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Imagining Cultures: The Transnational Imaginary in Postrace America

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I wish to address the matter of the “cultural imaginary” and of the significant contributions to our understanding of it in the work of Winfried Fluck in two contexts: in relation to the question of literary form and in relation to history. Doing so will also allow me explain the reasons for what I take to be a radical turn in 21st century fiction by ethnic writers to a new stage in the history of the novel.¹ I argue that since the turn of the millennium, a new generation of writers, born for the most part in the post-Civil Rights Era, have come to prominence. I use the works of these new authors to illustrate the post-magical realism, post-postmodern, post-borderlands and neo-fantasy transnational turn in the postrace era of American literature. Outlining a paradigm that I term “historical fantasy,” I argue that in the twenty-first century, the relationship between race and social justice, race and identity, and indeed, race and history requires the new generation of writers to invent a new “imaginary” for thinking about the nature of a just society.

At the outset, I wish to make one thing clear: race and racism, ethnicity and difference are nowhere near to becoming extinct in America. But to say that is not to proclaim that race and racism, ethnicity and diversity are today what they were during the climactic events of the Civil Rights Era in the 1960s. They are not. W. E. B.

¹ Aristotle’s distinction between *history* and *poetry* is relevant here. For Aristotle, “history” is a form that fails to be as philosophical or as serious as “poetry” (*Poetics*, chap. 10). As Catherine Gallagher points out “formalism in literary studies over the last two centuries has . . . often claimed that striving for form is the distinguishing mark of the literary,” Catherine Gallagher, “Formalism and Time,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000). 233.

Dubois's classic prediction in 1901, that "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" (*The Freedman's Bureau*, March 1901), couldn't have been more accurate an assessment of the fate of race during the twentieth century. In 1901, the color line represented the uncrossable barrier between white and black America. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the color line remains the central problem of American modernity, but one not exclusively defined in shades of black and white alone. Nor is the direction of the impossible crossing as obvious as it was once upon a time. Of greater moment today is the redeployment of arguments and strategies for understanding anew the way that "race" is constructed by the power of white supremacy and deconstructed by the lived experience of contemporary people of color. The narrative of this redefinition posits race and racialization as a *doing*, a communal ongoing system of processes that, as Paula M. L. Moya and Hazel Markus have convincingly argued in their introduction to their immensely significant work, *Doing Race: 21 Essays for the 21st Century*, "always involves creating groups based on perceived physical and behavioral characteristics, associating differential power and privilege with these characteristics, and then justifying the resulting inequalities" (Moya and Marcus, "An Introduction" x).

In making my case about *Form and History* in relation to the *Transnational Imaginary* and the redeployment of race of contemporary fiction, I will of necessity be acutely selective. But I trust that my comments will suggest possibilities for richer and larger conjectures.

I. The Postrace Generation

Since the turn of the millennium, and especially since 9/11, a new generation of writers, born for the most part in the post-Civil Rights Era, have come to prominence. I refer to postrace, postblack, postethnic writers, such as African Americans Colson Whitehead, Percival Everett, Darieck Scott, and Touré; Asian Americans Larissa Lai and Sesshu Foster; and Latino/a writers such as Marta Acosta, Michelle Serros, Salvador Plascencia, and Junot Díaz. The works of these and numerous other writers represent the post-magical realism, post-postmodern, post-borderlands and neo-historical transnational turn in what one could call postethnic fiction in the postrace era of American literature.² In the case of Latino and Mexican American authors, the

² See, for example, Marta Acosta, *Happy Hour at Casa Dracula* (New York: Pocket Star Books, 2006), Salvador Plascencia, *The People of Paper*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: McSweeney's Books, 2005), Michelle Serros, *Honey Blond Chica* (New York: Simon Pulse, 2007), Zadie Smith, *On Beauty: A Novel* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), Touré, *Soul City*, 1st ed. (New York: Picador, 2005), Colson Whitehead, *Sag Harbor* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), Sesshu Foster, *Atomik Aztex* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2005). Darieck Scott, *Hex: A Novel of Love Spells*. 1 ed (Carroll & Graf: New York, 2007. Percival L. Everett, *Erasure: A Novel* (Hanover, [N.H.]: University Press of New England, 2001), and Larissa Lai, *Salt Fish Girl: A Novel* (Toronto: T. Allen Publishers 2002).

generations of pre- and post-war baby boomer precursors have begun to be supplanted by Latina/o Generations X and Y, whose novels now populate our “Hispanic” bookshelves. I focus on of these authors: 2008 Pulitzer Prize winner, Junot Díaz. I wish to use Díaz’s novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) to illustrate this development in American ethnic fiction and to consider how the work of the millennial generation of Black, Latino, Asian, and Native authors contribute to our understanding of American literature in the global context within which American literary studies is today increasingly being viewed. To this end, I am concerned with what is and should be the relationship between American literary studies and other internationalist or comparative methods of literary and cultural study, especially in the age of Globalization. Is there a place today for nationally defined area studies of the US and the Americas under conditions of the relentless Inter-Nationalization of cultural and literary studies? What are the options? Because the work of Winfried Fluck has done much to illuminate the functioning of the imaginary in American culture, what I offer here is no more than a footnote and partial rejoinder to his great achievement.

