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At Second Glance: Retroactive Continuity in Junot Díaz's

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

Stephen Clancy Clawson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

At Second Glance: Retroactive Continuity in Junot Díaz's
The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

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This work explores Junot Díaz's incorporation of nerd culture into his novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and that move's larger impact on the genre of trauma narratives. By using allusions to nerd texts such as *The Lord of the Rings* to structure his depiction of the brutal reign of Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, Díaz effectively rewrites Dominican history, creating a retroactive continuity of fantasy. Retroactive continuity, or retcon, is a little-discussed interpretive strategy of the nerd community with striking parallels to Lacanian notions of fantasy. A reading of Díaz's retcon ultimately casts doubt on the silent victim's traditional role as the foundation of trauma narratives, suggesting instead that the ideological root of these stories is actually the hypothetical denier of trauma.

Keywords: Junot Díaz, *Oscar Wao*, retcon, fantasy, trauma

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... iii

INTRODUCTION 1

RETCON IN ACTION: THE FINDING OF THE ONE RING..... 4

FANTASY 9

RECOVERY 16

ESCAPE AND CONSOLATION..... 23

CONCLUSION..... 30

WORKS CITED..... 33

INTRODUCTION

Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) is a volume of nerd hermetica. Though the novel seems primarily concerned with the ways that Dominicans relate to their own traumatic history, the narrator's many references to the "genres"—science fiction and fantasy—function as intertextual shibboleths, testing readers' knowledge of the esoteric corpus of nerdism. While many readers can catch the references to hobbits and Jedi, the majority of the allusions are so obscure that initiates must turn to websites like *The Annotated Oscar Wao* to begin to make sense of the text. As helpful as sites like this are, they do little to explain the function of these nerd references in the novel—they help with the "what," but not the "why." The emerging scholarship about the novel has likewise failed to adequately address these allusions as they interrogate Díaz's narrative mode. Monica Hanna has briefly touched on some of the more prominent references, like to *The Fantastic Four*, arguing that Díaz's narrator, Yuniors, uses them to create a "pastiche that attempts to capture the Caribbean diasporic experience" (500), a resistance history that opposes the monolithic historiographies of Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina; yet, her treatment of the references seldom ventures beyond simple equations: "Lola's character is the rough equivalent of the Human Torch.... [Oscar's] obesity marks him as the equivalent to the most physically obvious 'freak' of the Fantastic Four: Thing" (514). Ramón Saldívar has come closest to a serious engagement with the nerd references, writing about the connections between history and fantasy as an emerging aesthetic mode, but he stops short of examining any one reference in detail.

Like Hanna and Saldívar, what most Díaz scholarship tends towards is a discussion of the trauma of the Trujillato, the period of Trujillo's reign from 1930 to 1961—at the expense of any sustained discussion of nerdism. In short, these scholars do not take nerdism seriously enough—

they are far too quick to subsume Yuniór's allusions into the dominant theoretical discourses of Dominican literature: trauma and transnationalism. If Díaz scholarship intends on focusing unhyprocritically on polyvocality and multiplicity as ways of dealing with trauma and transnationalism, then the nerd voices need to be granted an equal place at the conversation. Like the voices of the Caribbean, nerdism has its own literature and, more importantly, its own interpretive communities—communities that are wholly ignored when a scholarly reading contents itself with typological equations between characters. I hope to demonstrate that—even if Díaz scholars insist on discussing *Oscar Wao* in terms of trauma—a thorough consideration of the interpretive strategies of nerdism will reveal more about the function of trauma in the novel and in Dominican-American literature than does the current conversation on polyvocality.

Due to their prominence in the novel, Yuniór's numerous references to J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* provide the most dramatic example of how a nerd text and a nerd interpretive strategy can reshape the scholarly conversation on trauma in Díaz. *The Lord of the Rings*, a work described as “one of [the titular Oscar's] greatest loves and greatest comforts” (Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life* 307), details the struggles of the free peoples of a mythical land, Middle-earth, to dispose of the One Ring, a magical artifact created by the Dark Lord Sauron. While Tolkien's trilogy has been well-known in its own right since its publication in 1954 and 1955, it was virtually inescapable in the early 2000s thanks to Peter Jackson's Oscar-winning film adaptations. Out of the many nerd references in the novel, Díaz's narrator, Yuniór, frequently returns to *The Lord of the Rings* because of its freshness in the popular consciousness—even non-nerds would have heard of a hobbit. And return to it he does: Trujillo is constantly equated with Sauron and characterized as an evil being with the supernatural *je ne sais quoi* of a Dark Lord. Sauron is referenced with such persistence that the metaphoricality of

the comparison to Trujillo seems to disappear entirely: we are no longer in the realm of simple equation. What Yuniór appears to be saying is that Trujillo literally was a Dark Lord. This claim becomes clear if, instead of reading these references as metaphors, we approach Yuniór's characterization of Trujillo in terms of a nerd concept known as retroactive continuity or retcon. Though reminiscent of Benjamin's notion of materialist historiography, retcon traces its intellectual roots to the message boards of nerd-dom, from which it has inherited its connection to fantasy. Simply defined, retcon occurs when an element in a later installment of a series alters the established facts of previous episodes. When Darth Vader reveals to Luke Skywalker that he is his father in *The Empire Strikes Back*, this statement retcons the original *Star Wars*, retroactively changing the previously established fact that Luke's father was, as Obi-wan Kenobi had explained, killed by Vader. In this way, retcon forces the audience to return to the past and reread, rethinking established knowledge and reconsidering what is real—it is an epistemology of revision, an ontology of second glances.

Yuniór's characterization of Trujillo as Sauron is a recharacterization that follows the logic of retcon with its double-take imperative that forces a reevaluation of the facts of the story that we thought we knew, therein altering the previously established ontology of the Trujillato. The logic of retcon is most explicit when, in a footnote, Yuniór introduces the dictator:

At first glance, he was just your prototypical Latin American caudillo, but his power was terminal in ways that few historians have every truly captured or, I would argue, imagined. He was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator, a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up. (2)

To observers, Trujillo might have seemed to be just a dictator, but the real story as exposed through retcon is that he was quite literally a supernatural entity, the earthly incarnation of a malthestic god. Díaz's novel, the latest episode in the literary saga of the Trujillato, demands a rereading of the story thus far and a reevaluation of the previous depictions of Trujillo. Though I agree with Marta Caminero-Santangelo's assessment that many entries in the Dominican canon "elide national responsibility" by fixing the dictator as the "singular source of trauma" (6), only by considering Trujillo as literally metaphysical will we begin to fully grasp the extent of his power and his lasting impact on the Dominican people and its literature. But to accomplish this task—to appreciate the significance of *Oscar Wao*'s retcon of Trujillo—we need a more complete understanding of the ideological functioning of retroactive continuity itself and how it operates in the creation and maintenance of the metaphysical, of the Real. Retcon is an epistemological and ontological tool with the power to forge new national identities and remit collective trauma through its manipulation of the symbolic order; however, as it is used in Dominican literature today, it perpetuates generic suffering as a shield of fantasy against those who might hypothetically contest Trujillo's lasting impact. This conflicted potentiality of retcon will be clearest if we turn once again to Tolkien and read his retcons alongside those of Díaz, who draws so heavily from Tolkien's fantasy world. Even more revealing is Tolkien's own scholarship on continuity, which provides the rationale for his constant struggle to untie the knots in Middle-earth's continuity. It is in an ideological analysis of these knots that retcon's true potential to reshape trauma and the Real itself emerges.

