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In Defense of Genre Blending.

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Abstract: Readers often only care about one distinction when it comes to things they read. Is it fiction or nonfiction? Did it happen or didn't it? Presumably, we make sense of events we believe happened in a different way than we make sense of the ones that we don't believe. Deconstructionists often warn us about the hazards that occur with the strict binary thinking we tend to orient ourselves with. When this binary is blurred, which it often is in many contemporary works of literature, readers become unsettled. It is our position that genre, and even the more broad categories of fiction and nonfiction, should not be found exclusively as properties internal to the text itself, but rather, the way we make sense of genre is an active process of narrative comprehension. We will question how the particular binary concerning fiction and nonfiction has sold us short concerning the ways in which we make sense of literary texts, and how much more fluid our notions of genre really could and should be. We also want to argue that the reduction of the binary of genre merely into fiction and nonfiction is a gross oversimplification of the ways in which we understand both genres themselves, as well as the ways in which we understand both truth and reference.

Readers seem to care an awful lot about the apparent truth content of the books they choose. Is it fiction or non-fiction? Did it happen or did it not? Presumably, readers make sense of events they believe happened in a different way than they make sense of the ones that they don't believe happened. Many readers also tend to assume that fiction is merely that which is false and that non-fiction is simplistically true. But it is not necessarily that simple. Deconstructionists often warn us about the hazards that occur with the

strict binary thinking we tend to orient ourselves with. We organize our world hastily into black/white, male/female, straight/gay, liberal/conservative, and our literary works into fiction/non-fiction. We assume that these are false dilemmas, but what we are interested in here is the way we make sense of the fiction/non-fiction distinction. When this binary is blurred, which it often is in many contemporary works of literature, readers can become unsettled. Historical novels, autobiographical novels, concentration-camp-fiction, creative non-fiction, testimonio, and novels without plots, are just a few examples of works that can blend fictional and non-fictional elements. It is our position that genre, and even the more broad categories of fiction and non-fiction, should not be found exclusively as properties internal to the text itself, but rather, the way we make sense of genre is an active process of narrative comprehension. If making sense of genre is something that necessarily involves the reader, then the way in which we discuss genre will shift into more fluid categories and we can then talk meaningfully about what blended-genre might look like. We will question how the particular binary concerning fiction and non-fiction has sold us short concerning the ways in which we make sense of literary texts, and how much more fluid our notions of genre really could and should be. We also want to argue that the reduction of the binary of genre merely into fiction and non-fiction is a gross oversimplification of the ways in which we understand both genres themselves, as well as the ways in which we understand both truth and reference.

Our inspiration for the notion of genre-blending derives from gender-bending, where one actively resists or rebels against the standard male/female gender norms. One who is a gender-bender is someone who seeks to define gender outside of the standard binary categories of man/woman or masculine/feminine. Men gender-bend by wearing feminine clothing or makeup, and women gender-bend by dressing or carrying themselves in a more traditionally masculine manner. How then, do genres bend or blend? Genre bending happens when one genre includes non-standard features of that genre but does not fundamentally transform it. An example of genre-bending would be a horror movie which has elements of science fiction, where the two genres have no logical inconsistencies in the ways in which they are woven together. Genre-blending, on the other hand, goes a step further, as the blended incorporates elements that seem to change the genre more fundamentally. The lyric essay, for example, does this by including poetic literary elements (fictional) that are not traditionally found in a (non-fictional) essay. This presents potential problems, however, since fiction and non-fiction presumably cannot coexist within the same text. Since fiction and non-fiction are generally bound by a set of literary and appreciative conventions, then our account acknowledges that when the two genres work together, the end result is a form of genre-blending.

I. A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF FICTION

On the surface, fiction is simply something that is considered unreal. It did not happen or it does not refer. When we look deeper, however, it is not that simple. Part of what it means to understand something as fictional is to be able to turn the fictional descriptions into conceptual mappings that we know how to make sense of. That is, although what happens in a fiction did not actually happen, the events described in most fictional literature do happen in familiar kinds of places, with plausible relationships, they describe familiar kinds of situations, and they involve recognizable motivations, feelings, and resolutions. Events narrated in a fiction work differ from non-fictional narrated events only in that the events in the fiction presumably did not happen. The story form or narrative structure is the same, but we are not invited to believe the events in a fiction as we are with non-fiction.

