This writing sample is excerpted from chapter one of my dissertation. It includes a theoretical introduction to the concept of narrative compositing followed by analyses of two novels, Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. To keep the sample brief, complementary analyses of Alvarez’s *Saving the World* and Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God* and other portions of the argument have been omitted (and described when the cuts go beyond simple paring down). The Works Cited retains references cited only in the omitted sections. In the context of the dissertation, this chapter builds on the Introduction’s outline of the historical and methodological basis of compositing analysis in media, narrative, and globalization theories and provides an overview of prominent patterns of thematic, formal, and readerly narrative compositing as a literary response to accelerating globalization. Later chapters build on this analysis by examining unique manifestations of narrative compositing in novels where globalization is strategically backgrounded, and in new media narratives, narratives of technology and globalization, and novels featuring compositing as a response to the complexity of unfinished and partially suppressed transnational family histories.

Chapter One: “you have to imagine a story bigger . . . than the sum of your parts”: Compositing, Content, and Form in Narratives of Globalization[[1]](#footnote-2)

Among the effects of globalization are increased complexity in three key areas of contemporary life: identities, historical events, and world networks. John Tomlinson observes, “[t]he sheer scale and complexity of the empirical reality of global connectivity is something which defies attempts to encompass it: it is something we can only grasp by cutting into it in various ways” (17). Tomlinson contends that we must pursue economic, political, and cultural analyses of globalization “whilst always denying them conceptual priority: pursuing one dimension in the self-conscious recognition of multidimensionality. This sort of deliberately anti-reductionist analysis should also make us sensitive to the points at which different dimensions interconnect and interact” (17). A key method for managing such complexity is what I call compositing: we construct narratives, interpretations, and worldviews from logics, ideologies, and experiential fragments whose connections are not seamless. Compositing aims to make sense of these pieces, their interconnections, and the piecemeal whole constituted by their arrangements, while emphasizing the contingency of both process and product. Composites are complex wholes whose parts remain discrete but meaningfully connected, and they help authors, readers, and characters navigate our era of accelerating globalization and technological change. A significant strand of contemporary global fiction features narrative content and structures centrally concerned with compositing processes and configurations as a means of exploring experiences of global connections that are increasingly familiar to many around the world today.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Globalization scholarship is particularly sensitive to this state of affairs. In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Anthony Giddens stresses the separations and reassemblies in a way that essentially foregrounds what I call compositing processes:

The dynamism of modernity derives from the *separation of time and space* and their recombination in forms which permit the precise time-space ‘zoning’ of social life; the *disembedding* of social systems (a phenomenon which connects closely with the factors involved in time-space separation); and the *reflexive ordering and reordering* of social relations in the light of continual inputs of knowledge affecting the actions of individuals and groups. (Giddens 16-17)

Like Giddens’s disembedding, Tomlinson’s deterritorialization holds “that complex connectivity weakens the ties of culture to place” while extending cultural phenomena across networks spanning global distances (30). Tomlinson defines globalization as a modern condition of “*complex connectivity*” characterized by “the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependences that characterize modern social life” (2). These analyses of globalized complexity raise a follow-up question: how do individuals, societies, authors, and readers each *deal with* the overwhelming complexity of global connectivity?

In exploring the answer, I draw my central term, compositing, from the discourse of new media studies. As commonly used by media scholar Lev Manovich and the film industry, digital compositing “refers to the process of combining a number of moving image sequences, and possibly stills, into a single sequence with the help of special compositing software” (136-37). For Manovich, this media processing technique suggests and “exemplifies a more general operation of computer culture—assembling together a number of elements to create a single seamless object. . . . a typical operation in assembling any new media object” (139). Expanding on Manovich’s insight (most directly in chapter three), I argue that this strategy of selection and assembly extends to the creation of any expressive work and even to the interpretation of any complex situation; I also contend that one need neither intend nor achieve seamless composites. A key advantage of borrowing the concept of compositing (rather than related concepts such as relationality, hybridity, networks, systems, multivocality, or simply complexity or “complex connectivity”) is the emphasis on compositing as a local strategy rather than an essentializing or given structural. In other words, “compositing” precedes “composites” both chronologically and conceptually. Compositing as a strategy responds to the overwhelming complexity of contemporary media technologies and the globalized society they enable and pervade.