II. Macondo Meets McOndo in the Transnational Imaginary

One easy and, in my view incorrect, way to see the current turn toward post postmodern realism among US ethnic writers is to view it as a wholesale acceptance of the poetics of postmodern metafiction. A point in favor of this argument is the fact that Dominican American Junot Díaz is a product of the creative writing program at Cornell University. That biographical fact tells us something about the institutionalization of ethnic literature in the American academy and about its relationship to what Mark McGurl has called “the Program Era” of American literature.³ As a product of the institutionalization of creativity within the university in

³ Mark McGurl, “The Program Era: Pluralisms of Postwar American Fiction,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 1 (2005). McGurl requires us to take seriously the institution of the university and the processes of the democratization of education in the US during the postwar period in order fully to understand the nature of contemporary literary writing. The crucial evaluative questions that follow from his observation about the institutionalization of creativity within the university are: how have creative writing programs reorganized postwar American writing, and how might this reorganization affected our understanding of the writing itself? McGurl does not give the definitive answers to these questions but in posing and beginning to answer them he moves the field significantly toward a major new understanding of the nature of contemporary American fiction. His rewriting of the history of postwar American fiction also allows for a new way of considering the relationship between postmodern experimental high literary fiction and ethnic literatures. “The Program Era” offers an explanation for how these seemingly divergent strains of American literature could emerge at essentially the same moment, as well as for how we might make sense of the relationships in form and content between them. This argument is now fully extended in McGurl, *The*

the postwar period, Díaz's award-winning novel fits the pattern McGurl describes as creative programmed writing. In the case of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, however, it is not postmodern metafiction that is at stake in the realignments of American racial history and narrative form and the cultural imaginary, but *historical fiction*, as such. Like the Homeric rhapsode in Derek Walcott's *Omeros* and *The Odyssey*, in *Oscar Wao* Díaz is attempting to "stitch together" the lost histories and isolated communities of the Antilles, both in the home islands and the diasporic communities of the US by using an attenuated version of a classical form. In Díaz's case, the story of the dispossessed takes the form of what I will call here "historical fantasy," to signify the odd amalgam of historical novel, *Bildungsroman*, postmagical realism, sci-fi, fantasy, and super-hero comic romance that structures the *transnational imaginary* of *Oscar Wao*. I begin with some formal considerations about this novel to make my point about the functioning of the transnational imaginary in American postrace, postethnic fiction.

Oscar de León, the protagonist of our story, is a first-generation Dominican American, a product of two nations. This duality is, however, doubly fraught, not doubly comforting as Oscar is not at home in either Santo Domingo or New Jersey. Perhaps this is what the second epigraph to the novel, from Derek Walcott's poem "The Schooner *Flight*" is getting at: "I had a sound colonial education/ I Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation." At the beginning of the third section of the poem, Walcott's poetic voice, Shabine, says "I had no nation now but the imagination."⁴ "Shabine" is the Antillean, creole word for *mulatto*, *mestizo*, so clearly in Walcott, as in Díaz, we begin in a condition of racial hybridity. For Oscar, what does it mean to be a *mestizo*, latter-day "nobody," or even, "a nation"? And what do the answers have to do with the "imagi-nation"? A hint to a possible answer lies in the first epigraph of the novel:

"Of what import are brief, nameless lives . . . to **Galactus?**"
(*Fantastic Four*, Vol. 1, No. 49, April 1966)

The hint has to do with fantasy and the fantastic, especially as it refers to stories of "brief, nameless lives." As a genre and a form, fantasy is always linked to imagination and desire. Its value seems to reside "in its 'free-floating' and escapist

Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁴ Paul Breslin, *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). "Shabine" is the St. Lucian creole name for mulatto, 190. His task is "to give voice to one people's grief."

qualities.”⁵ The products of fantasy gain power from appearing “to be ‘free’ from many of the conventions and restraints of more realistic texts: they have refused to observe unities of time, space, and character, doing away with chronology, three-dimensionality and with rigid distinctions between animate and inanimate objects, self and other, life and death” (Jackson 1–2). From W. H. Auden, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, T. H. White and other modern fabulists of fantasy, a literary tradition has emerged that claims the transcending of reality, the possibility of escaping the human condition, and constructing alternate realities that recapture and revivify lost moral and social hierarchy (Jackson 2).