Aestheticians often use fiction as a technical term that has to do with the way we can meaningfully interact with a work of art, whether it be a painting, novel or any other kind of representational work. This generalized attitude is primarily because of Kendall Walton's seminal account in *Mimesis as Make-Believe*.[1] Although Walton focuses on many representational arts, for our purposes we are going to focus primarily on the literary. Also for our purposes, we will call this generalized form of fictionality, "Walt-fiction," named so in his honour. Walt-fiction is the kind of fiction that is both imaginative and prop-generated and has to do with the ways in which fiction invites us to imagine in certain ways. Others use the abstract notion of fictionality differently, where it might be more focused on the ways in which the work refers semantically and the resulting category distinction that places a particular literary genre. That is, fictional works do not refer to real objects in the same way that non-fictional works refer. For our purposes, that which is fictional refers to the events, characters, and storylines that are made-up, imaginary, invented, or just not real. It also includes traditional genre limitations: like that it may not be true (or if it is it is only incidentally so) and that it has a certain kind of narrative structure that allows readers to make sense of a text as a narrated storyline with a discernible structure.[2] Presumably, readers do not have a very hard time figuring out what is real and what is not, or what is fictional and what is non-fictional, but we see this division as potentially problematic because of the myriad of cases that involve the blending of the two genres. Philosophers have spent vast amounts of energy in an ongoing discussion about the best way to describe the interaction with fictions that we have emotionally and cognitively, but we have not spent nearly as much time thinking about how to engage most fruitfully with non-fictions, or how literary non-fictions need to be accounted for in a fundamentally different way. We will begin here with an explanation of the development of the ways in which we deal with fiction, not as a genre, but as a means of interaction.

Walton suggests that when we engage with a fiction we are simply engaging in a game of make-believe. With any game of make-believe we need

"props" as a starting point for the game.[3] This follows from what Walton calls the principals of generation [38], which is a contextual clue that is required in order for things to be imagined. That is, in the act or process of reading, the fictional text acts as the prop and we, as readers, are simply the players of the game. Walton explains that the props "give fictional worlds and their contents a kind of objectivity, and independence from cognizers and their experiences which contributes much to the excitement of our adventures with them" [42]. Taking into consideration the principal of generation and the need to use props, we can make the assumption that the key to entering a fictional world is also based upon our typical interactions with the real world. Thus Walt-fiction is what is to be imagined, in a parallel way as what is true is to be believed [40]. Fictionality then is incited in certain ways by certain kinds of prompts. For Walton, they can be stumps (as in a game of bears), paintings which provoke imagining certain kinds of pictorial worlds, or the prompts described in literary narratives.

But Walton's account is really only concerned with fictionality as an abstract concept that has to do with particular ways of imagining. He does not deal with non-fiction as a literary *genre*, but only non-fiction as it is *not fictional*. We have not overlooked the whole chapter in *Mimesis as Make-Believe* called "Fiction and Nonfiction" (chapter 2) but here Walton specifies that "for the sake of clarity I will mean by 'non-fiction' simply 'not fiction.' Any work with the function of serving as a prop in games of make-believe however minor or peripheral or instrumental this function might be qualified as 'fiction'; only what lacks this function entirely will be called nonfiction" [72]. We don't take this to be any kind of failing on Walton's part, but for our purposes, we need to have a better sense of how non-fiction functions as a literary genre. Our sense is that the way that we comprehend narrative as a particular kind of construction is very similar with both fiction and non-fiction.

Stacie Friend addresses non-fiction as a literary genre by approaching it specifically as two different (potentially complementary) genres, yet even she admits that it is not clear how fiction and non-fiction are related directly to one another. One genre (non-fiction) is not merely the negation of the other (fiction) nor are they really complements *per se*. She argues for what she calls a contextualist account of genre (or what also may be called a functional account) as the best way to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction. She claims that this account "focuses attention, not on how the parts of a work add up to the whole, but instead how the whole work is embedded in a larger context, and specifically in certain practices of reading, writing, criticizing, and so on".[4] Friend has worries about the ways in which the intentionalist approach to categorizing fiction as well as the make-believe theory both tend to end up being reductionist accounts of cataloguing and appreciating fiction.