In this chapter, I analyze the significance of compositing approaches to literary production in four novels in English: Zakes Mda’s *Heart of Redness,* Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Julia Alvarez’s *Saving the World,* and Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God*. The chapter highlights these novels’ use of similar composite structures to grapple with contemporary globalized life. This chapter, like its objects of analysis, is a composite produced by emphasizing some connections and letting others go. **Here I omit a brief rationale for limitations to the kind of texts considered.**

Multiple-focalizer narration is a structure more responsive to compositing than concepts (useful elsewhere) like hybridity or network. Multiple focalizing characters do not mix together and become hybrids; portions of their experiences are selectively combined to create a narrative whose meaning comes from juxtaposition and order more than from hybridization or networked connectivity. Hybrids are helpful in understanding cultures and identities, and networks are useful to explain global flows of money, power, goods, cultural and media objects, etc. The concept of compositing helps us see the abstracted similarities among these combinatory and connective processes. Whether at the levels of identity or community formation, worldview or historical construction or literary narration, or the development of political, economic, cultural, technological, or communication networks, compositing involves selecting from available ingredients, connecting them together (with or without a clear core or center), and investing the whole with new meaning derived from these processes of selection, creation, and representation.

In literature we can observe many kinds of compositing. Characters develop composite identities and worldviews to reconcile competing identity claims and beliefs without recourse to unworkable concepts of purity. Similar compositing processes are employed by organizations and communities—culturally, politically, and economically engaged groups with different understandings of history, interpretations of the present, and visions for the future. Scholars composite theories, literary works, and historical events to understand the world. Print technologies encourage or, at least, have normalized narratives in which even non-linear stories have a single clear reading sequence—a pre-composited order—whereas in chapter three, we will analyze new media technologies offering multiple not-yet-composited sequences and narratives within one expressive object. The novels considered in this chapter explore globalized experiences through narrative compositing of multiple generations, focalizing characters, geopolitical settings, languages, communities, times, and invoked contexts. These narrative techniques mirror and supplement the compositing methods characters use to understand themselves, their experiences, and the world.

***The Heart of Redness***

Mda, Díaz, Alvarez, and Castillo use compositing at both thematic and formal levels as a strategy for dealing with urgent, unavoidable complexity. Thematic compositing tackles the complexities of globalization in everyday life, while formal compositing (in static texts) creates a single narrative incorporating multiple perspectives. My readings here explore how compositing at these two levels operates interdependently in these texts. I begin with Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*, a 2000 novel structured around the religious, philosophical, and political conflicts between two branches of a South African family in the 19th and 20th centuries, featuring characters with both static and malleable composite identities and worldviews. In *The Heart of Redness*, singularity of focus and temporal linearity are replaced by composite narrative structures emphasizing juxtaposed subjects. Temporal/generational relations serve as both content and formal structuring device in a narrative organized around two discrete time periods, the 1850s and the 1990s, between which lies an unnarrated generational gap including the whole of apartheid. Both periods’ stories focus on the two branches of the family descended from Xikixa, with the contemporary narrative also emphasizing characters (Camagu and Dalton) whose relations to the central families are not (initially) familial. The twinning of families and temporal settings invites comparisons and contrasts of the globalized cultural, economic, and political engagements shaping Qolorha and their uneven effects.[[3]](#footnote-4)

*The Heart of Redness* frequently shifts between timelines within chapters without any demarcation clearer than a blank space between paragraphs or sections in different timelines. Despite the hundred-year temporal disconnect, Mda composites the timelines into deeply intertwined strands producing a narrative sequence emphasizing thematic parallels over chronology. Mda uses this to stress similarities between the two periods, for example by leaving readers momentarily uncertain what time is being narrated when sections begin without clear temporal markers, as when a section begins, “It was the land of the prophets. Then the gospel people came” (47). Mda’s temporal compositing strengthens thematic emphasis on the similarities between the central conflicts of the two time periods, most notably the conflict between Believers and Unbelievers (appellations drawn from the historical conflict). In the 1850s, this fictionalized conflict centers around the historical narrative of Believers who follow the young prophetess Nongqawuse in slaughtering all of their cattle and waiting for supernatural deliverance from the increasing oppression of white colonizers and, on the other hand, Unbelievers who find this faith in prophecy self-destructive, refuse to destroy their herds and crops, and instead try to negotiate a less oppressive relationship with the colonizers. The brothers Twin (a Believer) and Twin-Twin (“the original Unbeliever”) epitomize these two positions (62). In the 1990s, this tension, again embodied by the enduring split between the two branches of Xikixa’s descendants, manifests largely through attitudes toward preserving cultural traditions and engaging economic and cultural modernization at national and local levels. Mda refuses to give the Believer/Unbeliever dichotomy clean boundaries, sometimes tying the binary to a preservation/modernization framework and at other times undermining the simple consistency of this connection. The Believers, for example, side with Camagu and Dalton to find sustainable ways of incorporating cultural traditions into economic modernization efforts, in opposition to the Unbelievers who naively wish to go along with exploitative modernization plans (centered around a casino complex) being pushed by the national government.