RETCON IN ACTION: THE FINDING OF THE ONE RING

Díaz's novel assumes a basic familiarity with the story of Tolkien's *One Ring*—an assumption that is largely justified. But while most readers of Díaz will have a general

understanding of Tolkien's basic plot, few are aware of the extent to which Tolkien retconned the tale. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien presents the One Ring as the annular incarnation of Sauron's malignant will, corrupting those who own it and ultimately leading them to their doom. It is a constant threat to the free peoples of Middle-earth, even as they seek to destroy the evil ring once and for all by casting it into the fires of Mount Doom. Unfortunately for Tolkien, when he introduced the One Ring in his first work, *The Hobbit* (1937), he characterized it as a relatively benign piece of jewelry. In this book, Bilbo Baggins' finding of the One Ring is more coincidental than portentous. Bilbo, lost in the goblin tunnels of the Misty Mountains, simply happens upon it while groping his way through the dark. It seems like an accident, though the novel's narrator does take time to mention that "it was a turning point of [Bilbo's] career, but he did not know it" (Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit* 79). There is no mention of the moment's cosmic significance, and no mention of Dark Lords. The only thoughts to pass through Bilbo's mind after finding it—in stereotypical hobbit fashion—are thoughts of food. Eventually he wanders through the caverns to a pond where he finds the creature Gollum. Gollum, initially more curious about Bilbo than anything else, proposes a riddle contest, offering to give Bilbo a present if he wins—his magic ring (Gollum is unaware at this time that he has lost it in the tunnel). If Bilbo loses, he becomes Gollum's dinner. Gollum eventually loses the contest and, since the riddle game is described as being sacred for the two characters, sincerely attempts to fulfill his promise. But, since Bilbo already has the ring, Gollum is unable to find the prize and becomes distraught. Tolkien writes, "I don't know how many times Gollum begged Bilbo's pardon. He kept on saying: 'We are ssorry [sic]; we didn't mean to cheat, we meant to give it our only present if it won the competition.' He even offered to catch Bilbo some nice juicy fish to eat as a consolation" (325). Bilbo, casually neglecting to mention his find, instead asks for

Gollum to show him the way out of the caves, which the creature happily does. While indeed magical, the ring that Bilbo has acquired is not explicitly evil, nor does it corrupt its owners—Gollum would have given it away freely had he not lost it. Needless to say, this benignity presented a problem for Tolkien when he went to pen the sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*, as the overriding evil of the One Ring and the demon that forged it are the focus of that story.

To resolve this inconsistency and firmly establish the continuity of Sauron and the One Ring's evil with *The Hobbit*, Tolkien inserts several explanations for the discrepancy—retcons—into *The Lord of the Rings*. In the first volume, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), Tolkien employs two main strategies for retconning *The Hobbit*. First, in a section of the prologue titled “The Finding of the Ring,” he lays forth a revised version of the story of the riddle game between Gollum and Bilbo in which Gollum clearly does not offer the One Ring as a prize. The rationale here is that the Ring's evil drives its owner to intense possessiveness—Gollum would never have given it up of his own free will. This psychotically possessive version of Gollum is the character that the public is much more familiar with today. Second, in the course of the novel proper, the wizard Gandalf explains his skepticism about the original version of the story: “I heard Bilbo's strange story of how he had ‘won’ it, and I could not believe it. When I at last got the truth out of him, I saw at once that he had been trying to put his claim to the ring beyond doubt” (Tolkien, *The Fellowship* 52). Both the narrator of *The Lord of the Rings* and Gandalf make it abundantly clear that the discrepancy in the tale of the riddle game is a result of Bilbo's lying, which in turn is attributed to the malignant qualities of the One Ring. But these explanations fail to take into account why the narrator of *The Hobbit* does not explicitly state that this is the case. This forces Tolkien to do something curious. In regards to the version of the events that appeared originally in *The Hobbit*, he writes in the prologue of *The Lord of the Rings*:

This account Bilbo set down in his memoirs, and he seems never to have altered it himself. . . . Evidently it still appeared in the original Red Book, as it did in several of the copies and abstracts. But many copies contain the true account (as an alternative), derived no doubt from notes by Frodo [Bilbo's heir] or Samwise, both of whom learned the truth, though they seem to have been unwilling to delete anything actually written by the old hobbit himself. (14-15)

While before this moment it was clear from the end of *The Hobbit* that Bilbo intended to write the memoirs of his adventures, this passage makes explicit that that novel is the memoir. The Red Book of Westmarch, a sort of autobiography-history maintained by several different hobbits in the series, is presented here as a literary artifact—a found manuscript—and the ultimate source of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The narrator of *The Hobbit* did not point out Bilbo's lie because that narrator was Bilbo himself.

The Lord of the Rings thus ingeniously absorbs the discrepancy and uses it to its advantage by adding to the mythical world of Middle-earth a new layer of mythical manuscript history. The original epistemology of *The Hobbit*—knowledge as provided by an omnipotent narrator—is now suspect as Tolkien shifts the novel from fiction to metafiction. What was once presented to readers as objective is now explicitly subjective—our only glimpse of Middle-earth is through the partial eyes of particular hobbits. And as Tolkien turns art into artifact, Middle-earth enters into a new ontological space. Tolkien, as can be seen in his prologue and appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*, writes about Middle-earth as if it were real. But then Tolkien makes an additional move which reveals the depths of his anxiety about continuity: he rewrites the riddle game chapter of *The Hobbit* to coincide with the “true version” detailed in *The Lord of the Rings*. This is the version, with its scheming, treacherous Gollum, that has appeared in editions of *The*

Hobbit since 1951—the version of the tale that the majority of contemporary readers have encountered. Indeed, in retrospect, the original details of the riddle game seem quite odd to those of us familiar with the whole series: it is hard to imagine an amicable Gollum. That Tolkien would, after all of his efforts to accommodate and neutralize the discrepancy throughout the sequel, make these alterations in the original, rendering those retcons unnecessary, is truly baffling.