We agree with Friend's concerns about the reductionist tendency philosophers have in assessing genre, and want to continue to avoid them as well.

The problem is that when the discussion stays at the abstract level of fiction and non-fiction in terms of what we are either intended to imagine or believe, it sells short all of the subgenres of actual literary works. Fiction and non-fiction are not genres of literary works; they are conceptual categories that apply only to the broadest way of approaching the understanding and appreciation of literature. Discussions of fiction and non-fiction certainly have their place in the philosophical literature, but for our purposes we want to focus more on the discussions that are required to understand the way in which narrative comprehension is possible at all and the way that the work of comprehension is coextensive with making sense of genre. What this means, however, is that our work must function not only at the abstract level of understanding the genres but also dealing with a number of particular examples, and thinking seriously about the way in which comprehension works at the micro level (sentence structure), the macro level (story comprehension), and how various works form the network of relationships that make Friend's contextualist account of genre make sense.

II. HOW WE UNDERSTAND STORIES

Narrative structure is the key common feature of both literary fiction and non-fiction. We want to address here what it means to understand a basic story. First, following a narrative is not always a linear process. Since causation and temporality are not always given at the outset, linearity is also not a given. Unlike reading through an argument, however, where a sequence of statements logically leads its reader to a reasoned conclusion, narrative structure instead requires its reader to follow a sequence of statements or happenings as it unfolds. Often, one is not sure where the story leads until the reader reaches the conclusion. The reader must make a conscious effort to figure out what is going on in the narrative and must work to understand how what he/she is reading can form into a coherent whole. W. B. Gallie explains that "in following a story we must always keep our minds open and receptive to new possibilities of development, new hints, clues and leads, up to the very last line: besides exercising our intelligence in making predictions or seeing complicated but definite lines of continuity, we must be ready constantly to reassemble and reassess different possible relevancies, links, and dependencies, [and] still unexplained juxtapositions".[5] However, we must be *trained* to follow stories, especially ones that are not direct and linear.

In her book *Narrative Comprehension*, Catherine Emmott claims that the reader must know, at the very least:

1. Which characters are present in the physical environment
2. Where the action is located and
3. What the approximate time of the action is[6]

These three things are required because the actions of one character will affect other characters in a particular context and "whether or not precise

details of the time and location are necessary to read a particular story, the reader needs enough information to make positional judgments such as 'is the action occurring in the main narrative 'present time' or a flashback 'past time'?"[7] Basically, each sentence of a narrative adds information about these three story markers, and helps the reader to do what Donald Braid calls a "repeated reframing" of the events understood by the reader.[8] Repeated reframing helps the reader to "predict the narrative course and grasp the coherence that informs the narrative and gives it meaning".[9] The organizing principle may seem atemporal, but the coherence-making required on the part of the reader happens spatially and temporally as each sentence adds more and more information for the reader. Simultaneously, as we comprehend story structures and are repeatedly reframing contextual clues as we read, we also assess the plausibility of the events of the story. This assessment is the beginning of the active construction of genre that happens in the reader.

Beyond the "who, where, and when" categories, coherence-making is the other essential part of understanding narrative. Coherence-making is essential here partly because coherence is not explicit in the world outside of narrative. Coherence is constructed by the observer but it never exists in the "real" world. Coherence provides the sense that the beginning, middle, and end all work together to form a whole narrative. Experiences are not coherent in this way until they are narrated. For instance, I can tell you a story about something that happened to me this morning that makes causal sense, but the actual events of this morning, until they are carefully chosen (I always leave the most boring parts out of my interesting narrations) and constructed into a story form are not coherent in this way. So making sense of a narrative should be a conceptually less-difficult task than making sense of a real, un-narrated event. Although the narrative should provide a basic structure, the reader must be able to take in the combination of information and put it together into a coherent whole. What is significant here is the relationship between the text and the reader, in the way that the narrative is structured in such a way as to facilitate a certain kind of understanding generated by the reader. The narrative itself stands separately from the narrative understanding or comprehension that the reader has. The way that the narrative is constructed has a direct impact on the way that its reader will be able to understand and construct the story.