Mda uses temporal parallels in his narrative of these ongoing conflicts to demonstrate how basic tensions manifest in different ways at different times, showing a complex relationship between continuity across time (Believer/Unbeliever) and temporally specific phenomena (political dynamics and forms of modernization, for instance). This relationship is also reinforced by the comparisons and contrasts offered by the individual members of the family within and across the two timelines. Non-linear structure in *The Heart of Redness* develops a perspective on individual conflicts and enduring tensions, local particularity and global trends, and the traditional and the modern, as applied to both colonial and post-apartheid South Africa. Mda’s temporal compositing provides a selectively contextualizing perspective on current and historical events, identities, and the world, highlighting points of view directly affected by transnational and globalized concerns.

Mda’s narrative composites more than just time periods in its exploration of complex connectivity. In addition to the intergenerational and the historical/temporal, discussed above, the narratives of both time periods feature intercultural exchanges and changing configurations of personal and group identity.[[4]](#footnote-5) The Believer/Unbeliever dichotomy thematizes simultaneous, divergent, and ongoing (centuries-long, in fact) processes for developing worldviews grounded in a complex globalized locality—Qolorha—and for shaping the present and future of that community.[[5]](#footnote-6) Over time, the Believer and Unbeliever worldviews shift to account for current events and new information, but the core structures change slowly and rarely; fundamental similarities are recognizable between 1850s and 1990s versions of (Un)Believing. Each group strives to use ideological priorities (advocating progress, respecting tradition, maintaining economic independence, etc.) to help determine how new and old information from their environment should be incorporated into an understanding of the world. For example, Bhonco applies core values of his Unbeliever worldview, like progress, modernity, and wealth, to one of the novel’s central conflicts: a proposed casino complex that would drastically alter Qolorha’s economy and ecology.The core of Bhonco’s composite worldview resists change throughout the novel and guides his efforts to lead his family and community toward his preferred future.

Camagu is more open to incorporating new information and perspectives into the heart of his composite worldview in ways that meaningfully change it. Though initially more partial to the Unbelievers’ position, Camagu is skeptical of their idealistic faith in the benevolence of modernity and progress, which causes him to question their embrace of the casino project and ultimately side with the Believers in opposing it. Cultural, economic, and political stasis is not an option, so the question facing the village is *how* to change and modernize. Different routes to and destinations for modernization, bringing with them different relationships with the rest of the country and the world, are proposed and advocated.[[6]](#footnote-7) The national-government-sponsored, Unbeliever-backed option, a casino resort that would bring in money by steamrolling over local nature and culture, is ultimately prevented (by court order), and the end result is a combination of two more environmentally and culturally conscious Believer-backed modernization projects organized as cooperative societies: a holiday camp and a cultural village. Each modernization approach emerges from a different composite of political, economic, cultural, and social priorities and attitudes about history, culture, progress, and other concepts and ideals.[[7]](#footnote-8)

*The Heart of Redness* does not present a fundamentally malleable composite worldview as necessarily good and a stable or rigid one as bad, however. **Here I omit a few pages on how Mda avoids privileging a composite point of view over a stable one and how he emphasizes the contingent, complex circumstances leading to Camagu’s involvement in the struggle over Qolorha’s future. The concluding paragraphs of analysis of *The Heart of Redness* are considerably condensed.**

*The Heart of Redness* includes many characters’ perspectives on Qolorha’s situation without presenting any of these characters as a simple villain or hero whose perspective is to be unproblematically adopted or dismissed. In the 1850s narrative, the Believer Twin and the Unbeliever Twin-Twin both have sympathetic and unsympathetic sides, disrupting easy identification with one or the other as being “right.” Rather than creating a spectrum from “right” to “wrong,” the characters’ multiple perspectives form a composite narrative representation of available positions on issues of belief, cultural continuity, economic and political modernization, and social dynamics. The novel similarly refuses to establish a clear hierarchy along its other axes of composite structure such as time periods, major group dynamics (Believers vs. Unbelievers, local interests vs. distant corporate and government interests), central interpersonal relationships, and individual psychological tensions.