However, Tolkien's anxiety for establishing the continuity of Sauron's evil, and the resulting story's later impact on the Trujillo depicted in *Oscar Wao*, can be explained by exploring Tolkien's own views on fantasy and world-building. While it is true, as Díaz scholar Ramón Saldivar argues, that Tolkien was part of a literary movement “that claims the transcending of reality, the possibility of escaping the human condition, and constructing alternative realities that recapture and revivify lost moral and social hierarchy” (586-87), a close examination of Tolkien's specific work reveals how fantasy worlds actually avoid excessive distance from reality. In his essay “On Fairy-Stories” (1947), Tolkien writes about the importance of continuity in maintaining the world of fantasy or, as he calls it, the Secondary World. He argues that “the moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed” (“On Fairy-Stories” 132). All of the actions and events within a Secondary World must “[accord] with the laws of that world” (132) or else the ultimate aims of that world will remain unachieved. Just as catharsis was the goal of the presentation of a “serious, complete action” in Aristotelian tragedy (Aristotle 95), the aims of fairy-stories—fantasy, recovery, escape, and consolation—are crucial for Tolkien. They provide the reason for the work to exist, and the “why” behind Tolkien's retcons. Understanding this “why” will help us see that Díaz, like Tolkien, does not actually seek to distance himself from reality through his use of fantasy.

FANTASY

Tolkien's descriptions of fantasy reveal not only that his reasons for continuity are the same as those driving Díaz's retcon, but that the logic of retcon in general has strong parallels to Lacanian notions of fantasy. For Tolkien, fantasy—"the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds" ("On Fairy-Stories" 134)—centers on questions of desirability, as opposed to those of possibility. This form of desirability could be condensed into the sense of the question, "What sort of world do I want to live in?" A question like this provides the logic behind Tolkien's remarks that he both "desired dragons with a profound desire" (135) and desired "freedom from the domination of observed 'fact'" (139)—he desired to live in a world untamed by the imperial empiricism of modernity. Possibility then means not some infinitude in the sense of "the possibilities are endless," but a sort of unimaginative pragmatism. The antagonism between desirability and possibility also plays an obvious part in retcon: if the hero of the story clearly has died and we desire for him or her to return in the sequel, we can find a way for that to happen, even if it seems improbable, and more importantly, impossible. All we have to do is alter some of the established facts, so long as those alterations still maintain the consistency of the universe: he or she did not really die—he or she escaped through a secret passage just in the nick of time. We just did not know the real story. But such an explanation does not account for all aspects of desire's role in retcon, since it is clear that for Tolkien, desire is heavily inflected by Manichaean morality. He comments that little kids will not ask him if a tale is true or not; instead, he explains, "Far more often they have asked me: 'Was he good? Was he wicked?' That is, they were more concerned to get the Right side and the Wrong side clear" (133). Incidentally, the question of right and wrong is one that Tolkien marks as being "equally important in History and in Faërie" (133). This question seems to be what Saldívar is alluding to in his claim that

“fantasy... 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 order” (587); however, both Tolkien and Saldívar fail to address the implications of this dualistic morality on fantasy itself. Returning then to the condensed question of desire, the question is not simply “What world do I want to live in?” It is now a matter of “What world should I want to live in?” or “What sort of world is it right or good for me to want to live in?” contrasted, of course, against the question of possibility, “What world do/could I live in?” But in this formulation, there is little actual contrast—because of its internalization of moral imperatives of right and wrong, the question of desire is just as constrained as that of possibility.

The internalized injunction of restraint in desire is the first of many striking similarities between Tolkien and Lacanian thought. Discussing the two together will give us a better understanding of the role of fantasy and desire in retcon and, as a result, help us understand the moves Díaz’s novel makes. Žižek, for example, stresses that fantasy “literally teaches us how to desire” (*How to Read Lacan* 47). It is able to do this since “the desire staged in fantasy is not the subject’s own, but the *other*’s desire, the desire of those around me with whom I interact” (48). The desire of the Other must be understood in terms of the subjective and objective genitive: the desire possessed by the other and the desire for the other. Accordingly, Žižek explains that “the original question of desire is not directly ‘What do I want?’, but ‘What do others want from me?’” (49). To illustrate how this works, he retells the story from Freud of the little girl fantasizing about eating strawberry cake, noting that as she is eating, the girl is aware of how her parents respond to her own delight. She is not fantasizing about the cake at all; she is anticipating her parents’ response. In the end, this illustrates how the girl was less interested in cake and more interested in forming an identity “of the one who fully enjoys eating a cake given by the

parents,” and thus ultimately “[satisfying] her parents and [making] her the object of their desire” (49). This sort of fantasy is reliant upon the Lacanian big Other—the symbolic order itself as constituted by a Master Signifier, the signifier without a signified that quilts together free-floating signifiers. Upon entering into the symbolic order, upon accepting a symbolic designation, the subject is confronted with a gap between his or her immediate psychic reality and the full weight of its designation. Žižek characterizes this confrontation between subject and symbol with the hysterical question, “Why am I what you [the big Other] are saying that I am?” (*The Sublime Object* 126). In the case of Freud’s cake-eating girl, the question centers on if she really is a good daughter for the big Other: “My parents say I am a good daughter, but am I really what they say? What do they want?” Fantasy is both an answer to and a defense against this sort of question, against the infamous *che vuoi?* of Lacan.

But the desire of the big Other is ultimately inconsistent—we are never sure what it wants. Accordingly, we create a fantasy to answer that question, to create continuity in the big Other: “What my parents really want when they say, ‘You are a good daughter’ is a daughter that enjoys eating strawberry cake.” Thus, the girl’s fantasy teaches her what to desire while at the same time providing an answer to the big Other’s desire. When Žižek explains that “fantasy tells me what I am for my others” (*How to Read Lacan* 49), he is essentially arguing that fantasy is a way of making sense of our place in the symbolic order. The big Other (Father, God, Nature, etc.) is inconsistent—we have to fantasize about what it wants to make sense of what we are. Yet, there is no one right answer, no universal fantasy. The theoretical heart of the matter is the logic of the Lacanian maxim: “There is no sexual relationship” (48). Individuals have to create personalized fantasies, their own “‘private’ formula for the sexual relationship” since there is no one-size-fits-all logic of sexuality (48). If a partner conforms to one’s fantastic formula, the

relationship will succeed. If not... Likewise, we all must create our own personal fantasies to answer the symbolic designations of the inconsistent big Other, thereby attempting to extract ourselves from the recursive guessing game. So, instead of Tolkien's definition of "the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds" ("On Fairy Stories", 134), we could say that fantasy is the making or glimpsing of the Other's worlds. The question, "What sort of world should I want to live in?" contains not only Tolkien's desire, but the desire of a big Other—in his case, a Christian one. The Christian big Other can be characterized in the same way that Jack Miles has characterized the Lord God: ultimately inconsistent and contradictory. Miles argues that "the Judeo-Christian God is 'the divided original whose divided image we remain'" (408). This division in God as big Other provides the provocation that enables Tolkien's fantasy.

