within a roughly twenty-year time period, the novel has a much broader historical scope: colonial and pre-colonial time is frequently referenced throughout the text. The concluding scene of *No Telephone to Heaven* reveals the truck's destination: an American movie set in a Jamaican valley surrounded by bush (206). The movie being made repackages the history of Maroon rebellion against colonial slavery in Jamaica

according to hegemonic Western standards, featuring inaccurate portrayals of historical heroes Nanny and Cudjoe, who are prominent figures in Cliff's Clare Savage novels. Nanny the warrior, who the narrator tell us is generally characterized in Jamaican descriptions as "Old. Dark. Small," is played by "the elegant actress" who is "called in whenever someone was needed to play a Black heroine, any Black heroine, whether Sojourner Truth or Bessie Smith" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 206). Cudjoe, "small humpbacked soul" according to the narrator, is played by a "strapping" actor who appears to be a "former heavyweight or running back" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 206). The film's narrative turns Nanny and Cudjoe's resistance into a love story of rescue in which Cudjoe saves Nanny from Sasabonsam, a "Forest God" according to the narrator and "monster" according to the movie director (Cliff, *No Telephone* 206). Sasabonsam is played by Christopher/De Watchman, who is dressed in a "suit of long red hair, fiery, thick" and instructed by the narrator, "Remember, you're not human" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 207). The revolutionary group's choice of the movie set as their target in protest of neoliberal policies in Jamaica demonstrates their disgust with the Western resignification of colonial history in the neoliberal age. As Jennifer Smith argues, "In *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, restoring the history of Nanny importantly recovers a particularly gendered instance in Jamaican history marginalized by colonial and neocolonial discourses" (153). We hear a crew member's call to the actors to "make it real" juxtaposed by the narrator's observation that attention to historical detail "was out of the question, given these people even knew the truth" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 206). *No Telephone to Heaven*, like *Abeng*, not only seeks to establish Jamaican history from a non-exploitative perspective, but also makes apparent the means by which Jamaican history has been and continues to be misrepresented by Western cultural producers in order to help maintain global imbalances of power. That the two men who lead the film crew are American and British

further strengthens the novel's emphasis on the continuation of colonialism under the guise of neoliberalism.

Cliff's use of the fictional travelogue form in *No Telephone to Heaven* also highlights the relationship of formal colonialism to neoliberalism. Within the geographically and temporally nonlinear narrative of the novel—which begins and ends in Jamaica with thirty-six-year-old Clare Savage and the revolutionary group she joins—there are several major periods of focus in Clare's life between 1960 and 1982/3:⁵ Clare's teenage years as a high school and college student in the US; Clare as a twenty-something visiting Jamaica on holiday from graduate school in London; Clare as a twenty-something in the UK as a graduate student and traveling continental Europe after she has left her graduate program; and Clare in her early thirties in Jamaica. We are given the following explanation of Clare's decision to travel to London, the third point in her triangular journey, following the death of her estranged mother: "Clare Savage began her life-alone. Choosing London with the logic of a creole. This was the mother-country. The country by whose grace her people existed in the first place. Her place could be here. America behind her, way station. This was natural" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 109). Within these periods the focus of the narrative deviates to follow the stories of those Clare is closest to at the time: her mother, Kitty, and father, Boy; Harry/Harriet, Clare's friend in Jamaica who transitions from male to female over the course of the narrative; and Bobby, Clare's boyfriend, who is a Vietnam veteran and her traveling companion in Europe. The narrative also diverges to focus on

⁵ Both *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven* establish Clare's birth year as 1946. In *No Telephone to Heaven*, Clare dies at age thirty-six, though the year is unspecified. Curiously, the novel's final intertext is a *New York Times* piece on Jamaica from 1984 that stands alone between a narrative break, uncommented on by the narrator or other actors in the text (Cliff, *No Telephone* 200).

Paul H., who Clare meets at a party the night before he is murdered, and Christopher, Paul H.'s murderer, whose life intersects with Clare's at several key points although they are never acquainted. Most of the secondary actors in the novel are, like Clare, travelers of different kinds: Kitty and Boy move with their daughters from Jamaica to the US, though Kitty leaves the marriage and returns to Jamaica with Clare's younger sister only a few years later; Harry/Harriet leaves Kingston with Clare to move with the rebel group to Clare's grandmother's land in a rural part of the country, and he is on the truck with Clare en route to the film set; Bobby is an Army deserter from Alabama who now roams Europe itinerantly. As James Clifford, who paraphrases anthropologist Christina Turner's cautioning, reminds us, "[I]t's a mistake...to insist on literal 'travel.' This begs too many questions and overly restricts the important issue of how subjects are culturally 'located.' It would be better to stress different modalities of inside-outside connection, recalling that the travel, or displacement, can involve forces that pass powerfully through—television, radio, tourists, commodities, armies" (28). In addition to the literal travelers, *No Telephone to Heaven* includes many examples of such inside-outside connections that those who remain in Jamaica experience as a result of transnational circulation. The novel moves with the actors, spanning time and space in a nonlinear manner, a feature of both some postcolonial and postmodern literature, which is at once disorienting for the reader and representative of the global circulation of people in the neoliberal present.

While there are a great deal of travelers and travel in the novel, *No Telephone to Heaven* does not follow many genre conventions of travel writing, and Cliff's use of the form is more subtle than overt—perhaps why other critics have not read the novel as a fictional travelogue. This divergence from genre conventions is not immediately apparent, however. There is a rapid

jump from the academic formality of the novel's opening page with its definition of ruinate,⁶ a botanical phenomenon that exists only in Jamaica, and the tourist-like perspective that dominates the first few paragraphs. Before we realize that the people riding in the back of the truck are not in fact tourists, although they are on a journey, the narration evokes a feeling of unfamiliarity for the reader:

It was a hot afternoon after a day of solid heavy rain. Rain which had drenched them and seemed not to have finished with them, but only to have taken itself off somewhere to return soon, replenished, with a new strength. The promise of another deluge was suspended in the afternoon half-light. The sun—hanging somewhere behind the sky, somewhere they could not find it—was unable to dry the roadbed or the thick foliage along the mountainside, so the surface stayed slick-wet, making driving a trial. (Cliff, *No Telephone* 3)

Sidonie Smith argues of eighteenth-century European male travel writing:

[T]ravel narrators chronicled experiences of sublime encounter with landscape, an encounter through which they celebrated the intensity of sensuality released from the bourgeois constraints forced upon the European body at home...Because the sublime landscape upon which the traveler gazed was often perceived to be a pristine landscape, one not ruined by the artificial marks of civilization, the sight lifted the traveler out of historical time. Temporarily he felt himself shed the debilitating consciousness that separated him from nature and from the pure

⁶ Floyd's *Jamaica: An Island Microcosm* has reach beyond academia. Harry S. Pariser, in his 1990 text *Jamaica: A Visitor's Guide*, describes Floyd's work as a "[c]oncise description of island realities" (227).

sensations of his body and found himself absorbed by a primal sense of oneness with the landscape. (*Moving* 8)

The narration of *No Telephone to Heaven* continues in this seemingly sublime manner for several more paragraphs, describing a truck wending its way up a mountain, barely staying on the road around tight curves, and emphasizing the condition of the “narrow, loosely graveled road” (Cliff, *No Telephone* 3-4) before shifting focus to the truck’s passengers. In showing us the group of people traveling on the truck before announcing Clare’s presence, rather than focusing on Clare and panning out to the larger group, the narrator signals that the dynamic at work in the novel is collective.

Although the narrator’s descriptions of the Jamaican countryside and weather fit with the style of travel writing, the narrative voice is entirely third person,⁷ an important difference from most travel writing, both fictional and non-fictional. The third-person perspective shifts throughout the novel, providing us with the vantage point of multiple actors while creating the polyvocal feel of other works of transnational literary historiography.⁸ As Thompson notes in *Travel Writing*, a scholarly introduction to the genre:

[T]he narrative offered by a travel book will almost invariably be a retrospective, first-person account of the author’s own experience of a journey, or of an unfamiliar place or people. What is more, the personal or subjective aspect of that narrative is often very pronounced, as we are made keenly aware not just of the places being visited, but also of the author’s response to that place, and his or her impressions, thoughts and feelings. For this reason, Paul Fussell suggests that the

⁷ *Abeng* is also told in the third person.

⁸ I am thinking here particularly of Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker*, and Cristina García’s *Monkey Hunting*.

form is best regarded as “a sub-species of memoir in which the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker’s encounter with distant or unfamiliar data, and in which the narrative—unlike that in a novel or a romance—claims literal validity by constant reference to actuality.” (14)

Consistent with Fussell’s claims about travel writing, *No Telephone to Heaven*’s fictional plot is set within a historically faithful Jamaica, to which the novel continually draws attention. *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Abeng*—which, although I do not discuss it in detail in this project, also belongs to the genre of transnational literary historiography—also differ from most other works of transnational literary historiography, which are predominantly told in the first person.⁹ It is notable that Cliff employs the third person in *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, as both novels are semi-autobiographical. The third-person perspective creates a certain narrative distance between Cliff and Clare, whose lives parallel each other in many ways. Of Clare Savage, Cliff has written: “She is not an autobiographical character, but an amalgam of myself and others. Eventually, she becomes herself alone. Bertha Rochester is among her ancestors” (“Caliban’s Daughter” 43). Dionne Brand, whose work I discuss more fully below, posits, “To have one’s belonging lodged in a metaphor is voluptuous intrigue; to inhabit a trope; to be a kind of fiction. To live in the Black Diaspora is I think to live as a fiction—a creation of empires, and also self-creation. It is to be a being living inside and outside of herself” (18). The third-person narration of *No Telephone to Heaven*, particularly in its shifting focus, both

⁹ See as example Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy*, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, *My Garden (Book)*; and *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*; Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo*; Danticat’s *The Farming of Bones*, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, and *Brother, I’m Dying*. Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, written in the second person, is a notable exception to both travel writing and transnational literary historiography.

highlights the fictional qualities of the novel and manipulates the genre conventions of travel writing to remove emphasis from the individual.

While subverting focus on the individual traveler, Cliff also refigures the impulse of travel writing to define cultures against one another. Simon Gikandi argues that authors of nineteenth-century English travel writing on the West Indies defined themselves, and through themselves English culture in general, in opposition to those they encountered in their travels (“Englishness” 51). However, such authors’ observations were rooted in preconceived ideas of the West Indian “Other”: “[W]hat we have are narratives in which the ethnographic act—the gesture of travel, learning, and discovery—is sublimated to the imperial fantasy and mythos” (Gikandi, “Englishness” 64). Rather than presenting Jamaicans and foreign tourists as diametrically opposed, *No Telephone to Heaven* explores the relationship between their cultures, both historically and at present. Clare’s own ethnographic exploration during her last years in Jamaica uncovers how contemporary Jamaican culture has been formed by travel—the global circulation of people from the fifteenth century to the twentieth—and the fictional travelogue form of *No Telephone to Heaven* plays upon the fictions about non-Western cultures that circulated as truth, in part due to Western travelogues. Gikandi argues that the English writer Charles Kingsley—who Gikandi claims “operate[s] within a historiographic tradition that often wonders whether observed details are compatible ‘with preconceived principles or interpretations’ (Heyck 125),”—reads Trinidad “as nothing less than the stage on which the history of imperial possession is dramatically displayed” in his 1885 travelogue *At Last: A Christmas in the West Indies* (“Englishness” 58). In Cliff’s contemporary Jamaica, we see this colonial impulse continuing in the neocolonial era: in hotels named “‘Plantation Inn and Sans Souci’” that Harry/Harriet disdains in *No Telephone to Heaven* (127); and, in *Abeng*, in the

vacation home development with the oxymoronic name “Paradise Plantation,” where residents can “capture history in their summer homes” (24). As a fictional travelogue written from a Jamaican point of view, *No Telephone to Heaven* performs a historiography that exposes the trajectory of Western reliance on Jamaica for self-definition from the colonial to the neocolonial era.

The sense of readerly displacement that the narrative description of the Jamaican landscape and weather creates in the opening pages of *No Telephone to Heaven*, which evokes the feeling of a travel narrative, continues with “the harsh metallic voices of cling-cling blackbirds, questioning, it seemed, who these people were and asking what was their purpose here” (4). By mimicking the displaced yet paradisiacal feeling that characterizes much travel writing set in the Caribbean, Cliff, albeit briefly, gives the reader the sense that the narrative will proceed quite differently than it does.¹⁰ It quickly becomes apparent that the people riding in the truck are not tourists but travelers of another sort, united in a common goal signified by their “similar clothes, which became them as uniforms” despite their phenotypic and socioeconomic differences (Cliff, *No Telephone* 4). Although Clare is described in the opening chapter, she is not formally introduced to the Jamaica narrative until Chapter IV, eighty-seven pages into the novel, in the following passages that are key to my reading of the novel as a fictional travelogue:

The thirty-six-year-old woman Clare Savage is standing in the back of a truck climbing through the Cockpit Country. Her story is a long story. How she came to be here. For she had once witnessed for Babylon. Had been ignorant of the

¹⁰ Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, self-consciously a travelogue, opens similarly, describing in the opening paragraph North American and European travelers’ opinions of “islands” as “much too green, much too lush with vegetation, which indicated...that they got quite a bit of rainfall, which of course could spoil their vacations altogether” (3-4).

wildness of the Maroons. There are many bits and pieces to her, for she is composed of fragments. In this journey, she hopes, is her restoration. She has traveled far. Courted escape. Stopped and started. Some of the details of her travels may pass through her mind as she stands in the back of this truck...She may interrupt her memory to concentrate on the instant, on the immediate and terrible need. (Cliff, *No Telephone* 87)

Four pages later, the narrator continues Clare's introduction: "You know her also as the girl left behind [by her mother] in the Brooklyn apartment...She moves. Emigrated, lone travel" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 91). As these passages demonstrate, not only does Clare travel in the novel, but she is also characterized as a traveler. Clare's final journey, the one that leads to her death at the hands of the Jamaican government she and her group are rebelling against, comes as a result of all her previous journeys—those chosen and those compelled.

The description of place that opens the novel gives quick way to a critique of the foreign tourist industry in Jamaica—the recent rapid growth of which is the result of the neoliberal economic practices that the revolutionary group opposes—via a description of the military uniforms worn by the people on the truck:

The people on the truck wore khaki—and they wore discarded American army fatigues, stolen from white kids high on dope, plugged into machines sending our music into their heads, sleepyheads, on the beach at Negril or Orange Bay. Why these sleepy-headed kids, left behind after Sunsplash or Jamfest had finished, chose to wear old army clothes was another matter, to do with another country—and the people on the truck did not care at all about these children and had no difficulty stealing from them. They were nuisances, only rarely useful, bodies to

be stepped across—should a wallet be visible in the pocket, so much the better. There might be one of Papa’s credit cards tucked in, or at the very least a plastic case of American Express traveler’s checks. Were they caught by one of the sleepyheads in the act of lifting a jacket, the sleepyheads seemed genuinely hurt, pathetic. “But man, we love you. And the grass man, it’s good.” “Bullshit your honor. We don’t need you here.” Poor little Americans, after the ad had proclaimed JAMAICA, A WORLD OF CULTURE WITHOUT BOUNDARIES, to be told they were not welcome. Were hated deeply, by some. Poor little Americans—had they harmed anyone? (Cliff, *No Telephone* 6)

This is a direct response to the rhetoric of travel advertising and the behavior tourists adopt as a result, which Angeletta Gourdine has termed “touristing” (80). According to Gourdine, “Touristing [is a] a nexus for travel and leisure, [which] encompasses ritualized behavior that follows the colonial script: modern person travels to premodern historically frozen place, hoping to explore both internal and external unknowns” (81). Gourdine’s analysis of touristing behavior in *No Telephone to Heaven*, as well as Kincaid’s *A Small Place* and Danticat’s *After the Dance*, unfortunately focuses solely on the space of the Caribbean and, while she draws attention to Clare’s behavior as a native tourist in Jamaica in *Abeng*, ignores Clare as nonnative tourist in the US and Europe in *No Telephone to Heaven*. During her travels outside of Jamaica in *No Telephone to Heaven*, Clare behaves unlike the American tourists in Jamaica criticized in the novel. In fact, she conducts herself much as she does in her homeland, immersing herself in the history and culture of the places she visits at the level of the official—via museums—and the local.