Accelerating globalization influences each of these sites of compositing. Temporal and intergenerational composites highlight similarities that have persisted into the era of globalization but also ways in which globalized connections have gotten denser. Qolorha’s ties to the outside world in the late 1990s go beyond having outsiders come in, settle there, and impose changes. Villagers leave and/or return; outsiders like Camagu with some cultural, ethnic, and national connections come and stay; tourists of various interests are lured by the different manifestations of Qolorha’s modernizing tourist industry; and one group of corporate and government officials attempts to push through the casino development while others help Dalton produce the national heritage site declaration that stops it. Camagu and Xoliswa Ximiya have each spent time in America and bring back diametrically opposed descriptions of it (66, 64). The village debate over modernization and the romantic relationships that comprise the central plots of the contemporary narrative both revolve around disagreements over the best relationships between local traditions and global cultural influences, at the levels of the individual, the group, and the locality. These tensions are in many cases continuations of issues present in the 1850s narrative, but in the contemporary period they pervade all levels of life with an extensivity and an intensivity greatly increased during the intervening years.

*The Heart of Redness* is about individuals, groups, localities, and a nation revising their identities by selecting from and recombining both old and new. Mda structures this narrative by compositing fragments of times, generations, perspectives, cultural positions, and tensions together into a story whose combinatory structure undermines attempts to read it as reductively representative of the whole of the Eastern Cape or South Africa. *The Heart of Redness* is aware of both its contingent nature and also its validity and even urgency in a world whose inhabitants must similarly forge forward using the material and conceptual resources at hand or be forced along a path toward the future chosen by “the powers that be or their proxies” regardless of what is truly “good for the people” (Mda 277). *The Heart of Redness* ends with Camagu’s holiday camp and Dalton’s cultural village, both run by local cooperative societies, leading an economic revitalization of Qolorha while managing to “preserve indigenous plants and birds” and to keep jobs livable and local through pragmatic compromises arrived at after extensive debate (277). But though the casino complex has been thwarted, Mda makes clear that the struggle between local interests and larger globalized forces is not over. Local interests “have won the day,” Camagu reflects, “But for how long? The whole country is ruled by greed. Sooner or later the powers that be may decide, in the name of the people, that it is good for the people to have a gambling complex at Qolorha-by-Sea” (277). With Qolorha’s victories, local forces and interests retain some agency as modernization and globalization progress, but the future remains uncertain and beyond the full control of the local forces and the global networks they leverage. Agency in *The Heart of Redness*, like the narrative and the characters’ various worldviews, is understood as something fragmented, combinatory, and exercised in a variety of composite forms.

***The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao***

For a book with a single name in the title, Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* devotes a great deal of focus and focalization to other characters. Of its 335 pages, only roughly 150 focus on Oscar de Léon—through the anything-but-transparent lens of his charismatic narrator—while the other chapters and sections focus on his sister Lola, his mother Beli, his grandfather Abelard, and his friend/college roommate and now narrator, Yunior.[[8]](#footnote-9) Like *The Heart of Redness,* Díaz’s novel is structured in part around intergenerational and interpersonal relations so as to explore matters of concern to contemporary individuals and societies. The life of Oscar Wao, the book suggests, cannot be properly understood by attending to Oscar’s experiences alone. Instead, Díaz’s structure implies, understanding of Oscar requires a composite story involving the histories of Oscar’s family, his friend Yunior, and the Dominican Republic. In addition to the character and authorial compositing analyzed in *The Heart of Redness*, *Oscar Wao* prominently features the issue of readerly compositing: the reading process of deciding which details to focus on and which unknown language ands contexts to look up to organize understandings and lingering uncertainties into an overall interpretation of a text.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Díaz’s metafictional character-narrator Yunior embodies and emphasizes compositing processes. As a character he composites a worldview and historical narrative incorporating the relatively well known (Trujillo) and the overlooked (the street-level history of the de Léon family, the disrespected genres of sci-fi and fantasy), the widely accepted (importance of political players like dictators and agents of American influence) and the contested (*fukú americanus*). As a narrator, he presents to readers the composite narrative he uses to understand his world, bridging the realms of character and authorial compositing through the middle position of narrator. His story demonstrates that political networks like Trujillo’s and the United States’, economic networks like transnational diasporic money flows, cultural networks like the Dominican diasporic community, and media networks like genres are developed, curated, consumed, inhabited, and given meaning in ways quite comparable to the acts of narrative and worldview compositing described above. Each kind of compositing involves processes of selection, construction, maintenance, and application that give the composite its function and meaning. The sheer quantity of similar processes visible in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* across all aspects of life, and across the roles of character, narrator, author, and reader, suggest that attending to compositing processes helps us understand our world, our agency, and ourselves. These improved understandings could help ward off paralysis in the face of overwhelming globalized complexity, clarifying and even marginally increasing agency.