The Other's worlds of fantasy function similarly in Díaz's novel, but the particular ways in which the text addresses fantasy have broader implications for trauma narratives in general. Fantasy is ultimately used as a way to satiate a skeptical big Other, a hypothetical denier of trauma. On the one hand, Yunior himself constantly interprets the world through fantasy. Indeed, we have already looked at a few instances where he turns to *The Lord of the Rings* to structure and make sense of the events of the story. (And the many allusions to other series are equally interesting and worthy of study.) References to the fantasies of nerdism are easily identifiable because they seem tonally disparate in comparison to what Trenton Hickman has called the mode of "hagiographic commemorafiction" (99) extant in canonical Dominican trauma narratives: no one would imagine Julia Alvarez characterizing the Mirabal Sisters as Wonder Woman, Catwoman, and Supergirl in her *In the Time of the Butterflies*. But even beyond the overt references to the genres, Yunior must rely on these popular forms even to make sense of what he sees as historical fact. When he is describing Trujillo's death in a footnote, he fantasizes about it

in terms of Tony Montana from *Scarface* and John Woo cinematography (Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life* 155). The fantasies of nerdism have determined his narratological choices in advance. In contrast to Albert Jordy Raboteau's claim that the novel concerns itself with "spectacles of fantasy" (921), these passages demonstrate that Yuniór's fantastic vision is more ocular than lenticular. Yuniór does not hesitate to let us know that the other characters see the world through eyes of fantasy as well. Oscar is described as a "hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man" who "believed that that was the kind of story we were all living in" (Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life* 6). For most of the novel, Oscar's fantasy of choice is apocalypse: when a love interest's boyfriend returns, Yuniór tells us that "Oscar was back to dreaming about nuclear annihilation" (42). Additionally, Oscar's mom, Beli, is referred to as a "fantasist" because she believes her school crush will be faithful to her (101). According to Yuniór, everyone uses fantasy to make sense of history.

On the other hand, despite the constant equations between historical and fantastic figures, Yuniór vehemently denies that what he himself is writing is fantasy. In characterizing the reality and dysfunction of the world the characters live in, he declares, "It ain't no fucking Middle-earth" (194). In another part, after describing Trujillo's power, Yuniór then says, "But let's not go completely overboard: Trujillo was certainly formidable, and the regime was like a Caribbean Mordor in many ways, but there were plenty of people who despised El Jefe, who communicated in less-than-veiled ways their contempt, who resisted" (226). Extending his denial past Tolkien, he at another point insists, "Negro, please—this ain't a fucking comic book!" (138). Most telling, he also characterizes previous literary depictions of the Trujillato, like those of Alvarez, as fantasy—a fantasy he rejects. When writing about Beli's time at school, he says, "It wasn't like *In the Time of the Butterflies*, where a kindly Mirabal Sister steps up and befriends the poor

scholarship student” (83). This denial comes to a head when Yunion again, in what must now feel like an anxious, almost parodic, insistence on truth, pleads: “I know I’ve thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix but this is supposed to be a *true* account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” (285). Which is the true account? The second reading of the Trujillato that reveals a Dark Lord or this account that distances itself from Tolkien or Alvarez? Yunion is inconsistent on this point: immediately after this plea for the truth, Yunion returns to structuring his experience with fantasy: “This is your chance. If red pill, continue. If blue pill, return to the Matrix” (285).

The allusion to *The Matrix* places Díaz’s novel firmly in Lacanian territory once more, as this scene is one of Žižek’s favorite to discuss—so much so that, in his *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, he went so far as to digitally insert himself into the scene, taking Neo’s place and responding thusly to Morpheus offer of the two pills:

But the choice between the blue and the red pill is not really a choice between illusion and reality. Of course, the Matrix is a machine for fictions, but these are fictions which already structure our reality. If you take away from our reality the symbolic fictions that regulate it, you lose reality itself. I want a third pill. So what is the third pill? Definitely not some kind of transcendental pill which enables a fake, fast-food religious experience, but a pill that would enable me to perceive not the reality behind the illusion but the reality in illusion itself.

The first and most obvious implication of reading Díaz, Tolkien, and Žižek together is that the more Yunion insists that he is creating a true or real account, the more it is clear that he is overlooking the reality of fantasy—a reality that is likewise missed by Díaz scholar Elena Machado Sáez, who characterizes the Matrix as a “false reality” (540). Yunion perfectly

understands that there is no unmediated reality because all of the accounts—from histories to novels—already are thoroughly permeated by the subjectivities of their particular authors. Ben Railton stresses this side of Yunion when he argues that Díaz utilizes his “[novelist-narrator] to portray the construction of those narratives on both the social and literary levels,” and ultimately “exemplify American literary realism’s own contributions to the understanding, ongoing development, and revision of seminal national narratives like the American Dream” (150). This constructivism is most clear when Oscar and Yunion debate about what sort of world they are living in. Oscar insists, “What more sci-fi than Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?” to which Yunion ends up replying, “What more fukú?” (Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life* 6). Yunion’s “reality,” his fukú story—the story of cosmic struggle between curses (fukús) and countercurses (zafas)—is as much a construction as anything that Oscar could imagine. Yet, Yunion fails to grasp that both of these fantasies tell the characters what they are, that both of them glimpse the Other’s world and that this glimpse determines their subjectivity. He does not understand that his own retellings of the fantasies of curses generates a cursed subject and cursed Real.

The truth of fantasy is not that reality is mediated through subjectivity; it is that this mediation effectively is reality. This is what Žižek calls the “the ontological paradox” of fantasy:

[fantasy] subverts the standard opposition of “subjective” and “objective”: of course fantasy is by definition not “objective” (in the naïve sense of “existing independently of the subject’s perceptions”); however, it is not “subjective” (in the sense of being reducible to the subject’s consciously experienced intuitions either). Fantasy, rather belongs to the “bizarre category of the objectively

subjective—the way things actually, objectively seem to you even if they don't seem that way to you". (*The Parallax View* 170)

This is what it means to take the third pill—to see that our own fantasies constitute reality for us as subjects and at the same time teach us what being a subject of that reality means. Fantasies are subjective, true, but for us they are objective because we engage with them as if they were real. Fantasy's subversion of ontological and epistemological categories is the ultimate source of retcon's power. Retcon is an awareness that one has the power to rewrite the fantasy and ultimately reshape reality and the self. This is a point that Yunion seems to miss entirely, even as he is crafting his retcon.