Cliff's discussion of white tourists in Jamaica provides an early glimpse of how she wishes to represent Jamaica in the novel: an island sold into tourism against the will of the people as a direct result of the political and economic legacies of colonialism that we term neoliberalism. Kari Levitt, in her discussion of the Jamaican debt crisis of the late twentieth century, remarks,

The fact is that the PNP [People's National Party] and the JLP [Jamaica Labour Party], personalised by Mr Manley and Mr Seaga, share responsibility for the escalation of Jamaica's external debt from insignificant levels in the early 1970s to the monumental levels of today. Most of the debt was incurred in the ten years which include the last five years of Manley's PNP (1975-80) and the first five years of Seaga's JLP (1980-85). Partisans of the JLP squarely put the blame on Manley, for the decline of the Jamaican economy in the 1970[s]; in reality, the JLP is equally if not more responsible, because it benefitted from the special relationship with the Reagan administration, which pumped vast sums of money into Jamaica, and leaned on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to do likewise. The huge inflow of official loans and grants in the early 1980s, which might have rebuilt the capacity of Jamaica's economy to increase production, was largely spent on public and private consumption of imported goods and services. (109)

The expansion of foreign tourism in Jamaica is a direct response to the country's growing debt and extends beyond vacationers to the entertainment industry. As the American filmmaker, who has worked on sets in Jamaica more than once, says to his English coworker, who is concerned about the feasibility of filming in Jamaica, "As far as this place is concerned, don't worry. [...]"

You can't beat the prices. And, besides, they need the money...real bad. [...] They're trapped. All tied up by the IMF'" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 201). We can deduce Cliff's awareness of the continuity of colonialism and neoliberalism in what Clare's friend Liz from the University of London says of her dissertation project, a study of "hats, the significance of color and shape, in the battle scenes of Uccello": "'Once you get into it, there is something to it...the merchants' obsession with display...commerce...objects...trade routes...in Florence in the fifteenth century. [...] I expect it always goes back to the merchants' obsession with one thing or the other'" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 133). References such as this to the fifteenth century can be seen often in works of transnational literary historiography and serve as a reminder that the neoliberal present is inextricable from the colonial past. Florence Journey, writing on the critique of neocolonial politics in *No Telephone to Heaven* and Kincaid's *A Small Place*, notes,

Indeed, the realities of the new global economy are very present in both narratives, suggesting a new kind of colonization as is expressed by local Jamaican people in *No Telephone to Heaven*: "People said the IMF might repossess the country" (*No Telephone* 187). With the arrival of the tourist, colonialism has shifted only to become neocolonialism: "It was a time of more hideaways for the rich—the expansion of the sandbox. 'Make it your own,' the tourist board told the visitors" (*No Telephone* 187). The island becomes (once again?) a site for conflicts of power, divided between the "whorism" of "tourism" (*No Telephone* 22) and the revolutionary fight for true independence, both strangely reminiscent of the colonial era where the slave had to obey the master or decide to live as a maroon. (6)

Through Clare, a Jamaican expatriate newly returned, we are able to see late-twentieth-century Jamaica from a unique point of view, one that is not quite traveler and not quite at home, particularly early in the novel. Twenty-something Clare, who drunkenly vomits into a swimming pool at a party, is described from the vantage point of Paul H., an upper-class Jamaican with whom Clare has sex later in the evening, in language not far from that used for tourists: “Someone’s overseas cousin pale from compulsive intermarriage and northern lights come back for the Christmas not used to the sun and the food and too much champagne” (Cliff, *No Telephone* 21). Unlike twenty-something Clare and white tourists, thirty-something Clare and her fellow travelers on the truck are marked in their difference from stereotypical Western tourist behavior: “The soldiers smoked ganja only occasionally—and then according to strict tradition. But there was a big demand for it in America—where it apparently was used all hours of the day and night” (Cliff, *No Telephone* 11). Rather than consuming the marijuana they grow recreationally, the revolutionary group uses it primarily as currency, exchanging their crop for weapons manufactured and smuggled in from the US by a “shaggy whiteman” (Cliff, *No Telephone* 11). This underground economy, made possible by the influx of foreign capital to Jamaica, is the unintended consequence of neoliberalism, which the revolutionary group exploits in an attempt to effect change.

Before she settles in Jamaica and joins the revolutionary group, Clare moves frequently, spending only a few years in each place, never feeling settled. The narrator tells us, “Would there come a time, she asked her friend [Harry/Harriet]—half serious—when taking leave would not seem the likely conclusion to her every move?” (Cliff, *No Telephone* 144). In each place Clare lands, she is drawn to the African diaspora, despite her father’s desire for them to pass as white. In the US, seventeen-year-old Clare is so impacted by the 1963 Birmingham Sunday school

bombing that she carries a newspaper clipping in her wallet showing one of the victims lying in a coffin (Cliff, *No Telephone* 101-102). Upon discovering the photo, Clare's father asks, "'Girl, do you want to labor forever as an outsider?'" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 102). In London, twenty-something Clare is deeply disturbed by an anti-immigration march: "Chants. Shouts... KAFFIRS! NIGGERS! WOGS! PAKIS! GET OUT! A banner—white bedsheet [sic] with black paint—went past. KEEP BRITAIN WHITE!" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 137). While Clare demonstrates allegiance to the African diaspora, she never articulates a desire to travel to Africa, although Africa as a point of origin and identification looms throughout the novel. In addition to being described by the narrator as Ashanti, we are shown this image of thirty-something Clare, recently returned with the rebel group to her grandmother's land: "Basket on head, resting on a cotta, bought years ago in Knightsbridge, a gallery specializing in African art, carried as a talisman. Now being put to use, its true properties recognized. It had not been comfortable on a glass shelf; it belonged on a woman's head" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 12). At a nightclub in Jamaica, the décor of which is "intended to suggest a galleon on the Spanish Main," (Cliff, *No Telephone* 121) Harry/Harriet remarks, "[I]f they had *any* sense of irony, or history, they would call this place the Triangle Trade and be done with it" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 120). When approached by a white tourist, Harry/Harriet and Clare pretend to be African royalty—"Prince Badnigga" and "Princess Cunnilinga" of Benin—in an act of subversion that plays upon the ignorance of the tourist (Cliff, *No Telephone* 125). More seriously, the abeng, an African conch shell, is meant to signal to the rebel group the start of the attack on the set of the film that features a problematic portrayal of Ashanti deity Sasabonsam, although it is never heard because the rebels are ambushed by the Jamaican army (Cliff, *No Telephone* 207). Gikandi, writing on *Abeng*, posits, "[T]he conch shell (abeng) is a sign of both the narrator's connection to her previously repressed

African past and her functional distance from it; it is a symbolic representation of the process of historical remembering and disremembering” (*Writing* 237). While Gikandi emphasizes Clare’s heritage, Brand articulates the impossibility of full return to Africa for members of the diaspora: “Since leaving was never voluntary, return was, and still may be, an intention, however deeply buried. There is as it says no way in; no return” (1). It is, I argue, because of this impossibility, that Clare finally returns to Jamaica, claiming it as the home she has, up until then, been unable to locate, and proclaiming an allegiance to those Jamaicans negatively impacted by neoliberal economic practices, including poverty and lack of healthcare (Cliff, *No Telephone* 192). Before joining the revolutionary group, Clare becomes a teacher of reading, writing, and history, having conducted her own education on Jamaican history and incorporated what she has learned about herself and Africa via the diaspora on her journeys.

Brand’s concept of “the Door of No Return,” helps illuminate the significance of the absence of Africa from Clare’s travels in a novel that focuses so much on the lack of a consciousness of African history pre-slavery for Jamaicans. In her 2001 memoir *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, which is itself part travel narrative, Brand characterizes the Door of No Return—which represents the enduring resonance of the Middle Passage—as representing “the fissure between the past and the present...that place where our ancestors departed one world for another; the Old World for the New. The place where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast” (5). Brand clarifies, “The Door of No Return is of course no place at all but a metaphor for place” (18). Despite numerous references throughout *No Telephone to Heaven to Africa*, the Middle Passage, and the triangle trade, Africa is not a destination in Clare’s travels. Instead, Cliff rethinks the triangle trade in a twentieth-century

context, wherein Jamaica becomes the beginning and ending, rather than middle ground. Belinda Edmondson argues that Clare's movement is a "retracing [of] the 'triangle' of the slave trade," but she does not address why Cliff focuses on the pattern of movement between the Caribbean, North America, and Europe common during the latter half of the transatlantic slave trade while omitting the Middle Passage (185). Journey, citing Edmondson, remarks on the absence of Africa in an endnote: "It might be useful to note here that Clare does not return to Africa where the slave trade originated. The questions about her identity thus include her oscillating between the colonial motherland—that is to say England—and her native island of Jamaica. Even though Africa is never part of her personal journey, her choices hint at the impossibility of a return to Africa" (13n4). Although she focuses on the relationship of the colonial past to the neocolonial present in her article, Journey's analysis falls short in its glossing over of the elision of Africa from Clare's triangular travel. In contemporary political terms, Clare moves away from and back to the target of neoliberal policies, temporarily alighting in the twin hearts of neoliberalism—the US and England¹¹—in the middle of her journey. Cliff herself, in the essay "Clare Savage as a Crossroads Character," has characterized Clare's life as a triangular journey: "Though essentially tragic, for her life has been so, I see it, and envisioned it, as an ending that completes the circle, or rather triangle, of the character's life. In her death she has complete identification with her homeland; soon enough she will be indistinguishable from the ground" (265). For Cliff, too, then, Jamaica as site of the beginning and end of Clare's life is significant. While, as I have discussed above, Africa haunts the narrative, it remains unable to be fully accessed and thus

¹¹ For a concise explanation of the rise of neoliberalism in the US and Britain, see Chapter One of David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

geographically outside Clare's travels. After living in the US and Europe, Clare ultimately returns to Jamaica where she works to unearth the history of Jamaicans' ancestral past, yet the Door of No Return remains locked for Clare. And while we see the guerillas' solidarity with the African National Congress's struggle against apartheid (Cliff, *No Telephone* 7), their present focus is on the future of Jamaica, a future that, at the time of Clare's death in 1982 or 1983, is fiscally entwined with the neoliberal powers of the US and Britain during the Reagan and Thatcher eras, respectively, and directly linked to the history of colonial slavery. Thus, the absence of Africa from Clare's travels and the new triangle that her journey traces moves the focus to the neoliberal age while retaining and reminding readers of the connection to the colonial past, a strategy employed in all works of transnational literary historiography.

Africa is the link to the past of colonial slavery, which has directly influenced Jamaica's neoimperial present. Through the unnamed resistance leader in Jamaica, the novel emphasizes that, like Jamaica, countries in Africa face present struggles related to their colonial past. On the way back to her own (also unnamed) country, the leader parts ways with Clare saying, "Amandla" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 196), a word meaning power that was used by the African National Congress (ANC) during their struggles against apartheid. While the invocation of amandla is an allusion to the ANC, early in the novel the narrator references the party directly while describing the people on the truck: "[T]he gold and green and black knitted caps some wore—a danger because the bright gold would sing out in the bush—made them feel like real freedom fighters, like their comrades in the ANC" (Cliff, *No Telephone* 7). Comparing Cliff's writing on Jamaica to Richard Wright's writing on Africa, Wendy Walters posits that "[t]he double displacement of expatriate diasporic writers...denies an easy nostalgia for an irretrievable

homeland present in some diasporic discourses” (27). I argue that Cliff’s writing denies not only nostalgia for Jamaica but also for Africa, and that this denial is what makes Africa geographically inaccessible for Clare. What is accessible and desirable to Clare, unlike Africa prior to the transatlantic slave trade, are the traces of Africa that remain in Jamaica and other areas of the diaspora—such as the Ethiopian apples unearthed from the ruinate on Clare’s grandmother’s land (Cliff, *No Telephone* 7)—those things brought from Africa during the slave trade and inextricably incorporated into Jamaica. Brand writes that her unsuccessful querying of her grandfather for the name of their African ancestors, which he ultimately cannot remember, “revealed...a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being...a physical rupture, a rupture of geography” (5). *No Telephone to Heaven*, as an example of the fictional travelogue in transnational literary historiography, reveals a quest for historical origins that cannot be traced directly to their physical, geographic source but rather can be discovered in their transformed state in the diaspora.

History, as *No Telephone to Heaven* constructs it, is active and dynamic. Cliff’s historiography, like that found in all works of transnational literary historiography, looks to the present as a necessary element of engaging with the past. We as readers are alerted to this early in the novel, when we hear one of the revolutionaries on the truck sing lines from Jamaica-born, UK-based poet Linton Kwesi Johnson’s 1983 song “Making History,” which is a response to the 1981 Brixton riots protesting police discrimination against the Afro-Caribbean community in the UK: “‘It is no mystery/ We making history,’ someone hummed in dub. Yes” (Cliff, *No Telephone*

5).¹² The narrator's affirmation strengthens the assertion that the revolutionary group is taking Jamaica's future history into their own hands by fighting back against the neoliberal policies subjugating Jamaica in the global economy and wreaking havoc on the lives of most Jamaicans. The group's choice of a hegemonic cultural text—the movie being made about Nanny and Cudjoe—as their point of attack, rather than the government itself, is illustrative of the difficulty of resistance in the neoliberal era. As we can see via the production of the movie itself, which includes protection of the American and British crew by the Jamaican army in “helicopters marked MADE IN USA” (Cliff, *No Telephone* 203), a central target is difficult to pinpoint under neoliberalism due to the distribution of power across national governments and foreign business interests. The narrator describes the revolutionary group as “silent as Maroons” as they lie in wait for the abeng to signal their attack (Cliff, *No Telephone* 206), and this historical paralleling despite the different form that resistance must take in the late-twentieth century signals that the revolutionaries' project is not futile.

The novel's closing line, “Day broke” (Cliff, *No Telephone* 208), which directly follows the birdsong signaling Clare and her fellow revolutionaries' deaths, is an indication that the end of this telling of the story is another beginning, which is a feature of all transnational literary historiography. Caroline Rody calls this line “surprising” (182) because it is a return of narration after the text has dissolved into the sounds of nature. But I argue that this is not at all surprising, as it signals the reinception of the cycle—of which colonialism and neoliberalism are part—in

¹² Brixton is referenced later in *No Telephone to Heaven* during the narrator's discussion of Christopher's transformation into “De Watchman” while living homeless in Kingston (179). According to the narrator, “a reggae singer wrote a song about him” that “was played in Brixton.”

which the atrocities of history will be perpetuated via different (and not-so-different) methods and, always, contested. Cliff's transformation of the travelogue in *No Telephone to Heaven* is exemplary of this: the genre that has been used to justify and rouse support for colonialism and neocolonialism is reclaimed as a tool for resistance.

Chapter Four: Transnational Literary Historiographic Memoir: Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying*

Making a fantasy may seem to have no relation to making history, but to make history look at what it has ignored, it may be necessary to resort to an imaginative fantasy.

—Helen Buss, *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women* xiv

I've always liked this notion of nation as *imagi*-nation because I think for a lot of us that's all we have left. Imagine if I were the sort of blissful immigrant waving my flag and this thing happened, it would have definitely brought me back to no nation but imagination. Either way I would've landed on the ground really hard. If you are a writer at least you get to create your nation both in your imagination and on paper. I think that's a very wonderful and comforting idea.

—Edwidge Danticat in Pulitano, "An Immigrant Artist at Work" 47

While personal experience plays a role in all types of transnational literary historiography, as we have seen in my study of Jamaica Kincaid's oeuvre¹, memoirs written by authors who are primarily writers of fiction raise compelling questions about the writing of history, both personal and national.² Through a reading of Edwidge Danticat's 2007 memoir *Brother, I'm Dying*, in this chapter I examine the function of memoir within the larger genre of transnational literary historiography. My goal is not to distinguish transnational literary historiographic memoir from fiction—because although there certainly are differences between the two, their relatedness is of much greater consequence—but rather to establish how authors of transnational literary historiographic memoir compose history in a manner distinct from

¹ While it is classified as a gardening text, I consider Kincaid's *My Garden (Book)*: to also be a work of transnational literary historiographic memoir. See my discussion in Chapter Two.

² For example, the experiences of Sophie, the protagonist of Danticat's 1994 novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, bear some similarity to Danticat's own: both were left in the care of relatives in Haiti as young girls when their mother, in the case of Sophie, and parents, in the case of Danticat, emigrated to the US. Danticat has also written two works of historical fiction, *The Farming of Bones* and *The Dew Breaker*, which I discuss later in this chapter.

conventional historiography, a manner that calls into question the historical as we know it and asks us to reconsider what constitutes historical truth. Of memoir in general, William Zinsser claims, “[A] good memoir is also a work of history, catching a distinct moment in the life of both a person and a society” (15). Transnational literary historiographic memoir reaches beyond distinct historical moments, considering particular events within a broader historical trajectory. Such works both document history and create deeper understanding of its significance by theorizing its impact on lived experience. Literary critic Helen Buss, who like Zinsser is a memoirist, posits that memoir exists in a state of critical limbo—claimed fully within neither discipline of literary studies or history: “Because of their dependence on narrators who are never fully impartial, and often highly opinionated, memoirs have been considered to be both bad history (which assumes objectivity) and inferior literature (which prefers narratives that show rather than tell)” (xv). As a writer of fiction with a deep interest and investment in history, Danticat exploits the status of the memoir as a disciplinary outlier, synthesizing elements of fiction writing—particularly imaginative invention—and historiography—primarily theorization of the significance of historical events—to create a text that blends genres and blurs the lines between them, resulting in a strong work of literature and a good work of history.