Each numbered chapter (but one) of Díaz’s novel focuses on one central character within Oscar’s family: four on Oscar and one each on his sister Lola, his mother Beli, and his grandfather Abelard. The last numbered chapter is not devoted to a single character, but to Yunior, Lola, and Beli retrieving Oscar’s body from the Dominican Republic after his lover Ybón’s police captain boyfriend has Oscar murdered. Brief non-numbered sections generally retain Yunior as narrator (though the section at the beginning of Part II, like Lola’s chapter, is narrated by Lola). This structure grants different characters and generations centrality within their own sections and encourages readers to construct a composite understanding of the story by drawing connections between these sections in order to understand the story and the life of Oscar. Through extended shifts of focalization to and chapters organized around characters besides Oscar, the narrative denies that Oscar’s personal experiences comprise the main realm of knowledge needed to understand his life. Yunior’s consistent prominence and strong voice also highlight the importance of the narrator/compositor in piecing together Oscar’s narrative. His semi-opaque narration highlights the mediating distance between Oscar and the reader, reminding us that we’re reading neither Oscar’s life nor Oscar’s understanding of it, but Yunior’s version of Oscar’s life. With the partial exception of Oscar’s direct discourse (reported by Yunior), our access to Oscar’s thoughts and experiences is heavily mediated through Yunior’s idiosyncratic perspective on Oscar and on life. Furthermore, by repeatedly connecting the de Léons’ experiences to 20th-century Dominican politics, Yunior encourages us to read the overall story in that context, further decentering the individuals’ stories. The de Léons’ experiences point to the long-lasting traumatic effects of Trujillo’s political power even on those who leave the country. Like Mda’s Qolorha, Díaz’s de Léons are indicative of a larger political reality but not simplistically representative—they participate in the fukú of the New World but theirs is not the only version of it. On the first page of the novel, Yunior both differentiates between “little and large” varieties of fukú and connects them to each other and to “the arrival of Europeans” in the Americas (1). The de Léons’ experience a little fukú, a personal curse derived from the large fukú of Trujillo and Dominican politics, itself an instance of the *fukú* *americanus* initiated by Columbus. For Yunior, *fukú americanus* is a composite of discrete but related misfortunes, and the hemispheric appellation suggests that even *fukú americanus* is part of a larger global fukú.

The distributed, composite nature of Yunior’s narrative, focalized through four de Léons (and allowing Lola to narrate her own sections as the deceased Oscar cannot), represents an attempt on Yunior’s part to mitigate the dictatorial power of the author/narrator, an issue Díaz sees as a central concern of the novel.[[10]](#footnote-11) Yunior’s techniques also help to decenter Oscar or at least to decrease his dominance of the center, forcing his story and voice to share space and emphasis with those of his relatives and Yunior, creating a composite structure meaningfully engaged with multiple characters and generations. While their presence in one novel and the connective presence of Yunior’s narratorial voice bind the separate chapters together, different focalizations, non-linear temporal sequence, and varying geographical and political settings insist that their differences be attended to as well. They are part of a composite—rather than hybrid or episodic—whole whose parts retain their distinctness alongside their connectedness.

The non-linear sequence of chapters in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* emphasizes the significance of the generational relations to Oscar’s story. Instead of narrating the story of Oscar (and his family) chronologically, Yunior narrates Oscar’s youth, then Lola’s youth, Beli’s youth, Oscar in college, Abelard’s last years, and finally Oscar after college until his death, with some attention at the end to Yunior, Lola, and Lola’s daughter Isis in later years (nearer the narrating moment). This presentation reflects Oscar’s understanding of his own family history. As children, we tend to understand the world from our experiences outward before we organize it chronologically—we understand our time before our parents’ and before our grandparents’. To understand Oscar, Yunior begins not with what happened first (Abelard’s story), but with what Oscar knew first: his childhood, and then that of his sister.