Many of the pleasures that we gain from reading narrative come from the outcomes of this kind of comprehension. We make inferences and predictions that when they turn out to be correct we feel satisfied. Noël Carroll calls this kind of satisfaction a "transactional value" of reading, as the "value we derive by, among other things, exercising our powers of inference and interpretation in the course of reading".[10] Presumably the notion of the transactional comes from Louise Rosenblatt, who emphasized the organic relationship between the reader and the text. Readers regularly make predictions about what might happen, they make inferences about why certain characters did various

things, and they make (moral) judgments about whether or not the characters behaved as they should. If we take narrative comprehension to be an active process on the part of the reader, then the genre of the text cannot be within the text itself.

This transactional theory of meaning will serve as the basis of an important part of our argument concerning the flexibility of genre. Rosenblatt argued that multiple interpretations of a text were legitimate, but also that some interpretations were superior to others given some set of criteria. She argues, however, that "a full understanding of literature requires both a consciousness of the readers own 'angle of refraction' and any information that can illuminate the assumptions implicit in the text".[11] Narrative comprehension then, involves both making sense of the formal structures within the text and simultaneously working the sense of the story into one's own schemas of how the world works, what is possible and what is probable, how empirical experience fits with what is being narrated and how wish satisfaction and fulfilment are fleshed out as the reader makes sense of the narrative. So if one reads and believes wholeheartedly (and unreflectively) that the text is fictional, then the kinds of possible and probable world-generating beliefs are not challenged. But if one does *not know* if the book is "true" or not, then one must actively work to make sense of the text in ways that one doesn't have to work if those assumptions are made in advance.

III. CONSTRUCTING GENRE

One of the most common indicators of genre is subject matter, but according to Robert Stam however, "subject matter is [in fact] the weakest criterion for generic grouping because it fails to take into account how the subject is treated".[12] Westerns, horror, and alien fictions, for example, are all so named because of the kinds of characters, subject matter, or settings they include. But then there are musicals, science fictions, thrillers, and dramas that are not dictated by subject matter but by style. Musicals are so called because there is singing in them, not just because they are entertaining or happy. Many of them are not. *West Side Story*, for instance, is a tragedy, *Sweeny Todd* is a horror but both still musicals. Horror fictions, on the other hand, might be so categorized not because of their content or subject matter, but because they are intended to produce a certain kind of emotion in their readers. Noël Carroll makes this argument extensively about horror and adds that both horror and tragedy are supposed to evoke certain kinds of related emotions in their readers.[13] So genre is useful for making general category distinctions and it helps to align our expectations about how storylines within a text generally function.

Carroll describes a whole category of what he calls "Junk Fiction" or what others might call pulp fiction or genre fiction, which are primarily categorized by the ease of plot complexity, and their formulaic tendencies.[14] Romance,

for instance, especially of the Harlequin variety, offers standard plot developments which include a boy meets girl scenario, which inevitably exposes some misunderstanding between the boy and the girl, the misunderstandings are resolved and love endures. Works like these are plot driven and not generally noted for their literary qualities like complex sentence structure, depth, detail, well-developed characters, and the basis for real textual interpretation. Although we recognize their importance in understanding the many ways in which we categorize works of literature, these are not the kinds of genres we are interested in.

In its most rudimentary form, genre is a classification system. It is a system in which we find similarities and differences amongst texts and categorize them based off of these findings. Although genre distinctions are most commonly taught in reference to literary texts, the larger culture itself is where readers begin to learn how to use this classification system. Through our interactions with bookstores, libraries, and even as early as elementary school, genre distinctions are not only completely apparent but are also needed to help physically (and electronically) house and keep track of our books. Even when encountering the confusing world of television, young children learn to navigate through various television programmes by beginning to sort programmes into crude genres, thus making it easier for them to interpret their shows. However, once readers advance into more complex literary categorizations and are able to unpack the subtleties and nuanced distinctions between different genres, they find that it is more and more difficult to accurately place a text within just one genre. This is a problem that can take place at the most basic level of choosing whether a text should be considered fiction or non-fiction. After all, just like in the Linnaean Taxonomy used to classify species in biology, it becomes likely that genre species begin to mix and blend.