As I have been arguing throughout this project, transnational literary historiography emphasizes and narrates the deep and lengthy relationships between imperialist/neoimperialist nations—particularly the US—and countries in the so-called Third World. Danticat’s texts are suffused with the historical relationship between Haiti and the US. In the essay “Bicentennial” in *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, Danticat considers the tension felt by the US, the first democratic republic, as Haiti became the second in the Americas: “Haiti’s very existence highlighted the deepest contradictions of the American revolutionary experiment. [...]

By the time Abraham Lincoln recognized Haiti's independence in 1862 [six decades after the Haitian Revolution], America was already at war with itself over the issue of slavery" (98, 99). Ties between the US and Haiti remained complex throughout the twentieth century, with the US occupying Haiti from 1915-1934, supporting the Duvalier dictatorship, intervening multiple times in Haitian political regimes, and participating in the removal from power of democratically elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide.³ In *Brother, I'm Dying*, Danticat illuminates how the continued tense political relationship between Haiti and the US came to bear on three generations of her family.

While Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*, published in 1991, is also a work of transnational literary historiographic memoir, I use *Brother, I'm Dying* as example in this chapter precisely because Danticat first established herself as an author of fiction.⁴ Uniquely self-consciously poised as nonfiction, literary memoir that is also both transnational and historiographic draws on the conventions of fiction writing in interesting ways—specifically the manner through which the

³ While there is controversy surrounding Aristide's 2004 election and his supporters' tactics, Danticat has been reticent to discuss this directly, saying, "My view still is that he was voted in power. [...] I can't say, like some do, that he's all bad, or like some other people, that he's all good" (Barsamian). In *Create Dangerously*, Danticat references Aristide several times, including the following instances: linking the US to Aristide's 1991 deposal by military coup (42); referring to Aristide as "democratically elected" (47, 70); devoting a chapter to Alèste Bélance, a woman mutilated because her husband organized for Aristide's 1990 campaign (73-85); and presenting two versions of Aristide's 2004 deposal (100-101).

⁴ It is also for this reason that I do not delve into the "why memoir, why now" debate in this chapter. While it is certainly a lively and pertinent conversation about the proliferation of memoir at the turn of the twenty-first century, it largely concerns texts whose authors—primarily public figures, and particularly celebrities—do not write in other literary genres. *Brother, I'm Dying* and other transnational literary historiographic memoirs are part of the longer tradition of memoirs written by novelists. The subjectivity of the author also seems to be influential in the position of memoir within the academy that I reference above. Because the authors I include in my study have all published fictional texts in addition to memoirs, their place in literary studies has already been established.

author “fills in the gaps” of history within the memoir much as she would within historical fiction, as Danticat does in her 1998 novel *The Farming of Bones*, set around the 1937 massacre of Haitians by Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. Although *Brother, I’m Dying* is arguably the most explicitly politically charged text I deal with in my project, all works of transnational literary historiography do a similar kind of work to varying extents. Both transnational literary historiographic memoir and fiction make direct claims about political and historical disparity, but memoirs demonstrate this disparity through real-life examples with which the author is deeply intimate. Although both have the same investment in history, transnational literary historiographic memoirs take as their subject not only actual historical events and actors—as their fictional counterparts also do—but they also explore how these events and actors figure in the lives of the authors and their families. While both types of transnational literary historiography are invested in historical truth, memoirs in this genre foreground the personal as a means of understanding the historical.

Memoirs belonging to the genre of transnational literary historiography contextualize the events of the text within not only the sociopolitical climate of the time during which they took place but also the larger historical tapestry from which they are inextricable. Personal experience, although varied, in such texts is broadly constructed as shared rather than narrowly defined as individual. Chandra Talpade Mohanty provides a useful definition of “personal experience” as it relates to political practice:

I believe that meanings of the “personal” are not static, but that they change through experience, and with knowledge. I am not talking about the personal as “immediate feelings expressed confessionally” but as something that is *deeply historical and collective*—as determined by our involvement in collectivities and

communities and through political engagement. In fact it is this understanding of experience and of the personal that makes theory possible. So for me, theory is a deepening of the political, not a moving away from it: a distillation of experience, and an intensification of the personal. The best theory makes personal experience and individual stories communicable. I think this kind of theoretical, analytical thinking allows us to mediate between different histories and understandings of the personal. (emphasis mine 191)

Mohanty's explication of the personal as theoretical aids in understanding the work that memoirs in the genre of transnational literary historiography do in narrating national and political history via family history, deepening readers' comprehension of historical events beyond a shallow knowledge of "what happened" to a more nuanced awareness of the particular and long-term sociopolitical effects of these events.

Through a detailed exploration of the personal, Danticat theorizes the meaning of historical experience for the actors in *Brother, I'm Dying*. Of her interest in history, Danticat has said,

I'm not a historian but I'm fascinated by history and especially the way that it manifests itself in the present. That's always something I'm looking at and I think especially in the case of Haitian history. Often when you meet Haitians they're very mindful of one huge event, such as the Haitian Revolution that happened 200 years ago. But if you hear people talk about it, it's almost as if it happened last year. So the way in which history is not just something in the past, but the way that people carry it forward, the way they live in it, the way they claim it, is very interesting to me. So I'm also interested in the gaps in history...The silences of

history and even those ordinary moments during daily life, how people lived through that, interest me very much. I have found that in historical novels you have to, it's almost like archeological work, you have to put in so much detail that the world has to be shaped in your mind, even before you can start writing.

(Mirabal 34)

Although Danticat references historical novels and not memoir, historically faithful representation is a feature of both genres, and thus this idea of the archeology of the text, what must be unearthed in order to tell the story, helps me elucidate the difference between transnational literary historiography, particularly memoir, and conventional historiography. Transnational literary historiographic memoirs make plain the details that historiographers draw on but, more often than not, make secondary to the narrative. In transnational literary historiography, the everyday experiences of personal life as told through first-person accounts, as opposed to historical events, are the main focus. In other words, primary historical sources such as testimonies and diaries remain primary to the narrative. This is not to say that historical events are downplayed in the text, but rather that it is through the lived experiences of the actors in the narrative that we learn the immediate, continued, and often evolving significance of such events. Much of *Brother, I'm Dying* is drawn from conversations Danticat had with family members, and she recounts these exchanges throughout the text; this is not Danticat's memoir alone but a collective family memoir constructed from their oral histories, histories that Danticat has illuminated the importance of in her fictional works, particularly *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and her collection of short stories *Krik? Krak!*.

Although transnational literary historiographic memoirs consider a breadth of history, it is significant that these texts are just that: memoirs as opposed to auto/biographies. Rather than

attempting, as would happen in auto/biography, to construct a grand narrative—which, in its desire to create a definitive text on the life of a subject, is a similar project to encapsulating the history of a nation within a single text—memoirs instead focus on a particular period of time. Transnational literary historiographic memoirs always locate the time period in which the events of the text occur in relationship to the centuries-long historical phenomenon of imperialism, of which recent neoimperialism is a direct descendent. In the case of Danticat’s memoir, the period of immediate focus is roughly ten months between the summer of 2004 and spring of 2005, and in writing about the events that took place during this time, Danticat incorporates a number of sources and narrative styles. Julie Rak has expounded on the narrative form of memoir:

Memoir refers to writing as a process of note-taking, and to a piece of writing as a finished product at the same time. It can refer to a collection of memories, as when someone says that he or she wishes “to write my memoirs” but it can also refer to biographical writing about oneself and someone else. It is both finished and unfinished, unofficial and official, a collection of reminiscences of an occasional character, but also a record of historic events where the events, not the person who records them, is [sic] emphasized. It is about the self in relation to others, or even just about “others” without being biography or history. Therefore, “memoir” describes private and public, official and unofficial writing, writing as process and writing as product, all at once. (317)

Because memoir can mean so many things and encompasses both the writing process and the written product, I want to make clear that my discussion of transnational literary historiographic memoir is specific to a few texts and not typical of all memoir. For example, while some memoirs outside of transnational literary historiography do, as Rak points out, focus on a historic

event, in transnational literary historiographic memoirs the person recording or experiencing the event is never made secondary to the event itself. Rather, through an emphasis on the inseparability of history and personal experience, history is understood through the lives of those affected by historical events.

While transnational literary historiographic memoirs focus on relatively short periods of time, these texts are able to tie the events they take as their subjects to a longer historical trajectory. The opening lines of *Brother, I'm Dying* bring the news of impending birth and death, the perpetual cycle of family and history, as Danticat announces to the reader, "I found out I was pregnant the same day that my father's rapid weight loss and chronic shortness of breath were positively diagnosed as end-stage pulmonary fibrosis" (3). The central points of focus in the memoir are the family events that occur during Danticat's pregnancy—her father's diagnosis, the death of her uncle Joseph Dantica⁵ while in US custody, and the death of her father shortly after the birth of her daughter—but the narrative also necessarily incorporates events from earlier periods in Danticat's and her father's and uncle's lives. Throughout the text, Danticat connects her and her family's experiences to the colonial history of Haiti as well as the centuries-long historico-political relationship of Haiti and the US—particularly US military intervention, which Danticat's uncle experienced directly, as well as continued US neoimperial influence in Haiti. Danticat has characterized this "merging" of past and present as "natural" and "normal" in Haitian life (Shea 192), illuminating the ways in which different cultural experiences of the quotidian translate into storytelling. Danticat's discussion of history living on in the present cited above suggests an experience of historical time that is different from that represented in

⁵ Due to "an error" on her father's birth certificate, Danticat's immediate family spells their last name differently than her uncle Joseph, though the Creole pronunciation is the same (*Brother* 209). According to Danticat, "[I]n English we were 'cats' and he was not" (*Brother* 210).

conventional Western historiography. In *Create Dangerously*, she writes, [F]or many of us, it is as if the Haitian revolution [sic] was fought less than two hundred days ago, rather than more than two hundred years ago” (104). Here Danticat suggests that this historical event is accessible to present-day Haitians, who, despite not having lived through it, feel its continued influence and importance in their lives. Similar to the nonlinear narration characteristic of much, but certainly not all, postcolonial literature, Danticat’s discussion of how distant history lives on in the present evokes a nonlinear experience of historical space and time. Danticat recounts a phone call her father made to his brother, Danticat’s uncle Joseph Dantica, shortly after her father had learned the severity of his illness. The call occurred on Thursday, July 15, 2004, which was the fifty-first birthday of “twice-elected and twice-deposed” Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide (Danticat, *Brother* 24). On that day, Joseph Dantica had participated in a march calling for the return of Aristide to power in Haiti from his exile in South Africa, where he had been since he was removed from power about five months earlier by the US, France, and Canada (Danticat, *Brother* 24). During the phone call, Danticat’s father reiterated his wish for his brother and his nephew Maxo to move from their neighborhood in Bel Air. The phone call—already marked in connection to the neoimperial deposing of Aristide by the US and other Western powers—becomes even more significant when considered in relation to Dantica’s death on October 24, 2004 while being detained in Miami after requesting political asylum in the US, where he arrived legally on a tourist visa. This situatedness of the experiences of Danticat and her family members within the relationship between Haiti and the US, both historically and at present, signifies a strategic presentation of the connectivities between personal experience and broader national history.

The constellating of personal experience within the US and Haiti's larger historico-political relationship is further apparent in Danticat's discussion of how she wrote *Brother, I'm Dying*, which she informs the reader of early in the text:

I write these things now, some as I witnessed them and today remember them, others from official documents, as well as the borrowed recollections of family members. But the gist of them was told to me over the years, in part by my uncle Joseph, in part by my father. Some were told offhand, quickly. Others, in greater detail. What I learned from my father and uncle, I learned out of sequence and in fragments. This is an attempt at cohesiveness, and at re-creating a few wondrous and terrible months when their lives and mine intersected in startling ways, forcing me to look forward and back at the same time. I am writing this only because they can't. (26)

While invention, a trademark of fiction writing, is certainly an important element in the construction of her memoir, it is the act of theorizing the connections between events in the lives of several family members that allows Danticat to chart the confluence of the historico-political and the personal in *Brother, I'm Dying*. Danticat mobilizes personal experience as a means of distilling historico-political significance. I read Danticat's use of the term cohesiveness here as a reference not to totality but rather to the multiplicity of possible stories contained in a time period. *Brother, I'm Dying* is ultimately about meaning-making and the attempted discovery of truth, a process she has discussed with regard to *The Dew Breaker*, a work of fiction published in 2004: "I'm intrigued by ambiguity more than clarity, and I think this is definitely a book where there's a lot of ambiguity, a search for the truth" (Pulitano 54). Here Danticat complicates the notion of truth by associating it so closely with ambiguity, suggesting that the quest for definitive

truth—which necessarily includes theorizing possible stories—is really about becoming comfortable with uncertainty. In this interview Danticat also notes, “I felt like I had done a good job [of presenting history] when both sides were angry for their different reasons” (Pulitano 54). Danticat’s awareness of history as inherently biased—always written from a particular point of view (Pulitano 54)—spurs her to write *The Dew Breaker*, a series of linked stories about the legacy of the Tonton Macoutes, the Duvaliers’ military police squad that terrorized, tortured, and killed those viewed as threats to the dictators’ regime.⁶ The text ultimately leaves the reader in the uncomfortable position of recognizing someone with a monstrous past as a sympathetic character. Historian C. Behan McCullagh has declared bias in historiography as “deplorable,” while conceding that “although personal bias can be largely avoided, cultural bias is not so easy to detect or correct” (39). Danticat’s employment of literary genres such as memoir and fiction to document family and national history signals that avoiding “cultural bias” is not a concern to her, as readers expect such texts to reflect the cultural perspectives of their authors or subjects. For Danticat, theorizing how historical events have become determining factors in Haiti’s present allows her to demonstrate the ways in which culture is full of possibility and uncertainty. In discussing representations of Haiti in writing, Danticat has said,

[M]y own personal barometer [when writing about Haiti] is this: Am I telling a nuanced and complex story? Am I telling my version of the truth, which I know may not be somebody else’s. We’re not a monolithic group; no group is. Also, it’s important to keep in mind the genre in which we are writing. Fiction is full of

⁶ Danticat has not assigned a specific genre to *The Dew Breaker* beyond the more general category of fiction. According to Danticat, this was the suggestion of her editor, which Danticat agreed with because the structure of the text—nine stories about characters “connected tangentially”—made it “not really a novel” (Pulitano 55, 54).

invented stories about exceptional people in exceptional situations. Those situations are not always cheery or celebratory. Also fiction is not journalism or sociology or anthropology. Every story is singular. The way we get depth is by putting a bunch of singular stories together to tell larger more complex and sometimes even contradictory stories. (Murphy)

Danticat goes on to emphasize that it is the multiplicity of stories contributing to the larger narrative that is of greatest importance (Murphy). The notion that writers cannot sacrifice polyphony for metanarrative is a critical feature of transnational literary historiography, particularly memoirs in this genre.

Although both historiography and transnational literary historiographic memoir attempt to decipher truths, writing from a specific cultural point of view, one that is often underrepresented in conventional history, is a primary concern of transnational literary historiographic memoir. History for Danticat, whether within a fictional text or memoir, is not about winners and losers—there are no clear victors in any of her texts, which are filled with loss—and works of transnational literary historiography generally eschew such dichotomies. In *Create Dangerously*, Danticat notes, “For even if history is most often recounted by its victors, it’s not always easy to tell who the rightful narrators should be, unless we keep redefining with each page what it means to conquer and be conquered” (102). This is an outlook shared by other authors of transnational literary historiography. In a discussion of how race figures in her 2013 novel *See Now Then*, Jamaica Kincaid observes,

[I]f you look at life, in a way, as a kind of musical chairs and when the music stops who’s sitting down and who’s standing up, at one point, it very well might have been that the people from Europe are the ones doing the standing and the

people who look like me might be sitting down and pushing them around.