RECOVERY

Continuing our investigation of Tolkien will explain why Yunion cannot grasp the power of retcon. Tolkien's second aim of fairy-stories is recovery, which is the "regaining of a clear view," a sort of defamiliarization based on the act of seeing things as "apart from ourselves" ("On Fairy-Stories" 146). In describing this concept, he is careful to avoid characterizing this apartness in the empirical mode of "things as they really are"; instead he stresses that seeing objects as separate from us is the way to see things as "we are (or were) meant to see them" (146). The metaphors Tolkien uses to describe this process are telling: we must clean the windows of our perception in order to rid ourselves of the triteness that comes as a "penalty of 'appropriation'," meaning that "the things that are trite, or (in a bad sense) familiar, are the things we have appropriated, legally or mentally" (146). When we think we know things, when we think we have them figured out, we act as if we possess them. Or, as Tolkien writes, "We laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and acquiring ceased to look at them" (146). Tolkien's own retcons show why he values this recovery. Unless we do a double-

take and reevaluate what we know or think we know about Bilbo's ring, we will not be able to understand its importance in *The Lord of the Rings*. Understanding the rest of the story requires the reader to see things as they are meant to be seen by Tolkien. But once again, the big Other looms large—"meant to be seen" begs the question, "by whom?" It might be easy to answer this question in literature by appealing to a sense of authorial intent, but identifying the big Other in the genre of trauma narratives, Díaz's genre, requires more precision. Most theoretical approaches, like those of Giorgio Agamben, point to the traumatized as that which dictates the subjectivity of a trauma narrative, but a consideration of Díaz's novel suggests this is not the case. Instead the figure of the denier is genre's ultimate big Other.

We must work towards this conclusion by first looking at Tolkien's metaphor of our relationship to objects as a hoard. It is clear not only from his statement in "On Fairy Stories," but also from what Tolkien writes in *The Hobbit* that hoards are negative. The connotation is that they remove a mass of objects not only from their normal use, but from healthy admiration. This does not mean that these items are neglected. Smaug, the dragon in *The Hobbit*, knew the contents of his hoard "to an ounce" (Tolkien, *The Annotated Hobbit* 229), and though he had little use for the items, he was enraged when a single cup was stolen from him. This sort of behavior is the subject of Randy O. Frost and Gail Steketee's *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things* (2010). The several hoarders that Frost and Steketee studied reveal the reason for Smaug's anger: hoarders know their objects so well because each object is the embodiment of a relationship. Objects are, in essence, witnesses. Hoarding manifests itself in an overabundance of narratological attachment to objects. Or as Irene, a woman studied by Frost and Steketee, said, "I attach meaning to things that don't need it" (17). Hoarders seemingly refuse to see things as they are "meant to be seen" by those who do not know these narratives,

attaching meaning to everything, even junk. In talking about the narratives that sustained Irene's hoard, Frost and Steketee also remarked, "the abnormality lies not in the nature of the attachments, but in their intensity and extremely broad scope" (21). Hoarders effectively lose the ability to prioritize attachments, even hypothetical ones. Even items which hoarders have no use for could potentially serve to reinforce a relationship or at least serve as a reminder of one. This was the case for Irene, who constantly bought gifts that she never gave. But Frost and Steketee stress that the problem of the hoard is not necessarily a problem of mass: "Hoarding is not defined by the number of possessions, but by how the acquisition and management of those possessions affects their owner" (58). These effects can be seen most dramatically when something is removed from the hoard. Irene felt "incomplete" (42) when researchers made her throw away a sheet of paper with an unknown telephone number on it—she eventually dug it back out of the trash. Smaug, when the cup was stolen, terrorized the mountainside. These extreme reactions make it clear that there is something more than the object itself at play. What is being lost when an object in a hoard is stolen or destroyed is not the item, but the relationship. More than this, the hoarder's sense that he or she has been a faithful preserver of that relationship—the hoarder's very concept of self—is jeopardized as well.

With our focus on Díaz and the terror of the Trujillato, one cannot help but wonder if this fidelity to relationships in hoarding is similar to what Dominick LaCapra characterizes as "fidelity to trauma" (22). This is the "melancholic sentiment" of those that feel that by "working through the past in a manner that enables survival or a reengagement in life, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past" (22). These "consumed" are those to whom Díaz referred to in an interview as "devoured by a story" ("Questions"). This should be taken quite literally—those victims have become devoured by a story: the narrative of

their own trauma. They cannot exist without it. One feels like he is betraying the consumed because, in working through, he or she feels as if the trauma itself is delegitimized, thereby depriving the devoured of their identities. To use an analogy worthy of *Oscar Wao*, it as if two people were playing a virtual reality game (each on his own computer, linked to one another through a server) and one player, instead of simply exiting the program (thus allowing the other to continue playing), shuts down the server hosting the game (preventing the other player from playing at all). Working through the effects of trauma, divorcing objects of their narrotological oversaturation, involves “the possibility of making distinctions” (LaCapra 22). This is the process of learning to turn off the program without shutting down the server. Hoarding, like fidelity to trauma, stems from the belief that the program must be kept running on my computer so that all other players can keep playing. In other words, that I must continue to see things in terms of trauma—the way they are meant to be seen by the consumed—so that the trauma of others’ can retain its legitimacy. It is the belief that I, a local victim of trauma, must be the server that enables the community’s fantasy simulation. But by insisting that I host things in this way, as they are “meant” to be seen by the traumatized, it is not that I have become the big Other for these others—it is the reverse. The consumed seemingly have become the big Other to me, telling me what I should be. While helpful in understanding common notions of relationship to trauma, this paradigm is still missing an element: the denier of trauma.

To see how the consumed and the denier actually function in trauma, we should consider the problem that the trial of Eichmann poses for Agamben. What this trial effectively does is highlight the problems of witnessing when that witnessing is married to an idea of legalism. Agamben’s distinctions between the types of witnesses—*testis* (third party eyewitness) and *superstes* (someone who has lived through an event)—are distinctions based on Roman law.