Yunior’s narrative composite thus avoids linear structures more common in literature and history for an experiential order highlighting the pieces of the story as they might have come to Oscar’s attention, mimicking and emphasizing the compositing process by which he gradually understood his world and its history. Yunior’s reworking of historical narrative structure is matched by his revisionary attitude toward appropriate historical subject matter. As Monica Hanna’s historiographic analysis and José David Saldívar’s world-systems-influenced analysis of the novel both contend, *Oscar Wao* presents an unusual mix of high profile historical material (Trujillo and related political people and events) and the unknown/everyday/factually unsupportable (the de Léons, fukú, and other subjects rarely captured in official histories). Yunior’s composite narrative combines atypical elements in nontraditional (but reasonable) ways and, by providing an alternative, reveals the subjectivity of traditional historiography, a subjectivity too often suppressed by political powers or overlooked due to the disinterest of historians, narrators, and other compositors in the experiences of people like the de Léons.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Readers faced with *Oscar Wao*’s structure of discrete, non-linear chapters about different characters must work to connect them into a composite whole by developing interpretations of their interrelations; as with *The Heart of Redness*, the narrative does not give explicit reasons for the temporal compositing, leaving it to readers to decide how the timelines inform each other thematically and causally. By challenging readers in this way, Díaz’s and Mda’s novels mirror similar acts of narrative compositing by which readers revise their understandings of the real world. As Tzvetan Todorov and Hayden White (among others) argue, historical and fictional narratives are constructed in similar, subjective ways.In the age of accelerating globalization, understandings of the world demand to be constructed from the many varied experiences and connections that confront us daily and through which events and entities exert influence across great spatio-temporal distances.[[12]](#footnote-13) As we start to recognize such globalized influences in our lives, however, and as authors start to recognize them in their narratives, it quickly becomes apparent that the number of connections affecting a given individual or situation far exceeds our ability to represent or comprehend. Díaz and Mda address this challenge in their narratives by picking and choosing a subset of connections across generations, time, space, cultures, worldviews, and individuals, a selection depicting the interplay of global and local influences. In both narratives, though, the work of drawing the connections and explaining how things affect and relate to each other is left in part to readers rather than wholly explicated by the novel.

Transnational political, economic, and social conflicts persist throughout the timeline of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The effects of the Trujillo dictatorship ripple through the generations of Oscar’s family, following them to the United States in the form of psychological repercussions and socialized concepts of gender roles. Oscar, born in New Jersey, is painfully preoccupied by the extent to which he differs from ideals of Dominican masculinity, and Lola, also born in the States, scathingly asserts that “the perfect Dominican daughter . . . is just a nice way of saying a perfect Dominican slave” (56). The primary and footnoted texts about Dominican and American political history and incidents of national and international violence provide a composite political history interwoven with the family stories, helping readers see the events happening to the central characters as part of larger, historical patterns, but with the usual hierarchy of importance subverted by a focus on the individual, familial, and experiential.[[13]](#footnote-14)

The generational relations that provide the chapter structure for *Oscar Wao* and the foundation for readers’ understanding of Oscar’s life are not the novel’s only composite structures; they are layered on top of the Dominican/American historical and political connections described above as well as a globalized literature and media layer, expressed through both Oscar’s and Yunior’s heavy dependence on the tropes and details of sci-fi/fantasy genre literature to describe and understand their lives. **Here I omit further examples and development.** *Oscar Wao* consistently confronts readers with many of these cultural, geographical, historical, linguistic, and literary contexts at once: “before you could say *Oh Mighty Isis*, Maritza blew up into the flyest guapa in Paterson, one of the Queens of New Peru. . . . a ghetto Mary Jane . . . probably the only Peruvian girl on the planet with pelo curlier than his sister’s (he hadn’t heard of Afro-Peruvians yet, or of a town called Chincha)” (17-18).