It's all very arbitrary. It's why you can't take these things not only for granted but you can't assume that they're fixed. They're always in flux. Maybe not in our lifetime, yours and mine, but they're in flux. ("Time")

Both Danticat and Kincaid point to the changing nature of social categories and caution against notions of stasis. For Danticat, history is not about establishing concrete narratives of the past but rather exploring the way the past manifests in the present, as well as how the present forces us to reconsider the past. History, then, in transnational literary historiographic memoir, is both the goal of the genre and a lens through which authors view the present. Critics of memoir tend to agree that the telling of history is a constitutive element of the genre.⁷ What transnational literary historiographic memoirs do differently is not only capture a particular historical moment but also situate that moment within a larger framework rather than as an isolated moment in time. In other words, in order to contextualize her uncle's death, Danticat must discuss not only the political upheaval from which he was fleeing, but also the historical events upon which that upheaval was predicated. While the theorizing in Danticat's memoir differs from the theorizing that happens in more strictly academic works of scholarship, Danticat makes the interpretive leap between her family's experiences and the social and political institutions that determine them. Danticat's theorizing in her memoir is grounded in the desire both to synthesize disparate parts as well as to fill in what is unknown, while never positing that hers is the only possible account. In this way she contests historical metanarratives that elide the lived effects of both the colonial past and US neoimperial influence in Haiti. Theorization springs from the need to answer a question whose answer may never be discovered or determined and demands we look beyond the immediacy of

⁷ See as example Marcus Bilson, Helen Buss, Nancy Miller, Julie Rak, and William Zinsser.

lived experience. The theorization in *Brother, I'm Dying*—while at times more overt than others—establishes the interconnectedness of her family members' experiences and historical events. While the personal is at the forefront of the text, Danticat does not allow lived experiences speak for themselves as evidence but rather strategically contextualizes their political and personal significance.

Although all of Danticat's writing engages the historico-political to some degree, *Brother, I'm Dying* insists upon the necessity of viewing the lived experiences of the Dantica(t) family within broader contexts. This is apparent in the discussion of her uncle Joseph and his wife Denise's house in Bel Air, where as a child Danticat lived with them during the eight-year period between her parents' transmigration to New York and her own. After describing the physical appearance of the house, Danticat illustrates the significance of its location to the resistance movements against both French colonialism, which established slavery in Haiti in 1697, and US occupation from 1915-1934 (*Brother* 29). Danticat describes her father's early adulthood as "shadowed" by the political events that occurred in Haiti in the early 1960s, specifically the US-supported Duvalier dictatorship and the terror imposed by the Tonton Macoutes (*Brother* 51). In a striking textual moment, Danticat reveals her uncle Joseph's "most haunting childhood memory," which took place during the last year of the US's first occupation of Haiti: Dantica, sent by his mother to the marketplace—a place normally off-limits to him due to the risk that American soldiers would abduct him and send him to a labor camp—encountered a group of white men in military garb kicking the severed head of a black man "as if it were a soccer ball" (*Brother* 245-247).⁸ According to Danticat, this is the only story from his childhood that her

⁸ As Danticat discusses earlier in *Brother, I'm Dying*, during the forced labor policy of the first US occupation, Haitian men and boys were often taken from their homes and made to build bridges and roads (36).

uncle told her in detail, clearly marking it, specifically, and the US's occupation of Haiti, more generally, as critically formative. This historical relationship of US political involvement in Haiti plays a role in the INS's consideration of Joseph Dantica as illegally attempting to enter the US. While in US custody in Miami, the Haitian detainees "spoke [to Joseph and his son Maxo] of other guards who taunted them while telling them that unlike the Cuban rafters, who were guaranteed refuge, that few Haitians ever get asylum" (Danticat, *Brother* 212). Throughout *Brother, I'm Dying*, Danticat works through the major project of transnational literary historiography: to make apparent the relationship of neoimperial control at present to the legacy of colonialism, occupation, and intervention.

In *Brother, I'm Dying*, Danticat goes beyond examining the specific historical moment of her uncle's detention and death to fully explore how global imperialism of the fifteenth through twentieth centuries enabled twenty-first century US neoimperial influence in Haiti. Scholarship on *Brother, I'm Dying* largely focuses on the US "war on terror" and immigration policy in the post-September-11th era, while acknowledging that Danticat embeds her family's situation within the longer history of global imperialism. Both Nicole Waller, who focuses on the detention center, and Wendy Knepper, who examines birth and death, draw on the work of Giorgio Agamben and Judith Butler in considering Joseph Dantica's treatment as an asylum seeker and how biopolitics functions with relation to terrorism in the early part of the twenty-first century. Knepper posits, "To explain her uncle's death, Danticat exposes the disjunctive workings of a world where the combination of post-9/11 governmentality, global peacekeeping efforts, states of exception, neo-imperialisms, and racism contribute to precarity" (198). While this is partly true, Danticat herself links her uncle's detention not to political reaction to September 11th but rather to "biased immigration policy dating back from the early 1980s when

Haitians began arriving in Florida in large numbers by boat” (*Brother* 222). According to sociologist Carolle Charles, the Carter administration considered only a few of the thousands of Haitians fleeing by boat to the US to be political refugees of the Duvalier regime, then led by Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier: “The majority of the asylum seekers were defined as economic migrants, denied due process with no possibility to present their asylum claim, and refused refugees status” (199). Charles, who in her work considers the differing perspectives within the Haitian community on immigration to the US during the two primary waves, maintains,

The hegemonic position of the United States in the Caribbean also had a profound impact on processes of class formation, on racial and class dynamics, and on the struggle for control of state power in Haiti. The increased political violence of the [US-supported] Duvalierist state, both at the political and economic levels, left many Haitians no alternative but migration...Moreover, the various testimonies of Haitian refugees from different social backgrounds and the number of opposition figures residing in the United States attest to the role of the regime in creating the conditions for a social context of migration. (197)

Charles also notes that, as a result of Reagan-era anti-Haitian immigration policy, “[a]t one point there were 2,000 Haitians detained for more than a year at Krome, located in the Everglades swamps of Miami” (200). A year prior to her uncle’s detention at Krome, Danticat visited the detention center as a community observer with a delegation brought together by the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center. Danticat writes about this visit in *Brother, I’m Dying*:

I’d seen men who looked too young to be the mandatory eighteen years old for detention at Krome. A few of them looked fourteen or even twelve. How can we

be sure they're not younger, I'd asked one of the lawyers in our delegation, if they come with no birth certificates, no papers? The lawyer answered that their ages were determined by examining their teeth. I couldn't escape this agonizing reminder of slavery auction blocks, where mouths were pried open to determine worth and state of health. (212)

Danticat here reminds us that early-twenty-first-century neoimperialism is not exceptional and cannot be examined without consideration of the earlier imperialisms from which it evolved. The evocation of slavery auction blocks reiterates that all interaction between Haiti and the US is underscored by the Haitian Revolution's contradiction of the US's democratic project. As Danticat later discusses in *Create Dangerously*, which I mentioned briefly at the beginning of this chapter, the emergence of Haiti, a former slave-holding colony, as a democratic republic in which all people were citizens regardless of race challenged the US's claims to the same political status as a nation that upheld slavery (100-105). In referencing US slavery while discussing twenty-first-century political prisoners, Danticat questions how far from each other these two events really are on the longer historical trajectory. While Waller and Knepper both argue that Danticat's memoir makes plain the precarity of detainees particularly, and Haitians specifically, in the years following September 11th, I argue that the text also foregrounds the precarity of the historical representation of nations in the so-called Third World, specifically as those histories are linked to that of the US. Although both Waller and Knepper acknowledge Haiti's history of subjugation, such history is much more central to *Brother, I'm Dying* than comes through in their attention to the post-September-11th era. I do not so much argue against their readings of biopolitics and precarity so much as I posit that this text is not hyper-focused on the US's reaction to the events of September 11, 2001 as the impetus for Dantica's detention and

ultimately his death. In fact, in a text otherwise imbued with history—including multiple instances of events in family members’ lives specifically linked to historical events⁹—Danticat does not reference September 11th or subsequent changes to US immigration policy.¹⁰

As the establishment of historical truth is the project of transnational literary historiographic memoirs, authors draw on sources beyond testimony when crafting their narratives. Danticat has discussed the frustrations of dealing with the US government concerning her access to the documents detailing the circumstances and events of her uncle’s detention and death in both *Brother, I’m Dying* and interviews. In order to attain her uncle’s files, Danticat and her family sued the US government, after multiple Freedom of Information Requests “went nowhere” (Shea 189). Danticat incorporated the details from her uncle’s file “so that the facts may speak for themselves” (Shea 189). Were it not for the persistence of the Dantica(t)s, these facts may never have made it out of the file. This knowledge leads readers to question what facts are if they are not made public. Without the Dantica(t)s’ refusal to accept the US’s attempts to bury the file, we would know that Joseph Dantica died in US custody after requesting asylum and while holding a tourist visa. We would know what Joseph’s son Maxo witnessed while they were detained together prior to Dantica’s transfer to the hospital. But we would not know many other details, particularly that Joseph Dantica may have been shackled to a hospital bed when he

⁹ These include Danticat’s aunt’s grandmother narrowing the possible years of her birth to the term of Boisrond Canal’s presidency (68); the fleeing of Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier from Haiti to France on her uncle’s sixty-third birthday (133); the swearing in of President Leslie Manigat on her uncle’s sixty-fifth birthday, the date now being the official date of Haitian presidential inaugurations (133-134); the first swearing in of President Aristide on her uncle’s sixty-eighth birthday (138); and her aunt’s mild stroke that occurred the day after Aristide returned to office in 1994 (140).

¹⁰ On September 11, 2001, Danticat was in her parents’ home in Brooklyn, New York; she wrote about her experience of the day as part of a ten-year remembrance in *The New Yorker* (“September”).

died (Danticat, *Brother* 238). Medical professionals with whom Danticat shared her uncle's medical file have characterized his treatment based on his condition as "deplorable" (*Brother* 248). It should go without saying that the Dantica(t) family's experience is not unique. In fact, the US historical record is continually revised as previously sealed documents are made public. History is constantly being revealed in the present. Danticat wrote *Brother, I'm Dying* to be her "own file" (Shea 189) on her uncle Joseph, and, by drawing on multiple sources—including government documents, Dantica's personal papers, conversations with Dantica's lawyer and son Maxo, and her own memories—composed a portrait of her uncle's detention and death that supersedes his medical file. Danticat has said that her uncle's file was Kafkaesque, reading like a work of fiction (Shea 189). This allusion to literature when referencing a government file leads us to understand that when the official seems as fantastical as the literary, perhaps literature is the most appropriate genre for narrating it.

One of the most poignant and oft-cited sections of *Brother, I'm Dying* includes the pages in which Danticat's imaginative and theoretical narration, which she uses to make sense of the relationship of the personal to the historical, is largely absent. In this section, Danticat recounts the events of her uncle's detention in the US as revealed in his government file. Danticat shifts to reportage in these pages, allowing the stark reality of what her uncle experienced to resonate with the reader. This is a strategic stylistic move that I argue illustrates the different potential of memoir versus history. In the reportage section of the chapter "Let the Stars Fall," which spans three pages, we learn exactly what Danticat and her family know of Joseph Dantica's medical treatment while in US custody. In this section, Danticat offers little commentary or speculation, with a few notable exceptions that I discuss below. The section begins, "My uncle's medical records indicate that he arrived in the emergency room at Jackson Memorial Hospital around

1:00 p.m. with an intravenous drip in progress from Krome. He was evaluated by a nurse practitioner at 1:10 p.m., his pulse (80), temperature (97.0), blood pressure (169/78) checked and noted” (Danticat, *Brother* 237). The narration continues predominantly in this style until the section’s closing lines:

The next note on the chart shows that he was found pulseless and unresponsive by an immigration guard at 8:30 p.m. There is no detailed account of “the code” or the sixteen minutes between the time he was found unresponsive and the time he was pronounced dead, at 8:46 p.m. Only a quick scribble that cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and advanced cardiac life support (ACLS) “continued for 11mins.” (Danticat, *Brother* 239)

The only deviations Danticat makes from her uncle’s records concern contextual information about the ward in which he was placed: “Once in Ward D, where no lawyers or family members are allowed to visit, and where prisoners are restrained to prevent the staff, the guards and the prisoners from one another, his feet were probably shackled once more, just as, according to Krome records, they’d been during the ambulance ride” (*Brother* 238). While Danticat does conjecture in this sentence about the probable restraint her uncle was placed in while in hospital, by doing so she draws attention to how the file fails to completely describe the treatment Dantica received. In reminding us that no one who supported Joseph Dantica was with him in the hospital, it becomes clear that his perspective was not of great importance to those in whose care the US government had placed him. Neither, it seems, was his wellbeing. Although the note made in his file upon his admittance to the prison ward reads, “No acute distress, ambulatory. To IV hydrate and reevaluate. Patient closely observed,” it is not medical personnel but rather a guard who discovers that Dantica is dying (Danticat, *Brother* 238, 239). Absent from the file is

any commentary about Joseph Dantica of a non-medical nature. Neither the Dantica(t) family nor readers have any notion of Dantica's emotional or psychological state during his last hours. As we discover two pages later, Dantica's lawyer and family were unaware of the severity of his condition, having been misinformed that Dantica was "only being tested and observed" (Danticat, *Brother* 241). In the file, Dantica is reduced to a body, the language used to discuss his physical state cold and detached. The second section of this chapter—full of the emotions Danticat and her family experienced while first waiting for word about Dantica's condition and later sharing the news of his death—feels deeply raw. Reading these two very different accounts—that of Dantica's death and his family's fear and loss—separately makes clear how incomplete each would be without the other. In fact, the Dantica(t) family's understanding of the events of Dantica's last day remained incomplete until they won access to the file. Although the US government attempted to withhold Dantica's file from his family, should it have ever been made public in a context different from Danticat's memoir, its audience would likely not have understood much of Dantica's experiences prior to entering the US for the last time, or that he did so legally yet was treated as a criminal. In the context of *Brother, I'm Dying*, the file becomes an example of one perspective on her uncle's death—and an unreliable one at that—rather than a totalizing narrative of the situation. While Danticat clearly disputes the reliability of her uncle's medical file, she nonetheless includes it as part of the narrative polyphony, acknowledging that it too has a place in the story.

As *Brother, I'm Dying* is a collective memoir¹ that weaves together the lives of Danticat, her father, and her uncle over a period of a few months while constellating the events of the text's present with Haiti's historical past and theorizing the role of the past in the present, particularly Haiti's long connection with the US, we hear not only the testimony of the text's main subjects, but also that of others in the Dantica(t)s' family and community. Emphasizing individual experiences within a larger community context personalizes history as well as historicizes the personal in a way greater than making broader generalizations. In doing both of these things simultaneously, the text posits the inseparability of history and personal experience, demonstrating that neither can be understood without the other. While the effect of historical events on the larger population of a country is certainly important to consider, historiography often elides or glosses over many important details of how such events impact individual lives. Danticat has discussed the importance of testimony when asked about Édouard Glissant's work on collective memory² in connection to *The Farming of Bones*:

[A]fter 1987 [the 50-year anniversary of the massacre], I started doing research, just reading about the massacre, and I was trying to read it from both sides, the points of view of both Dominicans and Haitians, but it was really hard to find

¹ Danticat has characterized the text as "not really an autobiography...not even really a memoir" because it focuses on subjects in addition to herself (Shea 188), but she discusses it as memoir in numerous interviews. Although memoir is the genre most assigned to *Brother, I'm Dying* by critics, the National Book Critics Circle awarded it the 2007 prize for autobiography, despite it having been nominated in a category for "autobiography/memoir." On the dust jacket of the first hardcover edition, *Brother, I'm Dying* is called "a major work of nonfiction;" nowhere does the term memoir appear. The manner in which Danticat's texts have been strategically marketed as not belonging to traditional genre categories beyond fiction and nonfiction is striking [see discussion of *The Dew Breaker* in footnote 5 of this chapter], as the project of transnational literary historiography as I define it is to rework such categories to more fully attend to the historico-political relationships that influence contemporary experience.

² See Chapter Two for more detailed discussion of Glissant's claims.

much documentation on the Haitian side. I tried to find everything that was written about the massacre, and I traveled to both Haiti and the DR a couple of times, to actually see the physical places and to just talk to people on the border and in the area, in Dajabon, the area that I wanted to set the book in. At some point you really had to let the imagination take over. I also liked the idea of testimony, because I felt that in the research that I was doing, that's what was lacking. People were saying, "You know, there are few direct testimonials," and that's where I felt I needed to create these testimonials in the novel, because that's almost what I wished I had when I started. (Pulitano 53)

Danticat here alludes to the human element missing from much historical documentation. The reportage section of *Brother, I'm Dying* confronts this lacunae in her uncle's life through the stark presentation of the details in his medical records without imaginative embellishment.