But since the last decades of the twentieth century, another kind of fantasy has emerged to vie with earlier forms of fantasy and the imagination. It too links desire and imagination, utopia and history, but with a more pronounced edge intended to redeem, or perhaps even, create a new moral and social hierarchy. Its realm is not modern literature but popular culture, in the genres of TV cartoons, action hero comic books and graphic novels, science fiction romance and space opera, video role-playing games, anime films, and a whole range of other techno neo-fantasy genres, with sci-fi chief among them, wrapped up with adolescent daydreams, wish fulfillment, and desires for a better world.⁶ The novelty of this other form of sci-fi fantasy has to do with its allegiance “to interactions of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.”⁷ And so, respecting the generic predilections of our hero, Yunior, the novel's first narrator and “humble Watcher,” can thus say:

It might have been a consequence of our being Antillean (who more sci-fi than us?) or of living in the DR . . . and then abruptly wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey. . . You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest. OW 22, (footnote 6)

The intersection here of history, in the reference to the diasporic migrations from the Antilles to the U.S., science fiction and the phenomenology of fantastic alien-ness, asking us to imagine what it feels like to have “bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest,” and racial otherness, referring to the

⁵ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London; New York: Methuen, 1981). 1.

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London; New York: Verso, 2005). P. 2.

⁷ Veronica Hollinger, “Contemporary Trends in Science Fiction Criticism, 1980-1999,” *Science Fiction Studies* 26, no. 2 (1999).

experience of being “a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto,” the intersection of these three concepts forms the unwritten base of multiple referentiality that Díaz’s novel is about to explore.⁸

The recurring motif of doom which structures the fantasy about this intersection of history, fantasy, and racial otherness is something the narrator terms *fukú*. Its Ground Zero is not the one of atomic holocaust but of the terminal visions inspired by the instantiating moment of American modernity, that is, Columbus’s arrival in the Americas:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, more colloquially, *fukú*—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and Doom of the New World (OW 1).

Its “midwife and one of its great European victims” was the “discoverer” of the New World. We are back to the Antillean islands where first contact occurred, where cultures first clashed, where the wonder and magic of the new world first revealed itself. “No matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the *fukú* on the world, and we’ve been in the shit ever since. Santo Domingo might be *fukú*’s Kilometer Zero, its port of entry,” says Yunior, “but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not” (2). As an aside, I would like to point out that the moment of contact between Europe and the Americas has become an astonishingly prevalent motif in contemporary fiction, as the instantiating moment of our times, linking modernity, coloniality, and the emergence of world systems of commodity flows and imperial power.⁹

So, at the beginning, we know that the story of Oscar’s doomed life, as the latter-day recipient of the curse of imperial conquest and colonization, will also be the story of how 500 years of historical and personal *fukú* shape the destiny of our short-lived protagonist and his world. *Fukú* is carried into the present by homegrown

⁸ See Winfried Fluck, “The Role of the Reader and the Changing Functions of Literature: Reception Aesthetics, Literary Anthropology, Funktionsgeschichte,” *European Journal of English Studies* 6, no. 3 (2002). 258.

⁹ See, for example, Orson Scott Card, *Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus* (New York: TOR, 1996), Foster, *Atomik Aztex*, Leslie Silko, *Almanac of the Dead: A Novel* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), Yxta Maya Murray, *The Conquest: A Novel*, 1st ed. (New York: Rayo, 2002). These and other contemporary novels are using the mode of “alternative history” to imagine anew a different, perhaps, utopian possibility for the history of the Americas.

monsters like Rafael Trujillo, “one of the twentieth century’s most infamous dictators” (OW, footnote 1, 2), as the first of the novel’s footnotes informs us.

Like the *vaudou* of the sister-nation on the island of Hispaniola, Haiti, *fukú* is a symbolic residue of the violence of conquest in the Antilles. In defense against its malevolence, the narrator offers this explanation: “Not surprisingly, it was a word. A simple word (followed by a vigorous crossing of index fingers)” “Zafa.” “It used to be more popular in the old days, bigger, so to speak, in Macondo than in McOndo . . . Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell” (7).

This is a García Márquez moment of magical realism: the end of the book at the beginning, the story having come full circle. This time, however, the picturesque, exotic stereotypes the publishing world has come to expect of Latino writers, dealing with underdevelopment and exotic atmospheres, collective social injustices, spiritual or metaphysical phenomena, and rural settings, have been superseded by the transnational middle-class experiences of diasporic subjects in both the urban Caribbean and the United States.