They are part of the machine of passing judgment—of creating a narrative. When Eichmann admits guilt before God but not before the law, he is ultimately short-circuiting this machine. Thus the frustration and confusion of the matter—Eichmann refuses to acknowledge the big Other of the law. Even though judgment is passed and he is hung, the law has not exhausted the problem on account that Eichmann refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the legal game. Agamben explains that “the assumption of moral responsibility has value only if one is ready to assume the relevant legal consequences” (Agamben, *Remnants* 23). There should be no confusion of categories: morality and legality are disparate realms, distinct big Others. Thus, he argues that “in every age, the gesture of assuming a juridical responsibility when one is innocent has been considered noble; the assumption of political or moral responsibility without the assumption of the corresponding legal consequences, on the other hand, has always characterized the arrogance of the mighty” (*Remnants* 23-24). In order for the narrative of justice produced in the Eichmann trial to be satisfying, he would have had to acknowledge the same, legal big Other as those conducting the trial.

If in Eichmann we have a refusal to bow before the big Other of the law, we also have a refusal to acknowledge some master signifier—that signifier which knits together the symbolic field. Trauma’s master signifier seems to be the figure of the Muselmann. This becomes apparent not when Agamben first discusses the Muselmann in conjunction with *testis* and *superstes*, but when he introduces another concept of witness: *auctor*.

If *testis* designates the witness insofar as he intervenes as a third in a suit between two subjects, and if *superstes* indicates the one who as fully lived through and an experience and can therefore relate it to others, *auctor* signifies the witness insofar as his testimony always presupposes something—a fact, a thing or a

word—that preexists him and whose reality and force must be validated or certified. ... Testimony is thus always and act of an “author”: it always implies an essential duality in which an insufficiency or incapacity is completed or made valid. (*Remnants* 149-50)

This insufficient a priori which the *auctor* must presuppose is, of course, the Muselmann, the one who cannot bear witness—the devoured, the consumed, the drowned. In witnessing the Muselmann, trauma writers “articulate a possibility of speech solely through an impossibility and, in this way, mark the taking place of a language as the event of a subjectivity” (*Remnants* 164). We should not let the tail end of this statement slip past us: the Muselmann is not only the foundation of witnessing, but it is also fundamental to subjectivity itself. “*The authority of the witness consists in his capacity to speak solely in the name of an incapacity to speak—that is, in his or her being a subject*” (*Remnants* 158). The *auctor* can speak and exist as a subject because there is another, non-speaking foundation to his subjectivity: the Muselman. The descriptions of this impossibility/incapacity of speech—really of the Muselmann itself—point to this fundamental subject. In *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999), Agamben’s sources describe the Muselmann as being faceless and undead. We must understand “undead” in the Žižekian sense: the kernel which insists, the excess at the heart of life itself—the stuff of biological life (and horror movies). But what are we to make of facelessness?

Díaz’s novel suggest that facelessness is ultimately just another symbolic designation, not the root of subjectivity. One of *Oscar Wao*’s recurring characters is a sinister man without a face. It is first introduced when Beli is being taken to the cane fields:

Beli didn’t know if it was the heat or the two beers she drank while the colmadero sent for his cousin or the skinned goat or the dim memories of her Lost Years, but

our girl could have sworn that a man sitting in a rocking chair in front of one of the hovels *had no face* and he waved at her as she passed but before she could confirm it the pueblito vanished into the dust. (Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life* 135)

From this moment on, the faceless figure is an ill omen, a narrative cue that disaster is around the corner for the characters. Yet, Yuniór's dream at the end of the novel illuminates this recurrence. In the dream, he sees Oscar "wearing a wrathful mask that hides his face," but mentions that "behind the eyeholes [he can see] a familiar pair of close-set eyes" (325). While we should resist a simple equation between Oscar and the faceless man—an equation that would not make very much sense as Oscar himself is haunted by the figure—we should ask if, in fact, the horrific blank face is actually a mask. If Oscar can wear wrathful facelessness over his identity as Oscar, this means that the anonymizing horror of the Trujillato is not a totalizing force. It does not have the power to constitute the subject unless, as part of fantasy, that subject identifies with this symbolic mask.

For Agamben, the figure of the living being, of the face beyond the mask, is the Muselmann. This is the figure of raw life—desubjectivized life. But what if it is the Muselmann that is, in fact, the mask and not the face behind it? What if it is actually just another symbolic designation, and not that which is actually excluded from the hierarchy of designations, rendering that hierarchy meaningless? If, as *Oscar Wao* seems to indicate, this ultimate figure of trauma—the faceless man—is a changing and unfixed designation, then it is definitely not the unsayable abyss that serves as the ground of testimony. It is not the Master Signifier or the big Other. There is another signifier that constitutes the Muselmann and the rest of the symbolic field of trauma: the denier of trauma.

ESCAPE AND CONSOLATION

When Tolkien talks of escape, he does not have in mind the sort of paperback escapism that most critics of science fiction and fantasy accuse nerds of pursuing. He has something nobler and more heroic in mind, on par with escape from a prison. Contemplating those that criticize fairy stories, he sneers, “Not only do they confound the escape of the prisoner with the flight of the deserter; but they would seem to prefer the acquiescence of the ‘quisling’ to the resistance of the patriot” (“On Fairy-Stories” 148). What is the sin of a quisling in this case? Accepting modernity as inevitable. He uses the example of electric street lamps, which were pronounced as “come to stay” (148):

The electric street-lamp may indeed be ignored, simply because it is so insignificant and transient. Fairy-stories, at any rate, have many more permanent and fundamental things to talk about. Lightning, for example. ... [The escapist] does not make things... his master or his gods by worshipping them as inevitable, even “inexorable.” And his opponents, so easily contemptuous, have no guarantee that he will stop there: he might rouse men to pull down the street-lamps.

Escapism has another and even wickeder face: Reaction. (149)

What should now be evident from this and the other passages from Tolkien is that he derives a certain pleasure from resisting modern technology. For Tolkien, fantasy is a shield against this industrialized, modern Other. As such, Tolkien’s most elaborate fantasy is not the story about Middle-earth at all—it is his nostalgia-laden fantasy about writing fantasy itself as a way to protect his vanishing way of life.