Unlike with biological categories, however, genre distinctions are literary conventions that do not exist empirically. This leads to some theoretical disagreements about the definitions of specific genres (among philosophers at least). The fact that genre classifications do not exist empirically can lead us to believe that our perceptions of genres might even be socially constructed. In a primer about genre theory, Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress suggest that "genres only exist in so far as a social group declares and enforces the rules that constitute them".[15] Even though we categorize genre as a social exercise, we would like to question what the true benefits are of this constant categorization, especially into our favourite binary, fiction and non-fiction. Obviously we need basic categories to help us navigate around the world, and in this case the literary world, but we question whether or not some of the deeply ingrained categories are doing some potential damage to our literary expectations. We are not alone in this investigation; there have been several authors known to push the boundaries of genre purposefully for those very reasons. One author in particular who does this is Mark Sundeen, who not only purposefully stretches the constraints of genre (incorporating elements

of memoir, journalism, fiction, and essay in *Car Camping*) and further blurs the lines between fiction and non-fiction by starting this story as a published non-fictional magazine article and then developing it into a work he sold as fiction.

What we are interested in are the genres that seem to hover in between the so-called, clean-cut genres of fiction and non-fiction—those that might begin to blend into one another. We are thinking of works that fall loosely into the categories of historical fiction, (auto)biography, memoir, the essay, the lyric essay, journalism, new journalism, documentary, autofiction, faction, and other kinds of narrated works that straddle the line between non-fiction and fiction.[16] What is distinctive about these is that they all aspire to have some authenticity or to accurately represent real events. Presumably the accuracy of the representation of people and events described in non-fiction is one of the key elements of what allows these to be categorized as non-fiction at all. Important elements also include specific kinds of narration and narrators, plot developments, story structure, and various kinds of descriptions of people, places, and events. But confusion can set in when the story elements or the literary elements we are most familiar with, which we associate with fiction, are used with factual stories.

Genre is not merely dictated by subject or theme or content, but it helps readers to know how to interpret, evaluate, and how to properly manage expectations of a text. If I am anticipating a horror fiction and end up reading a psychological thriller, I am bound to be disappointed and think that the work was not as successful as I might have anticipated otherwise. If I read something I believe is non-fictional and it turns out to be fictional, I am not merely disappointed, but I feel duped, and I have to actively rework things I believed to be true into categories of fiction. This is often extremely unsettling. For example, when people found out that certain parts of James Frey's memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, had fabricated, exaggerated, and false aspects, readers were so upset that they filed a class action law suit against him to get their $13.95 back (and they won!). Often, in cases like this, readers become mistrusting of authors and might dismiss several works by that author. Unfortunately this happens despite the fact that much might be gained aesthetically and literarily from reading their works anyway.[17]

IV. BLENDING IN ACTION

We want to return here to Stacie Friend's contextual approach to understanding genre. She says that, most genres "are determined by a variety of non-essential conditions, including contextual and historical conditions".[18] Before diving into particular examples it would be prudent to take a moment to reflect on the "rules" that govern our biases in evaluating whether something is "fiction" or "non-fiction." In general, fictional works are texts in which there is the abundant use of figurative language, varied organizational

styles, character and plot development, documentation is neither needed nor relevant, clear narrators are usually found along the way, and it is basically set up for the world of the imagination. Rules that dictate non-fiction include works based on what the author believes or asserts to be true, there is clarity and directness with the language that the author uses, they are usually organized in a straightforward fashion, and non-fictions provide documentation where there might be questions. Although these rules appear to be clear, the reality is that they are not as clear as they appear. These general characterizations are often bent and blended and can produce texts that can easily fit into both genres of fiction and non-fiction. Platonic forms of fiction and non-fiction would be nice, but none are forthcoming. Further, style and form are not reliable ways of determining genre any longer.