Referring here to the sassy, street-wise, literary movement initiated by Chilean author Alberto Fuguet, Díaz aligns himself with “the great nation of McOndo . . . a place closely linked to the concept of the global village and the mega-net”—“an overpopulated, polluted country of freeways, metros, and cable TV [and] MacDonald’s, Mac computers, and condos, five-star hotels,” a spoof of magical realism, to be sure.¹⁰ “In our McOndo,” writes Fuguet, “as in [the magical] Macondo, anything can happen, although granted when persons fly [in our McOndo] it is because they are in an airplane or because they are high on drugs. . . . “ McOndo (that is Latin America, plus Spain, and Latino USA) “is as magical realist (surrealist, insane, contradictory, hallucinatory) as the imaginary land where people levitate, predict the future, and live eternally. . . . [In McOndo] climate changes, rivers salinate, the earth trembles, and Don Francisco [coffee] colonizes our unconscious. . . .”¹¹

¹⁰ Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez, *Mcondo*, 1. ed. (Barcelona: Grijalbo Mondadori, 1996). 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 15. Fuguet adds: “Latin America is, irremediably, MTV América Latina, that luminous consensus, that wave that colonizes our consciousness by way of cable, and which is being converted, in the grandest version of Bolívar’s dream imaginable, into a unity, more concretely and effectively than a hundred treaties or international forums ever could”(15-16), my translation.

The novel's sense of doom, even if not quite the apocalyptic catastrophe of the end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or the post-millennial anxieties of a whole slew of contemporary disaster narratives in the wake of 9/11, is still pretty scary, and is set off by the rich and playful language of its prose, shifting from English to Spanish to vernacular Spanglish and urban "Negropolitan" youth slang:

It's a well-documented fact that in Trujillo's DR if you were of a certain class and you put your cute daughter anywhere near El Jefe, within the week she'd be mamando his ripio like an old pro and *there would be nothing you could do about it!* Hiding your doe-eyed, large-breasted daughter from Trujillo . . . was anything but easy. (Like keeping the Ring from Sauron.) If you think the average Dominican guy's bad, Trujillo was five thousand times worse. Dude had hundreds of spies whose entire job was to scour the provinces for his next piece of ass; if the procurement of ass had been any more central to the Trujillato the regime would have been the world's first culocracy (and maybe, in fact, it was). In this climate, hoarding your women was tantamount to treason; offenders who didn't cough up the muchachas could easily find themselves enjoying the invigorating charm of an eight-shark bath (OW 217-8).

Hypermachismo as an instrument of brutal repression, the hot-blooded Latin thug turned head of state, all under the US-sanctioned policy of Cold War anticommunism in the Americas. But the experiences Yunió narrates are not weird or fantastic, exotic or based in a third world divided from metropolitan US, Macondo unrelated to McOndo. In the world of *Oscar Wao*, the simultaneity of modernization and dependency has become, the new norm, indeed the *paradigm* of the new norm in the Americas. The great achievement of *Oscar Wao* is, then, Díaz's ability to balance a coming of age story and a meditation on the history of horrors in the Americas since the first days of discovery with the sci-fi, role playing comic book fantasy-life in the imaginary of one of the least heroic of disappearing fantasy heroes one could imagine. This is a case where the *Bildungsroman* leads us inexorably to the realm of the *Transnational Imaginary*.

III. In the Realm of The Imaginary

Why the transnational imaginary? In previous work, I have described the transnational imaginary as a special form of Charles Taylor's idea of the "social

imaginary.”¹² Following Taylor, if in an American context we conceive of the syntax of codes, images, and icons, as well as the tacit assumptions, convictions, and beliefs that seek to bind together the varieties of national discourses as forming a social imaginary structure, then a *transnational imaginary* is the attempt to describe imaginary structures emerging from the social, cultural, and political intersections of multi-national populations across nation states. While I am in accord with views emphasizing the “persistence of state national power,” I maintain that the transnational spaces we see developing around the globe today also emphasize the *limits* of national power. They do so by exceeding the bounds of nationally prescribed versions of culture, economics, and politics. Current debates on the meaning of citizenship in its historical setting have focused on the ways in which processes of decolonization and migration as well as social identities based on ethnicity, race, and gender point to the existence of *other* than national identities as the basis for defining citizenship.

In understanding the power of the visualization of a transnational world beyond restrictive nationalisms, literary works exploring the nature of the transnational experience are laying the groundwork for an understanding of a contemporary staging of new versions of the self, activating the new forms of identity, and imagining the new cultural and political worlds that we see today emerging at the intersections of the global South and North.¹³

At the very least, this representation of a transnational reality that does not yet exist in fully realized form, serves to enable the postethnic and postrace visions emerging since the turn of the millennium, and especially since 9/11, from a whole new generation of writers, born for the most part in the post-Civil Rights Era. The works of these writers represent the post-magical realism, post-postmodern, post-borderlands and neo-fantasy transnational turn in what one could call postethnic fiction in the postrace era of American literature. Díaz’s *Oscar Wao* requires us to consider the nature of nation- and community- formation, the ethos of justice, and the crossing of symbolic borders and inhabiting the transnational imaginary, but all in the mode of multicultural fantasy and romance.