In talking about these sorts of moves towards nostalgia, Svetlana Boym makes a distinction between what she calls the restorative and the reflective: the first “proposes to rebuild

the lost home and patch up the memory gaps,” while the latter “dwells on... longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance” (41). While Tolkien exhibits tendencies typical of both categories, his thought gravitates towards restoration, as does that of Díaz. These restorative tendencies become apparent in light of Boym’s argument that “to understand restorative nostalgia it is important to distinguish between the habits of the past and the habits of the restoration of the past” (42). Habits of restoration appear as invented traditions:

Invented tradition does not mean a creation ex nihilo or a pure act of social constructivism; rather, it builds on the sense of loss of community and cohesion and offers a comforting collective script for individual longing. There is a perception that as a result of society’s industrialization and secularization in the nineteenth century, a certain void of social and spiritual meaning had opened up. (42)

In filling these voids with retroactively-created tradition, restorative nostalgia and invented traditions rewrite the past in order to maintain continuity with the present, not vice-versa. Žižek elaborates how this works on a national level:

When ethnic groups constitute themselves as nation-states, they as a rule formulate this constitution as the "retrieval of the ancient and forgotten ethnic roots." What they are not aware of is how their “return to” constitutes the very object to which it returns: in the very act of returning to tradition, they are inventing it. As every historian knows, Scottish kilts (in the form they are known today) were invented in the course of the 19th century. (*How to Read Lacan* 29)

When invention tradition is present, Boym notes that “national memory reduces this space of play with memorial signs to a single plot” (43). Again, this act of reducing the number of plots,

though not necessarily simplifying them—as was the case when Lucas combined the characters of Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker’s father—is an indicator that a retcon has taken place.

For Boym, restorative nostalgia gravitates toward one of two plots. The first plot is a “restoration of origins” (43). Tolkien’s Middle-Earth certainly qualifies, not in the sense of a return to an actual homeland of elves and dwarves, but instead to the telling of tales about those fantastic lands. For Díaz, the opening of the narrative makes it clear that he is crafting a continuity between the current Dominican condition to a distant origin as well:

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

Traditions, like this origin of Dominican suffering, depend on the Lacanian figure of the subject-supposed-to-believe, a hypothetical person that really does believe in the invented tradition. This person need not exist; we must simply believe that someone, somewhere believes. Yunion can talk about the history of the fukú and the economy of curses and countercurses because this subject-supposed-to-believe, wherever he is in time and space, actually accepts the fukú as fact. In speaking about prayer as a sort of countercurse, Yunion says, “We postmodern platanos tend to dismiss the Catholic devotion of our Viejas as atavistic, an embarrassing throwback to the olden days, but it’s exactly at these moments, when all hope has vanished, when the end draws near, that prayer has dominion” (144). Even if Yunion does not exactly believe in prayer, La Inca does. And if not her, then surely there would be someone else who would. The belief of the

subject-supposed-to-believe gives vicarious credence to Yuniór's origin story. Even if he does not believe that a nightmare door was cracked open in the Antilles, at least there is someone out there who really does believe.

When Díaz stages his fantasy of trauma, his epic story of the fragmented lives of the Dominican people, he is clearly shielding against someone—not the Muselmann or the consumed, since this is ultimately a symbolic mask perpetuated by trauma authors. And though I agree with Machado Sáez's claim that “the novel is responsive to the values of an academic readership by addressing the example of diasporic discourse” (523), this audience is too much of a consistent ally to provide the antagonism necessary to induce the shield of fantasy. The big Other of the trauma genre is not the sympathetic academic, but precisely the hypothetical untraumatized, the one who dismisses and denies that trauma took place. Instead of the subject-supposed-to-know, dismitter of trauma is the subject-supposed-to-deny. To return to the analogy of the virtual reality game, those authors faithful to trauma continue to host the simulation so that other can play out their fantasies, but more importantly they act as servers to keep the game from being deleted by denial. This denier figure, like the subject-supposed-to-believe, need not actually exist to play its structural role in the fantasy of trauma. Not only Díaz, but Agamben too is struggling with these problems of trauma before and for this big Other, to convince the denier and dismitter that trauma is a legitimate concern. In the final pages of *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben states, “If the survivor bears witness not to the gas chambers or to Auschwitz but to the *Muselmann*, if he speaks only on the basis of an impossibility of speaking, then his testimony cannot be denied. Auschwitz... is absolutely and irrefutably proven” (164). This emphatic resistance betrays an anxiety that Auschwitz actually is not a problem, is not proven. Is *Remnants of Auschwitz*, then, with its focus on the Muselmann, essentially a defense against

“Holocaust deniers?” If so, surely these deniers are less like figures such as Eichmann and Ahmadinejad and more like subjects-supposed-to-deny—hypothetical deniers that structurally constitute a community of witnesses.

If we push fantasy’s connection to Lacan a bit further, we can better understand the role of denial. Žižek’s discussion of the film *Enigma* is particularly helpful here. In the film, the CIA feigns and intentionally botches a mission to obtain a secret Soviet scrambling chip. The CIA does this because it already possesses the chip, but does not want the Soviets to know that this is the case. Žižek comments that “the strategy here is to stage a search operation in order to convince the Other (the enemy) that one does not already possess what one is looking for—in short, one feigns a lack, a want, in order to conceal from the Other that one already possesses the *agalma*, the Other’s innermost secret” (*The Puppet and the Dwarf* 50). In terms of Díaz, could the novel’s concern with trauma, with witnessing, really just be a feigned lack to convince the dismissive big Other that Dominicans are indeed a traumatized people in Diaspora? Perhaps the truth is that Dominicans are not actually haunted anymore and that Díaz views them—i.e. the Dominicans themselves—as the subject-supposed-to-deny. Instead of being like Oscar, who Díaz himself described in an interview as being “utterly unaware of this history and yet also dominated by it” (“Questions”), perhaps Dominicans effectively are undominated by historical trauma precisely because they are unaware. Their own subjective fantasies have provided an objective reality devoid of the trauma of the Trujillato. Their fantasies might even correspond to a different big Other, one outside of the discourse of Dominican trauma itself, confirming that trauma is ultimately part of the symbolic order and not an intrusion of the Real. Because these Dominicans have a fantasy outside of the symbolic field of Trujillato trauma, they are wholly

different subjects living in a reality alternate to the one where Sauronic Trujillo lingers. Such a subject would deny the objective, Real persistence of the Trujillato simply by existing.