Several key contexts inform the composite structures readers can discern (or must grapple with) in *Oscar Wao*. The generational manifests in the chapter structure, the generic and mass mediated manifest in allusions and vocabulary, and the historical and transnational manifest in characters’ understandings of identity and political history. Each context (but particularly history, Spanish language, and genre literature) is also addressed in prominent footnotes. The presence of these thirty-three footnotes prompts readers to consider their relationship with the non-footnoted text in the novel’s structural composite, since a clear typographical distinction is being made. The history, language, media, and generational composites extend across both forms of text, suggesting that the footnote format is not simply flagging one type of content or another as secondary. Rather, certain aspects of each area of interest are being placed in a typographically secondary role that paradoxically calls attention to itself (as an unusual structure in a novel), emphasizing the compositing problem of how we decide what is primary, secondary, and omittable in our own understandings of our lives and times.[[14]](#footnote-15) **Here I omit analysis of how the novel’s open-ended opening and closing sections emphasize the rough edges of narrative composites where contingent start and end points are subjectively decided upon.**

Instead of positing an end to the transnational and transgenerational reach of the trauma of political violence, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* ends by asserting the possibility of finding value within a life buffeted about by the forces of globalized history—of finding meaning in compositing rather than in escape to a simpler narrative. Though Oscar’s refusal to stay away from Ybón gets him killed by the Dominican police captain dating her, as he knew it might, both Oscar’s final letter and Díaz’s novel conclude with a reversal of Kurtz’s last words in Conrad’s classic novel of imperialism and turn-of-the-century colonial globalization, *Heart of Darkness*.[[15]](#footnote-16) “The beauty! The beauty!” Oscar writes before his death, confident that this brief taste of happiness and human intimacy is worth his life (335). The horrors of European imperialism, American collusion, and Dominican dictatorship are painfully present in Oscar’s story, but they are refused the last word; Oscar’s limited individual agency and Díaz’s and Yunior’s narratorial control (disturbingly authorial as it may be) wrest a redemptive, wondrous experience from those powerful globalized forces, acknowledging their power but denying its totality or centrality to their composite understanding of the life of Oscar de Léon.

**Here I omit analyses of Alvarez’s *Saving the World* and Castillo’s *So Far from God*.**

The novels of Mda, Díaz, Alvarez, and Castillo all employ multiple focalization (interpersonal compositing), spatial and/or temporal composites, and intergenerational comparisons (usually within families). By compositing together these various fragments, each novel highlights the key forces of globalization influencing their central characters, who are themselves employing compositing processes to understand and influence the complex globalized networks amongst which they live. These thematic concerns are mirrored by the novels’ narrative compositing of focalizers, times, places, cultural groups, and contexts. Characters, authors, and readers are all pushed to use compositing processes to cope with globalized complexity without wrestling it into a false coherence of worldview, narrative, or interpretation. There are always pieces left out, tensions within the composite, perspectives unaccounted for. These novels suggest through form and content that compositing allows characters, authors, and readers to better manage the overwhelming scope of a world of interconnected knowledge, people, and institutions. Of course this is only the first step of a meaningful engagement with the forces of globalization—the nature of our specific actions must spring from the situation at hand—but it is a first step that we must consistently employ to avoid slipping into either paralysis or overconfidence. Rather than surrendering our agency, disengaging in the face of paralyzing complexity, or handicapping ourselves with simplistically coherent worldviews and narratives, developing a composite vision lets us engage the world while remembering that the version of it we’re engaging is not the whole story.