IV. The Global South and the Transnational Imaginary

The idea of the “global South” first emerged in the postwar era from the fact that,

¹² Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹³ See Brook Thomas, “The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology, or, What’s Literature Have to Do with It?,” *American Literary History* 20, no. 3 (2008). 625. Thomas’s discussion of Iser’s “reception aesthetics” and Fluck’s notion of “the cultural imaginary” are immensely useful articulations of the functioning of literary texts to compel readers to imagine not an “existing reality” but to “realize something that does not yet exist.”

with few exceptions, practically all of the world's industrially developed countries lay to the north of the so-called developing countries. According to sociologist Saskia Sassen, in configuring the global South, geopolitics is more important than geography. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the term "global South" really refers to new phase of global capital. For Sassen, consequently, the global South designates primarily the territories that have been subjected to a post-Keynesian financial logic of land grabs, the imposition of debt as a disciplining regime, the extraction of value, and the massive expulsion of persons from middle class status into abject poverty (Sassen 24). The key word here is "expulsion." The underdevelopment of countries at a peripheral remove from the core of metropolitan economic power did not just happen—underdevelopment occurred as the result of active forces shaping its underdevelopment. For this reason, is fair to say that the various southern economies and cultures share comparable experiences of marginalization and unequal access to the resources of globalization that differentiate them from fully developed and hegemonic cultures in their respective locations.

The term global South does not imply that all developing countries are similar and can therefore be lumped together in one category. On the contrary, Sassen's definition usefully complicates what has sometimes been described as the "center-periphery model" for the study of globalization, a model that makes "power, commodities, and influence [flow] in one direction only, from the urban centers in the West to a peripheral developing world." As Paul Jay correctly notes, globalization works differently, and is "characterized by complex back-and-forth flows of people and cultural forms in which the appropriation of things—music, film, food, fashion—raise questions about the rigidity of the center-periphery model" (Jay 3). The global South usefully suggests that although developing countries range across the spectrum in every economic, social and political attribute one can imagine, they nevertheless share a set of vulnerabilities and challenges in relationship to the circuit of flow with developed countries. These vulnerabilities and challenges constitute an identifiable category of shared socio-political realities and fates that make the notion of the "global South" more than an empty abstraction.

The significance of these other critical angles of vision is not simply hermeneutical. These new critical vocabularies convey social analyses of contemporary ruling structures with the end of formulating the possibility of social justice and understanding the intersections, overlaps, and contact points between the global North and South. The writings of intellectuals from the border between global North and South draw their power from their analyses of the subjection and immersation to which I referred earlier. Their writing also help to give form to an understanding of that condition. This is what I term vernacular poetics—the creative impulse governed by the imagination shaped by borderland experience. It represents an exclusion from the domain of rationality and history. Moreover, recognizing as Winfried Fluck reminds us, that "Fictional texts represent made-up worlds, even

when they claim to be ‘realistic,’” vernacular poetics allows us to see how it is possible for fiction to reveal something meaningful about history.¹⁴ This is the place where fantasy and the imaginary intersect with history, in what Fluck terms as “negative aesthetics” in his discussion of Wolfgang Iser’s reception aesthetics, referring to the potential of literature to “expose the limitations and unacknowledged deficiencies of accepted systems of thought” (256).

In the case of postethnic fiction, “negative aesthetics” allows us to conceive how *fantasy* functions in relation to *history* to create an *imaginary* vision that goes beyond the formulations of realism, modernism, magical realism, and postmodern metafiction to articulate precisely what is absent in realism, magical realism, and metafiction. Formally, the role of the imaginary is thus crucial to the functioning of postrace fiction for in allowing the experience of something not literally represented, it compels readers to “provide links” across the “blanks” created by the intentional “suspension of relations” between meaningful segments of the text (Fluck 258).¹⁵ But beyond literary modernism’s defamiliarizing function of compelling “the reader to become active in making sense of what often appears incomplete or incomprehensible” (256), the literary works I refer to here as postrace, postethnic fictions do *something more* in linking fantasy, history, and the imaginary. Allow me to explain.