Without Joseph Dantica's testimonial, or that of anyone close to him, we are left with only one side of the story—a side that, as Danticat makes clear, grossly misrepresents her uncle.

Danticat's refusal to "let the imagination take over" in this section coupled with her discussion of the consensus of those doctors she later shared his file with speaks to the unreliability of the file in depicting the larger significance of Dantica's care. In her persuasive reading of *Brother, I'm Dying*, Veronica Austen closely considers how the reportage section of the text affects the audience's "empathetic engagement" with Joseph Dantica. Austen argues,

By offering only documented facts rather than an imagining of what her uncle's experiences must have entailed, Danticat is able to avoid compromising her own ethos amongst those who seek to deny fictionalization a place in testimony. The combination of memory, hearsay, and imagination may be commonly accepted as

autobiography's means of constructing a representation of reality, but when a story serves a larger purpose of human rights advocacy, the stakes regarding its credibility grow much higher, its truthfulness coming under intense scrutiny. (39)

While Austen here points toward the role *Brother, I'm Dying* plays in the larger conversation about immigration in the US, I interpret the implications of Danticat's narrative shift differently. Austen points to Danticat's discussion of Dantica's near-death experience while ill with malaria, which Danticat witnessed as a young girl. Austen reads this as an alternate death scene to the one at Krome that was not witnessed by anyone emotionally connected to Dantica. Austen cogently asserts that this marks a shift back into the imaginative narration of Dantica's life, a returned "willing[ness] to interpret her uncle's emotions and hypothesize what his actions mean" (48). However, Austen posits that Dantica thus experiences a "pseudo-resurrection," as a living, empathetic character in the narrative. I find the juxtaposition between these scenes instead to be a means of drawing attention to the narrative divergence between texts that include personal testimony and those that do not. While, as Austen argues, Joseph Dantica does return as a living actor in the text, albeit retrospectively, his reappearance has a deeper importance: ultimately it illuminates how the lack of testimony from sympathetic witnesses to Dantica's hospitalization and death render the narrative irreparably incomplete.

Through the reportage section of *Brother, I'm Dying* we can see how markedly different a historical representation of Joseph Dantica's death might look had his medical record been the only source available to the writer. With most of his personal documents lost in the looting of his church, the Dantica(t) family is the lone repository of information on Joseph Dantica other than the US government. Would historians narrativize his final hours despite only having access to the

point of view represented in his medical file composed by doctors and nurses in the hospital's prison ward? Danticat's refusal to participate in such a project—not even to attempt to narrativize an experience she has no credible access to, despite her knowing her uncle well enough to represent his thinking during other moments she was not present for—calls into question any other potential attempts to do so. Instead of speculation, Danticat offers questions: “When was he last conscious?...What were his final thoughts? When did he realize he was dying? Was he afraid? Did he think it ironic that he would soon be the dead prisoner of the same government that had been occupying his country when he was born?” (*Brother* 250). Tellingly, Danticat turns again to the history of the US and Haiti's relationship in attempting to comprehend her uncle's death: “In essence he was entering and exiting the world under the same flag. Never really sovereign, as his father had dreamed, never really free. What would he think of being buried here [in the US]? Would he forever, proverbially, turn in his grave?” (*Brother* 250). Dantica is buried in the US because the neighborhood gangs that drove him out of his church, the continued threat of whom prompted his request for temporary asylum in the US, threatened to decapitate his corpse if it was returned to Bel Air, a disturbing echo of Dantica's childhood encounter with US soldiers (Danticat, *Brother* 244). Danticat casts historical relations between Haiti and the US as a determining factor in her uncle's life, symbolic narrative bookends without which his memoir cannot be understood.

Although Danticat posits that understanding the historical relationship between Haiti and the US is key to understanding her uncle's life, this relationship is also responsible for a great deal of lost information. The lack of detail about Dantica's death made apparent in the reportage section of *Brother, I'm Dying* is characteristic of his youth as well: Danticat knew little specifics of her uncle's childhood—largely, we are led to understand, because Dantica's father was a

member of the Haitian guerrilla army that opposed US occupation, and the family had to be very secretive about his whereabouts (*Brother* 31, 246). As an adult, however, Joseph Dantica became something of a citizen historian, keeping notes on what he observed happening in his community. Danticat appears to have drawn on these notes while composing *Brother, I'm Dying*, as she quotes from them seemingly verbatim, despite many of the notebooks being lost or destroyed when Dantica's church was looted just days before he left Haiti for the final time (*Brother* 139, 187). According to Danticat, as a result of losing his voice to throat cancer in 1978, "[r]ecording things had become an obsession" for her uncle, one that Danticat assumes would have eventually led to a book (*Brother* 139, 176). Because her uncle is unable to do so himself, Danticat pens his memoir for him, incorporating Dantica's sources along with her own memories and those of their family members. One of the primary subjects of Dantica's notes, as Danticat highlights in *Brother, I'm Dying*, was details that may have otherwise gone unrecorded. We see a powerful example of this in Danticat's presentation of her uncle's documentation of the bodies of protesters killed by the army during the upheaval in Bel Air that followed the 1991 military coup that removed President Aristide from power: "In his notebooks, he wrote the names of the victims, when he knew them, the condition of their bodies, and the times they were picked up, either by family members or by the sanitation service, to be transported to the morgue or dumped in mass graves" (*Brother* 139). Danticat includes the following examples:

Jonas, maybe 20 years old, missing right hand, 11.35 a.m.

Gladys, maybe 35 years old, naked, 3:09 p.m.

Samuel, 75 years old, shoeshine man, 5:42 p.m.

Unknown male, 25 years old, face mutilated, 9:17 p.m. (*Brother* 139)

In these notes, we can see both Dantica's familiarity with his neighbors and his desire to ensure their deaths did not go undocumented. Dantica also wrote a "narrative"—one sentence followed by an itemized list of property that was stolen or destroyed during the events that occurred just before he left Haiti—on the plane to Miami (Danticat, *Brother* 214). While it is certain that Danticat was aware of her uncle's notebooks and the kind of information they contained, Danticat does not make clear in the text or her discussions of it in interviews whether or not she drew on them directly when writing *Brother, I'm Dying*. This, ultimately, is of little importance to the credibility of Danticat's memoir and its portrayal of her uncle's lived experiences. In *Brother, I'm Dying*, Danticat creates a plausible depiction of historical and familial events drawing on sources real and imagined, thus challenging historiography's claim that truth lies entirely in documented facts.

I read the imaginative and theoretical quality of *Brother, I'm Dying* and other transnational literary historiographic memoirs in constructing the relationship of the US and countries in the so-called Third World via the lived experiences of a small group of people as a critique of hegemonic Western historiography. Danticat has written on several occasions about the ways in which the marvelous is often discounted by Western readers and critics as not believable, most recently in a tribute to the late Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez:

I am often surprised when people talk about the total implausibility of the events in García Márquez's fiction. Having been born and lived in a deeply spiritual and extraordinarily resourceful part of the Caribbean, a lot of what might seem magical to others often seems quite plausible to me. [...] What seems implausible to me is a lifetime of absolute normalcy, a world in which there are no invasions,

occupations, or wars, no poverty or dictators, no earthquakes or cholera.

(“Gabriel”)

In *Create Dangerously*, Danticat equates the prevalence of the marvelous in Haiti to that of history: “The real marvelous, which we have come to know as magic realism, lives and thrives in past and present Haiti, just as Haiti’s revolution does” (103). *Brother, I’m Dying* theorizes the deep historical engagement of the US and Haiti as it manifests in the present lives of Danticat and her family members, at times mobilizing imagination when information is absent and allowing the deficit of information to speak for itself at others. It is particularly her uncle Joseph Dantica’s unjust death at the hands of the US that spurs Danticat to write, but it becomes clear quickly in the text that this event, while devastating, is part of a much larger and wide-reaching story. By engaging with both national and family history, foregrounding personal experience as always determined by the historico-political, and making apparent that imaginative invention is a necessary component all narrative, *Brother, I’m Dying* calls into question notions of Western historiography as more “factual” or complete than other cultural-historical traditions. In demonstrating that the real events of memoir are often indistinguishable from the imagined events of fiction, transnational literary historiographic memoirs bolster the truth claims of their fictional generic relatives.

Chapter Five: Transnational Historiographic Metafiction: Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

It is not that truth is multiple or that the truth is a whole ensemble of collective identities with partial perspectives. Truth is singular, but it is a continuous process of inquiry because it builds on a present that is moving ground. [...] There is no end to this project, only an infinity of connecting links. And if these are to be connected without domination, then the links will be lateral, additive, syncretic rather than synthetic. The project of universal history does not come to an end. It begins again, somewhere else.

—Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* 150-151

Ah, but that story is another story, inside another story, inside a story.

—Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo* 122

This chapter focuses on transnational historiographic metafiction through readings of Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. I will not only establish the conventions of this subgenre and its function within transnational literary historiography, but, perhaps more importantly, I will also distinguish both the subgenre and larger genre from postmodernism. Both Cisneros's and Díaz's novels contain elements that have led scholars and critics to classify them as postmodern fiction, particularly the self-reflexivity of the texts, the occurrence of "fantastical" events, and the footnotes that supplement the narratives of both novels. However, I argue that these elements function not as postmodern signifiers in Díaz's and Cisneros's novels but rather as conventions of transnational literary historiography.

I. The Historical Dynamic in Transnational Historiographic Metafiction

In transnational historiographic metafiction, the fictional narrative is clearly historically situated and contains fantastical elements. While these conventions are certainly not unique to the genre, the implications of them are. Genre features that are similar to those of postmodern fiction, such as historical footnotes, and postcolonial fiction, such as magical realism, work in transnational

historiographic metafiction to produce very different outcomes than in either of these genres. By comparing transnational historiographic metafiction to the antecedent and overlapping genres of postmodern and postcolonial fiction, we can better understand the unique literary historiography performed in this new genre. In this section I will argue for why *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are neither postmodern nor postcolonial despite some formal similarities to works in those genres.

Although I claim that transnational literary historiography is different from postmodern literary forms, I borrow the term “historiographic metafiction” from postmodern literary theory. Indeed, Linda Hutcheon, who coined the term, generally classifies historiographic metafiction as a subgenre of postmodern literature. While in her 1980 work *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*, Hutcheon resists identifying metafiction as postmodern because she finds the term “to be a very limiting label for such a broad contemporary phenomenon” (2), in her 1988 text *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, she maintains that “what would characterize postmodernism in fiction would be... ‘historiographic metafiction’” (ix). Thus we can conclude that the historiographic project is what makes some works of metafiction postmodern. Through their self-conscious presentation as fiction, works of historiographic metafiction reveal history to be a discursive construct. This historiographic turn in postmodern metafiction “confront[s] the problematic nature of the past as an object of knowledge for us in the present” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 92). For Hutcheon, the blending of history and fiction in works of historiographic metafiction destabilizes the truth claims of history. This destabilization applies not only to Eurocentric historical metanarratives but also subaltern historical counterclaims. In her study, Hutcheon cites works by Günter Grass and E.L. Doctorow as well as Maxine Hong Kingston and Salman Rushdie.

Although the narratives of both postmodern and transnational historiographic metafiction are historically situated, postmodern historiographic metafiction disputes the accessibility of history while transnational historiographic metafiction demonstrates how we arrive at historical truth. In transnational historiographic metafiction, history becomes accessible again in literature through the reconceptualizing of the past in relationship to the present. Due to both discourses' emphasis on narrative production, meshing historiography with metafiction is an ideal means through which transnational literature can establish how the interrogation of the historical significance of present events facilitates a deeper and clearer understanding of the past. In *Narcissistic Narrative*, Hutcheon defines metafiction as “fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (1). In her later work, Hutcheon establishes that historiographic metafiction “asks us to recall that history and fiction are themselves historical terms and that their definitions and interrelations are historically determined and vary with time” (*Poetics* 105). Although, as we will see, works of postmodern and transnational historiographic metafiction share some genre conventions, they ultimately diverge in their political projects.

The theory of “uptake,” which comes from Kathleen Jamieson’s work on genre in composition studies, can help us in understanding the relatedness of transnational historiographic metafiction to postmodern historiographic metafiction. In the most basic sense, “uptake” establishes how we can identify the influence of “ancestral” or “antecedent” genres in texts that respond to “unprecedented rhetorical situations” (Jamieson 408). As I argue in my introduction, transnational literary historiography, including its subgenre transnational historiographic metafiction, emerges in the mid-1980s as a response to the restructuring of global capitalism under the International Monetary Fund [IMF] and World Bank and continues to develop during

the current politico-economic crisis of neoliberalism. Such a shift in capitalism demanded an aesthetic response that would attend to both its unique effects in the present as well as its relationship to the larger history of capitalism of which it is part. Applying the theory of uptake to these texts allows us to understand how the texts I categorize as transnational literary historiography bear similarity to and yet are ultimately different from works in other literary genres that both precede and coexist with them. Transnational historiographic metafiction draws on the literary conventions of postmodern historiographic metafiction and postcolonial literature but uses those conventions to different ends in its response to our current, and certainly unprecedented, rhetorical situation.

While I borrow the term historiographic metafiction from Linda Hutcheon and consider postmodern historiographic metafiction to be an ancestral genre of transnational historiographic metafiction, my use of the qualifying term *transnational* is significant. For Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction is a subgenre of postmodern fiction that “problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge” by “keep[ing] distinct [rather than reconciling] its formal auto-representation and its historical context” (*Poetics* 106). Certainly we can see how “the problematizing of the nature of historical knowledge...points both to the need to separate and the danger of separating fiction and history as narrative genres” (*Poetics* 111) in both postmodern and transnational historiographic metafiction. However, although it may seem possible to classify novels such as *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Caramelo* as works of postmodern historiographic metafiction, I argue that these novels are very much concerned with problematizing dominant historical knowledge while at the same time offering the possibility of more complete and nuanced historical knowledge. That these texts are not set predominantly in a historical past—as seems to be characteristic of most works of postmodern historical fiction and

historiographic metafiction—but rather move between the historical past and a present closely contemporaneous with the novels’ publication is central to their representation of history as knowable. By reconciling history and fiction, transnational historiographic metafiction returns to the dialectic that Hutcheon claims postmodern historiographic metafiction eschews (*Poetics* 100).

Despite the distinction I make between the genres, transnational historiographic metafiction does share some of the characteristics of postmodern historiographic metafiction, but even these similarities have important differences. Works of transnational historiographic metafiction appear to follow Hutcheon’s assertion that historiographic metafiction “suggests that truth and falsity may not indeed be the right terms in which to discuss fiction” because they “openly assert that there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just others’ truths” (*Poetics* 109). Both *Oscar Wao* and *Caramelo* establish the variable nature of truth through the repositioning of historical perspective that privileges the formerly colonized perspective. In fact, the project of transnational historiographic metafiction, as the novels I will examine here make clear, is not so much the rewriting of history—as the project of postmodern historiographic metafiction seems to be—but the repositioning of historical perspective. While the outcomes of historical events do not change, our understandings of the events themselves do. Cisneros and Díaz make clear that all the information we need is available, just not highly visible. And so, while novels in both genres blur the line between fiction and history (*Poetics* 113), works of transnational historiographic metafiction ultimately do so in order to produce a new mode of historiography that can function in both fictional and nonfictional genres. The differences between transnational and postmodern historiographic metafiction become most clear when we look at what is implicit, rather than explicit (as the genre

features discussed above are) in Hutcheon's analysis: The works of postmodern historiographic metafiction that Hutcheon references in her study seem to foreground the fictional rather than the historical, while works of transnational historiographic metafiction do the inverse of this.

Due to their commitment to historical truth as well as their inclusion of the magically real, Cisneros's and Díaz's novels also bear similarity to works of postcolonial fiction, a genre that has its own contested relationship to postmodern fiction. The potentially "fantastical" elements in both novels have led scholars and critics to characterize them as either postmodern or postcolonial, and sometimes as a hybrid of both. Kumkum Sangari, in "The Politics of the Possible: Or the Perils of Reclassification," differentiates postcolonial marvelous realism, a term she uses in place of magical realism, from the postmodern fantastic. Sangari's essay is a response to Hutcheon's, although she does not cite her work directly, and other postmodern literary critics' claiming of postcolonial novels that contain marvelous realism for the postmodern canon. Sangari argues that classifying the nonmimetic narrative modes of postcolonial novelists as postmodern is problematic due to the inherent political function of marvelous realism that she does not see as a project of the postmodern aesthetic of collage. Interestingly, in her 1991 essay "Circling the Downspout of Empire," Hutcheon makes political distinctions between postmodernism and postcolonialism, arguing that postcolonialism "possesses a strong political motivation that is intrinsic to its oppositionality" while postmodernism "is politically ambivalent" (168). However, she continues, "there is still overlap in their concerns: formal, thematic, and strategic." By not considering Hutcheon's classification of both Gabriel García Márquez's and Salman Rushdie's novels as [postmodern] historiographic metafiction in *Poetics of Postmodernism*, Sangari misses an opportunity to develop the conversation about the intersections and divergences of postmodern and postcolonial literatures.