One example that straddles this fiction/non-fiction divide is Junot Díaz's fictional novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (Oscar). We will show here how this text not only straddles traditional genre barriers but also how it can straddle both fiction and non-fiction. On the publication page, the Library of Congress asserted (as it does with all novels): "This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental." We find this statement problematic because it contradicts what is, in fact, in this text. We understand this is a standard disclaimer, there presumably for legal purposes, but what interests us is that this particular book (and perhaps many others catalogued as fictional) has numerous true accounts. This book deals directly with an important part of Dominican history and the identity of its citizens. It is peppered with historical accounts of the tyrannical Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina who ruled from 1930-1961. *Oscar* could be taken merely as fiction. Walt-fiction suggests that we can use this as a prompt for imagination, and we can focus on the ways in which we are incited to make-believe the story of Oscar. Gregory Currie might tell us that since the authorial intent (assumed on the cover) is fictional, so we can use it to incite fictional imaginings.[19] Both of these approaches are reasonable, but it seems to do this particular book a disservice to leave it at that. Díaz uses literary techniques that mirror those of comic books, science fiction, and Caribbean literary styles (specifically magical realism), and the plot line about Oscar himself is presumably fictional as well. So we should just take it as fiction. Upon closer analysis, however, there is an abundance of accurate history, as well as an attempt to *rewrite* Trujillo's devastating reign. This seems to us more than a coincidental insertion of incidental true facts that many fictional works include. In this case it seems to change the nature of the work into something potentially transgenred. It arrives in the package of fiction, but the essence and details of the text are at the base of non-fictional.

Díaz uses multiple comic book references and comic book plot devices. This narrative is loaded page after page with references to comic books and other formulaic science fiction works. Monica Hanna, writing about historiographies in *Oscar*, goes so far as to suggest that the four main characters in this work actually mirror the *Fantastic Four*.[20] Given this, in line with Currie's assertion that character and narrative are made for each other, it is safe to say that the plot structure of *Oscar* could also be considered a superhero story.[21] Instead of the final product of *Oscar* being read as what Carroll would call a "Pulp Fiction," Díaz goes beyond this formulaic plot structure and incorporates other elements that make this text vastly more complex and more challenging to comprehend fully. It can be understood though that if we use Rosenblatt's reading continuum, and had one reader on the "aesthetic" or "reading for pleasure" side then that quick read might view *Oscar* as a narrative about a young man who is obsessed with science fiction, fantasy, dreams of becoming the "Dominican Tolkien," and plays the part of "hero" by trying to save a downtrodden girl.[22] Read deeply, or be on the "efferent" side of Rosenblatt's continuum, in which one reads to gain meaning, then this becomes a tale of migration, and finding and creating one's identity within a new culture. Oscar continually struggles not only to identify with his Dominican heritage, but also living in America. This is seen when the narrator, Yunior, comments on how Oscar's "nerdiness" negatively affects him in the Dominican community: Yunior says "Anywhere else his triple-zero batting average with the ladies might have passed without comment, but this is a Dominican kid we're talking about ... [He] was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands".[23] In order to deal with this rejection from his own people he becomes attracted to American-styled fantasies which give him access to American culture as well. The key to opening up his love for fantasies though, derives from his Dominican culture, and their implementation of magical realism, which is not only *another* genre, but another prominent element that Díaz uses within the text. This plot device is what moves Oscar away from the formulaic and causes the narrative to experiment with multiple genres, which makes it more complex for a reader to comprehend, but it also allows us to work backwards as readers, by moving from the props used by the superhero fiction to finding the truths they represent like an extension into magical realism.

Outside the world of comics and Oscar's fantasies, this text can be looked at as simply a rewriting of an unstable Dominican history, in which Díaz gives a voice to the marginalized and traumatized citizens over whom Trujillo ruled. He begins this by layering features of magical realism within the narratives of both Oscar and his family members. According to Hanna, magical realism originated in Latin American Literature, and was inspired by the "New World that is so different that it appears magical because it does not coincide with European conceptions of reality".[24] Although this literary feature may appear purely as a type of fiction to a Western reader, Hanna emphasizes that:

"magical realism is the Caribbean mode for understanding and representing history". Therefore to simply discount this as fiction that holds some truth seems to become problematic.[25] Traces of magical realism begin at the start of the novel and are threaded throughout the story. Although there are many moments of magical realism in the novel, there is one primary form of magical realism that Díaz heavily invokes. The first form is that of the "Fukú." The Fukú could be simply understood as a curse, but as it is explained in *Oscar*, it is much more than that. It "came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved . . . just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, Fukú – generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and Doom of the New World".[26] It could be that Díaz uses the Fukú just as a plot device. Possibly, but it really seems to indicate a metaphor for Caribbean Diaspora, and how that experience is inevitably a curse for those forced to leave their countries. Even the narrator of *Oscar* brings to light the power of Fukú by saying, "the Fukú ain't just ancient history, a ghost story from the past with no power to scare. In my parents' day the Fukú was real as shit, something your everyday person could believe in".[27] The Fukú is not just a plot device in the fiction; it is an accurate representation of the ways in which Dominicans make sense of difficult experiences.