That trauma lies within the symbolic order itself becomes evident in shifting from the mode of escape to that of consolation. This shift is facilitated by what Tolkien refers to as “the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death” (“On Fairy-Stories” 153). What ties death and escape to consolation is Tolkien’s concept of eucatastrophe, which Tolkien refers to as “the joy of the happy ending” or the “good catastrophe” (153). The particular consolatory power of the eucatastrophe derives from the fact that it gives “the glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (153). This joyous ever-after comes at the end of a continuity—an explicitly Christian continuity, to be exact: “The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends with joy. It has preeminently the ‘inner consistency of reality’” (156). Tolkien stresses that the eucatastrophe does not ignore “the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure” precisely because “the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance” (153). Perhaps this is finally the answer to Tolkien’s anxiety about continuity—the continuity of evil is necessary to secure the eucatastrophe, the happy, Christian ending. The joy from without is actually a function of the continuity within. Retcon then, at its most basic, is concerned with the continuity of the symbolic order with the intention of bringing about a generic Real. When Tolkien retcons *The Hobbit*, it is with the ending of *The Lord of the Rings* in mind. The eucatastrophe of the series is that moment at the end of the final installment, *The Return of the King* (1955), where Gollum, having reclaimed the One Ring from Frodo, accidentally falls into the Crack of Doom, destroying the Ring and Sauron with it. This intercession of fate hinges on a moment produced by the retconning of *The Hobbit* in *The*

Fellowship of the Ring: an exchange between Frodo Baggins and Gandalf. Frodo, frustrated that Gollum has revealed the location of the Shire to Sauron, exclaims “What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had the chance!” to which Gandalf replies “Pity? It was pity that stayed Bilbo’s hand” (*The Fellowship* 65). Gandalf goes on to explain that “the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of the many,” meaning of course that by sparing Gollum, Bilbo has ultimately set in motion the events that will lead to the destruction of the One Ring (65). This is what Yuniór characterized as “Gollum-pity” (Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life* 296). Frodo, after all, fails in destroying the Ring when he claims it for himself. Without Gollum, the Ring and Sauron would remain. That is why the version of the story in which Gollum freely gave up the Ring had to go: it was necessary for him to be so consumed with the Ring that he would ultimately destroy it with his careless desire.

The happy ending of the Real might work nicely for the Secondary World that is *The Lord of the Rings*, but eucatastrophes are harder to come by in Díaz. Evoking the defeat of the Dark Lord at the end of the trilogy, Yuniór writes:

At the end of *The Return of the King*, Sauron’s evil was taken by ‘a great wind’ and neatly ‘blown away,’ with no lasting consequences to our heroes; but Trujillo was too powerful, too toxic a radiation to be dispelled so easily. Even after death his evil lingered. Within hours of El Jefe dancing bien pegao with those twenty-seven bullets, his minions ran amok—fulfilling, as it were, his last will and vengeance. A great darkness descended on the Island and for the third time since the rise of Fidel people were being round up by Trujillo’s son, Ramfis and a good plenty were sacrificed in the most depraved fashion imaginable, the orgy of terror funeral goods for the father from the son. (*The Brief Wondrous Life* 156)

Was it that Trujillo was simply too powerful of a Dark Lord for any eucatastrophe to deliver the Dominican people from his lingering effects? From this passage it would appear so. But a mere two pages later in the novel, Yuniór writes “Already the necromantic power of El Jefe was waning and in its place could be felt something like a wind” (158). Yuniór is inconsistent about this point, ultimately calling into question the purpose of retconning Trujillo into a Dark Lord by wavering on the longevity of his lingering malignancy. This inconsistency stems from the fact that Yuniór believes that there is something beyond the symbolic order—that there is a Real independent of symbolization, a world beyond the Matrix. He shifts back and forth without realizing that these shifts—what Žižek calls parallax—are the Real. Yuniór knows not what he does nor for whom he is really doing it.

CONCLUSION

In the end, a Christian continuity dominates Tolkien’s retcons; his stories hinge on Fall and Redemption. Though not explicitly Christian, *Oscar Wao* is similarly littered with mentions of Falls. And, besides references to “Beautiful Days” (78) and “The Golden Age” (11), there is an actual identification with Eden. When Beli is vacationing with The Gangster, Yuniór writes: “One of the authors of the King James Bible traveled the Caribbean, and I often think that it was a place like Samaná that was on his mind when he sat down to pen the Eden chapters. For Eden it was” (132). The implication of this passage is, as troubling as it seems, that the Dominican Republic under Trujillo was Eden for Yuniór. For Žižek, the problem with the Fall is actually a problem of reading: “The problem with the Fall is thus not that it is in itself a Fall, but, precisely, that, *in itself, it is already a Salvation which we misrecognize as a Fall*. Consequently, Salvation consists not in our reversing the direction of the Fall, but in recognizing Salvation in the Fall itself” (*The Puppet and the Dwarf* 87). Yuniór seems to misrecognize the potential salvation of

the Dominican people when, in the list of Trujillo's accomplishments that he includes in a footnote, he mentions that the despot achieved "last but not least, the forging of the Dominican peoples into a modern state (did what his Marine trainers, during the Occupation, were unable to do)" (*The Brief Wondrous Life* 3). But how could this be the Dominican Salvation, when Trujillo's actions seem so much like a move in the wrong direction? If we press Žižek on the point, it becomes clear that he is, in typical Žižek fashion, of two minds when it comes to "wrong moves." On the one hand, he argues that we do not make the first, wrong move so that we can later heal the resulting wound—"the first move is already the right move, but we can learn this only too late" (*The Puppet and the Dwarf* 87). On the other hand, he seems to argue the opposite, that we need that first, wrong step. Žižek states that "the lesson of repetition is rather that our first choices was necessarily the wrong one, and for a very precise reason: the 'right choice' is only possible the second time, after the wrong one; that is, it is only the first wrong choice which literally creates the conditions for the right choice" (*Living in the End Times* 88). The only way to make sense of these two statements and resist a Žižekian stalemate is to focus on retroactivity. Whether the first step was a necessary wrong choice or a right choice that we misidentified, the point is that we can only tell through retrospection, through retconning that choice into a continuity with the present.

Perhaps the Trujillato, that modern state forged by the demon, was not Eden, but perhaps it was a wrong step in the right direction. Trujillo demonstrated that a national identity is possible for the Dominican people through an overt manipulation of the symbolic order. After all, he was a man incredibly fond of renaming things after himself, retconning the nation's maps and the face of the land itself. Here I agree with Machado Sáez's assessments that Yunior's dominant narration "establishes a link between storytelling and dictatorship" (527) and that the

novel as a whole “offers itself up as a foundational fiction of the Dominican diaspora” (526), but Díaz’s insistence on trauma and Trujillo is still a wrong step. The second, right step, would be for the Dominican people to decide for themselves just what that the new names will be.

Herein lies the true power of intentional retcon married to an understanding of its ideological mechanics. Whereas trauma narratives are fantasies that deflect and seek validation from the big Other of the trauma denier, retcons open up a new road of possibilities by constructing narratives with the intent of ushering in a new reality. It is true that we are caught in a web of fantasies, of mutually fictional narratives; but, it is also true that we have the power to rewrite those narratives and shape the Real. At the very least, retcon can reshape the current notion of trauma by exposing its actual ideological logic and reliance on those who would deny its existence.

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