While Sangari examines García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which admittedly contain significantly more "fantastical" elements than either Cisneros's or Díaz's novels, she maintains that it is these elements that make such novels nonmimetic. In contrast, I argue that the potentially fantastic elements in *Caramelo* and *Oscar Wao* do not necessarily disqualify them as mimetic novels; rather, I read both the narrative interruptions by Celaya's dead grandmother in *Caramelo* and the appearance of the Golden Mongoose to Beli and Oscar in *Oscar Wao* as simultaneously psychological reactions to trauma and a means of drawing deeper connections between actors and history. We can see both of these functions in Yunior's discussion of the first appearance of the Golden Mongoose: "Whether what follows was a figment of Beli's wracked imagination or something else altogether I cannot say. Even your Watcher¹ has his silences, his páginas en blanco... But no matter what the truth remember: Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena. How else could we have survived what we have survived?" (Díaz 149). Here Yunior toys with our readerly expectations about postcolonial literature and marvelous realism. Yunior characterizes the mongoose outside of literary critical jargon, with which he is undoubtedly familiar as a creative writing instructor, and instead refers to it as "extreme phenomena" while linking it to the Caribbean's history of conquest and colonization. Significantly, Yunior includes a footnote on the transnational history of the mongoose in this section of the narrative, deepening its historical context in the Dominican Republic: "The Mongoose, one of the great unstable particles of the Universe and also one of its greatest travelers. Accompanied humanity out of

¹ Mongoose, like the Watchers I discuss later in the chapter, is a character in the Marvel Comics Universe.

Africa and after a long furlough in India jumped ship to the other India a.k.a. the Caribbean” (Díaz 151).²

Yunior’s claim regarding the tolerance of Dominicans for “extreme phenomena” like the Golden Mongoose is interesting in relationship to Sangari’s argument that marvelous realism is distinctly postcolonial. Sangari claims that to classify works of marvelous realism as postmodern is to impose a Western lens onto the novels, evacuating them of political possibility and diminishing their force as reactions to colonialism. While Sangari’s discussion of the political possibility of the marvelous is compelling and important, her argument ultimately reinforces a binary division between Western and non-Western literature, excluding postmodern literature from political potential. Absent from Sangari’s analysis are texts that transgress the Western/non-Western binary, including transnational texts and other non-Euro-American literary movements, such as black postmodernism. While Sangari wishes to recuperate the political impetus of postcolonial literature, she ultimately ontologizes the experience of history by postcolonial subjects, as evidenced by her use of García Márquez’s famous remark that “ordinary people” in Latin America regularly claim to have seen the marvelously real elements of his novels in their own lives (qtd. in Sangari 14n10). Such a move forecloses any agency that lies in the project of the literary text to construct historical knowledge. The transnational space of novels like Cisneros’s and Díaz’s foregrounds the entanglement of national histories, which necessarily entails the intersection of literary genres. The “marvelous” elements in *Caramelo* and *Oscar Wao*

² In a telling example of the historical relationship between European colonialism and US neoimperialism, Operation Mongoose was the code name for a 1961 “U.S. policy of sabotage and related covert operations aimed at [the communist forces in] Cuba” following the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion (Domínguez 310).

that are themselves transnational draw attention to the ways in which history functions across national boundaries.

Further complicating her argument is Sangari's implicit suggestion that authors' positions as postcolonial national subjects authenticate them as writers of a literature politicized in ways that are impossible for Euro-American modernist and postmodernist writers. Sangari capitalizes on Rushdie's and García Márquez's nationalities and emphasizes the settings of their novels in India and (an albeit fictionalized town) in Colombia, respectively. Unfortunately, Sangari references only Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and does not discuss his texts set outside of India. She also does not address Rushdie's or García Márquez's cosmopolitan subjectivities and considers their work as related to the West only insofar as it is concerned with the legacies of colonialism in the novels' settings. This lacuna around transnationalism in Sangari's work is a limit to her important claim that the marvelous has political force. Through examining how the marvelous circulates in transnational literature, we can better understand its relationship to both the historical past and the present.

Transnational historiographic metafiction brings issues of history and genre into relief in a manner that locates such texts in the interstitial space between the Western/non-Western and history/fiction binaries. In Hutcheon's explanation of the genre, she presents postmodern historiographic metafiction as concerned with a drastic interrogation of history that negates any possibility of validity. In contrast, works of transnational historiographic metafiction are more concerned with writing their narratives into a relatively stable historical past without altering it in a way that calls its believability into question. However, what is ultimately significant about these past historical realities is the ways in which they function in the present. Moving between the US and Mexico and the Dominican Republic, respectively, *Caramelo* and *The Brief*

Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao confront the legacy of colonialism and the reality of neoimperialism today. By blending history and fiction, while keeping the lines between them clear, transnational historiographic metafiction recaptures the nuances that are elided from the dominant historical metanarrative yet deeply relevant to the fictional actors' lives. Unlike postmodern historiographic metafiction, transnational historiographic metafiction privileges history at the same time that it both challenges the dominant record and imagines a new form of historiography. History is deeply important in works of transnational historiographic metafiction, and it is not interchangeable with the fictional narratives of the texts.

Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* exploit the tension between history and fiction not to show the reversibility, and thus the unreliability, of both discourses but instead to explore the meaning of history in the present. Both novels' fictionalized main narratives are steeped in historical actuality. Historical footnotes play a crucial role in establishing the relationship of the historical to the fictional by connecting the fictional narratives to the intersecting historical records of the US and Mexico and the Dominican Republic, respectively. In contrast to footnotes in postmodern works that function to underscore the impossibility of historical truth, footnotes in transnational historiographic metafiction establish the documented historical narratives within which the fictional narratives are situated without calling the documentation completely into question.³ Although the fictional narrative occasionally bleeds into the footnotes, they generally stand apart from the fictional narrative and

³ Cisneros has commented in an interview on the footnotes in her novel, dismissing assertions that they are a postmodern literary device: "'Postmodernism, people call it,' Cisneros says of the storytelling games and footnotes found in novels by Manuel Puig and David Foster Wallace, and now in her own. '*De nada*,' she says, waggling her hand in dismissal. 'It's just the way people talk. You start a story — oh, but you have to explain something first. So you take a detour, but that leads to something else. Then you get back to your story'" (Weeks).

largely function in a more academic than literary mode. In so doing, the footnotes establish the necessity of historical knowledge to understanding the novels.

This separation yet connection of the historical and fictional narratives is an interesting play on intertextuality in which the historical intertexts never fully become integrated into the fictional narratives. This refusal to fully fictionalize the historical can also be seen in the ways historical figures function as actors in the novels. As Brian McHale shows, anachronism with regard to historical figures abounds in postmodern fiction, violating “real-world physics and logic” (88). McHale argues that in this violation, postmodern novelists “imply that history...may be a form of fiction” (96). Works of transnational historiographic metafiction instead depict meetings between historical figures and fictionalized actors that remain within the sphere of possibility without likely alteration of historical reality. Such a scenario asks us to consider how what is elided from the dominant historical narrative is often vitally important in establishing historical truth. Ultimately, the mobilization of history in transnational historiographic metafiction is not a way of saying that the past *is* the present but rather a means of establishing the *context* of the present. These novels accept the premise that historical “fact” is often questionable while recognizing that even what turns out to be fiction still has powerful effects that require us to continue to confront, interrogate, and refine the historical record. Transnational historiographic metafiction is equally invested in the effects of events as the events themselves. Such works help us understand why those historical “facts” that indeed turn out to be fiction or half-truths still merit our attention.

II. *Caramelo*: The Emergence of Transnational Historiographic Metafiction

In Cisneros's 2002 novel *Caramelo: or Puro Cuento* we can see the emergence of transnational historiographic metafiction. *Caramelo* weaves together the narratives of four generations of the Reyes family in a nonlinear narrative that moves in space and time between the US, Spain, and Mexico. Like *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, *Caramelo* is self-consciously a novel; as readers, we observe Celaya, the authorial narrator, writing the text. The novel's epigraph, "Tell me a story, even if it's a lie," indicates the desire for and power of narrative (Cisneros). The epigraph is followed on the next page with a disclaimer from either Celaya or Cisneros regarding the fictionality of the text: "If in the course of my inventing, I have inadvertently stumbled on the truth, *perdónenme*." This disclaimer seems to apply only to the fictionalized main narrative of the story—much of which parallels Cisneros's life and family history—rather than to the historical elements of the novel, which, as Cisneros acknowledges at the end of the novel, a number of people assisted her in researching. Regarding the fictionality of the central narrative of the Reyes family, Cisneros clarified in an interview,

I actually wanted to admit that characters were based on real people. But I wanted to also say and be truthful that it's based on real people but it isn't autobiography. Many books that you read, they have those disclaimers that say that, "None of the events and none of the people are based on real life and so on..." Well, I don't believe that. I think that as human beings many people touch us, especially people we love the most and we can't help but do character sketches when we go to our art. I felt that I was taking some real filaments of my life, some real memories, but I was embroidering from that and departing from that and leaping...especially plot. So much of the plot was invented. Even if the

characters were not. The characters were spun from real memories and there might be some of the plot—the trips to Mexico that were based on memory. The fight scene in Acapulco, the move to San Antonio, a lot of that was my pure imagination. (Birnbaum)

While Cisneros reveals that the stories of the members of the Reyes family are rooted in her own family's history, she does not indicate who is the intended author of the novel's disclaimer. This blurring of author and authorial narrator is heightened later in the narrative in a series of footnotes about a waltz written by Celaya's great-grandfather. In the first footnote about "A Waltz Without a Name" Eleuterio Reyes, Celaya's great-grandfather, is credited as the composer (Cisneros 122). However, this first footnote is flagged with a second footnote informing the reader that "[t]his song was actually written by the author's great-grandfather, Enrique Cisneros Vásquez" (Cisneros 123). This is an interesting singular moment that explicitly establishes Cisneros as the author of the narrative and not Celaya. Further complicating the relationship of author and authorial narrator, this footnote occurs in a chapter of the novel primarily narrated by Celaya's dead grandmother Soledad.

In the interview quoted above, Cisneros makes several important points about how stories that are relatively impossible to pin down as truth or fiction become historical fact. In response to a question about whether or not Elvis Presley had actually said that "he wouldn't kiss a Mexican" while making a film in Mexico, Cisneros replied, "Yes, the newspapers reported that he said that. Whether he really said that is subject to debate. But was there a big national boycott? Yes! Did everyone get up and get pissed? Yes! That is true" (Birnbaum). Here Cisneros illustrates how very often hearsay becomes history with real consequences and lasting effects that trump the veracity of the utterance or event. Despite its unverifiability, Elvis's supposed

derogatory comment about Mexicans aggravated already tense social relations between the US and Mexico. Similarly, *Caramelo* draws attention to how legend becomes part of the historical record. Celaya's name is telling of the significance of legend in the historical record, as well as the tension between history and fiction in the novel. Celaya is named for a key battle in the Mexican Revolution in which her grandfather Narciso claimed to have been injured. However, by 1915, when the Battle of Celaya occurred, Narciso was living in Chicago (Cisneros 133). Rooted in both fictional family legend and historical actuality, Celaya's name points to the equal importance of history and fiction. While remaining faithful to the historical record, Celaya characterizes her liberties with the family narrative, generally taken to fill in gaps in the story, as "healthy lies" (Cisneros 188). These "lies" or authorial liberties function not to destabilize the weight of historical truth but to draw attention to how hearsay, conjecture, and fiction are converted into historical truth in the process of discursive construction.

Throughout *Caramelo*, elements such as the Elvis incident and the origins of Celaya's name remind the reader that history, like fiction, is narrative and as such always shaped by the author. Although as a whole *Caramelo* is studded with historical detail—particularly Part II of the novel titled "When I was Dirt," which focuses on the stories of Celaya's grandmother and grandfather—the level of historical saturation is not quite as high as it is in *Oscar Wao*. It is Part II of the novel that I will largely focus on here in order to trace the emergence of transnational historiographic metafiction. This is not an attempt to pinpoint a definitive origin of the subgenre, as transnational novels published before *Caramelo* may share formal similarities. I have chosen *Caramelo* not only because of the richness of historical detail in Part II but also because Díaz, whose *Oscar Wao* is a more completely developed example of the genre, has named Cisneros as an influence on his work (Cespedes 899).

In the chapters that comprise Part II of *Caramelo*, Celaya explores her grandparents' stories in order to understand her and her parents' lives more clearly. She tells us: "When I was dirt is when these stories begin. Before my time. Here is how I heard or didn't hear them. Here is how I imagine the stories happened, then" (Cisneros 89). Celaya relies heavily on the historical record to situate her grandmother's and grandfather's narratives. She opens their section of the novel by describing the moment of her grandmother's arrival in Mexico, where she would soon meet Celaya's grandfather, in historical terms: "Once in the land of *los nopales*, before all the dogs were named after Woodrow Wilson...on the earth lived the woman Soledad and the man Narciso" (Cisneros 91). Celaya locates her grandparents in early-twentieth-century Mexico, at a time before the multiple US interventions under Wilson that would influence the tenor of US-Mexico relations into Celaya's lifetime. Celaya continues historically contextualizing the era of her grandparents' meeting without specifying dates a few pages later: "It's during the time just before the revolution. Mexico City is known as the City of Palaces, the Paris of the New World" (Cisneros 100). For Celaya, situating her grandparents' relationship within Mexican history allows her not only to more clearly explain the events of their lives—such as her grandfather's migration to the US to avoid fighting in the Mexican Revolution—but also to ground the events of her and her parents' lives in the US. A long historical footnote establishes the political climate of the period during which Narciso Reyes emigrated to the US, a time at which military recruitment posters with slogans such as "WE MUST HAVE VILLA" and "CAPTURE VILLA" papered Chicago streets (Cisneros 135). This footnote largely focuses on the inherent political contradictions between the 1914 and 1916 US invasions of Mexico:

In 1914 President Woodrow Wilson authorized the Marines to invade the port city of Tampico after American sailors entered a restricted dock and were

arrested. At the same time the U.S. was trying to bring about the destruction of General Huerta's government by encouraging the selling of American arms to northern revolutionaries like Pancho Villa. (This is interesting, since Wilson had supported this same General Huerta when he ousted President Madero from office with a military coup...)

Although Mexico released the detained U.S. sailors within the hour, on April 21 the U.S. Marines landed in "the halls of Moctezuma," and what resulted was a bloody battle with hundreds of civilian casualties. This "invasion" created strong anti-U.S. feelings, with the Mexican press urging citizens to retaliate against the "Pigs of Yanquilandia"...

Of course, later Pancho Villa would counter with an invasion of his own. In March 1916, Villa and his men crossed the U.S. border and attacked Columbus, New Mexico...[B]y the time the skirmish was over, eighteen Americans had been killed. President Wilson sent General John J. Pershing and six thousand American troops into Mexico to find Villa. But Villa and his men eluded them to the end." (italics original, Cisneros 135-6)

This extended consideration of the details of the US's pursuit of Pancho Villa under Woodrow Wilson draws attention to the US's shifting alliances with Mexican political factions and interventions into Mexican legal affairs that influenced Villa's invasion of the US. The US's involvement in Mexico, not only during the Mexican Revolution but dating back to the 1846-48 Mexican-American War (which Cisneros refers to as "the American War of Intervention" [435]), set the precedent for Mexican migration to the US, although the former is rarely causally linked to the latter in US historical narrative. As Justin Anders Chacón posits in *No One is Illegal*,

which he coauthored with Mike Davis, conversations about the current “crisis” of Mexican immigration to the US generally do not include consideration of the fact that much of the southwestern part of the US *was* Mexico prior to the Mexican-American war (99). Celaya’s attention to her grandparents’ location within US-Mexico affairs shifts the historical perspective in a manner that clarifies the context of mid- to late-twentieth-century Mexican migration to the US, of which the fictional Reyes family is a part.⁴ Celaya and her parents settle for a few years in San Antonio, Texas—the location of the Battle of the Alamo—reminding readers of Mexico’s role in the construction of the US.