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1. Quotation from Julia Alvarez, *Saving the World* 328. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. As should already be evident, talking about compositing lends itself to compound structures. These should be themselves be considered acts of compositing: as complex as such lists can sometimes be, they are not exhaustive, but rather attempts to express what I consider the most salient aspects of the subjects at hand. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Jana Gohrisch characterizes *Heart of Redness*’s “non-chronological stories with multiple focalizers” as “[r]epresenting history in the age of globalization” (232). The two Qolorha narratives, for Gohrisch, “have global connotations because they dramatize the connectedness of different racial and ethnic groups, classes and genders in the modern world” (243). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. As Hilary P. Dannenberg notes, “the novel is full of characters who are bound up in a process of making cultural choices and are part of a larger process of cultural intermingling and hybridisation, the inevitable result of contact between different cultures” (178). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. In Benita Parry’s analysis, the novel ““foreground[s] the problems of recuperation,” stressing “the need to understand cultural inheritance,” and showcasing “oppressed peoples who . . . fashion new and historically informed forms of consciousness replete with reverberations of rediscovered histories” (21). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Gorän Therborn’s historical analysis proposes “four major entries into modernity” – European, New Worlds, external threat, and colonial routes – while also noting that “individual societies may confront combinations and mutations of them” (131, 133). Multiple forms of engagement with modernity are also available on subnational levels like that of Qolorha, though the options are constrained by the larger nation or society’s overall form of entry into modernity. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Gohrisch concludes that “[b]oth Believers and Unbelievers try to provide their lives with a pattern they can follow in the future. While the Believers cling to the sense of history as hope, Unbelievers read it as defeat. Story-line and plot suggest a compromise which is questioned and commented upon by magical-realist devices, hyperbolic irony, and metaphors and symbols” (243). The narrative compromise Gohrisch highlights is an authorial composite, drawing on aspects of Believer and Unbeliever worldviews to present an understanding of the situation incorporating insights from both. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Oscar’s sort-of-adoptive grandmother, La Inca, is also relatively well developed over the course of the novel, but the chapter and section focalization structures rarely privilege her in the way they do the others. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. In Monica Hanna’s historiographic analysis of *Oscar Wao*, “the cornerstone of Yunior’s narrative and historiographic stance” is the fact that he “adopts several narrative frames and examines the story from multiple perspectives,” and that he “includes the reader in this process of reconstruction,” which “emphasiz[es] the constructed nature of all histories and narratives” (500, 501). One significance of the similarity in the compositing tasks of narrators and readers emphasized by *Oscar Wao* is the critical importance of compositing skills to navigating a complex globalized world. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. In an interview with *Slate*, Díaz asserts that “This novel (I cannot say it enough) is all about the dangers of dictatorship . . . but the real dictatorship is in the book itself, in its telling; and that’s what I think is most disturbing: how deeply attached we all are to the institution of dictatorship. . . . We all dream dreams of unity, of purity; we all dream that there’s an authoritative voice out there that will explain things, including ourselves. If it wasn’t for our longing for these things, I doubt the novel or the short story would exist in its current form. . . . In dictatorships, only one person is really allowed to speak. And when I write a book or a story, I too am the only one speaking, no matter how I hide behind my characters” (Díaz, “Questions”). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Elisabeth Maria Mermann-Jozwiakpoints out that fictions like *Oscar Wao* can be particularly effective at “trac[ing] individual acts of meaning-making . . . with respect to transnational processes” and “depicting alternate, not necessarily nation-based forms of community and identity,” concluding that “this affective dimension . . . is needed to complement a social science approach to migration and transnationalism” (18). Identity- and community-compositing along a transnational axis can incorporate individualized concerns to balance out or highlight the weaknesses of official history and large-scale politics that primarily value the collective, representative, and nation-centric. Whereas multiculturalism, for Mermann-Jozwiak, remains nation-centric, transnationalism decenters the nation in favor of individuals and their connections across nations, rather than seeing individuals primarily in terms of one nation. The individualized focus of a narrative like Yunior’s similarly decenters official or authoritative histories, relegating Trujillo (and American intervention in the Dominican Republic) largely to the footnotes. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Giddens and Tomlinson both theorize agency across distance. Giddens notes the influence of expert systems (such as trust in the medical profession or industrial safeguards, whose centers and authorities are quite distant from us in space) and sees four dimensions of globalization— capitalism, nation-states, military, and labour—all affecting people across vast distances (70, 71). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Hanna argues that Díaz “underscores the importance of writing history in new ways with new—or newly combined—forms capable of including experiences usually unexplored in traditional history, all while insisting on the impossibility of telling the *whole* story” (516). Saldívar asserts that Yunior’s focus on the *fukú americanus* rather than the nation-state provides insights into “the US and Eurocentric structures of hegemonic thought and representation that continue to dominate the globe today. It signals, too, the planetary networks within which fukú Americanity, globalization (capitalism), and modernity themselves all become possible” (133). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Chapter two explores globalized-composites-as-background in more depth. For more on footnotes and intertexts in *Oscar Wao*, see my article, “Some Assembly Required*.*” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. *Heart of Darkness* is, of course, also a prominent intertext in Mda’s novel, as Gail Fincham (among others) has explored, concluding that *The Heart of Redness*’s rich intertextuality “complicates the reader’s response” and does not “allow . . . the reader to reach a centre,” instead situating itself in an intertextual composite to be navigated by the reader (193, 194). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)