V. Fantasy, History, and the Imaginary

Playing the role of a “Watcher,” an extraterrestrial being from the *Fantastic Four* comic book series, a being committed to observing and compiling knowledge on all aspects of the universe but prohibited from interfering in the course of its history, Yunion, in the end, as Watcher is the ultimate post magical realist narrator whose

¹⁴ Fluck, “The Role of the Reader and the Changing Functions of Literature: Reception Aesthetics, Literary Anthropology, *Funktionsgeschichte*.” 255. See also, Winfried Fluck, “The Search for Distance: Negation and Negativity in Wolfgang Iser’s Literary Theory,” *New Literary History* 31, no. 1 (2000). Here, concerning Iser’s notion of “negativity,” as “an unlimited negating potential” in a text, Fluck argues that as an integral and foundational quality of a text, negativity “dislocates all norms, meanings, and forms of organization, not just those we would like to negate. This continuous invalidation is . . . the precondition for activating literature’s special potential,” allowing it to serve as a permanent and ongoing “negation of the negation” (186).

¹⁵ Fluck puts it this way: “Every text consists of segments that are determinate, and of blanks between them that are indeterminate. In order to establish consistency between these segments, the reader has to become active in providing links for that which is missing. A blank is thus not a mere gap, or an ideologically instructive omission. It is an intentional, often carefully crafted, suspension of relations in order to make us provide links for what is disconnected. The difference is significant: A mere gap allows readers to indulge in their own projections, a blank compels them to set up relations between their own imaginary constructs and the text” (“The Role of the Reader,” 258).

“cosmic duty” enjoins him from saving worlds at the abyss of destruction. As narrator, Yunior is incapable of either expressing the ending of history, or altering its course. At best, his role is to compose the “counterspell” to the unending effects of the *fukú*, the “Fuck you” (304). For that reason, in the end, the counterspell to the *fukú* of the atrocities of the history of the Americas takes three distinct iterations to bring the narrative to conclusion.

Chapter eight, “The End of the Story” thus ends three times. First, with the aftermath of Oscar’s murder at the hands of a brutal “jealous Third World cop” (291) with whose girlfriend, Ybón, Oscar has finally consummated something approaching love. It also reveals Yunior’s ten-year struggle to write Oscar’s story of geekiness, loneliness, and brutal death. Of this jealous boyfriend, Yunior tells us that he is “One of those tall, arrogant, acerbically handsome niggers that most of the planet feels inferior to. Also one of those very bad men that not even postmodernism can explain away” (294). For the ending of the novel to work, it must give us a sincere explanation for murder, cruelty, and evil, without resorting to postmodern irony or metafictional play.

A second attempt at an ending also concerns Yunior, and offers his “hope” and “dream” (331) that Oscar’s niece, Lola’s daughter, Isis, will escape the doom of *fukú* and of those condemned to repeat its curse by taking “all we’ve done and all we’ve learned and add her own insights and she’ll put an end to it” (331). This utopian ending too is compromised when Yunior reads “the last horrifying chapter: ‘A Stronger Loving World’” of Oscar’s treasured, “dog-eared copy of *Watchmen*” (331), and finds the only panel that Oscar has circled: “After the mutant brain has destroyed New York City; . . . after [Adrian] Veidt’s plan has succeeded in ‘saving the world,’ Dr. Manhattan replies ‘Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends’” (331).

In the third and final attempt at an ending, we get yet another diffracted view of Oscar and a catalogue of failed hopes. Yunior mimes Oscar speaking from the dead, when “almost eight months after he died, a package arrived . . . Two manuscripts enclosed,” including chapters from Oscar’s “never-to-be-completed opus, a four-book E. E. “Doc” Smith-esque space opera called *Starscourge*, and . . . a long letter to Lola, the last thing he wrote, apparently, before he was killed” (333). Another promised package “everything I’ve written on this journey. . . the cure to what ails us, . . . The Cosmo DNA,” never arrives (333). But Oscar’s letter reports “some amazing news”: “guess what? Ybón actually *kissed* him. Guess what else? Ybón actually *fucked* him. Praise be to Jesus!” The letter continues: “He reported that he’d liked it . . . but what really got him was not the bam-bam-bam of sex—it was the little intimacies that he’d never in his whole life anticipated”(334). “So this is what everybody’s always talking about! Diablo! If only I’d known. The beauty! The beauty!”, writes Oscar (335). The sentimental rhetorical power of this poignant ending is also undercut, in this case by the echoes of Kurtz’s “The horror! The horror!” from Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*.

The three failed endings, coupled with Yuniór's ventriloquy of the proverbial voice from the grave, together deny the efficacy of the classical plot of the love story, the heroic story of deferred success, and the story of triumphant emergence. If it is justice we seek in love, in life, and in the world, then justice, poetic or otherwise, is precisely what we do not get at the end of *Oscar Wao*. Our hero, murdered cruelly, mercilessly, is not redeemed by romance; the history of the Dominican Republic, forged in both imported and home-grown tyranny, is not atoned by utopian desire.¹⁶ And if we think we might be able to bracket the tyranny by seeing it as a product of distant Third World perversities, it turns out that Ybón's jealous boyfriend has full "First World" credentials, as an "American citizen," "naturalized in the city of Buffalo, in the state of New York" (295). Given the magnitude of the crimes assembled in the chronicle of Oscar's family's story, itself a synecdoche of transAmerican hemispheric history, none of the three endings can even hope to account for, let alone blunt, the apocalyptic, world destroying evil "that not even postmodernism can explain away."