Similar to the multiple narratives of national construction mediated in *Caramelo*, Celaya also acknowledges differentiating versions of her family’s history. Throughout “When I was Dirt,” Celaya’s grandmother frequently interrupts the narrative to dispute Celaya’s account of her and Narciso’s story, particularly unflattering representations of Soledad and the early years of her relationship with Narciso. In the chapter “God Squeezes” in this section, the narrative switches almost exclusively to Celaya’s grandmother’s voice, which is indicated by bold typeface. These interruptions by and narrative shifts to the voice of a dead actor contribute to the classification of *Caramelo* by several reviewers and critics as a postmodern novel.⁵ In contrast, I read the presence of Soledad’s voice as a way of letting the reader into Celaya’s mind as she writes, revealing much about the narrative process. Through her imagined conversation with her

⁴ This destabilizing of the authoritativeness of the US historical record also occurs in the historical chronology that is an appendix to *Caramelo*. The chronology focuses on Mexican and US historical events and often the intersections of national histories. It includes events related to culture, migration and immigration legislation, and economic and military intervention. The chronology begins with the arrival of Spanish colonizers in Mexico and ends with global undocumented migration, thus recontextualizing European “exploration” as illegal immigration.

⁵ See as example McCracken and Martin.

grandmother, Celaya demonstrates how she must sort through and arrange the many stories that she weaves together into the novel. We can feel the anxiety of influence through the grandmother's interruptions in Celaya's narrative while simultaneously recognizing that Celaya must develop her own understanding of history in order to make sense of her present.

Despite Soledad's frequent protestations that Celaya is misrepresenting the facts of her personal story, Celaya's grandmother never questions Celaya's account of Mexican history. In contrast, Celaya's historical discussion of Mexico City at the time her grandmother moved there prompts Soledad to remember other details from that era, such as the style of architecture and popular music (Cisneros 98, 101). We once hear Soledad become frustrated by her granddaughter's frequent historical contextualizing, which is often accompanied by editorial commentary. Approximately halfway through this section of the novel, Celaya compares the relative lack of sexual education for women during her and her grandmother's upbringings. Soledad interrupts exasperatedly,

Why do you constantly have to impose your filthy politics? Can't you just tell the facts?

And what kind of story would this be with just facts?

The truth!

It depends on whose truth you're talking about. The same story becomes a different story depending on who is telling it. Now, will you allow me to proceed?

And who's stopping you? (Cisneros 156)

Soledad's acquiescence to Celaya at the end of this exchange signals her understanding of the impact of narrative perspective on discourse. As Celaya tells her grandmother shortly after this scene, during a disagreement about Celaya's telling of Soledad's story: "Your story *is* my

story” (italics original, Cisneros 172). The shifting significance of stories, which is the central theme of *Caramelo*, is one of the hallmarks of transnational historiographic metafiction. In “When I was Dirt,” Celaya draws attention to how historical meaning shifts in light of present events: “The Mexican Revolution had tossed and tumulted everything, including everyone’s memories. It was as if the revolution gave everyone from the most beggarly and poor an excuse to say,—Before the revolution when we were monied, and thus, to excuse their humble present” (Cisneros 198). Moments like this and others I have examined in this section beg the question: How much of history is fact, and how much is perspective? Just as the line between fact and fiction is the central tension of the novel, transnational historiographic metafiction makes clear that the line between actuality and perception is the central tension of history.

The analysis of the epistemological basis of history as well as the perspectival shift both at the level of the subject and the nation in *Caramelo* are both techniques of the new form of historiography the novel imagines. *Caramelo* demonstrates the ways in which the history of formerly colonized nations is always-already transnational, while such transnationality is easily elided from the histories of imperial nations. As Susan Buck-Morss argues, “the colonial experience has been excluded from the stories Western thought tells about itself” (16). However, rather than simply arguing for the revision of historical narratives of imperialist and neoimperialist nations, *Caramelo* instead begins to enact a historiography that is not bounded by national borders. We can see an extended example of such transnational historiography in a footnote on the *rebozo*, a type of shawl:

The rebozo was born in Mexico, but like all mestizos it came from everywhere. It evolved from the cloths Indian women used to carry their babies, borrowed its knotted fringe from Spanish shawls, and was influenced by the silk embroideries

from the imperial court of China exported to Manila, then Acapulco, via the Spanish galleons. During the colonial period, mestizo women were prohibited by statutes dictated by the Spanish Crown to dress like Indians, and since they had no means to buy clothing like the Spaniards', they began to weave cloth on the indigenous looms creating a long and narrow shawl that slowly was shaped by foreign influences. The quintessential Mexican rebozo is the rebozo de bolita, whose spotted design imitates a snakeskin, an animal venerated by the Indians in pre-Columbian times. (italics original, Cisneros 96)

Soledad Reyes's father was one of the most well-known *reboceros*, or shawl weavers, famous for his mastery of dyeing black cloth. As Celaya tells us, "So prized was the black *rebozo de olor*, it was said when the crazed empress Carlota was presented with one in her prison-castle in Belgium, she sniffed the cloth and joyously announced,—Today we leave for Mexico" (Cisneros 92). By tracing not only the transnational origins of the material commodity that is the *rebozo* but also its global migration, Celaya makes clear that history since European conquest and the spread of global capitalism can only be constructed transnationally. It is this new form of historiography that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* develops in more detail.

III. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: The Realization of Transnational Historiographic Metafiction

Like *Caramelo*, Junot Díaz's 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* incorporates a wealth of historical research that is largely contained in footnotes to the main narrative. Díaz's novel presents the story of Oscar de León and his family and is narrated by the authorial figure Yunior, Oscar's college roommate. The footnotes to *Oscar Wao* function similarly to those in

Caramelo in their refusal to privilege the US historical record, often pointing to how it skews the events of the past in a manner that obscures US involvement in the Dominican Republic as a causal factor in migration trends. Yunior continually draws attention to and fills in historical gaps that elide the interconnectedness of US and Dominican history. This occurs in the opening pages of the novel in which Yunior introduces fukú, “the Curse and Doom of the New World” (Díaz 1). As Yunior tells his readers, fukú is a curse believed to have been brought from Africa to the Dominican Republic during the transatlantic slave trade, itself made possible by the arrival of Europeans in the fifteenth century. Yunior traces fukú from the landing of Columbus on Hispaniola through the death of John F. Kennedy and the US’s failures in Vietnam, establishing the historical context of the narrative that moves between the US and the Dominican Republic through three generations of the de León family. Oscar, who the title of the novel indicates as its central figure, believed fervently in fukú. Ultimately, we will discover history is an equally central figure as Oscar in the novel. Oscar’s story, as the introductory section of the novel indicates, cannot be told without the accompanying narrative of Dominican history. While the importance of history to Oscar’s story is indicated in the novel’s opening, the claiming of Dominican history as inextricable from Oscar’s story is repeated throughout the novel.

The historical footnotes that augment Yunior’s narration draw attention to the disparity in emphasis on different national histories. A significant number of footnotes address historical figures’ transnational subjectivities, deepening the interconnectedness of national histories. Yunior’s first footnote in *Oscar Wao* introduces the initially US-backed and ultimately US-deposed Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, who will later appear as a key figure in the de Leóns’ saga, and gives background information about his regime that provides necessary context for the events of the novel: “For those of you who missed your mandatory two

seconds of Dominican history: Trujillo, one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality" (Díaz 2). Here Yunior draws attention to the marginalization of Dominican history within the larger US historical narrative. This is problematic for Yunior particularly due to the two US interventions in and occupations of the Dominican Republic that are the context for late-twentieth-century Dominican migration to the US, of which both Oscar's and Yunior's families are a part. Yunior later expounds on this in a parenthetical aside within a footnote that references the US's first occupation of the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924: "You didn't know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when you have kids they won't know the US occupied Iraq either" (Díaz 18). Yunior's sarcasm here draws attention to how ultimately unpopular or unsuccessful US intervention in foreign affairs is often suppressed or downplayed in the historical record despite its causal relationship to immigration patterns and how this trend is likely to continue without historiographic intervention.

As in *Caramelo*, historical references in *Oscar Wao* are heaviest in the sections of the narrative concerned with the narratives of actors who are members of generations older than the narrator. This is partly due to the relevance of both family and national history to Oscar's story. It is also due to Yunior's excavating of historical information from multiple sources and distilling it into one narrative. While Dominican history emphasizes the US's role in Dominican politics in the twentieth century much more than the US's does, there simultaneously exist multiple silences about this period among the Dominicans who lived through the horrors of Trujillo's dictatorship and the oppressive rule of his successors. Yunior acknowledges this early in the novel, telling readers that his mother talks very little of her life in Santo Domingo but occasionally shares bits and pieces of information that are relevant to the narrative he is constructing in the novel (Díaz

6). So while Yunior is clear that the historical elisions he is filling in exist largely in the US narrative, as a member of the generation born after the Trujillo era he is also consciously working to prevent elisions in the Dominican narrative that threaten to occur should the stories about the Trujillo regime die with the members of the generations who lived under his rule. Yunior also realizes that the histories he constellates are not limited only to the Dominican Republic and the US. In his research on fukú, Yunior learns that similar curses exist in Haitian and Puerto Rican culture (Díaz 6). The imperative of nationalist history to place one nation at the center of the narrative results in the erasure of connections that do not appear immediately relevant but may prove to be so in the future. This imperative is inherent in all nationalist histories, be they of imperialist or formerly colonized nations. Through the breaking of silences born of trauma, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* reveals that even the inherently transnational histories of formerly colonized nations are limited in scope and that an overarching history less temporally compartmentalized and geographically bounded is imperative.

Moving back and forth in space and time, the narrative of *Oscar Wao* fluctuates in focus between Oscar and his sister Lola, mother Beli, and maternal grandfather Abelard Cabral.⁶ It is through Yunior's presentation of Abelard's narrative that we can most poignantly see how *Oscar Wao* differs from postmodern historiographic metafiction. Abelard's is the most historically grounded story in the novel, particularly due to its intersections with the Trujillo regime. Oscar's story is a tragic bildungsroman, and the origins of his quick demise are in his family history. The de Leóns identify Abelard's arrest, imprisonment, torture, and death on Trujillo's orders as the

⁶ Although Yunior is the central narrator of the novel, the narrative voice shifts several times. The most notable other narrative voice we hear is that of Oscar's sister Lola. Oscar's mother Beli, grandmother La Inca, and lover Ybón also appear as narrative voices for small sections of the novel.

starting-point of their family's ill fate. In a footnote Yuniór remarks, "There are other beginnings certainly, better ones, to be sure—if you ask me I would have started when the Spaniards 'discovered' the New World—or when the US invaded Santo Domingo in 1916—but if this was the opening that the de Leóns chose for themselves, then who am I to question their historiography?" (Díaz 211). Significantly, Yuniór situates this "opening" to the de Leóns' story over halfway through the novel. Yuniór instead begins the novel by discussing the arrival of the Spanish in the Caribbean, and he introduces the 1916 US invasion of the Dominican Republic in Chapter One. While Yuniór may appear to undermine the de Leóns' historiography in his ordering of the events of the novel, I read him as rather undermining the possibility of a singular historical origin of present events and instead privileging the multiple historical events that influence Oscar de León's brief and wondrous life.

As the lives of the actors in Díaz's novel—particularly Abelard, Beli, and Oscar—are inextricably connected to the history of his family and the Dominican Republic, historical events and figures necessarily play important roles in the fictional narrative. Yuniór, himself a fictional actor, blends history and fiction throughout the novel, creating a narrative that is not outside the realm of realist possibility. Historical figures appear in the novel as both actors and references, and Yuniór's portrayal of them is faithful to the record of their personas and actions. Abelard's fate is parallel to the fate of the numerous historical victims of the Trujillo regime that Yuniór chronicles, largely in footnotes, throughout the novel. Perhaps the closest historical analog to Abelard is Jesús de Galíndez, a Basque Ph.D. candidate at Columbia University who lived in exile in the Dominican Republic from November 1939 to February 1946 (Galíndez xiv). Galíndez fled the Dominican Republic for exile in the United States due to his own suspicions that he had garnered the negative attentions of the Trujillo regime for his involvement on the side

of striking sugar cane workers. The “unsettling” (Díaz 96) topic of Galíndez’s dissertation at Columbia, where he lectured in Spanish and government, was the Trujillo regime. Yunior devotes a long footnote to Galíndez and the legend of his death in which he characterizes Galíndez as “a ferocious leftist, despite the dangers, gallantly toiling on his Trujillo dissertation” (Díaz 97). Galíndez disappeared from New York in March of 1956, thirteen days after defending his dissertation, and was never seen again. According to John Bartlow Martin, US ambassador to the Dominican Republic from 1962-1964, Galíndez “was almost certainly kidnapped in New York, taken to the Dominican Republic, and murdered, all on order of Trujillo” (Galíndez ix). Notorious for its control over the press in the Dominican Republic, which resulted with few exceptions in the publishing only of positive reviews of the government, the Trujillo regime could not have been happy about Galíndez’s undoubtedly critical dissertation. In fact, one of the conclusions Galíndez reaches in his project is that the “picture [of the Trujillo dictatorship] is completed by Trujillo’s megalomania, nepotism, and the sycophancy and servility of his rotating favorites” (259). The general historical consensus regarding Galíndez’s disappearance is that it was directly linked to his denouncement of both Trujillo and his government. As is documented by both Yunior as well as historical accounts of the Trujillo regime, speaking against the dictator generally had dire consequences. Such consequences play a pivotal role in Abelard Cabral’s story.

The fictional Abelard shares several similarities with Galíndez, although, as we will see, they are not completely analogous. Both were highly educated—Galíndez as a lawyer and Abelard as a surgeon—members of the upper class, and each turned to history in middle age. Yunior refers to Abelard as an “amateur ethnographer in the Fernando Ortíz mode” (Díaz 213) whose topic of interest was the indigenous peoples of the Dominican Republic and notes that

Abelard's friends considered him a "historian" (Díaz 229). Abelard was known for hosting intellectual salons on a wide variety of topics, none of which ever touched on Trujillo directly. In contrast to Galíndez, Abelard went out of his way to avoid arousing the suspicion of the Trujillo regime. As Yunió tells us, "Abelard was unmatched in maintaining the outward appearance of the enthusiastic Trujillista" and elaborates in a footnote to this that "what was even more ironic was that Abelard had a reputation for being able to keep his head *down* during the worst of the regime's madness" (italics original, Díaz 215). This characterization of Abelard certainly distinguishes him from Galíndez, but it also serves to cast significant doubt on the official charges on which Abelard was arrested. While there are several theories about Abelard's offense, in the family's historiography, Abelard's troubles begin with the "Bad Thing he said about Trujillo" (Díaz 211). Trujillo's police arrested Abelard for "'Slander and gross calumny against the Person of the President'" after it was reported that he had drunkenly made a joke about Trujillo's propensity for covering up murders (Díaz 233). A popular explanation for Abelard's arrest, one that recognizes the disconnect between his character and the official charges, conjectures that Trujillo was angry over Abelard's refusal to honor his request that Abelard bring his eldest daughter to state functions on account of the dictator's notoriety as a rapist. Yunió discusses this theory but ultimately acknowledges its unlikelihood based on the fact that Trujillo did not pursue Abelard's daughter after the doctor's arrest. Yunió's consideration of both the official explanation for Abelard's arrest and the alternate theories performs three moves: First, it highlights the Trujillo regime's manipulation of the law in their quest for total, unchallenged control. Second, it heightens our attention to the narrativity of history and the importance of the historian's perspective, one that can never achieve total objectivity. Third, and most importantly, it exposes the repressions and elisions of the Trujillo regime's self-representation by positioning

the de Leóns' version of Abelard's story as a counternarrative to the Trujillo regime's version.

Yunior, along with others like Galíndez, refuses to allow the Trujillo regime's version of its history to become the "official" account but also recognizes the danger of writing that narrative out of history. Instead, Yunior allows stories like Abelard's to attest for the lacunae in the Dominican historical record from 1930-1961.