Thus far, *Oscar* has generally followed the rules of a fictional novel; it is imaginative, it uses figurative language, and only with the use of magical realism do we get slightly less realism. All of this changes, however, with one dominant element of non-fiction that Díaz uses: footnotes. Footnotes are traditionally found only in non-fictional texts, typically academic publications where documentation is readily needed, so it is rather curious that they are also used in this book. The footnotes themselves denote historically accurate information, but with a twist, from the fictional narrator's bias. One example in particular is the footnote which describes the dictator Trujillo, "A personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up. Famous for changing ALL THE NAMES of ALL THE LANDMARKS in the Dominican Republic to honor himself".[28] The use of footnotes clearly depicts a new way to look at history that shows a resistance to the one voice in power, and instead displays the polyvocality that exists in historical discourse, which this narrative offers. What happens in *Oscar* though is an attempt to re-write history. Even though this text is labeled fiction it is a different version of history from the perspective of a non-authoritative voice. With this in mind, Yunoir still demands the reader to work and not take his words to be authoritative, especially as he reflects upon Oscar's death: "So which is it? You ask. An accident, a conspiracy, or a Fukú? The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you'll have to decide for yourself. What is certain is that nothing's certain. We are trawling in silences here. Trujillo and Company didn't leave a paper trail?

they didn't share their German contemporaries' lust for documentation".[29] This is a powerful mechanism because it allows readers to reflect about the narrative and make important and grave inferences to the German Holocaust. This also causes readers to choose; to choose to believe or not to believe, and to be aware of all the facts; those both fictional and non-fictional that are laid out before them.

So what is the best way to make sense of this work? It is clearly labeled fiction and those are the rules by which we can easily catalogue it. But what about the footnotes? Are those facts of Trujillo's awful dictatorship just now considered true only in the fiction because they were truthfully portrayed within the fiction? We think not, and actually want to go as far as to say that this type of reading of *Oscar* can prove to be very beneficial as a text that might have a fictional story, but still accurately shows an outsiders voice within a history of oppression.

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic is another example which shows how genres are blended and the ways in which the lines between fiction and non-fiction are blurred. On the back cover it is listed as both memoir and graphic narrative, two potentially conflicting styles, especially when it comes to traditional ways of placing and evaluating genres. Right from the start it is clear that this narrative is already one that pushes some boundaries. This story is Bechdel's own, about her childhood growing up in the back of a funeral home (that her family referred to as the "fun home"), her coming to grips with her own sexuality, the mystery surrounding her father's death, and the struggles he seemed to have with his own sexuality. The structure of *Fun Home*, acts as two parallel stories that happen simultaneously, with the graphic image panels telling the stories of the past and the textual narration above which portrays Bechdel's take on things in the present.

Although *Fun Home* is clearly a non-fictional memoir there is still a lot of rule blending that takes place within this text. First of all, the use of graphic images strays far away from the rules and traditions that follow a non-fictional text only being one of words. It also is not organized in an obvious manner as the reader must jump from the comic strip to the written narration above.

These are two examples of how fiction and non-fiction are blended in ways that we may not have previously thought. But is there a reason why genre-blending is important, especially in the realm of blending fiction and non-fiction? We believe this mixing is essential to recognize in order to understand how we process these texts. Blending the rules that create an ambiguous dividing line between fiction and non-fiction can be beneficial. This recognition can facilitate the acknowledgement that understanding genre is part of an *active reading process* and that we as readers should not assume a simplistic true/false binary. Instead, the blending of genres will cause us, as readers, to make reading a more cognitively engaging activity, where we do more work outside of placing the formula or genre on a text, but instead look

at the ways in which the genres are blended and acknowledge that we need to actively work to understand what the work does.