VI. Conclusion: Imaginary History or Historical Fantasy

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode writes "It is not that we are connoisseurs of chaos, but that we are surrounded by it, and equipped for co-existence with it only by our fictive powers" (1967, 67). The powers of the imagination and the desire for the wholesale transformation of American history drive Junot Díaz to find a way to co-exist with the chaos, not because one finds peace in chaos but because in the context of the brutal histories of conquest, colonization, exploitation, and oppression in the Americas it is less duplicitous to stake an ending on chaos than on the teleologies of romance, realism, or emergence. While romanticism gives us fantasy coalescing with reality, and literary modernism gives us the defamiliarization of reality, and postmodernism gives us the ludic play of metafiction, *Oscar Wao* gives us something else, the mimetic representation of fantasy. Not fantasy, as such, but its imitation, at double and sometimes triple remove. Why? And where does the *mimesis* of fantasy, the staging of fantasy, rather than the representation of fantasy itself, leave us within the realms of the imaginary? Without a comic book, sci-fi, fantasy ending, *Oscar Wao* requires us to read the story of the history of conquest, colonization, diaspora, and social injustice in the Americas by forging links between the *fantasy of the imaginary* and the *real of history*.

This connection between *fantasy* and *history*, bewildering in the continual oscillation of the narrative's multiple referentiality to both the *real* and the *imaginary*, cannot be formulated by the text but forms the unwritten base that conditions and

¹⁶ On the relationship between "justice" and "literature," see Winfried Fluck, "Fiction and Justice," *New Literary History* 34, no. 1 (2003). See also, Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1995).

transcends the literal meanings of both history and fantasy, in the process creating something new, something we might call *imaginary history* or *historical fantasy*. This is the condition that Fluck identifies as the “negativity” of texts, in discussing Iser’s theory of reception aesthetics from *The Act of Reading*.¹⁷ It is the aesthetic equivalent of what I have identified as the rhetorical function of *parabasis* and *irony* in other related contexts of American posttrace fiction. It is a way of describing the “something more” that the literary works I refer to as posttrace fictions do in linking fantasy, history, and the imaginary, the *imaginary history*, in order to remain true to ethnic literature’s utopian allegiance to social justice.¹⁸

Paul Jay is certainly correct to have argued that in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz “frames the novel as both a historical critique of colonialism and dictatorship in the Americas, systems linked to masculinity and storytelling, and as a kind of counterspell that uses the very narrative power it critiques to undo that power” (Jay 12). Doing so allows him to call “attention to the power of storytelling to both critique and reverse dominant narratives, to, in effect, begin to undo the curse of colonizing power” (Jay 193). Even so, it is crucial to see that critiques of historical and social injustice and the curse of colonizing power take an unusually distinctive shape in *Oscar Wao*. In the end, true to the forms of fantasy that the narrative uses to tell his story, Oscar remains invisible, absent, and pieced together only tenuously from fragments and absences, all in the mode of fantasy, science fiction, gothic, and horror, that is to say, in the form of all the “genres” in the service of history gone awry.¹⁹ As a sexual being *manqué*, racialized, classed, and colonized by the long historical legacies of coloniality and modernity, at novel’s end Oscar does not so much disappear as he continues to perform his disappearance as a subject of history from the story of his own emergence. In contrast to the fantasy of heroic individual sexual desire, figured by Yuniór’s compulsive and destructive hyper-masculine sexuality, a sexuality for which Oscar always longs and by which he is finally destroyed, Oscar’s *historical fantasy* leads elsewhere. It binds him more closely to Belí, Lola, Ybón, Abelard, and all of the women and men caught in the total terror of real dictatorial regimes such as the historical Trujillato, even if narrated in the form of “the more speculative genres,” as Oscar once describes them. The terror created by really bad men masks “The beauty,” which is but another name for “life.”

¹⁷ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). Fluck adds that “Negativity generates aesthetic experience by enticing us to articulate something that is absent” (Fluck, “The Role of the Reader,” 258). See also, Fluck, “The Search for Distance: Negation and Negativity in Wolfgang Iser’s Literary Theory.” (186).

¹⁸ On the representation of social justice, see Fluck, “Fiction and Justice.” 20-21

¹⁹ See Roberts, Caroline. “Bostonist Interview: Junot Díaz, Author.” *Bostonist* (10 September 2007), online at: http://bostonist.com/2007/09/10/bostonist_inter_1.php.