Perhaps most interesting in connection to the novel's treatment of history is the third and "less-known" proposed reason for Abelard's arrest, which has both a historical parallel with Galíndez and an important connection to Oscar's narrative. In this explanation, Abelard was arrested because he was writing "an exposé of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime" (Díaz 245). This is, as Yunior tells us, of great interest to Oscar, who was fond of asking, "What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?" (Díaz 6). According to Yunior, Abelard's amateur ethnographic research into indigenous Dominican folktales was likely focused on identifying Trujillo's supernatural origins. This turn to history by Abelard that could explain his targeting by Trujillo bears similarity to Galíndez's project. While certainly different in focus, both Abelard and Galíndez sought to expose Trujillo in a manner that was offensive to the dictator. Yunior makes several references to Galíndez throughout the narrative, but the most significant reference comes in a footnote in the chapter of the novel devoted to Abelard. In order to demonstrate the total control Trujillo exercised over the Dominican Republic and its people, Yunior quotes a section from Galíndez's dissertation in which Galíndez recounts a graduate student's responding to an exam question about "the pre-Columbian culture in the Americas" by saying that "the most important pre-Columbian culture in the Americas was 'the Dominican Republic during the era of Trujillo'"; the student's committee passed him "on the grounds that 'he had mentioned El Jefe'" (Díaz 225). This reference to

Galíndez's dissertation provides evidentiary support for Yunior's characterization of life for Abelard and his family under the Trujillo regime and simultaneously draws the primacy of history in the narrative into relief. Significantly, unlike the dissertation that survived Galíndez's disappearance, Abelard's work was lost forever. In fact, according to Yunior, Trujillo's rage was so severe that he had all of Abelard's papers destroyed: "Not one single example of his handwriting remains" (Díaz 247). Testimonial about Abelard's project comes to us via a servant who assisted Abelard in his research. Like the lack of evidence of Abelard's work, however, no hard proof implicating the Trujillo regime in Galíndez's disappearance exists. Yunior's refusal to omit conjecture about either Abelard's book or Galíndez's disappearance speaks to the need to create narrative cohesion in spite of insufficient information. As Oscar's own story makes clear, the problem of missing evidence is not one that is exclusive to the past. Like his grandfather's book, Oscar's own research into "The Cosmo DNA"—proof of what he believed to be the extraterrestrial origins of Antilleans—disappears, lost in the mail, and his conclusions are never read (Díaz 333).

By presenting Abelard's fate as similar to Galíndez's, *Oscar Wao* reinforces the "truthfulness" of the historical narrative within which its fictional narrative is set. The conditions of Abelard's imprisonment and torture are similar to those described by many chroniclers of the Trujillo regime, and not far from the horrific details of the rumored murder of Galíndez, who was said to have been lowered naked into a vat of boiling oil while Trujillo watched, holding Galíndez's dissertation (Díaz 97). In *Una Gestapo en América*—which Yunior references in a footnote about the fictional and historical prisoners in Nigua, one of Trujillo's most famous "death camps" (Díaz 250)—Juan Isidoro Jimenes-Grullón documents the torture he and other prisoners suffered in Nigua. According to Galíndez, who used *Una Gestapo en América* as

evidence in his dissertation, Jimenes-Grullón “was beaten and witnessed the more serious tortures suffered by other prisoners” (133). Galíndez gives interesting treatment to the role of fiction in establishing historical truth in his dissertation with reference to fictionalized depictions of Trujillo’s prisons. In the paragraph following his discussion of *Una Gestapo en América*, Galíndez writes,

The novel *Cementerio sin Cruces* by Andrés Requena is essentially true, but it cannot be mentioned as a source because the author was not an eyewitness and uses hearsay evidence. The events belong to a later period, when the young boys of the Popular Socialist party and the Democratic Youth were arrested after their activities in 1946-47. Requena was himself murdered a few months after the publication of this novel. (133)

This passage succeeds in not only reinforcing the believability of the fictional narrative of *Oscar Wao* but also signaling the applicability of fiction to historiography. By including Requena’s novel in his study and noting the historical faithfulness of its fictional plot, Galíndez undermines his own verdict that the novel cannot act as evidence. Here we see the historical weight hearsay often carries not only causally but also evidentially.

The relationship between history and fiction plays out in Yunior’s narration of *Oscar Wao*. Yunior periodically refers to himself as “your Watcher” or “your humble Watcher.” This is a reference to the Watchers, characters in the Marvel Comics Universe who first appeared in a 1963 edition of *The Fantastic Four*. Watchers are members of an “extraterrestrial race” whose role is to “show up personally to monitor key events in history” in the universe and then compile the narratives of these events into a collective history (“Uatu”). Yunior, in a footnote to one of his references to himself as a Watcher, expresses “a certain amount of affinity for Uatu the Watcher”

because “he resides in the hidden Blue Area of the Moon” while “DarkZoners [citizens of the Third World] reside (to quote Glissant) on ‘*la face cachée de la Terre*’ (Earth’s hidden face)” (Díaz 92). The link Yunior makes here between the fictional Watchers and Édouard Glissant is significant to the novel’s treatment of history. Glissant emphasizes the need for historical connection and intersection, commanding writers to “struggle against a single History for the cross-fertilization of histories” (93). This is precisely the task of the Watchers, and Yunior’s identification with Uatu the Watcher is particularly telling. As a race, The Watchers are guided by a principle of non-interference, a principle Uatu violates numerous times. By aligning himself with Uatu, who found it impossible to simply observe events and not intervene in them, Yunior explains his own inability not to influence or take a position on Oscar’s story. This demonstrates the unavoidable influence the subjectivity of the author has on a text, be it fictional or historical. Through the reference to Glissant, Yunior’s discussion of the Watchers also points to the inability of disconnecting texts from the multiple histories that influence them as well as the responsibility of the author to make the connections between these histories.

The many references to science fiction, fantasy, and comic books in *Oscar Wao* have led to its labeling as a postmodern novel, or, like *Caramelo*, sometimes as a hybrid postmodern-postcolonial work, by a number of critics and reviewers.⁷ However, inclusion of these pop-culture references is not necessarily a postmodern move that calls into question the possibility of historical truth. As Díaz has said,

Without shit like race and racism, without our lived experience as people of color, the metaphor that drives, say, the X-Men would not exist! Mutants are a metaphor (among other things) for race, and that’s one of the reasons that mutants are so

⁷ See as example A.O. Scott and López-Calvo.

popular in the Marvel Universe and in the Real. I have no problem re-looting the metaphor of the X-Men because I know it's my silenced experience, my erased condition that's the secret fuel that powers this particular fucking fantasy.

(Danticat, "Junot")

Yunior inverts the assumption that the inclusion of science fiction in *Oscar Wao* problematizes the realism of the narrative by demonstrating that science fiction and fantasy are products of and reactions to history. These speculative genres are a means for making sense of the past, particularly in light of the present, and their continued popularity signals that this process is far from complete. This is also what *Oscar Wao* ultimately demonstrates.

Like his grandfather's and mother's before his, Oscar's story remains incomplete at the end of the novel. Yunior, who makes multiple references to *páginas en blanco* throughout the narrative, recognizes the multiple lacunas that are necessarily part of any history, be it personal or national. However, Yunior appears driven rather than dissuaded by the existence of blank pages to search for narrative completeness. As he tells us in Abelard's chapter, "We are trawling in silences here...A whisper here and there but nothing more" (Díaz 243). Undermining the notion of silence as total, Yunior is compelled to collect the whispers that have the potential to work together to form a more cohesive account of the de Leóns' history. Uncovering the scattered whispers in order to flesh out his story is a noble project that Yunior acknowledges he cannot likely complete alone.

In the penultimate section of *Oscar Wao*, Yunior reveals that he has saved all of Oscar's writings and research in the hope that someday Oscar's niece Isis will come to Yunior looking for answers about the uncle she never knew. Yunior writes, "And maybe, just maybe, if she's as smart and as brave as I'm expecting she'll be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned

and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it. That is what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream" (Díaz 331). The possibility of Isis completing the de Leóns' narrative is immediately called into question as Yunior concludes this section of the novel with his outlook on his worst days. On such days, Yunior turns to Oscar's copy of the graphic novel *Watchmen*, the last panel of which Oscar circled:

The panel where Adrian Veidt and Dr. Manhattan are having their last convo.

After the mutant brain has destroyed New York City; after Dr. Manhattan has murdered Rorschach; after Veidt's plan has succeeded in "saving the world."

Veidt says: "I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end."

And Manhattan, before fading from our Universe, replies: "In the end?

Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends." (Díaz 331)

Yunior's recognition of the incompleteness of the de Leóns' narrative calls into question history as a closed system. This, however, does not eliminate the possibility of a totalizing historical narrative. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, in its own unfinished totality, indicates that history is a continuing process that must constantly be reevaluated, recontextualized, and refined with respect to the present.

IV. Transnational Historiographic Metafiction and Universal History

In *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, from which I take my first epigraph to this chapter, Susan Buck-Morss proposes a revised framework for Hegelian universal history. Beginning the essay "Universal History" by asking "What happens when, in the spirit of dialectics, we turn the tables, and consider Haiti not as the victim of Europe, but as an agent in Europe's construction?" (80), Buck-Morss imagines history as constellational rather than linear and universal rather than

national. This is very much in line with Díaz's approach to history in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which he has discussed in an interview: "I think about the way the Dominican Republic casts a shadow onto the United States. Its involvement, which is completely forgotten, has shaped the entire destiny of this one country. It's a perfect example of how history works—history works in a way that you would never fucking expect it—and that's how the past feels" (Celayo 16). Here Díaz references the US involvement in the Dominican Republic that Yunior draws attention to in *Oscar Wao*. Like Buck-Morss, Díaz challenges us to rethink our expectations of historical narrative and draws our attention to what has been elided from the dominant historical narrative. However, the implication of this focus on history's missing pieces is not simply that national histories must be revised. Rather, what Cisneros and Díaz demonstrate is that national histories are insufficient for achieving historical totality. Cisneros and Díaz have not written literary historiographies of the US, Mexico, or the Dominican Republic alone. While *Oscar Wao* largely focuses on the historical connections between the Dominican Republic and the US, its narrative cannot be restricted only to those two countries. Spain and France, as colonizing powers on Hispaniola, are also implicated in the narrative along with other Latin American and Caribbean nations, as well as nations experiencing neoimperial domination such as Iraq. As my reading of the representation of the origins and movement of the *rebozo* reveals, history functions very similarly in *Caramelo*.

Through their novels that make connections between the past and the present, Cisneros and Díaz have shaped the literary genre that enacts the kind of historiography for which Buck-Morss argues. The open-ended nature of these novels, particularly *Oscar Wao*, signals the understanding that their narratives, like history, are not static. Particularly through the demonstration of the shifting significance of historical "fact," transnational historiographic

metafiction explores how meaning is continually in flux. As Buck-Morss writes, “[F]acts are important not as data with fixed meanings, but as connective pathways that can continue to surprise us. Facts should inspire imagination rather than tying it down. The less they are subsumed under the fiction of secure knowledge, marshaled as proof of a predetermined and authoritative thesis, the more truth they are capable of revealing” (14). The transnationality of the novels and their actors particularly allow for such a dynamic reimagining of history.

As we have seen in my consideration of the ending of *Oscar Wao*, history in these novels is not solely relegated to the past. Similar to the recognition that Oscar’s story and the history of the Dominican Republic will continue to shift and develop as the next generation begins looking for answers about what came before them, the unfinished *rebozo* Celaya inherits from her grandmother in *Caramelo* represents the inherent incompleteness of family and national history. As Buck-Morss maintains, such incompleteness does not negate the possibility of universal history. Her claim that “[t]he project of universal history does not come to an end” but rather “begins again, somewhere else” points to the continued relevance of the past—particularly the colonial past—in the present and future (151).

This emphasis on the continued relevance of colonial history is an important point in my critique of Kumkum Sangari’s argument regarding the political nature of marvelous realism. By ignoring the transnational and focusing exclusively on the Third World, Sangari fails to account for the relevance of colonialism in the First-World context, which is crucial given the migration that was forced or spurred by European conquest. In both *Caramelo* and *Oscar Wao*, the marvelous occurs in both the Third World and the First: the dead Soledad first appears to Celaya in Chicago, and the two continue conversing in both the US and Mexico; the Golden Mongoose appears to Beli in the Dominican Republic and to Oscar in New Jersey. Through the traveling of

the marvelous with the diaspora into the First World, works of transnational literary historiography posit that the contradictions of colonialism that the marvelous signal are not inherent to the Third World and are apparent in the First World as well. Sangari claims that “[t]he *margin* for arbitrariness, the casting up of the strange, the incongruous, the peripheral, is the *product* of a historical situation,” but to limit this historical situation only to the Third World is an odd move that seems to downplay the importance of colonialism and the role of the Third World in First-World histories and national construction (italics original 3). What I hope to have shown here is that the seemingly fantastical or marvelous elements of these texts, which other critics have claimed for postmodernism or postcolonialism, are instead indicators of the need for a broader and more complex, albeit never complete, consideration of history. Such a history must be transnational, as indicated by the appearance of the marvelous in both the Third- and First-World contexts of Cisneros’s and Díaz’s novels, and constellate the events of the colonial past with the neoimperial present—both of which have provoked different forms of mass global migration.

Essential to this project of universal history that Buck-Morss theorizes and Cisneros’s and Díaz’s novels imagine is the juxtaposition of multiple perspectives. Transnational historiographic metafiction illuminates how, as discursive constructs, the details of both fictional and historical narratives will change depending on the perspective of the speaker. In other words, historical objectivity in the guise of a singular metanarrative that is divorced from myriad human experiences is impossible. Satya Mohanty has explored the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in his argument against the postmodernist view that “truth and rationality are always socially and discursively constructed and [as such] their validity and applicability are necessarily limited to their particular situations” (xi). According to Mohanty, “Objectivity is inextricably tied

to social and historical conditions, and objective knowledge is the product not of disinterested theoretical inquiry so much as of particular kinds of social practice” (S. Mohanty 213). Through its immersion in the social and historical, transnational historiographic metafiction demonstrates that what we take to be objective knowledge is in fact derived from subjective experience and the theorizing of this experience in the quest for social change. Subjective experience is always the ground for objective knowledge. Díaz’s and Cisneros’s novels emphasize this not only through the juxtaposition of Dominican and Mexican accounts of history with that of the US but also through their refusal of a singular narrative voice. While Celaya and Yúnior are their novels’ primary authors, their narration is interspersed with or interrupted by other voices with different and often conflicting views of the story. From this, we can discern that in transnational historiographic metafiction objective universality or totality is not impossible, but that it can only be perceived through a consideration of multiple perspectives. We can see the historical example of this in the presentation of the 1930s in *Caramelo*. Celaya makes the point that during the 1930s, which are generally historically associated with the Great Depression in the US, Mexico was experiencing a period of great economic prosperity known as the Golden Age (Cisneros 205). By including both the US and Mexico in the characterization of the 1930s, we get a more nuanced picture of that period in history that further explicates the current relationship between the two countries.

The transnational space of these novels that subverts the Western/non-Western binary is a field in which historical truth becomes uniquely accessible. Mohanty’s argument that “when such a claim [of epistemic privilege] about a particular social group is true, its implications are general, not merely limited to the subjective experiences of the group in question. The knowledge we gain is ‘objective’” (S. Mohanty 235) sounds very much like the relationship that

Hegel posits between the universal and the particular. Aimé Césaire summarizes this relationship by stating, “[T]o arrive at the Universal, one must immerse oneself in the Particular” (qtd. in Buck-Morss 16). Through the foregrounding of the particulars of the subjective experiences of actors and communities, which yields objective knowledge, transnational historiographic metafiction allows for the achievement of the universal. *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* imagine historical truth as an achievable dynamic totality—a totality that can never reach stasis but rather needs constant revision in light of present events.

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Publication:

"A Hybrid Genre Supports Hybrid Roles in Community-University Collaboration." With Timothy Henningsen, Diane Chin, Ann M. Feldman, Caroline Gottschalk-Druschke, Tom Moss, and Nadya Pittendrigh. In *Going Public: What Writing Programs Learn from Engagement*. Ed. Shirley K. Rose and Irwin Weiser. Logan: Utah State UP, 2010. 85-109.

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"Breaking Boundaries: Transnational Literary Historiography and the Politics of Genre."
Presented at Rhetoric Society of America, 14th Biennial Conference, Minneapolis. May 2010.

"The Politicized Space of Transnational Fiction."
Presented at the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States, 24th Annual Conference, Scranton. April 2010.

Roundtable Presenter: "Responsible Publics, Responsible Selves: Interrogating Rhetorics of Civic Engagement."

At Rhetoric Society of America, 13th Biennial Conference, Seattle. May 2008.

Panel Chair/Discussant: “Questions and Transformations: Rethinking Ethnic Identity in Asia/America.”

At “Immigration, Transnationalism, Diaspora: Issues for Asian/American Communities,” Asian Pacific American Graduate Students Organization UIC Chapter Graduate Student Conference, University of Illinois at Chicago. March 2007.

“(Re)Imagining Past, Present, and Future in Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*.”

Presented at Moments of Futurity: From Present Conditions to Material(izing) Horizons, The 9th Annual Conference of the Marxist Reading Group, University of Florida. March 2007.

“Hardt and Negri and the Ghosts of Marxism Past.”

Presented at Spaces of Dissent: The Borders of Transnational Dreams, The 8th Annual Conference of the Marxist Reading Group, University of Florida. March 2006.

“Ghost Stories: History and Memory in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.”

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Teaching:

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Registration Committee, Narrative: An International Conference.
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