The blending of genres may also help us process narratives, especially of the fiction/non-fiction blend, differently. For example, in a psychological study by Hendersen and Clark, participants were told to read two passages one each labeled either fiction or non-fiction. Afterwards, participants had to retell what they read with as much detail as possible. The study found that when recalling the fictional example, the subjects could recall 20-50 percent more information when compared to the non-fictional recall. Maybe once a text is blended and can no longer be categorized strictly as fiction or non-fiction, a reader will be able to easily recall the "fictional" plot that informs the reader of "non-fictional" facts.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

As with any academic exercise, we must ask ourselves why any of this matters. We think that there are a number of implications of our argument that can be effective in heightening awareness of the ways that we think about the all-important binary between fiction and non-fiction. First, with the current emphasis on the division between fiction$_{(false)}$ and non-fiction$_{(true)}$ as one of the primary markers of the way that the Language Arts are taught in the Common Core State Standards in American schools, we think that we can bring some awareness to the complexity of these terms. That is, there is a real risk to teaching children that fiction is *merely* that which is false and that non-fiction is true in a straightforward and static way.[30] Common Core also advocates that narrative$_{(fiction)}$ is also always less complex than what they call instructional texts$_{(non-fiction)}$, which seems to us a misguided understanding of the way in which narrative itself works.

Second, we believe that people can become better readers by not being so attuned to the fiction/non-fiction distinction, but rather to the way in which stories are compelling, true to life, complex, and the way that good narrative requires a reader to constantly engage with the plot components in order to see connections within the story. This, in turn, makes readers more active in the process of reading itself and can enhance literacy at any level. The danger of the simplistic binary thinking about fiction/non-fiction can potentially do a reader more harm than good. Believing in advance of reading that a text is either fiction or non-fiction changes the way that we process that text. Rolf Zwann shows us how believing a text is fictional makes us hold out for meaning and relevance while believing it non-fictional makes us process information as it comes.[31] What we advocate is that genre not be something that is assumed, or taken for granted, but rather something that is recognized as being involved in the active process of reading. Figuring out how genre works for any given text should be something that is involved in the process of comprehending narrative structure. "Did it really happen?"

should be one of the last questions on our minds as readers if we can learn to read for true engagement, which comes from connecting story lines, imagining characters' actions and decisions, anticipating outcomes of those choices, and enjoying resolutions. The essence of narrative and storytelling is imaginative engagement, indulging in descriptive language and actively constructing meaning out of disparate parts along with the author. Genre has as much to do with the way in which one approaches the text as it does with the text itself. Reading narrative should not be about facts or falsities, and to focus on this one aspect sells short the best things about the joy of reading.

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NOTES

1. Walton 1990.
2. Greg Currie says that a work is fiction "if (a) it is the product of a fictive intent and (b) if the work is true then it is at most accidentally true." Currie 1990, 46.
3. Walton 1990, 11.
4. Friend 2012, 187.
5. Gallie 1964, 43-4.
6. Emmott 1997, 103.
7. Emmott 1997, 104.
8. Braid 1996, 9.
9. Braid 1996, 9.
10. Carroll 1994, 234.
11. Rosenblatt 1938, 115.
12. Stam 2000, 14.
13. Carroll 1990.
14. Carroll 1994.
15. Hodge and Kress 1988, 7.
16. We do not want to deal explicitly with film, although there are a certain number of genre categories that cross these boundaries as well. For instance, Docudramas, Mockumentaries, Docufiction.
17. We are thinking of an example here of an author like John D'Agata, who is an American essayist. He has taken liberties with his work, which he plainly admits to, and has changed "facts" about what he has written that he believes betters the literary quality of his writing. Other essayists dismiss his work as they find him not as respectful to the work as he should be.
18. Friend 2012, 3.
19. Currie 1990.
20. Hanna 2010, 33.
21. See Currie 2009.
22. Rosenblatt 1938.
23. Díaz 2007, 24.
24. Hanna 2010, 511.
25. Hanna 2010, 509
26. Díaz 2007, 1.
27. Díaz 2007, 2.
28. Díaz 2007, 2.
29. Díaz 2007, 243.
30. In my son's 2nd grade Common Core reading book, fiction is defined as "a story about events that could not have happened." I worry not only that in this educational standard, the youngest readers are being taught to differentiate fiction and non-fiction based on this faulty dichotomy.
31. In Zwann, 1994.

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