How could one possibly conceive of a narrativity to still this chaos? How create romance from consciousness colonized by self-hate and self-doubt? What kind of “beauty” could we even imagine to counter the horror before and after the “beauty”? And to what end? What would a literature of *political* and *racial* romance, sensation, fantasy, gothic, marvels, and absolute otherness appropriate to transporting us to the margins of the Imaginary and the Real accomplish that earlier forms of US ethnic literature have not? What would its referential world look like?

It is the nature of romantic literature to pose these kinds of questions. But when *fantasy* and metafiction come into contact with *history* and the *racialized imagination*, vernacular cultures, and the stories of figures from the American global South, they become something else again. And now we are back to the role of History. Being a Latino/a writer in the US appropriating history and the concerns of the distinctively modern experience of the borderlands with the global South does not require orthodox narrative structures and realist codes of representation. Sharing the goal of most ethnic writers to imagine a state of achieved social justice, Díaz certainly employs all of the classical forms and themes available to ethnic writers to make his point. Díaz draws from the traditions of vernacular narrative, popular culture, and the literary avant-garde, however, not simply to reiterate them, but precisely to show the *constant* and *complete* rupture between the redemptive course of American history and its origins in conquest.²⁰

Overcoming the choice between history and modernity by entering into a realm of post-postmodern and post-magical realism twenty-first century *fantasy*, Díaz’s novel exemplifies a phase of the US ethnic novel that shares formally more with the ironic irony of Mark Z. Danielewski, Dave Eggers, Michael Chabot, Jonathan Lethem, or Alex Shakar than with the critical aesthetics of García Márquez or Toni Morrison. In postrace fiction, neither postmodern play nor magical realist wonder can suffice as stand-ins for justice. Unlike the ironists, and even the magical realists, Díaz seeks to unmask, in all sincerity, without irony, the function of *ideological fantasy*, which can use “justice” as a perfect disguise for injustice. As Slavoj Žižek has argued, a truly post-ideological position would recognize the way that even “Freedom” can mask forms of exploitation. Ideological fantasy is the overlooked, misrecognized, unconscious illusion beyond illusion.²¹ It demarcates the realm of the imaginary beyond illusion, precisely the direction in which Díaz’s fiction points us.

Going beyond the defamiliarizing strategies of avant-garde literature, postrace works like Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* attempt to articulate an imaginary fantasy to the second and third degrees that might, paradoxically, serve as

²⁰ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).222.

²¹ On the “ideological fantasy,” see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Phronesis (London ; New York: Verso, 1989). 30-33.

the real basis for understanding our bewilderingly complex postcontemporary history. That is why, with the cruel murder of our hero, Díaz brings us pitilessly, as is Oscar at the moment of his brutal beating, “back to the Real” (OW 298), with a capital R. He compels us to see that in the age of free markets and globalization the world has diminished and constricted so that we “Americans” now share with others around the globe a synthetic fantasy culture of television shows, animated films, space operas, graphic novels, and digital media, a synchrony of intersecting fantasies worthy of being considered “magical.” The reality of this new world is not gratuitous, nor virtual; but it might well be, perhaps, postmagical, and postracial.

Coda

Whatever its full features might be, I offer, as coda, this synoptic glimpse of a future history of postrace American ethnic fiction. Gathering my evidence from the instance of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and numerous other contemporary fictions by a new generation of authors of color, I propose that US ethnic fiction of the postrace and post postmodern turn offers these specific characteristics:

1. It is multi-perspectival, offering heterogeneous views of a life that is itself so dynamically full of wonder and magic that no one single point of view can have a prayer of encompassing it.
2. The multi-perspectival quality leads to a second characteristic, about the relationship of individuals to communities. The challenge faced by West Indians, Central Americans, Mexicans, and US Americans: to imagine and artistically render their common experience when they lack a communally shared sense of what constitutes their cultural distinctiveness. Díaz’s version attempts to redefine culture, performatively. We are what we do, as a community, not as individuals. The flip of this is also true, that we cannot be known, or understood, or loved as individuals in isolation from the history of our families and our nation.
3. The American post postmodern novel will be racially undetermined in its reflection of American identities, requiring a blend of Anglo, Latino, Euro-Hispanic, African, and Indian identities, necessitating a move beyond the American racial binary of black and white.
4. It will require a transnational imaginary in order to express its cosmopolitan and international allegiances.
5. It will be diasporic, migratory, and transitory in its hemispheric reach. These are not stories about immigration and the American immigrant experience. They are about DIASPORA and what that experience “feels” like, family dramas intertwined with that of at least two nations.

6. The post postmodern American novel will require a dialogical tongue, a bi- or multi-lingual aesthetic.

These features separately characterize much American ethnic literature, but taken together they signify something else: the radical reconfiguration and recapitulation of the history of fictional genres and classical forms of the novel.

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